

Locke on the Motivation to Suspend Desire

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Abstract. This paper takes up two questions regarding Locke’s doctrine of suspension. First, what motivates suspension? Second, what are the conditions under which we are motivated to suspend? In response to the first question, I argue that suspension is motivated by the desire to avoid the possible future evils that might result from acting precipitately upon some desire without suspending. In response to the second question, I argue against the common assumption that the desire motivating suspension must be an agent’s most pressing desire.

The doctrine of suspension is the centerpiece of Locke’s account of liberty. Locke argues that, while “it is natural” that an agent’s “most pressing” desire should determine their will, “the mind” possesses “a power to *suspend* the execution and satisfaction of any of its desires”, allowing us to refrain from acting on our desires until we have had a chance “to examine, view, and judge, of the good or evil of what we are going to do” (2.21.47).¹ Locke claims that this power to suspend and examine our desires is “the source of all liberty” (2.21.47) and the “hinge” on which our liberty “turns” (2.21.52). And yet, despite its importance, Locke says remarkably little about how suspension works. As a result, there is little agreement in the literature about how to understand it.

I am going to take up two questions regarding the mechanics of suspension. First, what motivates suspension? Second, what are the conditions under which we are motivated to suspend? In

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all in-text citations refer to Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Locke 1975) by book, chapter, and section. Other in-text citations are as follows: I cite Locke’s *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (Locke 1996) as “*Some Thoughts*” by section, and I cite Hume’s *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Hume 2000) as “*Treatise*” by book, part, section, and paragraph.

response to the first question, I will argue that suspension is motivated neither by the general desire for happiness as such nor by some other motivational principle distinct from the general desire for happiness but rather by a particular desire generated by the general desire for happiness, namely, the desire to avoid the possible future evils that might result from acting precipitately upon some desire without suspending. In response to the second question, I will argue against the common assumption that the desire motivating suspension must be an agent's most pressing desire. Since Locke claims that we are usually able to suspend even our most pressing desires, he must hold that a *less pressing* desire can motivate an agent to suspend their *most pressing* desire. Anticipating Hume, his point is that an agent's most pressing ("violent") desire need not be the desire with the greatest influence upon the will ("strongest"). The desire motivating suspension thus need not be an agent's most pressing desire in order to motivate suspension.

1. Background

We can begin with some background. Locke holds that "the *Will*" is "a *Power* to begin or forbear, continue or end several actions of our minds, and motions of our Bodies" (2.21.5). He goes on to ask what determines an agent to will the particular actions that they do and answers that "some (and for the most part the most pressing) *uneasiness* a Man is at present under [...] is that which successively determines the *Will*, and sets us upon those Actions, we perform" (2.21.31). He then specifies that the particular kind of uneasiness that determines the will is "*Desire*", which Locke takes to be "an *uneasiness* of the Mind for want of some absent good" (2.21.31; compare 2.20.6).

A complication arises when the desired absent good is relief from present pain:

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 [...]. (2.21.31)

If I feel some pain, Locke thinks that I am actually subject to two uneasinesses. Since Locke explains elsewhere that he uses the words "pain" and "uneasiness" synonymously (2.7.1–2), the first uneasiness

is the pain itself. The second uneasiness (“scarce distinguishable” from the first) is the desire for the negative good of relief from that pain. In such cases, Locke is ambivalent about which uneasiness determines the will, writing that what determines the will is “some present uneasiness, which is, or at least is always accompanied with that of *Desire*” (2.21.71). In what follows, I will bracket this complication and assume that the will is determined exclusively by desire, an uneasiness of the mind directed towards some absent good (positive or negative).

Locke observes that we are constantly subject to all manner of uneasinesses, including “the *uneasiness* of *Hunger, Thirst, Heat, Cold, Weariness* with labour, and *Sleepiness*” as well as “the fantastical *uneasiness*, (as itch after *Honour, Power, or Riches*, etc.) which acquir’d habits by Fashion, Example, and Education have settled in us” (2.21.45). Since these uneasinesses either are or give rise to desires and desire determines the will, the result is that the will is often determined by desires for lesser short-term goods rather than greater long-term goods. Locke gives the example of a drunkard who returns to the tavern every evening even though he recognizes “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” (2.21.35). While the drunkard “sees [the greater good], and acknowledges it [...] 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” (2.21.35).

The doctrine of suspension is Locke’s answer to this worry. While “it is natural [...] that the greatest, and most pressing [desire or uneasiness] should determine the *will*”, Locke says that “the mind” possesses “a power to *suspend* the execution and satisfaction of any of its desires” and that, “during this *suspension* of any desire, before the *will* be determined to action, [...] we have opportunity to examine, view, and judge, of the good or evil of what we are going to do” (2.21.47). This power to suspend and examine our desires is significant because, according to Locke, “due, and repeated Contemplation” of absent goods can bring those goods “nearer to our Mind”, give us “some relish”

of them, and “[raise] in us some desire” for them (2.21.45). As a result, “by a due consideration and examining any good proposed, it is in our power, to raise our desires, in a due proportion to the value of that good, whereby in its turn, and place, it may come to work upon the *will*, and be pursued” (2.21.46). The drunkard, for example, might suspend his desire to return to the tavern and, through examination, gradually strengthen a competing desire for the greater goods of health and sobriety.² If all goes well, this newly bolstered desire may then determine his will, motivating him to stay home and pursue the greater good.

Unfortunately, Locke never specifies what the act of suspension consists in. Significantly, however, he speaks not merely of suspending desire itself but also of suspending the “execution and satisfaction” or “prosecution” (2.21.47) of desire, which suggests that suspending some desire constitutively involves *not acting* on that desire. There are a few ways in which an agent might *not act* on some desire. First, an agent might not act on some desire by willing not to act on that desire, that is, by willing *to forbear* acting on that desire.³ The trouble with this suggestion is that it fails to distinguish the act of suspending some desire from the decision not to act on that desire. A second and more promising way in which an agent might not act on some desire is not by *willing to forbear* acting on that desire but by *forbearing to will* to act on it.⁴ The drunkard, for example, might suspend his desire to return to the tavern by forbearing to will to return to the tavern. A third way in which an agent might not act on some desire is by, as it were, simply putting a hold on that desire or blocking its motivational efficacy. On this interpretation, suspension would not involve an act of the will at all but would instead

² While I used to assume that examination is able not only to raise new desires but also to weaken the suspended desire, an anonymous referee for this journal astutely observes that Locke only speaks of raising new desires and not of weakening old desires.

³ Stuart (2013, 462) seems to suggest this interpretation: “when an agent suspends the prosecution of his strongest desire for positive action, he must do so by means of a volition to not perform that positive action”. But cf. Stuart (2013, 460). Note that, for Locke, we can equally will either the performance or the forbearance of any action. For further discussion, see Lowe (1986) and Stuart (2013, 403–423).

⁴ Rickless (2013a, 49) and Garrett (2015, 275) both seem to endorse this proposal, although neither distinguishes *willing to forbear* from *forbearing to will*. Note that, since Locke treats both performances and forbearances as actions, *forbearing to will* is different from *not willing* in that the former but not the latter is a kind of action.

be something *sui generis*: to suspend some desire would be to prevent that desire from affecting the will in the first place.⁵ I am not going to take a stand on which of these readings is the most plausible.⁶ Instead, in what follows, I will talk about suspension generally without taking a stand on what exactly it consists in.

Despite this agnosticism, I will make one crucial and, admittedly, controversial assumption (more on the controversy in a moment): I will assume that suspension is voluntary, that is, that we *will* to suspend desire.⁷ If suspension consists in forbearing to will to act on some desire, for example, then I am assuming that we *will* to forbear willing to act on that desire.⁸ While I am not going to argue for this assumption in any detail, it does enjoy at least some textual support.⁹ First, there is one passage in which Locke says (or at least implies) that suspension involves an act of will: “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*” (2.21.53; my emphasis). Second, since Locke holds that we can be held responsible for suspension (e.g. 2.21.56), he is under some pressure to admit that suspension is within our voluntary control. This evidence is far from decisive, but it does make for a compelling *prima facie* case.

⁵ On this interpretation, one effect of suspension might be that the agent forbears from willing. Alternatively, having suspended desire, the question of whether or not to will simply might not arise, with the result that the agent neither wills nor forbears from willing.

⁶ Walsh and Lennon (2019, 2) suggest two more possibilities: suspension might consist in the *absence* of volition, or suspension might be “ontologically the same thing” as deliberation. On the latter possibility, cf. Glauser (2003, 707), who insists upon distinguishing suspension from examination. See also Walsh (2014) for an account of suspension on which for some desire to be suspended is for the motivational efficacy of that desire to be interrupted by some conflicting affective state. See note 12 for further discussion.

⁷ Suspension need not always be voluntary. An excessively hesitant person might be compelled to suspend by an idiosyncratic psychological quirk. I will set aside such cases for present purposes, however.

⁸ Rickless (2013a, 49) and Garrett (2015, 275) both endorse this proposal. Note that this interpretation commits Locke to the possibility of higher-order volitions. I do not take this commitment to be problematic. While Locke does seem to claim in 2.21.25 that there would be something problematic about appealing to higher-order volitions in order to give an account of freedom of will, he never denies the possibility of higher-order volitions in general. For further discussion, see Chappell (1994), Rickless (2000), Garrett (2015, 269–272), and Leisinger (2017).

⁹ I am borrowing the following two considerations from Rickless (2013a, 51–53). See also Chappell (2000, 241) and Glauser (2003, 707–708). Cf. Walsh and Lennon (2019, 13n37) for a response to Rickless.

Once we grant that suspension is voluntary, an important consequence follows. Locke holds that, whenever an agent wills some action, their will is determined by some desire. So, if we will to suspend desire, then it follows that the act of suspending desire is itself motivated by some desire. *Prima facie*, this consequence might seem paradoxical. How could desire motivate the suspension of desire? There is no paradox, however. Locke speaks not of the global suspension of desire in general but of the local suspension of this or that desire.¹⁰ If the drunkard wills to suspend his desire to return to the tavern, for example, then his volition to suspend this desire is motivated by some other desire. The latter desire motivates the drunkard to suspend the former. My goal is to understand this mechanism: what is the desire that motivates us to suspend desire, and what are the conditions under which this desire actually motivates us to suspend?

In assuming the suspension is voluntary and therefore motivated by desire, I am deliberately setting aside a large and somewhat heterogeneous family of interpretations on which suspension is not motivated by desire. Commentators who read Locke as a libertarian maintain that the doctrine of suspension introduces an indeterministic element into his account of liberty and therefore that suspension is not determined by anything, desire included.¹¹ Similarly, while Walsh (2014; 2018) opposes the libertarian reading, Walsh does so by arguing that suspension is not something that we *do* at all but rather “something that happens to us” (2014, 150). Consequently, for Walsh, “Suspension is not itself something that is willed” (2018, 658) and, therefore, is not motivated by desire.¹²

¹⁰ See Rickless (2013a, 50–51) and Stuart (2013, 462). Cf. LoLordo (2012, 49).

¹¹ The most developed libertarian reading is Schouls (1992, 148–154), who argues that suspension is a “pure self-determination [...] determined by neither desire nor reason” (155), although Schouls complicates his interpretation by claiming that suspension may be determined by “the master passion” (161) subsequent to an initial act of pure self-determination. See also Aaron (1971, 268–269), Colman (1983, 218–224), Lowe (2005, 135), Mabbott (1973, 66–69), and Vailati (1990, 224–225). For criticism, see Chappell (2000, 245–246), Davidson (2003, 213–224), Losonsky (1995, 304–309), and Stuart (2013, 467–473).

¹² While I am not going to discuss Walsh’s interpretation, I take it to be consistent with a modified version of my project. This is because, while Walsh denies that *suspension* is motivated by desire, Walsh nonetheless maintains that *deliberation* is motivated by desire. Indeed, Walsh and Lennon (2019, 2) propose that suspension and deliberation are “ontologically the same thing”. As a result, my interpretive questions might be rephrased within Walsh’s framework as follows: what is the desire that motivates us *to deliberate*, and what are the conditions under which this desire actually motivates us *to deliberate*?

Intermediate between these two approaches, LoLordo (2012, 60–62) reads Locke as agnostic about the causes of suspension but argues that “it is difficult for him [Locke] to say that suspension is voluntary” (49).¹³ Finally, Garrett (2015, 277) maintains that suspension is voluntary but suggests that Locke treats the doctrine of suspension as an exception to the claim that desire determines the will, citing passages in which Locke says that an agent’s most pressing desire determines the will only “ordinarily” or “for the most part”.¹⁴

My goal is not to refute these interpretations. Instead, I wish to set them aside in order to examine Locke’s doctrine of suspension under the assumption that suspension is voluntary and therefore motivated by desire. I believe that many commentators will happily grant this assumption. Those who do not may read the paper as an elaborate conditional with this assumption in the antecedent. So, without further ado, I turn now to my two questions: granting that suspension is voluntary and determined by desire, what is the desire that motivates suspension and what are the conditions under which it does so?

2. What Motivates Suspension?

I begin with the first question: what motivates suspension? More specifically, what is the desire that motivates suspension? Locke comes closest to answering this question in the following passage:

For the inclination, and tendency of their nature to happiness is an obligation, and motive to them, to take care not to mistake, or miss it [...]. Whatever necessity determines to the pursuit of real Bliss, the same necessity, with the same force establishes *suspence, deliberation*, and scrutiny of each successive desire [...]. (2.21.52)

Locke’s suggestion seems to be that “the inclination [...] to happiness” motivates suspension. Earlier in the *Essay*, he explains that “Nature [...] has put into Man a desire for Happiness, and an aversion to Misery”, which he describes as “innate practical Principles, which [...] do continue constantly to

¹³ See Rickless’s (2013a, 50–53) response to LoLordo. LoLordo argues that suspension cannot be voluntary for Locke because *desire* cannot motivate the suspension of *desire*. But, as I noted earlier, we need not understand suspension as involving the global suspension of all desires. Instead, one desire may motivate an agent to suspend another desire.

¹⁴ I offer an alternative interpretation of these passages in §3.

operate and influence all our Actions, without ceasing” (1.3.3). Likewise, in his discussion of liberty, Locke speaks of “the general *Desire* of Happiness” and says that it “operates constantly and invariably” (2.21.71). Locke’s suggestion thus seems to be that it is the general desire for happiness that motivates suspension.

This account remains incomplete, however. Locke contrasts the “general *Desire* of Happiness” with “particular *desire*[s]” for apparent goods (2.21.71). Since the general desire for happiness “operates constantly and invariably” (2.21.71), Locke maintains that “happiness and that alone [moves *desire*]” (2.21.41) and that “we all aim at [happiness] in all our actions” (2.21.36). As a result, Locke holds both that we desire *all* those goods that we judge necessary for our happiness:

[B]eing *uneasie* in the want of whatever is judged necessary to their Happiness, as soon as any good appears to make a part of their portion of happiness, they begin to *desire* it. (2.21.43)

And moreover that we desire *only* those goods that we judge necessary for our happiness:

[A]ll 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. (2.21.43)

Accordingly, if an agent possesses a particular desire for some apparent good, Locke maintains that they desire this apparent good only because they desire happiness and judges that this apparent good is necessary for their happiness.¹⁵ In this sense, the agent’s particular desire is generated or explained by the general desire for happiness.

If this much is correct, then it seems that the general desire for happiness, simply as such, cannot motivate suspension. Consider the drunkard, whose most pressing particular desire is the desire to return to the tavern. On Locke’s view, the drunkard desires to return to the tavern only because he

¹⁵ For defence and further discussion of this interpretation, see Glauser (2014), Moauro and Rickless (2019), and Leisinger (2020); see also Magri (2000, 67). This interpretation differs from what used to be the standard interpretation of Locke’s theory of motivation on which, while desire may have a 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, 203–205; 2000, 238–243) for a classic statement of this interpretation.

desires happiness and judges that returning to the tavern is necessary for his happiness.¹⁶ The general desire for happiness thus underlies and explains the drunkard's desire to return to the tavern. Consequently, the general desire for happiness, simply as such, cannot also motivate the drunkard to suspend his desire to return to the tavern, since the general desire for happiness is what explains why the drunkard desires to return to the tavern in the first place.¹⁷

Here is another way to make the same point. Why do we suspend some desires but not others? If the general desire for happiness motivates suspension, then it seems that the answer to this question must be that the general desire for happiness can be stronger or weaker relative to different particular desires, motivating us to suspend some but not others. But, since the general desire for happiness itself generates our particular desires, it is hard to make sense of such comparisons. After all, a stronger general desire for happiness would simply generate stronger particular desires. Moreover, Locke says that the general desire for happiness “operates constantly and invariably” (2.21.71), which seems to imply that the general desire for happiness cannot grow stronger or weaker relative to any particular desire.¹⁸

Fortunately, there is another way to understand Locke's suggestion that the general desire for happiness motivates suspension. While the general desire for happiness cannot motivate suspension by itself, the general desire for happiness might motivate suspension by generating another particular

¹⁶ There is a puzzle here. Since Locke holds both that happiness consists in pleasure and the absence of pain and that something is good only to the extent that it tends to produce pleasure rather than pain (2.21.41–42), it follows for Locke that an agent's happiness *just is* their greater good. So, given that the drunkard recognizes that his greater good does not lie in returning to the tavern, it seems that he ought likewise to judge that returning to the tavern is not necessary for his happiness. For three possible solutions to this puzzle, see Glauser (2014, 490–497), Moauro and Rickless (2019), and Leisinger (2020).

¹⁷ Cf. Magri (2000, 63–68), who defends a minimalist interpretation on which the general desire for happiness as such is able to motivate suspension because it possesses, in addition to the “intrinsic and direct motivational force” (65) that usually determines the will, a further “non-intrinsic and indirect motivational force” (66). LoLordo (2012, 49n42) and Weinberg (2016, 200–201) attribute a similarly minimalist interpretation to Chappell (2000, 241–242), but Chappell's view is complicated by his observation that “each of us is always uneasy in just the way that is required for us to suspend our desires before acting” because “in addition to all the particular uneasinesses that dominate our lives [...] each of us has constant and abiding concern for true happiness”, which seems to suggest that the motivation to suspend involves something beyond the general desire for happiness as such.

¹⁸ Weinberg (2016, 200–201) makes this point. See also LoLordo (2012, 49n42).

desire that motivates suspension. On this interpretation, cases of suspension involve three desires. The first is the general desire for happiness. The second and third are particular desires generated by the general desire for happiness: the desire *to be suspended* and the desire *motivating suspension*.

What is the particular desire motivating suspension? Here is my proposal. Locke introduces the doctrine of suspension by noting the “variety of mistakes, errors, and faults which we run into, in the conduct of our lives, and our endeavours after happiness”, explaining that the purpose of suspension is precisely “To prevent” such mistakes (2.21.47). To illustrate, suppose that I am choosing between A and B and desire A more than B. I realize, however, that B might (unbeknownst to me) be a greater good than A. Indeed, it might even turn out that A is not good but evil. I thus realize that, if I act on my desire for A, there is a chance that I may end up either with a comparative evil (a lesser good) or even with an absolute evil. In other words, I realize that I might be making a kind of mistake if I were to act on my desire for A. This realization might plausibly give rise to a new particular desire, namely, the desire to avoid the possible evil that might result if I were to act on my desire for A. It is this desire, I propose, that motivates me to suspend the desire for A. More generally, if an agent suspends the particular desire for some apparent good X, the agent’s act of suspension is motivated by the further particular desire to avoid the (comparative or absolute) evil that might result if they were to act on the desire for X.

Locke sometimes expresses this aspect of his view by distinguishing “real” or “true” happiness from merely “imaginary” happiness. He says that “the highest perfection of intellectual nature, lies in a careful and constant pursuit of true and solid happiness”, that “the care of our selves, that we mistake not imaginary for real happiness, is the necessary foundation of our *liberty*”, and therefore that “we are by the necessity of preferring and pursuing true happiness as our greatest good, obliged to suspend the satisfaction of our desire in particular cases” (2.21.51). His point is that, while we possess a general desire for happiness and therefore “aim at [happiness] in all our actions” (2.21.36), we are often

mistaken about what will make us *really* or *truly* happy—that is, about the greater good or, given Locke’s hedonism (2.21.41–42), about what will bring us the most pleasure in the long run. As a result, we often end up pursuing merely *imaginary* happiness, acting in pursuit of various apparent goods that we *imagine* will make us happy but that will actually bring us either less pleasure or more pain. The purpose of suspension is to prevent this kind of mistake by allowing us examine “whether the satisfaction of [desire], does not interfere with our true happiness” (2.21.52):

[T]he satisfaction of any particular *desire* can be suspended from determining the *will* to any subservient action, till we have maturely examin’d, whether the particular apparent good, which we then desire, makes a part of our real Happiness, or be consistent or inconsistent with it. (2.21.71)

Given this distinction, we can capture Locke’s view by saying that the desire that motivates suspension is the desire to avoid missing out on real or true happiness (the greater good) or to ensure that one is not pursuing merely imaginary happiness. As Locke says in the quotation from the beginning of this section, “the inclination [...] to happiness is an obligation, and motive to them, to take care not to mistake, or miss it” (2.21.52). We are motivated to suspend by a desire not to “mistake” or “miss” happiness.

It is worth distinguishing this interpretation from some close competitors. Davidson (2003, 225) proposes that we are motivated to suspend “If on reflection, we see that satisfying a first-order desire would not contribute to our real happiness, we form a second-order desire not to have the original desire motivate us.” This proposal strikes me as overly demanding. For Davidson, an agent can be motivated to suspend some desire only if they already recognize that satisfying that desire will not contribute to their real happiness. On my interpretation, by contrast, the act of suspending some desire is motivated by the desire to avoid the possible future evil that might (but might not) result from acting on that desire. In other words, on my interpretation, suspension arises from a kind of risk-aversion in contexts of uncertainty. As a result, suspension does not require that an agent already

believe that satisfying some desire will not contribute to their real happiness. Suspension only requires that the agent be sufficiently uncertain.

Rickless (2013b, 413) suggests another interpretation: “if a subject S wills to suspend willing, what determines her volition to suspend is a desire D1 to be rid of pain, presumably pain at the thought of what would likely happen if she did not suspend.” Recall that, for Locke, every present pain is accompanied by a desire for the negative good of relief from that pain (2.21.31). According to Rickless, the desire that motivates suspension is one such desire. Rickless suggests that, when an agent considers the possible negative consequences of failing to suspend, this consideration gives rise to a kind of pain. On Rickless’s interpretation, it is the desire to be rid of this pain that motivates suspension. While I do not have a principled objection against this reading, it seems needlessly complicated. On my interpretation, an agent is motivated to suspend because they realize that the failure to suspend might lead to some future evil, which they desire to avoid. On Rickless’s interpretation, the agent has the same realization but is motivated to suspend not because they desire to avoid the possible future evil but because their realization generates a further pain which they desire to relieve. I do not see any reason for this complication.¹⁹

Weinberg (2016, 183–205) suggests a third interpretation.²⁰ Weinberg observes, as I did earlier, that something besides the general desire for happiness is required to motivate suspension (200–201). Accordingly, Weinberg proposes that what motivates suspension is “the concern for ourselves that

¹⁹ Rickless (2013a, 51) suggests yet another complication: “suspension occurs because one wills to suspend, and [...] one wills to suspend because one desires to suspend, and [...] one desires to suspend because one is uneasy at the thought that the hasty prosecution of one’s most pressing desire may lead to a notably suboptimal outcome.” The implication here seems to be that the agent’s desire to relieve the pain caused by the thought of future evil generates yet another desire, *the desire to suspend*, which is the desire that most proximately motivates suspension. Again, I have no objection to this interpretation except that it seems needlessly complicated. In general, if an agent desires X, then the desire for X should be sufficient by itself to motivate the agent to perform some action A in pursuit of X. The agent need not possess the additional desire *to perform A*. Likewise, in the case of suspension, if an agent desires to avoid the possible negative consequences of failing to suspend, then this desire should be sufficient by itself to motivate suspension. The agent need not also possess the additional desire *to suspend*.

²⁰ See also Walsh and Lennon (2019, 12–13), who explicitly follow Weinberg’s interpretation.

we attain *true* happiness” (200) or “the desire for true happiness” (195). It is not entirely clear how Weinberg understands the relation between the general desire for happiness and the desire for true happiness. If the desire for true happiness is just a particular desire generated by the general desire for happiness, then I take it that Weinberg’s proposal is more or less the same as my own. There are a number of passages, however, in which Weinberg seems to suggest that the desire for happiness is *not* just another particular desire generated by the general desire for happiness. Weinberg explains that, just as the general desire for happiness is “a natural drive toward our own physical self-preservation here and now” (184) or “a natural motivation pushing us in the direction of present preservation (happiness)” (195), so too the desire for true happiness is “a natural drive toward our long-term preservation, what Locke calls our “true” or “real” happiness” (184). Weinberg concludes:

Working in tandem with our natural drive to happiness generally (the innate natural tendency to pleasure and away from pain imprinted in us from birth (I.iii.3)), is the *additional* concern for ourselves that we attain the kind (and degree) of happiness suitable to an intellectual nature—true happiness. (202; emphasis in original)

Here, Weinberg seems to imply that the general desire for happiness and the desire for true happiness are two distinct and equally fundamental sources of motivation. On this reading of Weinberg’s interpretation, suspension is not *in any sense* motivated by the general desire for happiness, either as such or via some particular desire derived from it. Instead, suspension is motivated by the desire for *true* happiness.²¹

My central objection to Weinberg’s interpretation, understood in this way, is that there is no need to posit a desire for true happiness entirely distinct from the general desire for happiness. On my interpretation, Locke does indeed hold that suspension is motivated by “the desire for true

²¹ On this reading, Weinberg’s interpretation is similar to that of Schouls (1992), who distinguishes “*natural passion* or desire, and *the master passion*” (107) and argues that (at least subsequent to an initial act of self-determination) “acts such as those of suspension of action on desire [...] are determined by the *master passion*” (161). But cf. Schouls’s later (somewhat obscure) suggestion that the general desire for happiness “becomes” the master passion once it has “reason” as its “servant” (111).

happiness”, but I maintain that this desire is itself just another particular desire derived from the general desire for happiness. After all, if an agent desires happiness and realizes that acting on some desire might lead to future evils that undermine their happiness, then it is not hard to see how this realization might give rise to a further desire to avoid such future evils that would motivate the agent to suspend. So, while I agree with Weinberg that the general desire for happiness cannot *by itself* motivate suspension, I reject the inference that Locke must posit a further principle of motivation distinct from the general desire for happiness.

Weinberg’s interpretation (or at least this reading of Weinberg’s interpretation) also faces a textual challenge. Locke says that we possess two “innate practical principles”: “a desire of Happiness” and “an aversion to Misery” (1.3.3). As a result, when Locke asks “what ’tis moves *desire?*”, his answer is “happiness and that alone” (2.21.41). He gives no indication that there might be a further motivational principle distinct from the general desire for happiness. Weinberg points to passages from 2.21.51–52 in which Locke writes, for example, that “we are by the necessity of preferring and pursuing true happiness as our greatest good, obliged to suspend the satisfaction of our desire in particular cases” (2.21.51). Commenting on this passage, Weinberg says that “Locke seems to be distinguishing true happiness from happiness generally” and claims that “whatever drives us to *true* [happiness] as opposed to happiness generally is what also drives us to suspend desire” (202). It is worth emphasizing, however, that Locke never opposes *happiness* to *true happiness*, nor does he oppose *the desire for happiness* to *the desire for true happiness*. Instead, as we have seen, Locke contrasts true happiness not with *happiness simpliciter* but with *imaginary happiness*. For Locke, happiness *is* true happiness; “false happiness” would not be happiness precisely because it is false. Likewise, to desire happiness *is* to desire true happiness, just as (at least in ordinary circumstances) to desire money *is* to desire true money (as opposed to Monopoly money) or to desire friends *is* to desire true friends (as opposed to sycophants). Locke’s view is not that we possess, above and beyond the general desire for

happiness and the various particular desires that it generates, a further principle of motivation that motivates us to suspend those particular desires in order to pursue true happiness. Instead, on the interpretation that I am proposing, Locke holds that one and the same desire for happiness that gives rise to all of our particular desires also gives rise to a further desire to avoid the possible evils that might result if we were to act precipitately upon some desire without suspending. It is this particular desire, I have argued, that motivates suspension.

3. What are the Conditions of Suspension?

I turn now to my second question. Suppose that an agent has two particular desires, the first a desire for some apparent good and the second a desire to avoid the possible evils that might result if they were to act on the first desire without suspending. The mere fact that the agent has the second desire need not guarantee that they will suspend the first. So, what are the conditions under which the second desire would actually motivate suspension?

While this question has received little scholarly attention, Matthew Stuart (2013, 461–463) helpfully articulates and defends an answer that others often seem to take for granted.²² Stuart imagines a case in which “an agent is deciding which of three acts to perform (A_1 , A_2 , or A_3) and [...] has a corresponding desire (D_1 , D_2 , and D_3) to perform each of them” (462), of which D_1 is the most pressing. The agent also has a fourth desire (D_4) which is the desire that would motivate the agent to suspend D_1 .²³ Stuart then explains the conditions under which D_4 motivates suspension:

While the agent suspends the attempt to satisfy D_1 , and reflects on the likely consequences of each of A_1 , A_2 , and A_3 , D_4 is stronger than D_1 . Reflection can alter the balance of power between an agent’s desires for positive action. [...] Eventually one of the agent’s desires for positive action becomes stronger than D_4 , reflection ends, and the agent acts. (Stuart 2013, 463)

²² Other implicit proponents of something like Stuart’s answer include Chappell (2000, 242), Rickless (2014, 110–111), and Weinberg (2016, 212).

²³ Since Stuart holds that to suspend some desire is to will to forbear acting on that desire, he characterizes D_4 as the desire “to not perform any of A_1 , A_2 , or A_3 at present” (263).

Stuart's proposal is that D_4 motivates suspension only so long as it is the agent's most pressing desire. As soon as some other desire becomes more pressing than D_4 , D_4 no longer motivates suspension. For example, if examination augments the strength of D_2 , then D_2 will motivate the agent to perform A_2 as soon as D_2 becomes the agent's most pressing desire. So, D_4 motivates suspension just in case (and so long as) D_4 is the agent's most pressing desire.

This interpretation faces what I take to be a decisive objection. When Locke introduces the doctrine of suspension, he says that, while "it is natural" that "the greatest, and most pressing desire should determine the *will*", "it does for the most part, but not always" because "the mind [has] in most cases [...] a power to *suspend* the execution and satisfaction of any of its desires" (2.21.47). For Locke, therefore, an agent's most pressing desire determines the will "for the most part, but not always" because, in cases of suspension, the agent's most pressing desire is suspended and therefore does not determine the will.²⁴ So, if some desire D is an agent's most pressing desire, Locke claims that, at least in most cases, the agent is able to suspend D . It seems to me that Stuart has to deny this claim. According to Stuart, if the agent suspends D , this act of suspension must be motivated by another desire D^* . And, in order for D^* to motivate suspension, D^* must be the agent's most pressing desire. Therefore, since D^* is the agent's most pressing desire, it follows that D cannot be the agent's most pressing desire after all. Stuart's interpretation thus implies that an agent cannot suspend their most pressing desire. On Stuart's interpretation, for an agent to suspend some desire is actually just for that desire to be outweighed by another, more pressing desire. Strictly speaking, therefore, it is not possible for an agent to suspend their most pressing desire.

In his defense, Stuart seeks to explain away Locke's claim that an agent's most pressing desire determines the will "for the most part, but not always". Returning to Stuart's example, in which an

²⁴ Cf. Garrett (2015, 277), who reads this qualification as implying not that an agent's *most pressing* desire does not always determine the will but that *desire* does not always determine the will.

agent is choosing between three actions (A_1 , A_2 , and A_3) and has a desire to perform each (D_1 , D_2 , and D_3) as well as an additional desire (D_4) motivating suspension, Stuart (2013, 463) reads Locke as claiming merely that the agent's will "need not be determined by the most pressing of D_1 , D_2 , and D_3 ." I think that this interpretation distorts Locke's meaning. Locke's claim is not merely that the will is not always determined by an agent's most pressing desire *to perform some particular action* (A_1 , A_2 , or A_3). Instead, his claim is that the will is not always determined by an agent's most pressing desire, *full stop*. Of course, if this were the only passage in which Locke appeared to claim that the will is not always determined by an agent's most pressing desire, then Stuart might insist that Locke is simply being imprecise. In fact, however, Locke makes the same claim in a number of different passages. He writes that what determines the will is "some (and for the most part the most pressing) *uneasiness* a Man is at present under" (2.21.31; my underlining), that the desire that "has the precedency in determining the *will* to the next action" is "that ordinarily, which is the most pressing of those, that are judged capable of being then removed" (2.21.40; my underlining), and that "The greatest present *uneasiness* [...] for the most part determines the *will* in its choice of the next action" (2.21.40; my underlining). Locke's section headings bring out the same point: the heading of 2.21.40 states that "The most pressing *uneasiness naturally*"—but not necessarily—"determines the *will*" (my underlining) and the heading of 2.21.47 proclaims that "The power to suspend the prosecution of *any* desire makes way for consideration" (my underlining). There is thus abundant evidence that, in Locke's view, an agent's most pressing desire does not always determine the will, which is why Locke claims in 2.21.47 that we are able to suspend even our most pressing desires.

The interpretation that I am proposing has significant implications for the doctrine of suspension. On my reading, Locke holds both that an agent is able to suspend their most pressing desire and that the act of suspension is motivated by some other desire. It follows that the desire that motivates suspension need not be the agent's most pressing desire. If an agent suspends some desire

D and D is the agent's most pressing desire, then it turns out that the desire that motivates the agent to suspend D must be *less pressing* than D.

Prima facie, this interpretation may appear paradoxical. How could a *less pressing* desire motivate an agent to suspend their *most pressing* desire? Indeed, Stuart (2013, 461) considers and quickly rejects this possibility, which is why he seeks to explain away Locke's claim that an agent's most pressing desire only determines their will "for the most part, but not always". Stuart expresses the worry with characteristic acuity:

If on some occasion the greatest and most pressing uneasiness does not determine the will, then what does? One possibility is that the will is then determined by another, weaker, desire or uneasiness. [...] Yet it is hard to make sense of the claim that a weaker desire occasionally overpowers a stronger one. The very fact of its winning the competition would seem to show that it was, at that moment, the stronger of the two desires. (Stuart 2013, 461)

Applying the point to cases of suspension, Stuart's worry is that, if some less pressing ("weaker") desire were to motivate an agent to suspend their most pressing ("stronger") desire, this fact alone would reveal that the desire motivating suspension was in fact more pressing than the desire suspended and thus that the desire suspended was not the agent's most pressing desire after all. Stuart concludes that the desire motivating suspension must be the agent's most pressing desire in order for it to be "strong" enough to "overpower" the agent's other desires.

I think that this worry rests on a misinterpretation of what it is for a desire to be more or less pressing. Hume famously distinguishes a desire's "violence" from its "strength": whereas a more violent desire is one that is felt more intensely, a stronger desire is one that has greater influence upon the will (*Treatise* 2.1.1.3, 2.3.3.8–10, 2.3.4.1–2).²⁵ For Hume, a violent but weak desire is a desire that is felt intensely but has little effect upon the will. By contrast, a calm but strong desire is a desire that is not felt intensely but has great effect upon the will. The point is that we often feel violent passions that we do not act upon (e.g. momentary feelings of rage) and often act upon desires that are not

²⁵ I am grateful to Stephen Puryear for suggesting the connection to Hume.

particularly passionate (e.g. “kindness to children” [*Treatise* 2.3.3.8]). Stuart’s objection assumes that, when Locke speaks of a desire as being more or less “pressing”, he is talking about the desire’s *strength*—Stuart himself uses the words “weaker” and “stronger”. On this interpretation, it would follow trivially that an agent’s most pressing desire always determines the will because an agent’s most pressing desire would be defined as the desire with the greatest influence upon the will. We need not make this assumption, however. On the contrary, when Locke speaks of a desire as being more or less “pressing”, he might instead be talking about the desire’s *violence*. On this interpretation, it would not follow trivially that an agent’s most pressing desire always determines the will because, as Hume observes, an agent’s most violent desire need not be their strongest desire. An agent’s will might sometimes be determined by a less violent desire that nonetheless has greater influence upon the will.

I think that we ought to adopt the latter interpretation. Recall that Locke conceives of desire as a state of “uneasiness” (2.21.31) and that, in Locke’s vocabulary, “uneasiness” is roughly synonymous with “pain”: “By *Pleasure* and *Pain*, I would be understood to signifie, whatsoever delights or molests us [...] whether we call it Satisfaction, Delight, Pleasure, Happiness, *etc.* on the one hand; or Uneasiness, Trouble, Pain, Torment, Anguish, Misery, *etc.* on the other” (2.7.2).²⁶ Consequently, Locke holds that desires vary primarily with respect to how painful they are, writing that a desire is “greater or less, as that uneasiness is more or less vehement” (2.20.6). So, when Locke speaks of desires as being more or less “pressing”, he is likely referring to their relative degrees of painfulness: a more pressing desire is just a more painful desire. Locke’s pressing-ness is thus similar to Hume’s violence insofar as, in either case, we are concerned primarily with the felt intensity of a desire rather

²⁶ In a manuscript dated 16 July 1676, Locke gives an early version of the *Essay*’s definition of desire in terms not of uneasiness but of pain: “Desire [...] is nothing but a pain the mind suffers in the absence of some good” (Locke 1997, 242).

than with its influence upon the will.²⁷ As a result, it is not surprising that, according to Locke, an agent's most pressing desire determines the will "for the most part, but not always" (2.21.47). Locke is simply anticipating the Humean point that the violence or painfulness of a desire can come apart from its influence upon the will. For Locke, therefore, there are at least some cases in which the desire that determines an agent's will is not their most pressing desire. The clearest such case, and the only one that Locke discusses explicitly, is the case of suspension in which some less pressing desire motivates an agent to suspend their most pressing desire.

I do not wish to overstate my claim. Since desire is a state of uneasiness or pain, all desires are painful to some degree. Moreover, since Locke specifies that it is the uneasiness of desire that determines the will, he seems to hold that part of the reason *why* desire determines the will is *because* it is painful. Accordingly, Locke almost certainly holds that more pressing—that is, more painful—desires do tend to have greater influence upon the will. It is presumably for this reason that, according to Locke, an agent's most pressing desire usually determines the will, because more pressing desires tend to be stronger. For the same reason, Locke emphasizes that suspension allows us to "raise our desires" (2.21.46) for absent goods—that is, to render our desires for absent goods *more pressing*—so that they might be able to determine the will "according to [their] greatness, and pressure" (2.21.45). Locke thus holds that we often need to make our desires more pressing in order to for them to acquire sufficient strength to determine the will. It does not follow from any of these claims, however, that an agent's most pressing desire must always determine the will. On the contrary, I have argued that, in Locke's view, there are at least some cases—namely, cases of suspension—in which the *less pressing* of two desires is nonetheless the *stronger* of those desires.

²⁷ But note that Hume identifies the violence of a desire not with its painfulness but with the emotional "disorder" or "agitation" that it occasions (*Treatise* 2.3.4.1).

We might wonder, however, what could possibly make a less pressing desire stronger than a more pressing desire. Given that more pressing desires do tend to be stronger *ceteris paribus*, what additional source of strength might bolster a less pressing desire such as the desire that motivates suspension and allow it to overpower a more pressing desire? While Locke does not address this question explicitly, Hume is once again a helpful guide. Hume defends the distinction between calm yet strong desires and violent yet weak desires by pointing to the effects of custom: once a desire becomes deeply engrained through “repeated custom”, it may become a “settled principle of action” that has great influence upon the will even though “it commonly produces no longer any sensible agitation” (*Treatise* 2.3.4.1). Locke might make a similar appeal. On this proposal, the reason why a less pressing desire can sometimes motivate an agent to suspend their most pressing desire might be because the former desire, while less pressing, is nonetheless stronger as a result of habituation.

Locke himself gestures towards such a suggestion in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*.²⁸ Throughout that work, Locke emphasizes the cultivation of good habits. He writes, for example, that “the principle of all virtue and excellency lies in a power of denying ourselves the satisfaction of our own desires where reason does not authorize them” and explains that “This power is to be got and improved by custom, made easy and familiar by an *early practice*” (*Some Thoughts*, §38; emphasis in original). Later, he explains that “he that knows not how to *resist* the importunity of *present pleasure or pain* for the sake of what reason tells him is fit to be done, wants the true principle of virtue and industry” and therefore recommends that “this habit, as the true foundation of future ability and happiness, is to be wrought into the mind as early as may be” (*Some Thoughts*, §45; emphasis in original). Recast in the language of the *Essay*, Locke’s suggestion in such passages seems to be that we ought to cultivate the habit of suspending desire, both in ourselves and in our children. Now, Locke does not

²⁸ I am indebted to Weinberg (2016, 209–210) in the following discussion.

explain in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* precisely how it is that he takes habit to influence the will.

Locke takes up this point in the *Essay*, however:

[T]he pleasure of the action it self is best acquir'd, or increased, by use and practice. [...] Habits have powerful charms, and put so strong attractions of easiness and pleasure into what we accustom our selves to, that we cannot forbear to do, or at least be easy in the omission of actions, which habitual practice has suited, and thereby recommends to us. (2.21.69)

Locke argues that habituation causes us to take pleasure in habitual actions and, as a result, to desire them. Habit thus influences the will by creating or strengthening desires for habitual actions. The implication is that, by cultivating the habit of suspending desire, we may increase the strength of the desire motivating suspension. Now, one way in which habit might strengthen this desire is by causing it to become more pressing or painful, since more pressing desires do tend to be stronger. Locke does not commit himself to this narrow account habituation, however. And, indeed, this narrow account does not seem particularly plausible: the habitual desire to brush my teeth consistently determines my will every morning, for example, even though this desire is not particularly pressing or painful. The alternative is that habituation might be able to strengthen certain desires *without* making them more pressing. Accordingly, one possible consequence of habituation, albeit one that Locke himself does not note explicitly, is that habituation might render the desire motivating suspension *strong enough* actually to motivate suspension even in cases in which it is not the agent's *most pressing* desire.

It may be worth stepping back at this point to review the dialectic of the argument. My goal in this section has been to argue for the negative claim that the desire motivating suspension need not be an agent's most pressing desire. The evidence for this negative claim is that, according to Locke, we are able to suspend even our most pressing desires, which implies that the desire motivating suspension need not itself be our most pressing desire. Against this proposal, Stuart objects that a *less pressing* desire cannot motivate an agent to suspend a *more pressing* desire. In response to Stuart, however, I have argued that, in Locke's view, for a desire to be more or less *pressing* is just for it to be more or less *painful*, and there is no reason why a *less painful* desire should not be able to motivate an agent to

suspend a *more painful* desire. To lend further credence to this view, I have suggested that a less painful desire might grow *stronger* (that is, more causally efficacious) than a more painful desire as a result of habituation. While Locke himself does not make this suggestion explicitly, it does seem to fit nicely with what he has to say about cultivating the habit of suspension.

4. Concluding Remarks

Earlier, I noted that Locke says remarkably little about how suspension works. All that he says about my first question (*What motivates suspension?*) is that “the inclination, and tendency of their nature to happiness [...] puts them upon caution, deliberation, and wariness, in the direction of their particular actions” (2.21.52). He says nothing at all about my second question (*What are the conditions under which we are motivated to suspend?*), merely observing that it “is evident in Experience” that we usually can suspend even our most pressing desires. Having examined each of these questions in some detail, I think that we are now in a position to appreciate Locke’s silence. Locke may not have much to say about the mechanics of suspension for the simple reason that he does not take them to be particularly puzzling. Given that we all desire happiness and realize that we often do not desire what will really make us happy, it stands to reason that rational beings like us will desire to avoid the possible future evils that might result from acting precipitately upon our most pressing desires. This desire may not be particularly pressing or painful, especially compared with the powerful urges that we are often called upon to resist. Nonetheless, through education and habituation, this desire may (and, evidently, often does) gain the strength needed to overpower even our most pressing desires, motivating us to suspend those desires and deliberate about what will bring us the greatest happiness in the long run. This account is far from complete, less a developed “doctrine” than a casual observation about the psychology of self-control, but Locke seems content to leave it at that.²⁹

²⁹ I am grateful to Steve Darwall, Michael Della Rocca, Scott Harkema, Jen Nguyen, Stephen Puryear, Alison Simmons, Ken Winkler, and audiences at the 2018 Annual Congress of the Canadian Philosophical Association and the 15th Atlantic

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