

## RESEARCH

## Locke's Diagnosis of Akrasia

Matthew A. Leisinger

Emmanuel College, University of Cambridge, GB  
ml888@cam.ac.uk

I argue for a new interpretation of Locke's account of akrasia. On this interpretation, akrasia occurs on Locke's account because certain cognitive biases endemic to the human mind dispose us to privilege present over future happiness. As a result, we end up irrationally pursuing present pleasure and the removal of present pain even as we simultaneously judge that doing so runs contrary to our own greater good. In this sense, I argue that Locke seeks to *diagnose* akrasia by identifying its underlying psychological causes.

**Keywords:** Locke; akrasia; weakness of will; judgment; desire

Locke seems to have an akrasia problem. Akrasia (weakness of will) is what happens when an agent wills to act contrary to their judgment. Officially, Locke blames akrasia upon the influence of desire. He gives the example of a drunkard, who is motivated by desire to return to the tavern even though he judges his greater good to lie in abstinence (2.21.35).<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere, however, Locke says that judgment always determines the will, as when he writes that 'every Man is ... determined in *willing* by his own Thought and Judgment, what is best for him to do' (2.21.48). Such claims seem to render akrasia impossible, since we cannot will to act *contrary* to judgment if judgment *always* determines the will.

The obvious solution is to distinguish different kinds of judgments: while there is *one kind* of judgment that always determines the will, akrasia occurs when an agent wills to act contrary to *another kind* of judgment. In a recent paper, entitled "Does Locke Have an Akrasia Problem?", Leonardo Moauro and Samuel C. Rickless (2019) deploy this strategy to great effect. Building on the important work of Richard Glauser (2014), who distinguishes judgments *of the greater good* from judgments *about what is necessary for one's happiness*, Moauro and Rickless further distinguish judgments about what is necessary for one's *present* happiness from judgments about what is necessary for one's *future* happiness. On their reading, Locke holds that the will is always determined by the former kind of judgment but not the latter. Akrasia is thus possible in cases where an agent wills to pursue present happiness at the expense of future happiness. The drunkard, for example, returns to the tavern because he judges that doing so is required for his present happiness even though he also judges that his future happiness (and greater good) lies in abstinence.

Moauro and Rickless's interpretation represents an important advance in the literature. They identify a significant shortcoming in Glauser's interpretation, and I think that they are broadly correct to seek its remedy in the difference between present and future happiness.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, I am going to argue that their interpretation contains a rather fundamental problem. According to Moauro and Rickless, Locke holds that we always will to pursue present happiness, even when this pursuit leads us to act contrary to future happiness. One consequence of this interpretation is that the akratic agent is not mistaken in any way. Akrasia is just what happens when our *true* judgments of present happiness lead us to act contrary to our *true* judgments of future happiness. By contrast, I am going to argue that Locke takes akrasia to involve a genuine mistake,

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all in-text citations refer to Locke's *Essay* (Locke [1690–1706] 1975) by book, chapter, and section number (e.g., 1.1.1). Where relevant, I use square-brackets to distinguish editions of the *Essay* (e.g., 1.1.1 [1<sup>st</sup>]). Passages from Locke's correspondence (Locke 1976–1989) are cited in-text as '*Correspondence*' followed by volume and page number and then letter number (e.g., *Correspondence* 1, 1/Letter #1).

<sup>2</sup> Moauro and Rickless (2019: 5–6) also provide effective criticism of Vailati's (1990) interpretation of Locke on akrasia.

specifically, a false judgment about happiness. The drunkard's problem is that, while he does will to pursue what he judges to be necessary for his happiness, his judgment is mistaken because he irrationally privileges present over future happiness. On my interpretation, therefore, Locke aims not to *rationalize* akrasia but to *diagnose* its underlying causes.

The paper proceeds as follows. After setting out the problem of akrasia in §1, I will describe Moauro and Rickless's solution and raise objections in §§2–3. In §4, I will then present my own interpretation of Locke's account of akrasia. Locke's view, I will argue, is that akrasia occurs when an agent's judgment about their own happiness (happiness *simpliciter*, not *present* or *future* happiness) leads them to act contrary to their judgment of the greater good. This divergence takes place because our judgments about happiness are influenced by a number of irrational psychological tendencies that do not affect our judgments of the greater good in the same way. These tendencies include (1) the tendency to discount future pleasures and pains in comparison with present ones, (2) the tendency to privilege the removal of pain over the acquisition of pleasure, and (3) the tendency to rest satisfied with lesser pleasures when greater ones are attainable. The cumulative result of these tendencies, in Locke's view, is that we often will to act contrary to what we ourselves judge to be the greater good.

## 1. The Problem of Akrasia

When Locke published the first edition of the *Essay*, he had no akrasia problem for the simple reason that he took akrasia to be impossible. In the first edition, Locke explains that '*Volition* or *Willing*, regarding only what is in our power, is nothing but the *preferring* the doing of any thing, to the not doing of it' and that this '*Preferring*' is 'nothing but the *being pleased more with the one, than the other*' (2.21.28 [1<sup>st</sup>]). In other words, to will some action is just to desire the performance of that action more than its forbearance.<sup>3</sup> Locke goes on to argue that, 'If willing be but the being better pleased, as has been shewn, it is easie to know what 'tis determines the Will, what 'tis pleases best: every one knows 'tis Happiness, or that which makes any part of Happiness, or contributes to it; and that is it we call *Good*' (2.21.29 [1<sup>st</sup>]). He concludes that we always will to pursue whatever we judge to be the greater good: '*Good* then, *the greater Good is that alone which determines the Will*' (2.21.29 [1<sup>st</sup>]). It follows that akrasia is impossible because we can never will to act contrary to our own judgment of the greater good.

Locke made significant revisions to his discussion of human motivation in the second and subsequent editions of the *Essay*. First, Locke distinguishes volition from desire, arguing that the will is the mind's power to 'command', 'order', or 'direct' its actions, not merely for it to be 'more pleased' with some rather than others.<sup>4</sup> Second, Locke retracts his earlier claim that we always will to pursue whatever we judge to be the greater good. Instead, Locke argues that, 'upon second thoughts', what determines the will is not 'the greater good in view: But some (and for the most part the most pressing) *uneasiness* a Man is at present under', explaining that 'This *Uneasiness* we may call, as it is, *Desire*; which is an *uneasiness* of the Mind for want of some absent good' (2.21.31). Locke cites cases of akrasia as evidence for this new view:

Let a Drunkard see, that his Health decays, his Estate wastes; Discredit and Diseases, and the want of all things, even of his beloved Drink, attends him in the course he follows: yet the returns of *uneasiness* to miss his Companions; the habitual thirst after his Cups, at the usual time, drives him to the Tavern, though he has in his view the loss of health and plenty, and perhaps of the joys of another life: the least of which is no inconsiderable good, but such as he confesses, is far greater, than the tickling of his palate with a glass of Wine, or the idle chat of a soaking Club. 'Tis not for want of viewing the greater good: for he sees, and acknowledges it, and in the intervals of his drinking hours, will take resolutions to pursue the greater good; but when the *uneasiness* to miss his accustomed delight returns, the greater acknowledged good loses its hold, and the present *uneasiness* determines the *will* to the accustomed action; which thereby gets a stronger footing to prevail against the next occasion, though he at the same time makes secret promises to himself, that he will do so no more; this is the last time he will act against the attainment of those greater goods. And thus he is, from time to time, in the State of that unhappy Complainer, *Video meliora proboque, Deteriora sequor* [I see the better and approve, but I follow the worse]: which Sentence,

<sup>3</sup> While Locke does distinguish volition from desire, he says only that volition is 'the actual producing of something that is voluntary' whereas desire 'is referred to things remote' (2.21.33 [1<sup>st</sup>]). For further discussion, see Stuart (2013: 392–99).

<sup>4</sup> See esp. 2.21.5 and 2.21.30. Locke systematically revises his characterization of volition throughout the chapter to reflect this change (2.21.8, 9, 10, 13, 21, 28, and 29). For further discussion, see Rickless (2013: 407–9) and Stuart (2013: 444–51). See also Glauser (2003: 697–98) on Locke's conception of volition.

allowed for true, and made good by constant Experience, may this, and possibly no other, way be easily made intelligible. (2.21.35)

The drunkard judges that his greater good lies in abstinence. And yet, when the evening arrives, he wills to return to the tavern nonetheless. Locke's explanation is that the drunkard's will is determined not by his judgment of the greater good but by his most pressing desire. So, far from denying the possibility of akrasia, Locke now takes such cases to provide strong evidence for his new view.

The problem of akrasia arises because there are several passages in the revised editions in which Locke continues to claim, as in the first edition, that judgment always determines the will. He writes that we would not be free 'were we determined by any thing but the last result of our own Minds, judging of the good or evil of any action' (2.21.48), that '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' (2.21.48), that it would entail 'a Contradiction' to 'deny, that a Man's *will*, in every determination, follows his own Judgment' (2.21.48), that 'a Man may justly incur punishment, though it be certain that in all the particular actions that he *wills*, he does, and necessarily does will that, which he then judges to be good' (2.21.56), and that 'the determination of the *Will* immediately follows the Judgment of the Understanding' (2.21.71; see also *Correspondence* 7, 410–11/Letter #2979). These passages are difficult to square with Locke's official account of akrasia, which seems to be that akrasia occurs precisely because judgment *does not* always determine the will, allowing desire to motivate an agent to act contrary to judgment. Locke thus seems to claim both that judgment always determines the will and also that judgment does not determine the will in cases of akrasia—a plain contradiction. Hence the akrasia problem.

## 2. Two Distinctions and a Preliminary Solution

If we are to solve Locke's akrasia problem, we will need to heed two important distinctions, the first between two kinds of judgments and the second between two kinds of desires. Indeed, as we will see, Richard Glauser (2014: 490–97) has argued that these distinctions alone are sufficient to resolve the problem. We can begin with the former, which arises from Locke's discussion of desire.

Locke is a psychological hedonist, holding that 'happiness and that alone [moves *desire*]' (2.21.41), that happiness consists in pleasure and the absence of pain, and that an object is good only to the extent that it tends to produce pleasure or reduce pain (2.21.42).<sup>5</sup> It follows, Locke says, that whatever tends to produce pleasure or reduce pain is 'the proper object of *Desire* in general' (2.21.43). Locke goes on to qualify his hedonism, however:

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 satisfy himself. *Happiness*, under this view, every one constantly pursues, and *desires* what makes any part of it: Other things, acknowledged to be good, he can look upon without *desire*; pass by, and be content without. (2.21.43)

According to Locke, we do not desire every apparent good. Instead, we desire all and only those goods that we take 'to make a necessary part of [our] happiness'. To illustrate, Locke compares an 'Epicure' and a 'studious Man' (2.21.43). While each acknowledges the pleasures both of 'Knowledge' and of 'Sense', the epicure does not desire to expand his knowledge and the studious man does not desire to indulge his senses. Locke explains:

Though each of them cannot but confess, there is great Pleasure in what the other pursues; yet neither of them making the other's delight a part of his happiness, their *desires* are not moved, but each is satisfied without what the other enjoys, and so his will is not determined to the pursuit of it. (2.21.43)

<sup>5</sup> Since happiness consists in pleasure and the absence of pain, Locke takes happiness to come in degrees such that an agent may be more or less happy depending on their precise allotment of pleasures and pains: '*Happiness* then 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' (2.21.42).

Locke's idea seems to be that, since there are many different and often practically incompatible ways of achieving happiness, different individuals go about pursuing happiness in different ways, 'placing their satisfaction' in some goods to the exclusion of all others. As a result, Locke holds that we desire all and only those goods that we take to be necessary for *our happiness*, that is, for the particular, idiosyncratic kind of happiness that we have undertaken to pursue, whether that be the sensual happiness of the epicure or the intellectual happiness of the scholar.<sup>6</sup>

Significantly, Locke goes on to strengthen this qualification of his hedonism, arguing not merely that we do not desire every apparent good but moreover that we do not always desire the *greater* apparent good. Locke observes that there are many people who acknowledge the possibility of 'a state of eternal durable Joys after this life' who nonetheless 'bound their happiness within some little enjoyment, or aim of this life, and exclude the joys of Heaven from making any necessary part of it' with the result that 'their desires are not moved by this greater apparent good' (2.21.44). Just as the epicure fails to desire intellectual pleasures because he does not take them to be necessary for his happiness, so too Locke maintains that many do not desire the joys of heaven—which they themselves recognize to constitute their greater good—because they do not take them to be necessary for their happiness.

Locke gives judgment a central role in this account of desire.<sup>7</sup> When Locke says that we desire all and only those goods that we 'take' to be necessary for our happiness, he understands this *taking* as a kind of judgment. Locke makes this identification explicit when he writes that we desire 'whatever is judged necessary to [our] Happiness' (2.21.43) and, later, that 'we do not fix our desires on every apparent greater good, unless it be judged to be necessary to our happiness' (2.21.68). For Locke, therefore, the reason why the epicure and the scholar desire different kinds of goods is because they make different judgments. The epicure judges that sensual pleasures are necessary for his (the epicure's) happiness, while the scholar judges that intellectual pleasures are necessary for his (the scholar's) happiness. In offering this account of desire, therefore, Locke implicitly distinguishes two kinds of judgments: judgments *about what is good* (including judgments *of the greater good*) on the one hand and judgments *about what is necessary for our happiness* on the other. While we do not always desire what we judge to be good (or even what we judge to be the greater good), we do always desire what we judge to be necessary for our happiness.

In addition to this distinction between two kinds of judgments, Locke also draws a second distinction between two kinds of desires: desires for absent *positive* goods and desires for the absent *negative* good of ease from present pain. The former are relatively straightforward: as we have seen, Locke thinks that, whenever an agent judges that some absent positive good is necessary for their happiness, this judgment gives rise to a desire for that good. The latter are somewhat more complicated:

All pain of the body of what sort soever, and disquiet of the mind, is *uneasiness*: And with this is always join'd Desire, equal to the pain or *uneasiness* felt; and is scarce distinguishable from it. For *desire* being nothing but an *uneasiness* in the want of an absent good, in reference to any pain felt, ease is that absent good; and till that ease be attained, we may call it *desire*, no body feeling pain, that he wishes not to be eased of, with a desire equal to that pain, and inseparable from it. (2.21.31)

According to Locke, every pain or uneasiness is accompanied by a desire for the absent negative good of ease from that pain. Recall that Locke defines desire as 'an *uneasiness* of the Mind for want of some absent good' (2.21.31; compare 2.20.6). Elsewhere, Locke makes it clear that he uses the words 'uneasiness' and 'pain' as rough synonyms (2.7.2).<sup>8</sup> A desire, therefore, is itself a feeling of pain or uneasiness. Locke thus holds, somewhat peculiarly, that every pain or uneasiness is itself accompanied by (and 'scarce distinguishable from') a second pain or uneasiness, namely, the desire for ease from the first pain or uneasiness.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> An anonymous reviewer suggests an alternative reading of this passage as claiming not that the epicure fails to desire knowledge even though he believes that it is good *for him* but rather that the epicure fails to desire knowledge even though he believes that it is good *for the scholar*. Locke writes, however, that 'There is no Body, I think, so senseless as to deny, that there is pleasure in Knowledge' (2.21.43), which seems to imply (at least on a straightforward reading) that even the epicure believes that there is pleasure in knowledge and therefore that knowledge is good for him.

<sup>7</sup> To my knowledge, Glauser (2014: 496–97) is the first to note this role explicitly, but see also Magri (2000: 67). Previously, the standard interpretation had been that, while desire may have a certain cognitive aspect insofar as it is directed towards absent good as its object and can be influenced by examination, there is no intrinsic connection between desire and judgment. See Chappell (1994: 203–5; 2000: 238–43; 2007: 148–54) for the classic statement of this interpretation.

<sup>8</sup> See Weinberg (2016: 186–87) for discussion.

<sup>9</sup> Compare Garrett (2015: 265). Locke later expresses some ambivalence about which of these two pains or uneasinesses determines the will: 'That which in the train of our voluntary actions determines the *Will* to any change of operation, is some present uneasiness, which is, or at least is always accompanied with that of *Desire*' (2.21.71).

Richard Glauser (2014: 492–99) has argued that these two distinctions—between two kinds of judgments and two kinds of desires—are sufficient to resolve Locke's akrasia problem. According to Glauser, Locke's two kinds of judgments serve different functions. On the one hand, in order for an agent to have any desire at all for some good, it is both necessary and sufficient that the agent judge that good to be necessary for their happiness. On the other hand, supposing that the agent does indeed desire some good, the strength of that desire is a function of the agent's judgment about the greatness of that good. In other words, according to Glauser, judgments of happiness are responsible for the *existence* of desire, while judgments of the greater good are responsible for the *strength* of desire. Glauser argues that akrasia arises because these two kinds of judgments interact differently with Locke's two kinds of desires. Regarding desires for ease from pain, Locke maintains that we always judge ease from pain to be necessary for our happiness and, moreover, that we always judge accurately about the greatness of present pains (2.21.58). It follows both that we always desire ease from pain and moreover that we always desire ease in proportion to its actual goodness, which is why Locke says in the passage quoted above that every pain is accompanied by 'a desire equal to that pain' (2.21.31). By contrast, regarding desires for absent positive goods, Locke holds that we do not judge all absent positive goods to be necessary for our happiness (and moreover that we often judge falsely about the greatness of absent goods, although this point is not relevant to akrasia). Consequently, we sometimes find ourselves in situations in which we form the following judgments:

- (1) That ease from some present pain P is necessary for our happiness,
- (2) That some absent good G is not necessary for our happiness, and nonetheless
- (3) That G is a greater good than ease from P.

In such cases, we desire ease from P (and desire it in proportion to P's actual greatness) but do not desire G, even though we judge that G is a greater good than ease from P. We thus suffer akrasia, because the desire for ease from P motivates us to act contrary to our judgment that G is the greater good.<sup>10</sup>

*Prima facie*, Locke's example of the drunkard might appear to fit nicely into Glauser's schema. After all, the drunkard does indeed labour under a present pain, namely, the '*uneasiness* to miss his Companions' or 'the habitual thirst after his Cups' (2.21.35). On Glauser's interpretation, therefore, the drunkard might act akratically because he forms the following judgments:

- (1') That ease from 'the habitual thirst after his Cups' is necessary for his happiness,
- (2') That abstinence is not necessary for his happiness, and nonetheless
- (3') That abstinence is a greater good than ease from the pain of 'thirst'.

The drunkard suffers akrasia, on this reading, because the desire for ease from his thirst motivates him to act contrary to his own judgment that abstinence is the greater good.<sup>11</sup>

As Moauro and Rickless (2019: 6–7) have argued, however, closer examination reveals that Locke's description of the drunkard does not actually match Glauser's schema. On Glauser's interpretation, the drunkard acts akratically because he judges that abstinence is the greater good but that it is not necessary for his happiness. Since Glauser takes the latter judgment to be necessary for desire, it follows that, on Glauser's interpretation, the drunkard should not desire abstinence at all. Locke writes of the drunkard, however, that 'in the intervals of his drinking hours, [he] will take resolutions to pursue the greater good' and that, even as he returns to the tavern, 'he at the same time makes secret promises to himself, that he will do so no more' (2.21.35). The drunkard's problem, therefore, is not that he simply fails to desire abstinence. Instead, the drunkard's problem is that, while he does desire abstinence, his desire for abstinence is not strong enough to overcome his desire to ease the pain of his thirst. Glauser's interpretation lacks an explanation of this

<sup>10</sup> This possible explanation of akrasia undermines Magri's (2000: 60) claim that 'motivational externalism'—i.e. the view that there is only a 'contingent' connection between desire and judgment—is required for the intelligibility of akrasia'. For Locke, akrasia occurs when there is a disconnect between desire and our judgments of the greater good, even though we always desire what we judge to be necessary for our happiness. See also Vailati (1990: 215–16), who likewise reads Locke as a motivational externalist, as well as Stuart (2013: 476–81), who offers effective criticism of the externalist reading.

<sup>11</sup> Davidson (2003: 223–24) suggests that Lockean akrasia occurs because 'what appears pleasurable to an agent at the present might run quite contrary to her all-things-considered judgment concerning her ultimate pleasure or happiness' (224). While neither Glauser (2014) nor Moauro and Rickless (2019) discuss this proposal, I take Glauser's interpretation to build upon the virtues of Davidson's. The key difference is that, whereas Davidson mistakenly supposes that we desire whatever 'appears pleasurable' (a claim that we have already seen Locke to deny in 2.21.43), Glauser rightly observes that, for Locke, we desire whatever we judge necessary for our happiness.



problem. After all, on Glauser's interpretation, if the drunkard judges both that abstinence is necessary for his happiness (as he must if he does desire abstinence) and that it is the greater good, then he ought to desire abstinence more than he desires to ease the pain of his thirst. But he does not. Therefore, Glauser's interpretation cannot be the whole story about akrasia.

### 3. Moauro and Rickless's Solution

Moauro and Rickless (2019) pick up where Glauser leaves off. They argue that, in order to understand Locke's account of akrasia, we need to posit a further distinction, not merely between judgments of *the greater good* and judgments of *happiness*, but between judgments of *present* happiness and judgments of *future* happiness. On their reading, when Locke claims that we desire whatever we judge to be necessary for our 'happiness', Locke is talking exclusively about present rather than future happiness: 'For Locke, our wills are determined by judgements of present happiness via desire, and can be indirectly determined by judgements of future happiness only when, via custom and habit, we begin to take pleasure in ... actions conducive to future happiness' (Moauro and Rickless 2019: 7). On this interpretation, we always desire whatever we judge to be necessary for our present happiness, but do not desire what we merely judge to be necessary for our future happiness. In order to act in pursuit of future happiness, therefore, we must make *the means to obtaining future happiness* part of our present happiness. In this case, once we judge that certain actions conducing to future happiness are necessary for our present happiness, we will begin to desire them—not as the means to future happiness, but for their own sake.

Moauro and Rickless's interpretation offers a promising explanation of Locke's drunkard. The drunkard judges that abstinence is not only his greater good but also necessary for his future happiness. Moreover, since the drunkard has had time to contemplate his future happiness 'in the intervals of his drinking hours' (2.21.35), the drunkard would actually take some pleasure from performing those actions that conduce to his future happiness; he might feel a certain pride, for example, if he were to stay home from the tavern. The drunkard thus judges that staying home from the tavern is necessary for his present happiness and, consequently, desires to stay home. Unfortunately, when evening falls, the drunkard suffers 'the habitual thirst after his Cups' and cannot help but judge that ease from this pain is also necessary for his present happiness. The drunkard thus has two desires: the desire to stay home and the desire for 'his Cups'. Unfortunately, it turns out that the latter is stronger than the former. The drunkard thus acts akratically: he wills to return to the tavern, even though he recognizes that he is acting contrary both to his greater good and to his future happiness.

Moauro and Rickless's interpretation also enjoys some independent textual support. First, there are many passages in which Locke emphasizes the contrast between present and future happiness. He explains, for example, that the reason why we often do not desire the greater apparent good is because 'All present pain, whatever it be, makes a part of our present *misery*. But all absent good does not at any time make a necessary part of our present *happiness*, nor the absence of it make a part of our *misery*' (2.21.44). On Moauro and Rickless's reading, Locke's point in such passages is that, strictly speaking, we do not desire those goods that we merely judge necessary for our *future* happiness. Instead, we can only desire such goods in a derivative sense, insofar as we judge the present means to obtaining them necessary for our *present* happiness. Second, Locke makes a point of arguing that it is indeed 'in a Man's power to change the pleasantness, and unpleasantness, that accompanies any sort of action', both through 'due consideration' and through 'practice, application, and custom' (2.21.69). According to Moauro and Rickless, this claim is crucial to Locke's overall view because it is only by bringing ourselves to take pleasure in those actions that conduce to our future happiness that we can bring ourselves to desire and, consequently, to perform those actions.

I think that there is something importantly correct about Moauro and Rickless's interpretation. In particular, I think that Moauro and Rickless correctly identify the problem with Glauser's interpretation when they remark that Glauser fails sufficiently to take into account the '*temporal* element that Locke alludes to on many occasions' (Moauro and Rickless 2019: 7). I disagree, however, with their positive proposal. Moauro and Rickless claim that, according to Locke, we desire all and only those goods that we judge necessary for our *present* happiness, regardless of whether we judge them necessary for our *future* happiness. We might wonder, however, why Locke should deny that we desire what we merely judge necessary for our future happiness. According to Moauro and Rickless, Locke gives his reasons for denying this claim in 2.21.37. In this section, Locke argues that the will is determined not by the greater apparent good but by the uneasiness of desire because '[*uneasiness*] alone is present, and 'tis against the nature of things, that what is absent should operate, where it is not'. Consequently, if we are deciding between pursuing some absent good and easing some present pain or uneasiness, '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*' (2.21.37). Here is how Moauro and Rickless gloss the latter passage:

Since Locke believes that the present uneasiness of desire alone determines the will, any judgement of absent good can be motivationally efficacious only insofar as it can be considered a *present good*. The judgments that raise our desires and thereby determine the will, it would seem, are judgements of present happiness alone. (Moauro and Rickless 2019: 8)

On this reading of the passage, Locke infers from

(1) The present uneasiness of desire alone determines the will,

to

(2) Only judgments of present good raise desire and determine the will.

This inference, however, is a non sequitur. While Locke does hold that the *uneasiness* of some desire must be present if it is to determine the will, it does not follow that the *object* of that desire must also be 'present' (in some sense) if it is to determine the will. Just as judgments about present goods can raise present desires for those present goods, I see no reason for Locke to deny that judgments about future goods can raise present desires for those future goods. Indeed, there is at least one passage in which Locke seems to endorse the latter claim: 'the present moment not being our eternity, whatever our enjoyment be, we look beyond the present, and desire goes with our foresight, and that still carries the *will* with it' (2.21.39; see also 2.21.59). In Locke's view, therefore, while only present desires can determine the will, some of our present desires are directed towards future goods, having been raised by our 'foresight' or judgment about those future goods.

I think that Moauro and Rickless misread Locke's argument in 2.21.37. Here is the relevant passage, quoted now at greater length:

Another reason why 'tis *uneasiness* alone determines the will, may be this. Because that alone is present, and 'tis against the nature of things, that what is absent should operate, where it is not. It may be said, that absent good may by contemplation be brought home to the mind, and made present. The *Idea* of it indeed may be in the mind, and 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*. (2.21.37)

Locke's point in this passage is that, given the principle of no-action-at-a-temporal-distance, absent goods cannot determine the will by themselves precisely because they are *absent* and not *present*. He concludes that the will must be determined not by the absent goods themselves but by the present uneasiness of desire for those absent goods. The passage is thus silent both about the temporal proximity of the objects of desire (whether they are present goods or future goods) and also about the judgments that raise desire (whether they are judgments of present happiness or judgments of future happiness).

Setting aside this textual objection, it is worth reflecting philosophically upon the account of human motivation that Moauro and Rickless attribute to Locke. Suppose that I am considering whether to book a massage for tomorrow afternoon. On Moauro and Rickless's interpretation, while I may judge that the massage is necessary for my future happiness, Locke insists that this judgment by itself cannot generate desire and, consequently, cannot motivate me to book the massage. If I am to act in pursuit of my future happiness, it is not enough that I merely anticipate the future pleasure of the massage. Instead, I must take pleasure in *the present act of booking it*. It is only if I judge that booking a massage is necessary for my present happiness that I can desire to undertake the means towards what I already judge to be necessary for my future happiness. This is an extraordinarily myopic view of human motivation. Granted, Locke does hold that we tend to privilege the present over the future—I myself will emphasize this aspect of his view in the next section. But surely Locke does not deny that we can at least sometimes be motivated to act directly in the pursuit of future happiness.

These objections point towards a deeper problem. One consequence of Moauro and Rickless's interpretation is that the drunkard is not guilty of any mistake. He judges, correctly, that abstinence is necessary

for his future happiness. And he also judges, correctly, that ease from the very real pain of his thirst is necessary for his present happiness. The drunkard acts akratically, therefore, not because he has made some false judgment but rather because he has made two true judgments that, due to the structure of human motivation, tragically lead him to act contrary to his own greater good and future happiness. This is a startling consequence. On this view, what the drunkard needs to do to avoid akrasia is not to correct his judgments (since his judgments are not actually incorrect) but rather to find some way to take pleasure in those actions that will, in fact, conduce to his future happiness. While he may now find them intrinsically unpleasant, he must somehow learn to enjoy them if he is ever to act in a way that will conduce to his future happiness. In this sense, it turns out that akrasia is not a failure of rationality but a failure of taste.

How did we end up here? I think that Moauro and Rickless's interpretation exemplifies the common adage, *hard cases make bad law*. Moauro and Rickless rightly note that Locke's account of akrasia contains an important temporal element that previous interpreters have underplayed. They go on, however, to ossify this observation into a general psychological principle, namely, the principle that we *only* desire what we judge necessary for our *present* happiness. I think that this ossification is a mistake. On the view that I am going to develop, the drunkard's problem is that he *irrationally* pursues present happiness at the expense of future happiness. If the drunkard were being fully rational, he would desire and will to pursue what he himself judges to be necessary for his (future) happiness, despite the present pain involved. I am thus going to insist upon distinguishing general psychological principle from particular irrational deviation. Locke's general psychological principle is the one that he himself states, namely, that we desire whatever we judge necessary for our happiness—happiness *simpliciter*, not *present* or *future* happiness. The drunkard's problem is that, while he does desire what he judges necessary for his happiness, he irrationally privileges present over future happiness.

#### 4. A New Solution: Locke's Diagnosis of Akrasia

Let's make a fresh start. Locke uses the case of the drunkard as evidence for his claim that the will is determined not by the greater apparent good but by the uneasiness of desire. The drunkard wills to return to the tavern even though he judges that his greater good lies in abstinence because 'the *uneasiness* to miss his accustomed delight returns, the greater acknowledged good loses its hold, and the present *uneasiness* determines the *will* to the accustomed action' (2.21.35). Locke's position becomes more complicated when he argues that we desire all and only those goods that we judge to be necessary for our happiness (2.21.43), since it follows that there are actually at least two judgments at work in the case of the drunkard: his judgment of the greater good and his judgment about what is necessary for his happiness. Moauro and Rickless further complicate matters when they observe (in objection to Glauser) that the drunkard does desire abstinence, even if his desire for abstinence is weaker than his desire to ease the pain of his thirst, since it now follows that there are actually not two but three judgments at work:

- (1) That abstinence is the drunkard's greater good,
- (2) That easing the pain of thirst is necessary for his happiness, and
- (3) That abstinence is necessary for his happiness.

Judgments (2) and (3) give rise, respectively, to the drunkard's desire to ease the pain of thirst and to his desire for abstinence. The drunkard acts akratically because judgment (2) gives rise to a desire that motivates him to act contrary to judgment (1).

So far so good. We might wonder, however, why the desire stemming from judgment (2) is stronger than the desire stemming from judgment (3). Presumably, the answer is that, while the drunkard does judge both that *easing the pain of thirst* is necessary for his happiness and that *abstinence* is necessary for his happiness, he nonetheless also judges that the former is *more important* for his happiness than the latter, much as I might believe that cake and balloons are both necessary for a smashing birthday party and yet concede that the cake is far more important than the balloons.<sup>12</sup> This answer, however, raises a further question, which I take to be the fundamental question at issue in Locke's discussion of akrasia: Given that the drunkard judges that abstinence is his greater good, why does he nonetheless judge that ease from the pain of thirst rather than abstinence is more important for his happiness?

<sup>12</sup> Moauro and Rickless (2019: 9) suggest a similar answer when they write that, in paradigmatic cases of akrasia, 'one makes the means necessary to secure her future happiness a part of her present happiness, but not enough so to override the motivational pull exerted by uneasiness that draws her will away from the path to future happiness.'



I think that the answer to this question, briefly stated, is that the drunkard is irrational. Recall that Locke takes happiness to consist in pleasure and the absence of pain and that he takes an object to be good for an agent only insofar as it brings that agent more pleasure or less pain (2.21.41–42). Given these definitions, it is hard to see how a lesser good (something that brings less pleasure) could possibly be more important for an agent's happiness (their overall pleasure) than a greater good (something that brings more pleasure). Of course, as we saw earlier, Locke does hold that there are different, mutually incompatible ways of pursuing happiness, which is why the scholar pursues intellectual pleasures rather than sensual pleasures and why the epicure pursues sensual pleasures rather than intellectual pleasures. Akrasia is different, however. An akratic scholar would not be one who neglects sensual for intellectual pleasures but one who neglects great intellectual pleasures (say, studying Locke's *Essay*) for more meagre ones (reciting nursery rhymes, perhaps).<sup>13</sup> It is hard to see how that kind of trade-off could possibly be rational on Locke's view. Therefore, since the drunkard judges that abstinence is his greater good, he ought rationally to judge that abstinence is more important for his happiness than ease from thirst. The drunkard does not form the latter judgment, however. Instead, he forms the contrary judgment that ease from thirst is more important for his happiness than abstinence. It follows, I claim, that the drunkard is irrational. Indeed, it appears to follow not merely that he is irrational but that he is inconsistent: he judges both that abstinence is his greater good and that ease from thirst is more important for his happiness than abstinence even though, given the signification of the terms 'good' and 'happiness', the truth of the latter judgment entails the falsity of the former.

At this point, it will be helpful to distinguish two questions about akrasia. First, *what is akrasia?* I think that we already have Locke's answer to this question. Akrasia is what happens when an agent wills to pursue what they themselves judge to be a lesser good rather than a greater good because they judge the lesser good to be more important for their happiness than the greater good (or because they do not judge the greater good to be necessary for their happiness in the first place). This answer, however, gives rise to a second question: *What causes akrasia?* If akrasia is a form of irrationality, then what are the underlying psychological causes that might drive an agent to such irrationality?

To answer the latter question, we can begin by setting aside akrasia and turning briefly to Locke's views about judgment more generally. In a chapter entitled '*Of wrong Assent, or Errour*', Locke catalogues several biases that sometimes lead us to pass judgment contrary to the evidence. He considers, for example, the case of 'an intelligent *Romanist*, that from the very first dawning of any Notions in his Understanding, hath had this Principle constantly inculcated, *viz.* That he must believe as the Church (*i.e.* those of his Communion) believes' (4.20.10). According to Locke, the 'intelligent *Romanist*' possesses overwhelming evidence against, for example, 'the Doctrine of *Transubstantiation*', and yet the psychological weight of the principle that 'he must believe as the Church ... believes' so prejudices his judgment that he grants his assent nonetheless. Locke gives similar examples of the ways in which deference to a 'received *Hypothesis*' (4.20.11) or '*common received Opinions*' (4.20.17) as well as the influence of 'Men's Appetites, and *prevailing Passions*' (4.20.12) often prejudice our judgments. This discussion leads Locke to a rather pessimistic conclusion about human rationality:

Earthly Minds, like Mud-Walls, resist the strongest Batteries: and though, perhaps, sometimes the force of a clear Argument may make some Impression, yet they nevertheless stand firm, keep out the Enemy Truth, that would captivate, or disturb them. (4.20.12)

In Locke's view, human judgment often falls far short of a clear-eyed, impartial assessment of the evidence. On the contrary, Locke argues that our judgments are deeply influenced by a range of biases that we ourselves often fail to recognize.

The same is true of the judgments involved in akrasia. In 2.21.57–68, Locke considers '*How Men come often to prefer the worse to the better*; and to chuse that, which, by their own Confession, has made them miserable' (2.21.56), going on to blame 'the wrong judgments Men make of future Good and Evil' (2.21.58). Locke explains that 'as to present Happiness and Misery, when that alone comes into consideration ... he knows what best pleases him, and that, he actually prefers' (2.21.58). We get into trouble, however, when we 'look beyond our present enjoyments, and carry the Mind out to absent *good[s]*' (2.21.59), which 'come to be *represented* to our desires, *under deceitful appearances*' on account of '*Judgment* pronouncing wrongly

<sup>13</sup> I am not sure what Locke would say about the intermediate case of a scholar who neglects great sensual pleasures for meagre intellectual pleasures.

concerning them' (2.21.61). The fundamental cause of such errors, Locke explains, is '*the weak and narrow Constitution of our Minds*' (2.21.64):

We cannot well enjoy two Pleasures at once, much less any Pleasure almost, whilst Pain possesses us. The present Pleasure, if it be not very languid, and almost none at all, fills our narrow Souls, and so takes up the whole Mind, that it scarce leaves any thought of things absent: Or if among our Pleasures there are some, which are not strong enough, to exclude the consideration of things at a distance; yet we have so great an abhorrence of Pain, that a little of it extinguishes all our Pleasures: A little bitter mingled in our Cup, leaves no relish of the sweet. (2.21.64)

According to Locke, present pleasures and pains so fill our feeble minds that we often find it difficult to turn our attention to absent goods. As a result, we tend to be terrible judges of future pleasures and pains.

Now, one consequence of this narrow-mindedness is that our judgments of the greater good are often mistaken. When we suffer under present pain, we 'passionately think' that 'nothing ... can exceed, or almost equal, the uneasiness that sits so heavy upon us' (2.21.64). In such cases, we neglect the greater good out of simple ignorance. Locke is more concerned, however, with a second consequence of our narrow-mindedness. According to Locke, even when our judgments of *the greater good* are not mistaken, our judgments about what is necessary for our happiness often are. This is what happens in cases of akrasia. The drunkard, for example, correctly judges that his greater good lies in abstinence, and yet the pain of his habitual thirst so fills his mind that he ends up judging that easing that pain with a glass of wine is not only necessary for his happiness but also more important for his happiness than abstinence.

Locke discusses at least three ways in which the narrowness of our minds tends to distort our judgments about what is necessary for our happiness. The first is a form of future-discounting:

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. Thus most Men, like spend-thrift Heirs, are apt to judge a little in Hand better than a great deal to come; and so for small Matters in Possession, part with great ones in Reversion. (2.21.63)

It is important to recognize that the kind of future-discounting at issue here does not involve simply underestimating future pleasures and pains in comparison with present ones. On the contrary, Locke's point is that we are 'apt to judge a little in Hand better than a great deal to come', suggesting that we tend to prefer lesser present pleasures over *what we ourselves judge to be* greater future pleasures (and likewise *mutatis mutandis* for present and future pains).<sup>14</sup> Locke thus appears to have in mind cases of akrasia. His point is that we tend irrationally to judge that the immediate gratification of present pleasure is necessary for our happiness even when we ourselves judge that it does not constitute our greater good.

Second, Locke argues that our narrow-mindedness also disposes us to privilege the removal of pain over the acquisition of pleasure. As we saw a moment ago, Locke holds that we are particularly sensitive to present pains: 'A little bitter mingled in our Cup, leaves no relish of the sweet' (2.21.64). He explains elsewhere that 'Pain and *uneasiness* [are], by every one, concluded, and felt, to be inconsistent with happiness; spoiling the relish, even of those good things which we have: a little pain serving to marr all the pleasure we rejoiced in' (2.21.36). The result is that, if we are forced to choose between removing some pain and gaining an equal or greater pleasure, we tend to choose the former:

Under the present Pain we find not our selves capable of any the least degree of Happiness. ... And therefore our whole Endeavours and Thoughts are intent, to get rid of the present Evil, before all things, as the first necessary condition to our Happiness, let what will follow. (2.21.64)

<sup>14</sup> When Locke says that we are 'apt to judge a little in Hand better than a great deal to come' (2.21.63), I take him to mean that we are apt to judge a little *pleasure* in hand better than a great deal of *pleasure* to come. An anonymous reviewer suggests that Locke might instead mean that we are apt to judge a little *good* in hand better than great deal of *good* to come, but I think the context makes it clear that Locke is discussing the comparison of present and future pleasures and not the comparison of present and future goods.

Importantly, the point here is not, as I noted earlier, that we tend to overestimate present pains in comparison with future pleasures. Instead, the point is that, even when we are not guilty of such overestimation, we tend to privilege the removal of pain over the acquisition of pleasure because our minds are so constituted that even the slightest pain tends to leave us unable to enjoy even those pleasures that we actually possess.<sup>15</sup> Locke thus seems to have in mind a (perhaps non-paradigmatic) kind of akrasia, in which we judge that the removal of a small present pain is necessary for our happiness despite also judging that the greater good lies in tolerating that pain for the sake of greater pleasures.

A third way in which the narrowness of our minds tends to distort our judgments about what is necessary for our happiness is by disposing us to rest satisfied with lesser pleasures even when greater pleasures are attainable. Locke provides a striking example of this phenomenon, which I noted earlier but is now worth quoting at greater length:

In this life there are not many, whose happiness reaches so far, as to afford them a constant train of moderate mean Pleasures, without any mixture of *uneasiness*; and yet they could be content to stay here for ever: Though they cannot deny, but that it is possible, there may be a state of eternal durable Joys after this life, far surpassing all the good is to be found here. Nay they cannot but see, that it is more possible, than the attainment, and continuation of that pittance of Honour, Riches, or Pleasure, which they pursue; and for which they neglect that eternal State: But yet in full view of this difference, satisfied of the possibility of a perfect, secure, and lasting happiness in a future State, and under a clear conviction, that it is not to be had here, whilst they bound their happiness within some little enjoyment, or aim of this life, and exclude the joys of Heaven from making any necessary part of it, their desires are not moved by this greater apparent good, nor their *wills* determin'd to any action, or endeavour for its attainment. (2.21.44)

Locke observes in this passage that many people who firmly believe in the possibility of perfect eternal happiness in heaven are nonetheless so content with their small allotment of worldly pleasures that they do not even desire the joys of heaven, much less do anything to secure them. Again, Locke seems to have in mind a form of akrasia: the imagined believer judges that their greater good lies in the joys of heaven but nonetheless wills to pursue lesser, worldly pleasures instead. Later, Locke offers the following explanation of such cases:

For in this narrow scantling of 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, whilst it lasts, sufficient to make us think ourselves 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. For who is content is happy. But as soon as any new uneasiness comes in, this Happiness is disturb'd, and we are set afresh on work in the pursuit of Happiness. (2.21.59)

Locke actually proposes two complementary explanations in this passage. First, he suggests that we tend to satisfy ourselves with lesser pleasures simply because 'we desire not to venture the change' (2.21.59). Locke elaborates on this suggestion later, writing that 'it [seems] so preposterous a thing to Men, to make themselves unhappy in order to Happiness, that they do not easily bring themselves to it' (2.21.68). Here, Locke seems again to emphasize our tendency to pain-aversion: we rest satisfied with lesser pleasures because we do not wish to suffer the pain necessary to achieve greater pleasures. Second, in the passage quoted above, Locke also highlights our tendency to focus on present rather than future happiness: 'we judge that we are happy already' because small present pleasures '[suffice] for our present Happiness' (2.21.59). So long as we are, in fact, happy with our present circumstances and possess at least 'the lowest degree of what

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Stuart (2013: 453–54), who reads Locke as arguing in 2.21.36 that the reason why uneasiness alone determines the will is because 'the elimination of uneasiness is the first and necessary step towards happiness' (454). Stuart himself criticizes this claim: 'It is rather like saying that a company must pay off all of its debts before going about the business of earning money' (454). I think, however, that Stuart is guilty of an interpretive error similar to the one that I have attributed to Moauro and Rickless. On my reading of 2.21.36, Locke is merely giving a psychological explanation of why uneasiness determines the will; he is not endorsing this explanation as a rational or effective way of pursuing happiness. Like Moauro and Rickless, therefore, Stuart mistakes Locke's *psychological explanation* of our irrational behaviour for a *rationalization* of that behaviour.

can be called *Happiness*, namely, 'so much ease from all Pain, and so much present Pleasure, as without which any one cannot be content' (2.21.42), we tend not to concern ourselves with the augmentation of our happiness.<sup>16</sup> As a result, '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' (2.21.44).

Stepping back, let me summarize the interpretation of Locke's account of akrasia that I have been developing. First, *what is akrasia?* Broadly speaking, akrasia is what happens when an agent wills to act contrary to their own judgment of the greater good. On Locke's view in particular, akrasia is what happens when an agent wills to pursue something other than what they themselves judge to be the greater good, either (1) because they do not judge that the greater apparent good is necessary for their happiness or (2) because, while they do judge that it is necessary for their happiness, they do not judge that it is as important for their happiness as something else that they also judge to be necessary for their happiness. Second, *what causes akrasia?* For Locke, akrasia is caused by a range of cognitive biases that systematically distort our judgments about what is necessary for our happiness. Due to '*the weak and narrow Constitution of our Minds*' (2.21.64), we are psychologically predisposed (1) to prefer present pleasures over future pleasures and future pains over present pains, (2) to privilege the removal of pain over the acquisition of pleasure, and (3) to rest content with lesser pleasures even when greater pleasures are attainable. As a result, we tend to judge that present pleasure and ease from present pain is necessary for our happiness, even when these judgments run contrary to our judgments of the greater good. We are thus motivated to act akratically, contrary to the greater apparent good.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

My goal in this paper has been to develop a new interpretation of Locke's account of akrasia. I take the central insight of this interpretation to be that Locke understands akrasia as a form of genuine irrationality. When the drunkard wills to return to the tavern, for example, Locke thinks that he does so because he has made a false judgment about what is necessary for his happiness, and that this false judgment is caused fundamentally by certain irrational biases endemic to the human mind. In this sense, Locke seeks to *diagnose* akrasia by identifying its underlying psychological causes.

This diagnostic orientation marks the central difference between my interpretation and that of Moauro and Rickless. Moauro and Rickless deserve credit for emphasizing the temporal element in Locke's account of akrasia. The drunkard, for example, acts akratically because he is pursuing his *present* happiness rather than his *future* happiness. The trouble is simply that Moauro and Rickless overgeneralize the drunkard's irrational pursuit of present happiness when they conclude that, according to Locke, we always will to pursue whatever we judge necessary for our *present* (as opposed to *future*) happiness. As I argued in §3, there is little reason to think that Locke endorses this highly peculiar principle. Instead, on my interpretation, Locke's view is that we always will to pursue whatever we judge necessary (not for our *present* happiness but) for our happiness *simpliciter*. In some cases, we confuse happiness *simpliciter* with *present* happiness and thereby end up, like the drunkard, acting akratically. Fortunately, however, we are not always so irrational.<sup>17</sup>

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Locke suggests elsewhere that this may be for the best because otherwise 'we should be constantly and infinitely miserable; there being infinite degrees of happiness, which are not in our possession' (2.21.44; compare 2.21.68).

<sup>17</sup> I would like to thank Steve Darwall, Michael Della Rocca, Alison Simmons, and Ken Winkler as well as Antonia LoLordo and two anonymous reviewers for this journal.

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**How to cite this article:** Leisinger, Matthew A 2020 Locke's Diagnosis of Akrasia. *Journal of Modern Philosophy*, 2(1): 6, pp. 1–13. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32881/jomp.105>

**Submitted:** 15 February 2020

**Accepted:** 27 April 2020

**Published:** 16 June 2020

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