

On July 15, 1693 John Locke wrote to inform his friend and correspondent William Molyneux of certain changes he intended to make to the chapter 'Of Power' for the second edition of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (hereafter *Essay*). In this letter, Locke writes that after carefully reviewing the chapter, he noticed that he had made one mistake which, now corrected, has put him "into a new view of things" which will clarify his account of human freedom. Locke says that he had "put things for actions, which was very easy to be done in the place where it is, viz. p. 123. as I remember, for I have not my book by me here in town."¹ Molyneux took this comment to refer to §28, which appears on page 123 of the first edition, and agreed that he then plainly saw the mistake of putting 'thing' where 'action' should be.² This exchange between Locke and Molyneux gives rise to three problems. First, the word 'things' only appears once on page 123 and in the second edition it is not replaced by 'actions'.³ If, on the other hand, we suppose that in his letter Locke made a further orthographical error, writing 'things' and 'actions' where he meant 'thing' and 'action', we notice that the word 'thing' appears four times on page 123, and in two places it is replaced by 'action' in the second edition of 'Of Power' - §28, where Molyneux took Locke's reference to be, and §25.⁴ The second problem, then, is that Locke does not tell us to which section he refers. Finally, on its face, the result of replacing 'thing' with 'action' is hardly clear. The aim of this paper is to, (1) make sense of Locke's statement to Molyneux, (2) give an analysis of the replacement of 'thing' with 'action' in §25 and §28, and (3) explain why the substitution of 'actions' for 'things' marks an important correction to Locke's view, one which prompts him to state near the end of the second edition of 'Of Power':

To conclude this enquiry into humane Liberty, which as it stood before, I my self from the beginning fearing, and a very judicious Friend of mine, since the publication suspecting, to have some mistake in it, though he could not particularly shew it me, I was put upon a stricter review of this Chapter. Wherein lighting upon a very easy, and scarce observable slip I had made, in putting one seemingly indifferent word for another, that discovery open'd to me this present view, which here in this second Edition, I submit to the learned World, and which in short is this: Liberty is a power to act or not to act according as the Mind directs. (II.xxi.71:282, editions 2-5.⁵)

While Locke characterizes his mistake as a mere verbal slip, we shall see that his change in view suggests that the correction has far greater importance.

¹ *The Correspondence of John Locke*, ed. E.S. de Beer. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), Vol.4, no.1643, 15 July, 1693. (Hereafter *Correspondence*.) Locke's use of the phrase that he was put "into a new view of things" is most likely a term of art. However, given the content of his comment to Molyneux, we might interpret Locke to mean that he has come to a new view of the word 'thing' and has perhaps intended a double entendre.

² *Correspondence*, Vol.4, no.1652, 12 August, 1693. Molyneux writes: "As to that part of your Letter relating to the Alterations you have made in your Essay concerning Mans Liberty, I dare not Venture upon those short hints you give me to pas my Opinion. But, now that you have discoverd it to me, I plainly perceive the Mistake of sec. 28. pag. 123. where you Put *Thing* for *Action*. And I doubt not, but in your next Edition, you will fully rectify this Matter."

³ "To avoid these, and the like absurdities, nothing can be of greater use, than to establish in our Minds clear and steady Notions of the **things** under Consideration: if the Ideas of Liberty, and Volition, were well fixed in our Understandings...", II.xxi.26:247, first edition, boldface added. The parallel passage in the second edition remains essentially unchanged. All references to Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* are from the critical edition, ed. Peter Nidditch. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975). (Hereafter, *Essay*.) References to the *Essay* refer to book, chapter, section and the page number in the Nidditch edition follows the colon.

⁴ The other two instances of the word 'thing' on page 123 of the first edition of 'Of Power' occur in §28 but are not present in the second edition. They therefore fail to be candidates for the substitution.

⁵ The "judicious Friend" is presumably Molyneux. Locke also uses the adjective 'judicious' when he refers to Molyneux by name in *Essay*, II.ix.8:145-46, editions 2-5.

I

While Molyneux claimed to "plainly perceive" the mistake of putting 'thing' for 'action' in §28, contemporary commentators have struggled to make sense of the importance Locke placed on this substitution. Vere Chappell, for instance, mentions Locke's comment about the substitution, and the difficulties with it, but sides with John Colman in saying that it remains unclear why Locke thought using 'thing' instead of 'action' is a mistake, and why it is important for his view of freedom.⁶ I think that we can come to see the importance of Locke's correction, but we must first make sense of his comment to Molyneux. The first two problems with the comment, that the one instance of 'things' on page 123 is not replaced by 'actions' in the second edition and that the word 'thing' is replaced by 'action' in two places on page 123, can be resolved relatively straightforwardly. Rather than suspect Locke of an orthographical error, or of mistakenly identifying the page on which the change occurs, we can take Locke to be using 'thing' and 'action' in the plural. That is, 'thing' is replaced by 'action' in two places, and thus Locke's mistake was putting "things for actions". This rather simple observation solves both of the aforementioned problems. First, Locke did not mean that he was replacing the word 'things', but rather the word 'thing' with the word 'action', twice. This, in turn, solves the second problem of the word 'thing' being replaced by 'action' in two places on the relevant page - Locke meant both.⁷ And the change in both sections constitutes an important correction.

II

Let us begin with §25. The first edition of the passage in question reads:

Since then it is plain, a Man is not at liberty, whether he will *Will*, or no; (for when a **thing** in his power is proposed to his Thoughts, he cannot forbear Volition, he must determine one way or other;) the next thing to be demanded is, *Whether a Man be at Liberty to will which of the two he pleases, Motion or Rest.* (II.xxi.25:247, first edition, boldface added.)⁸

⁶ Chappell, Vere. "Locke on the Intellectual Basis of Sin," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 32 (1994): 197-207, 198, n.3. Chappell cites Colman, John. *John Locke's Moral Philosophy*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1983), 266, n.7. Chappell takes note of two commentators who have tried to make sense of Locke's comment to Molyneux. First, Paul Ramsey tries to explain the substitution by stating that "[i]t was his [Locke's] making a distinction between things or objects chosen and acts of choice which led Locke to a radical reconstruction of his views on the liberty of the will" (58). Ramsey takes the substitution to be a sign that Locke gave up his first edition view that the will is determined by the greater good. Ramsey suggests that Locke's considered view is that the will is concerned with acts to be done, and not with the "mind's apprehension of the greater good (which has more to do with the *thing* presented)" (60). See Ramsey's introduction to: Edwards, Jonathan. *Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 58-60. I agree with both Chappell's claim that Ramsey's suggestion is internally sound, and that it rests on a distinction between the object of choice and the act of choosing that is not evident in Locke's work. As we'll see below, my interpretation of the substitution is much simpler and, I think, more in keeping with Locke's view. It is also worth mentioning that Ramsey takes the substitution to be unique to §28, and does not consider the change in §25. Second, Chappell mentions Klaus Jacobi, whose discussion suffers from erroneously locating the substitution, which he takes to be in the fourth sentence of §28, a sentence which, as noted above (n.4), does not appear in the second edition. See Jacobi, Klaus. "Locke und Leibniz über den Begriff der menschlichen Freiheit und über die Motivation menschlichen Wollens und Wählens," *Studia Leibnitiana*, Supplementa XIX (1980): 194-205, 199-200.

⁷ It is worth mentioning that Locke does not correct Molyneux's statement that the replacement occurs in §28 alone. As we'll see below, however, the replacement has the same function in both sections, so perhaps Locke did not see the need to correct his friend on this detail.

⁸ The parenthetical remark in this passage, which contains the substitution, is eliminated in the fifth edition of the *Essay*.

The only substantive change in the second edition passage is the replacement of 'thing' with 'action'.⁹ Prior to this section, Locke has been concerned to answer the question first posed in §22, "*Whether a Man be free to will.*"¹⁰ To that end he has argued that a volition must of necessity occur once an action within one's power is proposed to one's thoughts, and he has argued that volitions are the preferences of the mind.¹¹ He has also stated that human liberty consists in "the power to act, or not to act, and in that only."¹² A preference necessarily follows the proposal of an action within our power; in fact the preference is the volition, and the action that results from the volition is voluntary.¹³ For Locke, it is not up to us *whether* we have a preference when an action is proposed to us, and in §25 he argues that neither can we determine *what* we prefer. Locke thinks the question of whether human beings are free to will their preferences is absurd because an affirmative answer would entail an infinite regress of volitions, each to determine the preference of the last.¹⁴ This point is critical to the 'thing'/action' substitution. Notice that the phrase where the substitution occurs could be read to contradict Locke's very claim in §25, that it is not possible to will to will. If any 'thing' within our power proposed to our thoughts demands a volition, then one might take a volition itself to be such a thing. For instance, if it is proposed to my thoughts that I prefer motion to rest, then I might take Locke to mean that I must have a volition about this thought - namely, I must have a volition about whether I prefer that I prefer motion. This interpretation makes Locke's view susceptible to the very infinite regress he wants to avoid. By replacing 'thing' with 'action', Locke closes the loophole which could lead to the pernicious interpretation. The ambiguity is eliminated by the claim that the only things in our power are actions.¹⁵ A volition, on the other hand, is not an action - it is something we have, not something we do.

The first edition of §28 reads:

[W]e must remember, 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; Action to Rest, & *contra*.
(II.xxi.28:248, first edition, boldface added)

⁹ The only other change is that the "to be" of "the next thing to be demanded" is eliminated.

¹⁰ This question is what Locke takes people to mean when they ask whether the will is free. Locke argues that it makes no sense to ask whether the will is free because the will and freedom are both powers of human beings. Thus, we should ask whether a man is free to will. See Locke, *Essay*, II.xxi.14-22, all editions.

¹¹ "[A] Man in respect of willing any Action in his power once proposed to his Thoughts, cannot be free...it being necessary, and unavoidable (any Action in his power being once thought on) to prefer either its doing, or forbearance, upon which preference, the Action, or its forbearance certainly follows, and is truly voluntary." Locke, *Essay*, II.xxi.23:245-6, first edition.

"This *Power* the Mind has to prefer the Consideration of any *Idea*, to the not considering it; or to prefer the Motion of any part of the Body, to its Rest, is that, I think, we call the *Will*; and the actual preferring one to another, is what we call *Volition*, or *Willing*." Locke, *Essay*, II.xxi.5:236, first edition.

Locke takes volition, willing, and preference to be synonymous. See *Essay*, II.xxi.6:236, all editions, II.xxi.15:241, all editions.

¹² Locke, *Essay*, II.xxi.24:246, first edition.

¹³ "The power the Mind has at any time to prefer any particular one of those Actions to its forbearance, or *Vice versa*, is that Faculty which, as I have said, we call the Will; the actual exercise of that Power we call *Volition*; and the forbearance or performance of that Action, consequent to such a preference of the Mind is call'd *Voluntary*." Locke, *Essay*, II.xxi.7:237, first edition.

¹⁴ Locke discusses this point two sections earlier in §23 where he writes that in order for a man to be free with respect to his preferences, "there must be another antecedent *Will*, to determine the Acts of this *Will*, and another to determine that, and so *in infinitum*: for where-ever one stops, the Actions of the last Will cannot be free." *Essay*, II.xxi.23:245, first edition. This passage is eliminated from §23 in the fifth edition of the *Essay*.

¹⁵ Of course, only certain kinds of actions are within our power. Locke mentions the beating of the heart, circulation of the blood, and convulsions as examples of actions over which we have no control. See Locke, *Essay*, II.xxi.11:239, all editions.

The parallel passage in the second edition reads:

We must remember, that *Volition*, or *Willing*, is an act of the Mind directing its thought to the production of any **Action**, and thereby exerting its power to produce it.
(II.xxi.28:248, editions 2-5, boldface added)

As in §25, the word 'thing' in the first edition of this passage could be read to include volition, which would lead to the infinite regress. But that reading is less forgivable here than it is in §25 given Locke's description of the kinds of doings that one might prefer - action or rest. While it makes sense to speak of action or rest with respect to, for example, walking, it does not make sense to speak of action or rest with respect to volitions. But a problem with this interpretation arises upon consideration of the second edition of the passage. There, Locke refers to volition as an act of the mind and I have been relying on the distinction between actions as something we do and are thus (often) in our power, and volitions as preferences not within our power. This problem dissolves, however, when we consider how Locke is using the word 'act' in referring to acts of the mind. He does not use 'act' to indicate activity, but rather, in vestigially Aristotelian fashion, as an event or state of mind. Locke uses 'act' in just this way to describe both passive perception and the state of desire.¹⁶ Perceptions and desires, like volitions, are precisely things that we have, not "things" that we do. Locke's considered view, then, is that volitions are states of mind that produce actions - and actions belong to a class of things that does not include volitions themselves.

III

Locke emphasizes the importance of the substitution of 'thing' for 'action' twice - once in his letter to Molyneux where he states that after correcting his mistake of one word, "I got into a new view of things, which, if I mistake not, will satisfie you, and give a clearer account of humane freedom than hitherto I have done" and again in §71 of the second edition of 'Of Power', cited above, where he states that in correcting his verbal slip a new view of human liberty was opened to him. But notice that neither in the letter nor in §71 does Locke state that the correction itself constitutes the clarifying change. In the letter he writes that in making the change he got into a new view of things, and in §71 he says the discovery of the mistaken word opened to him the view presented in the second edition. We might take Locke to mean that in replacing 'thing' with 'action' in §25 and §28 he was brought to revisit his view that volitions are always determined and that even the actions that are within our power are determined by our preferences. Locke's correction ensured that volitions could not be taken to be actions within our power, but it may also have alerted him to the fact that his view did not leave room for any activity of the mind. Volitions, preferences, desires, and perceptions are all acts of the mind, but are all things we have, and not actions we do. Locke's first edition discussion of the role of judgment in determining whether something desired is representative of true or apparent good indicates that he thought such an action of the mind exists, but

¹⁶ "The power of Perception is that which we call the Understanding. Perception, which we make the act of the Understanding, is of three sorts..." Locke, *Essay*, II.xxi.5:236, all editions.

"Though Thinking, in the propriety of the *English Tongue*, signifies that sort of operation of the Mind about its *Ideas*, wherein the Mind is active; where it with some degree of voluntary attention, considers any thing. For in bare naked Perception, the Mind is, for the most part, only passive; and what it perceives, it cannot avoid perceiving" Locke, *Essay*, II.ix.1:143, all editions. Locke's most explicit statement of the passivity of perception comes in the fifth edition where he states: "[A] Power to receive *Ideas*, or Thoughts, from the operation of any external substance, is called a *Power* of thinking: But this is but a *Passive Power*, or Capacity" Locke, *Essay*, II.xxi.72:286, fifth edition.

Locke says "*desiring* and *willing* are two distinct acts of the mind" in *Essay*, II.xxi.30:250, editions 2-5. He describes desire as a state of uneasiness in *Essay*, II.xxi.32, editions 2-5. Interestingly, the OED definition of 'act' as an operation of the mind uses Locke's description of desire and will as acts of mind (*Essay*, II.xxi.30, editions 2-5) as examples of such a use of 'act'.

no account of it is provided.¹⁷

While Locke's theory of volitions does not change from the first to the second edition – in both versions volitions are determined – in clarifying that volitions are not actions in the second edition, Locke is faced with the problem of how to account for the role he has given to judgment.¹⁸ This problem is corrected in the second edition with the introduction of the doctrine of suspension, which Locke heralds as "the source of all liberty."¹⁹ This doctrine states that the mind can suspend a desire in order to judge its merit. Suspending desire is an action of the mind - it is something that we do. The doctrine of suspension provides the missing link between volitions and judgment – it furnishes the mind with the power to put a desire on hold in order to exercise judgment. Without the mind's ability to perform the action of suspension, judgment remains impotent despite the function assigned to it by Locke. Liberty, then, goes from being the power to act or not act in the first edition, to the power to act or not act as a result of judgment in the second.²⁰ For this reason the doctrine of suspension warrants the title as the "source of all liberty" given that it allows the mind to enter into deliberations about its preferences rather than blindly following them.

It was, then, in revisiting his argument against willing to will in the first edition of the *Essay*, that Locke realized that by making volitions both determined and the determiners of action, no room was left for activity of the mind. The inclusion of the doctrine of suspension in the second edition rectifies this omission and is the new view that became open to him upon the correction of his one word mistake.

¹⁷ Locke says that things are often presented to us "*under deceitful appearances*: and that is, *by the Judgment pronouncing wrong on them*" (*Essay*, II.xxi.39, first edition, parallel to §61, editions 2-5:274). From §39-§44 of the first edition Locke discusses the role of judgment in our assessments of true and apparent good. It is worth noting that in subsequent editions of the *Essay*, Locke's discussion of judgment remains essentially unchanged. With some minor revisions what were §§39-42 in the first edition are §§61-64 in editions 2-5, and what were §§43-44 are §§66-67 in editions 2-5.

¹⁸ Some commentators have taken changes made to the fifth edition of the *Essay* as evidence that in Locke's final view some volitions could be undetermined. See, for instance, Chappell, Vere. "Locke on Freedom of Will," in *Locke's Philosophy: Content and Context*, ed. G.A.J. Rogers. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 101-123, 118-121.

¹⁹ Locke, *Essay*, II.xxi.47:263, editions 2-5.

²⁰ Recall the first edition definition of human liberty, Locke, *Essay*, II.xxi.24:246, cited above, see n.12.