

Education

(forthcoming in *A Companion to Locke*, Matthew Stewart editor, Blackwell Publishing)

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By

Ruth W. Grant and Benjamin R. Hertzberg

Duke University, Department of Political Science

John Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* began as a series of letters to his friend, Sir Edward Clarke, advising him on how best to raise his son. Written while Locke was in exile in Holland during the same period he was writing the final draft of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, they were first published in 1693. During the next century, there were 21 English editions of the work and translations into Dutch, French, Swedish, German and Italian. Locke's theory of education drew comments from authors such as Swift, Goldsmith and Richardson. It is not unusual to find contemporary authors acknowledging his status as "the father of modern education in England" or claiming that the *Thoughts* may have been Locke's most practically influential work (Smith 1962, 403; Wood 1983, 20). The *Thoughts* challenged both the received wisdom concerning the psychology of children and the standard educational practices of the day. Taken alone, the *Thoughts* represents a major contribution to modern theories of education.

But it would be a mistake to limit consideration of Locke's reflections on education to this one work, despite its importance. Locke was as concerned with cultivating the minds of adults as he was with childhood education. *Of the Conduct of the Understanding* addresses this concern. Published posthumously in 1706, it was originally intended as the final chapter of the *Essay*. It consists of a series of recommendations detailing how to develop the capacity to judge independently and well. It could be said that, like the *Thoughts*, it aims at habituation of the mind to reasonableness. The *Conduct* also stands as a link between the *Essay* and the political writings. Locke's recommendations for the conduct of the intellect flow from his

understanding of the workings of the human mind as elaborated in the *Essay*. At the same time, the importance of this educational undertaking is moral and political: the creation of citizens who will reject prejudice, partisanship and dogmatism in favor of the critical and reasonable assessment of opinions.

Locke was acutely aware of the importance of education for morals and politics. In an entry in his commonplace book titled “Labour,” he wrote that gentlemen and scholars ought to spend a few hours of every day in “honest labour” while manual labourers ought to spend a similar portion of their day studying. This scheme would have the twofold benefit in morals of curbing idleness and luxury among the upper classes while delivering the labouring classes from “horrid ignorance and brutality.” It would have the twofold benefit in politics of diminishing both dangerous political ambition in the upper classes and moblike behavior in the people. An educated people would be “removed from the implicit faith their ignorance submits them in to others” (Wooton 1993, 440). Locke was as concerned with combating illegitimate intellectual authority as he was with combating illegitimate political authority: in his view, the two are inseparable.

Locke’s thoughts on education are part of his comprehensive epistemological, moral and political reflections. For this reason, we will begin by considering the *Thoughts* and the *Conduct* in turn for what they reveal of Locke’s educational principles and recommended practices. But then we will turn to address the ways in which these writings on education can deepen our understanding of unresolved theoretical problems in Locke’s thought, of key concepts such as freedom and reasonableness, and of the degree of coherence of his philosophy altogether.

*Some Thoughts Concerning Education*

Locke addresses his *Thoughts* to those parents “so irregularly bold that they dare venture to consult their own reason in the education of their children rather than wholly to rely upon old custom” (par. 216). He views his enterprise as a radical one, challenging “fashion”, “custom” and “fancy” in the name of reason. And he knows that reasonable proposals will appear heretical where customary practices are perverse. What are Locke’s radical proposals? In place of rules and precepts, a Lockean education relies on practice and example. Beatings and rewards are replaced by praise and blame; chastisement, by encouragement and patience; indulgence, by hardiness; and affectation, by naturalness. When the young gentleman is old enough to be sent to boarding school, Locke recommends instead that he stay at home with a tutor where he can learn useful things in a spirit of freedom and enjoyment, rather than useless things under compulsion and with a servile spirit. In presenting this educational alternative, Locke reveals his sense of humanity and his love of children (Axtell 1968, 11). He admonishes parents to wake their children gently from their sleep, for example. He reminds them that fear is inconsistent with learning; instructing a trembling mind is like writing on shaking paper. Locke always remembers to “consider them as children” (par. 39). First and foremost, Locke’s education aims at developing character. What matters is not what the child learns, but who he becomes. Locke presents this advice on education as the counsel of reason. We must ask what supports that claim. What principles and what psychological assumptions ground the educational aims and methods that Locke recommends?

The aim of education, according to Locke, is to produce virtuous and useful men and women, whatever their station in life. Education must be practical, and, of course,

that will vary depending on the pupil. What will be useful for a gentleman's son in his adult life is not the same as what will be useful for the son of a laborer. But even the gentleman's son is to be educated to be able to actively manage his affairs, not for a life of luxury and idleness. Locke had no patience for idleness or waste; everyone ought to lead a useful life, each in his own way. The education to virtue, on the other hand, applies to all alike – it is “the first and most necessary of those endowments that belong to a man or a gentleman” (par. 135). And, since women do not differ from men with respect to “truth, virtue and obedience,” their education ought not differ either (letter to Mrs. Clarke, January 7, 1684; see Locke 1975, 102). The core of virtue is self-denial: the ability to resist the satisfaction of our desires and to follow where reason leads instead; or, to put it somewhat differently, to follow our desires only when reason authorizes them. It is impossible to act reasonably without the capacity for virtue understood in this way, as self-discipline, and that is what makes virtue so important. We might say, then, that the aim of education is to produce useful, virtuous, and reasonable men and women.

How does Locke propose to achieve this aim? His methods begin with establishing healthy habits, first with respect to the body's needs for food, sleep and exercise. Habituation is a powerful method of education. Children can be brought to almost any behavior if it is made customary for them. Locke recommends that the children of gentlemen be treated like those of “honest farmers” with respect to their health. In this way, they will develop a physical hardiness akin to the mental capacity to resist pains and pleasures.

The importance of the proper disposition towards pain and pleasure is one of the reasons that Locke is such a harsh critic of corporal punishment as the method of

disciplining children. Instead of teaching self-control, beating simply encourages the propensity to indulge pleasure and avoid pain, which is the root of all vicious actions. Moreover, beatings can secure outward compliance, but they cannot produce the internal goodness that will be required eventually when the child becomes an adult. Finally, “slavish discipline” produces a “slavish temper” in children. “The true secret of education” is to secure obedience without servility, and Locke offers an alternative method to accomplish this goal (pars. 46, 56). He relies on praise and blame, esteem and disgrace. Children want to be well-regarded by their parents and by others around them. They should be encouraged in this and come to associate all good things with good reputation. Through the desire for esteem and the fear of disgrace, children can be motivated to meet the expectations of their parents willingly. And when self-control is expected and praised, this sort of discipline can become self-discipline. The desire for esteem also leads children to emulate those around them, particularly older children and adults. For this reason, parents must be very careful of the quality of their child’s company. The tutor particularly must possess virtue and breeding. Through emulation of him, rather than rules and precepts, the child will acquire the necessary habits of civility and conform to the norms of customary behavior.

Finally, Locke proposes a series of educational methods that flow from the principle of respect for the child. The education should be adapted to the individual temperament of the child. It should be appropriate to his stage of development: in particular, children should not be punished for “faults” which are nothing more than age-appropriate behavior that they will soon grow out of. Learning should be done through games and with pleasure. Adults should reason with children at a level appropriate to

their age. As the young gentleman grows, his father should become less authoritative and more familiar and begin to develop a friendship with his son. The tutor should make the child see the usefulness of his studies, approach him with “sweetness” and “tenderness,” and “beget love in the child” so that he will be motivated to learn (par.167). Locke’s educational methods are comparatively gentle - habituation, praise and blame, learning by example, respect for the child – and strikingly modern. Today, we would call his approach “developmentally appropriate, child-centered education.”

Through these methods, the child can be expected to acquire virtue, wisdom, breeding and learning; the four parts of education that Locke identifies. Virtue, of course, is the foremost of these, but, as a matter of curriculum, it gets short shrift. The child should be taught a simple idea of God, to tell the truth, and to care for others, along with simple moral lessons like those of the Ten Commandments and *Aesop’s Fables*. Wisdom, by which Locke means the prudential management of one’s affairs, also receives brief discussion since it requires experience that is not available to children. But he does advise that the tutor introduce the child to the ways of the world and cultivate his capacity to judge men well. The child should not be “like one at sea without a compass” but should have some knowledge of the “rocks and shoals” so that he will not sink before he gains experience (par. 94).

The tutor is also the source of the child’s education in breeding, which cannot be learned from books. The child will learn good breeding through observation of the tutor’s conduct. Breeding is conducting oneself always with self-respect and respect for others. This mutual respect is the condition under which disagreement becomes civil disagreement. It is a universal quality that is essential for civility and social harmony in

any society. Manners, on the other hand, are an expression of good breeding that vary from place to place and are secondary in importance. True good breeding is not a matter of the forms of politeness and courtesy; it flows from humility and good-nature and is the capacity to make others comfortable in their interactions with us.

After virtue, wisdom and breeding, Locke remarks: “You will wonder, perhaps, that I put *learning* last, especially if I tell you I think it the least part” (par. 147). Locke makes clear that it is far better that your son be a good and wise man than a great scholar. And if he is not a good man, learning can make him more foolish, worse, and more dangerous. Locke begins his attack on the standard curriculum for English gentlemen by attacking the idea that education is a matter of acquiring impressive accomplishments; “furniture” for the mind. Instead, character development matters most, and after that, useful learning. Locke is highly critical of developing talents for poetry and music for this reason. For the same reason, it should not be considered beneath the young gentleman to learn merchant’s accounting and a manual trade such as carpentry or gardening. In place of logic and metaphysics, Locke would have knowledge related to the senses; viz. geography, astronomy, anatomy, history, etc. There will be no Greek. Latin and French are expected of a gentleman, so they are included in the curriculum, but they should be learned through conversation as one naturally learns languages. Locke is extremely critical of teaching Latin through the writing of verses and themes on subjects children know nothing about and equally critical of teaching rhetoric and disputation. The education of a reasonable man should teach him to “yield to plain reason and the conviction of clear arguments” rather than to triumph through cleverness in senseless disputes. (par. 189; see also *Conduct* par. 7). Locke concludes his discussion of the

young gentleman's studies by remarking that the business of the tutor "is not so much to teach him 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" (par. 195). Once again, Locke strikes a surprisingly modern note familiar in contemporary progressive education: he seeks to create "independent learners."

In concluding the *Thoughts*, Locke summarized his approach:

The great business of all is *virtue* and *wisdom*. . . Teach him to get a mastery over his inclinations and *submit his appetite to reason*. This being obtained, and by constant practice settled into habit, the hardest part of the task is over. To bring a young man to this, I know nothing which so much contributes as the love of praise and commendation, which should therefore be instilled into him by all arts imaginable. Make his mind as sensible of credit and shame as may be; and when you have done that, you have put a principle into him which will influence his actions when you are not by, to which the fear of a little smart of a rod is not comparable, and which will be the proper stock whereon afterwards to graft the true principles of morality and religion (par. 200).

The strength of Locke's claims for the reasonableness of this approach depends upon the strength of his psychological assumptions. While there is no systematic discussion of these in the *Thoughts*, the grounds of Locke's argument are clear. He begins the work with the claim that ". . . of all the men we meet with, nine parts of ten are what they are, good or evil, useful or not, by their education" (par. 1). Human beings are malleable, and it is the experiences of childhood that are formative (Passmore 1965). Moreover, childhood experiences are formative morally. Locke rejects an Augustinian view of childhood with its emphasis on original sin (see *Reasonableness of Christianity*, pars. 1-9). When we see vices in children, they are usually the parents' fault. Children are taught lying, intemperance and violence by the example of their parents, especially by being beaten. Moreover, parents classify natural childish behaviors as faults and punish

children for innocent play that should be left entirely free. In dealing with children, it is a mistake to begin with the assumption that they are sinful creatures who must be made good through harsh discipline. It would also be a mistake to assume that they are angelic innocents; Locke rejected a romanticized view of childhood as well.

Instead, Locke describes children as fundamentally the same as adults psychologically, though much more fluid because as yet unformed.

I grant that good and evil, reward and punishment are the only motives to a rational creature; these are the spur and reins whereby all mankind are set on work and guided, and therefore they are to be made use of to children too. For I advise parents and governors always to carry this in their minds, that children are to be treated as rational creatures (par. 54).

Because all human beings are motivated by pleasures and pains, which we call “good” and “evil” (see *Essay*, II. 20. 2), the whole trick is to employ the right pleasures and pains and to bring your pupil to take pleasure in the right things. “For you must never think them set right till they can find delight in the practice of laudable things” (par. 108). The tutor has done his job when the young man relishes virtue and places “his strength, his glory, and his *pleasure* in it” (par. 70, emphasis added).

This is why habituation and the desire for esteem are such important educational methods. These are the processes that shape our pleasures. What is habitual or customary for us becomes pleasant, or at least indifferent. And because we seek esteem, we adopt as our own whatever is customarily done. Custom is powerful in both of these senses. Why do children become cruel, taking pleasure in causing pain? It is a “habit borrowed from custom and conversation.” “Unnatural cruelty” is glorified in history and becomes “by fashion and opinion . . . a pleasure which by itself neither is nor can be any”

(par. 116; see pars. 67, 129). Locke stresses that the power of custom and habit is far greater than that of reason; there is very little limit to their formative power.

But despite their importance, and despite Locke's famous assertion that the minds of children are "blank slates" when it comes to ideas, there are natural psychological dispositions that must be taken as given in devising a program of education. First, as we have said many times, children find a natural pleasure in the approval of others and pain in their disapproval that can be used to shape their behavior. They also love liberty and desire to be treated as rational, so their studies should be approached without arbitrariness or constraint. All people, even children, desire to be masters of themselves. More problematically, they also desire to be masters of others (Tarcov 1984, 89ff.). They are willful and proud, and the love of dominion is even stronger than the love of liberty. This love of dominion is the origin of those vices which are ordinary and natural, and it must be redirected. It is the source of the one important exception that Locke makes to his advice concerning corporal punishment. If you have a willful child; one who is obstinate and rebellious and simply wants to have his way, you must beat that child until he submits to your authority and you must not stop until that point is reached. Pride must be curbed. It can, however, also be used to good effect. For example, habits of civility toward servants and inferiors will curb the pride of a young gentleman. But he can be brought to his studies by taking pride in the new accomplishments that give him a sense of superiority over others. Thus, the child will become "good or evil, useful or not" according to how his education shapes these dispositions and determines his pleasures (par. 1).

Locke leaves us with a number of paradoxes. Virtue, the aim of education, he defines as the ability to resist the appetites and to listen to reason. But he does this in the context of a thoroughly hedonistic psychology; rational creatures are always motivated by pleasure and pain. He presents his own work as an attack on custom in the name of reason, but argues for the power of custom over that of reason. Most men govern their conduct and opinions by whatever is customary and habitual for them. And lastly, he portrays a child who is governed by habit and the concern for the approval of others whom he hopes will become an independent adult relying on his own reasoned judgment. Can the child, raised to value reputation so highly, become sufficiently independent to challenge, like Locke himself, the prevailing social and political practices of his day?

This question brings us directly to *Of the Conduct of the Understanding*, a work that aims to teach its readers how to cultivate independence of mind. The *Conduct* details practical advice for seeking the truth without the distortions of passion, custom, partisanship, and dogmatism. It resembles the *Thoughts* in that its aim is reasonableness and that, in the name of reasonableness, it offers a radical critique of certain contemporary practices. But, unlike the *Thoughts*, it is more narrowly focused on intellectual development; character development, or virtue, is presupposed. And, unlike the *Thoughts*, its primary emphasis is intellectual independence. It teaches men to “see with their own eyes” (*Conduct*, par. 24). This is because its audience is adults rather than children. To take ideas on trust is “childish,” according to Locke (*Conduct*, par. 6). And, while concern for reputation is the appropriate motivation for childhood, there comes a time when “the true principles of morality and religion” must take its place (*Thoughts*, pars. 61, 200).

*Of the Conduct of the Understanding*

Locke opens *Of the Conduct of the Understanding* with the claim that “No man ever sets himself about anything but upon some view or other which serves him for a reason for what he does...The will itself, how absolute and uncontrollable soever it may be thought, never fails in its obedience to the dictates of the understanding” (par. 1). With this broad reference to his philosophical psychology as elaborated in the *Essay*, he argues that it is the ideas in peoples’ minds that govern their behavior. People act in the world according to what they believe, and so both morality and politics are determined by individual opinions, as ignorant or misled as they may be. This claim is the ground of one of the important implications of Locke’s argument in the *Conduct*. Because people act in politics according to their opinions, those authorities who control opinion and decide the difference between orthodoxy and heterodoxy (sectarian theologians, the Schoolmen, the Crown, etc.) inherently wield great political power. The *Conduct* is an open attack on all intellectual authorities other than the individual mind. Locke makes a powerful case that the best way to govern the understanding is to rely on individual judgment. His aims are to show that each individual has the capacity to discover the truth and to guide those who love the truth in their search for it.

Like the *Thoughts*, the counsel Locke gives in the *Conduct* arises directly out of his understanding of the nature and workings of the mind as analyzed in the *Essay*. Indeed, because Locke intended it to be the last chapter of that work, it can be seen as a practical application of the epistemological and psychological principles developed there

(Axtell 1968, 57). As such, the *Conduct* demonstrates the radical political and moral implications of the *Essay*.

Locke begins with an attack on the logic of the Schoolmen. He cites Bacon's preface to the *New Organon*, where Bacon calls for a new set of principles to guide the understanding in addition to formal scholastic logic, for logic, as important a guide as it may be, "reached not the evil; but became a part of it" (par. 2). Logic is not a sufficient guide for human understanding because it is possible to make logically valid deductions that nevertheless lead to false conclusions. And, if individuals believe they are assenting to correct propositions merely because they can be logically demonstrated, then logic is misleading and can be morally dangerous.

People will also be misled if they have no knowledge either of how the mind works as it comes to give or refuse assent to propositions or of the limits of the mind's natural capabilities. People need to understand how their mind constructs the ideas with which they interpret the world and how it comes to associate ideas with each other (the subject of the *Essay*). With that knowledge, they can know when to be suspicious of logical conclusions and when to accept them. From the foundation laid in the *Essay*, then, Locke develops principles that will ensure that the mind functions properly in determining the truth of the propositions presented to it, insofar as it is able to do so.

Locke's first recommendations are deceptively simple: individuals who wish to ensure that their understandings function well in finding truth should be open-minded and widely read (par. 3). Today such recommendations sound banal, yet Locke does not assume that they are obvious; he supports them by careful argument. They depend upon Locke's understanding of the limits of the human mind. In order for one to be absolutely

certain that one's conclusions are true, one must ensure that the conclusions are validly deduced from the principles upon which they "bottom" and that those foundational principles are based upon adequate evidence. Here, however, the nature of the human mind presents a problem. Truly accurate understanding demands universal knowledge of all things, all "facts." However, any one individual mind's perspective is always unavoidably partial. Human minds are separated from the world and from other minds, and they cannot presume adequate knowledge of things beyond their own perspective. Angels, whose minds are not limited by such partiality, have the luxury of being both certain and dogmatic. For mortal humans, however, the partiality inherent in their unavoidably individual perception of the world demands that they consider their conclusions to be provisional; they must always remain open minded and willing to reconsider their beliefs. Further, they must strive to ensure that their views are as broad and informed as is humanly possible, thereby approaching, although always distantly, the universal, angelic view. Locke argues that reading widely is the best available way to do this.

Closely related to Locke's recommendation that individuals be open-minded and widely read is his condemnation of prejudice (pars. 10, 12). For Locke, prejudice is the unwillingness of individuals to submit their beliefs and opinions to analysis and criticism; it is the arrogant refusal to recognize the limited nature of their own minds. Individuals who fear to reconsider their beliefs or to allow others to critically examine them show a lack of confidence in their truth. If your opinions are true and rationally defensible, why not subject them to critical examination? Here, Locke openly attacks the sectarian intellectual authorities of his day: Divines, Schoolmen, and others who treat those who

disagree with them as heretics and do not allow their cherished principles to be questioned. Persecution is the most dangerous consequence of prejudice and the arrogance that Locke finds beneath it.

Prejudice, however, is easier to condemn than to eradicate. Firstly, it is often reinforced, if not demanded, by the authority of the state. It also becomes habitually ingrained in the mind; the “empire of habit” is powerful (par. 41). Individuals unused to independently examining their beliefs do not start doing so easily, and ideas long associated in the mind tend to stay that way, even after criticism has demonstrated their false foundation. Locke recommends two difficult disciplines as necessary for individuals to rid themselves of prejudice. First, they must be indifferent to the propositions they examine; they cannot want any one proposition to be true. To do so is to love that proposition more than the truth and therefore to no longer care for the accuracy of one’s judgments—another shot at the sectarians and partisans. This call for indifference, of course, must be equally applied to one’s own opinions; one cannot grant them special value and must examine them as impartially as any others. Hence Locke’s second discipline: critical self examination. Lovers of truth must be willing to indifferently examine all propositions, even those that they happen to hold.

But this requires practice, effort, and discipline. The proper conduct of the understanding presupposes the sort of virtue described in the *Thoughts*: the ability to put aside self and passion in the indifferent examination of one’s own beliefs. Individuals who want to conduct their understandings properly must first be habituated into acting against their passions and the desire of the moment *before* they begin the process of learning to use their understandings well. Then, they must be habituated into Locke’s

recommended practices of indifference and self-examination; these must be learned as mental skills, which can be very difficult. Individuals who have long associated ideas in their mind without examining them are not accustomed to critiquing their own prejudices. They suffer from a disease of the mind and have a long intellectual convalescence ahead of them before they will be able to assess the truth of propositions confidently (par. 12, see also pars. 33, 35, 41).

This sort of habituation to intellectual discipline is the second of Locke's major, general recommendations in the *Conduct*, after impartiality. Both aim to ensure independence of mind in the dual sense of freedom from external authorities and intellectual self-mastery. Here, Locke makes an analogy between the mind and the body. Like the body, the mind is unprepared to do difficult tasks without long, sustained, and practiced exertion. The mind is like any other consciously controlled part of the body; it must be trained. Attempting difficult problems before one is adequately prepared may "break" the understanding and cause one to develop a fear of using it for anything difficult in the future, much as athletes might hurt themselves by trying physically challenging feats for which they are insufficiently prepared. The first step to properly conduct the understanding is to practice doing so, beginning with simple problems and moving sequentially to more difficult ones. Intellectual achievement, then, is not the result of virtuoso ability or the memorization and application of rules; rather, intellectual achievement is the result of a mind that has been well prepared and exercised in the appraisal of arguments. For this reason, Locke dismisses the claim that intellectual errors are best explained by individual differences in intellectual ability. Instead, differences in individual ability are mainly caused by differences in education—in mental exercise.

Other common errors are caused by certain “natural defects” in the operation of the human mind that Locke believes can be corrected (par. 2). It is then no surprise that Locke believes education to be a continual endeavor, extending long into adulthood: one must use one’s mind, or lose it.

Common human errors demonstrate the importance of this sort of practice in reasonableness. Locke discusses the experience of correcting individuals’ reasoning, only to hear them make similar arguments a few moments later. The reason for this illogical behavior is the “empire of habit;” individuals have been habituated into false reasoning, and they can only be released from it after difficult effort (par. 6, see par. 41). For Locke, the consequences of a widespread lack of intellectual practice explain much of the ignorant and irrational beliefs observed in the world and the behaviors that arise from them. This is Locke’s response to those who point to general ignorance and irrationality as an argument against his claim that individual understanding is the best method to find truth. People are not incapable of thinking well on their own; they are only unpracticed in reasoning.

Locke recommends the study of mathematics as an antidote to this problem, not because mathematics *per se* is important, but because mathematics trains the mind in following long chains of reasons and in thinking abstractly. This sort of practice is universally necessary (though to varying degrees depending on one’s station in life), because justice, duty, and other moral ideas are abstract concepts whose evaluation depends upon such painstakingly developed abilities. Similarly, the purpose of the Sunday Sabbath is to allow all individuals the chance to exercise their minds in the study of religion and theology, those topics which are of the highest absolute importance and

will train them not only in morality, but in the vitally important skill of evaluating moral claims.

These, then, are the solutions to “the common and most general miscarriages” of the understanding: open-mindedness, broad reading, indifference, self-examination, and intellectual exercise, especially the practice of mathematical reasoning (par. 12). If diligently followed, they will give the mind “freedom,” enabling it to perform well no matter the subject. Educators should habituate their students into such intellectual practices; they should not follow the sectarians’ methods and “principle” students by having them memorize rules and precepts determined by authorities. Such methods close the mind by “instilling a reverence and veneration for certain dogmas” (ibid.), forcibly habituating the mind into making the same unexamined associations of ideas over and over again. Instead, Locke’s education will train the mind in the ability to perceive new connections and apply itself to new topics. Locke’s method is both more likely to lead the mind to truth and more practical (because one cannot know in advance what one might need one’s mind to do). It is also strikingly similar to modern educators’ emphasis on teaching students critical thinking skills.

In the remainder of the *Conduct*, Locke (who was a physician) deals with what can be termed “diseases of the mind.” The “diseases” that Locke discusses include: the tendency to observe facts without drawing conclusions from them, or to draw general conclusions from too few observations, the tendency to search for as many arguments as possible to justify a conclusion one has already made or to simply have the appearance of being learned, the tendency to make hasty conclusions, the tendency to be partial toward explanations that arise from a well-loved or well-known subject, to be most convinced by

the first argument one hears, or by the most recent, or to assume that the truth of a proposition can be accurately determined by who held it, its historical situation (ancient or modern), its relationship to common opinion, or whether or not it happens to be in a book. His analysis has the effect of pointing out, often wittily, the errors upon which many base their beliefs.

Locke's aim is to train the mind to believe (i.e. to assent to the truth of a proposition) only so far as the evidence warrants. To conduct oneself according to such well-founded beliefs is to be a reasonable man. The alternative is "implicit faith" which leads people to hold fast to their beliefs whether true or false, and hence to act unreasonably as well. Locke is a strident critic of this alternative:

. . . all the world are born to orthodoxy: they imbibe at first the allowed opinions of their country and party, and so, never questioning their truth, not one of a hundred ever examines. They are applauded for presuming they are in the right. He that considers is a foe to orthodoxy, because possibly he may deviate from some of the received doctrines there. And thus men, without any industry or acquisition of their own, inherit local truths (for it is not the same everywhere) and are inured to assent without evidence... Thus we are taught to clothe our minds as we do our bodies after the fashion in vogue, and it is accounted fantasticalness, or something worse, not to do so... And those that break from it are in danger of heresy; for, taking the whole world, how much of it doth truth and orthodoxy possess together? Though it is by the last alone (which has the good luck to be everywhere) that error and heresy are judged of... I never saw any reason why truth might not be trusted to its own evidence. ( par. 34).

The *Conduct* is a radical argument for the individual mind's ability to perceive the truth and a stirring call for individuals who are willing to take up the difficult task of putting aside the random opinions dealt them by tradition, sect, party, and fashion to embark on a quest for the truth. It is a proclamation of the power of individual judgment, and as such it is not only a direct application of the conclusions of the *Essay*, it is also deeply

congruent with Locke's political teachings in the *Two Treatises on Government* and the *Letter Concerning Toleration*. In the *First Treatise*, Locke demonstrates the critical power of individual reason in interpreting Scripture. The *Second Treatise* defends a liberal politics, and particularly a right of revolution, that depends, at bottom, on the ability of the people to judge. And the *Letter* argues for the respect that should be accorded individual religious judgment. However, the *Conduct* still leaves us with many of the same tensions as did the *Thoughts*. We can, for example, wonder if the fiercely independent truth seeker of the *Conduct* could ever really develop out of the deeply reverential and obedient child of the *Thoughts*, or if liberated individual judgment will not inherently tend to undermine the moral strictures and discipline that Locke sees as its foundation. These tensions, among others, are the subject of our final section.

#### Interpretive Issues

Consider first the apparent tension between the *Thoughts'* aim of an education to virtue and Locke's thoroughly hedonistic psychology. Locke argues in the *Essay* that all people are motivated by the desire to be happy and that happiness is ultimately pleasure. Yet a primary aim of a Lockean education is virtue understood as the capacity to resist the temptations of pleasure and the aversions of pain. How can Locke speak of virtue at all, given his hedonistic account of motivation? Locke's philosophical psychology is developed in Chapter 21 of Book Two of the *Essay*, titled "On Power." Here Locke explains both freedom and virtue in a manner that reconciles his recommendations in the *Thoughts* and the *Conduct* with his analysis in the *Essay*.

"On Power" opens with Locke's critique of the notion of free will, which Locke takes to be a nonsensical construction: humans cannot choose not to will, and therefore

their will cannot accurately be described as free. He goes on to argue that human actions are most strongly affected by desire, specifically the desire to enjoy pleasure and avoid pain. Avoidance of pain (Locke calls it “uneasiness”) is peoples’ primary motivation, explaining the vast majority of human actions. (We eat, for example, to avoid the unease of hunger, sleep to avoid the unease of fatigue, etc.) Yet, although Locke here appears to deny free will in favor of a Hobbesian mechanistic hedonism, he does not deny that people can choose which desires to follow. People are not powerless in the face of their desires. While their wills are not free in the sense of possessing the ability not to will, individuals are free (Locke's technical description is that humans have “liberty”) to hold their wills in abeyance while they judge which of the options available to them ultimately will give them the most happiness or help them avoid the most misery. Hence, Locke’s psychological hedonism is consistent with the possibility of virtue and responsibility because he does not believe human action is fully determined by pleasure and pain in a mechanistic fashion. Because people can choose which pleasures to follow and which pains to avoid on the basis of a reasonable judgment, some decisions can be called right and others wrong, some virtuous and others despicable.

This central role for individual judgment in Locke’s psychology explains his consistent emphasis on cultivating the ability to judge, for in that moment when the will is held in abeyance, it is peoples’ ability to judge wisely that will determine whether or not they make good decisions, in both the moral and in the self-interested sense. An individual who is ignorant or hasty will choose poorly; an individual who is well informed and careful will choose well. Locke’s education for virtue as described in the *Thoughts*, then, is consistent with his hedonistic psychology in the sense that it is

designed to train children in the discipline required to resist their passions and exercise judgment. Indeed, “Of Power” even gestures towards the importance of education for moral decisions; Locke describes, for instance, how individuals’ pleasures can be altered by custom and habituation, allowing education to encourage higher, more refined, more choiceworthy pleasures.

This same chapter in the *Essay* is also a good place to begin considering another paradox raised by our discussion of the *Thoughts* and the *Conduct*: the apparent contradiction in Locke’s insistence that individuals must be disciplined and habituated into liberty. As we have seen, Locke argues in the *Essay* that human liberty is contained in the ability to hold desire in abeyance while judging which course of action is the best to follow. “This is so far from being a restraint or diminution of *Freedom*, that it is the very improvement and benefit of it: ‘tis not an Abridgment, ‘tis the end and use of our *Liberty*” (*Essay*, II. 21. 48) Liberty requires the discipline of virtue. As is the case elsewhere in Locke’s work, liberty is distinguished from license (*Second Treatise*, pars. 6, 22, 63). For Locke, liberty is never the ability to do whatever one wants without the tiresome necessity of discipline, because an individual who so scorns the essential moment of judgment will have his or her actions determined, not by their choice, but by whichever desire is the strongest at the moment. They will then be determined, not free. In order to be truly free, one must be able to decide what it is that one wants, and deciding that requires the discipline to wait, consider, and evaluate—the very abilities that Locke argues are essential in the *Conduct*, and that the education to virtue in the *Thoughts* will inculcate.

In the *Thoughts*, we learn that this discipline is to be acquired as a habit by children who are made to acquiesce early and completely to the ultimate authority of their parents. This education seems to conflict with the fiercely independent, irreverent individual described in the *Conduct*, who refuses to believe something is true simply because someone in a position of authority—including his or her parents—happened to say so. Yet, it would be a mistake to say that the *Conduct* advocates the *unrestrained* freedom of the human mind. As we argued above, there are many tendencies of the mind that lead individuals directly into error, and if individuals are going to govern their understandings according to Locke's recommendations, they must be able to exercise control over those dangerous tendencies—those aspects of the mind that make it susceptible to the diseases Locke outlines. For example, the *Conduct* concludes with a discussion of the difficulty of controlling our own thoughts, a discussion that clearly equates self-mastery with “liberty of mind” (par. 49). To be preoccupied with something trivial, for example, is to be less mentally free than to be able to direct our own thoughts. As a whole, the *Conduct* can be characterized as Locke's recommendations for the self-conscious control of the individual mind, and as such those recommendations presuppose a mind that has been habituated into the sorts of virtues and disciplines Locke argues for in the *Thoughts*. In other words, discipline and freedom are not treated as contradictory in Locke's framework, for freedom is primarily a discipline, and, as such, can be attained through the development of certain habits (Schouls 1992, 173).

The power of customary practices, in the sense of personal habits, can be reconciled in this way with independence. But, the power of customary practices in a different sense, those practices based on common opinions and enforced by esteem or

reputation, also threatens individual independence. Locke could not be clearer in stressing how very powerful social customs are, and this for two reasons. First, as we have seen in the discussion of the *Thoughts*, the desire for esteem and fear of disgrace are powerful psychological mechanisms. Locke claims in the *Essay* that the “Law of Fashion” is, in fact, the strongest psychological motivator; stronger than the divine law or the natural law (*Essay* II. 28. 12). And secondly, Locke understands that social customs and customary opinions support the structures of power in every society. The powerful, and particularly the priests, have an interest in maintaining traditional practices no matter how unnatural or irrational and in maintaining obedience to their authority in establishing orthodox opinion. Locke never tires of pointing out the persistence of irrational practices supported by the powerful (see e.g., *Essay* I.3.9-12; *First Treatise*, pars. 57-59; *Reasonableness of Christianity*, pars. 241, 243).

Yet, at the same time, Locke’s clear educational aim is to free people from custom and esteem in their thinking. Custom may be powerful, but it has no authority. “[A]n argument from what has been to what should of right be has no great force (*Second Treatise*, par. 103)”. And those same parents whose approval should mean everything to us when we are young become part of the problem – Locke criticizes those who put “implicit faith” in “parents, neighbors, ministers” instead of thinking critically for themselves (*Conduct*, par. 3). This is nothing but “childish, shameful, senseless credulity” (*Conduct*, par. 12).

There is nothing in Locke’s position here that raises stark theoretical contradictions. One can recognize the enormous *influence* of social customs without acknowledging their *legitimacy*. The desire for social acceptance and esteem can be seen

as the powerful psychological force that it is, without arguing that we ought to conform in our thinking to whatever happens to be the prevailing opinion. And a person can develop habits of critical thinking and question the orthodoxies of his day without rudeness or incivility, sustaining good breeding and a concern for the opinion of others in that sense while remaining independent minded.

Nonetheless, there are revealing tensions in Locke's position that are inherent in any project for education for a liberal society. Unlike traditional authoritarian societies where childhood habits of obedience are often expected to persist into adulthood for many people, liberal societies require an independence of adults that is not possible for children. Childhood itself is a problem for liberal educational theory. We are all born dependent and pre-rational and must be subjected to some kind of authority – Locke makes clear that it should be absolute authority established as early as possible. Even in the purely intellectual sphere, authority comes before independence: “Learners must at first be believers” (*Conduct*, par. 28). The great question is how to devise an education that establishes good habits in obedient children, cultivates true intellectual and personal independence in adults, and facilitates the transition between the two.

Locke does not pose the problem in this way. Instead, he argues that childhood obedience is the precondition for adult independence, because, as we have seen, independence *is* obedience to 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*, par. 36). Locke recommends habituation to reasonableness. And he tries to replace the customary opinions that reward

unquestioning obedience with new opinions that reward those qualities, like curiosity, that support independent inquiry.

Locke's position is not without its difficulties. We are entitled to ask whether his recommendations don't depend overmuch on the reasonableness of parents. We might wonder as well whether it isn't psychologically implausible, though logically possible, for a person raised with a heightened concern for social acceptance to be willing to risk regularly the ostracism involved in challenging prevailing orthodoxies. And lastly, we must recognize that the Lockean educational culture that praises independent individual judgment and critical thinking itself can become a new orthodoxy.

Finally, an apparent tension arises within Locke's thought on account of the very importance of education itself. The striking thing is that it takes so much effort to become a reasonable person, both on the part of parents, who must carefully supervise their children's education, and on the part of adult individuals. Elsewhere in Locke's writing, human rationality is taken as given. It is the natural faculty which defines man's distinctive place in the Creation. All human beings are subject to God's law, which Locke calls both the law of nature and the law of reason. To violate the law of reason is to "quit the Principles of Human Nature" (*Second Treatise*, par. 10). And because all people are "furnished with like Faculties" (*Second Treatise*, par. 6), we are equal and independent. The assumption of universal human rationality is the grounds for Locke's liberal political project.

Reading Locke's political writings without also taking account of the educational writings can leave the impression that Locke is optimistic about the possibilities for a political order grounded in individual judgment (consent), operating according to rational

principles, and guaranteeing individual freedom. The educational writings produce a more sober view. To be sure, all people are rational in the sense that we are capable of understanding God's law and acting accordingly. On account of our God-given rational faculty, it makes sense to consider humans, unlike other animals, as morally responsible beings (*Essay* III. 11. 16). According to Locke, cultivating that rational faculty is itself one of our moral duties. Moreover, Locke asserts repeatedly that everyone, no matter how poor or how difficult their situation, can realize their rational potential sufficiently to know their duty (see e.g., *Conduct*, par. 8; *Essay*, I. 1. 5; IV. 12.11). But, to be guided in our conduct by reasonable judgments is another thing entirely and a condition very difficult to attain. Locke believed that it required a revolutionized approach to education and continual effort throughout life. Most people most of the time will hold to their settled opinions, allow themselves to be governed by the judgments of others, and be biased in their own case. It is this last human propensity that is instrumental in bringing about the need for government in the first place (*Second Treatise*, par. 13). In Locke's view, a politics purged of bias, partisanship and orthodoxies enshrined to uphold the powerful is not to be expected.

### Conclusion

Careful consideration of Locke's educational writings—*Some Thoughts Concerning Education* and *Of the Conduct of the Understanding*—confirms Locke's status as a leading early modern educational theorist, one whose vision challenged contemporary orthodoxies. That vision still resonates deeply today. Locke's writings provide a theoretical foundation for some of the educational aims that have become

central for contemporary progressive education: “age-appropriate, child-centered education,” “critical thinking skills,” and “independent, life-long learners” among them. That said, it would be a mistake to simply assimilate Locke’s views to those of contemporary progressive educators. Locke’s education is as notable for what it lacks as for what it prefigures; strikingly, there is no mention in either the *Thoughts* or the *Conduct* of cultivating creative thinking, encouraging artistic creation, or stimulating the imagination. Indeed, Locke’s comments about the imagination are generally negative; he sees it primarily as a dangerous force, something that can lead people into misleading and debilitating superstitions (*Essay* III. 10. 30; *First Treatise* pars. 57-59; *Thoughts*, par. 138; Mehta 1992, 119ff.).

His strikingly critical attitude can be explained partially by chronology: Locke’s works came well before Romantic celebrations of the imagination and criticisms of the Enlightenment. From a Romantic perspective, restrained Lockean reasonableness seems stifling: monastic masochism dressed up as free-thinking. Nonetheless, while Lockean individual judgment is indeed different from the Romantic’s individual self-expression, it would be an overstatement to allege that Locke intended his education to stifle creative, imaginative thinking, especially when it was directed toward the discovery of truth. Rather, Locke’s unyielding emphasis on reason must be understood in the argumentative context of his day. Locke argues for the virtues of reasonableness in response to a body of thinking that was deeply suspicious of all human attempts to understand the world directly, without the mediation of scripture. For Luther and Calvin, it is a simple inference from the fallen individual’s abject, irremovable sinfulness to the conclusion that unaided human reason is utterly unreliable as a guide for judgment (Skinner 1978, 3-19).

Locke opposes his conception of reasonableness to a particular Protestant critique of it, not to Romantic creativity, and his call to reasonableness should be understood in that context. Reasonableness is the antidote to fanaticism, zealotry and superstition.

Moreover, to rely on reason as the test of truth is entirely consonant with religious duty. God created our senses and our reason; He does not ask us to deny the evidence that He presents to us through these faculties.

Locke's educational writings illuminate the centrality of Locke's call to reasonableness for his thought as a whole. Reasonableness is crucial to all of his major concerns: politics, religion, morality, judgment, liberty, and virtue. For Locke, each of these concepts is related, as each orbits around reasonableness. The reasonable individual created by the education described in the *Thoughts* and the *Conduct* will have the discipline to be free, to judge well, and to be virtuous. Education of this sort is not easy, but its rewards are great. A Lockean education aims to produce people who will have the capacities necessary to recognize and to prevent oppression at the hands of authorities - intellectual, political or religious - and thereby to improve the possibilities for a humane and tolerant politics.

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