

John Locke and the Demand for Self-Determination

In the first edition of *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, Locke maintains the familiar, compatibilist view that freedom is just an agent's ability to act as she pleases in the absence of external impediments. Many of Locke's commentators believe that he never gave up this view. I argue that he did. Beginning in the second edition, Locke comes to realize that desire itself can be an enslaving force. He concludes that we would not be free if our actions were determined wholly by our desires. Freedom, he argues, requires that an agent be able to determine her own actions. In other words, freedom demands self-determination as opposed to determination by the vicissitudes of desire.

In my dissertation, I reinterpret Locke's views about freedom, motivation, and personhood in light of this demand for self-determination. For example, many of Locke's commentators read him as holding that desire alone determines the will. By contrast, I argue that desire and judgment work together in determining the will on Locke's view. Whereas desire determines the will by *causing* volition, judgment determines the will by *allowing* some desires rather than others to cause volition. Locke thus holds that an agent is able to determine her own volitions and actions by exercising her judgment to decide which of her desires to follow.

Much the same line of thought gives rise to Locke's so-called "doctrine of suspension", his claim that the power to suspend and examine our desires is necessary for freedom. Locke's commentators have long struggled to reconcile the doctrine of suspension with his official account of freedom. After all, if freedom is just an agent's ability to act as she pleases, then it seems that an agent could be free even if she were unable to suspend and examine her desires. On my interpretation, by contrast, since freedom demands that we be able to determine our own actions and not merely be determined to act by our desires, Locke argues that, in order to be free, an agent must be able to suspend her desires, examine their objects, and judge for herself about whether or not to act on them.

One consequence of my interpretation is that Locke's account of freedom is less like that of Hobbes, his notorious compatibilist predecessor, and more like that of the Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth, whose account of freedom I examine in the dissertation's first chapter. Like Locke, Cudworth argues that freedom demands self-determination, developing a highly original psychological theory centered around "the power of freewill" that aims to explain how we are able to determine our actions despite the influence of desire. Unlike Locke, however, Cudworth thinks that the demand for self-determination entails libertarianism: in order for an agent to determine her own actions, Cudworth thinks that she must be the uncaused agent-cause of (some of) her actions. I argue that Locke rejects this further conclusion. To this extent, Locke agrees with Hobbes. Locke's account of freedom thus synthesizes Hobbesian compatibilism with Cudworthian insights about reflective self-determination, yielding a more sophisticated kind of compatibilism.

In the final chapter, I turn to larger questions about the relation between a person and her desires. What is the crucial difference between self-determination and determination by desire? Why is determination by *my own* desires (as opposed to *someone else's* desires) insufficient for freedom? In order to answer these questions, I examine Locke's theory of persons. I argue that, for Locke, a person is a substance that characteristically possesses certain cognitive capacities, including the powers of reason and reflection, as well as a distinctive kind of unity. One consequence of my interpretation is that, when a person determines her actions through suspension, examination, and judgment, her actions are determined by powers that she possesses essentially as a person rather than by her accidental desires. Locke's answer to the demand for self-determination thus rests on his conception of the self or person that is able to determine its actions.