

PHIL 3923H: Honors Colloquium on Free Will
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8/29/06
Locke, “Of Power”, §1–14 and §31–50

- Two types of power: active (to make changes) and passive (to receive changes). God and spirits give us clear examples of active power. But, reflection on the operations of our own minds (as opposed to sensation of external bodies) gives us the best insight into the idea of active power. (§2, §4–5)

This *Power* which the mind has, thus to order the consideration of any *Idea*, or the forbearing to consider it; or to prefer the motion of any part of the body to its rest, and *vice versa* in any particular instance is that which we call the *Will*. The actual exercise of that power, by directing any particular action, or its forbearance is that which we call *Volition* or *Willing*. The forbearance or performance of that action, consequent to such order or command of the mind is called *Voluntary*.

- Our ideas of liberty and necessity come from reflecting on our own power (§7):

Every one, I think, finds in himself a *Power* to begin or forbear, continue or put an end to several Actions in himself. From the consideration of the extent of this power of the mind over the actions of the Man, which every one finds in himself, arise the *Ideas* of *Liberty* and *Necessity*.

- And now for Locke’s account of freedom (§8):

...so far as a Man has a power to think, or not to think; to move, or not to move, according to the preference or direction of his own mind, so far is a Man *Free*.

Note how something can be voluntary without being free. Also, pay attention to the examples given in §9–10.

...the Person having the Power of doing, or forbearing to do, according as the Mind shall chuse or direct. Our *Idea* of Liberty reaches as far as that Power, and no farther. For where-ever

restraint comes to check that Power, or compulsion takes away that Indifferency of Ability on either side to act, or to forbear acting, there *liberty*, and our Notion of it, presently ceases.

- Locke allows for 2 ways in which necessity can hold (§13):

Where-ever Thought is wholly wanting, or the power to act or forbear according to the direction of Thought, there *Necessity* takes place.

These conditions show that Locke's notion of necessity differs from our common understanding of determinism.

- Locke thinks it is inappropriate to speak of the *will* as being free (or unfree). Instead, *people* or *agents* are free (or unfree). (§14)
- Now skip to §31. Here Locke claims that *uneasiness*, or *desire*, determines the will. (This is desire for *happiness* — see §41–42.) Good and evil influence the will, but only as mediated by desire. (§33–38)

How many are to be found, that have had lively representations set before their mind 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 of 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 never so great.

- Absent goods do not move us as much as present pains. This is fortunate (§44):

If it did, we should be constantly and infinitely miserable; there being infinite degrees of happiness, which are not in our possession.

- By considering the good, we can adjust our desires accordingly. We can also suspend the satisfaction of a desire. (§46–47)

This seems to me the source of all liberty; in this seems to consist that, which is (as I think improperly) call'd *Free will*. For during this *suspension* of any desire, before the *will* be determined to

action, and the action (which follows that determination) done, we have opportunity to examine, view, and judge, of the good or evil of what we are going to do; and when, upon due *Examination*, we have judg'd, we have done our duty, all that we can, or ought to do, in pursuit of happiness; and 'tis not a fault, but a perfection of our nature to desire, will, and act according to the last result of a fair *Examination*.

Importantly, Locke argues that this kind of determination of our will (by examination) is very valuable, as well as perfectly compatible with liberty. (§48–50)

And therefore every Man is put under a necessity by his constitution, as an intelligent Being, to be determined in *willing* by his own Thought and Judgment, what is best for him to do: else he would be under the determination of some other than himself, which is want of Liberty.