**Reply to Rickless**

Antonia LoLordo

September 27, 2013

**I**

Rickless and I disagree about whether animals have active power and hence will and freedom of action. It’s important to my case that they do, for this shows that mere freedom of action isn’t sufficient for moral agency.

Rickless agrees that animals have active power, but denies that they have will or freedom, “for there is strong textual evidence that this is something Locke denies” (section 4). Here’s his evidence:

God creates an extended solid substance, without the superadding any thing else to it, and so we may consider it at rest: to some parts of it he superadds motion, but it has still the essence of matter: other parts of it he frames into plants, with all the excellencies of vegetation, life, and beauty, which are to be found in a rose or a peach-tree, &c. above the essence of matter in general, but it is still but matter: to other parts he adds sense and spontaneous motion, and those other properties that are to be found in an elephant. Hitherto it is not doubted but the power of God may go, and that the properties of a rose, a peach, or an elephant, superadded to matter, change not the properties of matter; but matter is in these things matter still. But if one venture to go one step further, and say, God may give to matter thought, reason, and volition, as well as sense and spontaneous motion, there are men ready presently to limit the power of the omnipotent Creator, and tell us he cannot do it; because it destroys the essence, “changes the essential properties of matter.” (W4: 460)

This passage doesn’t show what Rickless thinks it does. In this passage, Locke is talking to an opponent who grants that animals have sense and spontaneous motion, but denies that they have thought, reason, and volition. Locke points out that this position is badly motivated. Animals only have sense and spontaneous motion because God gave them those superadded powers. And if God can superadd the powers of sense and spontaneous motion, then he can also superadd the powers of thought, reason, and volition. The view that animals have sense and spontaneous motion, but no will or volition, is not Locke’s view but his opponent’s.

Indeed, we *know* that Locke does not hold that animals have sense and spontaneous motion but lack thought, reason, and volition. If they have sense, they have thought. If they have ideas – which they do, since they have sense – they have reason. (And, I say, if they have spontaneous motion, they have volition.) So Rickless’s textual evidence doesn’t show what he says it does.

I say that “will and liberty … are the active powers we grasp most clearly, perhaps the only active powers we grasp at all” (27). Rickless replies that active power is not unique to spirits and gives three counter-examples, three active powers that aren’t the exercise of will:

1. The spontaneous motion or self-motion of animals.
2. Mediately perceived secondary qualities like fire’s power to melt wax.
3. Gravitational attraction and other apparent distance forces.

Since I think that animals will, I don’t think (i) is a counter-example at all. I’m not worried by (ii) either. I think it’s pretty clear that Locke would assume that fire’s power to melt wax is open to mechanical explanation. After all, he can think this without being fully committed to the mechanist programme. Hence the power to melt wax is the transmission of motion too.

I find the gravity case a bit more worrying. Perhaps Locke suspected that gravitational attraction involves an active power superadded to matter. Certainly, as I say in the book, he thinks it’s an empirical claim that will is the only active power. However, this does not affect my claim that the only active power we have a clear grasp on is will. And it certainly does not affect my claim that active power extends far more widely than moral agency.

**II**

I say that someone performs action A freely iff she does A because she wills to do A, and she would not have done A had she not willed to do A. Thus, free actions are voluntary actions that also meet certain counterfactual conditions. An agent acts freely in performing an action just in case she does that action because she wills to do it, and, if she had not willed to do it she would not have done it.

Rickless objects that Locke isn’t talking about acting freely at all: he’s giving “general conditions for an agent’s being free” (section 3), the most general of which is the condition that an agent is free just in case she can act or not act according as she wills. It seems to me that what Sam calls a general condition is really a schema. Locke’s discussion of freedom is full of cases where the issue is whether the agent is free in respect of a particular action. In fact, *all* the examples in 2.21 concern particular things performing or not performing particular actions.

Rickless adds that Locke is also giving “more particular conditions for an agent’s being free *in respect of* a particular action or omission”. Here I found myself at a bit of a loss. I don’t see the difference between a condition for an agent being free in respect of performing a certain action she performs, and a condition for an agent performing an action freely. The second strikes me as just a shorter way of saying the first.

I found myself at a bit of a loss with respect to how we each filled in our conditions too. I say that S does A freely iff she does A because she willed to A *and* it’s the case that if she had not willed to A she would not have done A. Rickless says that S is free in respect of A iff she has the power to do A if she wills to do A, *and* she has the power to forbear doing A if she wills to forbear doing A. It seems to me that these two conditions end up giving the same verdict.

Let’s assume that S does A freely, that is, that she is free in respect of doing A. On Rickless’s condition, this implies that she must have willed to do A. And, since she has the power to do A if she wills to do A, it implies that she did A *because* she willed to do A. Moreover, it implies that if she had willed to forbear doing A, she would have forborne doing A. So anything that meets Rickless’s conditions will meet mine.

It also works the other way around. I say that S does A freely iff she does A because she willed to do A, and if she had not willed to do A, she would not have done A. Now, if she does A because she willed to do A, she must have the power to do A if she wills to do A. And – since if she had not willed to do A, she would not have done A – she must have the power to forbear doing A if she wills to forbear doing A. So anything that meets my conditions will also meet Rickless’s.

Here I’ve bracketed out two issues. One is about whether forbearing to do A is willing to not do A, or not willing to do A. I’m not sure what to say about this; it seems to me that it depends on how A is characterized. The other is the issue of deviant causal chains. Rickless uses the example of Sally the compulsive speaker: “if Sally had not willed to speak, God would have glued her lips shut”. He says that for my Locke, Sally has the power to hold her peace. But, he thinks, this is intuitively wrong. Moreover, he thinks that Locke would deny that Sally has the power to hold her peace in this case, because he would deny that Sally “can, by a … thought of [her] Mind … produce … silence”. Now, I think Rickless is right that Locke would deny that Sally has the power to hold her peace. But this is precisely what my Locke *would* deny. After all, Sally does not hold her peace because she wills to, but because God glued her lips shut.

Rickless might reply that even if our conditions give the same verdict, his are still preferable because they fit the text better. But consider these two passages, which he himself quotes:

Where-ever any performance or forbearance are not equally in a Man’s power; where-ever doing or not doing, will not equally follow upon the preference of his mind directing it, there he is not *Free* (2.21.8).

[A] man falling into the Water … has not herein liberty … For though he has Volition, though he prefers his not falling to falling, yet the forbearance of that Motion not being in his Power, the Stop or Cessation of that Motion follows not upon his Volition; and therefore therein he is not *free* (2.21.9).

In 2.21.8, the man is not free because doing or not doing will not equally follow his willing or not willing, as well as because performing or forbearing are not equally in his power. In 2.21.9, the man is not free because the cessation of motion follows not upon his volition, and the cessation of motion follows not upon his volition because the forbearance of motion is not in his power. In these passages Locke is going back and forth between Sam’s conditions and mine. This too suggests that the difference in formulation does not matter.

**III**

Rickless writes, “Faced with the problem that a spirit’s liberty, which is distinct from its will, also appears to be an active power,” I counter by saying that liberty is the same active power as will (section 3). He thinks this is just confused: Lockean freedom of action is

[A] combination of two conditional active powers (the power to act in accordance with one’s volition to act + the power to forbear acting in accordance with one’s volition to so forbear), each of which is completely distinct from (and does not in any way result from) the will (8). It is therefore misleading to suggest that, at bottom, the only real active power of a spirit is its will. Under ordinary circumstances, a spirit also has the power to initiate thought (without borrowing anything from without), and this appears to be an active power if anything is (8).

Two things about this puzzled me. First, forbearing is an action, according to Rickless. So why is this two conditional active powers instead of one? Second, why isn’t the power to initiate thought (without borrowing anything from without) will? Consider how Locke introduces will in 2.21:

We find in our selves a *Power* to begin or forbear, continue or end several actions of our minds, and motions of our Bodies, barely by a thought or preference of the mind ordering, or as it were commanding the doing or not doing such or such a particular action. This *Power* … is that which we call the *Will* (2.21.5).

The power to initiate thought sure seems like the power to begin an action of the mind.

In any case, much of my disagreement with Sam here comes from our larger disagreement about what active power is. Sam argues that active power is the capacity to make changes by one’s own power. I think of active power in terms of efficacy, the thing Hume denied we have any idea of. Will and liberty are exercises of the same active power because both involve the mind’s using its metaphysical oomph to bring about a thought or motion.

**IV**

Rickless disagrees with two points I borrowed from Gideon Yaffe: that 2.27 uses two different notions of liberty, and that the second sort of liberty is free agency, which depends on the power to suspend. Rickless argued against Yaffe in this journal in 2001.[[1]](#footnote-1) His strategy involved going through all the passages that Yaffe argues require something beyond mere freedom of action, and showing how they could be read so that suspending is just like any other action.

Here’s how Rickless deals with a passage that both Yaffe and I find compelling:

[T]hough this general *Desire* of Happiness operates constantly and invariably, yet 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, which we then desire, makes a part of our real Happiness, or be consistent or inconsistent with it. The result of our judgment upon that Examination is what ultimately determines the Man, who could not be *free* if his *will* were determin'd by any thing, but his own *desire* guided by his own *Judgment* (2.21.71).

Rickless says,

[I]f we wish to read [this passage] in a way that brings it into harmony with the rest of the section in which it appears, we should understand Locke to be making a point … that, if an agent’s will were determined by anything other than her own desire guided by her own judgment, then she would be *as good as* unfree (251).

He goes on to argue that when Locke describes the power to suspend as “the source of all liberty”, the “great inlet, and exercise of all the *liberty* Men have”, and “the hinge on which turns the *liberty* of intellectual Beings in their constant endeavours after, and a steady prosecution of true felicity”, he means “that the *point* or *function* of the power of suspension is the attainment of happiness”. In the next paragraph, he says that “the end, use, and foundation of our liberty … is the avoidance of misery and the acquisition of pleasure”.

In other words, Rickless holds not only that we have the power to suspend because it helps us attain happiness, but that we have *liberty* because it helps us attain happiness. I don’t think this can possibly be right. If God simply wanted us to attain happiness, he could have simply created us happy. He didn’t need to create us free and then hope we’d use our freedom to attain happiness. Hence, freedom must be intrinsically valuable.

A similar point can be made about the power to suspend. If God just wanted us to desire the right thing, he could have simply created us so that we always had a desire for the right thing which was strong enough to outweigh all other desires. He didn’t need to give us the power to suspend. So the power to suspend must be intrinsically valuable.

Notice that this isn’t something Yaffe could say. Yaffe thinks that the power to suspend is valuable because it allows us to be determined by the good. But God could have created beings who are determined by the good without giving them the power to suspend.

I think Rickless does show that the passages Yaffe uses as textual evidence can be made sense of on his deflationary view as well. In some cases Yaffe’s reading still seems a lot more natural to me, but in some Rickless’s does. I don’t want to say that textual evidence doesn’t matter here. But I do think the text here is messy: it’s open to several different readings, and which reading you find more natural is awfully easily influenced by the big picture you have in mind when you approach the text. So we might be better off thinking in big-picture terms. And in big-picture terms, my reading is clearly superior. It makes more sense of why Locke cares about suspension, why 2.21 goes on for so long, and why we have the power to suspend than either Rickless’s or Yaffe’s.

**V**

Rickless says that suspension is caused by the volition to suspend, which is determined by a desire. I say that Locke never tells us what causes supension. In the book I said that the passage from 2.21.71 I just quoted makes clear that suspension can’tbe caused by the volition to suspend. And although Rickless accuses me of overreading, I still think 2.21.71 is evidence that suspension is not caused by the volition to suspend. For what desire could determine that volition? Not the “general *Desire* of Happiness”, since that “operates constantly and invariably”.[[2]](#footnote-2) And there don’t seem to be any other candidates.

A second, related reason for denying that suspension is caused by a volition to suspend is this. Suspension can’t do the work Locke needs it to do if your desire to suspend has to be strong enough to outweigh your desire to pursue an immediate good. We are supposed to suspend precisely so that we aren’t just blown around by whatever desire is most pressing.

A third reason is that Locke simply never says that a desire – or anything else – causes suspension. This suggests that he doesn’t think it matterswhat causes suspension.

Rickless himself gives a fourth reason not to make suspension voluntary: that making suspension voluntary raises an infinite regress. He thinks this is a problem for Locke, not his interpretation of Locke. I disagree. It’s a problem for Locke as Rickless reads him, but not a problem for Locke as I read him. So it’s a problem for Rickless’s reading.

Rickless also points out that Locke clearly thinks you can be blamed for failing to suspend and hence must think that we can will to suspend:

It follows that Locke is committed to the view that whether humans suspend or not is a matter of choice: for if an agent’s failure to suspend is something that happens regardless of her choices, then it seems wrong to criticize her for her failure to suspend.

But on Rickless’s view it seems wrong to criticize agents for their failure to suspend too! If “suspension, which is a forbearance to will, is really no different from any other mental act or forbearance”, then it’s determined by a desire. If I don’t suspend, it’s because my desire to do what’s in my long-term best interest wasn’t strong enough to outweigh my desire for immediate gratification. And how am I any more blameworthy for the weakness of the first desire than for the strength of the second? Thus, Rickless is no better off here than I am.

**VI**

I’ll end with the moral of the story. I say that Locke is agnostic about the metaphysics of moral agency, deliberately articulating an account that is compatible with both libertarianism and necessitarianism. Thus I agree with Rickless that Locke’s account of freedom, like Hobbes’, is compatible with necessitarianism. (I won’t quarrel with him over the meaning of the term ‘compatibilist’.) But unlike Hobbes, Locke is not committed to necessitarianism. This is indeed a kind of metaphysical neutrality.

1. “Review Essay: Gideon Yaffe’s *Liberty Worth the Name: Locke on Free Agency”.*  *Locke Studies* 1 (2001): 235-255. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. You might think the general desire for happiness always operates, but only determines the will when it outweighs the particular desire. But that would imply that we suspend when the particular desire in question is relatively weak, and this seems wrong. When the desire in question is weak we don’t *need* to suspend – the desire will be overridden anyway. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)