The Empiricists // Spring 2016

Handout 8

Locke: Freedom, knowledge

Power and will. Locke gives an account of freedom that is broadly compatibilist. It implies that the causal necessity in the world is compatible with the existence of free agents. Let us try to unpack some of the elements of this view.

To begin with, we have a taxonomy of power, will, and volition. Power is a capacity of substances to produce change. Humans have two powers, of thinking and willing (or volition). These are obviously powers of the mind. 'Will' is properly defined as the capacity to exercise the voluntary power, whereas 'volition' (or 'willing') stands for the actual exercise of that power. E II.vi.2 E II.xxi.5

Example 1. I can say, 'God gave me the will to do karate every day', but at the same time say, 'I am not willing to do karate every day.'

The object of will is to perform, or not to perform, a certain motion of the body (but also to entertain, or not to entertain, certain thoughts). That is said to be source of the idea of liberty (where the term 'liberty' is of course synonymous with 'freedom'). E II.xxi.5 E II.xxi.7

Liberty. Locke predicates liberty of agents. When the person forms a volition, and there are no obstacles (in Locke's examples, of material nature) to prevent an action according to that volition, then the person is said to be free. Furthermore, liberty is attributed to those actions resulting from understanding and thought. Only those actions are 'voluntary'. Next to them we have 'involuntary' actions, such as jerking of the limbs in a Parkinson's disease patient. E II.xxi.8 E II.xxi.9

Remark 2. Locke insists that liberty can be attributed to human agents only. This follows straight from the definition—so far as inanimate objects have no volitions (and no understanding either). Herein is one difference with Hobbes, whose view Locke's account resembles in some other regards. E II.xxi.9

Liberty is said to be a power of doing or not doing. For this reason, I think, we are repeatedly told that liberty cannot be predicated of the will, since then it would be a power of power, which is absurd. E II.xxi.15 E II.xxi.16

But one might wonder whether this is nothing other than an arbitrary postulation. Let us consider Locke's own example, that of a locked room. The point of that example is to show how actions can be both voluntary and non-free.

Remark 3. The example illustrates the claim made back in E II.xxi.8. In E II.xxi.9 Locke gives the examples designed to show that, if an action is involuntary, then it is clearly non-free.

Locked Room. (1) Whilst asleep, I am carried into the Room. Awakening, I discover there, incredibly, Jennifer Connelly eager to strike a conversation with me. Therefore, I find the Room to my taste and elect to stay there to extend the pleasant conversation. Unbeknownst to me, the door is locked, and it is physically impossible for me to leave. According to Locke, I am staying in the Room *non-freely*: I cannot leave—even if I wanted. Since I do not in fact want to leave on account of Ms Connelly's charms, this settles the question of my staying *voluntarily*. E II.xxi.10

(2) Yet suppose the story is told differently. Russell Crowe wants to play a prank on me. He dresses like Ms Connelly and arranges for me to be carried into the Room. Not suspecting the prank, I gladly agree to stay and talk to the false 'Ms Connelly'. But you would no longer think that I stay voluntarily. Your suspicions are strengthened further if you are told that Mr Crowe's action was no mere prank, but rather had a nefarious motive: I am a guard at the bank, and it is essential for Mr Crowe's planned robbery to keep me in that Room etc. It would be pathetic for Mr Crowe to argue—in court—that the guard 'voluntarily agreed', or 'was willing', to remain in that Room.

Presumably there is an easy fix to apply to Locke's solution for it to be able to deal with the Crowe example. We should only demand that the agent has sufficient information about the situation, and that his beliefs about what is going on are factually adequate. Thus he should not mistake Mr Crowe, or anyone else, for Ms Connelly. This fix can be reconciled even with the letter of Locke's view, since that view requires the engagement of thought and understanding. One can argue that neither is properly engaged in the case of a factual error.

(3) But now consider another slight modification of the story. Let us say that there is a real Ms Connelly involved, but that I generally cannot stand her company. However, once she sees me awake, she threatens me with a terrible torture—if I decide to leave the room. Fearful of the certain pain, I decide to stay. Is the action voluntary? There is a sense in which it is (after all, *I* decided to stay, did I not?), and there is a sense in which it is not ('I acted under duress, *she* forced me etc.'). Locke opts for the latter solution: there was a compulsion involved. Still, the explanations he offers are hardly sufficient. E II.xxi.13

(4) That they are not sufficient will be evident from a further modification: Unbeknownst to me, Ms Connelly dutifully plays her part in a psychological experiment whose subject I am. I was selected precisely because I absolutely hated Ms Connelly, in every regard. The experiment started earlier when a team of psychologists subjected me to a series of television commercials where Ms Connelly displayed her many seductive charms. Then the psychologists arranged for me to be put to sleep and carried into the Room. Once I wake up and find Ms Connelly across from me, I am instantly attracted to her. In line with the psychologist' expectations, I decide to stay. Am I then under compulsion? That is no longer clear. I am not threatened in any way, and no violent force is applied to me. Yet, once again, you will have your doubts (I think), since I now appear to be a victim of a psychological manipulation. There must be some sense in which the psychologists *made me* stay in the Room.

At this point, remaining within the framework of Locke's narrow definition, it is difficult to see where the problem is. My beliefs are factually adequate, at least in any straightforward sense, and I am in control of my mental and physical capacities. Locke in effect says that an agent acts freely when, having willed to perform an action, he is able to carry it out, E II.xxi.8

and also able to not carry it out. We now want to add that, for an action to be free, it must be willed freely ('having *freely* willed an action. . . '). That proviso Locke repeatedly militates against.

To put the problem another way: Locke attributes liberty to some voluntary actions. We want to know what makes the actions voluntary, and whether there are *any* voluntary actions.

Determination of will. When we look into Locke's discussion of the determination of the will, we get a taste of what his response to the Locked Room scenarios should be. On different occasions we are moved by different desires. They pull us toward different goals. But we are able to pause and calmly evaluate them (in 'suspending' our desires). This is the process of deliberation ('examination'), and its outcome is judgement. In the application of this judgement to practice the will is determined. Moreover, only such will can properly said to accompany voluntary actions. E II.xxi.47

On the face of it, this is no answer: a subject of the psychological experiment is able to deliberate. But we can develop this line of thought and say that a properly formed judgement is never a subject to external manipulation.

Is that plausible? For suppose, with naturalists, that every process of deliberation is part of some natural process. Then this natural process takes place in some natural environment. Factors within the environment will affect—indeed, causally determine—the way the deliberation is performed. Even where there is no purposive manipulation, the deliberation process can still be said to be manipulated by the environment.

A more straightforward objection is also available. We only have to notice that in our rational deliberation we are affected by our irrational (say, biological) preferences. To this extent there is no purely rational deliberation, completely disentangled from desires.

Knowledge. In Book IV Locke comes to the discussion of knowledge. Mind has only ideas as its objects. So knowledge should consist in the perception of agreement between these ideas. This claim, however, suits best one particular kind of knowledge—intuitive. So, for example, the ideas of white and black 'disagree' one with the other, in the sense that we cannot perceive things as being white and black all over, at the same time. But as for sensory knowledge, it remains unclear what kind of agreement is supposed to be between our ideas.

Intuition and demonstration. Some truths are known by us immediately by intuition, others require a demonstration. Examples of intuitive knowledge include the knowledge that white is not black, that a circle is not a triangle, and that three is greater than one. The mind, in apprehending these truths, grasps them immediately. Notice, however, that this claim fails to demarcate between classes of statements. If I am presented with a very large circle, I will be perfectly unable to grasp anything about its nature immediately. Similarly, I will have little to say about whether a very large number represented by many digits is greater than another large number represented again by many digits. For these statements, it seems, I will require a demonstration. E IV.ii.1

So a question can be put generally with regard to why some statements are known intuitively, and some demonstratively. Locke appears to locate the difference not in the properties of statements themselves, but rather in the properties of an observer. This means that there could be an observer for whom the statements demonstratively known by us are intuitively known.

Limitations of knowledge. Our knowledge reaches only as far as ideas. We cannot know how things are in themselves. Locke is perhaps too pessimistic about our abilities to know the inner workings of the matter. But he is not overly pessimistic in thinking that knowledge of the things themselves is impossible. Locke tends to deemphasize this incapacity, since it is suitable to our purposes. E IV.iii.1 E I.i.5-7

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