

Locke on Human Action

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Locke's compatibilist theory of the will, developed in the first half of the lengthy chapter "Of Power" in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, has received substantial scholarly attention in recent decades, probably due to the rise in popularity of compatibilism. In contrast, his action theory, found in the second half of that same chapter, has been largely ignored, despite the fact that it serves as the foundation of his compatibilism. In light of that neglect, the goal of this paper is modest. It is to create a reasonably coherent and systematic account of Locke's mechanistic theory of action out of his often-bewilderingly disorganized text. Along the way, I will offer some small comments on the weaknesses of Locke's account of action.

In "On Power," Locke's theory of action emerges out of his compatibilist account of human freedom as merely the power to act according to the thoughts and desires of one's own mind (2.21.27). It is a response to the question, "What is it that determines the will in regard to our actions?" (2.21.31). Locke's basic answer is that voluntary human action is motivated by a desire to eliminate some pressing pain impinging upon happiness, where such desires may be overruled if determined contrary to genuine happiness. Toward the end of "Of Power," Locke helpfully summarizes his views as follows:

Liberty is a power to act or not to act, according as the mind directs. A power to direct the operative faculties to motion or rest in particular instances is that which we call the will. That which in the train of our voluntary actions determines the will to any change of operation is some present uneasiness, which is, or at least is always accompanied with that of desire. Desire is always moved by evil, to fly it: because a total freedom from pain always makes a necessary part of our happiness: but every good, nay, every greater good, does not constantly move desire, because it may not make, or may not be taken to make, part of our happiness. For all that we desire, is only to be happy. But, though this general desire of happiness operates constantly and invariably, yet the satisfaction of any particular desire can be suspended from determining the will to any subservient action, till we have maturely examined whether the particular apparent good which we then desire makes a part of our real happiness, or be consistent or inconsistent with it. The result of our judgment upon that examination is what ultimately determines the man; who could not be free if his will were determined by anything but his own desire, guided by his own judgment (2.21.73).

So let us unpack this theory of action, particularly focusing on the roles of pain, desire, and reason in the generation of action.

Pleasures and Pains in Human Life

In his chapters "Of Simple Ideas of both Sensation and Reflection" (2.7) and "Of Modes of Pleasure and Pain" (2.20), Locke offers some general observations on the simple ideas of pleasure and pain, also known respectively as "delight" and "uneasiness" (2.7.2). As with all such simple ideas, we grasp the meaning of "pleasure" and "pain" by direct experience with particular pleasures and pains, rather than by definition or description (2.20.1). The terms are used broadly to encompass "whatsoever delights or molests us; whether it arises from the thoughts of our minds, or anything operating on our bodies" (2.7.2). Unsurprisingly then, such pleasures and pains are omnipresent in ordinary experience. Locke tells us that "delight or

uneasiness, one or other of them, join themselves to almost all our ideas both of sensation and reflection” such that “there is scarce any affection of our senses from without, any retired thought of our mind within, which is not able to produce in us pleasure or pain” (2.7.2).

As a hedonist, Locke understands happiness strictly in terms of feelings of pleasure and pain. Happiness is “the utmost pleasure we are capable of” where “the lowest degree of what can be called happiness is so much ease from all pain, and so much present pleasure, as without which any one cannot be content” (2.21.43). Any sensations of pain necessarily diminish happiness. That’s because pleasure and pain are not just opposites, but also functional correlates—in the sense that that “in reference to the passions, the removal or lessening of a pain is considered, and operates, as a pleasure: and the loss or diminishing of a pleasure, as a pain” (2.20.16). Consequently, happiness is incompatible with any pain of any sort. Locke writes, “as much as whilst we are under any uneasiness, we cannot apprehend ourselves happy, or in the way to it” since “pain and uneasiness ... spoil[s] the relish even of those good things which we have: a little pain serving to mar all the pleasure we rejoiced in” (2.21.36).

Significantly, Locke holds that pains are somehow felt more deeply or clearly than pleasures: “pleasure operates not so strongly on us as pain” (2.20.14). By that principle, Locke suggests that “the enjoyments of a conjugal life” are largely the result of fear of the hell promised by Saint Paul (“It is better to marry than to burn”) since “a little burning felt pushes us more powerfully than greater pleasures in prospect draw or allure” (2.21.34).

Locke is not mere a hedonist; he is a psychological hedonist, meaning that humans “constantly desire happiness” as their ultimate end (2.21.40). That is why the source of all human action is ultimately pleasures and pains, particularly pains. Locke is explicit on this point, writing that “every one constantly pursues [happiness], and desires what makes any part of it: other things, acknowledged to be good, he can look upon without desire, pass by, and be content without” (2.21.44).

Pleasures and pains directly serve human life by motivating action. Without the constant motivation afforded by them, “man... would be a very idle, inactive creature, and pass his time only in a lazy, lethargic dream” (2.7.3). To prevent that unfortunate state and motivate men to the actions required for “preservation of themselves, and the continuation of their species,” God wisely “scattered up and down several degrees of pleasure and pain, in all the things that environ and affect us; and blended them together in almost all that our thoughts and senses have to do with” (2.21.34, 2.7.5). Notably, such pleasures and pains are the foundation of all our judgments of good and evil. So “we call good [that] which is apt to cause or increase pleasure, or diminish pain in us; or else to procure or preserve us the possession of any other good or absence of any evil” whereas “we name that evil which is apt to produce or increase any pain, or diminish any pleasure in us: or else to procure us any evil, or deprive us of any good” (2.20.2).

Yet as we shall see, Locke’s psychological hedonism does not imply that humans necessarily desire the greatest good. The arousal of desire for some good requires that the person regard it as “a necessary part of his happiness” (2.21.44). This complex view of the role of pleasure and pain in human life will figure prominently in Locke’s theory of action.

Desire as Uneasiness in Want of an Absent Good

In Locke’s action theory, feelings of pain or uneasiness motivate action via desire—meaning that desire is the critical link between pain and action. So what is desire? In his discussion of passions such as love, fear, despair, and joy in “Of Modes of Pleasure and Pain,” Locke states that desire is “the uneasiness a man finds in himself upon the absence of anything

whose present enjoyment carries the idea of delight with it” (2.20.6). Notably, Locke does not say that uneasiness for an absent good *arouses* some distinct and separate feeling of desire, but rather that desire *just is* uneasiness for an absent good. Moreover, the strength of any given desire is purely a function of the strength of that uneasiness. A desire is “greater or less” depending upon whether the “uneasiness is more or less vehement” (2.20.6). So “desire... is stopped or abated by the opinion of the impossibility or unattainableness of the good proposed”—but only “as far as the uneasiness is cured or allayed by that consideration” (2.20.6). So according to Locke, when Andromache mourns the death of her beloved husband Hector, she necessarily desires his living presence with the same intensity as she feels pain for his absence—for the simple reason that her desire is identical to that pain. Andromache’s knowledge of the permanence of Hector’s death cannot diminish her desire except by somehow diminishing her pain. Thus Locke holds a reductionist view of desire, in the sense that he reduces desire to nothing but a kind of pain.

Locke applies this basic understanding of desire to other forms of uneasiness, including the passions, in the critical chapter “Of Power.” After reminding his readers that desire is “an uneasiness of the mind for want of some absent good” and that uneasiness refers to both “pain of the body” and “disquiet of the mind,” Locke claims that “with this [i.e. uneasiness] is always joined desire, equal to the pain or uneasiness felt” such that the desire is “scarce distinguishable from it” (2.21.31). So any form of uneasiness necessarily involves a corresponding desire. At first glance, Locke might seem to be hedging on his reductionism in this passage by speaking of desire as “scarce distinguishable” from the pain, since that would imply some difference between the pain and the desire. Yet Locke does not here suppose that desire is actually distinct from uneasiness for an absent good. Rather, the uneasiness in question is any physical or mental pain, not only that uneasiness for an absent good identical to desire (2.21.31). The general claim is one particular kind of uneasiness, namely desire, is always aroused by and closely bound to other forms of uneasiness, such as frustration about a lazy co-worker or the sensation of a hot poker on one’s skin. Locke offers two distinct arguments in support of this view; let us consider each in turn.

Locke’s first argument is that uneasiness always excites desire because any feeling of uneasiness means that ease itself is felt to be an absent good. He writes:

For desire being nothing but an uneasiness in the want of an absent good, in reference to any pain felt, ease is that absent good; and till that ease be attained, we may call it desire; nobody feeling pain that he wishes not to be eased of, with a desire equal to that pain, and inseparable from it (2.21.31).

To put the point more simply, a person always desires the elimination of any feelings of uneasiness because they diminish the happiness (or ease) that all necessarily desire. This argument clearly depends on Locke’s psychological hedonism: it presumes that every person holds happiness (or ease) as his final end. So if some people genuinely prefer to wallow in their own misery—perhaps because they regard themselves as morally unworthy of happiness or even as virtuous for suffering, as Christians often do—then Locke’s argument fails. In such cases, the felt pain would not arouse a desire for the absent ease.

Locke’s second argument is that uneasiness arouses desire because any uneasiness must also concern some particular absent good regarded as necessary to our happiness, whether the affection of a cat, money to pay the rent, or the destruction of an enemy. Locke writes that “besides this desire of ease from pain [of the first argument], there is another of absent positive good; and here also the desire and uneasiness are equal” (2.21.31). Although absent positive goods do not necessarily “cause pain equal to [their] greatness” in the way that “all pain causes

desire equal to itself,” still “as much as we desire any absent good, so much are we in pain for it” (2.21.31). So a desire for some particular absent good necessarily entails equal uneasiness for it, once again because that desire just is the uneasiness for that absent good. This argument wholly misses its intended target: it does not show or even suggest the desired conclusion that “with [uneasiness] is always joined desire” (3.21.31). It only restates the basic premise of the definition of desire, namely that all desire involves uneasiness for some absent good.

According to Locke, simple pains are not the only causes of desire. Passions such as “aversion, fear, anger, envy, [and] shame” also arouse or involve desire—due to “the uneasiness which makes up, or at least accompanies, most of [them]” (2.21.40). They influence a person’s will and his actions as a result (2.21.40). Notably, Locke draws this conclusion about the intimate relationship between the passions and desire solely from his general (but as we’ve seen, not well-justified) claim that “wherever there is uneasiness, there is desire” (2.21.40). He does not examine any of the negative passions (i.e. those constituted by uneasiness) to find the underlying uneasiness for an absent good—yet such may be done with relative ease. For example, with sorrow, defined as “uneasiness in the mind, upon the thought of a good lost, which might have been enjoyed longer; or the sense of a present evil,” the felt absent good is obviously just the particular good lost, such as a child killed in an accident (2.20.8). With anger, defined as “uneasiness or discomposure of the mind, upon the receipt of any injury, with a present purpose of revenge,” the absent good is whatever the injury took from us, such as property, dignity, reputation, or health (2.20.12). With envy, defined as “uneasiness of the mind, caused by the consideration of a good we desire obtained by one we think should not have had it before us,” the absent good is whatever the other person obtained still lacked by us, such as a promotion (2.20.13). So however inadequate Locke’s general argument, some part of the uneasiness of these negative passions does seem to be due to pain for an absent good, i.e. desire.

The case of fear and of the positive passions (i.e. those constituted by delight) is somewhat more complicated. Locke defines fear as “uneasiness of the mind, upon the thought of future evil likely to befall us,” so the absent good might be thought of as security in our persons, possessions, family, friends, and the like (2.20.10). Similarly, positive passions supposedly arouse desire due to fear that the present pleasure might end. So Locke claims that “even in joy itself, that which keeps up the action whereon the enjoyment depends, is the desire to continue it, and fear to lose it” (2.21.40). That analysis seems dubious: the fearful person has not yet lost anything but merely may do so in the future. So how can that person feel desire, i.e. uneasiness in want of absent goods, when the goods are all still present? Locke’s all-too-brief answer is that “desire goes with our foresight” (2.21.40). Notably, Locke does maintain that feelings of immediate pain take precedence over any fears of losing some present pleasure. So “whenever a greater uneasiness than [the fear of losing some present pleasure] takes place in the mind, the will presently is by that determined to some new action, and the present delight neglected” (2.21.40). So the uneasiness in the two cases differs in magnitude, even if not in kind.

The basic difficulty with Locke’s reductionist account of desire as nothing but uneasiness in want of some absent good is simple: reflection on ordinary experience suggests that desires are neither identical to nor even correlated with such uneasiness. Desires clearly differ from pains for absent goods in their basic nature. Desires are necessarily goal-directed: they aim at some possible future good (or lesser evil), whether real or apparent. That’s why desires motivate action: some action must be taken to achieve the object of desire. In contrast, pains for absent goods are merely reactions to some untoward circumstance in the present. While such pains may arouse desires, they may also be felt entirely passively, without any thought or feeling for the

future, i.e. without any desire for the absent good or any motive to act for it. So a man may be miserable in his marriage, yet experience no desire whatsoever to change it, let alone a desire equal to his misery, if he has resigned himself to his fate or thinks divorce contrary to duty. In short, pain is not sufficient for desire. It is also not necessary for desire. Desires are often grounded in the anticipation of future pleasures without any feeling of lack in the present, as when a person anticipates a delicious dinner in a few hours even though not remotely hungry now. So contrary to the definition of desire on which Locke's whole analysis depends, desire is not a kind of pain. It is not even necessarily correlated with pain, since desires are *for* some good in the future while pains are *about* some evil in the present.

Unfortunately, Locke never offers any arguments for identifying desire with pain. He expects his readers to confirm his view by their own reflections, writing "that desire is a state of uneasiness, every one who reflects on himself will quickly find" (2.21.32). Yet as we've seen, such reflections undermine rather than support Locke's view of an intimate connection between pain and desire. Without that, Locke cannot justify his further analyses of desire, since all depends on that premise.

Uneasiness of Desire Determines Action

According to Locke, our actions are determined by our minds—and our minds are determined by pleasures and pains. Action is always motivated by some present uneasiness—or rather, the uneasiness of desire for some absent good. Thus Locke asks, since "the will [is] nothing but a power in the mind to direct the operative faculties of a man to motion or rest, as far as they depend on such direction...What is it determines the will?" (2.21.29). Locke answers that question with three ever-more specific formulations. First, the "true and proper answer" is simply "the mind" (2.21.29). In willing, "the agent itself [is] exercising the power it has that particular way" (2.21.29). Second, Locke notes that "the motive for continuing in the same state or action" is always and only "the present satisfaction in it," whereas "the motive to change is always some uneasiness: nothing setting us upon the change of state, or upon any new action, but some uneasiness" (2.21.29). So actions are motivated by present pains, particularly "some (and for the most part the most pressing) uneasiness a man is at present under" (2.21.31). Third, Locke claims that the will is not determined by uneasiness in general, but rather the uneasiness of desire. He writes, "that which immediately determines the will, from time to time, to every voluntary action, is the uneasiness of desire, fixed on some absent good: either negative, as indolence to one in pain; or positive, as enjoyment of pleasure" (2.21.33). Desire is the motor of all our actions. Desire's uneasiness "determines the will to the successive voluntary actions, whereof the greatest part of our lives is made up, and by which we are conducted through different courses to different ends" (2.21.33).

Locke's psychological hedonism serves as the glue between pain and action. Uneasiness moves us to act for the basic reason that uneasiness entails unhappiness, yet we "constantly desire" happiness (2.21.40). Locke describes happiness as "the utmost pleasure we are capable of" (2.21.43). A person could not be induced to act while experiencing such untarnished bliss, except perhaps to secure its continuation. After all, "when a man is perfectly content with the state he is in—which is when he is perfectly without any uneasiness—what industry, what action, what will is there left, but to continue in it?" (2.21.34). Only uneasiness can be a spur to action—and so "that which... determines the choice of our will to the next action will always be—the removing of pain, as long as we have any left, as the first and necessary step towards happiness" (2.21.36). Still, Locke occasionally hedges his bets, saying that "*the chief, if not only*

spur to human industry and action is uneasiness” (2.20.6). Since Locke never identifies any particular exceptions to his general principle, the meaning and significance of that qualification is unclear.¹

Although the will (or power of volition) is determined by the most pressing uneasiness, Locke insists that desire is not identical to the will—and in so doing, clarifies the connection between desire and action. According to Locke, “volition is nothing but that particular determination of the mind, whereby, barely by a thought the mind endeavours to give rise, continuation, or stop, to any action which it takes to be in its power” (2.21.30). Thus the scope of volition is quite narrow: it is “conversant about nothing but our own actions; terminates there; and reaches no further” (2.21.30). In contrast, our mental lives are infused with myriad desires from innumerable sources, meaning that desire “may have a quite contrary tendency from that which our will sets us upon” (2.21.30).

To clarify his distinction between will and desire, Locke offers two examples in which “the will and desire run counter” (2.21.30). In the first case, a man might be obliged by another to convince a third of something, even though he hopes his arguments will be rejected (2.21.30). So a junior prosecutor might will himself to argue for the guilt of a defendant to a jury on orders from his district attorney, even though he thinks the defendant innocent and desires the jury to acquit him. In the second case, a man might desire an end to the pain of gout in his limbs, yet never will any action required to alleviate it since that might result in more serious illness (2.21.30). These cases seem to concern conflicting desires in which the stronger determines the will—as is consistent with Locke’s general claim that the will is determined by “some (and for the most part the most pressing) uneasiness a man is at present under” (2.21.31). In both cases, some present uneasiness is endured (namely arguing for the guilt of a man thought to be innocent and the pain of gout in the limbs) so as to avoid the greater pain of the loss of a job or serious illness. Although the will is determined by the greater pain, the lesser pain does still arouse a conflicting desire. So by Locke’s theory, the will must be distinct from desire. (As we shall see, Locke’s analysis of these cases does cast some doubt on his claim that uneasiness alone determines the will.)

Absent Goods Alone Do Not Motivate Action

Throughout his discussion of the generation of action, Locke repeatedly insists that an absent good cannot motivate action unless some feeling of uneasiness is also aroused thereby. In so doing, he explicitly rejects the common view (and his own prior view) that the will is determined by the prospect of some good, not even a great good recognized as such by the agent. According to Locke’s updated view, if the absence of some good “carries no displeasure or pain with it,” such that “a man [is] easy and content without [that good],” then he will not be motivated to take action to secure it (2.20.6). He might feel “a bare velleity” for it (i.e. the “lowest degree of desire... next to none at all”), but that amounts to nothing more “effectual or vigorous” than “some faint wishes” (2.20.6).

To support his change of view, Locke examines three cases of weakness of will. First, a poor man might perfectly well understand that a wealthy life would be far more convenient for him, “yet, as long as he is content with the latter, and finds no uneasiness in it,” he will not act to alleviate his “nasty penury” (2.21.35). Second, a vicious man might grasp the necessity of virtue for “any great aims in this world, or hopes in the next”—yet he will not act to secure this greater

¹ Locke tends to include such qualifications in his formulations from time to time, perhaps due to some general doubt about the universality of his claims.

good until “he hungers or thirsts after righteousness, till he feels an uneasiness in the want of it” (2.21.35). The mere recognition of the greater good cannot motivate action in these two cases; only some uneasiness will do so. The third case illustrates a slightly different point, namely that even explicit commitments to the greater good are easily overridden by immediate pains and pleasures. So a drunkard might persist in his indulgence in liquor despite clearly grasping its destructive effects on every aspect of his life. However many resolutions he makes to better his life, “when the uneasiness to miss his accustomed delight returns, the great acknowledged good loses its hold, and the present uneasiness determines the will to the accustomed action,” namely further drinking (2.21.35). According to Locke, the theory that the will is determined by the greatest good renders these ordinary cases of weakness of will mysterious, whereas his own view that the will is determined by present uneasiness explains them handily. To feel the desire required for action, a person must regard the absent good not only as good but also as “necessary to [his] happiness” (2.21.44). If, as in these cases, a person thinks himself capable of happiness without that good—even a “great and confessed good”—he will neither desire nor pursue it (2.21.44).

In addition to this appeal to cases of weakness of will, Locke also offers an important “argument from proximity”: he claims that the will is determined by uneasiness rather than absent goods on the grounds that “that [uneasiness] alone is present, and it is against the nature of things, that what is absent should operate where it is not” (2.21.37). As stated, that argument is an obvious equivocation on the term “absent,” since the absent goods in question would be present in the mind and so able to affect action, even if absent in reality. Locke directly responds to that objection as follows:

It may be said that absent good may, by contemplation, be brought home to the mind and made present. The idea of it indeed may be in the mind, and viewed as present there; but nothing will be in the mind as a present good, able to counterbalance the removal of any uneasiness which we are under, till it raises our desire; and the uneasiness of that has the prevalency in determining the will. Till then, the idea in the mind of whatever is good is there only, like other ideas, the object of bare unactive speculation; but operates not on the will, nor sets us on work... (2.21.37).

Admittedly, Locke’s point in this passage is somewhat obscure. However, it seems to be that an absent good cannot be present in the mind—at least not in the critical sense of being immediately experienced as good at the moment of contemplation. At best, a person might imagine the absent good present, but that idea will not have the force and vigor of the actual experience of the good itself. Meanwhile, we are constantly beset by all kinds of pressing pains, not just bodily pains associated with “the ordinary necessities of our lives” (e.g. hunger, sleepiness) and “accidental harms” (e.g. a bruised shin), but also those originating in “acquired habits, by fashion, example, and education” (e.g. the quest for honor and wealth) (2.21.46). Consequently, Locke claims, “a very little part of our life is so vacant from these uneasinesses, as to leave us free to the attraction of remoter absent good” (2.21.46). Our minds are simply too occupied with present pains to concern ourselves much with absent pleasures. The absent good can only effectively motivate action if it is deemed necessary to happiness, such that its absence becomes a source of pain.

Unfortunately for Locke, this argument from proximity seems to wreck havoc with Locke’s commonsense analysis of absent and present pains, as found in his distinction between will and desire. In drawing that distinction, Locke specifically allowed that a person might endure significant pains in the present so as to avoid worse pains in the future, as in the case of the man suffering from gout. Such cases are undoubtedly pervasive in ordinary life. Yet that psychology would seem to be rendered impossible by the general principles of the argument from proximity. The merely imagined worse pain could not motivate and guide action since it

would be overridden by the lesser pain actually experienced by the person in the present. Consequently, the person would act to alleviate the lesser pain, even knowing that such would arouse a worse pain in the future, since that absent worse pain would not be so present to his mind as the felt lesser pain. Thus Locke's primary theoretical justification for the motivational precedence of present pains over absent goods has implications for human action that no empiricist would wish to embrace.

However, Locke does also attempt to justify his view by appealing to a fourth and final case of weakness of will. Locke writes:

How many are to be found that have had lively representations set before their minds of the unspeakable joys of heaven, which they acknowledge both possible and probable too, who yet would be content to take up with their happiness here? And so the prevailing uneasiness of their desires, let loose after the enjoyments of this life, take their turns in the determining their wills; and all that while they take not one step, are not one jot moved, towards the good things of another life, considered as ever so great. (2.21.37)

Locke's basic aim in this case is simple. It is to show that if Christians cannot be moved to act as Christianity demands by the prospect of "unspeakable joys of heaven" but instead are pushed around by minor earthly pains, then absent goods must clearly exert a very weak hold on the mind in comparison to present pains.

In response to Locke's four cases of weakness of will, the advocates of the view that the will is determined by the greater good in mind might plausibly respond that the weak-willed person does not truly understand the relative merits of the goods in question. The capacity to recite the benefits of wealth, virtue, and sobriety may be a far cry from truly grasping their superiority to poverty, vice, and drunkenness. Similarly, even seemingly devout Christians may harbor enough secret doubts about the prospect of an unseen afterlife to render them unwilling to sacrifice all earthly pleasures for that prospect.

However, even if Locke is right that the "greater good" view cannot account for cases of weakness of will, Locke's own view that the will is determined by the most pressing present uneasiness is just as inadequate for explaining ordinary human behavior. In particular, it cannot explain cases of strength of will in which the person endures some great pain for the sake of some distant good. For example, some alcoholics do exert the fortitude required to resist the lure of the bottle, even enduring great pains in the process. Similarly, not all Christians opt for the alleviations of the pains of this life over the joys of the next; many early Christians endured (and even pursued) the horrifying pains of martyrdom in the hope of salvation. While the strong-willed recovering alcoholic and devout Christian may well regard (respectively) sobriety and salvation as necessary to their future happiness, Locke's insistence that the will is determined by uneasiness, such that the prospect of future pleasures is easily overshadowed by present pains, makes their capacity for endurance mysterious.

More generally, Locke's four cases of weakness of will only show that present pains *may* overrule greater goods. They do not yield the desired conclusion that the will is *determined* by present pains. Locke's attempt to reduce human motivation to a single causal force seems unlikely to explain the observed complexity of human behavior. He certainly offers no argument for his assumption that one source of motivation is primary, overruling all others.

Shaping Desires by Reason

Despite his generally mechanistic theory of the origin of human action, Locke is not a full-blown hedonistic determinist. He attempts to leave some room for human liberty in action via the rational evaluation of the means to happiness. More particularly, Locke holds that a

person can exercise his rational judgment to arouse, shape, and order his desires so as to achieve what he necessarily most desires, namely happiness. In so doing, a person indirectly controls his own actions—and becomes morally responsible for them.

Locke's basic view of the role of reason in the generation of action is that "by a due consideration, and examining any good proposed, it is in our power to raise our desires in a due proportion to the value of that good, whereby in its turn and place it may come to work upon the will, and be pursued" (2.21.47). Such rational evaluation of desires has two primary effects on our set of desires: (1) arousing desire for absent goods and (2) reordering existing desires.

First, reason helps arouse desire for absent goods. As already discussed, absent goods alone cannot move a person to action. Since we feel no "unhappiness in [their] absence," they would be "justled out, to make way for the removal of those uneasinesses we feel" (2.21.46). However, reason can generate desire for absent goods. The "due and repeated contemplation" of some absent good by reason brings that good "nearer to our mind," gives us "some relish of it," and ultimately arouses desire for it (2.21.46). In other words, reason may show some absent good to be necessary to our happiness. At that point, the absent good constitutes "part of our present uneasiness"—and thereby "stands upon fair terms with the rest to be satisfied, and so, according to its greatness and pressure, comes in its turn to determine the will" (2.21.46).

Second, reason can change the strength and thus the precedence of our desires. Experience, Locke tells us, shows that the mind generally has "a power to suspend the execution and satisfaction of any of its desires"—and then "to consider the objects of them, examine them on all sides, and weigh them with others" (2.21.48). So a person may examine any proposed good to determine its "nature" and "consequences," particularly whether it will "make him happy or not" (2.21.57). Then, "when he has once chosen it, and thereby it is become a part of his happiness, it raises desire, and that proportionably gives him uneasiness" (2.21.57). That uneasiness then "determines his will, and sets him at work in pursuit of his choice on all occasions that offer" (2.21.57).

In short, while actions are still motivated by "some (and for the most part the most pressing) uneasiness a man is at present under," reason does permit a person to exercise some measure of control over them (2.21.31). Locke argues that this control is "the liberty that man has"—and his only liberty (2.21.48). The failure to use this liberty well is the source of "all that variety of mistakes, errors, and faults which we run into in the conduct of our lives, and our endeavours after happiness" since we often "precipitate the determination of our wills, and engage too soon, before due examination" (2.21.48). Of course, even with the diligent scrutiny of desires, individuals will differ greatly in their pursuits in life. Although all pursue the final end of happiness, not all people invest their "happiness in the same thing, or choose the same way to it" (2.21.55). Still, people should be held responsible for their actions based on their capacity to deliberate about their desires. After reiterating the basic process by which reason influences the desires that determine the will to a certain course of action, Locke justifies punishment for wrong actions as follows:

For, though [a person's] will be always determined by that which is judged good by his understanding, yet it excuses him not; because, by a too hasty choice of his own making, he has imposed on himself wrong measures of good and evil; which, however false and fallacious, have the same influence on all his future conduct, as if they were true and right. He has vitiated his own palate, and must be answerable to himself for the sickness and death that follows from it. The eternal law and nature of things must not be altered to comply with his ill-ordered choice (2.21.57).

The vicious person could have done otherwise: he could have reasoned about his happiness better.

Unfortunately, Locke never offers any details on the means by which reason shapes desires, yet such are very much needed. Locke's own example of the weak-willed Christian shows that a person may not be moved in his desires, even though he recognizes the possibility of and professes belief in an eternal afterlife of unimaginable pleasures. Moreover, as noted earlier, Locke holds that "desire ... is stopped or abated by the opinion of the impossibility or unattainableness of the good proposed"—but only "as far as the uneasiness is cured or allayed by that consideration" (2.20.6). So the mere intellectual grasp of some desired good as unattainable will not directly lessen desire for it. These two cases suggest that reason does not alter desires by its grasp of facts relevant to a person's future pleasures and pains. As such, it's wholly unclear how reason might influence desire at all on Locke's theory of action.

Moreover, Locke offers no substantive arguments for his proposed capacity to rationally deliberate about the best means to or constituents of happiness. Instead, he claims that it is "evident" that "we find in ourselves a power to begin or forbear, continue or end several actions of our minds, and motions of our bodies, barely by a thought or preference of the mind ordering, or as it were commanding, the doing or not doing such or such a particular action" (2.21.5). More particularly, God has given "a power to our minds, in several instances, to choose, amongst its ideas, which it will think on, and to pursue the inquiry of this or that subject with consideration and attention, to excite us to these actions of thinking and motion that we are capable of" (2.7.3).

However, this proposed liberty of mental action seems inconsistent with the other elements of Locke's action theory. In the above quotes, Locke supposes that reason is free to think on this or that idea as it pleases. In fact, such mental actions ought to be just as driven by the uneasiness of desire as bodily actions. Without some plausible argument, the claim that physical actions are determined by the uneasiness of desire while mental actions are free choices seems arbitrary. Moreover, Locke sometimes does suggest that our mental lives are driven by necessity. Not only do humans necessarily desire happiness as the highest good, but we are also obliged by our very natures to examine our desires by reason. Locke writes:

Whatever necessity determines to the pursuit of real bliss, the same necessity, with the same force, establishes suspense, deliberation, and scrutiny of each successive desire, whether the satisfaction of it does not interfere with our true happiness, and mislead us from it (2.21.53).

Yet in fact, as Locke elsewhere notes, people often do fail to examine the relationship of their desires to their happiness. These contradictions in the various elements of Locke's account of human action seem irreconcilable.

Concluding Thoughts

The basic purpose of Locke's action theory seems to be some account of action in solely mechanistic terms as driven by the pain of desire, rather than as the purposeful pursuit of chosen goals. That basic project is dubious in and of itself, as desire cannot be properly understood as a mechanistic mental state: it is inherently goal-directed. Moreover, as we've seen, that view cannot plausibly account for cases of strength of will. Locke only compounds these problems by attempting to introduce some substantial freedom into human action via the capacity of reason to examine and influence desires. In so doing, Locke not only leaves the means by which reason might affect desire mysterious, but also contradicts more basic elements of his action theory in so doing. All considered, Locke's action theory cannot be regarded as successful, either in whole or in parts.