

# Locke, Education, and “Disciplinary Liberalism”

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**Abstract:** This paper contends that Locke’s educational writings are more robust in their commitment to autonomy than recent assessments of Locke as a theorist of “disciplinary liberalism” suggest. While Locke’s account of parental power is conflicted, it is mostly compatible with a liberal, child-responsive approach to education. Insofar as Locke develops a pedagogy sensitive to the pupil’s temperament and his rights as a child, he articulates a nuanced understanding of autonomy, shown to be a product of the individual’s participation in a community of rational beings. Complicating both received understandings of Lockean liberalism as atomistic and newer claims about the dark forces of socialization it unleashes, this paper gleans from Lockean education the potential of a socially embedded subject, who looks both within and without himself to cultivate a posture of considerable critical independence.

Recent Locke scholarship indicates that an intriguing reassessment of liberalism is underway, owing to a concerted recovery of Locke’s writings on education. Liberalism is no longer seen to revolve exclusively around the atomistic, rights-bearing subject of social-contract theory but is also perceived to develop a nuanced account of a socially embedded subject, the product of early training in the family. However, the turn from what one scholar calls the “Teflon” subject of earlier understandings of liberalism to the “sticky” or socially embedded subject has largely served to reinforce earlier critiques of liberal autonomy as a fundamentally flawed ideal.<sup>1</sup> Since the Lockean subject, several scholars contend, develops as a consequence of unreflective habits instilled by parents and educators in early childhood, its freedom is highly circumscribed and mostly takes the form of consent to established parental-communal models of virtue.<sup>2</sup> While Locke separates political

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<sup>1</sup>John Baltes, “Locke’s Inverted Quarantine: Discipline, Panopticism, and the Making of the Liberal Subject,” *Review of Politics* 75 (2013): 189 and 191.

<sup>2</sup>In addition to Baltes, see Joseph Carrig, “Liberal Impediments to Liberal Education: The Assent to Locke,” *Review of Politics* 63, no. 1 (2001): 41–76; David C. Durst, “The Limits of Toleration in John Locke’s Liberal Thought,” *Res Publica* 7 (2001): 39–55; Robert Sumser, “John Locke and the Unbearable Lightness of Modern Education,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 26, no. 2 (October 1994): 1–15; and Uday Singh

and paternal power in his political writings, paternal power, on these readings, remains essential to his vision of the liberal polity: it oversees the creation of a subject allowed considerable latitude in the public sphere because its education, in the private sphere, ensures a predictable pattern of assent.

This essay proposes a different interpretation of Locke's educational writings—within which I include not only *Some Thoughts concerning Education* (1693), the focus of recent commentary, but also the posthumously published *Of the Conduct of the Understanding* (1706)—and their implications for liberal autonomy.<sup>3</sup> It does so by bringing these works into dialogue with the account of freedom Locke develops in the *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1689).<sup>4</sup> Because freedom, as described in the *Essay*, is contingent upon a practical identity shaped by a lifetime of habits, Locke does not perceive habituation to be opposed to autonomy. The question we must pose to Locke's educational writings is not why habits matter but which habits matter, and whether these are as autonomy-friendly as Locke takes them to be. Our response, I suggest, will depend on which of two images of education, both of which circulate in the *Thoughts*, we decide to weigh more heavily: education as cultivating the instruments of a future freedom, or education as teaching the child to imitate adult freedom. I argue that the first of these understandings has more authority in Locke's writings, taken as a whole, and that it sketches a compelling understanding of autonomy, one that derives from the individual's participation in a community of rational beings.

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Mehta, *The Anxiety of Freedom: Imagination and Individuality in Locke's Political Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

<sup>3</sup>John Locke, *Some Thoughts concerning Education and Of the Conduct of the Understanding*, ed. Ruth W. Grant and Nathan Tarcov (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1996). I will cite these separately as *Thoughts* and *Conduct*, and give page number references in parentheses. All emphases are in the original unless otherwise noted. Written in 1697, *Of the Conduct of the Understanding* was intended as an addition to (and the longest chapter of) a revised edition of the *Essay concerning Human Understanding*. On the relationship of the educational writings to the *Essay*, see especially James L. Axtell's introduction to *The Educational Writings of John Locke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968); and Peter A. Schouls, *Reasoned Freedom: John Locke and Enlightenment* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 183–84. Ruth W. Grant and Benjamin R. Hertzberg also contend that it important to consider the *Thoughts* in relation to the *Conduct*, and both works in relation to the *Essay*. See "Locke on Education," in *A Companion to Locke*, ed. Matthew Stuart (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2016), 448–65.

<sup>4</sup>John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979). Henceforth cited as *Essay*; page number references are given in parentheses.

## Disciplinary Liberalism

Some thirty years ago, at the height of the debates between liberals and communitarians, communitarians often cited John Locke's writings as a seminal instantiation of the atomistic individualism underwriting liberalism.<sup>5</sup> Social-contract theorists like Locke, Charles Taylor argued, give rights primacy at the cost of a properly social understanding of selfhood: they place at the heart of liberalism a disengaged subject at odds with our lived experiences.<sup>6</sup> This picture has given way in recent times to a radically different understanding of Lockean liberalism, owing to an unprecedented interest in the philosopher's writings on education, especially his 1693 treatise on educating a gentleman's son, *Some Thoughts concerning Education*. Ruth W. Grant and Nathan Tarcov suggest that far from being unconcerned with the social sources of the self, Locke offers us a psychologically rich account of the development of character.<sup>7</sup> Nor is this account unrelated to the freedom formulated by the second of the *Two Treatises of Government* (1689). Indeed, for a growing number of scholars, especially scholars influenced, directly or indirectly, by Michel Foucault's account of the rise of modern disciplinary society in *Discipline and Punish*, the liberty of the *Second Treatise* only makes sense in

<sup>5</sup>The classic works in the communitarian critique include Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); and Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Bristol, 1981). For the argument about atomistic individualism, see, especially, Charles Taylor, "Atomism," in *Powers, Possessions, and Freedom*, ed. Alkis Kontos (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), 39–61.

<sup>6</sup>Taylor, "Atomism"; and *Sources of the Self*.

<sup>7</sup>Ruth W. Grant, "John Locke on Custom's Power and Reason's Authority," *Review of Politics* 74 (2012): 607–29; and Nathan Tarcov, *Locke's Education for Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). See also Grant and Tarcov's editors' introduction to the Hackett edition of *Some Thoughts concerning Education and Of the Conduct of the Understanding*. All students of Locke are indebted to Tarcov's pioneering book-length study on Lockean education, *Locke's Education for Liberty*. However, Tarcov's focus is less the "liberty" invoked by his title than the specific gentlemanly liberal virtues Lockean education inculcates. Concerned strictly with the relationship between *Some Thoughts concerning Education* and the *Two Treatises of Government*, Tarcov does not consider how Locke's treatment of education coheres with the account of freedom he develops in the *Essay*; nor does he engage Locke's account of adult education in the *Conduct*, the most natural bridge between the *Essay* and the *Thoughts*. A more recent study that builds on *Locke's Education for Liberty* to further extend the dialogue between the *Thoughts* and the *Two Treatises*, and that is specifically interested in the implications of Lockean education for the art of governing others in society, is Peter Josephson, *The Great Art of Government: Locke's Use of Consent* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), chap. 7.

light of the pedagogy of the *Thoughts*.<sup>8</sup> Uday Mehta, Joseph Carrig, and John Baltes argue that the noncoercive politics of the first presupposes “the disciplinary subject” of the second, a subject whose education preprograms his demands and consent. Locke’s educational prescriptions, Baltes suggests, mobilize the insight that limited government requires liberal subjects who are “made rather than found, constructed from the ground up by discipline.”<sup>9</sup> Concomitantly, Locke the educationist “entangles his subjects in an architecture of power of which they become the bearers, a system of surveillance and power forming and norming those in its sway.”<sup>10</sup> Mehta contends that “while forging individuality, Locke simultaneously truncates its reach, its singularity, its independence,” and Carrig concludes that “The implication to be drawn from Locke’s *Education* is... that liberalism is no *less* authoritarian than any other system.”<sup>11</sup>

Bearing a strong family resemblance, these recent criticisms comprise what I will refer to as the disciplinary reading of Locke, or the reading of Locke by the disciplinarians—that is, those who ascribe to Locke a “disciplinary liberalism,” or who interpret the Lockean subject as shaped by distinctively modern techniques of power, relying less on the rod than on the subtle, often invisible, manipulation of infantile will and desire.<sup>12</sup> The disciplinary reading has replaced communitarianism as the most important criticism of liberalism at the present, and it can claim to be far more damaging because it does not presuppose a straw-man version of the liberal subject: it concedes to liberalism a more nuanced account of selfhood and subjectivity than did communitarianism. As Baltes explains, “There are no ‘Teflon’ subjects here [in Lockean liberalism], detached from the background of discipline, autonomously choosing as they slide effortlessly past their entanglements.”<sup>13</sup> Instead, “Locke’s educative goal is the construction of a ‘sticky subject’ who will govern desire with a virtuous character inculcated by his parents and tutors.”<sup>14</sup> This subject is sticky because his education has instilled indelible habits in him from the onset of subjectivity. Inculcated before rational

<sup>8</sup>Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995). Direct engagement with Foucault’s work is beyond the scope of this essay, which focuses instead on recent Foucault-inspired readings of Locke. I am singling out what I view as the three most powerful such readings, given by Baltes, Carrig, and Mehta. An earlier interpretation, influencing recent work, is James Tully, *An Approach to Political Philosophy: Locke in Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>9</sup>Baltes, “Locke’s Inverted Quarantine,” 191.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>11</sup>Mehta, *Anxiety of Freedom*, 124; Carrig, “Liberal Impediments,” 76.

<sup>12</sup>I take the term “disciplinary liberalism” from Baltes, “Locke’s Inverted Quarantine,” 173.

<sup>13</sup>Baltes, “Locke’s Inverted Quarantine,” 191.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 189.

choice is available, these habits immerse the child in a network of parental and communal values, of which he becomes the unwitting bearer. His immersion is reinforced, the disciplinarians suggest, by Locke's emphasis on early obedience to parental and especially paternal will, and by the importance he attaches to reputational concerns as an instrument of education. On these readings, Locke's advice that educators replace candy and beatings with public esteem and shame as the new carrots and sticks of education seeks to ensure that the child wholeheartedly adopts his community's virtues.<sup>15</sup> The Lockean child's will, Carrig asserts, is not his own but is "directed by 'other People's Reason,' a 'public' reason 'communicated' to him by the 'paternal' power."<sup>16</sup> Baltes concedes a certain minimal liberty to the Lockean subject but underscores that this subject is "'free' only in the sense that as an agent, he chooses to follow the model of virtue propounded by the parent."<sup>17</sup> We must, Baltes concludes, relinquish autonomy as "the gold standard of liberalism."

The disciplinarians are not wrong to find authoritarian elements in *Some Thoughts concerning Education* but they are wrong to see these as necessary entailments of Locke's liberalism. Against the contention that this liberalism is built on an illiberal foundation, I will argue below that the *Thoughts* is a divided text, torn between two understandings of education, with different implications for freedom as the goal of education.<sup>18</sup> The divisions I am

<sup>15</sup>As Mehta puts it, "Locke's ostensibly liberal and compassionate program is counterbalanced by the demand that the child internalize the standards—the anguishing standards—of shame, guilt, and responsibility" (Mehta, *Anxiety of Freedom*, 142).

<sup>16</sup>Carrig, "Liberal Impediments," 71.

<sup>17</sup>Baltes, "Locke's Inverted Quarantine," 191.

<sup>18</sup>Margaret Ezell and Hugh Cunningham make related arguments about Locke and the eighteenth century more generally, highlighting the ambivalences that mark supposedly enlightened attitudes to education. Focusing on the imagery associated with childhood and education, Ezell notes that eighteenth-century attitudes produce no neat break from the seventeenth century, with its Augustinian view of children as "limbs of Satan." Instead, they "act like the bits of colored glass in a kaleidoscope: all the pieces making up the images of childhood are present from the seventeenth century, but the patterns change during the eighteenth, depending on which way one turns the focus." In his wide-ranging study of Western views of childhood, which updates Philippe Ariès's seminal *Centuries of Childhood* (1962), Cunningham observes that when we turn to the eighteenth century, "both in attitudes to childhood and in behaviour towards children we are confronted at every turn by ambivalences and contradictions." This is true also of Locke's educational writings: "Anyone who followed Locke to the letter would have been engaged in a form of child-rearing which was quite as much conservative as innovative." See Margaret J. M. Ezell, "John Locke's Images of Childhood: Early Eighteenth Century Response to *Some Thoughts concerning Education*," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 17, no. 2 (1983–84): 139–40; and Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500* (London: Routledge, 2005), 59.

interested in derive from the extent to which Locke sees education as a child-responsive project, shaped by the temperament and reason of the pupil, as well as by an understanding of childhood as a distinct phase of human life. A child-responsive approach is widely taken to constitute Locke's principal educational innovation: both Locke's defenders and critics interpret him as marking a radical shift from the earlier Augustinian paradigm of childhood, which places children on a par with unreformed adults, and pictures education as a forcible weeding out of sin. Nonetheless, vestiges of that earlier illiberal paradigm, especially as transmuted by Puritanism and Protestantism, continue to inhabit *Some Thoughts concerning Education*.<sup>19</sup> They are implicit in Locke's periodic anxiety about children's "unruly and disordered appetites" (30), which must be "silenced" as early as possible, and in his argument, early in the *Thoughts*, that the child's will must be brought to conform near-automatically to parental will.<sup>20</sup> The nexus between silencing desire and obeying parents obtains from Locke's belief, espoused in the *Thoughts* and the *Essay*, that children lack the reason to reflect upon desire or control it, and that it is only in obedience to their educators that they can practice the adult virtue of self-command. On what I will call the adult-imitative paradigm of education, an inheritance from Augustinian/Protestant writings, Locke blurs the line between childhood and adulthood by identifying adult self-command as an appropriate goal of early childhood education and the child's will as the primary focus of education. This must be bent into adult shape in the hope that self-command will become a lifelong habit.

By contrast, on the child-responsive paradigm, present more consistently in the *Thoughts*, education does not attempt to make children behave like little adults. Rather than figuring self-command as a goal or habit appropriate to early childhood education, the child-responsive paradigm identifies it strictly

<sup>19</sup>Cunningham's review of the Protestant literature on childhood sounds eerily like a summary of aspects of Locke's *Thoughts*. The model Protestant child, Cunningham observes, was the product of "training by parents from an early age in good habits. The analogies and metaphors which pervade [Protestant] books are not ones of natural growth, but of horticulture, of preparing good soil, of rooting out weeds, of training young shoots in the direction you want them to go; or they are of the instilling of obedience into puppies or colts. Left to themselves, children will turn out bad. Their wills must be broken... . So far as possible this training should be done rationally and calmly, but there might be occasion for inflicting corporal punishment; if so, it must not be too severe, and it must not be administered in anger" (Cunningham, *Children and Childhood*, 47). W. M. Spellman emphasizes Locke's indebtedness to the Puritan belief in natural depravity in *John Locke and the Problem of Depravity* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988).

<sup>20</sup>Children, Locke argues, must be taught to "deny their appetites... by the custom of having their inclinations in subjection" (79). They must be accustomed "early to silence their desires" (79), and to learn "the art of stifling their desires as soon as they rise up in them" (78).

as a future possibility. Concomitantly, the educator’s focus shifts from bending the child’s will (to accord with parental reason) to influencing the instruments of the child’s future freedom—that is, the desire and reason that, according to Locke’s *Essay*, determine the will. While listening to parental reason remains important on this alternative, parental authority is itself shaped by the child’s emergent capabilities. Freedom, on the child-responsive paradigm, cannot itself be taught; it can only be prepared for by encouraging certain habits of desiring and reasoning.

The plan of this essay is as follows. In the next section, I will consider the *Essay*’s account of freedom and explain why Locke, unlike the disciplinarians, does not oppose autonomy and habituation. I will then make the case for the *Thoughts*’ division into adult-imitative and child-responsive claims about education, and draw out the contours of the latter in particular. Finally, I will unpack certain critical assumptions underwriting the disciplinary reading of Locke, and suggest that this reading mobilizes, as a norm, a curiously asocial model of subjectivity. Locke’s socially embedded subject of education, notwithstanding its flaws, appears preferable to the latter.

### Freedom: A Practical Power

Locke’s fullest discussion of freedom appears in Book II of the *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, in the chapter entitled “Of Power,” the *Essay*’s longest chapter.<sup>21</sup> That Locke would devote so much attention to freedom—and more specifically, moral freedom—is unsurprising, both because ethical questions consistently frame the epistemological project of the *Essay*, and because the work’s primary finding—that knowledge is a derivative of experience rather than a product of innate ideas or principles—raises potentially troubling questions about freedom.<sup>22</sup> Hence, while Locke’s groundbreaking critique of innatism seeks to liberate human reason from the thrall of seemingly innate first principles—unquestioning subscription to which, he contends, is encouraged by the power elite to produce a docile citizenry (*Essay*, 712)—it might be thought to reintroduce the problem of undue influence by figuring the mind as a white paper.<sup>23</sup> Freedom is a core concern of

<sup>21</sup>Locke revised and expanded “Of Power” for the second edition of the *Essay*, published in 1694, one year after *Some Thoughts concerning Education*. As Schouls observes, “while Locke was thinking about freedom and desire, self-determination and habit, he was at the same time preparing *Some Thoughts concerning Education* for the press” (Schouls, *Reasoned Freedom*, 183).

<sup>22</sup>Early in the *Essay*, Locke underscores, “Our Business here is not to know all things, but those which concern our Conduct” (46).

<sup>23</sup>The most famous occurrence of this image is at the beginning of Book II: “Let us then suppose the Mind to be, as we say, white Paper, void of all Characters, without any *Ideas*; How comes it to be furnished?” (104).

Locke's epistemological project because its hallmark anti-innatism is a two-edged sword, at once clearing the underbrush of ossified first principles and potentially leaving the mind vulnerable to indoctrination.

Philip Vogt has argued persuasively, however, that the persistent association of Lockean empiricism and metaphors such as the white paper and, still more famously, the *tabula rasa*, is problematic, not only because of the relative scarcity of these images in Locke's writings but also owing to the qualifications that accompany this limited usage.<sup>24</sup> As Vogt suggests, Locke's is no simpleminded empiricism, with the mind functioning as a passive, unfiltered receptacle for experience, because experience, as Locke describes it, is fundamentally bipartite in nature, comprising not only sensation (that which opens the mind to the world) but also reflection, the mind's relationship to itself.<sup>25</sup> This second "Fountain," as Locke calls it, "from which Experience furnisheth the Understanding with *Ideas*," connotes a certain independence from the world: "This Source of *Ideas*, every Man has wholly in himself" (*Essay*, 105).

"Of Power" builds on Book II's opening claims about the reflective structure of the mind, as well as on the hedonistic psychology delineated in the same book. According to Locke, while there are no innate practical principles,

<sup>24</sup>Philip Vogt, *John Locke and the Rhetoric of Modernity* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), esp. chap. 2; and "Seascape with Fog: Metaphor in Locke's *Essay*," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 54, no. 2 (1998): 1–18. Regarding the image of the white paper, Vogt notes that "Locke has direct recourse to it exactly twice in the *Essay* and makes indirect reference to it exactly four times more" ("Seascape," 13). Vogt underscores that in the *Essay* Locke nowhere mobilizes the *tabula rasa* metaphor. It appears instead in the "Abstract of the *Essay*" that Locke sent to Père le Clerc in France and that Peter King, Locke's nephew, subsequently published in England. In the "Abstract" Locke observes, "In the thoughts I have had concerning the Understanding, I have endeavoured to prove that the mind is at first *rasa tabula*. But that being only to remove the prejudice that lies in some men's minds, I think it best in this short view I design here of my principles, to pass by all that preliminary debate which makes the first book, since I pretend to show in what follows the original from whence, and the ways whereby, we receive all the ideas our understandings are employed about in thinking" (quoted in Vogt, *John Locke and the Rhetoric of Modernity*, 62). Vogt's interpretation of this reference to the blank slate metaphor is compelling. As he suggests, "The metaphor of the *tabula rasa* is not offered as a model of the human mind. Instead, it functions polemically, to undermine alternative theories, and heuristically, to illustrate how our preconceptions must be purged of erroneous doctrines like innatism... [Locke] is not saying that the mind ever exists in an empty state. He is simply asking us to take up the problem of the origin of knowledge without the encumbrance of the discredited theory of 'native' or innate ideas" (Vogt, *John Locke and the Rhetoric of Modernity*, 62).

<sup>25</sup>Vogt argues that scholars who take Locke to be espousing an essentially passive empiricist epistemology forget that "Locke always couples the 'sensation' by which simple ideas are acquired with 'reflection,' or the capacity for original and independent thought" (Vogt, "Seascape," 12).



in the sense of moral principles imprinted on the mind at birth, one can speak of innate practical principles, in the sense of fundamental motives of human action. These are the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. Human beings, Locke contends, are creatures of appetite, constantly solicited by a host of "natural or adopted desires" (*Essay*, 262), ranging from the need for food and sleep to "the fantastical *uneasiness*, (as itch after *Honour, Power, or Riches*, etc.) which acquir'd habits by Fashion, Example, and Education have settled in us, and a thousand other irregular desires, which custom has made natural to us" (261–62). The primary engine of action is pressing present uneasiness: "the *uneasiness of desire*, fixed on some absent good, either negative, as indolency to one in pain; or positive, as enjoyment of pleasure... determines the *Will* to the successive voluntary actions, whereof the greatest part of our Lives is made up" (*Essay*, 252). But present uneasiness, Locke explains, does not always determine the will:

There being in us a great many *uneasinesses* always solliciting, and ready to determine the *will*, it is natural... that the greatest, and most pressing should determine the *will* to the next action; and so it does for the most part, but not always. For the mind having in most cases, as is evident in Experience, a power to suspend the execution and satisfaction of any of its desires, and so all, one after another, is at liberty to consider the objects of them; examine them on all sides, and weigh them with others. In this lies the liberty Man has; and from the not using of it right comes all that variety of mistakes, errors, and faults which we run into, in the conduct of our lives, and our endeavours after happiness; whilst we precipitate the determination of our *wills*, and engage too soon before due *Examination*. (*Essay*, 263)

Liberty or freedom is a power of agents rather than an intrinsic feature of the will.<sup>26</sup> It denotes the individual's ability to reflect upon particular desires and "weigh them with others" before they determine the will.<sup>27</sup> While some scholars interpret Lockean freedom as irrevocably opposed to desire, the passage above suggests that freedom does not negate all desire.<sup>28</sup> It lies instead in the ability to choose among competing desires by reference to a principle of

<sup>26</sup>Hence the irrelevance, according to Locke, of the free will debates. It is not the will but the agent that is free. As Locke puts it, "I think *the Question is not proper, whether the Will be free, but whether a Man be free*" (244).

<sup>27</sup>For a related interpretation of the *Essay's* account of freedom, one that foregrounds the role of probabilistic judgment, see Douglas John Casson, *Liberating Judgment: Fanatics, Skeptics, and John Locke's Politics of Probability* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), chap. 5.

<sup>28</sup>Yolton writes, for example, of Locke's "wholly negative" attitude toward desire. See John Yolton, *John Locke and Education* (New York: Random House, 1971), 34. Other readings attributing an uncompromising rationalism to Locke include Mehta, *Anxiety of Freedom*; and Taylor, *Sources of the Self*.

conduct or “greater good” (*Essay*, 253) higher than the removal of a present uneasiness.

As such, Lockean freedom anticipates twentieth-century paradigms of autonomy, including Harry G. Frankfurt’s account of second-order desires and Christine M. Korsgaard’s neo-Kantian understanding of reflective endorsement.<sup>29</sup> On these interpretations, we are autonomous insofar as we reflect upon first-order desires and act on those that pass the test of reflection, the standards for which derive from our valued practical identities or considered principles of conduct. Korsgaard argues, for example, that the reflective structure of the mind enables autonomy by compelling us to supplement desire with reasons as the basis of action: “I desire and I find myself with a powerful impulse to act. But I back up and bring that impulse into view and then I have a certain distance. Now the impulse doesn’t dominate me and now I have a problem. Shall I act? Is this desire really a *reason* to act?”<sup>30</sup> Korsgaard explains that agents act autonomously when the reasons that render desire actionable derive from a practical identity that they take to be normative. To be a moral being, she suggests, is to have a self-conception “under which you value yourself and find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking.”<sup>31</sup> Autonomy reaffirms such a valued practical identity: “Autonomy is commanding yourself to do what you think it would be a good idea to do, but that in turn depends on who you think you are.”<sup>32</sup>

For Locke, as well, autonomy mobilizes a normative practical identity, that of a rational being: “every Man is put under a necessity by his constitution, as an intelligent Being, to be determined in *willing* by his own Thought and Judgment, what is best for him to do: else he would be under the determination of some other than himself, which is want of Liberty” (*Essay*, 264). Unlike Kantians such as Korsgaard, however, Locke is interested not only in a practical identity that becomes normative but also in the *practices* that constitute identity. While the potential for freedom is available to all, Locke suggests that whether we will act on this potential depends upon our past practices or habits. “Of Power” is centrally concerned with questions such as the following: Am I the kind of person who is used to giving in to present desire? How do I understand my best self? How strong is my commitment to that self? One’s best self, Locke urges repeatedly in the *Essay*, must itself be an object of active desire for it to determine choice and outweigh other desires as determinants of the will: “Let a man be never so well perswaded of the advantages of virtue... yet till he *hungers and thirsts after righteousness*; till

<sup>29</sup>Harry G. Frankfurt, “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,” *Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 1 (Jan. 1971): 5–20; and Christine M. Korsgaard et al., *The Sources of Normativity*, ed. Onora O’Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>30</sup>Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 93.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 122–23.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 107.

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; but any other *uneasinesses* he feels in himself, shall take place, and carry his *will* to other actions" (*Essay*, 253).

Locke does not oppose habituation to autonomy because the empirical practical self—the product of past practices that congeal over time into acquired traits or character—enables or disables the normative self that autonomy endorses. Whether or not we choose to reflect upon our desires at critical moments of choice depends upon a vast network of past choices and practices, including, but not limited to, habits of reasoning. Unsurprisingly, habituation is a crucial theme of the *Essay*, as it is of the *Conduct* and the *Thoughts*. In the *Essay*, Locke focuses on the bad mental habits that prohibit individuals from thinking clearly and independently, especially the erroneous association of ideas that have no necessary connection: "some independent *Ideas*, of no alliance to one another, are by Education, Custom, and the constant din of their Party, so coupled in [men's] Minds, that they always appear there together. ... This gives Sence to *Jargon*, Demonstration to Absurdities, and Consistency to Nonsense, and is the foundation of the greatest, I had almost said, of all the Errors in the World" (*Essay*, 400–401).

If the *Essay* focuses on bad habits, the educational writings foreground good ones. The importance Locke attributes to education derives from his sense that it has the potential to cultivate autonomy-friendly habits. Without the right kind of education, he suggests, habits will still be formed but they will be formed heteronomously, without due regard to the duty to exercise one's power of freedom. Several recent studies have homed in on this aspect of Locke's thought, identifying him as a pragmatist who looks to education to reinvent custom and habituation in an autonomy-friendly direction. Mark E. Button argues that Locke's response "to the conditions of habits and custom is not an inquiry into how these extrarational features might be extirpated from the calculus of social and political order but, more pragmatically, how these necessary characteristics of political society might be given a different structure and a different purpose."<sup>33</sup> Jad Smith suggests that for Locke, "the relentless occurrence of social reproduction—whether delivered of necessity, desire, dependence, indifference, or reason—always bears with it moral and social consequences. In an attempt to shape these consequences, Locke undertakes the transvaluation of custom."<sup>34</sup> Ruth Grant observes that Locke astutely recognizes that

<sup>33</sup>Mark E. Button, *Contract, Culture, and Citizenship: Transformative Liberalism from Hobbes to Rawls* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 164.

<sup>34</sup>Jad Smith, "Custom, Association, and the Mixed Mode: Locke's Early Theory of Cultural Reproduction," *ELH* 73, no. 4 (2006): 832 and 845.

“there is no escape from custom’s power. ... The only possibility for improvement is to enlist custom’s power in the service of reason’s authority.”<sup>35</sup>

This scholarship offers a valuable counterpoint to the disciplinary reading of Locke, which, as already noted, views habituation and autonomy as fundamentally contradictory foci of Locke’s liberal project. However, Grant, Smith, and Button do not consider in detail the habits that matter to Locke as educationist. In the two most extended considerations of these issues, Alex Neill and Peter Schouls suggest that Lockean education seeks to habituate children to reason and self-mastery.<sup>36</sup> Neill argues that Locke is especially interested in training children’s understandings, since only through such training can the individual exercise self-mastery. Such training, Neill adds, is not opposed to autonomy because Locke believes that the mind must be influenced by the outside world, including by other people, for reason to develop. Schouls also interprets the influence of the educator to be fundamentally benign, arguing that it is parental reason and not parental will that directs the child: “Since it is the parents’ reason that forces the child to the freedom of rational action, it is, in effect, reason that is the child’s teacher.”<sup>37</sup> On this reading, parental reason must ensure, above all, that the child develop the habit of deferring pressing desires: “At the age when children are still incapable of rational examination, they can be conditioned to suspend action on desire through the process of denying them immediate gratification.”<sup>38</sup>

I agree with Neill that habituation in reasoning is an important feature of Locke’s educational program but I will argue, in the next section, that it is by no means Locke’s primary emphasis, at least with regard to early childhood education. Instead, Locke stakes his claims about reason’s education in the context of a wide-ranging pedagogy, which addresses all three components of freedom, as described in the *Essay*: reason, will, and desire. Regarding Schouls’s claim about the importance to Locke of teaching the child to defer desire, I agree that this is an aspect of Locke’s pedagogy but I see it as a problematic one, belonging to the adult-imitative paradigm of education. If Locke’s principal point were that parents should consistently prevent children from gratifying their desires, his pedagogy would produce not freedom but disgruntled children, weary and wary of parental authority. Unlike Schouls, I will foreground the ways in which Lockean pedagogy accommodates many of children’s desires. Such an accommodation is called for by Locke’s own understanding of freedom, which, as indicated above, highlights that desire is a key determinant of the will.

<sup>35</sup>Grant, “Custom’s Power,” 621.

<sup>36</sup>Schouls, *Reasoned Freedom*; Alex Neill, “Locke on Habituation, Autonomy, and Education,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 27, no. 2 (1989): 225–45.

<sup>37</sup>Schouls, *Reasoned Freedom*, 217.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 211.

My reading of the educational writings centers around Locke’s claim in the *Thoughts* that the “principal business” of education is “to set the *mind* right, [so] that on all occasions it may be disposed to consent to nothing but what may be suitable to the dignity and excellency of a rational creature” (*Thoughts*, 25). The “intelligent being” of the *Essay*, the one who owes it to himself to act freely, is identified here as the rational creature whose “dignity and excellency” education seeks to vivify and realize. How is this to be done? What habits need to be fostered so that the mind “consent[s] to nothing but what may be suitable to the dignity and excellency of a rational creature”? Further, who determines what constitutes rational dignity and excellence? These are the key questions Locke takes up in the *Thoughts*.

### Parental Authority: The Framework for Education

*Some Thoughts concerning Education* has its origins in a correspondence between friends, building upon letters that Locke wrote to Edward Clarke of Chipley between 1684 and 1690, advising him on the education of his oldest son (eight years of age at the beginning of the correspondence).<sup>39</sup> This background is useful to keep in mind as we approach the book’s contents for at least two reasons. First, it is unsurprising that fathers figure prominently in Lockean education (though mothers, a hired tutor, and other reasonable adults also play a role) since Locke’s letters were addressed to a father and trusted friend. Second, while the book refers, at various points, to the education of young adults, its primary focus is children since Clarke’s son, as Locke notes in his conclusion to the *Thoughts*, was “very little” (161) during the exchange.

Notwithstanding its narrow courtesy-book topic of how to educate the ruling elite, the *Thoughts* connects to Locke’s major philosophical works by identifying virtue as the single most important goal of education.<sup>40</sup> Of the four goals of a gentleman’s education—virtue, wisdom, breeding, and learning—virtue, Locke suggests, is “the first and most necessary of those

<sup>39</sup>For a detailed publication history of the *Thoughts*, see Axtell’s introduction, *Educational Writings of John Locke*, 3–17.

<sup>40</sup>While the book has a narrow class and gender focus, Locke suggests that his educational advice is generalizable. In his dedication, he enjoins readers to draw conclusions for the “training up [of] youth with regard to their several conditions” (8). Elsewhere in the *Thoughts* he hints that girls’ education should be broadly similar to boys’, and “where the difference of sex requires different treatment, it will be no hard matter to distinguish” (12). In a letter to Edward Clarke’s wife, Mary Clarke, dated January 1, 1685, Locke writes that there is “no great difference” between the education of boys and girls, “for making a little allowance for beauty and some few other considerations of the s[ex], the manner of breeding boys and girls, especially in their younger years, I imagine should be the same” (quoted in Axtell, *Educational Writings of John Locke*, 5).

endowments that belong to a man or a gentleman" (*Thoughts*, 102). Rather than book learning, it is "the hard and valuable part to be aimed at in education" (*Thoughts*, 49). Locke enjoins home schooling for the sons of the gentry since parents can then more fully control the environment to foster virtuous dispositions. These include a sense of religious duty, benevolence, and truthfulness, but the key to virtue, Locke indicates, is freedom or autonomy. Summoning the *Essay's* definition of freedom early in the *Thoughts*, Locke suggests: "the great principle and foundation of all virtue and worth is placed in this, that a man is able to *deny himself* his own desires, cross his own inclinations, and purely follow what reason directs as best though the appetite lean the other way" (*Thoughts*, 25). And a little later, "the principle of all virtue and excellency lies in a power of denying ourselves the satisfaction of our own desires where reason does not authorize them" (*Thoughts*, 29).

As the essence of virtue, freedom is the overarching goal of Lockean education. But the question immediately arises as to what kind of role it is to have in early childhood education given Locke's contention, in both the *Thoughts* and the *Essay*, that children lack the tools to be free: that is, they lack the reflective reason that makes self-command command of the self by itself. In the *Essay*, Locke suggests that children begin life absorbed in the outside world and only gradually turn their gaze inwards, to reflect on the mind's operations: "the first Years are usually employ'd and diverted in looking abroad. Men's Business in them is to acquaint themselves with what is to be found without; and so growing up in a constant attention to outward Sensations, seldom make any considerable Reflection on what passes within them" (*Essay*, 108). In the *Thoughts*, Locke reinforces this point: while children, he suggests, are capable of simple forms of reasoning early on—their ability to reason is coterminous with the acquisition of language (*Thoughts*, 58)—serious reflection is "the concomitant of prudence and age and not of childhood" (37).

Locke justifies summoning freedom in the context of early childhood education by reminding us of the nexus between freedom and habituation: "The great thing to be minded in education is what habits you settle" (*Thoughts*, 19). We become who we are through habituation and if we would be independent adults we must develop autonomy-friendly habits early on. What, then, are the autonomy-friendly habits relevant to children yet incapable of autonomy? It is in response to this last question that the *Thoughts* becomes a divided text, prescribing two distinct ways of approaching the interaction of will, desire, and reason that, according to the *Essay*, enables freedom. We will recall from the *Essay* that the will has no agency of its own. Desire determines it though reason can ensure that higher, rather than lower, desires obtain authority. Since children lack a developed reason, heteronomous desires determine their wills, unless their educators intervene. On the adult-imitative paradigm of education, which appears with greatest force early in the *Thoughts*, Locke suggests that this intervention eclipse the gap between childhood and adulthood by rendering self-command, the goal of the future, a

virtual reality in the present. Children, he argues, cannot practice actual self-command but they can imitate it by submitting their wills to parental reason until they have reason of their own. Self-command, in other words, becomes itself a teachable habit, which parents must instill in their children as early as possible:

He that has not a mastery over his inclinations, he that knows not how to *resist* the importunity of *present pleasure or pain* for the sake of what reason tells him is fit to be done, wants the true principle of virtue and industry and is in danger never to be good for anything. This temper, so contrary to unguided nature, is to be got betimes; and this habit, as the true foundation of future ability and happiness, is to be wrought into the mind as early as may be, even from the first dawns of any knowledge or apprehension in children. (*Thoughts*, 32–33)

Education should teach children mastery over their inclinations, even if such "mastery" implies, in the first instance, a kind of servitude. Present compliance with the reason of others, Locke elaborates, ensures future compliance with one's own reason: "He that is not used to submit his will to the reason of others *when he is young*, will scarce hearken or submit to his own reason when he is of an age to make use of it" (*Thoughts*, 27).

This last claim is questionable, however, since the Lockean child is being taught not only to comply with (others') reason but also, more pointedly, the habit of obedience. Locke's remarks about parental authority are illuminating in this context. While he asserts that parents should calibrate their authority to the child's developing reason, with cordial friendship replacing early strictness (*Thoughts*, 31), he leaves unclear how the transition is to happen by figuring obedience to parents as an unquestioned first principle in a child's life: "your authority," he tells parents, "is to take place and influence [your child's] mind from the very dawning of any knowledge in him that it may operate as a natural principle, whereof he never perceived the beginning, never knew that it was or could be otherwise" (*Thoughts*, 75). The child, in other words, will not be able to tell where his will begins and that of his parent ends. Locke reinforces this point: "A compliance and suppleness of their wills, being by a steady hand introduced by parents before children have memories to retain the beginnings of it, will seem natural to them and work afterwards in them as if it were so, preventing all occasions of struggling or repining" (*Thoughts*, 32). This regime of naturalizing parental power jars with Locke's excoriation, in the *Essay*, of the processes by which beliefs are made to seem innate by being "insinuated into [children's] unwary, as well as unbiass'd Understandings" and "riveted there by long Custom and Education beyond all possibility of being pull'd out again" (*Essay*, 712).

Locke's claims about filial obedience and the naturalization of parental power are amongst the disciplinarians' principal targets, exposed especially forcefully by Carrig. Carrig contends that the goal of Lockean education is less virtue than obedience, and it accomplishes this goal by making "the

will of the father appear to the child as his own."<sup>41</sup> The child's liberty, Carrig suggests, is entirely incidental to Locke's project, invoked only as a means to the end of cementing parental authority: "This new method makes the exercise of power 'invisible,' or unnoticed, and it is precisely this characteristic that gives paternal power its perpetual effect."<sup>42</sup> Carrig suggests that whereas in the *Second Treatise*, Locke advocates that paternal power is legitimate only temporarily (during the child's nonage), the *Thoughts* endorses its permanence: "Perpetual respect for paternal authority is the principal goal of Locke's educational system."<sup>43</sup>

This reading would have greater force, however, if Locke did not complicate his own claims about the reach and import of parental authority. If, on the one hand, Locke suggests that the goal of education is to habituate the child to self-command—and to do so, in the first instance, by dissolving the gap between the child's will and adult will—on the other hand, he argues that the child's will should not be bent into adult shape, in the service of an adult goal. What I am calling a child-responsive approach to education emerges in the *Thoughts* because most of Locke's pedagogical prescriptions flow out of the insight that childhood and adulthood are distinct stages of human life, with different needs and capabilities, and that adult freedom cannot be the goal of early childhood education. While children are born dependent and hence reliant upon adult reason, the child's will matters as an entity distinct from the adult will. Rather than forcing it to conform to parental reason, educators should give it considerable leeway—to be determined by the individual child's age and temperament—and focus their energies on encouraging habits of desiring and reasoning that will enable a future autonomy.<sup>44</sup>

Locke foregrounds three ways in which the child's particular will becomes a force in early education, constraining the exercise of parental power. First, he argues that parents must recognize that the child's will is the will of a child and even suggests that it cannot be subject to adult standards of virtue. Children must be allowed to be children rather than expected to behave like little adults: "Never trouble yourself about those faults in them which you know age will cure" (*Thoughts*, 43); "They must be permitted...

<sup>41</sup>Carrig, "Liberal Impediments," 50.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 48. Locke's precise argument in the *Second Treatise* is that fathers, even though they cannot prescribe actions to their grown sons, can expect to enjoy "a perpetual right to respect, reverence, support and compliance too, more or less, as the Father's care, cost and kindness in his Education, has been more or less" (Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988], 312).

<sup>44</sup>On the ways in which education is rendered responsive to the child, see also Lee Ward, *John Locke and Modern Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), chap. 5.



the foolish and childish actions suitable to their years without taking notice of them" (*Thoughts*, 57); their "gamesome humour, which is wisely adapted by nature to their age and temper, should rather be encouraged to keep up their spirits and improve their strength and health than curbed or restrained" (*Thoughts*, 39). Second, educators must respect the innate talents and temperament of the pupil, and tailor their pedagogy (and authority) accordingly. "God has stamped certain characters upon men's minds, which, like their shapes, may perhaps be a little mended but can hardly be totally altered and transformed into the contrary" (*Thoughts*, 41). The educator cannot expect to "make the gay pensive and grave, nor the melancholy sportive, without spoiling them" (*Thoughts*, 41). Instead, he must constantly ask if the goals he is setting for the child, and the methods he is using to accomplish them, are "suited to the child's natural genius and constitution" (*Thoughts*, 41).

Finally, Locke enjoins that even the incipient reason children manifest early in life should be a factor consulted by parents as they exercise power over children. For example, "even children discern when we do things in passion" and "that has most weight with them that appears sedately to come from their parents' reason, and they are not without this distinction" (*Thoughts*, 59). While parents are right to demand obedience of their offspring, parental commands must increasingly be capable of rational justification rather than insinuated into children's "unwary Understandings," to borrow the *Essay's* formulation. Indeed, "there is no virtue they [children] should be excited to nor fault they should be kept from which I do not think they may be convinced of, but it must be by such *reasons* as their age and understanding are capable of and those proposed always in very *few and plain words*" (*Thoughts*, 58).

Locke's suggestion that the child's will matters as an entity distinct from parental will diminishes the value of self-command as a goal of early childhood education since the child is incapable of self-command. It also identifies the parent-child relation as marked by much greater reciprocity than is suggested by the disciplinarians' regime of invisible parental power. Under the child-responsive paradigm, parental authority provides the framework for an education focused less on bending the child's will to adult reason than on encouraging habits that will permit the child's own reason and desire to shape its will in a future freedom.

### **Education and the Instruments of Freedom: Desire and Reason**

The education of desire is the most important aspect of education as described in the *Thoughts* since the book's focus is childhood, and desire, Locke argues, addresses the child's will before reason. The bulk of the *Thoughts* indicates that the educator's goal is not to stifle infantile desire, by forcing the child to submit to the educator's *developed* reason, but to render it compatible with the child's *developing* reason so that this reason will become a principal

factor determining his will in the future. As such, educating desire involves a twofold effort. First, what the *Essay* describes as “natural” desires (for food, sleep, etc.) are to be prevented from proliferating unnaturally so the will doesn’t become hostage to multiple desires, and reason, once it awakens, has room to speak to it. Second, in relation to what the *Essay* calls “adopted desires” (quest for glory, riches, etc.), the child is to be encouraged to fall in love with the life of reason—exemplified, in the first instance, by the adults around him—and to cultivate a practical identity as a rational being. Locke contends that the child must *want* to aspire to “the dignity and excellency of a rational creature” if he is to achieve this excellence later in life.

The *Thoughts* begins with a focus on the body because bodily appetites are the first to address the will. While Locke begins by prescribing a Stoic hardiness in this context—accustoming children to cold baths and wet shoes, for example—he continues with a resounding affirmation of nature, rather than man, as the best educator of appetite. Children, he argues, should be habituated to satisfying nature’s needs but not to augmenting them. Hence, they should eat only when hungry and only enough to quell hunger, sleep when sleepy and as long as they need, without becoming addicted to their beds. The key to the early stages of educating desire is preventing the corruption of natural desires into exorbitant adopted desires. Locke is deeply critical of overly indulgent parents, who, “by humouring and cockering them when *little*, corrupt the principles of nature in their children, and wonder afterwards to taste the bitter waters, when they themselves have poisoned the fountain” (*Thoughts*, 26). Under the child-responsive paradigm, Locke takes pains to revoke the Augustinian view of children as innately sinful: “I desire to know what vice can be named, which parents and those about children do not season them with and drop into them the seeds of as soon as they are capable to receive them?” (*Thoughts*, 27).

If one aim of the education of desire is preventing the corruption of natural desires, another, which becomes relevant as the child’s reason gathers strength, is fostering certain autonomy-friendly adopted desires. The most important such desire, Locke suggests, is the desire to be considered rational, which can become the basis of a healthy self-esteem. Children, Locke observes, “love to be treated as rational creatures sooner than is imagined” (*Thoughts*, 58). He urges parents to encourage children to connect self-esteem with rationality so that they are motivated to be rational. Parents and tutors should foster the child’s pride in his reason by praising him when he reasons well and by refraining from shaming him when he does not. Hence, “When his reasons are anyway tolerable, let him find the credit and commendation of it; and when they are quite out of the way, let him, without being laughed at for his mistake, be gently put into the right” (*Thoughts*, 95).

Locke’s interest in children’s self-esteem prompts such liberal pedagogical advice as that their aptitudes be consulted in structuring their studies, and that they be “allowed the liberties and freedoms suitable to their ages, and

not be held under unnecessary restraints” (*Thoughts*, 45). He accompanies this advice, however, with the more controversial argument that the child’s self-esteem, which is nourished by the esteem others accord him, should become the basis of a new system of rewards and punishments, centered on reputation and obviating the need for the corporal punishment as an instrument of education. As Locke puts it, “If you can once get into children a love of credit and an apprehension of shame and disgrace, you have put into them the true principle, which will constantly work and incline them to the right” (*Thoughts*, 36).

But doesn’t this “true principle” connote socialization in the community’s values, or simply provide a mechanism, as Carrig puts it, “for the exercise of community power”?<sup>45</sup> On the disciplinary reading, Locke’s prioritizing of reputation in the *Thoughts* contradicts his indictment of reputational concerns in the *Essay*, where the law of opinion, one of the three laws individuals summon when judging their actions (the others being divine and civil law), is represented as, at once, the most powerful of all laws and the cause of much error (*Essay*, 356–57). In the *Thoughts*, Locke himself concedes that a concern for one’s reputation is “not the true principle and measure of virtue” but it is “that which comes nearest to it; and being the testimony and applause that other people’s reason, as it were by common consent, gives to virtuous and well-ordered actions, it is the proper guide and encouragement of children, till they grow able to judge for themselves and to find what is right by their own reason” (*Thoughts*, 38).

Locke believes that a child’s investment in his reputation does not prevent him from becoming an independent adult because, to return to a key insight of the *Essay*, the mind is not a cipher to be filled by the world (including the reason of others) but is fundamentally reflective in structure.<sup>46</sup> It has the capacity to turn a critical eye onto its own and others’ ways of thinking. This insight remains underelaborated in the *Thoughts*, which is focused on the education of desire, but it takes center stage in Locke’s second major work on education, *Of the Conduct of the Understanding*, a work entirely dedicated to reason’s education and directed at leisured gentlemen who want to improve their powers of understanding. A principal thesis of the *Conduct* is that adults have the inner resources to render their understandings more critical because they are provided with a rule—the principle of associating only clear and determined ideas through their most probable connections—for judging their own and others’ patterns of reasoning. True knowledge, as against conventional wisdom or thinking along party lines, requires

<sup>45</sup>Carrig, “Liberal Impediments,” 60.

<sup>46</sup>This insight is obscured by the disciplinarians’ contention that for Locke, “reason” signals nothing other than “a foundation of habitual thinking and acting” or “the rules of the game well-bred men observe.” See, respectively, Carrig, “Liberal Impediments,” 61; and Baltes, “Locke’s Inverted Quarantine,” 190.

perceiving “the habitudes and respects our ideas have to one another” (*Conduct*, 189). Therefore, “when a man once perceives how far they [his or others’ ideas] agree or disagree one with another, he will be able to judge of what other people say, and will not be led by the arguments of others, which are many of them nothing but plausible sophistry” (*Conduct*, 190).

In one of its many forays into childhood education, the *Conduct* suggests that education should promote good practices of association: “I can see no other right way of principling [children], but to take heed, as much as may be that, in their tender years, ideas that have no natural cohesion come not to be united in their heads” (*Conduct*, 219). On this account, how children put ideas together is much more important than what they think.<sup>47</sup> The objective of book learning, for example, is not “to perfect a learner in all or any one of the sciences, but to give his mind that freedom, that disposition, and those habits that may enable him to attain any part of knowledge he shall apply himself to” (*Conduct*, 187).

Towards the end of the *Thoughts*, Locke anticipates the *Conduct’s* argument about method over content when he enjoins a hired tutor to remember that “his business is not so much to teach him [the child] all that is knowable, as to raise in him a love and esteem of knowledge and to put him in the right way of knowing, and improving himself, when he has a mind to it” (*Thoughts*, 148). As in the *Conduct*, to put the child on the “right way of knowing” requires encouraging him to associate ideas in their clearest forms. The child’s mind, Locke contends, should be trained to move “from the knowledge it stands possessed of already, to that which lies next and is coherent to it, and so on... by the simplest and most uncompounded parts it can divide the matter into” (*Thoughts*, 150). In all instruction, “great care must be taken with children to begin with that which is plain and simple, and to teach them as little as can be at once. ... Give them first one simple idea, and see that they take it right and perfectly comprehend it before you go any farther” (*Thoughts*, 137).

In addition to good habits of association, the *Thoughts* points to other ways in which the education of children can ensure that they become critically self-reflective adults as opposed to hostages of reputation or communal values. The most important such mechanism is also perhaps the simplest, that of encouraging children to reason about all things, to practice reasoning. Practice, Locke argues in the *Conduct*, is the key to reason’s transformation from latent to manifest ability: “we are born to be, if we please, rational creatures, but it is use and exercise only that makes us so, and we are indeed so no farther than industry and application has carried us” (*Conduct*, 178). The parents of the *Thoughts* are urged to exercise their children’s reason in every

<sup>47</sup>On Locke’s formalism or his commitment to how (rather than what) knowledge is acquired, see Paul Schuurman, “Locke’s Way of Ideas as Context for His Theory of Education in *Of the Conduct of the Understanding*,” *History of European Ideas* 27 (2001): 56.

way possible. Nothing, Locke enjoins, should obstruct a child's "forwardness to be reasoning about things that come in his way." Nobody should "check this inclination in him or mislead it by captious or fallacious ways of talking" (*Thoughts*, 95). Curiosity, he suggests, is a particularly important infantile appetite, which parents should nourish by taking children's questions seriously and by answering them in ways that encourage further questioning (*Thoughts*, 79, 93–95). As sons get older, their fathers, Locke advises, should draw them into conversation about serious subjects (*Thoughts*, 72). Likewise, tutors should teach by mobilizing their pupils' powers of reasoning: "All their time together should not be spent in reading of lectures and magisterially dictating to him what he is to observe and follow" (*Thoughts*, 74). Instead, pupils should be made "to reason about what is proposed." Such a practical-conversational approach to learning is especially enjoined in relation to questions of virtue: "[The pupil] will better comprehend the foundations and measures of decency and justice and have livelier and more lasting impressions of what he ought to do, by giving his opinion on cases proposed and reasoning with his tutor on fit instances than by giving a silent, negligent, sleepy audience to his tutor's lectures" (*Thoughts*, 74).

Much of what Locke has to say about reason's education in the *Thoughts* has to do with drawing children into a rational conversation, pitched at their particular rational capacities. Indeed, education and conversation emerge as coterminous developments.<sup>48</sup> Hence, a trusted tutor becomes necessary as soon as children begin to talk: "I would from their first beginning to talk have some *discreet, sober, nay, wise* person about children" (*Thoughts*, 63). A key quality of the tutor must be "the skill to carry himself with gravity, ease, and kindness in a constant conversation with his pupils" (*Thoughts*, 135). Nor are children perceived to be the only gainers from such an exchange: "The native and untaught suggestions of inquisitive children do often offer things that may set a considering man's thoughts on work" (*Thoughts*, 94). Children's relatively unprejudiced viewpoints can be engaged productively even by their rational betters, in order to better question the legitimacy of custom.

Locke's argument that one of the best means of educating a child's reason is engaging him in rational conversation opens up another understanding of "other people's reason" than the conventional wisdom highlighted by the disciplinary reading of Locke. Other people's reason, it appears, takes the form not only of the reputational standards that a child, hungry for the esteem of the rational adults in his life, brings to bear on his actions, but also the more critical form of other people's rational arguments, in dialogue with which the child realizes his own powers of reasoning. The claim that

<sup>48</sup>Richard Yeo argues that conversation figured prominently in Locke's "life-long concern about the proper grounds of assent and belief" (Richard Yeo, "John Locke on Conversation with Friends and Strangers," *Parergon* 26, no. 2 [2009]: 12).

debate and dialogue sharpen one's critical faculties is a principal line connecting the *Thoughts* and the *Conduct*. In the latter work, Locke observes, "We are all short-sighted, and very often see but one side of a matter; our views are not extended to all that has a connection with it. ... This might instruct the proudest esteemer of his own parts, how useful it is to talk and consult with others, even such as come short of him in capacity, quickness and penetration" (*Conduct*, 169). Engaging others is important not only in the service of a liberal many-sidedness but is fundamentally so because, as Locke elaborates, most of our knowledge—including our knowledge of the principles grounding our actions—has to do with probabilities rather than certainties. And "in probabilities... it is not enough to trace one argument to its source, and observe its strength and weakness, but all the arguments, after having been so examined on both sides, must be laid in balance one against another, and upon the whole the understanding determine its assent" (*Conduct*, 180). In other words, informed assent to principles presupposes taking into account the perspectives of others. Locke summarizes, "To prejudge other men's notions before we have looked into them is not to show their darkness, but to put out our own eyes" (171).

Together, the *Conduct* and the *Thoughts* indicate a complex role for "other people's reason" in Lockean education. While children engage other people's reason, to begin with, as a standard, against which they can measure their own actions and arguments, they must engage it more critically as their own reason strengthens. They have the tools to do so because, as Locke puts it in the *Conduct*, "every man carries about him a touchstone... which is natural reason" (171). This inner resource suffers attrition at the hands of custom and traditional education but an education in autonomy-friendly habits can restore its strength. And one of these habits, relevant to both children and adults, is the habit of discoursing rationally with others. "Other people's reason" is at once traditional ways of thinking, which unreflective individuals abide by, and the diversity of viewpoints that reflective adults consult to sharpen their own reason. It is at once a static entity, subscription to which assures mental servitude, and a dynamic and ever-expanding republic of rational argumentation, without which no critical thinking or freedom is possible at all.

### Conclusion: Liberalism's Sticky Subject

Locke's educational writings suggest that the disciplinarians are right to find a "sticky" subject at the heart of liberalism but I have argued that this subject is far more complicated a figure than the disciplinarians indicate because Locke is torn about the degree to which education should be a child-responsive project. To the extent that it is sensitive to the child's temperament and rights as a child, Lockean education yields an intriguing understanding of autonomy, one that meaningfully incorporates our commonsensical

intuitions about the subject's social embedment. Freedom, Locke argues, is not an inherent feature of the will but a practical achievement, one that requires the help of others. Locke is fully aware that such "help" is often no more than hindrance; he describes socialization as typically a training in prejudice. But he also insists that freedom requires outside influence to be possible at all. This is so not only because of the empiricist commonplace that the mind must engage the world—through sensation and reflection—in order to generate ideas but also because the individual needs to engage "other people's reason" in order to use his or her own reason effectively. At their boldest, Locke's educational writings suggest that we need to extend our understanding of empiricist experience itself: this is not only the sensation and reflection prompted by the world of inanimate objects but also, importantly, *social experience*.

It is well worth contrasting Locke's claims about social experience with that of the disciplinarians. While the stated aim of the disciplinarians is to criticize Locke's *particular* pedagogical understanding, they betray a more far-reaching dissatisfaction with *all* forms of social influence. The Foucauldian spirit of Baltes's and Mehta's interpretations suggests why this might be the case: if subjects are immersed in social forces best thought of as "power" (a power that, according to Foucault, is productive rather than repressive but that, nonetheless, denotes a relationship of constraint and hierarchy) then one should be suspicious, indeed, of any and all social engagement. Such a blanket suspicion is implicit in Mehta's casting of his intervention as an attempt to rescue the "natural self" from Locke and liberalism, as well as in Baltes's metaphors of "entanglement" and "enmeshment" to describe the stickiness of the sticky subject: these suggest that the sticky subject is more stuck than sticky.<sup>49</sup> As there are no metaphors in Baltes's reading to indicate a different relationship between the subject and sociability—one in which the latter does not immobilize the subject—the implication is that society bears upon the individual only in unwholesome ways. It is not surprising then that Baltes, like Mehta, worries about a natural self, putatively eclipsed by Lockean education.<sup>50</sup>

Even Carrig, who is critical of Mehta's commitment to a natural self, implicitly mobilizes such a commitment by treating all socialization as, fundamentally, negative in its bearing upon individuality. A case in point is his argument that even an education that seeks to create a critical posture is yet another instantiation of indoctrination. Referring to Locke's injunction that education should concern itself less with knowledge than method, Carrig observes, "The distinction between teaching as the communication

<sup>49</sup>Mehta, *Anxiety of Freedom*, 24 and 124; Baltes, "Locke's Inverted Quarantine," 173, 178, 183, 190, 191, 192.

<sup>50</sup>Locke's turn to discipline, Baltes argues, is due to his "fear of the natural... self" ("Locke's Inverted Quarantine," 190).

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of knowledge and teaching as the creation of a disposition to think for oneself is impossible to maintain. Both are expressions of power, the latter being no more than a camouflaged version of the former.”<sup>51</sup> If all forms of social influence are “power” then it does, indeed, become impossible to speak of freedom. Or rather, it becomes impossible to speak of the freedom of the socially embedded subject. The freedom that can be gleaned at the margins of the disciplinary reading of Locke is the freedom of a radically asocial subject, outside society altogether. The disciplinarians are right that this is not freedom, as Locke understands it, but they are wrong to imply that this is what freedom means.

The liberalism that emerges from a consideration of Locke’s educational writings is not without its problems: once we accept that autonomy is a contingency of education and habituation, a host of thorny issues about power arise that Locke treats inconsistently. Unlike the disciplinarians, however, Locke refuses to posit a binary opposition between freedom and social influence, and he delineates a frequently compelling picture of what the freedom of the socialized subject looks like. As an entailment of Lockean education, liberal autonomy in no way presumes the radical disengagement that communitarians attribute to it; nor is autonomy simply a meaningless concept because the subject of education, as the disciplinarians observe, is a sticky subject. Instead, Locke’s sticky subject looks both within and without himself to find the resources to live a life of considerable critical independence. And what’s more, he enjoys this effort, since his education has inspired him to love the “dignity and excellency of a rational creature.”

<sup>51</sup>Carrig, “Liberal Impediments,” 75.