

Locke and the Problem of Weakness of the Will

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The chapter of Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that deals with the question of the will and freedom (II 21, "Of Power") underwent extensive revisions during the *Essay's* five first editions¹, some of which are acknowledged by Locke in II 21 §35, §§71-72, and in the Epistle to the Reader, where he says: "I have found reason somewhat to alter the thoughts I formerly had concerning that, which gives the last determination to the *Will* in all voluntary actions"². In the first edition Locke held an intellectualist theory of moral psychology. Let us call "intellectualism" a theory according to which an agent's conative states and attitudes towards certain goods (or evils) are determined, at least in part, by her evaluative judgments about the goods (or evils). Locke's version of intellectualism in the first edition was that one's volitions to act are directly caused by one's ideas, or rather judgments, of good and evil: "*Good*, then, *the greater Good is that alone which determines the Will*" (II 21 §29, 1st ed.); "the preference of the Mind [is] always determined by the appearance of Good, greater Good" (II 21 §33, 1st ed.). According to this position:

If S judges that X is a greater good than Y, and if S judges that S can perform either an act A in order to attain (to bring into existence or to otherwise promote) X or an act B in order to attain Y, and if S is prepared to act now in order to do either A or B, then S's judgement determines a volition to do A.

A seemingly important implication of this intellectualist position was pointed out to Locke by Molyneux in a letter of 1692: "you seem to make all sins to proceed from our understandings, or to be against conscience, and not at all from the depravity of our wills", hence "a man shall be damned because he understands no better than he does"³. Locke took Molyneux's objection seriously, for he duly revised II 21 and in the second edition he amended his moral psychology so as to avoid the implication that "all sins [...] proceed from our understandings"⁴. His amended moral psychology also

¹ Most of the textual alterations were made in the second (1694) and fourth (1700) editions, and prepared for the fifth (1706), which was to be posthumous. The single greatest textual revision concerns §§28-38 of the first edition, which were replaced by §§28-60 in the second. Parts of the original eleven sections survived, however, and were variously relocated in the second edition.

² *Essay*, p. 11. Unless otherwise indicated, future references to the *Essay* are to II 21.

³ *The Correspondence of John Locke*, Vol. 4, letter 1579, p. 601. Hereafter references to Locke's letters will be to CJL followed by volume, letter and page: thus CJL 4, 1579: 601.

⁴ It is difficult, however, to determine just how seriously Locke took Molyneux's objection. Even in the first edition Locke was arguably not committed to the conclusion that "a man shall be damned because he understands no better than he does", because, according to *Essay* IV, we have the epistemic duty of judging according to *all* the probabilities available to us, and doing

attempts to account for the mental dysfunction described by Ovid's famous sentence: "*Video meliora, proboque, deteriora sequor*" (§35), commonly called "weakness of the will", or "akrasia". There is no doubt that Locke took Ovid's phenomenon seriously, for he says that the truth of the sentence is "made good by constant Experience" (§35).

Locke's task was not an easy one, however. For, although he asserted freedom to act and freedom of thinking, he was by no means prepared to renounce his staunch denial of freedom to will, which he had developed in the first edition and which he retained in all subsequent editions of the *Essay*, albeit with modifications brought to his initial arguments against it⁵. Thus, as of the second edition Locke sought to make room for an account of weakness of the will while at the same time denying freedom to will. That being so, according to Locke, akrasia is something we are responsible for, and responsibility calls for some sort of freedom.

I shall defend three interconnected points. (1) Insofar as Locke's account of weakness of the will calls for some sort of freedom, the freedom required is nothing over and above freedom of thinking; it is not freedom of willing. (2) Locke's conception of akrasia is relatively mild in the sense that it does not involve a particularly deep form of practical irrationality. (3) Although in the second and subsequent editions of the *Essay* Locke loosens the strong and direct connection between judging and willing that was characteristic of the first edition, it is mistaken to claim, as some commentators do (though not Chappell⁶), that Locke entirely renounces intellectualism. His new position retains a significant streak of intellectualism, although it is no longer situated, as in the first edition, between evaluative judgments about goods and volitions, but between some such judgments and desires. What remains of intellectualism, I shall argue, accounts for the mildness of Locke's conception of akrasia.

In the first section, I briefly discuss the changes Locke brings to his moral psychology as of the second edition. In the second section, I focus on Locke's position regarding weakness of the will.

I. Three alterations made to the second edition

The alterations that Locke brings to his moral psychology concern: (1) the causal role of the psychological state of uneasiness; (2) the fact that the strengths of our desires for certain goods are not necessarily proportionate to the judged greatness of those goods; and (3) the power to suspend one's desires. All three are essential to Locke's conception of practical rationality in general, and to his account of akrasia in particular.

(1) Regarding the first issue, here is how Locke presents his change of mind and introduces his new position in the second edition:

so is a matter of employing our freedom of thinking by *willing* to find out all the probabilities we can discover, and of willing to examine them carefully before judging.

⁵ Cf. Glauser (2003). Furthermore, Locke cannot take the expressions "depravity of our wills" and "weakness of the will" literally, because depravity and weakness are dispositions, and the will is a power. Locke, as is well known, denies that a power can be the bearer of another power (§14). Only a person, an agent, can be depraved or weak; a power cannot be. In fact, Locke makes no use of these expressions in the *Essay*. On this matter, cf. Chappell (1994), p. 201.

⁶ Cf. Chappell (1994), p. 203.

“To return to the Enquiry, *what is it that determines the Will in regard to our Actions?* And that upon second thoughts I am apt to imagine is not, as is generally supposed, the greater good in view: But some (and for the most part pressing) *uneasiness* a Man is at present under. This is that which successively determines the *Will*, and sets us upon those Actions, we perform” (II 21 §31).

“It seems so established and settled a maxim, by the general consent of all Mankind, That good, the greater good, determines the will, that I do not at all wonder, that when I first publish’d my thoughts on this Subject I took it for granted; and I imagine, that by a great many I shall be thought more excusable, for having then done so, than that now I have ventur’d to recede from so received an Opinion. But yet, upon a stricter inquiry, I am forced to conclude that *good*, the *greater good*, though apprehended and acknowledged to be so, does not determine the *will*, until our desire, raised proportionably to it, makes us *uneasy* in the want of it” (II 21 §35).

Thus, as of the second edition what immediately determines a volition is no longer the idea of a certain good judged to be greater than others, but a conative, motivational state: an uneasiness closely connected to a desire for some absent good represented by an idea. So, in the second edition Locke says: “Good and Evil, present and absent, ‘tis true, work upon the mind: But that which immediately determines the *Will*, from time to time, to every voluntary Action, is the *uneasiness* of *desire*, fixed on some absent good”⁷. Thus, the uneasiness of desire is fitted into the psychological causal chain as an intermediate link between the idea of a good and a volition to act in order to attain that good. Accordingly, the general theory of uneasiness depends on two claims that hold for the explanation of ordinary action as well as for cases of akrasia: (1) two uneasinesses cannot simultaneously cause two volitions, for we are “capable but of one determination of the will to one action at once” (§36); (2) whenever an agent has different uneasinesses at the same time, the uneasiness that “has the precedency in determining the will” is “that *ordinarily*, which is the most pressing of those, that are judged capable of being then removed” (§40, my italics).

Here, it is important to remember Locke’s distinction between desire and volition. A desire always aims at a certain good, which is to be attained by acting in a certain way⁸. A volition, however, directly aims at nothing more than some type of act which the agent believes he can perform, and which he believes is, or is conducive to attaining, a desired good⁹. Whereas “Desire is directed to the agreeable, [...] Will is

⁷ *Essay*, II 21 §33. Bennett rightly notes that Locke is unclear whether uneasiness is identical with desire, is a cause of desire, or an effect of desire. Locke seems to vacillate between the three possibilities (cf. Bennett 1994, pp. 96-97). So, let us say merely that an uneasiness is always closely connected to a desire inasmuch as there is no desire without some uneasiness, however faint.

⁸ Good and evil are primarily pleasure and pain; secondarily, good and evil are “*things [...] that draw after them Pleasure and Pain*” (§61).

⁹ “*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” (§30).

directed only to our actions and terminates there”¹⁰. Because one can have several conflicting desires at the same time, each aiming at a different good, whereas one can have only one volition at a time, one can quite well desire several goods without willing, or trying to act in order to attain them. Although a volition depends on a desire, not all the desires we may simultaneously have cause a volition. Hence, it is possible to have desires that are contrary to one’s present volition, because they run contrary to the desire that determines the volition to act in a certain way. Without such a distinction between desire and volition, one could not explain coerced or constrained voluntary action, which implies, on the one hand, willing to act in order to obtain a certain goal whilst, on the other hand, desiring that such a goal should not be realised: “A Man, whom I cannot deny, may oblige me to use persuasions to another, which at the same time I am speaking, I may wish not prevail on him. In this case, ‘tis plain the *Will* and *Desire* run counter. I will the Action, that tends one way, whilst my desire tends another, and that the direct contrary” (§30).

(2) The second modification Locke brings to his moral psychology in the second edition onwards is that the idea of an absent good does not necessarily cause a desire and uneasiness for it: “absent good may be looked on, and considered without desire” (§31); “[...] they may have a clear view of good, great and confessed good, without being concerned for it, or moved by it” (§43). Furthermore, when we have the ideas of several goods, all of which we desire to a certain extent, and some of which we judge to be greater than others, it is not always the case that the respective strengths of our desires are proportionate to the comparative greatness of the desired goods. Although we judge a good X to be greater than a good Y, it may nevertheless happen that our desire for Y is stronger than our desire for X: “the *greater visible good* does not always raise Men’s *desires* in proportion to the greatness, it appears, and is acknowledged to have” (§44). Of course, if we were always entirely rational the comparative strengths of our desires would be proportionate to the comparative judged greatness of the goods. However, because we are sometimes less than entirely rational in practical matters, we have an obligation to strive to ensure, as far as possible, a fitness between strength of desire and judged greatness of good, just as in speculative matters we are under the rational obligation to see to it, as far as possible, that the degree of our assent to a probable proposition is proportionate to the degree of the available probabilities in favour of it all things considered.

(3) The third important addition Locke makes in the second edition is the theory of suspension of desire. Suppose one simultaneously has several desires and uneasinesses caused by ideas of different absent goods, some desires being stronger than others, and that one wishes to examine these ideas and to deliberate before acting. The point of deliberation is twofold: (a) to determine which presented good to pursue among others (which desire to try to satisfy); (b) if that is settled, to determine which type of action to perform in order to attain the chosen good. The latter deliberation optimally results in what Locke calls a “last judgment”. Locke’s theory of a last judgement is largely to be found in his correspondence with van Limborch, although traces of the doctrine are also present in II 21. A last judgement is a judgement “about the thing to be done” (CJL 7, 2979: 411), that is, about an action that one believes to be in one’s power, and that one

¹⁰ CJL 7, 2925: 327. Also: “[...] the *will* or power of *Volition* is conversant about nothing, but our own Actions; terminates there; and reaches no farther” (§30).

intends to perform right away. It is a practical evaluative judgement, the content of which has the general form: “this [type of action] is better for here and now” (CJL 7, 2979: 410)¹¹. Locke takes the expression “last judgement” literally. A last judgement always “immediately precedes Volition”, so that a last judgement is last precisely because no further judgement is made between it and one’s willing to act¹². One of the implications of Locke’s position is that, once a last judgement has been made, one is not free to will to perform any (type of) action different from the one aimed at in the judgement. As he explains to van Limborch, “liberty cannot consist in a power of determining an action of willing contrary to the judgement of the understanding because a man does not possess such a power”. For, “an action of willing this or that always follows a judgement of the understanding by which a man judges this to be better for here and now” (2979: 410). In other words, the volition that immediately follows a last judgement always conforms to it¹³.

Let us return to the suspension of desires and to the first part of the process of deliberation enabled by suspension, the part that determines which presented good to pursue among others (which desire to try to satisfy). If one’s most powerful present desire and uneasiness determined one to will to act before the process of deliberation began, or before it were completed, the whole point of the process would be defeated, since one would not act according to the result of one’s deliberation. Therefore, in order to initiate the process of deliberation and to pursue it to its rational conclusion, the agent must have some power to momentarily prevent her most powerful present desire and uneasiness from causing a volition to act. The suspension of desire, however, does not suppress or eliminate one’s desires. During the period of their suspension our desires remain, along with their attendant uneasinesses, although they will not remain unaltered as to their comparative strengths if we conduct our deliberation to its conclusion. What is momentarily suspended, strictly speaking, is a desire’s causing a volition to act. Our power of suspension, of course, is empirically limited because some uneasinesses are overwhelming. A man being tortured cannot suspend his desire to be relieved of his present pain; he is not able to momentarily prevent that desire from causing him to will to do something in order to avoid further pain. However, under less extreme circumstances, without the power to suspend one’s desires the attempt to examine one’s

¹¹ However, as Locke makes clear to van Limborch, a last judgement is not necessarily a “mature and right judgement”; it does not necessarily result from deliberation. For, “that judgement [...] which is in reality the last judgement” is so “whether it has been well pondered and recast by mature deliberation, or is extemporaneous and sprung from a sudden impulse; and equally determines the will, whether or not it is in accordance with reason” (CJL 7, 2979: 411).

¹² Thus, there are three circumstances in which a last judgement can be made. It can be made without our suspending our desires in order to deliberate, and so without deliberating; it can be made after we have prematurely de-suspended our desires, that is, after we have interrupted our deliberation before its rational completion; or it can be made after we have de-suspended our desires and when our deliberation has achieved its rational conclusion.

¹³ Thus, a volition in Locke is determined both by an uneasiness and by a last judgement. I will not here go into an explanation of how this possible. The strategy I develop elsewhere is to show that an uneasiness and a last judgement determine a volition in two different, yet complementary respects. The uneasiness determines a volition in the sense of motivating it; the last judgement determines a volition by way of fixing its content to a certain type of bodily movement or act of thinking to be performed here and now. Cf. Glauser (2003).

ideas of absent goods and to deliberate before trying to act would be pointless. This is why Locke repeats that it is not inevitably the case that the most powerful uneasiness that one has at a certain moment determines one to will to act at that moment; it does so only “ordinarily,” “for the most part,” that is, when one does not suspend one’s desires in order to deliberate, whatever the reason for not deliberating may be¹⁴.

“[...] it is natural [...] that the greatest, and most pressing [uneasiness] 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. In this lies the liberty Man has; and from not using it right [...] we precipitate the determination of our *wills*, and engage too soon before due *Examination*. To prevent this we have a power to *suspend* the prosecution of this or that desire, as every one daily may Experiment in himself. This seems to me to be the source of all liberty; in this seems to consist that, which is (I think improperly) call’d *Free will*” (§47).

Clearly, Locke refuses to call the kind of freedom discussed here “free will”, although he acknowledges that others improperly call it so. And one can well understand why he refuses. For what the power to suspend one’s desires enables is the effective use of one’s power to freely deliberate. Locke’s point is that it is freedom to think, not freedom to will, that is enabled by the suspension of desire.

As we have seen, according to Locke, it is only “ordinarily” or “for the most part” that one’s present strongest desire determines one to will to act in order to satisfy that desire. But what does this mean exactly? Does it mean, for instance, that one can see to it that one of one’s present weaker desires determines a volition to act? Does it mean, in other words, that one can freely will to act in order to satisfy a present weaker desire whilst also having stronger desires at the same time?

I propose a negative reply. In order to see why, let us ask: When is it *not* the case that one’s strongest present desire determines one to will to act accordingly? The only case Locke mentions is when we suspend our desires in order to deliberate, as is clear from §47 quoted above¹⁵. This strongly suggests that as long as we do not suspend our desires - or, if we do, as soon as we de-suspend them - the strongest uneasiness of desire determines a volition to act in order to satisfy that desire. It is *only if and whilst* we suspend our desires that the strongest uneasiness of desire does not determine a volition.

In fact, so much is only to be expected, for, as we shall see in the next section, the whole point of suspending our desires in order to deliberate before acting - about which of our desires to satisfy - is to try to make the respective strengths of our desires proportionate to the comparative judged greatness of the goods considered. That is to

¹⁴ Cf., for example, §40.

¹⁵ This question should not be confused with another question, namely: When is a volition not determined by an uneasiness? There is only one case where a volition is not determined by an uneasiness and that is when we will to continue an action. In such a case “The motive, for continuing in the same State or Action, is only the present satisfaction in it; The motive to change, is always some *uneasiness*: nothing setting us upon the change of State, or upon any new Action, but some uneasiness” (§29).

say, we try to see to it by deliberating that the goods we judge greater become the objects of stronger desires, whilst the goods we judge lesser become the objects of weaker desires. This implies that (we believe that) once we de-suspend our desires the strongest desire will prevail; it will determine a volition to act in order to satisfy that desire. Otherwise, why should we be concerned to deliberate in order to heighten our desires for absent greater goods, and to weaken our desires for lesser present goods? In sum, the whole point of suspending our desires and of deliberating is to try to ensure that, once we have completed our deliberation and de-suspended our desires, the strongest desire we end up with will be the desire for the good we judge greatest. Locke says as much in an admittedly abbreviated manner:

“And thus, 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” (§46).

“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. For 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*, which determines his *will*, and sets him at work in pursuit of his choice on all occasions that offer” (§56)¹⁶.

Strictly speaking, therefore, it turns out that: (1) a volition is always causally determined by our strongest desire except when it is in our power to suspend our desires momentarily in order to deliberate, during which process there is no volition; (2) a volition, when it occurs, *always* aims to contribute to satisfy our present strongest desire. What suspension of desire affords is the possibility for us to employ freedom of thinking in order to modify, in some limited measure, the comparative strengths of our present desires so as to ensure that the desire we judge should be the strongest becomes the strongest. At no point in Locke’s account is there any possibility of willing to act in order to satisfy a comparatively weaker present desire among stronger ones.

II. Locke’s discussion of Ovid’s phenomenon

Because willing to act is always determined by a last judgement and by the uneasiness of the strongest desire (when we do not suspend our desires, or after we have de-suspended them), Locke rules out the possibility of what Alfred Mele calls a strict incontinent action, which Mele defines thus:

¹⁶ “For, since the *will* supposes knowledge to guide its choice, all that we can do, is to hold our *wills* undetermined, till we have *examined* the good and evil of what we desire. What follows after that, follows in a chain of Consequences linked one to another, all depending on the last determination of the Judgment, which whether it shall be upon an hasty and precipitate view, or upon a due and mature *Examination*, is in our power” (§52). “The result of our judgment upon that Examination is what ultimately determines the Man, who could not be *free* if his *will* were determin’d by any thing, but his own *desire* guided by his own *Judgement*” (§71).

“An action *A* is a *strict incontinent action* if and only if it is performed intentionally and freely and, at the time at which it is performed, its agent consciously holds a judgement to the effect that there is good and sufficient reason for his not performing an *A* at that time.”¹⁷

In Mele’s definition, judgement and action are roughly simultaneous (“at the time at which it is performed...”), so Mele’s judgement corresponds to a Lockean last judgement. And the content of Mele’s judgement “there is good and sufficient reason for [...] not performing an *A* (now)” would be phrased in a Lockean last judgement as “refraining from doing *A* is better for here and now”. Because a Lockean last judgement immediately determines a volition, the volition would be to refrain from doing *A* now, which is incompatible with Mele’s definition of a strict incontinent action. Locke’s internalist conception of the relation between last judgement and volition shows that the kind of akrasia he envisages is not the sort picked out by Mele.

Also, it is situated elsewhere. The main point of Locke’s account of Ovid’s phenomenon lies in the lack of fitness between the judged greatness of goods and the strengths of the desires for those goods. This is a discrepancy between our judgement regarding goods and our desire for them, not between last judgement (regarding an action) and volition.

In order to situate Locke’s position more precisely, it is useful to see how it fares with Davidson’s understanding of the problem of akrasia. Davidson defines an incontinent action in the following way:

“D. In doing *x* an agent acts incontinently if and only if: (a) the agent does *x* intentionally; (b) the agent believes there is an alternative action *y* open to him; and (c) the agent judges that, *all things considered*, it would be better to do *y* than to do *x*”¹⁸.

The difficulty in understanding the possibility of such an action arises because it seems to be incompatible with the conjunction of two plausible claims:

“P1. If an agent wants to do *x* more than he wants to do *y* and he believes himself free to do either *x* or *y*, then he will intentionally do *x* if he does either *x* or *y* intentionally.

P2. If an agent judges that it would be better to do *x* than to do *y*, then he wants to do *x* more than he wants to do *y*”¹⁹.

Let us reformulate P1 and P2 in Locke’s vocabulary, keeping in mind his distinction between desire and volition:

P1* If an agent desires to attain a good *x* more than he desires to attain a good *y*, and he believes himself free either to do an action *A* in order to satisfy his desire for

¹⁷ Mele (1987), p. 7.

¹⁸ Davidson (1989), p. 22, my italics.

¹⁹ Davidson (1989), p. 23.

x or an action B in order to satisfy his desire for y , then he will voluntarily do A if he does either A or B voluntarily.

P2* If an agent judges that x is a greater good than y , then he desires to attain x more than to attain y ²⁰.

As we have seen, Locke does not accept P1* unconditionally. For Locke, P1* obtains only if the agent does not suspend his desires, or after he has de-suspended them. If and whilst he suspends them, it is not the case that his present strongest desire determines a volition to act in order to satisfy that desire.

Next, it should be noted that in P2* the judgement is not a Lockean last judgement, because it is not about an action to be performed now, but about a good to be attained by acting in a certain way. According to Vailati, Locke refuses P2²¹. It is preferable to say that he refuses P2*. Because Locke rejects P2* his version of weakness of the will is made possible, as we have seen, by an occasional discrepancy between the judged greatness of goods and the strengths of the desires for those goods. We may judge X to be greater than Y and yet desire Y more than X, or not even desire X at all.

It is important to notice, too, that the kind of *akrasia* Locke considers is a discrepancy between the strength of our desires and our *judgment* about the greatness of certain goods. It is not necessarily a discrepancy between the strength of our desires and the objective greatness of the goods themselves. To make this clearer, suppose that X is in fact a greater good than Y, and that one judges falsely that Y is a greater good than X, but that one nevertheless desires X more than Y. In such a case, our desires just luckily happen to be proportionate to the goods considered. Yet, this chance fitness does not manifest the rational fitness Locke holds we are under the obligation to aim for, because the chance fitness is based on an unknown mistake in judgment, that is, both on error and ignorance. True, when discussing Ovid's phenomenon, Locke concentrates on true judgements²²; he does not explicitly consider a case of discrepancy between desire and false judgment. Yet, if he were to, I submit he would consider it a case of *akrasia* in his

²⁰ There are two reasons for which we cannot rephrase P2 by saying "If an agent makes the last judgement that it is better to do x than y here and now, then he wills to do x more than he wills to do y here and now". First, because, according to Locke one can have only one volition at a time, "we being capable but of one determination of the will to one action at once" (§36). Secondly, for Locke volitions do not admit of degrees, contrary to desires; one cannot will more or less to do something, but one can desire to attain one good more than one desires to attain another. This is why Davidson's use of "wanting" in P2 must be translated as "desiring" in P2*.

²¹ Cf. Vailati (1990), p. 214.

²² For instance: "that *good*, the greater *good*, though apprehended and acknowledged to be so, does not determine the *will*, until our desire raised proportionably to it, makes us *uneasy* in the want of it" (§35). In the following passages it is clear that the judgement that something is a good, or a greater good than something else, is taken to be true: "till he feels an *uneasiness* in the want of it, his *will* will not be determin'd to any action in pursuit of this confessed greater good" (§35); "'Tis not for want of viewing the greater good: for he sees, and acknowledges it" (§35); "all good, even seen, and confessed to be so, does not necessarily move every particular man's *desire*" (§43); "they may have a clear view of good, great and confessed good, without being concern'd for it, or moved by it" (§43); "the *greater visible good* does not always raise Men's *desires* in proportion to the greatness, it appears, and is acknowledged to have" (§44).

sense. If so, *akrasia* as understood by Locke occurs when our desires are inadequate to our judgment about goods, whether the judgment be true or false.

At this point, two questions arise. (A) What causes such a discrepancy? (B) How can it be either avoided or remedied? Let us discuss both questions successively. As regards the first question (A), it is important to distinguish two aspects of the discrepancy. For, on the one hand, (A1) some desires are too weak, or even non-existent, whereas, on the other hand, (A2) other desires are too strong, with respect to the judged greatness of goods.

II (A1). *Desires too weak*

According to Locke, we are generally concerned both with (a) relief from our present misery, which consists in all the present pains we endure, and with (b) attaining happiness, which consists in all the pleasures or positive goods we are capable of, including eternal salvation. “*Happiness* [...] in its full extent is the utmost Pleasure we are capable of, and *Misery* the utmost Pain: And 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”²³. However, there is an asymmetry between pleasure and relief from pain. Whereas complete relief from pain is mere contentedness and can be achieved without enjoying many pleasures, the enjoyment of pleasure (and happiness) depends on and implies relief from pain.

It is therefore important to distinguish two sorts of absent goods - relief from present pain and positive good - and, correspondingly, two sorts of uneasiness. First, there is the uneasiness that is identical to a present pain, and this is always equal to the desire to be rid of the pain: “All pain of the body, of what sort soever [sic], and disquiet of the mind, is *uneasiness*: And with this is always join’d Desire, equal to the pain or *uneasiness* felt” (§31). In other words, the strength of the desire to be rid of a pain is always equal to the greatness of the pain. “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 be attained, we may call it *desire*, no body feeling pain, that he wishes not to be eased of, with a desire equal to that pain, and inseparable from it” (§31). Now, relief from a pain is an absent good called “ease” (albeit not a positive good because it is not the same thing as a pleasure). Yet, the importance of a desired ease is always relative to the greatness of the pain we desire to be relieved of. Hence, there is no disproportion between the strength of our desires for ease and the importance of such absent goods. *Akrasia*, therefore, does not concern desire for relief from present pain, but only desire for positive goods.

Nor does it concern desire to continue to enjoy present pleasure. At least, if we consider present pleasures in abstraction from their consequences, our desires to continue to enjoy them are always equal to the greatness of these goods:

“Things in their present enjoyment are what they seem; the apparent and real good are, in this case, always the same. For the Pain or Pleasure being just so great, and no greater, than it is felt, the present Good or Evil is really so much as it appears. And therefore were every Action of ours concluded within it self, and drew no

²³ II 21 §42. “So the greatest Happiness consists, in the having those things, which produce the greatest Pleasure ; and in the absence of those, which cause any disturbance, any pain” (§55).

Consequences after it, we should undoubtedly never err in our choice of good; we should always infallibly prefer the best.”²⁴

Therefore, the occasional discrepancy between the strengths of our desires on the one hand, and the greatness of absent goods on the other hand, concerns only goods that are *both* positive and absent. Why? Because the absence of an *acknowledged* absent *positive* good does not necessarily cause a pain. So, even if we judge that a certain absent positive good X is greater than Y, it may be that we have little or no desire for X when its absence causes no pain and uneasiness:

“As much as we desire any absent good, so much are we in pain for it. But here all absent good does not, according to the greatness it has, or is acknowledg’d to have, cause pain equal to that greatness; as all pain causes desire equal to it self: Because the absence of good is not always a pain, as the presence of pain is. And therefore absent good may be looked on, and considered without *desire*” (§31; cf. §36).

There is a good reason for which this is the case, for if every absent positive good we conceive caused a pain “we should be constantly and infinitely miserable; there being infinite degrees of happiness, which are not in our possession” (§44).

Thus, two factors contribute to explain why we are naturally led to have some desires for absent positive goods that are too weak in comparison with the acknowledged greatness of those goods. First, because happiness depends on relief from the numerous present pains that assail us relating to the “ordinary necessities of our lives” – such as “the *uneasiness* of *Hunger, Thirst, Heat, Cold, Weariness* with labour and *Sleepiness* in their constant returns, *etc.*” (§45) - our general desire to be rid of such pains occupies the greater part of our time and efforts, and takes precedence over our general desire to attain great acknowledged absent positive goods²⁵.

Secondly, we correctly judge that desiring all the positive absent goods it may be possible to pursue would only increase our present misery by raising more uneasiness. Because of these two factors we tend to be content with the mere removal of present pain and with the enjoyment of the scant positive goods we can easily obtain in the near future: “All *uneasiness* therefore being removed, a moderate portion of good serves at present to content Men; and some few degrees of Pleasure in a succession of ordinary Enjoyments make up a happiness, wherein they can be satisfied”²⁶.

²⁴ II 21 §58. In the last lines of the quotation “choice” and “prefer” refer to desires, for they aim respectively at the “good” and the “best”. Also: “Therefore, as to present Pleasure and Pain, the Mind, as has been said, never mistakes that which is really good or evil; that, which is the greater Pleasure, or the greater Pain, is really just as it appears” (§63).

²⁵ “Because, as has been said, the first step in our endeavours after happiness being to get wholly out of the confines of misery, and to feel no part of it, the *will* can be at leisure for nothing else, till every *uneasiness* we feel be perfectly removed, which in the multitude of wants, and desires, we are beset with in this imperfect State, we are not like to be ever freed from in this World” (§46). Cf. also §36, §57 and §64.

²⁶ II 21 §44. “Convince a Man never so much, that plenty has its advantages over poverty; make him see and own, that the handsome conveniencies of life are better than nasty penury: yet as long as he is content with the latter, and finds no *uneasiness* in it, he moves not; his *will* never is determin’d to any action, that shall bring him out of it” (§35). “For in this narrow scantling of

The two factors explain why we can have disproportionately weak desires, or even no desire at all, for acknowledged great positive absent goods,²⁷. What is striking in this account, though, is that the reasons invoked by Locke have nothing to do with Molyneux's conception of "depravity of the will", nor even with any deep practical irrationality. On the contrary, given the hard conditions and constraints bearing on our daily subsistence, both factors in Locke's explanation seem to make the discrepancy between judgment about, and desire for, absent positive goods quite rational and thus, to some extent, hardly avoidable.

II (A2). *Desires too strong*

There are at least two reasons for our having disproportionately great desires for acknowledged small goods. First, there is the pervasive influence of our passions. Their influence in this respect is due to the fact that desire and uneasiness accompany, or are part of, most passions²⁸. Secondly, there are what Locke calls "fantastical *uneasiness*, (as itch after *Honour, Power, or Riches*, etc.) which acquir'd habits by Fashion, Example, and Education have settled [sic] in us, and a thousand other irregular desires, which custom has made natural to us" (§45). Both passionate and "irregular" desires tend to be disproportionately strong in comparison with the judged greatness of the absent positive goods they aim at.

Are there more factors, according to Locke, than just these two? It is hard to say. In §56 he addresses the issue "*How Men come often to prefer the worse to the better*", and he gives a detailed reply in §§57-70. One might have expected Locke, in these paragraphs, to be pursuing his previous discussion of the discrepancy between our desires and our (presumably true) judgments about absent goods (as in §§35 and 43). But this is not the case. For in §§57-70 he seeks to prove that we prefer the worse to the better because of *wrong* judgements about the absent positive goods considered. Thus, instead of pursuing the question of the discrepancy between the strength of desires for absent positive goods and judgements about the value of such goods, Locke now addresses the altogether different question of the discrepancy between our desires and *the absent goods themselves*. And he answers the latter question by showing that in such a case our desires are determined by, and therefore adequate to, mistaken judgments. We will not look at the reasons Locke gives for our false judgments, but here is an example. He identifies an illusion common to sight and to moral psychology. Just as

capacity, which we are accustomed to, and sensible of here, wherein we enjoy but one pleasure at once, which, when all uneasiness is away, is, while it lasts, sufficient to think our selves happy, 'tis not all remote, and even apparent good, that affects us. Because the indolency and enjoyment we have, sufficing for our present Happiness, we desire not to venture the change: Since we judge that we are happy already, being content, and that is enough" (§59).

²⁷ This is why "The *Idea* of it [a positive absent good] indeed may be in the mind, and view'd as present there: but nothing will be in the mind as a present good, able to counter-balance 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 good, is there only like other *Ideas*, the object of bare unactive speculation" (§37).

²⁸ "But yet we are not to look upon the *uneasiness* which makes up, or at least accompanies most of the other Passions, as wholly excluded in the case. *Aversion, Fear, Anger, Envy, Shame*, etc. have each their *uneasiness* too, and thereby influence the *will*. [...] Nay there is, I think, scarce any of the Passions to be found without *desire* join'd with it" (§39).

bodies seen close up may seem larger than those viewed at a distance, positive absent goods which we believe may be attained easily in the near future *seem* greater than those which we believe to require more efforts and time to be attained, and often a lesser probability of success:

“[...] *when we compare present Pleasure or Pain with future*, (which is usually the case in the most important determinations of the Will) *we often make wrong Judgments* of them, taking our measures of them in different positions of distance. Objects, near our view, are apt to be thought greater, than those of a larger size, that are more remote: And so it is with Pleasures and Pains, the present is apt to carry it, and those at a distance have the disadvantage in the Comparison” (§63).

This confirms that Locke retains an important intellectualist streak even in the second and subsequent editions of the *Essay*. For, inasmuch as the discrepancy between the respective strengths of our desires and the respective greatness of the goods considered is to be explained by wrong judgments, it is assumed that the desires that are disproportionate to the goods, are determined by – and adequate to – false judgments regarding the goods. Indeed, speaking of such false judgements, he says: “Other *uneasinesses* arise from our desires of absent good; which desires always bear proportion to, and depend on the judgment we make, and the relish we have of any absent good; in both which we are apt to be variously misled, and that by our own fault” (§57).

II (B). *Avoiding and overcoming akrasia*

Let us return to akrasia. How does Locke think it can be either avoided or overcome? His explanation focuses not on desires that are too strong, but on those that are too weak, one of the basic reasons for this being that he wants to account for the fact that persons tend to be insufficiently concerned for their salvation (cf. §§60 and 70). In such a case, according to Locke, we have not made the absent good considered “a necessary part of our happiness”:

“[...] all good, even seen, and confessed to be so, does not necessarily move every particular man’s *desire*; but only that part, or so much of it, as is consider’d, and taken to make a necessary part of his happiness. All other good however great in reality, or appearance, excites not a Man’s *desires*, who looks not on it to make a part of that happiness, wherewith he, in his present thoughts, can satisfie [sic] himself” (§43).

But how, exactly, does one make some good a part of one’s happiness? We know what the effect of such an endeavour is: it is raising the strength of a desire so as to make it appropriate to the greatness of the judged absent good: “Men may and should correct their palates, and give a relish to what either has, or they suppose has none” (§69). So, how do we produce such an effect?

Locke gives two answers. One is cognitive, the other is practical: “A due consideration will do it in some cases; and practice, application, and custom in most” (§69). Let us set aside the practical aspect (“practice, application, and custom”) and consider the cognitive aspect: “due consideration”. This echoes a previous passage:

“And thus, 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” (§46). This is only one in a long series of passages where Locke holds that, with the help of our power to suspend our desires (cf. §§47 and 56), we can raise them to some extent merely by deliberating and judging better than we previously did²⁹. What does this mean? It cannot mean that by more deliberation and rational examination we *correct* our previous judgements about the respective greatness of goods, since those judgments are supposed to be true. Indeed, in Locke’s words, we are taking about goods “seen, and confessed to be so”. Therefore, it can only mean that by further deliberation and rational examination we *learn* something new: we discover a probability we had not previously taken into account, the probability that a certain absent positive good is “a part of our happiness”.

“we do not fix our desires on every apparent greater good, unless it be judged to be necessary to our happiness: if we think we can be happy without it, it moves us not. This is another occasion to Men of *judging wrong*, when they take not that to be necessary to their Happiness, which really is so” (§68).

In other words, it is one thing to judge a certain good to be very great; it is quite another to judge that good to be a necessary part of our happiness³⁰. By coming to make the second judgment, we come to learn something not expressed by the first. Thus, if a desire for a great absent positive good is inappropriately weak with regard to the first (presumably true) judgment about that good, it is in our power, according to Locke, to make the desire appropriate by heightening it. This can be accomplished by further rational deliberation just in case our deliberation reaches the conclusion expressed by the second judgment: that the good is conducive to – or constitutive of – our happiness.

There is, however, a difficulty to be addressed. As we saw above, when Locke explains why the strength of our desires may be disproportionate to the greatness of goods, he presupposes that the disproportionate desires are appropriate to the false judgements we make of the goods. Yet, as we have also seen, the strength of our desires is not necessarily appropriate to the (presumably true) judgements we make concerning the greatness of goods. The difficulty can readily be solved. What Locke wants to say is that when a false judgment about the greatness of a good is accompanied by a judgment that such a good is necessary to our happiness, then the two judgments together determine a desire which is appropriate to the first judgment, a desire whose strength is

²⁹ For instance: “absent good, though thought on, confessed, and appearing to be good, not making any part of this unhappiness in its absence, is jostled out [...] till due, and repeated Contemplation has brought it nearer to our Mind, given some relish of it, and raised in us some desire” (§45); “we should take pains to suit the relish of our Minds to the true intrinsick good or ill, that is in things; and not permit an allow’d or supposed possible great and weighty good to slip out of our thoughts, without leaving any relish, any desire of it self there, till, by a due consideration of its true worth, we have formed appetites in our Minds suitable to it” (§53).

³⁰ “’Tis our opinion of such a necessity [the necessity of a certain good to “the making or increase of our Happiness”] that gives it its attraction: without that we are not moved to any absent *good*” (§59); “Their aptness therefore to conclude, that they can be happy without it, is one great occasion, that Men often are not raised to the desire of the greatest absent *good*” (§60).

proportionate to the greatness of the good *as (mistakenly) judged*. But, when a true judgment about the greatness of a good is *not* accompanied by a judgment that the good is necessary to our happiness, then the desire for the good may be inappropriate to the (first and only) judgment because the strength of the desire may not be proportionate to the greatness of the good *as (truly) judged*.

III. Conclusion

Two connected points must be made in conclusion. The first concerns Locke's conception of akrasia. According to Locke, Ovid's phenomenon is important, not only for reasons pertaining to his ideal of human rationality, but also because our salvation may depend on avoiding or overcoming it. Yet, it seems to involve no deep psychological irrationality. First, as we have seen, Locke rejects the possibility of what Mele calls a strict incontinent action. Secondly, Locke seems to believe that the discrepancy between the strength of our desires and our (presumably true) judgements concerning the greatness of absent positive goods occurs when we do not suspend our desires in order to deliberate and think more carefully, or when we prematurely interrupt the process. Completing the process calls for the recognition that a certain judged great good is part of our happiness. Locke does not talk about such a discrepancy remaining *after* deliberation has come to its full rational conclusion. This implies that when we are victims of akrasia, the judgements to which our desires are inappropriate are not 'all-things-considered' judgements. They cannot be, since our desires can be heightened by better judgment and by understanding that the goods in question are part of the happiness we desire.

This is not to say that akratic *action* is ruled out by Locke. On the contrary, it turns out that:

S does B akratically if:

- (i) S judges that X is a greater good than Y,
- (ii) S desires Y more than X,
- (iii) S judges that S can do either A in order to attain X, or B in order to attain Y,
- (iv) either S does not suspend S's desires in order to deliberate, or S does so but interrupts her deliberation before its rational conclusion, and therefore S continues to desire Y more than X (therefore S's desire and uneasiness for Y, along with S's last judgment about what is to be done here and now, determine S to will to do B);
- (v) S does B.

In such a case S acts contrary to S's judgment about the respective greatness of goods X and Y. However, as long as the judgement that X is a greater good than Y is not an "all-things-considered" judgment, Locke's conception of akrasia seems to be a relatively mild affair. However, this is somewhat a question of perspective. If Locke's conception of akrasia seems mild, involving no deep irrationality, it is partly because of his high normative requirements concerning rationality, both epistemic and practical, along with his belief in the possibility of our satisfying them to some extent. This leads us to the next point, concerning intellectualism.

The second concluding remark is that in the second and subsequent editions of the *Essay*, Locke is far from entirely renouncing intellectualism³¹. True, in any case, our being possessed of our most general desire, the desire for happiness, is not determined by our evaluative judgments, but seems to be entirely natural, although we are often in doubt as to what happiness consists in. Furthermore, as of the second edition, evaluative judgements about goods no longer directly determine volitions. Locke's amended moral psychology now makes the connection between judgement about goods and volition both indirect and weaker by introducing the intermediate role of desires and uneasiness, as distinct from volitions, and also the power to suspend desires in order to deliberate before willing to act. Nevertheless, important aspects of intellectualism remain. For example, (1) disproportionately weak and strong desires are determined by false judgements about the greatness of certain goods, accompanied by the judgement that the goods, as judged, are necessary to our happiness. The ensuing desires may be disproportionate to the goods, but they are appropriate to the judgments. (2) While we suspend our desires, it is in our power, if we pursue our deliberation to its full conclusion, to heighten an inappropriately weak desire by deliberating more and judging better, so that the new (hopefully true) judgments about an acknowledged great good made during suspension – including the judgment that the good is a necessary part of our happiness – determine a desire that is appropriate to the judgement about the greatness of the good, and thus, proportionate to the greatness of the good. (3) If this happens, after we de-suspend our desires, the strongest desire, with its attendant uneasiness, determines a volition. In such a case our new judgements about a certain good indirectly determine a volition by directly heightening a desire and uneasiness for a greater good acknowledged to be part of our happiness. (4) In all cases, though, volitions are directly determined, not only by uneasiness, but also by *last* judgements, which are not directly about goods, but about what is to be done here and now in order to attain them.

Aspects of intellectualism are retained in the four points just mentioned. They go a long way to explain why Locke's conception of weakness of the will is comparatively mild.

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³¹ This point has been made by Chappell (1994); however, our arguments differ.

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