

Locke and the Desire for Immortality

Bruce Hunt

Angelo State University

Abstract: Many scholars of John Locke's political thought argue that for him people are naturally reasonable and rights-respecting, but this view appears to contradict the simple fact that for Locke most people are vicious. It is also doubtful that this contradiction can be relaxed by interpreting viciousness as being the same, or compatible with, being reasonable. Scholars also agree that under Locke's social compact theory, consent is necessary for government to be legitimate. Yet when most people are vicious, we lack a clear answer for how a reasonable, rights-respecting people can emerge such that they in turn form and consent to reasonable, rights-respecting government. I address these tensions by directing attention to Locke's view on the desire for immortality, which when satisfied by a reasonable religious faith (exemplified by his view of Christianity) motivates people to become sufficiently reasonable and rights-respecting members of a safe and legitimate social compact.

Is it true that for John Locke, “the cultivation of good attitudes is left to individuals and to churches” (Nussbaum 2013, 4)? If it is then Locke’s theory has a problem: political societies naturally aiming at perpetuity need to more or less guarantee, rather than simply expect, that the cultivation of good attitudes actually takes place in their population. Otherwise, once good societies may not always remain so: after some serious interruption in cultural transference the polity may increasingly struggle with basic coordination. Amid such cultural fragmentation, members may grow alienated from each other and political bonds would consequently fray. If individual moral development for Locke is a protected, private matter then this allows once united societies to find themselves by their own collective negligence drifting waywardly toward a terrible state of disorder.

There are possible solutions to this problem in Locke’s writings. One scholar, for instance, points to the fact that “Locke was a serious and radical cultural critic, as well as a political revolutionary” (Grant 2012, 622). Thus—by following Locke’s example—vigilant cultural criticism on the part of those public intellectuals like Locke may ballast against cultural decay.

The reason we still (frustratingly for some) have a scholarly frontier in Locke studies may itself be a cultural phenomenon, rooted in the culture of the West. When Westerners examine their countries, they typically form a particularly Western conception of what a “normal” person is. Perhaps this sounds familiar: all normal human beings have a certain self-evident (see: Declaration of Independence), common-sense, grasp of basic right and wrong. This capacity is less of a cultural achievement, and more of a natural aspect of human psychological development and/or maturation. Theories of equality and rights often premise themselves on this view of human nature. Indeed, some scholars explicitly argue that Locke himself basically views people and the basis of their political rights in this fashion. Such studies have enjoyed enduring influence (see e.g. Zuckert 2004).

However, when we look beyond the U.S and Western Europe we may quickly notice a depth and intensity of social strife which seems to challenge all this. Only think of the Middle East with its ill-fated Arab Spring, and the uncertain outcomes of political revolutions. Or, think of regime change operations undertaken by the U.S. and other Western allies in Middle Eastern countries like Iraq, and perhaps one day, Syria. Democracy is not an easy transition for all peoples to make: cultural factors seem to condition the realistic possibility of instituting political equality. Still, these types of problems can seem foreign and flatly inexplicable. Why pay attention to these weird, inscrutable problems? American society, for example, appears quite resistant to corruption. Should we mind our own business? For all of the condemnation and apocalyptic fears that inter-party competition generates, generally sustained are law, order, and feverous commercial activity regardless of which major party wins office. Still, we cannot know how illusory the stability is until it is lost. It bears remembering that the Soviet Union once enjoyed an ultimately illusory stability. It may unfortunately be true that avoiding social corruption is an enduring aspect of human political society.

In short, whether we want to better understand foreign national crises, or form more accurate prognoses for the West’s social and political future, we might in the absence of great alternatives still have more to benefit from continuing our research into what the Father of Liberalism thinks about the

causes, preventions, and remedies of social corruption.¹ In this paper I will argue that the primary mechanism Locke relies on to keep the public thriving and healthy—while also keeping attitude cultivation essentially private—is the proper cultivation of individuals’ desire for immortality.

Given that social corruption and especially the desire for immortality are not exactly the standard foci for a Locke study, it is important to distinguish the argument I am developing from what might otherwise be expected. First, my focus aims intentionally away from Locke’s ideas regarding religious toleration. The need to tolerate religious diversity on the one hand and the question of needing to have some sort of religion on the other are entirely distinct concerns.

My argument is that Locke’s intention was to assimilate the basic beliefs of “natural law” (what we now basically call classical liberalism) into the Protestant Christianity of his time, and through it to posterity.² He chose this approach not as a zealous Christian authoritarian,³ however, but first and foremost as a pragmatic political philosopher. For him, the biasing effects of ignorance and self-love lead human beings away from awareness of and obedience to natural law—impacting the whole moral spectrum from basic respecting of rights to the highest expressions of human virtue. But Christianity, by its strong and compelling appeal to man’s natural desire for immortality, and its potential scriptural compatibility with reason and natural law, could lead them back.

Section 1: Most Men are Vicious and Political Rights are Theoretically Conditional

Does Locke think that deplorable, vicious people should get the vote? Locke scholars mostly give an emphatic “yes,” but for different reasons. On one hand, Jeremy Waldron finds Locke to be so optimistic about human nature that full political rights should be a default grant for all. He states that, “I don’t think we are in a position to say, for example, that [for Locke] there is a person or group of persons in a given community who have a natural duty to defer to the rest of the community or its rulers without their own consent” (2002, 121). Waldron concedes one exception: a criminal “forfeits his moral status of freedom and equality” (143). However, for Waldron “This position of Locke’s is highly problematic and in my view it is not carefully thought out . . . I certainly don’t know how to reconcile it with the background theory of basic equality” (143). Thus everyone is naturally equal in the sense that they all are of sufficient character that they should have equal political rights within society. Waldron thinks that most are going to be law-abiding individuals that maintain their moral status, but also gives a

¹ Grant’s (2012) study on custom and reason in Locke’s thought is an impressive contribution to this endeavor, but there still are plenty of other pieces of the puzzle to put together. She in fact ends the piece by raising a next step sort of question, “Does Locke’s understanding of the power of custom require us to re-evaluate what he really means by independence and rationality? These and similar questions remain” (p. 626). At least some of the questions alluded to here are precisely what will be taken up in this essay.

² A great example of this influence in practice is exhibited by Elisha Williams’s “The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants [1744]” (Sandoz 1998, 51-118), which is thoroughly influenced by Locke.

³ Locke’s independent-minded, one might say free-thinking, approach to Christianity is widely acknowledged (see e.g. Forde 2000).

begrudging admission that some criminals, for Locke, will forfeit this status. This forfeiture is questioned, though. Like most Locke scholars, Waldron sees in Locke's thought a special moral status bestowed universally from nature upon just about all human beings, and the idea of any forfeiture of moral status is puzzling and even shocking. This reaction demonstrates how egalitarian they take Locke's theory to be.

In a much different way to a similarly egalitarian conclusion, Michael Zuckert states that Locke's "doctrine of executive power of the law of nature emphasizes more and more [human beings'] right to harm others, whenever and to the degree they judge it appropriate for preserving themselves and others" (1994, 239). Here, natural law is subjective, and thus is nearly impossible to violate. The chaos this creates drives human beings into political society, where they then agree via compact to respect each other's rights and form consensus as to what view of natural law should be written into the positive laws of the polity. In a word, it is egalitarian in the more Hobbesian sense, and rather than worry about how vicious people might become, simply assumes this to be the case, to which, to the extent that this is a problem, the rights-based republic is the solution. It is one thing, however, to selfishly believe in the rights of one's self and quite another to selflessly believe in the rights of one's fellow countrymen or of all human beings. Zuckert's answer to this problem has to do with man as a naturally rational being, that man has "minimal rationality" (2005, 431), and that this leads to the stable rights-respecting people we find, presumably, in the United States today. All men are rational-vicious, but they are rational-orderly inside of a social compact and deserve full political rights as such. Again, the tone and tenor suggests a comfortable a priori expectation for universal suffrage.

Between men being good as in Waldron, or bad as in Zuckert, there is room for a middle position that I want to explore: all are born vicious (lacking strong moral bearing), but have a right to become and regarded as, through proper guardianship during childhood and self-discipline during adulthood, reasonable and rights-respecting. Waldron assumes that for Locke either just about all human beings arrive in this condition naturally, while Zuckert sees the institution of the artificial social compact as socializing any and all groups of adults who are, by nature, minimally rational precisely to the level requisite for this to work.

So let's review Locke's writing on the viciousness of human nature, and the means by which it can be reformed. First consider Locke's fascination with extremely vicious behavior from around the world. According to Peter Laslett: "The French translation of the *Commentarios Reales* of Garcilaso de la Vega, published in 1633, seems to have been a favourite book [of Locke's], and it was in Locke's Oxford study in 1681. It is frequently quoted in his diaries and published works" (TT, ft.nt. to 1T, sec 58, p. 182). Locke shares in sec. 58 of the *First Treatise* an account from Peru, of a people who took captives in war, wed the women and "choisly nourished the Children they had by them, till about thirteen Years Old they Butcher'd and Eat them, and they served the Mothers after the same fashion, when they grew past Child bearing, and ceased to bring them any more Roasters" (TT, 182).

Locke then in the next section gives his famous remark that "reason" is man's "only Star and compass." What is remarkable about this sequence of passages is that it implies the story from Peru is an instance of how "the imagination is always restless and suggests variety of thoughts, and the will,

reason being laid aside, is ready for every extravagant project; and in this State, he that goes farthest out of the way, is thought fittest to lead, and is sure of most followers” (TT, 182). Locke then asks us to look around the globe, and observe how there is “reason to think, that the Woods and Forests, where the irrational untaught Inhabitants keep right by following Nature, are fitter to give us Rules, than Cities and Palaces” (TT, 183). What he seems to have in mind here is that because man’s behavior is so often worse than animals, it would be better to adopt the rules followed by animals, the rules of nature, as opposed to the rules followed by men in more developed societies around the world. It is worth noting the manner in which Locke associates the influence of civil society with corruption, and how this relates to a similar argument Rousseau would later develop substantially. Also, Locke’s view reflects (knowing him to be a serious Bible reader) the stories of both Moses’s departing from society to obtain the 10 commandments, as well as Jesus’s departing from society prior to the initiation of his ministry.

Also on human viciousness, Locke states in his *Essays on the Law of Nature* that, “most people are little concerned about their duty; they are guided not so much by reason as either by the examples of others, or by traditional customs and the fashion of the country, or finally by the authority of those whom they consider good and wise . . . [T]here are only few who, neither corrupted by vice nor carelessly indifferent, makes a proper use of” their ability to know the law of nature (ELN 95).

And from the *Reasonableness of Christianity*, Locke states that, “Experience shows, that the knowledge of morality, by mere natural light, (how agreeable soever it be to it,) makes but a slow progress, and little advance in the world. And the reason of it is not hard to be found in men’s necessities, passions, vices, and mistaken interests; which turn their thoughts another way . . . human reason unassisted failed men in its great and proper business of morality” (RC 140).

And from the *Second Treatise*: “For though the Law of Nature be plain and intelligible to all rational Creatures; yet Men being biased by their Interests, as well as ignorant for want of study of it, are not apt to allow of it as a Law binding to them in the application of it to their particular Cases” (ST 351).

So how does Locke bridge this vicious human nature with his liberal political theory? As one scholar puts it, “Prerational, nonrational, and irrational social forces will affect opinions and behavior always. The trick [for Locke] is to harness those forces to support positive cultural reform” (Grant 2012, 628). I fully agree with this and hope to develop more specifically *how* Locke finds leverage to achieve this end—how can social forces be harnessed?

There are a variety of factors that shape who becomes a reasonable person and who does not. For Locke, human beings are neither all reasonable nor all vicious. There are a few that are able to be reasonable, and the rest are best following these few. In her study on custom vis-à-vis reason for Locke, Grant basically makes the same observation: “While all human beings have sufficient capacity for rationality, to be reasonable in one’s thinking and behavior is extremely difficult, according to Locke. It requires challenging the effects of custom” (2012, 609). I believe Grant here is pointing to the middle position between Waldron and Zuckert. Waldron is not right to conclude that people by default have all

sorts of requisite qualities for political rights, nor is Zuckert right to argue that people, because of sufficient rationality, become peaceful and orderly in the social contract simply because of the social contract. There is instead a war in the character of all people between prejudice and reason, which raises serious doubts about the prudence of universal suffrage as a condition-free given. Prejudice has to be overcome within the character of a people, and this achievement is what allows the social contract to function as intended: protecting the rights of all as free and equal human beings. Voting and holding office under a social contract is neither a special privilege nor a universal right, but is a particular right of those—whether they are many or few—that are reasonable and rights-respecting.

Section 2: The Desire for Immortality is Key to Basic Righteousness and Hence Political Rights

Scholars have recognized the desire for immortality's existence in Locke's writings, but they have not sufficiently unpacked all that entails for politics. Analysis of this desire, for reasons unclear, rarely exceeds a couple of paragraphs, even in the most respected and thorough treatments of Locke's political thought. Among these notable works, slightly different interpretational frames have been placed around Locke's motivational use of this desire.

In *John Locke's Liberalism* (1987), for example, Grant writes that according to Locke:

Men are rewarded in the afterlife to the extent that their conduct on earth accords with the law of nature, the law of reason, the law of God. What this means concretely is that men are rewarded as they exercise their faculties to secure their preservation and happiness in this life without interfering with other men's efforts to do the same. (Grant 1987, 47)

The afterlife incentivizes the respect for the rights of others—so a crucial component of a political theorist who premises everything on respecting rights.

Echoed later in Forde (2001), for Grant this heaven incentive tips the scales of the calculating self-interested individual beyond affirming only selfish Hobbesian rights. If heaven does not truly exist, however, such an assumption is not maximally beneficial for the individual, and only the public benefits from this noble lie. In this formulation, the use of heaven as a religious-political motivator seems relatively weak. Most would still be selfish, finding it better, as the saying goes, to ask for forgiveness later than permission today.

Alternatively, the expectation of the afterlife for some Locke scholars pertains more to that which exceeds the basic ethics of respecting rights—the promotion of virtue and human perfection. Myers, for example, writes that, "Locke affirms that a reasonable faith in a heavenly afterlife as a just God's reward to the virtuous engenders in the faithful an 'expectation' that 'carries a constant pleasure with it'" (1998, 157). Myers here is citing from Locke's most famous work on education, providing evidence that there are, at least in some respects, worldly benefits—the pleasure of anticipating the rewards of the afterlife. Still, neither Grant's rights respecting or Myer's sweetened pursuit of virtue

seem to be beneficial in their own right, but require these incentives to be dangled out in front of the individual.

With these interpretations in mind, I now want to analyze Locke's writings on the human desires, and the quest for eternal salvation. Most importantly is the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, where Locke argues (rather vehemently) that the belief in God and an afterlife is somehow inherently valuable for a human being to rationally pursue virtue or any great aims in this world (*Essay*, II.21, secs. 35, 55-56). These ideas are found in the *Essay* chapter "Of Power." This is the longest chapter of the *Essay* (comprising 73 sections), and was substantively expanded and revised after the first publication in 1689.⁴ Some past scholars have related this chapter to Locke's political writings, but their focus has often left aside the specific relationship between freedom and the desire for immortality.⁵ What my analysis of "Of Power" attempts is a more thorough explanation of Locke's motivational theory and the desire for immortality. This in turn provides a deeper understanding of how individuals in his political works are assumed to be—beyond the standard view of the equal, rational, and autonomous individual, exercising liberty and pursuing self-preservation and profitable commercial activity.

The first feature to note in this chapter is Locke's deliberate break with the ancient, Platonic conception of an erotic longing that points inexorably to the transcendent truths. The human desires are not presented as hierarchically arranged in this manner, nor are they in a position that is naturally susceptible to philosophical elevation. Locke is clear on this when he states that, "the Philosophers of old did in vain enquire, whether *Summum bonum* consisted in Riches, or bodily Delights, or Virtue, or Contemplation: And they might have as reasonably disputed, whether the best Relish were to be found

⁴ The *Essay* is an immense work. Spellman has written of it with a significantly more encompassing perspective, which may perhaps be helpful to the reader: "Locke . . . began his enquiry with a moral question, a Christian question: what type of knowledge was really worth having in this life, what type of knowledge could and should men work to acquire? . . . In the end, the message which he delivered on the problematic question of mankind's potential for good was, not surprisingly, a deeply depressing one, an almost Augustinian one" (Spellman 1988, 105-6).

⁵ In addition to those already mentioned, many other political theorists and philosophers have approached this chapter with a wide variety of philosophical, pedagogical, and political questions. Lee Ward mainly focuses on this chapter's polemical aspects concerning the liberty of the mind. He states that, "Locke argues [here] that both innatist metaphysics and Hobbesian materialism fundamentally misunderstand and, in different ways, overly constrain human freedom" (2010, 41). What I think Ward neglects, however, is the pivotal factor that Locke's metaphysical agnosticism plays against this highly voluntaristic (free will) position. Schouls (1992, ch. 7) relates many of the ideas from "Of Power" in a more constricted sense to Locke's teachings on education. Patapan and Sikkenga (2008) dedicate two paragraphs to analyzing "Of Power" in their paper on Hobbes's critique of Platonic eros. They show that Locke indeed has some under-appreciated thoughts relevant to the major debate between Hobbes and the ancients on the desire for immortality. Tuckness (2002) claims to discover that because Locke is "committed to a hedonistic theory of human motivation," he needed "fear of eternal punishment" in order to "motivate a magistrate" (Tuckness 2002, 294). Forde's (2001) analysis relies heavily on this chapter as well; my disagreements with it were discussed above.

in Apples, Plumbs, or Nuts” (sec. 55). The greatest good for the human being is simply that which provides the most amount of pleasure, and the pleasure derived from bodily delights can be (and among people often are) much greater than the pleasure derived from virtue.

Presaging a deeply entrenched western view—for Locke, happiness can be relative. For instance, he engages with the classic comparison between “the studious Man” and “the Epicure” (sec. 43). Of these two archetypes, he states that, “Though each of them cannot but confess, there is great Pleasure in what the other pursues . . . but each is satisfied without what the other enjoys” (sec. 43). The diverse human desires are clearly being presented, especially in comparison to Plato, in a leveled, one might say horizontal manner. Each type of person—from Dionysian to ascetic—is capable of being fully satisfied in the pursuit of his or her preferred objects of desire, at least as far as this world is concerned. Under Locke’s view, abandoned is the notion that knowledge of the so-called eternal verities is what truly satisfies the human soul, and is the true object of our human faculties. Also left aside is the uniquely ancient notion of freedom, namely that of the philosophy-loving soul from the tyrannical chains of the enslaving passions. Locke indeed does not seem to follow Plato at all in arguing that the best happiness of man is necessarily philosophic.

Prudence has here seemed to eclipse wisdom, which in Locke’s works can be traced to two aspects of his break with Platonic philosophy. The first dimension is the one just mentioned regarding the nature of the pleasures themselves, where Locke disagrees with Plato that certain of these have any qualitative superiority over others. Under Locke’s view, satisfaction and contentment, by whichever road, is potentially equally pleasant and conducive to happiness. At any given moment,⁶ the satisfied epicure is just as happy as the satisfied philosopher. The second dimension to Locke’s skepticism is with regards to what is knowable and what is not. Derived from his empirical theory of the origin and scope of our ideas, Locke denies that the human mind can penetrate into the essences of things, or can understand “the whole.” Sense data delimits the knowledge we can acquire, blocking us from higher transcendent knowledge regarding the nature of essences themselves, such as the essence of the human being commonly termed “the soul.” The metaphysical essence of the human being, like the metaphysical essence of the color blue, is impenetrable by the human mind. The pursuit of such knowledge is foolish and imprudent.

⁶ This distinction here is perhaps more apparent than real, however. When we embark down the hedonistic road of self-interest well understood, Plato argues that we will arrive at the realization that the philosophic life is the best, and that the eternal things produce more pleasure than the bodily pleasures. Perhaps some difference for Plato lies in the depth of satisfaction available to non-philosophers satisfied by bodily pleasures. In any case, the main point I am trying to make is that Locke is, at least rhetorically, much more committed to following the hedonistic, pleasure-maximizing life should it lead away from philosophy. For Locke, the moral human life largely replaces the philosophic life and is less its own reward than it is rational to follow in order to be rewarded with endless bliss in Heaven. One might speculate that Locke is more sensitive than Plato to the pleasure sacrifices sometimes required by the good human being, and hence more concerned with the self-interest of the individual vis-a-vis the community than was Plato. Unfortunately, exploring this possibility more deeply would take me beyond the scope of this paper.

Faced with this diversity of possible pleasures, however, we have to continually exercise our liberty. We have to make choices as to which of our disparate potential desires to cultivate and to satisfy. In this calculation, man's ultimate confrontation with death is introduced by Locke, rather unexpectedly, as being profoundly important. This leads to a major fork in the existential road, by which there are two mutually exclusive logics to the pursuit of happiness: (1) a logic assuming there is no afterlife, and (2) one that assumes there is.

Locke states here that a man's choosing to assume there is no afterlife, and his corresponding preference for "the short pleasures of a vicious life" involves a "wrong judgment . . . whilst he knows, and cannot but be certain, that a future life is at least possible" (*Essay*, 282). The vicious life is not wrong because it is less happy in this world, but because it neglects the reasonably perceived possibilities of the next world. It is from this position that his theory, which grounds itself in a relativistic, hedonistic foundation, avoids condoning all pursuits. This is indeed regardless of how much doubt there may be concerning the afterlife, bearing in mind that it always remains a possibility. The benefit of Locke's skeptical position that metaphysics are unknowable, while losing the apparent enticement of the philosophic life, is also to make it impossible to refute this philosophic (and religious) claim. This requires rational people to hedge their existential bets on its account. The basic instruction here is not to choose in a precipitous manner, in a manner which could be (eternally) regretted.

What Locke is evidently doing is transforming the human relationship with eternal life from one of natural longing (*eros*) into one of calculated possibility, the calculation of which we are all personally responsible. This might seem like a reasonable position, but the example of Cephalus from the *Republic* quickly comes to mind. This example should make us particularly suspicious of Locke's position. An elderly, financially well-off character, Cephalus serves as something of a foil to Socrates, comforting himself late in life by participating in religious rituals. His character is especially intriguing because he will not bear the questioning of Socrates as to whether Cephalus is really deluding himself. He does not seem to care about the truth, at least as Socrates might make it appear. Rather than a Socratic desiring for eternal truth, Cephalus himself desires comfort and hope, as he tries to convince himself towards the end of his life that he is strategically positioned for what lies beyond. Is this what Locke means to advocate?

To answer this, we should first acknowledge that though Locke rejects the philosophic life, he nevertheless does greatly admire and extol virtue. He states that,

Let a Man be never so well perswaded of the advantages of virtue, that it is as necessary to a Man, who has any great aims in this World, or hopes in the next, as food to life: yet till he *hungers and thirsts after righteousness*; 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; but any other uneasiness he feels in himself, shall take place, and carry his will to other actions. (*Essay*, 253)

Beyond their characterization as "food to life," the "advantages of virtue" are left frustratingly unclear here. Nevertheless, Locke importantly puts the desires more in charge of the will than rational

calculation. A man can be fully convinced that virtue is better than vice, but if he feels more need to satisfy a vice than a virtue, the vice will be what actually determines the will. Like Plato, then, it is the strongest desire that determines the will, but for Locke the strongest desire can in all reasonable seriousness be for any number of things (instead of The Good). The task of the man who wants to satisfy his hopes for the next world (like Cephalus), in order to tightly secure his willful behavior to the pursuit of these objects, must cultivate within himself a stronger uneasiness in the lacking of virtue than in the lacking of vice. Locke would encourage Cephalus to stay with Socrates and embrace the resulting uneasiness he was sure to experience. The acquisition of righteousness requires a deep uneasiness in the want of righteousness, not comfortable dogmatic ritualism.

The concession being made here is that “thirsting after righteousness” is the most readily available means to achieve salvation, and is presented as the alternative to temporally bounded hedonism. We can “thirst after righteousness” (*Essay*, 253) with some deliberate reflective effort, but this occurs through pragmatic choice rather than realizing our inner desire for the *summum bonum* of philosophic contemplation. Man is alone to choose whether he wants to indulge in the physical pleasures of this world, or deny himself these presently available pleasures in favor of the pleasures of virtue and heavenly rewards. Man is to contemplate, presented with this state of things, where the greatest absent (and real) good *most likely* exists, and to put his happiness in its pursuit. The individual’s deepest desire is determined subjectively and may be shaped to steer his or her behavior in seemingly innumerable directions.

Also, like Plato, for Locke particular desires can be eliminated when one believes that they cannot be satisfied, or when one is unaware of them. This was a crucial insight by Hobbes in his project of conquering man’s natural vanity in favor of restoring the rationality of worldly peace and the fear of death (see e.g. McClure (2011); Ahrens Dorf (2000)). By understanding that our curiosity for evidence of forthcoming immortality cannot be satisfied, for example, we must turn to other pleasure-producing things that we can pursue and acquire. Our desires will attach to the things we direct them towards. In a similar vein, Locke states that,

For the will being the power of directing our operative faculties to some action, for some end, cannot at any time be moved towards what is judg’d at that time unattainable: That would be to suppose an intelligent being designedly to act for an end, only to lose its labour; for so it is to act, for what is judg’d not attainable; and therefore very great uneasiness move not the will, when they are judg’d not capable of a Cure: They, in that case, put us not upon endeavours. (*Essay*, 257-8)

Locke holds a middle position here between Plato and Hobbes, rejecting the possibility of satisfying a desire for immortality through philosophy, but also asserting a much more optimistic view than Hobbes of the need to prepare for the possibility of an afterlife by considering faith and righteousness. What this optimistic view does in the process is foster concern with justice, right, and legitimacy over and above temporally bounded pleasure-seeking.

Bias and the Suspension Power

There is another crucial step in Locke's theory here that explains why desiring immortality specifically is so important to the freedom of the human being. That importance comes from the fact that desiring immortality is essential to allowing the human being to rise above the cognitive biases generated by pursuing immediate gratification. This additional step is intertwined with Locke's concept of the suspension power. I will start by explaining this suspension power by itself and then explain its relationship to the desire for immortality.

Lockean bias is normally associated with self-love and ignorance, as it is briefly described in the *Second Treatise*. A more complicated picture emerges, however, in the second half of "Of Power." Here, Locke understands bias—"all that variety of mistakes, errors, and faults which we run into"—as the psychological failure to temporarily "suspend the prosecution of this or that desire," which leads to false opinions regarding both the prudent path to happiness and the goodness of one's actions (sec. 47). The key passage from this section is lengthy, but useful:

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 the not using of it right comes all that variety of mistakes, errors, and faults which we run into, in the conduct of our lives, and our endeavours after happiness; whilst 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 the source of all liberty; in this seems to consist that, which is . . . 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 our 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. (*Essay*, 263-4, emphasis mine)

By way of this suspension power, the mind achieves a form of freedom from the demands of the desires, which would otherwise determine all of our behavior. Indeed, the mind is seemingly "free" only insofar as it possesses within itself this power, and can temporarily disengage itself from proceeding one way or another. This passage places profound importance to the commonplace (perhaps even trite) term that we have with will-power.⁷ Through it, Locke argues that we acquire the opportunity for our reason to more accurately consider the best means of achieving happiness.

Implicit in this discussion thus far is the tension between the goods presently available and future goods. Locke makes this more explicit in other sections, for instance when he states that, "were the satisfaction of a Lust, and the Joys of Heaven offered at once to any one's present Possession, he would not balance, or err in the determination of his choice" (sec. 58). The problem is that "most Men .

⁷ This continues to be a very important concept in psychology literature. See e.g. Baumeister and Tierney (2011).

. . are apt to judge a little in Hand better than a great deal to come” (sec. 63). The more far off a possible good might be, the less certain that good appears in contrast to what is immediately available. However, it is the very uncertainty of future goods that creates a necessity for reflection in the present. The necessity for reflection is what initially motivates—or one might say strengthens—the use of the suspension power, in order to allow such reflection to take place. Locke thus states that a man becomes free by his “choosing of a remote Good as an end to be pursued. Here a man may suspend the act of his choice till he has examined” whether it will really make him happy, in accordance with his pursuit of that remote good (sec. 56). The remote good Locke almost exclusively mentions, and repeatedly so, is the “infinite eternal Joys of Heaven” available in the possible afterlife (sec. 38). I only point out in passing that there appears to be an obvious relationship between these instances and the repeated invocations of the “appeal to Heaven” in Locke’s political doctrines on the justified use of force.

Another important aspect to this is that this suspension⁸ power is presented as available to everyone equally—it thus represents a very strong voluntarist⁹ and egalitarian position that Locke is staking out against the hierarchical rationalism of Plato. Locke is arguing against the Platonic principle that human beings pursue “The Good,” the idea that human beings pursue different things is simply a sign that they perceive the good to be different things as a function of the fallibility of judgment. Rejecting this, Locke sees the separation between the will and the desires as evidence that works against Plato’s position. There is a pull of the will in one direction that is apparently at least vaguely cognizant of its ignorance of future potentialities and a desiring part that pursues near and immediate gratification. In this struggle it is the stronger desire that wins, the near at hand pleasure versus the future and remote pleasure, not a personally insurmountable misunderstanding of the good.

An important aspect of this is the grounding of independent moral responsibility. When we fail to use our power to suspend our immediate pursuits and deliberate on them, we become morally responsible for our debased taste in what we internalize “good” to be (*Essay*, 270-1). The moral consequences that human beings potentially face in the afterlife, potentially influential from their ability to suspend their will and reflect upon them, seem to alleviate the need for political society to have an educative relationship with the people as is found in Plato’s *Republic*. Indeed Locke seems to pile on a bit here in terms of the amount of individual responsibility he places on people for their actions. He states that, “Nor let any one say, he cannot govern his Passions, nor hinder them from breaking out, and carrying him into action; for what he can do before a Prince, or a great Man, he can do alone, or in the presence of God, if he will” (*Essay*, 268). This also seems to be a rebuttal to a political theory that presupposes that an over-awing absolute sovereign such as Hobbes’s Leviathan is necessary to control

⁸ C.f. Rousseau: “Nature commands every animal, and beasts obey. Man feels the same impetus, but he knows he is free to go along or to resist; and it is above all in awareness of this freedom that the spirituality of his soul is made manifest” (Rousseau 1987, p. 45).

⁹ C.f. Calvin: “We can establish that the soul consists of two parts, the intellect and the will. The work of the intellect is to make distinction between good and bad, and the function of the will is to choose and follow what the intellect says is good, rejecting what is bad. The intellect is a guide for the soul, and the will waits for its direction. Aristotle rightly taught that in the area of physical desire, choices made seem to be in line with intellectual judgment. Intellect governs the will . . .” (Calvin 1987, pp. 60-65).

the passions of the people. Individuals are, according to Locke, fully capable of controlling themselves anywhere as effectively as if there was a terrifying Leviathan government trying to coerce them to do so. Individuals need only suspend the determination of their will to pull up and see more clearly where the greatest absent good to them really lies.

In short, moral failure can be overcome by properly cultivating the human desire for immortality. Acknowledging the human mystery of death shows to us the “darkness” we are in (*Essay*, 560), and our desire for immortality incentivizes us to the task of freely and creatively working through that darkness. Our “only star and compass” in this task is reason (1T, sec. 58), and our desire for immortality pushes us to consult it. The psychological mechanism by which man overcomes his bias and embraces rational consideration is therefore directly tied to man’s desire for immortality. Immortality is a far off object of desire we are free to choose, and which we should choose in order to realize our potential capacities for liberty and rationality.

Section 3: The Reasonableness of Christianity and Its Political Significance

We have seen that the philosopher and the philosophic life is somewhat redefined under Locke’s own philosophy, if not mostly dismissed. Practical reason replaces philosophizing about the essence of Truth and the *summum bonum*, and this faculty is universally available by way of the suspension power. It does not take a cradle-to-grave totalitarian-style education system to produce the rational society. Moral truth—variously called the Natural Law, the Law of Reason, or God’s Law—has become more independently accessible under Locke’s theory than Plato’s. The question of moral truth is elevated for the individual by a rational acknowledgement of his hedonistic desires for immortality and the darkness he is in with regards to how to achieve it. This is a significantly clearer picture of Locke’s man in the state of nature than is found in the *Two Treatises of Government*.

The problem of course is that the “infinite eternal Joys of Heaven” (*Essay* II.21.38) are not known by reason alone, but by the purported revelations of prophets. To work through this we need to turn to the *Reasonableness of Christianity*, where Locke draws the complicating distinction between what reason can see on its own and what, when knowledge is proposed to it, it is able to affirm. He suggests in “Of Power” that reason by itself cannot dismiss the possibility of the afterlife. He also argues that without the possibility of the afterlife, there is little motivation to use reason to perceive basic moral truths. So, the possibility of the afterlife has to be considered, but for the possibility of the afterlife to be considered, the idea of the afterlife has to be either proposed by another, or independently imagined. One cannot contemplate the possibility of Heaven if one has never heard of or imagined such a thing.

Locke steps up and tries to meet this challenge, offering an account of how reason gained ascendancy in the world strictly on account of itself. He states that, “The same spark of the divine nature and knowledge in man [i.e. reason], which making him a man, showed him the law he was under, as a man” (RC, 133). It is through man’s awareness that he is a rational creature that he first senses reason’s central capacity to reveal rules by which to guide his life, i.e. Natural Law. There is obviously a

gap, however, from sensing the benefits of rationality and believing in God or Heaven by reason alone. Locke states that, “Though the works of nature, in every part of them, sufficiently evidence a deity; yet the world made so little use of their reason, that they saw him not . . . [F]earful apprehension in most, gave them up into the hands of their priests . . . [and] [i]n this state of darkness and ignorance of the true God, vice and superstition held the world” (RC, 135). The desire for immortality thus originally backfired, as it only pushed most people to listen, out of fear of death and punishment, to those who promoted the collective rejection of reason, and to dogmatically accept contrived superstitions. This “darkness” greatly overshadowed the light, as the numbers of adherents to these superstitions collectively generated and wielded political power. Locke states that, “Whatsoever Plato, and the soberest of the philosophers, thought of the nature and being of the one God, they were fain, in their outward professions and worship, to go with the herd, and keep to their religion established by law” (RC, 136).

What Locke seems to claim in the *Reasonableness* is that the ethics of his political writings—the doctrine of natural rights—actually came to the world by way of Jesus Christ; that after His ministry man’s rational capacities were able to affirm and transmit this easily affirmable doctrine.¹⁰ Beyond this, however, is the central importance to the desire for immortality. Jesus Christ is important not only as the philosopher who emerged with a doctrine most compatible with Natural Law, but as the Son of God promising eternal life for obedience to this Law. Otherwise, “just measures of right and wrong” can be seen as “bonds of society, and conveniences of common life, and laudable practices,” but not an “obligation . . . of the highest law, the law of nature” (RC, 144). “That could not be, without a clear knowledge and acknowledgement of the law-maker, and the great rewards and punishments, for those that would, or would not obey him” (RC, 144). Without Christ’s promise of Heaven, virtue was left “unendowed, [and] very few were willing to espouse her” (RC, 150). And to be sure, in the context here, virtue very clearly connotes obedience to the Law of Reason. For Locke, therefore, the world that was lost in irrational superstition was necessarily coeval with the world that lacked the hope for the infinite and eternal joys of Heaven as has been promised by Christ and his apostles. The above analysis of “Of Power” explains Locke’s psychological justification for this view, which centers on a hedonistic theory of human motivation. Of course, to say that the historical Christ was necessary to the rational taming of the world does not imply belief in his divinity, or divinity in general.

¹⁰ This has to be factored against, however, the scholarly view that equality is a reason-based assumption in the *Second Treatise*, which itself serves as the prime postulate in his reasoning for natural rights. This equality only expressly assumes the possibility of a silent God, validating the principle as rooted in Natural Law. There is no mention there of Jesus Christ, so one might speculate that at most, Locke derives his morality from minimalistic tenets of natural theology. Since so much clearly rides on how Locke arrives at his assumption of human equality in order to understand how serious Locke views the role of religion (and Jesus Christ) in his ethical doctrines, the current scholarly debate over Lockean equality is a crucial one (see e.g. Waldron 2002; Zuckert 1994; Forde 2006).

Section 4: Property Rights and Piety: Who God left the World to

I want to return now to a problem I mentioned earlier in the paper, which is that Locke's psychological theory in "Of Power" is actually formulated after the publication of the *Two Treatises*. This is easy to overlook, as the *Two Treatises*, the *Letter Concerning Toleration*, and the *Essay* are all published in Locke's so-called "miracle year" of 1689. Locke, however, rewrites "Of Power" for the second edition of the *Essay*, but never goes back to rewrite any of the political works of 1689 (the *Reasonableness* comes after each of these works in 1695). Locke either did not want, for one reason or another, to update his political works in accord with his most recent psychological views of the human being, or he did not perceive a need to.

Some need certainly seems to exist, though, as the differences between the first version and the second version of "Of Power" are quite significant. The key principle that Locke abandons is that human beings are motivated by their assessment of the greatest absent good. What he replaces this with is the idea that the desires are crucial, over and beyond what a person might rationally perceive as the greater good. From this position, Locke explains why those who know about, and even believe in, Heaven are not always motivated by it. It is not enough to believe in Heaven, but one must "thirst after righteousness," a phrase Locke takes directly from the Epistles of St. Paul. This seems like a fundamental enough shift to warrant an analogous revision of his political works. Locke has shifted the base of human motivation from nearly purely rational, to a hybrid between reason and the desires.

What can be noted is that there is both a good and likely reason why Locke declined to revise his political works, as well as a good and likely reason why he probably should have. Although it is too far afield to explore here, Locke could easily have seen in his political works of 1689 enough formal space to accommodate the changes that he made to this particular chapter of the *Essay*. Locke's depiction of human beings in the *Second Treatise*, for example, accounts for many cases where reason is not the decisive motivating factor, and loses out to the biases of passion and ignorance. Also, the desire for immortality is already explicitly built in via the religious rhetoric employed, especially the "appeal to Heaven." On the other hand, why Locke probably should have gone back and made the importance of desires more clear, is that this omission is arguably the biggest source of criticism his works face today, with his incorporation of religious rhetoric being a close second. For generations Locke has been criticized for advancing a rigidly rational, autonomous, almost robotic view of the human being. Finally, another worrisome issue with not revising the political works is that his revisions to "Of Power" might have been accordingly constrained.

Be this as it may, Locke's original construction of the *Second Treatise* with religious rhetoric still requires an interpretation in accordance with the preceding analysis. I think this begins with Locke's incorporation of the writings of Richard Hooker, who was a well-known Protestant writer in Locke's time. Hooker is also someone who scholars today agree to various degrees is cited by Locke for his Christian *bona fides*. In the *Second Treatise*, Locke's rhetorical strategy not only involves trying to show off some Christian orthodoxy to disarm his critics, but also to solve the philosopher's more fundamental dilemma of getting the people to listen (cf. *Rep.* 327c). Locke realizes, like Paul and Plato before him,

that people only listen out of self-interest, and questions about justice achieve their best leverage on self-interest calculation from an existential point of view.

Locke incorporating the writings of Hooker provides the stage for the concepts—over and above “power” and “right”— of love, duty, and justice in the *Second Treatise*. Without these concepts, the appeal to Heaven and invocations of final Judgment, which are some of the most commonly pointed to instances of Locke being merely rhetorical, might have vastly different meaning. What can be easily missed here is how important and revealing rhetorical purposes can be. Indeed, to recognize a purpose as rhetorical can often be conflated with its being unnecessary or dispensable. It has been speculated by scholars, for instance, that the appeal to Heaven is not a theological point at all, but a call to arms servicing the political demands of the moment. I have tried so far to offer evidence challenging this view. Locke’s concern is with articulating a theory of *legitimate* government and *legitimate* revolution, which a bare call to arms would contradict. The appeal to Heaven, then, has to be taken more seriously if we are to take Locke’s aim of establishing a theory of legitimate politics seriously.¹¹ Similarly, deriving human equality from man’s relative place under God is not simply a move to establish ontological authority, but putting this issue into its more psychologically effectual existential context.

Locke, of course, was one among many influential philosophers in early modernity who were working at rationalizing politics, especially in the wake of the preceding religious warfare of the time. In closing, comparing Locke with Thomas Hobbes in this project worth touching on, as so many scholars view Locke as something of a closet Hobbesian. Why Locke and Hobbes see a need for politics to become more this-worldly seems to have some important differences, however. For Locke, emphasis on industriousness and commerce is politically necessary for security from external enemies. Developing land and increasing population “is the great art of government” that will make a prince “too hard for his neighbours” (ST, sec 42). Hobbes is different. James Stoner (2004, 559-60) recaps Leo Strauss’s interpretation of this, stating that “the key insight of Hobbes’s thinking is the moral superiority of fear to pride . . . ‘fear of violent death [is] the passion which brings men to reason.’” Emphasis on this world for Hobbes, then, is more about public compliance to the sovereign than Locke’s emphasis on economic prosperity-driven national security.

This makes sense insofar as the general scholarly consensus suggests that we relate Hobbes with domestic security and Locke with property and commerce. Complicating this distinction however, is Stoner’s statement that “Because Hobbes already thinks men have a property in their person, Locke’s development of a theory of the origin of external property in the labor of that person can be said by Strauss to be a development of liberalism on Hobbesian principles” (Stoner 2004, 561). Locke appears, then, to be a continuation or development of Hobbesian principles, increasing the suspicion that Locke

¹¹ Locke explains his use of this expression as follows: “Where there is no Judge on Earth, the Appeal lies to God in Heaven . . . [W]hether I may as Jephtha did, appeal to Heaven in it? Of that I my self can only be Judge in my own Conscience, as I will answer it at the great Day, to the Supream Judge of all Men” (ST, sec. 21).

also wanted his metaphysical agnosticism to undercut human pride and vanity in the same style of Hobbes.

Where I think the strongest evidence points to is that Locke sought both—domestic security brought on by way of philosophical skepticism of religious superstition, but then to build further on that accomplishment by expanding on the ethics of commercial activity. Such a notion is clearly stated by Locke: “God gave the world . . . to the use of the Industrious and Rational . . . not to the Fancy or Covetousness of the Quarrelsome and Contentious” (ST, sec. 34). If I am correct, then Locke was indeed in this respect complicit with Hobbes in seeking to influence the desire for immortality in favor of a more economically-driven politics. Religion had wreaked undeniable havoc. Locke, however, ended up in an entirely different theoretical direction by locating in this potent desire the popular motivation needed to sustain the ethical dimension of the commercially orientated, rights-based regime. Rather than aggravating it like Hobbes, Locke elevated it as an essential psychological motivator to sustain the healthy society.

References

Ahrens Dorf, Peter. 2000. “The Fear of Death and the Longing for Immortality: Hobbes and Thucydides on Human Nature and the Problem of Anarchy”. *American Political Science Review*, 94 (3), 579-593.

Bailey, Jeremy. 2012. “Was James Madison ever for the bill of rights?”. *Perspectives on Political Science*, 41 (2), 59-66.

Baumeister, Roy and John Tierney. 2011. *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength*. London: Penguin Books.

Calvin, John. 1987. *The Institutes of Christian Religion*. (T. Lane & H. Osborne, eds.) Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

Danoff, Brian. 2005. “Lincoln and Tocqueville on Democratic Leadership and Self-Interest Properly Understood”. *The Review of Politics*, 67 (4), 687-719.

Dunn, John. 1969. *The Political Thought of John Locke: An Historical Argument of the ‘Two Treatises of Government’*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Forde, Steven. 2006. “What Does Locke Expect Us to Know?” *The Review of Politics*, 68, 232-258.

Forde, Steven. 2001. “Natural Law, Theology, and Morality in Locke”. *American Journal of Political Science*, 45 (2), 396-409.

Grant, Ruth. 1987. *John Locke’s Liberalism*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Hobbes, Thomas. 1994; 1668. *Leviathan*. (E. Curley, Ed.). Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.

Kateb, George. 2009. “Locke and the Political Origins of Secularism”. *Social Research*, 76 (4), 1001-1034.

- Locke, John. 2010. *Locke on Toleration*. (R. Vernon, Ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Locke, John. 2006. *Political Essays*. (M. Goldie, Ed.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Locke, John. 2003; 1689. *Two Treatises of Government*. (P. Laslett, Ed.) Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Locke, John. 1975; 1689. *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*. (P. H. Nidditch, Ed.) Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Locke, John. 1824; 1695. *The Reasonableness of Christianity as Delivered in the Scriptures*. (C. Baldwin, Ed.) London.
- Locke, John. 1824. *Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Galatians, I and II Corinthians, Romans, and Ephesians*. (ULAN Press) London.
- Mansfield, Harvey. 1995. "Self-Interest Rightly Understood". *Political Theory*, 23(1), 48-66.
- McClure, Christopher. 2011. "Hell and Anxiety in Hobbes's *Leviathan*". *The Review of Politics*, 73, 1-27.
- Myers, Peter. 1998. *Our Only Star and Compass: Locke and the Struggle for Political Rationality*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Nussbaum, Martha. 2013. *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Patapan, Haig and Jeffrey Sikkenga. 2008. "Love and the Leviathan: Thomas Hobbes's Critique of Platonic Eros". *Political Theory*, 36 (6), 803-826.
- Plato. 1998. *Gorgias*. (Trans. J. Nichols). Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Plato. 1968. *The Republic of Plato*. (A. Bloom, Trans.). New York: Basic.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. 1987. *The Basic Political Writings*. (D. Cress, trans.) Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Sandoz, Ellis. (Ed.) 1998. *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730-1805, Volume 1*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.
- Schouls, Peter. 1992. *Reasoned Freedom: John Locke and Enlightenment*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Spellman, William. 1988. *John Locke and the Problem of Depravity*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Stoner, James. 2004. "What Leo Strauss Wrong about John Locke?". *The Review of Politics*, 66 (4), 553-563.

Tuckness, Alex. 2002. "Rethinking the Intolerant Locke". *American Journal of Political Science* , 46 (2), 288-298.

Waldron, Jeremy. 2002. *God, Locke, and Equality: Christian Foundations in Locke's Political Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ward, Lee. 2010. *John Locke and Modern Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wolfson, Adam. 1997. "Toleration and Relativism: The Locke-Proast Exchange". *The Review of Politics*, 59 (2), 213-231.

Zuckert, Michael. 1994. *Natural Rights and the New Republicanism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press