

LOCKE ON THE FREEDOM OF THE WILL

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Locke was a libertarian: he believed in human freedom. To be sure, his conception of freedom was different from that of many philosophers who call themselves libertarians. Some such philosophers maintain that an agent is free only if her action is uncaused; whereas Locke thought that all actions have causes, including the free ones. Some libertarians hold that no action is free unless it proceeds from a volition that is itself free; whereas Locke argued that free volition, as opposed to free action, is an impossibility. On the other hand, Locke agrees with the typical professed libertarian that free actions depend on volitions - or, as he often puts it, that an agent is free only with respect to the actions she wills, to those that are voluntary. And he also refuses to make voluntariness sufficient for freedom, whereby a free action is merely one that is willed. The free agent, Locke insists, must also be able or have been able to do something other than she does or did. Thus both Locke and the libertarian professor require indifference as well as spontaneity for freedom. But Locke's freedom is not contra-causal; and he denies that it extends to volition.

In this paper I want to focus on just this last component of Locke's view of freedom: that freedom in willing, far from being required for free agency, is not even possible. I call this 'the thesis of volitional determinism'. Locke presents an argument for this thesis in the *Essay*, but scholars have never paid much attention to it: I want to examine it. But I also have a further concern. It is well known that Locke's views on freedom and motivation changed considerably after he first presented them in the chapter 'Of Power' in the first edition of the *Essay*. This chapter was extensively rewritten for the second edition of 1694, and Locke made significant further additions to it both for the fourth edition, published in 1700, and for the fifth, which came out after his death in 1706. These subjects are also discussed in his correspondence with his Arminian friend Philippus van Limborch in 1701 and 1702. One of the most striking features of Locke's 'second thoughts' on freedom appears in the middle of the revised version of Book II, Chapter xxi that was included in *Essay*'s second edition. This is the observation that an agent may, while deliberating what to do, 'suspend the execution and satisfaction of any of [his] desires' (2-5 263), and so keep his will from being determined to any action.¹ This doctrine of suspension at least appears to conflict with the volitional determinism that Locke affirms and argues for earlier in the chapter, in its revised no less than in its original version. But not only did Locke at first fail to see that there might be a conflict between the two doctrines; he refused to acknowledge the problem of reconciling them when van Limborch pointed it out to him. Eventually, it appears that Locke did see the problem, and he altered his views and made some adjustments in the text of the *Essay* accordingly. Even so, he did not make all the adjustments that a full change of view would have called for. Hence doubts remain, both as to the actual bearing of these doctrines on one another and as to Locke's understanding of their relationship. My further purpose, therefore, is to consider Locke's volitional determinism in relation to his doctrine of suspension, and to ascertain his final position concerning it.

I begin with a more exact statement of Locke's view of freedom. The idea of freedom (or liberty) is introduced early in Chapter xxi of Book II, the official subject of which is power. *Power* in general, Locke says, is an attribute of an individual substance, by which it is able to do or suffer something. The power is *active* when it enables the substance possessing it to perform an action of some kind; it is *passive* when it makes the substance liable to be affected in some way. *Will* is an active power belonging to rational agents; *volition* or *willing* is the exercise of this power, i.e. the action that having a will enables an agent to perform. Volitions are actions in their own right, but every volition is ordered or directed to some further action of the same agent - what might be called the *target* of the volition. A volition, more specifically, is either a volition to do or a volition not to do something - to forbear doing it.

When an agent wills to do something, and does it, and does it because she has willed it, she is said to have acted in accord with her will, and her action (i.e. the target action) is *voluntary*. When an agent doesn't do something she wills to do, or does something else instead of that, then her forbearance or alternative action is *involuntary*, and she is said to have forborne or acted against her will. Also involuntary are actions performed merely without being willed, though these are not done against the will of the agent. Only the actions of rational agents are voluntary, since only such agents are capable of willing. But involuntary actions are performed by non-rational as well as by rational agents. Indeed, all of the actions of beings without reason or thought are involuntary.

Locke first defines *freedom* as the property of a rational agent whereby he has the power to act or not to act 'according to the preference or direction of his own mind' (237), i.e. in accord with his will. It might appear from this that Locke identifies free with voluntary agency - that being free for him just consists in doing or being able to do what one wills. And so a number of commentators have taken him to do.² But in fact his position is that voluntariness is merely a necessary condition of freedom. This is the point of his famous example of the man locked in a room with someone he longs to be with. The man 'stays willingly' in the room, i.e. his doing so is voluntary. But his staying is not free because, being locked in, 'he is not at liberty not to stay, he has not freedom to be gone' (238). Hence 'where-ever any performance or forbearance are not equally in a Man's power; where-ever doing or not doing, will not equally follow upon the preference of his mind directing it, there he is not *Free*, though perhaps the Action may be voluntary' (237). And again, 'where-ever ... compulsion takes away that Indifferency of Ability on either side to act, or to forbear acting, there *liberty* ... presently ceases' (238). Locke's freedom, therefore, includes this liberty of indifference as well as the liberty of spontaneity: freedom means having a choice in addition to choosing. To be free an agent must not only do something because she has willed it, and thus be able to do what she wills; she must also be able, by willing, to do something other than that - her action must be avoidable, she must have an alternative to it.

Things that lack freedom, for Locke, are *necessary*; the word 'necessary', at least in the chapter on power, just means 'not free'. Necessity, like freedom, is properly a property of agents; but Locke sometimes calls actions with respect to which an agent is 'under necessity' 'necessary actions'.³ An action may be necessary because it is done by an inanimate or otherwise non-rational agent; or because its (rational) agent either is compelled by some irresistible internal or external force to do it against his will, or else merely fails to exercise his will with respect to it. Thus all involuntary actions are necessary for Locke. But likewise necessary are those voluntary actions which an agent cannot avoid doing because of internal or external constraints which prevent him from performing any alternative action, including that of merely forbearing the action he does.

It is important to note that no action is necessary for Locke simply by being the effect of antecedent causes. Locke's use of 'necessary' thus differs from that of certain 'compatibilist' philosophers with whose views on freedom his is often associated - Hobbes and Hume for example. For the latter, 'necessary' means 'causally determined'; and in this sense, they maintain, an action can be necessary *and* free: this is what makes them compatibilists. For Locke, on the contrary, since 'necessary' means 'not free', the same action cannot be both free and necessary. Is Locke then an incompatibilist? In one way he is; but in another not. For his disagreement with Hobbes and Hume is only verbal. He believes, as they do, that all human actions are causally determined, and hence that all free actions are. So Locke accepts the substance of the compatibilists' view: his incompatibilism concerns 'necessity' only in *his* sense of the word.

Locke claims that it follows from his view of freedom that the 'long agitated' question, '*Whether Man's Will be free, or no*', is 'unintelligible'. It makes no more sense to say that the will is, or is not, free than to say that one's sleep is swift or his virtue square. This is so because '*Liberty*, which is but a power, belongs only to Agents, and cannot be an attribute or modification of the *Will*, which is also but a Power' (240).

Later on, however, Locke concedes that those who dispute 'Whether the *will* be free' may have a different question in mind. What they may mean to ask is not whether the will itself has the property of freedom, but whether an agent having a will is free to exercise it upon occasion: 'Whether a man be free to will' (245). This question, Locke allows, is perfectly intelligible, and he proceeds to provide his own answer to it. It is in the course of doing this that he puts forward his doctrine of volitional determinism.

In fact Locke construes the question here in two different ways. What he actually considers, therefore, are two distinct questions. In the one case, the question is whether a man is free 'in respect of willing any Action in his power once proposed to his Thoughts'. In the other, the question is whether 'a Man be at liberty to will either Motion, or Rest; Speaking, or Silence; which he pleases'. Locke takes up the first of these questions in Section 23, the second in Section 25.

His answer to the first question is negative. Once a man considers an action, or starts deliberating about it, he 'cannot be free' in respect of willing it, since it is 'unavoidably necessary' that he will either to do it or not to do it. Locke argues for this position as follows:

... *Willing*, or Choosing being an Action, and Freedom consisting in a power of acting, or not acting, [1] *a Man in respect of willing any Action in his power once proposed to his Thoughts, cannot be free*. The reason whereof is very manifest: For [2] it being unavoidable that the Action depending on his *Will*, should exist, or not exist; and its existence, or not existence, following

perfectly the determination, and preference of his Will, [3] he cannot avoid willing the existence, or not existence, of that Action; it is absolutely necessary that he *will* the one, or the other, *i.e.* *prefer* the one to the other: since one of them must necessarily follow; and [4] that which does follow, follows by the choice and determination of his Mind, that is, by his *willing* it: for [5] if he did not *will* it, it would not be. So [1] that in respect of the act of *willing*, a Man is not free: Liberty consisting in a power to act, or not to act, which, in regard of Volition, a Man has not: it being necessary, and unavoidable (any Action in his power being once thought on) to prefer either its doing, or forbearance, upon which preference, the Action, or its forbearance certainly follows, and is truly voluntary. (1-3 245: bracketed numbers added)

Locke's reasoning here has the form of a constructive dilemma. A more perspicuous statement of it, with suppressed premises and lemmas filled in, is the following (numbers in brackets refer to the text just quoted):

Pr (1) [2] Every action a man considers doing must either exist or not exist.

Pr (2) [5] If the man considering such an action did not will it to exist, it would not exist.

So (3) [4] If such an action exists, the man wills it to exist.

Pr (4) If the man considering such an action did not will it not to exist, it would not not exist.

So (5) If such an action does not exist, the man wills it not to exist.

So (6) [3] Every such action must either be willed to exist or be willed not to exist by the man considering it.

Pr (7) If a man wills an action to exist, he wills.

Pr (8) If a man wills an action not to exist, he wills.

So (9) A man considering an action must will.

Pr (10) If a man considering an action must will, then he is not free in respect of the act of willing: he cannot avoid willing.

So (11) [1] A man considering an action is not free in respect of the act of willing: he cannot avoid willing.

This argument, clearly, is valid. But equally clearly, it has a false premise. The obvious offender was spotted by Leibniz. Here is Theophile's response to Philalethe's summary of Section 23 in the *Nouveaux Essais*:

I would have thought that one can suspend one's choice, and that this happens quite often, especially when other thoughts interrupt one's deliberation. Thus, although it is necessary that the action about which one is deliberating must exist or not exist, it doesn't follow at all that one necessarily has to decide on its existence or non-existence. For its non-existence could well come about in the absence of any decision. (II. xxi. 23: 181)⁴

Leibniz's point is directed against premise (4) of Locke's argument. This premise is not stated explicitly, but sentence [5] in the text quoted above plainly implies it; and in any case the argument requires it. So if Leibniz is right - as surely he is - then Locke's reasoning fails to establish its conclusion.

But if Locke is thus guilty of accepting an evident falsehood, that is not the whole of his fault in this matter. For he also expressly acknowledges the very ability to 'suspend one's choice' that Leibniz uses to refute his argument in Section 23. That agents have such an ability is precisely the point of his doctrine of suspension, stated in Section 47 of the same chapter of the *Essay*. Thus, not only is premise (4) of Locke's argument false, it is directly contradicted by something he himself affirms. Indeed, the doctrine of suspension contradicts the argument's conclusion also. It is true that these inconsistencies are not to be found in the first edition of Locke's work. For though the argument of Section 23 was present from the outset, the doctrine of suspension did not appear until the second edition. But the inconsistencies did exist then, and they continued to do so thereafter. For Locke made no changes in the doctrine of suspension in subsequent editions of the *Essay*, nor did he excise or amend the (false) premise of his argument in Section 23 - although he did finally, in his revisions for the fifth edition, qualify the argument's conclusion.

There is more to be said about Locke's position here; but to say it would take me away from my central concern in this paper. For the thesis that a man who thinks about doing something is unavoidably bound to will one way or the other regarding it - call this the unavoidability thesis - is not volitional determinism; nor is there any logical relation between this thesis and that. Volitional determinism applies to concrete acts of willing, and it ascribes necessity *de re* to all of them. It says of every volition that it is a necessary action on the part of its agent. The unavoidability thesis, by contrast, ascribes necessity *de dicto* to a proposition about agents, agents operating, furthermore, under a special condition. It says that if an agent thinks about doing something *x* then it is necessary

that either he will to do x or else he will not to do x .⁵ Not only does this thesis attribute necessity to no individual volition, but it is less than universal in scope, since not all of the actions that agents perform, or even their voluntary actions, are ‘proposed to their thoughts’ before being done. We often do things, and will to do things, quite spontaneously, without first thinking about them.

To discover Locke’s volitional determinism, then, we must look to the second of the two questions he considers in Sections 23-25. This second question is whether a man is free to will what he does will - free to will to move, for example, as opposed to willing to stand still, or willing not to move, or not willing to move, or even not willing at all. Locke’s immediate response is that

This Question carries the absurdity of it so manifestly in it self, that one might thereby sufficiently be convinced, that Liberty concerns not the Will in any case. For to ask, whether a Man be at Liberty to will either Motion or Rest; Speaking, or Silence; which he pleases, is to ask, whether a Man can *will*, what he *wills*; or be pleased with what he is pleased with. A Question, which, I think, needs no answer: and they, who can make a Question of it, must suppose one Will to determine the Acts of another, and another to determinate that; and so on *in infinitum* (247)

What is Locke’s position here? The question, he says, has an ‘absurdity’ in it. But he does not say that it is an ‘insignificant’ or an ‘unintelligible’ question. Furthermore, he pronounces the absurdity ‘manifest’; but then, as if not trusting us to see it, takes steps to locate it. He suggests that the absurdity lies not in the question itself, but in an affirmative answer to it; that it consists in some sort of viciously infinite succession of wills; and that it arises somehow from the idea of iterated willing, of willing to will. It seems plain that Locke is urging a substantive, albeit negative answer to the question at issue, and that he is basing it on an argument of the *reductio ad absurdum* form. This negative answer is in fact the thesis of volitional determinism.

But what exactly is the reasoning by which Locke seeks to establish this thesis? His argument is barely adumbrated in the text I have quoted from Section 25; and in the fifth edition of the *Essay* the section ends with the words ‘*in infinitum*.’ But in the first four editions these words are immediately followed by a reference to an earlier statement of the same argument: ‘an absurdity before taken notice of’. This earlier statement occurs in Section 23 - or did in the first four editions, after which it too was dropped, along with the reference to it. This section originally contained two distinct arguments, both ostensibly in support of the unavoidability thesis. The second of these is indeed the *reductio* argument of Section 25, more fully and more explicitly set forth. (The fact that the unavoidability thesis is logically distinct from the thesis of volitional determinism may explain, assuming he realized it, why Locke cut this passage out of the fifth edition.) Here is the earlier statement:

Besides, to make a Man free after this manner [sc. free with respect to the act of volition], by making the Action of *willing* to depend on his *Will*, there must be another antecedent *Will*, to determine the Acts of this *Will*, and another to determine that, and so *in infinitum*: For where-ever one stops, the Actions of the last *Will* cannot be free: ... (4 245)

This statement enables us to identify three of Locke’s premises. (1) The first is that an agent’s action of willing must, to be free, ‘depend on his Will’: i.e., it must be voluntary. This is just the general requirement that free actions be voluntary applied to the special case of actions of willing.

(2) To say that an action ‘depends on a will’ is to say that the will ‘determines’ that action. When the action determined is a volition, then there is a will to which that action belongs: a volition just is the act of a will. It might be supposed that the will by which a voluntary volition is determined is the same as that to which the volition belongs, or at least that it could be the same. On this supposition, a will would be capable of determining itself, i.e. of determining its own acts of willing. Locke, however, is clearly denying such self-determination on the part of the will. His position is, in fact, that a voluntary action of willing can only be determined by ‘another antecedent will’ - a will distinct from the will to which it belongs. (That the will can determine itself is what I shall call the ‘autonomy principle’; its denial is then the ‘heteronomy principle’.)

(3) Given that a voluntary volition requires a second will, distinct from the one it belongs to, why should any third will be required, let alone the infinite series of wills invoked by Locke’s argument? Locke holds that when a will determines an action it does so by acting, i.e. by performing one or more volitions. Let us say that the volition by which a will determines an action ‘produces’ the action, to distinguish the relation the volition bears to the action from the relation the will bears to it. If a volition, belonging to a will, is voluntary, then there is another volition, belonging to a second will, which produces it. But there is so far no need for this second volition to be voluntary also: that is, the fact that the first volition is *voluntary* does not require this. What does require it, according to Locke, is the fact that the first volition is *free*, besides being voluntary. For in this passage he

embraces (what I shall call) the ‘inheritance principle’ of free action. This is the principle that a free action must ‘inherit’ its freedom from the volition which produces it. More precisely, it is the principle that an action is free only if the volition which produces it is free; or, contrapositively, that if a volition is necessary then any action produced by it also is necessary. By this principle, a free volition requires a second volition that is free, and not merely voluntary; and this in turn requires a third free volition; and so on without end. ‘For where-ever one stops, the Actions of the last Will cannot be free.’

It appears, then, that the argument of Section 25 - and of Section 23 in Editions **1-4** of the *Essay* - can be represented as follows.

- Pr (1) Acts of willing are acts.
- Pr (2) Every act with respect to which an agent is free is voluntary.
- Pr (3) An act is voluntary iff there is an act of willing which produces it.
- Pr (4) An act of willing is voluntary iff there is a will which determines it.
- Pr (5) Every act of willing belongs to a will.
- Pr (6) The act of willing which produces a voluntary act of willing belongs to the will which determines that act.
- Pr (7) No will determines itself, i.e. determines the acts of willing which belong to it.
[Heteronomy principle]
- Pr (8) An agent is free with respect to an act, only if he also is free with respect to the act of willing which produces that act. [Inheritance principle]
- Pr (9) If an act of willing is such that (a) there is an act of willing which produces it, and (b) there is a will which determines it, and (c) the act of willing which produces it belongs to the will which determines it, and (d) no will determines its own acts of willing, and (e) an agent is free with respect to an act only if he also is free with respect to the act of willing which produces that act; then there is an infinite series of wills running back from the will to which the first act of willing belongs.
- Pr (10) An infinite series of wills running back from the will to which a specified act of willing belongs is an absurdity.
- Pr (11) There are no absurdities.
- So (12) No agent is free with respect to an act of willing.

Locke’s argument, as I have rendered it, is valid. The task of evaluating it is therefore reduced to that of assessing its premises. We need not reach the question of the truth of these premises, however. For one of them turns out to be such that it cannot have been held to be true by the argument’s own author, i.e. by Locke himself, which means that he cannot consistently have used the argument against its intended victims. The premise in question is (8), the inheritance principle, which specifies a necessary condition for an action’s being free: the action is free only if the volition that makes it a voluntary action itself is free. That such a condition holds is a fundamental doctrine of the very philosophers who were Locke’s opponents on this issue. It is these philosophers who pronounce that ‘Man’s will is free’, although what they must mean is that ‘men are free to will’. And it is at them that Locke’s sarcastic jab in Section 22 is directed: ‘It passes for a good Plea’, he remarks, ‘that a Man is not free at all, if he be not as free to will, as he is to act, what he wills’ (245). This remark by itself might convince us that Locke would not have accepted Premise (8). But beyond that, there is a passage farther on in Chapter xxi in which he explicitly rejects it. A prisoner, Locke writes,

that has his Chains knocked off, and the Prison doors set open to him, is perfectly at *liberty*, because he may either go or stay, as he best likes; though his preference be determined to stay, by the darkness of the Night, or illness of the Weather, or want of other Lodging. He ceases not to be free; though the desire of some convenience to be had there, absolutely determines his preference, and makes him stay in his Prison. (266)

In any case, the conjunction of Premise (8) with Locke’s own libertarianism directly contradicts the conclusion of his *reductio* argument. Locke begins his discussion of freedom in Chapter xxi with the declaration that ‘every one finds in himself’ the power of acting freely. But if the volitions by which free actions are produced also had to be free, it would follow that some volitions are free, which is just the position that Locke’s argument is directed against.

There is, to be sure, another way of using a *reductio* argument against an opponent.⁶ Instead of reaching an absurdity via premises that he himself would accept, the author of a *reductio* may reason *ad hominem*, seeking to

show that the absurdity follows from the opponent's own premises. The conclusion then drawn is that some part of the opponent's position is faulty, no matter whether it be the proposition originally tagged for 'reduction' or some other premise, since in any case the position is damaged. It might then be suggested that Locke's *reductio* argument was meant to be used in this *ad hominem* way, with libertarians such as Bramhall and the Arminians the intended targets. There is no doubt that Premise (8) of the argument had a crucial place in the credo of these thinkers.⁷ Most of the other premises, as well, would have been acceptable to the philosophers that Locke was attacking.

But the *ad hominem* use of a *reductio* argument can succeed only if *all* of its premises would be accepted by the *homine* against whom it is directed. For otherwise the intended target can disarm the argument simply by rejecting any premise that fails to accord with his overall position. And there is one premise of Locke's argument which most of his opponents indeed would have rejected, viz. (7), the heteronomy principle, that no will is self-determining. These thinkers subscribed, on the contrary, to the autonomy principle: for them, the power of self-determination is the central feature of the will. It is also the key to the will's freedom, and thence the basis of all human freedom, freedom with respect to acts other than volitions as well as volitions themselves. William King, for example, in a direct comment on Section 23 of (the first edition of) the *Essay*, says of the claim 'that there must be an antecedent will to determine this will and so in infinitum', that 'this were true if the will were a passive power'. But in fact, King maintains, the will 'is an active power [that] determines it self in its choice and is not determined by another', adding that 'he that doth not understand this understands nothing of liberty'.⁸ And Bishop Bramhall, in his *Castigations of Mr. Hobbes*, declares that it 'is a truth not to be doubted of' that 'the will doth determine itself'.⁹ It is extremely unlikely, therefore, that Locke's *reductio* was intended to show the absurdity of his opponents' position upon their own premises. But even if it had been so intended it would not have succeeded.

But if Locke's argument fails, it does not follow that its conclusion, the thesis of volitional determinism, is false. We have not shown even that any of its premises are false - we have not raised any question as to their truth - only that their relation to other positions held by Locke and by his opponents is such that effective use of the argument is barred. Perhaps, after all, the thesis is true; and perhaps there is some other argument that Locke could have used to establish it.

Perhaps indeed. But the fact is, as I have noted, that Locke's view of freedom and motivation changed considerably after he published it in the *Essay*'s first edition. One significant new element in the position set forth in the second edition is the doctrine of suspension. This doctrine, far from providing support for volitional determinism, seems rather to undermine it: and Locke himself seems, near the end of his life, to have given it up.

I turn now to consider this doctrine. It is stated in Section 47 of the revised version of Chapter xxi that Locke wrote for the second edition. At this point in the chapter Locke is presenting his new view of 'what determines the will'. His exposition here is subtle and intricate, and to do justice to it I should have to lay out at length not only what the new view amounts to, but how it differs from the old one, what led Locke to give up the one and develop the other, and what it is to 'determine the will' in the first place. In this paper, however, a rough sketch is all that is needed, to indicate the context in which the doctrine of suspension is introduced.

According, then, to Locke's second thoughts on the subject, what determines the will of an agent who is set to do something 'is not, as is generally supposed', and as he himself used to think, 'the greater good in view: But some...' *uneasiness* [the agent] is at present under' (250-51). This uneasiness is the troublesome feeling that constitutes, or at least is a part of, *desire*. Since 'desire' is defined as 'an uneasiness of the Mind for want of some absent good' (251), we cannot say that 'uneasiness' has simply, in Locke's later view, been substituted for 'the greater good in view' as the one factor that makes agents will as they do. Originally, the mere perception of something as good was deemed sufficient to determine the will to an action, an action designed to attain the good so perceived; and desire and volition were hardly distinguished. In Locke's revised view, 'desiring and willing are two distinct Acts of the mind' (250), related as cause and effect. The will, moreover, is not actually affected, we are not 'set on work', unless our desire for the good we perceive 'makes us uneasy in the want of it' (253). For 'tis uneasiness alone [that] operates on the will' (254); only uneasiness 'immediately determines' its choice (252). Still, 'Good and Evil, present and absent', do 'work upon the mind' (*ibid.*), even if they do not do so directly. Indeed, they are always involved in the motivational process.

A simple example may help to convey Locke's position. Suppose a man to be hungry. Hunger is a form of desire, a desire either for food or for the relief that eating will bring. Relief is pleasant, and food produces pleasure; but the hunger itself is painful, an uneasy state. Depending on his situation and his beliefs, our hungry

man wills to go to the fridge or a restaurant, or to pick a strawberry, or to perform some other action which is apt to satisfy his desire, bring relief from his pain, remove his uneasiness. Now the object of our agent's desire, food or relief, being pleasant or productive of pleasure, is good, at least in his eyes. The target of his volition is the action he opts for, e.g. to go to the fridge. And his desire determines his will, meaning that his desire causes his will to settle upon the action chosen, in the sense both of producing an actual volition and of making it to be a volition to perform precisely that action.

The agent in our example has only one desire, hunger. In real life, however, Locke observes, we are 'beset with sundry *uneasinesses*, distracted with different *desires*' (257), all clamoring for attention, the will being incapable of being determined to more than one action at once (254). Locke then asks himself which of these competing desires 'has the precedency in determining the *will* to the next action' (257). It is in addressing this question that he introduces the doctrine of suspension.

There being in us a great many *uneasinesses* always solliciting, and ready to determine the *will*, it is natural ... that the greatest, and most pressing should determine the *will* to the next action; and so it does for the most part, but not always. For the mind having in most cases, as is evident in Experience, a power to *suspend* the execution and satisfaction of any of its desires, and so all, one after another, is at liberty to consider the objects of them; examine them on all sides, and weigh them with others. ... we have a power to *suspend* the prosecution of this or that desire, as every one daily may Experiment in himself. ... [And] during this *suspension* of any desire, before the *will* be determined to action, and the action (which follows that determination) done, we have opportunity to examine, view, and judge, of the good or evil of what we are going to do; ... (263)

Two features of Locke's position are worth noting. The first is that the doctrine of suspension is not a logical consequence of any element of his (revised) view of motivation. He presents it rather as an empirical datum. Second, the point of suspending one's desires, for an agent, is to effect some change in their content or relative strength. The doctrine of suspension does not presuppose, but it nicely supports, Locke's conviction that an agent may, through diligent effort and (especially) rational consideration, control his desires. Thus 'due, and repeated Contemplation' is capable of bringing some absent good, which we have recognized as such but have not judged to be essential to our present happiness, 'nearer to the Mind', of giving 'some relish' to it, and raising 'in us some desire; which then beginning to make a part of our present *uneasiness*, ... comes in its turn to determine the *will*' (262). In this way, Locke continues, 'by a due consideration and examining any good proposed, it is in our power, to raise our desires, ... whereby [that good] may come to work upon the *will*, and be pursued' (262). It follows, he later notes, that it is within 'a Man's power to change the pleasantness, and unpleasantness' of things (280-81). This is not the position Locke had taken in his original version of Chapter xxi. Indeed, he had explicitly maintained the contrary, saying that it is not 'in [anyone's] choice, whether he will, or will not be better pleased with one thing than another' (I 248).

Locke's doctrine of suspension, I said earlier, appears to conflict with his volitional determinism. I said 'appears to conflict' because I believe that though there is some reason to think that the two positions do contradict each other, there is also some reason to think that they do not.

Volitional determinism is the thesis that no volition is free. This thesis is inconsistent with the doctrine of suspension if the latter entails that some volitions are free. According to Locke's view of freedom, a volition is free for an agent if two requirements are met: first, the volition is voluntary - the agent wills to perform it - and second, it is avoidable - the agent can forbear from performing it by willing not to do so.

The case for holding that Locke's two positions are in conflict is this. If one is able to suspend all of one's desires then the second requirement is met: that one can avoid performing some volition. For suppose that agent *m* has several desires, the most pressing of which is about to determine her will to action *s*. Thus *m* is about to perform the volition of willing *s*. Now suppose that *m* suspends these desires, and thereby keeps her will from being determined to *s*. It is plain that *m* has avoided willing *s*; but has she done so by willing not to will *s*? That depends on whether suspension is a voluntary action on the part of its agent, whether suspending one's desires is something one does in consequence of willing to do it. But Locke surely did hold that suspension is voluntary, although he never says so explicitly.¹⁰ And if so, then *m* suspends her desires by willing to do so. And thus it is by willing also that she forbears from willing *s*. Hence there is a volition that *m* is able to avoid by willing.

As for the first requirement, that some volitions are voluntary, the doctrine of suspension entails that it too is met, provided we make a small and plausible addition to Locke's actual statement of the doctrine. Locke says that

an agent can suspend all of her desires during deliberation and so avoid performing the volition that the desires would otherwise have caused. It is plausible to add to this that an agent also has the power of lifting or rescinding a suspension once imposed, thus reinstating the suspended desires and allowing them, or the most pressing among them, to proceed to determine her will. But if any suspension is voluntary, so too must its rescission, or the de-suspension, if I may so call it, of the suspended desires, be voluntary. It is true that most volitions that are or could have been avoided because of a suspension would not have been or were not the result of a rescission of a previous suspension by their agent, or of any other voluntary action on her part. But those that do follow (voluntary) rescissions are themselves voluntary: their performance is consequent upon the will. Since all such volitions follow suspensions as well, they are also such as could have been avoided. Hence both requirements for free volitions are met in their case. So there are free volitions if agents have the power of suspending (and subsequently de-suspending) their desires.

So goes the case for holding that the doctrine of suspension is in conflict with volitional determinism. The case for the contrary proposition runs as follows. It is true that an agent who suspends her desires, or de-suspends desires previously suspended, exercises control over her will; and that, since suspending and de-suspending are voluntary actions on her part, she does so by willing: she wills or forbears from willing at will. But her (first-order) willing or not willing is not the direct or immediate target of her (second-order) willing in such cases. (I use Harry Frankfurt's terminology to distinguish the two willings here involved.¹¹) The precise and immediate target of someone who wills to suspend her desires is the action of suspending such and such desires. The forbearance from willing that then ensues is only the consequence or result of that action, a distinct event that is brought about by it. This is so even if the agent wills the suspension for the purpose of preventing the first-order volition, if suspension is the means employed by the agent in order to bring about the end of keeping her will from being determined. But Locke's view of freedom limits free actions to those that an agent wills, and whose forbearance she could will, directly, i.e. to those whose performance and forbearance are themselves targets of the agent's willing. Volitions which an agent manages to accomplish or prevent by willing something else which in turn brings about their existence or non-existence do not meet this condition, and hence are not free actions. The doctrine of suspension, therefore, poses no challenge to volitional determinism: the two positions are perfectly compatible.

In my view, neither one of the two lines of reasoning just sketched is conclusive. The issues wherever they differ have been discussed by philosophers for centuries, without ever, to my mind, having been definitely settled. There surely is a difference between direct and (what we might call) instrumental willing - between the things we simply will to do and those we can only accomplish by willing to do other things that cause the former to occur. But just where and how is the line dividing these two to be drawn? Clear cases exist on both sides: on the one hand, I move my right arm; on the other, I turn on the light by flipping the switch. But suppose I scratch my left elbow (by moving my right arm), or (Descartes' example) enlarge my pupils by looking at a far-distant object? These cases seem to fall between the first two, but is it still clear that the one is, whereas the other is not, an instance of direct willing? And even if it is clear with these actions, are there not others which fall between them, and whose position with respect to the direct-instrumental divide is not clear? Furthermore, even in the clear cases of direct willing, as when I move my right arm, can we not treat the action here as a kind of result brought about by other things I do - more 'basic' things such as intending or trying to move my arm, or moving various muscles? And in the clear cases of instrumental willing, such as turning on the light by flipping the switch, is there not a sense in which the one action just *is* the other differently described, so that there is really only one action being performed? Or if there really are two, is not their relation such - that of the means to an end - that willing carries over from the one to the other? Some philosophers at least would agree with St Thomas that 'when you will the means to an end you thereby also [*eodem actu*] will the end'.¹²

In the absence of definitive answers to these questions, there is, I believe, no certain basis for pronouncing that Locke's doctrine of suspension either does or does not entail the denial of his volitional determinism. That is, there is no basis for any pronouncement concerning the relationship of these two positions considered in and of themselves. It is of course a different question as to what Locke thought about that relationship. And as to that, there is no evidence in the text of the second, third, or fourth editions of the *Essay* that he had any thought about it at all. To be sure, since he explicitly affirms both volitional determinism and the doctrine of suspension in all three editions, we might ascribe to him the implicit view that the two positions are consistent. But it is probably more accurate to say that he simply had no view whatsoever about their relationship, not having perceived it to be a matter one needs to have a view about.

Some time after the publication of the fourth edition in 1700, however, Locke's perception changed. Not only did he come to see a conflict between the doctrine of suspension and volitional determinism, but he repudiated the latter because of this conflict, thus opting for the one position at the expense of the other. The result is set forth in a passage Locke wrote to be added to the *Essay*'s fifth edition, which was actually published, as it turns out, after his death.

Liberty 'tis plain consists in a Power to do, or not to do; to do, or forbear doing as we *will*. This cannot be deny'd. But this seeming to comprehend only the actions of a Man consecutive to volition, it is farther enquired, whether he be at Liberty to *will*, or no? and to this it has been answered, that in most cases a Man is not at Liberty to forbear the act of volition; he must exert an act of his *will*, whereby the action proposed, is made to exist, or not to exist. But yet there is a case wherein a Man is at Liberty in respect of *willing*, and that is the chusing of a remote Good as an end to be pursued. Here a Man may suspend the act of his choice from being determined for or against the thing proposed, till he has examined, whether it be really of a nature in it self and consequences to make him happy, or no. (5 270)

Locke indicates here that he takes the doctrine of suspension to conflict with his unavoidability thesis, defended in Section 23 of Chapter xxi, as well as with the volitional determinism of Section 25. But he plainly abandons the latter as well as the former of these two positions: the admission of 'a case wherein a man is at Liberty in respect of *willing*' is all that is needed to refute the proposition that 'Liberty concerns not the will in any case' (247).

What accounts for this change in Locke's outlook? The answer lies in several letters that passed between Locke and Philippus van Limborch in 1701 and 1702. Van Limborch found much to dispute in Locke's account of liberty, not only as presented in the *Essay*, but especially as Locke restated and elaborated it in response to his friend's criticisms. One major point of difference is just Locke's refusal to admit free volitions - his thesis of volitional determinism. In one of his letters Locke insists that liberty 'consists solely in the power to act or not to act consequent on ... the determination of the will' (C 2925: VII, 329). To this van Limborch replies, 'altogether to the contrary, that liberty consists solely in a power by which a man can determine, or not determine, an action of willing' (C 2953: VII, 368). He goes on to claim that this power of determining the will is manifested in a man's ability to 'suspend his action' of willing on occasion, and declares that he 'thought that [Locke's] opinion was the same' on this, citing Section 47 of the chapter on power (C 2953: VII, 370). He also says that though he agrees with several of the things set forth in Section 47, he 'cannot reconcile them with' certain other features of Locke's position, including, presumably, his denial of free willing (*ibid.*).

At first, Locke either failed or refused to grasp the significance of van Limborch's point here - more likely the latter, in view of the blustery manner of his initial reply (C 2979: VII, 402 ff.) But van Limborch pressed the matter in his next letter; and in responding to that Locke did acknowledge the problem at issue, albeit not directly. For in lieu of a direct answer to several of van Limborch's criticisms, Locke sent along with his letter a set of 'explications' to be inserted at various places in Chapter xxi of the *Essay*. Among them was the passage I quoted a moment ago, in which Locke affirms the incompatibility of the doctrine of suspension with volitional determinism. It is past doubt that this passage was written because of van Limborch's efforts. But as further confirmation of van Limborch's role I would note that Locke did at last, in a letter written a year later, inform his friend directly of his change of mind. 'Generally', Locke writes,

in my opinion a man is free in every action, as well of willing as of understanding, if he was able to have abstained from that action of willing or understanding; if not, not.

More particularly, as regards the will: there are some cases in which a man is unable not to will, and in all those acts of willing a man is not free because he is unable not to act. In the rest, where he was able to will or not to will, he is free. (C 3192: VII, 680)

Locke's final position, therefore, is that the doctrine of suspension is incompatible with the thesis of volitional determinism, and that, since the former is true, the latter is false: there are free volitions, cases in which a man is indeed free with respect to his willing this or that. The last question I wish to discuss concerns the consequences of this about-face on Locke's part for his overall view of human free action. It seems clear that he himself did not go very far in working out these consequences: for example, he made no change in the text of (that portion of) Section 25 in which volitional determinism and the argument supporting it are stated (although he did, as I noted earlier, drop another statement of the same argument from Section 23). Furthermore, whereas some of Locke's readers have judged his doctrine of suspension, along with the free volitions he took it to entail, to be inconsistent with the main thrust of his theory of freedom, others have made the contrary claim.¹³

The central core of Locke's theory of freedom comprises the following propositions:

- (1) Freedom is a property only of rational agents.
- (2) Human beings are free agents; i.e. they are free with respect to some of their actions.
- (3) The human will is not an agent; hence the will is not a free agent.
- (4) A free action is an action whose agent is free with respect to it.
- (5) Every action is the effect of antecedent causes.
- (6) Every free action is voluntary; i.e. its causes include a volition on the part of its agent.
- (7) Every free action is avoidable; i.e. its non-occurrence can be effected by a volition on the part of its agent.
- (8) The volition that causes a free action need not itself be a free action.

Now it is obvious that it doesn't follow from any of these propositions, or from all together, that no volition is a free action. Hence volitional determinism is not a logical consequence of them. Hence the denial of volitional determinism is perfectly consistent with the essential core of Locke's theory of freedom. Locke's admission, therefore, late in his life, that there are free volitions, neither conflicts with the main thrust of his original thoughts on the subject, nor produces an incoherent new body of thought.

In particular, Locke is not, by allowing free volitions, joining forces with libertarians of the Bramhallian or the Arminian stripe. To give up on volitional determinism is not to give in to the inheritance principle. Nor does the admission of some free volitions commit one to holding that all volitions are free. Surely the right view, on empirical grounds, is both that most of the volitions that agents perform are not free, and that very few of their free actions are brought about by free volitions. And this is the view, one presumes, that Locke in the end held as well.

On the other hand, if there are free volitions, then Locke's *reductio* in Section 25 of Chapter xxi is unsound. But the loss of this argument does no damage to his overall theory. Indeed, as I hope to have shown, it could not have fulfilled the purpose he intended it for in any case.

As for the doctrine of suspension, I have not myself endorsed Locke's final view that it entails the admission of free volitions. But nor have I rejected it. In my judgment, the correctness of that view is an open question, pending further investigation. But it is clear that the doctrine of suspension itself is perfectly compatible with the central core of Locke's theory - although it is not, as I remarked earlier, entailed by it. And I agree with Locke, again on empirical grounds, that the doctrine is true.

If there are free volitions, then there are second-order volitions, i.e. willings whose targets are other willings, these being volitions of the first order. There may even be volitions of the third and fourth orders. Some philosophers, Hobbes and Leibniz for two, have objected to the very idea of such iterated willing.¹⁴ But no solid argument has ever been offered, to my knowledge, in support of these objections. To be sure, the capacity of human consciousness is limited, in such wise that we can be sure that 17th-order volitions, say, never occur, and that even third-order willing is exceedingly rare. But the warrant for our assurance here is empirical; and not only is the idea of willing to will coherent, but it can be used to provide valuable light in moral psychology, as recent work by Frankfurt and others has shown.¹⁵

Nothing that I have said in this paper, however, should be taken to imply that I accept, or even that I understand, the general theory of will and volition that underlies Locke's view of freedom. I have tried to work around this theory, taking Locke more or less at his word with regard to it, and leaving his meaning, for the most part, unexplored. But I am well aware that a full account of Locke's thought would have to include a detailed examination and critical assessment of this theory also.

NOTES

1 References to the *Essay* are made via page number of the Clarendon edition, ed. by Peter Nidditch (Oxford, 1975), preceded by a numeral in boldface to indicate which original edition is cited when that information matters. References to Locke's correspondence are made via letter number and volume and page number in the Clarendon edition, ed. by E. S. de Beer (Oxford, 1976 ff.), thus: C 2881: VI, 274.

2 See, e.g., Edmund Law, in his edition of King's *Origin of Evil*, 5th ed. (London, 1781) 186, n. 42; John W. Yolton, *Locke and the Compass of Human Understanding* (Cambridge, 1970) 144; D. Locke, 'Three Concepts of Free Action', *Aristotelian Society Supp.* Vol. 68 (1975) 96; and J. O'Higgins, *Determinism and Freewill* (The Hague, 1976) 119.

3 Though he never, I think, makes the parallel move from 'free agent' to 'free action'. But since there is no reason for him to avoid the latter expression, I shall myself use it in expounding Locke's position.

4 I quote from the translation by Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett (Cambridge, 1981); the page number is that of the Akademie edition, whose numbering also is used by Remnant and Bennett.

5 This is one possible way of construing Locke's unavoidability thesis, as a conditional necessity. Another is to take it as a necessary conditional: it is necessary that if an agent thinks about doing x then either he wills to do x or he wills not to do x .

6 This point was suggested to me by Martha Bolton, who heard an earlier version of this paper.

7 See, e.g., Bramhall's *Defence of True Liberty* (London, 1655) 13-16; and van Limborch's letter to Locke dated 8 July 1701 (C 2953: VII, 368).

8 King's comment is made in a letter to William Molyneux, who conveyed it to Locke with his own letter of 15 October 1692 (C 1544: IV, 540).

9 *The Works of John Bramhall, D.D.* (Oxford, 1842 ff.) IV, 221.

10 It is worth noting, however, that two professed followers of Locke, Anthony Collins and Jonathan Edwards, do explicitly say that suspension is a voluntary act on the part of its agent: see Collins's *Philosophical Inquiry concerning Human Liberty*, in J. O'Higgins, *Determinism and Freewill* (The Hague, 1976) 73-74; and Edwards's *Careful and Strict Enquiry into the ... Freedom of Will ...*, ed. by Paul Ramsey (New Haven CT, 1957) 210.

11 See his 'Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person', first published in the *Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971), reprinted in *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge, 1988).

12 *Summa Theologiae*, tr. by Thomas Gilby *et al.* (London, 1964 ff.) IaIIae. 8. 3: XVII, 58/59.

13 One reader who has taken the former position is Edmund Law, *op. cit.*, 214-16, n. 48. On the other side, both Collins and Edwards maintain that there is no conflict between the doctrine of suspension and the rest of the Lockean theory of freedom, which is also the theory (more or less) that each of them wishes to defend. See Collins, *op. cit.*, 73-74; and Edwards, *op. cit.*, 209-11.

14 See Hobbes's *Of Liberty and Necessity*, in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, ed. by William Molesworth (London, 1839 ff.) IV, 240.; and Leibniz's *Nouveaux Essais*, *op. cit.*, 182.

15 See Frankfurt's *The Importance of What We Care About*; also, e.g., Susan Wolf's 'The Importance of Free Will', *Mind* 90 (1981) and Eleonore Stump's 'Sanctification, Hardening of the Heart, and Frankfurt's Concept of Free Will', *Journal of Philosophy* 85 (1988).

16 A version of this paper was presented at the Clarendon Locke Conference in Oxford in September 1990. More distant ancestors of it were read at Dartmouth College and to the Seventeenth-Century Study Group at the Institute for Advanced Study. I am grateful to my auditors on those occasions, and especially to Martha Bolton, Willis Doney, Robert Sleigh, and James Tully, for helpful questions and suggestions.