

This is a repository copy of *Managing Expectations : Locke on the Material Mind and Moral Mediocrity*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/132174/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Book Section:**

Wilson, Catherine [orcid.org/0000-0002-0760-4072](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0760-4072) (2016) *Managing Expectations : Locke on the Material Mind and Moral Mediocrity*. In: *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*. Royal Institute of Philosophy , London , pp. 127-146.

---

**Reuse**

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

## Managing Expectations: Locke on the Material Mind and Moral Mediocrity

Catherine Wilson

*Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 78:127-146 (2016)

(Post-print)

In his *Essay concerning Human Understanding* of 1689, John Locke declared that the human being is ‘inconsiderable, mean, and impotent...in all probability...one of the lowest of all intellectual Beings’ (IV. iii. 23).

Locke hammered this point home throughout the book. We have no innate knowledge of theoretical or practical principles (Book I. i-iv). Our words are largely ‘doubtful and uncertain in their signification,’ which impairs communication and the representation of states of affairs (III.ix.10-17). Where the acquisition of empirical knowledge is concerned, we are confined to ‘a small part of the immense Universe,’ and as to the other planets ‘what sorts of Furniture and Inhabitants those Mansions contain in them, we cannot so much as guess (IV. iii. 24). Here on earth, we are limited to the perception of middle-sized objects; we can't see the subvisible corpuscles upon which everything depends (IV.iii. 25). Even if we could see them, we wouldn't be able to understand how configurations of primary qualities give rise to secondary and tertiary qualities (IV.iii. 25-6).

The limits theme in Locke has been well studied in connection with these issues. It is less a recapitulation of the theological view that our linguistic and epistemic capacities were destroyed in Adam's Fall, though it trades on it, than it is an attack on both scholastic metaphysics and the Cartesian ambition of explaining everything in corpuscularian terms and achieving practical mastery over nature. It is constructive as well as destructive. The key notion is ‘mediocrity,’ not depravity. Locke wants us to see things differently and to act differently, abandoning certain futile scientific pursuits along with nonreferential metaphysical discourse, and perhaps adopting an experimental-observational approach to medicine in place of the theoretical one suggested by Descartes.<sup>1</sup>

The other context in which Locke employs the feeble, fallible man theme, his moral philosophy, has not been as well studied. His chapter on ‘Powers’ presents us as strikingly powerless; and in *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, he comments on ‘the frailty of our minds, and weakness of our constitutions; how liable [we are] to mistakes, how apt to go astray, and how easily to be turned out of the paths of virtue.’ Our moral limitations, he says, are apparent to anyone from ‘the testimony of his own conscience.’ And if some saintly person ‘feels not his own errors and passions always tempting, and often prevailing, against

the strict rules of his duty; he need but look abroad into any stage of the world, to be convinced...' (R 112).

Had Locke been a more conventional philosopher, human mediocrity would not have presented him with the problem of reconciling anthropology with moral demandingness; he could have subscribed to the traditional scheme of fallen-man-but-with-God-given-free-will that had long served to reconcile inherent sinfulness with moral obligation. But Locke did not really believe in free will. On the contrary, he thought that human beings are essentially passional, hedonistic organised bodies. Our constitutions, in all their reactivity and impulsiveness, are given to us by God for our own benefit, but God at the same time requires from us behaviour in conformity with Christian moral principles.

Doubting the existence of an incorporeal soul and regarding the person as a material machine endowed with a bundle of powers, Locke decided to try, as he explained in his Epistle to the Reader of the *Essay*, the difficult task: 'to put Morality and Mechanism together' (I. iii. 14). He had to show why libertinism was not the inevitable consequence of accepting mortalism and materialism. He had three distinct solutions to this problem, which also required him to present a new theory of the Resurrection as personality-restoration via memory-restoration. The first solution involved undercutting his own passional account by assigning the mind a power of suspension. A second, more satisfactory and interesting solution was to treat moral competence on analogy with physical skill, as a capability achieved through instruction and practice. The third solution was to face the mediocrity problem head on and to insist on divine forgiveness.

In the final analysis, Locke didn't paint a very convincing picture of moral responsibility. For, despite –indeed, because of–his suspicion that we are hedonistic machines, he needed the Christian revelation with its carrot-and-stick approach to defining and cultivating rectitude.<sup>2</sup> This commitment sat oddly, to the contemporary mind, with his metaphysically cautious and sociologically observant outlook. Nevertheless Locke's project of relating morality to nature and education as far as possible is impressive, and the more radical elements of his moral psychology, though they were evident to 18th century empiricists, have perhaps not been appreciated fully. Locke describes multiple instances of passional behaviour, striving for a descriptively adequate, realistic account of human cravings, ambivalence, and weakness. He was a mechanical philosopher who denied the will an autonomous role and who refused to assert that the faculty of reason is sovereign over feeling.

To explore the limits theme in Locke's moral philosophy and to argue for this interpretation of the morality-and-mechanism passage, I will first defend the claim that humans, in Locke's view are soulless corporeal machines (or at least that moral theory must assume that they are). Next, I draw attention to some of Locke's many passages on emotionality and impulsivity; and finally I comment on the forgiveness theme in his moral theology, a conceptual device that to some extent mediates between his naturalism and his moralism.

### I. Locke's theory of the material soul

One of the many background assumptions Locke was challenging in the *Essay* was that an incorporeal, intrinsically immortal soul endowed with a free will was a necessary condition of morally significant agency. He did not think our practices should rely on an experience-transcendent proposition, and, on his considered view, 'All the great Ends of Morality and Religion, are well enough secured, without philosophical Proofs of the Soul's Immateriality' (IV. iii. 6).

There is room for debate on the question what Locke had in mind with his counterproposal that God might have superadded powers of thought to matter 'suitably organised.' There is further room for debate over whether he believed that that is what happened, and that we are wholly material and mortal beings, or held, more cautiously and circumspectly, that the existence of the separable Cartesian soul was an unproved though possible, indeed probable hypothesis.<sup>3</sup> Although his language sometimes indicates the latter—Locke declares that it not his intention anywhere to 'in any way lessen the belief of the Soul's Immateriality' (IV.iii.6)--and although there was apparently nothing to be gained by way of public esteem and much to be lost in advancing the former thesis, consideration of the *Essay* as a whole suggests that Locke, in company with many physicians of the 17th century, suspected the former to be true.

The attack on the Cartesian soul and the corresponding defense of thinking matter is developed by employing the mediocrity argument. According to Locke, 'The simple ideas we receive from sensation and reflection are the boundaries of our thoughts; beyond which the mind, whatever efforts it would make, is not able to advance one jot; nor can it make any discoveries, when it would pry into the nature and hidden causes of those ideas' (II. xxiii. 29). We have an idea of the soul derived through experience as an immaterial thing that thinks and

that can ‘excite motion in the body by willing or thought’ (but not bodies at a distance from it) (II.xxiii. 20-22), and an idea of body derived through experience as involving ‘the cohesion of solid, and consequently separable parts, and a power of communicating motion by impulse’(II. xxii.17). Both ideas are ‘obscure’. The idea of matter is obscure because cohesion is inexplicable, and so is the communication of motion. The idea of the soul is obscure because we can have no experience of things that do not impact on our senses. So, as far as proper epistemology, that is ‘Contemplation of our own Ideas, without revelation,’ is concerned, we cannot discover either that ‘Omnipotency has given to Matter fitly disposed, a power to perceive and think’ or that God has ‘joined and fixed to Matter so disposed, a thinking immaterial Substance’ (IV. iii.6).<sup>4</sup>

In his lengthy correspondence with Stillingfleet over what was obviously a provocative remark, Locke refused to back down. He developed an argument that is not found in the *Essay*, though it is consistent with his view that nature is characterised by continuity and with his appeal to gravity as a superaddition.<sup>5</sup> First, he argued that even in purely material systems such as the solar system, the ‘bare essence’ or ‘natural powers’ of matter are unable to account for planetary orbits. Next, he pointed out that ‘the vegetable part of the creation is not doubted to be wholly material; and yet he that will look into it, will observe excellencies and operations in this part of matter, which he will not find contained in the essence of matter in general, nor be able to conceive how they can be produced by it.’ Advancing to the animal world, we ‘meet with yet greater perfections and properties, no ways explicable by the essence of matter in general.’ This indicates that the Creator superadded the ‘qualities’ of life, sense, and spontaneous motion, along with a power of propagation, and so, the implication is, the addition of the property of thought is only the next step in ‘the superinducement of greater perfections and nobler qualities’.<sup>6</sup>

As well as professing ignorance as to the nature of substance, and as to God’s employment of His powers, and advancing the stepwise argument just cited, Locke engages in constant sniping at the incorporeal Cartesian soul that is the repository of imprinted innate ideas and whose essence it is to think. Their claim that the essence of the soul is to think forced the Cartesians to embrace the conclusion that the soul always thinks (on pain of the self’s not existing), in the womb, when asleep, when detached from the body (II. i. 9-19) even if we are not always aware of ourselves as thinking those thoughts. But thinking, says Locke, is an operation of the mind, something we suppose ‘it’ can do, not an essential attribute (ibid.) Why would God have created an incorporeal soul that produces thoughts of which the subject is unaware, or that it immediately forgets, along with the follies of dreams? A

thinking mind of whose thoughts we are unaware ‘makes two persons of one man’ (ibid. 19).  
Further,

They who make the soul a thinking thing, at this rate, will not make it a much more noble being, than those do, whom they condemn, for allowing it to be nothing but the subtilest parts of matter. Characters drawn on dust, that the first breath of wind effaces; or impressions made on a heap of atoms, or animal spirits, are altogether as useful, and render the subject as noble, as the thoughts of a soul that perish in thinking; that once out of sight are gone for ever, and leave no memory of themselves behind them (II. i. 15).

Matter, he concludes, is not such useless stuff (ibid.)

There are however some passages in which Locke seems to acknowledge the existence, or at least the probable existence of incorporeal spirits. For example, in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, Locke argued that materialism is a tempting position but one inadequate to explain all the phenomena, and that young gentlemen ought to be discouraged from adopting it. ‘Matter being a thing, that all our Senses are constantly conversant with, it is so apt to possess the Mind, and exclude all other Beings, but Matter, that prejudice, grounded on such Principles, often leaves no room for the admittance of Spirits, or the allowing any such things as *immaterial Beings in rerum natura*.’<sup>7</sup>

Locke’s concern here is, however with atheism, not with the existence of other spiritual substances. Locke did believe in an incorporeal God, the necessary author of the many active powers he ascribed to material nature, and he believed himself to have given a good and novel argument for the existence of the ‘eternal cogitative Being,’ namely that ‘It is impossible to conceive, that ever bare incogitative Matter should produce a thinking, intelligent Being, as that nothing should of it self produce Matter’(IV. x. 10). His references to other spirits, even in the context of his ‘mediocrity’ sentiments, appear exaggerated and ironic. ‘How inconsiderable a rank the Spirits that inhabit our Bodies hold amongst those various and possibly innumerable, kinds of nobler Beings; and how far short they come of the Endowments and Perfections of Cherubims and Seraphims, and infinite sorts of Spirits above us, is what by a transient hint, in another place, I have offered to my Reader's Consideration.’ (IV. x. 17). As he has already pointed out several times, ‘having the Ideas of Spirits does not make us know, that any such Things do exist without us, or that there are any finite Spirits, or any other spiritual Beings but the Eternal GOD’ (IV: xi. 12).<sup>8</sup>

Several other passages seem initially to pose apparent problems for ascribing materialism-with-powers to Locke. First, at (II. xxiii. 16) he says that the soul is a ‘real being’ and that ‘I ...know, that there is some spiritual being within me, that sees and hears. This, I must be convinced, cannot be the action of bare insensible matter; nor ever could be, without an immaterial thinking being.’ Second, at II. xxvii. 25, he says, ‘I agree, the more probable opinion is, that this consciousness is annexed to, and the affection of one individual immaterial substance.’ And third, in his discussion of personal identity, at II. Xxvii. 15-23, he appears to take seriously the idea that souls can be detached from bodies in which they are or were ordinarily resident and attached to other bodies.

To the first point, all Locke appears to mean here is that neither matter nor thought could have come into the world in the absence of an original thinking being with creative powers. The ‘real being’ of the soul does not imply the reality of individual incorporeal cogitative substance, by contrast with the real existence of soul-functions. All we know is that ‘we have in us something that thinks’ (IV. ii. 6)-- a ‘spiritual being’—not what its metaphysical nature is, and we can safely take the reference to the ‘immaterial thinking being’ that is a condition of anything’s seeing and hearing to be the Creator. To the second point, when Locke refers to the existence of the incorporeal soul as the more ‘probable’ opinion, I take it he is using ‘probable’ in the casuistic sense; it is the opinion accepted by most authorities. He cannot be using ‘probable’ in an evidentiary sense, insofar as he maintains that we have no positive evidence whatsoever for the existence of individual incorporeal cogitative substance. Finally, as for the supposition of ‘detachable souls,’ the aim of all the examples involving pigs and Socrates, cobblers and princes, is not to make it appear probable that souls can flit about, alighting in other bodies, but to show that what we consider relevant to identity is entirely experiential: the existence of first-person memories.

Perhaps, someone might insist, Locke genuinely has no preference for or against the hypothesis of the incorporeal soul? Perhaps thinking matter is merely a worst case scenario to be armed against? Given the evidence, text external as well as text internal, this is implausible. The criticism of Locke as a ‘Hobbist’ by John Edwards, the careful distinction Edwards made between Locke and Boyle, who was very much like Locke in his presentation of the corpuscularian hypothesis and his doctrine of qualities, but above theological suspicion, together with Locke’s reception in the 18th century as the principal proponent of thinking matter as shown years ago by John Yolton<sup>9</sup> all confirm the seriousness of Locke’s attraction to the hypothesis. If you truly regard theologically scandalous hypothesis A as no more likely than theologically safe hypothesis B, why strive to impress on your readers that

the arguments and evidence for B are utterly lacking without correspondingly casting aspersions on A? Further, Locke's agenda for moral philosophy is premised on our being hedonistic, but not entirely unreasonable machines, as I now show.

## II. Locke's Depiction of Passional Man

We are, then, corporeal machines with superadded qualities and powers, including life, movement, reproduction, experience and thinking, and we find ourselves in the world endowed with a set of reactions and mental habits that preserve our lives. Pain and pleasure, punishment and reward, are the basic elements of the human experiential economy.<sup>10</sup> 'God has so framed the constitutions of our minds and bodies,' says Locke in his early essay on the passions<sup>11</sup> 'that several things are apt to produce in both of them pleasure and pain, delight and trouble, by ways that we know not, but for ends suitable to His goodness and wisdom. Thus the smell of roses and the tasting of wine, light and liberty, the possession of power and the acquisition of knowledge please most men, and there are some things whose very being and existence delights others, as children and grandchildren.'<sup>12</sup>

The references to pleasure--to sensory pleasure and the pleasures of human relationships—establishes Locke as something of a voluptuary, refusing both Christian asceticism and Stoic ideals of independence and tranquillity. Here he follows Descartes, who insisted that perceptions, feelings, and emotions are all essentially good, and Hobbes who considered tranquillity a false and absurd ideal. Like the 'ideas' of the external world generated by the senses, and the 'ideas' of hunger and thirst generated by the bodily organs, feelings and emotions are 'ideas' produced by situations. According to Descartes's influential account, pleasure and pain and their prospects prompt actions, according to the designs of God, for the welfare of the living creature. Although the senses and our internal sensations can deceive us, they mostly do not, and we do well for the most part to trust them.<sup>13</sup> The same holds for the emotions. For Hobbes, tranquillity belongs neither to death nor to life, for it is a denial of the 'vital motions' by which we live.<sup>14</sup> For both of Locke's predecessors, the passions sometimes need repression, not because tranquillity is a desirable state of the soul but rather because they can be dangerous or harmful to other people. For Locke, as for Hobbes and Spinoza, emotion-driven religious and political enthusiasms and the persecution manias of groups become the focus of concern.<sup>15</sup>

Locke agrees with Descartes: 'our All-Wise Maker, suitable to our constitution and frame, and knowing what it is that determines the Will, has put into man the uneasiness of



hunger and thirst, and other natural desires, to move and determine their Wills, for the preservation of themselves and the continuation of their Species' ( II.xxi.34), thereby adding sexual desire to the list of beneficial human endowments. In his chapter on 'Powers,' in the *Essay* he evokes vividly the misery of needing and wanting things, and the individuality and specificity of our desires.

The ordinary necessities of our lives, fill a great part of them with the uneasiness of Hunger, Thirst, Heat. Cold, Weariness, with labour, and Sleepiness in their constant returns... To which... if we add the fantastical uneasiness , (as itch after Honour, Power, or Riches, etc.) which acquired habits, by Fashion, Example, and Education have settled in us, and a thousand other irregular desires...we find, that a very little part of our life is ...vacant from these uneasinesses... (II. xxi.45).

Some wants and preferences of particular human beings—such as food, drink, shelter, and liberty-- are universal; others, such as ambition and lust, take forms that vary from culture to culture.

Locke appeals to the innocent pleasures and satisfactions of consuming Cheese, Lobsters, Apples, Plumbs, and Nuts. He also comments on the painful deprivations that render people pathetic and desperate. There is the drunkard, whose 'habitual Thirst' drives him to the tavern despite his ability to see that 'his Health decays, his Estate wastes; Discredit and Diseases,' pursue him (II. xxi. 35); the bridegroom driven to conjugal life by 'burning (ibid. 34);' and Rachel in the Bible, who cries out "give me Children, give me the thing desir'd or I die.' For Locke, 'Life it self and all its Enjoyments, is a burden cannot be born under the lasting and unremoved pressure of such an uneasiness' (ibid. 32).

In his 'Powers' chapter, Locke analyses liberty as a relationship between a person's preferences and their environmental constraints. A person has liberty not when his or her will is free, as the notion of a free will is meaningless in his eyes, but when there are no constraints imposed by their situation or the laws of external nature on what they prefer to do, or (Locke is not always clear on this point) no constraints on what a person could do if they preferred to do that thing (II. xxi. 8-12). A person also lacks liberty when there are internal constraints that prevent them from doing what it is in their long term interest to do, that is what they would (continuously) prefer to do, absent the blocking feature. Lacking liberty is in fact a fairly common occurrence. In the morning, the drunkard prefers not to waste his estates

and he is free to resist a drink, but as evening comes, the drinking motivation swamps that preference and he cannot do otherwise than go down to the soaking club.

Locke refers in this connection to those 'extreme disturbances' that can 'possesses our whole mind. 'Some ideas,' he says,

like some motions to the body, are such as in certain circumstances it cannot avoid, nor obtain their absence by the utmost effort it can use. A man on the rack is not at liberty to lay by the idea of pain, and divert himself with other contemplations: And sometimes a boisterous passion hurries our thoughts as a hurricane does our bodies, without leaving us the liberty of thinking on other things, which we would rather choose' (II:xxi:12).

...[A]ny vehement pain of the body, the ungovernable passion of a man violently in love, or the impatient desire of revenge, keeps the will steady and intent; and the will, thus determined, never lets the understanding lay by the object, but all the thoughts of the mind and powers of the body are uninterruptedly employed that way, by the determination of the will, influenced by that topping uneasiness as long as it lasts (II:xxi:38).

For a woman who has lost a beloved child, its death 'rends from her Heart, the whole comfort of her Life, and gives her all the torment imaginable; use the Consolations of Reason in this case, and you were as good preach Ease to one on the Rack, and hope to allay by Rational Discourses, the Pain of his Joints tearing asunder' (II:xxxiii.13). The idea of the child and her lost enjoyment are so tightly associated that if time does not erode her memories she may 'carry an incurable Sorrow' to the grave.

Thus reason has no definite power over the emotions. The powers of self-control we associate with the will come and go; when, experientially, we regain control of ourselves in a moment of fury, or are able to resist some temptation, we feel and describe ourselves as 'free.' But freedom is not a metaphysical attribute that we possess in virtue of having a soul. Contrary to what Descartes said, it is not in the least comparable with God's will. 'Willing' implies desiring and preferring, and emotion-driven behaviour is not what takes over when reason loses its grip but the only real option. Consequently, moral motivation can only take the form of appetite; it is on all fours with hunger and thirst 'Let a man be never so well perswaded of the advantages of virtue...yet till he hungers and thirsts after righteousness, till he feels an uneasiness in the want of it, his will will not be determin'd to any action in pursuit of this confessed greater good' (II. xxi. 35).

Having analysed human freedom in terms of preferences and obstacles, and voiced the view that human beings are neither free nor determined but sometimes able to direct their thoughts and actions, at other times utterly undone and overwhelmed by them, Locke, in the first edition of the *Essay*, declared that ‘Good, therefore, the greater good, is that alone which determines the will.’ It is widely believed that he changed his mind in response to criticism, but close analysis shows that he changed only his wording, which was misleading, but not his underlying view.<sup>16</sup> His original argument in First Edition of the *Essay*, II. xxi.28-45, ran as follows

Pleasure and pain, whether of mind and body, are produced by the operation of bodies on us.

Happiness is pleasure, Misery is pain.

Whatever produces or contributes to Happiness is what we call Good.

Whatever produces or is conducive to Misery we call Evil.

The will is determined by what best pleases it.

‘Good, therefore, the greater good, is that alone which determines the will.’

If we were able to look on happiness (pleasure) and our misery (pain) with indifference, he comments, we would not be free but miserable and enslaved. Someone who does not respond to hedonic incentives and ahedonic disincentives, in other words, must be in the grip of some pathology. But if the Good is, ultimately, pleasure, isn’t this to say that our liberty is not diminished in having no freedom to be indifferent to pleasure? How is this view tenable?.

Locke’s original answer to this question was that ‘good’ and ‘evil’ do just reflect preferences; every evil is somebody’s good and vice versa. Some people are attracted by study and knowledge, some by hawking and hunting; some go in for by luxury and debauchery, others for sobriety and riches. Some people prefer wine to the preservation of their eyesight. In the second edition of the *Essay*, where the chapter on Powers was greatly expanded, Locke apologised to his readers for his apparent error in agreeing with the received view that the will always pursues, is always determined by, the greater Good (II.xxi.35). He had obviously realised that his subjectivism was unacceptable. So he introduced a notion of the ‘true (greater) good’ as opposed to the apparent. Locke continued to hold that everyone simply pursues what looks best to him or her, and if there were no ‘Prospect beyond the Grave and if ‘all Concerns of Man terminated in this Life,’ the diversity of preferences would be beyond criticism (II. Xxi.54). However, what produces the most pleasure and least pain over the very long term is compliance with God’s commands as far as possible. The ‘true

good' is accordingly 'what produces the most pleasure and least pain' for the individual over the long term. Nobody pursues the true good, however, unless they actually develop a hunger for it.

The emendation to his theory of motivation was accordingly essentially verbal. Locke no longer speaks of the greater good as attracting and so determining the will as a Platonist who believed that the soul of man yearns for the Good, the True and the Beautiful might. Rather he emphasises the push from 'uneasiness' –the desire to escape from conditions of want and deprivation. The 'uneasiness' account does not however replace the 'greater good' account. It was already there in the first edition, where he had observed that, there are in us 'a great many uneasinesses always solliciting and ready to determine the will...' When possessed by the pain of deprivation, we cannot attend to any pleasure in prospect 'a little of it extinguishes all our Pleasures...[w]e desire to be rid of the present Evil, which we are apt to think nothing absent can equal' (II. Xxi. 41) . Motivation remains personal and subjective. The true good remains what it was-- happiness or pleasure—either the greater happiness and pleasure that result in terrestrial life by moderating desires, or the happiness and pleasure that attend obedience to divine commands in the next world.<sup>17</sup>

As observed earlier, Locke's chapter on Powers turns out to be largely about powerlessness. We can't understand power metaphysically, but there is empirical reality to being in a locked room, or longing for a child we can't conceive, or being overcome by rage or by some addiction. Locke presents the reader with a distinctly mediocre moral agent. Because the mind is not metaphysically distinct from the body, or the will from desire, it would seem that there are no *a priori* generalisations to be made about what lies within 'our' power. For different individuals, in different cases, what lies within their power is different.

The moralist in Locke could not accept his anthropological conclusions. Shifting into the admonitory and moralistic mode, he declares that we are not entitled to appeal to our own frailty, as our excuse. '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.' (II. xxi. 53). The same lecture is delivered at II. xxi.71, where Locke startlingly asserts that 'the 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...makes a part of our real Happiness, or be consistent or inconsistent with it.'

The suggestion that any passion or impulse whatsoever can be repressed on the spot is frankly inconsistent with everything else Locke has been arguing in his chapter, as several

commentators have noted. He would have done better to remind his readers that they are thinking matter as well as emotional matter and that their passions are not entirely ungovernable, and are in fact more governable than they may suppose.

### III. Mediocrity and Education

Locke's view of the person as an arena of competing powers, emotional and rational, situated in the midst of a complex, poorly-understood, unpredictable universe, and as highly vulnerable to psychological and moral upset recommended to him a solution that seems not to have occurred to Descartes, Spinoza or Hobbes, namely the education of the young. Where Descartes and Spinoza remain focussed on self-improvement, and Hobbes on social organisation, Locke, in keeping with his lifelong interest in children and childhood, sees early intervention into the structure of human mental machinery as critical. In this connection as well, he thinks materialistically and rejects the posit of an essentially rational soul. In his essay *On the Conduct of the Understanding*, he develops numerous parallels between physical and mental education. He argues that as the bodily deportment of a gentleman, the legs of a dancing master, and the fingers of a musician, which are no different in their original construction from those of the ploughman, can only be developed through long practice, so mental qualities including wit, poetic talent, and reasoning are advanced by practice and encouragement.<sup>18</sup> Skill in mathematics is like skill in writing, painting, dancing or fencing.<sup>19</sup> We are not born reasonable but only potentially so, and we become reasonable through 'Use and Exercise' of our mental faculties. Further, education should not overstress the educatee: 'The mind by being engag'd in a Talk beyond its Strength, like the Body, strain'd by lifting at a Weight too heavy often has its force broken.'<sup>20</sup> Finally, the 'variety of Distempers in Mens Minds is as great as those in their Bodies;...'<sup>21</sup>

The constant references to legs and limbs in the *Conduct* speak only to the parallelism, not to the identity of mind and body. They do however invite the reader to regard human rationality in a robustly physical light. Moral education meanwhile serves to replace destructive or useless forms of uneasiness with more constructive ones. It aims at creating an appetite for the long term good and to make the pupil or oneself 'uneasy in the want of it, or in the fear of losing it...' (II. Xxi. 53). Religious instruction, Locke thought, including instruction in the Christian duties and their rewards and penalties serves as input to the human machine that can modify the character of young persons. Even the Stoic philosophy found in Cicero can have this beneficial effect.<sup>22</sup>

At times, these remodelling efforts seem to be carried too far in Locke's imagination. He thought not only that children could be conditioned out of their baseless fears, such as fear of frogs, by a kind of cognitive behavioural therapy, but that they needed to be hardened against pain and discomfort by being made to experience them. 'Since the great Foundation of Fear in Children is Pain,' he observes in *Some Thoughts on Education*, the way to harden, and fortifie Children against Fear and Danger, is to accustom them to suffer Pain. This 'tis possible will be thought, ' he admits, 'by kind Parents, a very unnatural thing towards their Children....' <sup>23</sup> Although his good friend Molyneux offered no comment on this passage, Molyneux professed himself 'shock'd' by Locke's view -- 'all that in your whole book I stick at' -- that the educator ought never to give into children's desires. <sup>24</sup> In his treatise, Locke had stated 'a child should never be suffer'd to have what he craves, or so much as speaks for, much less if he cries for it.' <sup>25</sup> Only in this way can children be taught to 'stifle their desires and to practice modesty and temperance.' Molyneux seems to agree that one should ignore children's complaints of hunger, but he thinks Locke goes overboard in applying his stifling to 'wants of fancy and affectation.' Why may they not choose for themselves 'harmless things, and plays or sports?' In response, Locke says that he is not against children's recreation. They are however apt to covet trips, 'fine cloaths, and playthings.' Desires of this sort 'being indulged when they are little, grows up with age, and with that enlarges it self to things of greater consequence. And has ruin'd more families than one on the world. This should be supressed in its very first rise.' <sup>26</sup>

This evident harshness and insistence on training in 'stifling' seems to contrast with the more sympathetic attitudes towards tears and neediness that Locke evinces in the *Essay*. This is consistent with his view that children are highly plastic, whereas adults are comparatively rigid. Once the critical age is past, the machine, with all its skills and associative habits is fully formed, and change is difficult. Recognising the power of desires in adult life, Locke clearly thinks it best to begin early in learning self-control. His apparent severity on the subject of children's desires and vulnerabilities is consistent with his overall picture: human appetitiveness shows up already in childhood. The conflict between the demands of morality and the God-given constitution of human emotional and appetitive machinery is accordingly mitigated by the susceptibility of the machinery to teaching.

#### IV. Mediocrity and Forgiveness

The comparative rigidity of the adult mind leaves a residual problem of moral accountability. What about persons who have not received a Christian education, such as the infanticidal and cannibalistic Caribbeans described with evident horror in Book I, or those whose fully-formed emotional dispositions or cravings leave them vulnerable to rages and regrettable actions? Human emotionality and its sequelae can obtain divine forgiveness in Locke's theology. As our frame and constitution, and so the mechanisms that determine the human will, are established by the Creator, it would be morally and rationally unacceptable to be punished for every disobedient action or omission to which we are impelled. In his treatment of such persons, Locke reflects the softer theological mood of his contemporaries, the liberal Puritans and Anglicans, including Richard Baxter, Gilbert Burnet, and Isaac Barrow who see divine knowledge and power as manifest in the understanding and mercy of God rather than in God's piercing vision when it comes to the detection of hidden sins and the force and scope of his wrath.<sup>27</sup>

In *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, Locke makes this point clearly. The person whose rational self-control has forsaken them under intolerable pressure will receive divine mercy.

But if any extreme disturbance (as sometimes it happens) possesses our whole mind, as when the pain of the rack, an impetuous uneasiness, as of love, anger, or any other violent passion, running away with us, allows us not the liberty of thought, and we are not masters enough of our own minds to consider thoroughly and examine fairly; God, who knows our frailty, pities our weakness, and requires of us no more than we are able to do, and sees what was and what was not in our power, will judge as a kind and merciful father (II. Xxi. 53).

One cannot morally require, from a given human being, what their machine, by reason of its constitution and its experiences, cannot produce by way of prudent or correct behaviour.

There is no point in trying to reason with a woman who has lost a beloved child or with the drunkard or the person in a jealous rage. In such cases, while the law or society must punish the crimes that result, God, who sees into the heart, may forgive

God, Locke says, 'did not expect... a perfect obedience, void of slips and falls: he knew our make, and the weakness of our constitution too well, and was sent with a supply for that defect' (R 112). The Redeemer was sent to give mankind a second chance at eternal life after the first was botched, and God gives second chances to some persons who have blotted their copy-books. 'God will require of every man, "according to what a man hath, and not

according to what he hath not.” He will not expect the improvement of ten talents, where he gave but one; nor require any one should believe a promise of which he has never heard’ (R 132). The pagans and savages are not condemned to hell, despite their highly uncharitable behaviour.

Locke points out that his account of personal identity is ‘forensic;’ i.e., is meant to provide a relevant and useful criterion of responsibility in creatures subject to the law. (III. xxvii. 26). However, it emerges that the human law is not entirely capable of recognising persons. Agency depends on what we ought to remember, not simply on what we do remember, and that is a transcendental notion. Only God can ascertain what we ought to remember, given who we are and what the context of some actions of our body’s was, and only God, it seems, can ascertain whether we could have exerted ourselves to avoid doing wrong on some occasion. ‘Humane Judicatures’ must punish the disorderly drunkard because the man, that is to say his body, committed a crime, but God may excuse him insofar as ‘no one shall be made to answer for what he knows nothing of’ (II. xxvii.22).

## V. Conclusions

The mediocrity of human beings is something of a cliché in Western philosophy. The notion that human beings are intermediate between angel and beast, sharing in the intellectual powers of angels but also the bodily functions and passions of beasts, can be traced back to Augustine and Neoplatonism. Locke made something new of the mediocrity figure. First, he instituted a sharp, double-pronged attack on both the certainty of Cartesian metaphysics and the realisability of the Cartesian ambition to explain all phenomena mechanically and to become ‘masters and possessors of nature.’ Second, he used the mediocrity figure to show the way to improving practical philosophy by understanding human psychology in a realistic, rather than in an idealistic or artificially exaggerated fashion. For Locke, human moral mediocrity is not the manifestation of an inherent metaphysical sinfulness permeating the human soul that can be expelled, momentarily or permanently by an act of divine grace. Rather it is an inevitability arising from the God-given powers of the human constitution and their liability to becoming unbalanced. .

How well did Locke succeed in his project of making Morality consistent with Mechanism? By mechanism, Locke did not mean either atheism or, for that matter, deism. Judging by his professed horror at the brutality of warfare and the practices of savages



involving women and children, Locke's moral ideals relate to the protection of the weak, a value he finds exclusively in Christian religious teaching. The implicit distinction between the morally desirable and the merely desired requires a transcendental source in God's commands, although the motive to obey them can only be a strictly prudential desire for eternal happiness over eternal misery. In the absence of God's ability to reward and punish obedience and disobedience, and his commitment to doing so, all human motivation would be properly governed by a combination of appetite and mundane prudence.

Locke thought his argument for an incorporeal Creator of matter and the many and varied powers of life and thought conclusive and irrefutable. He considered and rejected the position of Spinozists who conceded the necessary existence of an eternal cogitative being but considered it to be material, as well as that of the Epicurean atheists who thought that particles of matter can produce cogitation on their own (IV. x. 5-15). He did not, however, have an argument to show that the eternal cogitative being has an ongoing interest in the affairs of human individuals. Nothing in our experience or demonstrable *a priori* indicates that this is the case. And his discussion of Revelation and miracles in Book IV, Chs 16 and 18, needed to establish the unique warrant of Christian morality and its linkage with punishment and reward is basically unconvincing.

The upshot is that there are fractures in Locke's moral philosophy that other philosophers, even those who shared his mechanistic view of the passions avoided. Descartes put God out of the business of enforcing morality, avoiding having to address the question why God creates emotional, fallible beings and sends many of them to hell, and Spinoza explicitly dispensed with salvation and retribution in the usual senses. Instead of faulting Locke for having to introduce supernatural elements to explain normativity and to encourage obedience, his achievement can be recognised. Whilst remaining to some extent (though not enough to satisfy his critics) within a Christian framework, Locke made the passions and the gratification of desire prominent in his image of human life, propounded radical ideas about the power of education, insisted on divine understanding and mercy as constituents of divine justice, and adopted a highly tolerant, individualistic stance with respect to the pleasures and worldly goods.

Intertextual references:

References are cited by book, chapter and section to John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P.H. Nidditch, Oxford, Clarendon, 1975.

R = John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, Volume VII in *The Works of John Locke*. 10 vols., 12th ed., London: Tegg, Sharpe, et al. 1823.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Steven Shapin, 'Descartes the Doctor: Rationalism and its Therapies.' *The British Journal for the History of Science*, 33 (2000)131-154. Locke's approach to medicine is studied by Kenneth Dewhurst, *John Locke, 1632-1704, Physician and Philosopher* (London: Wellcome Historical Medical Library, 1963), more recently by Jonathan Walmsley, 'Sydenham and the Development of Locke's Natural Philosophy,' *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 16 (2008),65-83.

<sup>2</sup> On the conflict between empiricism and philosophy of religion, see Richard Ashcraft, 'Faith and Knowledge in Locke's Philosophy,' in *John Locke: Problems and Perspectives*, ed. John W. Yolton, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969) 194-223.

<sup>3</sup> On superadded powers see Margaret D. Wilson 'Superadded properties: the limits of mechanism in Locke.' *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979) 143-150; M. R. Ayers, 'Mechanism, Superaddition and the Proof of God's Existence in Locke's *Essay*,' *Philosophical Review* 90 (1981) 210-51; and Matthew Stuart, 'Locke on Superaddition and Mechanism,' *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 6 (1998) 351-379. It is clear that Locke is really departing from 'pure' mechanism, but this is not surprising since there are no pure mechanists in early modern philosophy with the possible exception of Hobbes.

<sup>4</sup> We have the *Ideas of Matter and Thinking*, but possibly shall never be able to know, whether Matter thinks, or no; it being impossible for us, by the contemplation of our own *Ideas*, without revelation, to discover, whether Omnipotency has given to Matter fitly disposed, a power to perceive and think, or else joined and fixed to Matter so disposed, a thinking immaterial Substance: It being equally easie, in respect of our Notions, to conceive, that GOD can, if he pleases, superadd to our *Idea* of Matter a Faculty of Thinking, as that he should superadd to it another Substance, with a Faculty of Thinking; since we know not wherein Thinking consists, nor to what sort of Substances the Almighty has been pleased to give that power, which cannot be in any created Being, but meerly by the good Pleasure and Bounty of the Creator.' (IV.iii. 6). This mode of argumentation echoes that of Galileo. In his *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* of 1632. Simplicius observes that, insofar

---

as God might have produce the celestial phenomena by any number of underlying systems, 'it would be excessive boldness for anyone to limit and restrict the Divine power and wisdom to some particular fancy of his own.' (tr. Stillman Drake, New York: Modern Library 2001) 538).

<sup>5</sup> 'For since we must allow he has annexed Effects to Motion, which we can no way conceive Motion able to produce, what Reason have we to conclude, that he could not order them as well to be produced in a Subject we cannot conceive capable of them, as well as in a Subject we cannot conceive the motion of Matter can any way operate upon?' (IV.iii.6) Locke also held that ' All stones, metals, and minerals, are real **vegetables** that is, grow organically from proper seeds, as well as plants,' which requires superadded powers. *Works* III: 319.

<sup>6</sup> Locke, *A Letter to Edward, Bishop of Worcester, The Works of John Locke*, 10 vols., 12th edition (London: Tegg, Sharpe et al, 1823) IV: 461-2.

<sup>7</sup> Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (1695), ed J. W. Yolton and J. S. Yolton, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989) 246.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. IV.iii. 27: 'But that there are degrees of **Spiritual Beings** between us and the great GOD, who is there, that by his own search and ability can come to know? '

<sup>9</sup> J.W. Yolton, *Thinking Matter: Materialism in Eighteenth-century Britain* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>10</sup> Locke's hedonism was definitively established by von Leyden; see his Introduction to Locke's *Essays on the Law of Nature*, *Works* III: 70-72. Von Leyden comments on 'the inherent difficulty in the issue between Locke's hedonism and his belief in an absolute system of moral principles.<sup>13</sup> Since he wished to retain both, he had on the one hand to avoid strong hedonistic expressions in his theory of the nature of the good, and on the other to show reserve in putting his case for natural law and the 'proper basis' of morality.'

<sup>11</sup> Locke, *Essays on the Law of Nature*, *Works* III: 326.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

<sup>13</sup> 'I am... taught by nature that various other bodies exist in the vicinity of my body, and that some of these are to be sought out and others avoided...[T]he fact that some of the perceptions are agreeable to me while others are disagreeable makes it quite certain that my body, or rather my whole self, in so far as I am a combination of body and mind, can be affected by the various beneficial or harmful bodies which surround it.' Descartes, *Meditation VI* in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 2 vols., tr. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch ( Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) II: 81. Cf.

---

*The Passions of the Soul*, op. cit I: 141: ‘As for desire, it is obvious that when it proceeds from true knowledge it cannot be bad, provided it is not excessive and that it is governed by this knowledge....[I]f we had no body, I venture to say we could not go too far in abandoning ourselves to love and joy, or in avoiding hatred and sadness. But the bodily movements accompanying these passions may all be injurious to health when they are very violent; on the other hand, they may be beneficial to it when they are only moderate.’

<sup>14</sup> ‘[I]n the first place I put for a generall inclination of all mankind a perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power, that ceaseth only in death.’ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 70.

<sup>15</sup> See Susan James, ‘Passion and Politics,’ *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 52 (2003) 221-234.

<sup>16</sup> For the contrary view, see Jack D. Davidson, ‘Locke's Finely Spun Liberty,’ *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 33 (2003) 203-227, esp. 204-6.

<sup>17</sup> Von Leyden quotes an unpublished note on volition that reads as follows: ‘Voluntas: That which has very much confounded men about the will and its determination has been the confounding of the notion of moral rectitude and giving it the name of moral good. The pleasure that a man takes in any action or expects as a consequence of it is indeed a good in the self able and proper to move the will. But the moral rectitude of it considered barely in itself is not good or evil nor any way moves the will, but as pleasure and pain either accompanies the action itself or is looked on to be a consequence of it. Which is evident from the punishments and rewards which God has annexed to moral rectitude or pravity as proper motives to the will, which would be needless if moral rectitude were in itself good and moral pravity evil. J.L.’ *Works* III: 72.

<sup>18</sup> Locke, *The Conduct of the Understanding*, ed J. Yolton (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1996) § 4.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* § 6.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* § 27.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* § 37.

<sup>22</sup> Locke, Letter to Carey Mordaunt, September/October 1697 no. 2320 in *Locke: Selected Correspondence* ed. Mark Goldie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 253.

<sup>23</sup> Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, ed. Yolton and Yolton, 178.

<sup>24</sup> Molyneux to Locke, August 12, 1693, in *Some Familiar Letters Between Mr. Locke, and Several of His Friends*, *Works* IX: 318.

<sup>25</sup> Locke, *Some Thoughts*, 164.

---

<sup>26</sup> Locke to Molyneux, August 23, 169, *Familiar Letters*, 324.

<sup>27</sup> R.S. Crane argued in an influential essay that the introduction of a new sentimentalism in moral theory—the dominant framework of 18<sup>th</sup> century philosophy—with its constant references to sympathy, benevolence, and even pity, was stimulated by the theology of the ‘Latitude-Men.’ See ‘Suggestions Towards a Genealogy of the ‘Man of Feeling,’ *English Literary History* 1 (1934) 205-230. Anticipating the doctrines of Hutcheson, Hume and Smith, Barrow refers in one of his sermons to ‘that general sympathy which naturally intercedes between all men since we can neither see, nor hear, nor imagine another’s grief without being afflicted ourselves.’ Isaac Barrow, Sermon XXIX: ‘Of a Peaceable Temper and Carriage,’ *Works of Dr. Isaac Barrow*, 2 vols., ed T.S Hughes (London: A.J. Valpy, 1831) II: 287.