We enter into our reflection on the modern conception of freedom with a discussion of John Locke, not necessarily because he is the most influential or important of the early modern philosophers—though Lee Ward certainly has some justification for calling him “the canonical figure of Western liberalism”1—not even because his interpretation of the nature of freedom is exceptionally clear. In fact, his writing on this topic is notoriously difficult to decipher, to such an extent that it has appeared to be not just confusing, but confused: as a contemporary critic observed regarding his attempt to explain the nature of freedom, “Here even Locke, that cautious philosopher, was lost.”2 The reason we choose Locke is because of the basic ambiguity in his thinking about freedom rather than in spite of it. The larger claim that we intend to make is that the modern conception of freedom has an inherent, indeed logical, tendency to subvert itself, and we aim to show in our first two chapters that this tendency comes to a certain perfection of expression in the thinking of Locke.

It is well known that conflicts in interpretation have attended the reception of Locke’s idea of freedom from the first moment of the publication of his Essay Concerning Human Understanding in 1690,3 and only intensified with his attempts to clarify his conception of freedom in the subsequent revised editions of the book.4 Indeed, it was precisely the chapter that dealt with the question of free will, namely, the twenty-first
chapter of the second book, already one of the longest in the Essay, that was subject to the most revision. To put the controversy in modern terms: Is Locke a compatibilist, who believes (like Hobbes) that our actions are free but the volitions that produce those actions are not? Or is he a libertarian who thinks that, no matter how much one might be influenced by outside determinants, the will has the final say, so that we are justified in taking the will to be an absolute cause, and so to be accountable ultimately only to itself for its choices? Contemporary scholarship on Locke’s notion of freedom has continued to struggle with resolving the problem of determining where Locke stands on the question of the will’s freedom.

The difficulty can be set forth in a rather straightforward manner, though we will have to dwell on many of the details later in our discussion. In the initial edition of his Essay, Locke seems—though not without ambiguity even here, which is attested to by the immediate controversy—to incline toward a compatibilist perspective, that is, to hold that there is a freedom of action but a natural determinism of the will. This is something that concerned Locke when he finished, and, as he explains in a letter to William Molyneux—an admirer of Locke’s, with whom Locke began to take up correspondence after the publication of his Essay—it was a tendency that emerged in the writing, contrary to his intentions as he began. Locke says in the first edition that it is ultimately nonsensical to ask whether the will is free, since the category is intelligible only in relation to agency, and the will is not itself an agent but the faculty of an agent. The will is not self-determining, but it is determined in every situation by the greatest good that presents itself in that situation. “Upon a closer inspection into the working of men’s minds, and a stricter examination of those motives and views they are turned by” (“Epistle to the Reader,” 16), however, and prompted by questions friends and critics had raised, he felt a need to revisit the problem. In response to Locke’s request for a critique, Molyneux admitted that Locke seemed to espouse a kind of intellectualism that failed to give due weight to the self-determining power of the will and was thus unable to explain the will’s tendency to stray from reason—that is, the classic problem of *akrasia* (“incontinence” or “weakness of will”). In Molyneux’s words, Locke appeared “to make all Sins to proceed from our Understandings, or to be against Conscience; and not at all from
the Depravity of our Wills.” Moreover, Molyneux sent to Locke notes an acquaintance of his, Bishop William King, had made, which articulated in strong words a complaint that Locke failed to grasp the will’s self-determining nature, rendering it a “passive power”: whereas Locke had said that one can ask for no more freedom than to be able to act in accordance with one’s will, King insisted this is true only if “that will not be crambed down his throat, but proceed meerly from the active power of the soul. [W]ithout any thing from without determining it to will or not to will.” In the second edition, Locke sought to mitigate the role of external determination by strengthening the agent’s power, in a manner we will explore in detail below.

What is curious is that, although Locke makes what appear to be decisively new qualifications in the second edition (and also in the fifth), which fundamentally modify one’s view of what freedom is, he added them to his original ideas as a supplement without in fact changing much of the substance of what he had previously written. It may be true that, in the second edition’s “Epistle to the Reader,” he admits to having changed his mind about the question, but he also suggests in the text (and explains in a letter to Molyneux) that the change amounts to little more than the substitution of “one indifferent word” for another, “actions” for the word “things,” which he had used in the first edition. The change of understanding he confesses would thus appear to be rather slight. And so there seem to be several interpretive options available here, which we can boil down to the three most evident. Either (1) Locke was originally a compatibilist, but as a result of his closer consult of evidence and experience, and discussion with others, he altered his position and became a libertarian. Or (2) he was always a compatibilist, even in the later editions of his work, and what seem to be changes are in fact better interpreted as clarifications of his prior position or qualifications of his original position that would allow him to accommodate apparently contravening evidence without abandoning that position. Or, finally, (3) he was always a libertarian, and the ideas he introduced in subsequent editions merely enabled him to bring out more clearly and forcefully what was essentially a part of his thinking from the beginning. Serious scholars can be found defending each of these three interpretations.

What we wish to propose is that the reason a serious defense of each of these three opposed interpretations of Locke can be found is...
that they are all exactly correct. Locke’s view of freedom, in its final form, can be justifiably interpreted either as compatibilist or as libertarian, because the inherent logic points, as it were, in both directions at the same time. It is interesting in this context to note that, in the development of psychology in the centuries that followed, both the “associationists,” who tended to be determinists, and the “faculty psychologists,” who tended to be libertarians, pointed to Locke as the father of their school of thought. Locke himself was evidently committed to preserving a full sense of human freedom, while at the same time he was resolute in his desire to avoid any tendency toward blind, arbitrary spontaneity. Because it is the logic of his conception that bifurcates simultaneously in these two directions, it becomes relatively unimportant for the purposes of our investigation what he himself intended to achieve. In what follows, therefore, our interest lies above all in the philosophical implications of his core ideas, rather than his own comments on them, or how his ideas were received by his contemporaries. To show these implications requires a much more precise presentation of those ideas, and so it is to this task that we turn first.

On Power

Let us first recall the context of Locke’s presentation of his notion of freedom. The treatment comes in volume 2, chapter 21, of the Essay, which is entitled “Of Power.” The general argument of the Essay is to show that the human mind is essentially a “white sheet,” a blank piece of paper, which gets filled with content through the experience of the world: the Essay is thus a “natural history of the mind,” in the sense that he follows an empirical, historical method in his interpreting the activity of the mind. To make this argument, Locke attempts to show the genetic origin of our ideas in experience, first the simple ideas that we have, which cannot be reduced to anything more basic, and then the complex ideas, which are constructed upon those simple ideas and usually involve relations between several of them. The notion of power is a simple idea, according to Locke (2.7.8), which means that it is a univocal concept—“nothing but one uniform appearance, or conception in the mind,” which “is not distinguishable into different ideas” (2.2.1.145; all
emphasis we have throughout the book for Locke is in the original un-
less otherwise noted)—and thus is derived in an immediate way from
sensation and reflection. In the context of this first mention, he notes
just that the simple idea of power arises from the experience of differ-
ent forms of change (2.7.8.163). To say that it is a simple idea means that
“power” cannot be defined, though it can be known only by acquaint-
tance with the experience of change.

But Locke returns to elaborate the notion of power as a “simple
mode” (as distinct from a “mixed mode”), which is a variation on a
simple idea that does not involve the introduction of another idea.
What Locke means by classifying power as a “simple mode” is appar-
tently that it can be further differentiated within itself without the in-
troduction of some other simple idea. The elaboration of the notion of
power occurs in chapter 21, just before Locke turns to the “mixed
modes,” that is, combinations of simple ideas, the first of which is the
notion of substance.

Now, the reason Locke focuses this lengthy and complex chapter
on power almost exclusively on the experience of the human will is that
an exercise of the will, according to Locke, is the sole experience from
which we are able to derive the notion of power. The reason that it is ex-
clusively our own exercise of will that affords a notion of power is that,
as Locke explains, it is only here that we see power in its most proper,
active sense as the ability to *bring about* a change, as distinct from
power in the passive sense as the ability to *undergo* a change. Clearly,
the active sense is primary, insofar as the changes that one thing under-
goes have to be produced actively by something else. Although it is
true that we witness the effecting of change constantly in the world
around us, it is nevertheless also true that every event can be causally
traced to the precedent conditions, and so on: as Locke says regarding
physical body in the natural world, “we observe it only to *transfer*, but
not *produce* any motion” (2.21.4.312). The activity of the will presents a
contrast to this: “The idea of the *beginning* of motion we have only
from reflection on what passes in ourselves” (2.21.4.313).

The crucial question that arises here is whether the exercise of the
will is in fact a beginning of motion—as we will see, it is just this ques-
tion that Locke never definitively manages to answer. It is therefore no
surprise that the question of freedom would continue to occupy Locke

© 2017 UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME
in later editions. We need to note the importance of this point. The notion of power is not just one of the various ideas that Locke reflects on in his account of the mind and its contents, but it represents, as Pierre Manent has suggested, the very center of the *Essay*, the reference point for all of the most significant notions he goes on to describe. Indeed, once we consider the pragmatic turn of Locke’s thought generally, we may say that the notion of power is the heart of his philosophy simply: it is the basis of his metaphysics, insofar as it presents the “principal ingredient” (2.21.3.311) of his notion of substance and of cause and effect; it is the basis of his epistemology, since all perceived qualities of the world are expressions of the power that things exert on the mind; it is the heart of his anthropology, since in rejecting all innate ideas he nevertheless founds his interpretation of human nature on the basis of innate powers; and, needless to say, Locke conceives the goal of political philosophy to be the proper distribution of power:

The Great Question which in all Ages has disturbed Mankind, and brought on the greatest part of those Mischiefs which have ruin’d Cities, depopulated Countries, and disordered the Peace of the World, has been, Not whether there be Power in the World, nor whence it came, but who should have it.

If the notion of power, around which so much turns, can be derived from nowhere else but an insight into the will as a beginning of motion, then a proper interpretation of will is a matter of no small concern for the success of Locke’s philosophy. His revision in this respect is not a matter of satisfying his critics, but of satisfying the demands of his own thinking.

### Volition and Freedom

Having considered the context in which Locke’s discussion of human freedom occurs, and what is at stake for him in this discussion, let us now turn to the details of the discussion itself. Locke’s definition of freedom appears quite straightforward, but it turns out to be rather complex when he attempts to elaborate and justify the elements of that
definition. In the tightest nutshell, to be free, for Locke, is “to have the power to do what [one] will.” Locke explains that the power to do a particular thing is free only if it includes also the power not to do it. This aspect, which is one of the things that distinguishes his view from that of Hobbes, is so much a part of the essential meaning of freedom in his understanding as to require explicit mention in the more precise elaboration of the definition, which he thus gives as “a power in any agent to do or forbear any particular action, according to the determination of the mind” (2.21.8.316). That this represents his definitive understanding of freedom, whatever qualifications he eventually adds, becomes evident when he refers to it again, towards the end of his life, as the settled definition. In letters to his Arminian friend Phillip van Limborch, in a debate they had concerning the indifference of the will, Locke affirms that freedom “consists solely in the power to act or not to act, consequent on, and according to, the determination of the will,” and “Liberty for me is the power of a man to act or not to act, according to his will: that is to say, if a man is able to do this if he wills to do it, and on the other hand to abstain from doing this when he wills to abstain from doing it: in that case a man is free.”

As these formulations reveal, freedom for Locke concerns above all action. According to Locke, man has an active power to perform (or refrain from performing)—that is, to begin (or to forbear)—two different types of action, “thinking and motion” (2.21.8.315). One condition of freedom is that there be nothing that either prevents a man from exercising that power or coercively forces him to exercise it, in any given case. But this is only part of the matter. For Locke, in addition to this negative and external condition, there is a positive and internal one: the action must also be voluntary, which means that it must be an expression of the man’s will. A free act, in other words, is one that is founded on a prior “act,” what Locke calls “volition.” To understand Locke properly, it is crucial to grasp the distinction between volition and action proper. It is not the case, as one might initially think, that volition is internal (as an act of the mind), while action denotes an external movement of the body, an outward expression of what is in the mind, for as we just noted Locke classifies thinking as a type of action. Instead, volition is an internal activity that is distinct from thought; it is specifically the mind’s determining itself to some action, whether that
action be internal (thinking) or external (movement). Locke defines the will as the “power the mind has thus to order the consideration of any idea or the forebearing to consider it; or to prefer the motion of any part of the body to its rest, and vice versa, in any particular instance” (2.21.5.313). There is thus first a power to think about actions and rank their desirability; volition, most properly speaking, is the “exercise of that power” (ibid.).

We can achieve some insight into what Locke precisely means by this somewhat obscure notion if we compare it to a similar sort of activity. Locke explains that the verb that comes closest to capturing the sense of “to will” is “to prefer,” but he insists that these actions are nevertheless not the same insofar as I can say that I would prefer to fly than to walk, but I would never say that I will to fly (2.21.15.320). Behind Locke’s judgment here seems to be an ambiguity in the phrase “to prefer,” which on the one hand designates a kind of disposition (i.e., a state or way of being), while on the other hand, though this usage is now obsolete, it refers to the transitive action of placing one thing before another (which is indeed what its etymology implies). In any event, the point is that for Locke volition strictly speaking is not a “wanting” in the sense of a positive disposition or condition of approval. (It is interesting to note already here that the distinction Locke seeks to draw between “willing” and “wanting” is an effort to rid the will, in its essence, of an appetitive dimension, insofar as that dimension implies its subordination to something outside of itself, as we will explain in the discussion of “unease” below.) Rather than being most basically a response to a prior reality, volition is an event, something that happens, the actualizing of a power, in relation to something over which we have some control. Locke thus specifies that volition “is an act of the mind knowingly exerting that dominion it takes itself to have over any part of the man” (2.21.15.320). Note that Locke very carefully says here “exerting” rather than “exercising”: the achievement of dominion would be an action in the proper sense: the lifting of my arm, the turning of my head, and so forth. Volition, more specifically, is the directing of the mind to this action, whether or not the action is subsequently able to be achieved. Since the will is a power, and power reveals itself in the effecting of some change, it follows that a volition is not a state, but an occurrence. On the other hand, Locke wishes to dis-
tistinguish the act of will from the action of the man. He thus comes to characterize it as a kind of subaction, the act of intending a particular action, which can be described as a “directing” of the mind.  

Now, the fact that there is a distinction between volition and action proper, that volition in other words is the active determination to an action, but not yet the action itself at the level of the person’s deliberate deed, allows Locke to make a distinction between an action’s being voluntary and its being free. Volition is a necessary, but insufficient, condition for the freedom of an action. For it to be free in the full sense requires more than the agent’s will—it requires, in addition, what we might call the cooperation of external circumstances. To show this, Locke presents his famous example of the man who is brought while asleep into a locked room with a close friend: he is there willingly or voluntarily, since conversing with his friend is what he desires to do, indeed, what he would actively prefer to do given other options, and yet he is not free, since his being in the room was not his action and he has no power to leave it. A similar distinction can be made with respect to the internal activity of thinking: certain thoughts might be put into my head, so to speak, without my so choosing—by virtue of some unconscious habit, for example—and yet I may enjoy them while they are there. In this case, I could be said to think something willingly, but not freely. Freedom presupposes voluntariness, but voluntariness does not necessarily entail freedom.

Now, it is just this distinction between the voluntary and the free, and its implications, that has given rise to much of the controversy we alluded to earlier in the interpretation of Locke’s views. On the one hand, the distinction separates Locke quite clearly from a more obviously compatibilist thinker like Hobbes. For the Hobbes of the *Leviathan*, freedom is exclusively a question of action and its external conditions, which is why we may speak equally of the freedom of a man to do x, y, and z, and of a river, which flows unimpeded along its course. But Locke insists that unimpeded action is not free unless it is also the expression of a volition, an act of preference, which means that only what is rational can be considered free, since only that which has a mind can direct it to some action. This is why Locke judges (contra Hobbes), for example, that a tennis ball cannot be free no matter how unimpeded its flight. On the other hand, however, Locke rejects what
is typically taken to be a decisive question in the traditional debate concerning freedom, namely, whether the will itself is free—that is, whether the act of volition is a free action—as ultimately a meaningless question (though he modifies this judgment to a certain extent in the second edition, and most clearly in the posthumous edition, as we will see in the next section):

I leave it to be considered, whether [the idea that freedom requires rational preference] may not help to put an end to that long agitated, and, I think, unreasonable, because unintelligible question, viz. Whether man’s will be free or no? For if I mistake not, it follows from what I have said, that the question itself is altogether improper; and it is as insignificant to ask whether man’s will be free, as to ask whether his sleep be swift, or his virtue square: liberty being as little applicable to the will, as swiftness of motion is to sleep, or squareness to virtue. (2.21.14.319)

The essential reason he offers for this rejection is that freedom concerns action, and the will is not itself an agent but only the faculty of an agent, that is, of an acting person. Moreover, freedom concerns action as the expression of a preference, and it does not make sense to say that the will has a preference: it is the agent who does. Finally, given that the will has been defined as a power, and freedom has been defined as a power, to ask whether the will is free, according to Locke, amounts to the patently absurd question whether a power has a power.30

But Locke does not simply rest his case with this reductio ad absurdum; he offers instead a more detailed account of the activity of the will in order to show—at least initially—why the question of freedom is not relevant at this level. He makes two arguments in this regard. The first argument, given in sections 23 and 24, draws essentially on his observation that we cannot help in any particular case preferring or not preferring something the very moment it is proposed to our understanding. There are two claims here. The first is that, when action that is immediately to be done is proposed to us, we cannot but take up some position in its regard; we necessarily will to do it or not to do it. This claim does not seem very controversial. The second claim is the bolder one: Locke is suggesting not only that necessity drives the fact of having to will one
or the other, but also that it determines the content of the volition. He
does not explain what he means by this, but what he seems to have in
mind is that we cannot help but will a certain thing, that is, the mind can-
not help but direct itself in a particular way, given who we are and the
circumstances in which we find ourselves. To put it in other words—
which are not Locke’s but help to clarify his—the act of will, under-
stood as preference, occurs immediately and automatically. We don’t
have control over what we like or dislike; we don’t decide what we want.
Instead, we make decisions with respect to wants that are simply given.
To ask whether the act of will is free, as he puts it, thus amounts to the
pointless question “whether a man can will what he wills, or be pleased
with what he is pleased with” (2.21.25.328). Do we have to determine
whether we want to want what we want if we wish to say that we want
it? Is it not sufficient simply to say, “This is what I want”?

The second argument is related to this last question, and in fact
Locke articulates it briefly after making this point. In the first four edi-
tions, Locke had made essentially the same argument twice: at the end
of section 23 and at the end of section 25. In the fifth edition, he elimi-
nated the first instance and kept only the slightly briefer articulation, to
which we refer here. Locke goes on to say, in this succinct formulation,
that, if one of the requirements for an act of will to be free is that it it-
self be the result of an act of will, then we fall into an infinite regress:
the act of will that makes this particular act of will free is either neces-
sary or free. If it is free, it can only be by virtue of an antecedent act,
which is in turn either necessary or free, and so on into infinity. There
ultimately needs to be some determination external to the will, some
preference that is not chosen but simply given, to set the series in mo-
tion, and therefore volition itself cannot ultimately be a free action.

It becomes evident at this point that Locke has “backed into” a kind
of compatibilism that is scarcely distinguishable in its general implica-
tions from that of Hobbes’s, though it is certainly more sophisticated.
To put the matter clearly: we may or may not be free, to the extent that
we have the ability to do what we want to do, but this determination of
the question of freedom is altogether separate from the question of the
origin of our desire. Freedom is, in other words, perfectly compatible
with the position that our preferences are themselves wholly the result
of external causes, naturalistically conceived. In this respect, at least,
Locke’s view of freedom, just like Hobbes’s, can be affirmed within the context of a universal mechanism, that is, without removing human action, no matter how lofty or idealistic it might appear to be, from the necessary chain of causal events governing nature as a whole.

In addition to all of the logical and moral problems that this position entails in the traditional objections, it also presents a fundamental difficulty in the context of Locke’s Essay that is not often noticed:34 the whole point of the discussion, as we indicated earlier, is to show the origin of the idea of power, which depends on our experience of the production of action as opposed to the mere transfer of activity that we witness everywhere else in the natural world. If the act of will, upon closer inspection, turns out to be itself nothing more than a transfer of power, then we have lost the basis for one of the fundamental building blocks, if not the very foundation, of Locke’s philosophy. And so the entire building will collapse.

Second Thoughts

We have said that the positing of a “universal mechanism” is perfectly compatible with Locke’s understanding of freedom, but that does not mean that Locke himself adopts it. It can be harmonized with Locke’s position, as so far described, but is it in fact Locke’s position? It is just on this point that Locke’s work of revision in the second edition most decisively bears. The revising entailed the insertion of a few lines or the changing of a few words or phrases here and there in the first twenty-seven sections of chapter 21, but Locke added a great deal of new material to everything that comes after this in the chapter, apart from some concluding observations tying the discussion back to the general idea of power. What had been eleven sections of text he expanded into thirty-four sections, as Locke attempted to deal more adequately with the problem of free will, prompted in part, as we saw, by the problem of failing to do justice to what Locke originally affirmed to be the properly active quality of the will, which was set into relief by both Molyneux’s and King’s criticisms.

Locke believes generally that every event has a cause,35 and this apparently excludes an event’s being self-caused, which, given the normal