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**Locke’s Limited Liberty: Ascetic Hedonism and the Suspension of the Will**

As is well known, Lockean liberty is not unlimited. He says repeatedly that liberty is not absolute freedom to do whatever one wants to do—“*not a State of License*” as he says near the beginning of the *Second Treatise*. In that work he clearly identifies two limits to liberty—“reason,” also referred to as the “law of nature;” and any positive law adopted by a legitimate government established by the social contract, which he refers to as “Freedom of Men under Government” in chapter IV of that work. These have been widely discussed and not much remains to be said about them. What receives a great deal less attention, however, is a third limit to liberty, which is discussed not in the *Two Treatises* at all, but in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Here, the limit to liberty exists within one’s own conscience as a limit to the will, and more specifically in the desire for the “greatest good.” What constitutes the greatest good is a matter of some dispute, but I will argue that while there may be many *greater* goods, there is only one “greatest good” to Locke: the infinite reward of Heaven. The purpose of this essay is to explore that third limit, and to argue that it provides essential context for the other limits to liberty discussed in the *Second Treatise.*

In the *Essay* Locke refers to the third limit to liberty as the “source” of liberty, and the fact that it is articulated in an expressly theological context (as I will argue) reflects an underlying characteristic of the principle of liberty for Locke that is rarely recognized. His argument in the *Essay* places liberty at the center of a moral and ethical system, such that his references there to the greatest good are not merely about questions of individual self-interest but rather moral questions. What’s more, his discussion, in this context, of the “uneasiness” (desire) that is the most fundamental of our motivations reflects what I call ascetic hedonism, or the idea that while the pursuit of pleasure may be the principal goal for every human, what he has in mind is a very particular sort of pleasure that requires a kind of abnegation of desire. This ascetic hedonism is best understood by an exploration of the origins of the idea in Epicureanism, with which Locke was likely quite familiar (Kroll 1984).

**The Standard Account: Liberty in the *Second Treatise***

The usual understanding of Locke’s concept of liberty is based on various passages in the *Second Treatise on Government*. The most extensive discussion is, paradoxically, at the beginning of chapter IV, On Slavery. It would seem that in order to properly define slavery, Locke realized he had to define its antithesis first. Here he identifies three forms of liberty:

“THE *natural liberty* of man is to be free from any superior power on earth, and not to be under the will or legislative authority of man, but to have only the law of nature for his rule. The *liberty of man*, in society, is to be under no other legislative power, but that established, by consent, in the common-wealth; nor under the dominion of any will, or restraint of any law, but what that legislative shall enact, according to the trust put in it…. *[F]reedom of men under government* is, to have a standing rule to live by, common to every one of that society, and made by the legislative power erected in it; a liberty to follow my own will in all things, where the rule prescribes not; and not to be subject to the inconstant, uncertain, unknown, arbitrary will of another man” (Locke 1988).

Natural liberty is that which pertains in the state of nature. The liberty of man in society is a kind of positive or republican liberty that arises out of the social contract. The freedom of men under government is that space within the context of a system of law (which is itself a constraint on liberty) where people are free to make choices as long as they don’t violate the law. This we know as negative liberty. It is, in its character, like natural liberty in that it is a freedom from all constraint other than the bounds set by law. Of course, all natural liberty *is* constrained since, as he says, the state of nature “*is not a state of license*” since it is bounded by the law of nature, which he calls reason (Locke 1988).

The freedom of men under government is in a sense a vestige of natural liberty—as long as we stay within the prescribed bounds (principally, not harming others), we are free do to as we wish. Much of what we might wish to do with that liberty, in the state of nature or under the social contract, is use our labor to acquire property, which is subject to the two provisos (don’t take so much that it spoils, and leave enough and as good for others), but the significance of the provisos is largely vacated with the invention of money. The terms of the social contract are intended to safeguard that liberty and that property; men give up their natural liberty to gain the freedom of men under government, which provides them with security for their property. It is a purely self-interested agreement, and the central term has to do with liberty—exchanging natural liberty for the liberty protected by the authority of the state. Our interest in liberty is, then, entirely focused on our self-interest.

**Liberty in the *Essay***

The usual account of Locke’s concept of liberty overlooks the discussion of liberty in the *Essay*, which has a quite different character. Likely written before he wrote the *2nd Treatise* (Niddich 1975),[[1]](#endnote-2) the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* goes much further than the Treatises in providing the moral context for the principle of liberty.

The essence of Locke’s argument in the *Essay* is that we can only be held accountable for that which we know or accept as truth. This requires a clear understanding of what knowledge and truth are, and what they are not. *Truth*, at least the truth that is experienced by humans, is an *idea* that resides in our *minds*, and there are only two sources for ideas: experience (which can be referred to as external truth) and reflection (internal truth) (Book II ch XIX). The difficulty regarding truth is that in order to become an object of cognition, an idea, it must be articulated in words. Indeed, all ideas must be articulated in words, and even experience ultimately joins the gallery of ideas in the form of words. But what do words mean? The meaning of words is socially determined, but subject to our own mental processes and combined with experience. This means that the “true” meaning of words is always uncertain—even of such fundamental words as Scripture and Revelation. One can never be fully certain that what one understands to be the truth is, in fact, the truth (and this is besides the point that much of what we take to be “true” is merely received truth, not the result of our own thought processes). So, what happens to our culpability if it turns out that we misunderstood the commands of the Devine as revealed through Scripture? The answer is clear:

“So in the greatest part of our Concernment, he [God] has afforded us only the twilight…of Probability…wherein to check our over-confidence and presumption, we might by every day’s Experience be made sensible of our short-sightedness and liableness to Error; the Sense whereof might be a constant Admonition to us, to spend the days of this our Pilgrimage with Industry and Care, in the search, and following of that way, which might lead us to a State of greater Perfection. It being highly rational to think…that as Men employ those Talents, God has given them here, they shall accordingly receive their Rewards at the close of the day…” (1975, Bk IV, Ch xiv, §2).

The answer, in other words, is judgment: we can be held accountable for our exercise of judgment based on our understanding. Where does our understanding come from? The best basis for understanding, according to Locke, is experience—thus liberty is essential to the understanding, because only if we have liberty to act and experience the consequences of our actions can we make valid judgments about them (1975, Bk IV, Ch. xvi, §6). So, ultimately, people must have liberty in order to gain understanding and demonstrate our capacity for judgment. This is, then, the function of reason which underlies the Law of Nature: We exercise our reason in developing our understanding, which guides the choices that we make in exercising our liberty. The ability to make those choices is what Locke calls, in the *Essay*, the “source of liberty.”

The discussion of liberty in the *Second Treatise* is primarily about physical action, but the discussion in the *Essay* is concerned with human understanding—simply put, what we think and how we come to think it. In Book II chapter XXI of the *Essay*, Locke distinguishes between will, volition, and liberty, making clear that the first two govern motivation while the last involves the capacity to act on our choices. Specifically, Locke says (repeatedly) that liberty is “a power to act, or to forbear acting” (§24). That this chapter is entitled “Of Power” seems to draw the attention away from what appears to be its primary substance, which is a discussion of liberty, but the title should give us a sense that the discussion of liberty is taking place within a particular context.

Locke defines power as the capacity to either make change or to be changed; in the first case it is active power and in the second case it is passive. As he puts it, “Thus we say, Fire has a *power* to melt Gold…and Gold has a *power* to be melted; That the Sun has a *power* to blanch Wax, and Was a *power* to be blanched by the Sun” (*Essay*, Bk II, ch. xxi, §1). In our understanding, we may refer to the power to change ideas.

The will is one such power, which Locke defines as the ability to “begin or forbear, continue or end several actions of our minds, and motions of our Bodies, barely by a thought or preference of the mind ordering, or as it were commanding the doing or not doing such or such a particular action”(§5). Exercising that power is called “willing” or “volition.” Where action or inaction resulting from the will results from an active process of the mind, we consider that action voluntary; if the mind is not engaged then it is involuntary. The idea of liberty, which is paired with that of necessity, has to do with the extent of the power one has over one’s ability “to begin or forbear, continue or put an end to several Actions in himself” (§7). Where this is based on the “preference or direction of his own mind, so far is a Man *Free*” (§8). Locke explains the difference between voluntary and free action: There may be cases where we take action that is not voluntary but, because it aligns with our preference, it may still be done freely. The significance is “that *Liberty* cannot be, where there is no Thought, no Volition, no Will” (§8).

Any action always involves change, thus power. The first power involved is the will. Antecedent to will is desire or, to use Locke’s preferred term, “uneasiness.” But there may be more than one desire, and these may conflict with one another—as well as the possibility of doing nothing. When faced with the possibility of change, in other words, when presented with a choice, then it is necessary for one to will—one has no choice about whether one will will, one *must* will. Thus, Locke says, the question of “free will” is nonsensical, because we have no choice but to will, and our will will always reflect our preference. Whether we are able to carry out that preference is an entirely different question—we may be very clear in our will and preference not to fall off a cliff and onto the rocks below, but if we have fallen, will what we will, we will not be at liberty to stop our fall (§24).

The desire for change is always driven by some uneasiness, which Locke describes as a kind of pain. That which we desire—be it some sort of pleasure or the relief of some sort of direct pain—he refers to as an “absent good” (§33). The nature of this absent good becomes a major concern for Locke, and it was the cause of a major revision to the *Essay* after the first edition came out. In the first edition, he argues that *“the greater Good is that alone which determines the Will*” (fn. p. 251), by which he means the eternal Good of Heaven. In the second edition, however, he admits that he was wrong: “*good*, the *greater good*, though apprehended and acknowledged to be so, does not determine the *will*, until our desire, raised proportionably to it, make us *uneasy* in the want of it” (§35). As long as a person is content, they will not experience the necessary uneasiness. “Let a Man be never so well perswaded of the advantages of virtue, that it is as necessary to a Man, who has any great aims in this World, or hopes in the next, as food to life: yet till he *hungers and thirsts after righteousness*; till he feels an uneasiness in the want of it, his *will* will not be determin’d to any action in pursuit of this confessed greater good” (§35).

In fact, three levels of “good” can be identified for Locke: the present good, which is usually the most immediate cause of our “uneasiness”; a more remote and therefore more abstract *greater good*, which will be more beneficial to our long-term happiness but for which we are less likely to have any immediate sense of uneasiness (*Essay*, Bk II, ch xxi. §35); and the *greatest good*, which is the eternal bliss of Heaven but which is, by its nature, the most remote and therefore the most abstract. Indeed, this greatest good is so remote and abstract that in order to create a sense of uneasiness, various cultures have established a variety of rituals and practices to help make the sense of it more present [cite].[[2]](#endnote-3)

Walsh (2014) misses the difference between the “greater” good and the “greatest” good, going so far as to confuse the two at times. For example, in a passage discussing Locke’s change of heart, she says, “While we may see that a greater good exists, this does not entail that it pleases us more than a good that is known to be lesser…. He begins by saying that it is not, in fact, the greatest *perceived* good that determines the will, but the greatest *felt* good” (p. 124; emphasis in the original). However, in the passage she quotes to support this claim, Locke refers not to the greatest good, but to “the *greater* good” (p. 125; *Essay*, Bk II, ch xxi, §35). It may seem like a small matter, but recognizing the difference between the greater good and the greatest good is necessary in order to place liberty—and, more important, the suspension of the will, in a moral and ethical context as opposed to one concerned merely with self-interest.

**The “Source of Liberty”: The Suspension of the Will**

Having determined that the will is determined by desire, Locke asks, “But we being in this World beset with sundry *uneasinesses*, distracted with different *desires*, the next enquiry naturally will be, which of them has the precedency in determining the *will* to the next action?” The answer is fairly simple and straightforward: that “which is the most pressing of those, that are judged capable of being then removed” (§40). This then leads into the determination that what “moves *desire*” is “happiness and that alone” (§41).

The problem that troubles Locke is that the desire that may be most pressing may not be the best thing for our happiness, especially the desire for the *greatest* happiness, which is the most remote and the most abstract. Our physical needs, for food, drink, warmth or cooling take up so much of our attention that we have little room for more abstract goods. The greatest—even the greater—good requires intention and thought to become a strong enough desire to determine our will. “[T]hus, by a due consideration and examining any good proposed, it is in our power, to raise our desires, in a due proportion to the value of that good, whereby in its turn, and place, it may come to work upon the *will*, and be pursued” (§46). This means that we must, at times, set aside other desires in order to make room for this more distant, more abstract desire which, he firmly believes, any rational person would recognize as leading to the greatest happiness.

“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 endeavors after happiness…we have a power to *suspend* the prosecution of this or that desire…. This seems to me the source of all liberty” (§47; emphasis added).

As Walsh (2014) notes, the suspension of the will is not a major subject for Locke. His discussion of it is confined to Book II chapter XXI of the *Essay*. But although he does discuss it at length in that chapter, there is surprisingly little attention given in the secondary literature to Locke’s discussion of liberty in the *Essay*. An exception to this is Walsh, who undertakes a very careful analysis of the power to suspend the will, although she misses the larger context within which the suspension is made. For her, “The end and use of liberty is the exercise of this capacity for rational thought and judgment in order to act in ways that are, as far as possible, in accordance with the pursuit of happiness” (153).

What’s missing from Walsh’s account is a sense of what constitutes happiness. However, it seems clear enough that, for Locke, true happiness is that which is found in the afterlife.[[3]](#endnote-4) As Walsh notes there is some controversy on this topic, but within the chapter in question he seems quite clear about it. Allow me to quote at length in order to make my case:

“Men often are not raised to the desire of the greatest absent *good*. For whilst such thoughts possess them, the *Joys of a future State* [emphasis added] move them not…the *will*, free from the determination of such desires, is left to the pursuit of nearer satisfactions…. Change but a Man’s view of these things; let him see, that Virtue and Religion are necessary to his Happiness; let him look into the future State of Bliss or Misery, and see there God the righteous Judge, ready to *render to every Man according to his Deeds; To them who by patient continuance in well-doing, seek for Glory, and Honour, and Immortality, Eternal Life; but unto every Soul that doth Evil, Indignation and Wrath, Tribulation and Anguish*: To him, I say who hath a prospect of the different State of perfect Happiness or Misery, that attends all Men after this Life, depending on their Behaviour here, the measures of Good and Evil, that govern his choice, are mightily changed. For since nothing of Pleasure and Pain in this Life, can bear any proportion to endless Happiness, or exquisite Misery of an immortal Soul hereafter, Actions in his Power will have their preference, not according to the transient Pleasure, or Pain that accompanies, or follows them here; but as they serve to secure that perfect durable Happiness hereafter” (Bk II, Ch xxi, §60).

The passage makes clear that, for Locke, the “greatest absent *good*” is the eternal happiness of Heaven, and that whether or not anyone able to enjoy it depends on the quality of their judgment during their brief time on Earth. That is, it is a question of whether they are able to successfully suspend their will in the right ways and at the right time in order to make the right choices.

Recognizing this places Locke’s concept of liberty in a very different light from what we see in the *Second Treatise*. For Locke, the exercise of liberty is as much in what we choose *not* to do as in what we do. Philosophers at least since Plato have argued that the worst form of tyranny made one a slave to one’s passions. Just as the restraint imposed by the law is essential to the establishment of the liberty of man in society, so it is the case that self-restraint is essential to the liberty of man under government. Importantly, the liberty Locke refers to is firmly situated within a moral and ethical context that is largely missing from the account in the *Second Treatise*. Further, the constraint on our actions required by this form of liberty is something that functions at a deeper level than does the law. After all, the law is not omnipresent, but, if we are living an ethical, moral life, our conscience (or our God), is.

What I want to suggest here, then, is that what Locke is talking about is a kind of asceticism. which I call ascetic hedonism. Ascetic hedonism has its roots in Epicureanism, something Locke was familiar with through various sources, including the French philosopher Pierre Gassendi, who is famous for having worked to Christianize Epicurus, and with whom Locke spent some time (Kroll 1984; Sarasohn 1996).[[4]](#endnote-5)

**Epicurus’s Ascetic Hedonism**

Epicurus’ philosophy can be understood as hedonistic, but the use of “hedonism” carries the danger of some confusion, because it is very different from our modern sense of the term.[[5]](#endnote-6) Hedonism is a moral philosophy concerned with the pursuit of pleasure, that identifies pleasure as the “sole intrinsic good.”[[6]](#endnote-7) Epicurus’ philosophy is unquestionably hedonistic, since *hedone* (pleasure) is clearly at its center, but it is, paradoxically, an ascetic sort of hedonism.[[7]](#endnote-8). However, Epicurus’ philosophy was more than this; as Rosenbaum puts it, he articulated “a set of constraints on human behavior, developed…for the purpose of creating social conditions in which people are best able to be happy” (1996). How people relate to one another and the conditions in which their interactions occur are then seen as crucial for happiness. A second essential difference, that helps to explain the first, has to do with our ideas about pleasure.

Several points may be made. The first is the common point that, as Epicurus puts it, “while every pleasure is naturally good, not every pleasure should be chosen. Likewise, every pain is naturally evil, but not every pain is to be avoided” (Epicurus n.d.-a). Through the use of our faculty of reason we are able to recognize those situations in which we may want to forego certain pleasures or accept particular pains.

A second point is that Epicureans recognize two fundamentally different kinds of pleasure. Annas articulates the difference in this way: “One kind of pleasure is kinetic, the other ‘katastematic’ or static.… [T]he pleasure of drinking is kinetic, that of having drunk, static” (1993). Kinetic pleasure is active and transient, experienced in the course of fulfilling a need or addressing a lack. Static pleasure is passive and constant, experienced in the absence of pain and realizing its maximum when all pain has been removed. Kinetic pleasures are particular to a specific need or desire, and are therefore instrumental, while static pleasure is a general state and an end unto itself. This latter form, according to Annas, Epicurus refers to as “tranquility or *ataraxia*,” and it is this that he “identifies [as] our final end” (1993).[[8]](#endnote-9)

A related point has to do with the relationship between pleasure and pain, and the character of pleasure, particularly of the katastematic sort. In effect, pain establishes the limits for pleasure. “Pleasure,” as he puts it, “reaches its maximum limit at the removal of all sources of pain.… When pain arising from need has been removed, bodily pleasure cannot increase—it merely varies. But the limit of mental pleasure is reached after we reflect upon these bodily pleasures and the related mental distress prior to fulfillment” (Epicurus n.d.-b). The act of fulfilling a pain- causing need gives rise to kinetic pleasure, which is experienced directly and is limited to the action of relieving the pain. This sort of pleasure is limited in two ways: First, it only lasts as long as the action itself, and, second, certain ways of fulfilling the need may give rise to new pains (for example, the pain associated with overeating). Further, kinetic pleasure is particularized: It is associated not with the general condition of hunger but with the specific condition of being hungry, so the pleasure of eating is restricted to that particular instance of being hungry, involving elements not directly associated with the pain of hunger, such as the taste of the food or the conditions in which it is consumed. Things like the desire for certain kinds of food or eating in certain kinds of settings can never, in fact, be satisfied in a stable way because once a given eating experience is complete, the desire is sure to return.

Katastematic pleasure, in contrast to kinetic pleasure, is an enduring condition that is best understood as the absence of pain, and it has a mental element that is largely missing from kinetic pleasure. For example, katastematic pleasure comes from not only being fed, but being what in contemporary terms is referred to as “food secure”—in other words, not having anxiety about where one will get one’s next meal. The “pleasure” is characterized by the absence of pain, but not by any specific positive feeling. While clearly related to a physical condition, it has more to do with a particular mental condition or state of mind (or, more accurately, the absence of a particular mental condition), making it a mental, not a physical sort of pleasure.[[9]](#endnote-10)

The difference between kinetic and katastematic pleasure is reflected in Epicurus’ ideas about desire. [this is where the connection to Locke comes in.] There are three different kinds of desire, he tells us, based on two distinctions: “Among desires some are natural and necessary, some natural but not necessary, and others neither natural nor necessary…” (Epicurus n.d.-b). Elsewhere, unnatural and unnecessary desires are referred to as “empty” (Epicurus n.d.-a). Annas explains that, “There is an established idiom in Greek in which ‘empty’ is used for what is futile or pointless,” so the pursuit of an ‘empty’ desire reflects not simply a “factual error but a mistake which renders your efforts pointless, sidetracking your life away from the right way to happiness” and therefore harmful (Annas 1993).

An analysis of the distinctions between ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural,’ and ‘necessary’ and ‘unnecessary’ adds an additional dimension to the difference between kinetic and katastematic pleasure. Annas argues that, in effect, the distinction between the different types of desire is between a *general* desire (for example, for food) and a *specific* desire (for example, for a particular kind of food). It is natural to want food; the fulfillment of that desire is the pleasure of satiation, a static pleasure that, as discussed above, is limited by the removal of the associated pain, hunger. But while the hunger may give rise to a natural desire for food, it does not in itself give rise to a desire for a particular kind of food. It is the particular desire for certain kinds of food that causes problems, as this involves a kinetic pleasure that not only fades away as soon as the meal is finished, but that is both unstable, in that it may change, and insatiable, as the desire can never be filled in any lasting way (Annas 1993). A simple meal made from available ingredients may leave me satisfied, but a fine dinner of lobster leaves me with the desire to repeat the experience as soon as possible, perhaps next time on a bed of rice rather than pasta, and with a different sauce. And were the side vegetables satisfactory? What about dessert? And perhaps the setting could have had better lighting. The varieties are endless, leaving me with an on-going, unfilled desire.[[10]](#endnote-11) This is the sort of desire that Epicurus considered “empty” and inherently problematic, to be avoided to the greatest extent possible. From this perspective, then, a clear understanding of Epicurus recognizes that desire is the primary source of pain, such that the best route to happiness is the overcoming of these empty desires.

It might even be said that, for Epicureanism, it is wrong to associate happiness with the fulfillment of desires at all. Happiness does not arise from any particular activity, so the goal of an activity is neither the experience itself, nor even any particular consequence that arises out of the action. Because happiness is associated with the condition of *ataraxia*, this is the object, or purpose, of any activity (Annas 1993). Best suited for this are those activities that are considered virtuous. As Epicurus puts it, “The greatest virtue and the basis for all virtues is prudence…the art of practical wisdom.… It is not possible to live pleasurably unless one also lives prudently, honorably, and justly; nor is it possible to live prudently, honestly, and justly without living pleasurably. For the virtues are inseparable from a happy life, and living happily is inseparable from the virtues” (Epicurus n.d.-a).[[11]](#endnote-12) As he puts it elsewhere, “The happiest men are those who enjoy the condition of having nothing to fear from those who surround them. Such men live among one another most agreeably, having the firmest grounds for confidence in one another, enjoying the benefits of friendship in all their fullness” (Epicurus n.d.-b). The greatest value of virtue, then, is that it means that you have nothing to fear. Thus, virtue can be seen as instrumental: Not good in itself, but simply the best kind of action because it is most likely to establish the conditions for the kind of pleasure most conducive to happiness.

So, while Epicurean philosophy was centered on pleasure, it was of a very limited sort. If we consider that the most common and persistent sort of pain that we experience is the pain of unmet desire, and if we accept that katestematic pleasure is more conducive to happiness than static pleasure, then it is clear that the most sure route to happiness is not in the fulfillment of our myriad desires but in the abnegation of desire. Normally, this is referred to as asceticism. But if we take the next step and recognize that, for Epicurus, the epitome of pleasure comes in the removal of all pain—including the pain of desire—then the abnegation of desire will produce the greatest extent of pleasure. This brings us back to hedonism. I call this ascetic hedonism.

**The Epicurean Locke**

Like Epicurus, Locke holds that all human action is driven by two fundamental forces, one attractive and the other repellant: pleasure and pain. These are “whatsoever delights or molests us; whether it arises from the thoughts of our Minds, or any thing operating on our Bodies” (*Essay*, Bk II, ch vii, §§2-6). In terms that Bentham no doubt had opportunity to consider, Locke writes, “Things then are Good or Evil, only in reference to Pleasure or Pain” (*Essay*, II, xx, §2). I have already discussed the fact that Locke considers desire, or unease, to be the primary motivator for action; this can now be understood as similar to the Epicurean view that what motivates us is our *desire* for pleasure (*Essay*, II, xx, §6).[[12]](#endnote-13) The similarity continues, as Locke argues that this unease can be understood as a kind of pain: “As much as we desire any absent good, so much are we in pain for it;” and every pain gives rise to a desire: “all pain causes desire equal to it self” (*Essay*, Bk II, ch. xxi, §31). Happiness, then, is understood in terms of pleasure and pain: “*Happiness* then in its full extent is the utmost Pleasure we are capable of, and *Misery* the utmost Pain: and the lowest degree of what can be called *Happiness*, is so much ease from all Pain, and so much present Pleasure, as without which any one cannot be content” (*Essay*, Bk II, ch. xxi, §42). The “ease from all Pain” would seem to be an essential characteristic of happiness, because as long as we have pain, we have a desire (to get rid of the pain), which undermines any pleasure we might feel.

There are differences between Locke and Epicurean thought. Locke makes no qualitative distinction between pleasures in his account, and pleasure seems to be of the kinetic sort. He does, however, recognize that “the removal or *lessening of a Pain is* considered, and operates as a *Pleasure*,” but this seems to be mostly a relativistic statement, as he follows it immediately by saying that, “the loss or diminishing of a Pleasure [is] a pain” (*Essay*, Bk. II, ch. xxi, §16). As a result, this does not alter the sense of pleasure and pain as particular sensations or experiences.

What brings Locke closer to Epicurus is his understanding of desire as a kind of pain, and the idea that the key to happiness is through the exercise of liberty that is found in the power to suspend the will. This suspension of the will, then, in order to deny an immediate desire in favor of a distant, abstract good, is a kind of asceticism. This asceticism, if it can be called that, is undoubtedly weak, but the notion of the suspension of desire is certainly one that the Epicureans would have felt comfortable with. Nonetheless, Locke’s claim reflects an important step in the rise of modern hedonism. The shift in attention from pleasure to desire here is important, in effect elevating the status of desire. For Epicurus, desire was without question an evil to be purged, to the greatest extent possible, from the system. For Locke, it gains substantially in value, because it becomes the root cause of action—even, in the desire for the greater good of the afterlife, virtuous action. We may also notice the departure of katastematic pleasure, which has no room in Locke’s theory.

One of the features of kinetic pleasure that distinguishes it from katastematic pleasure is its temporal frame. The latter’s stability is contrasted with the inherently unstable, fleeting nature of the former. Kinetic pleasure is in the moment, as it lasts only so long as the experience lasts. As positive entities, pleasure and pain become measurable (at least in theory), so one can tell at any given moment whether their quantity of pleasures exceeds their quantity of pain. One can then measure happiness over any given span of time—in the moment or with the moments all added up into a lifetime. This is qualitatively different, however, from understanding happiness as the quality of one’s life. If happiness is understood to be made up of discrete moments, these may be seen as isolated or only thinly connected to one another. Understood in the full frame of a lifetime, the factors that contribute to the quality of our lives take on additional meaning as they relate to one another. While momentary happiness may be recognized as social in the sense that other people are involved, it is easy to see this only as our own happiness, something that we experience ourselves and for which we ourselves are responsible. It is more difficult to individualize happiness when understood in the full frame of life, as it becomes clearer how our relationships with others—our interrelationships—affect our happiness, and our happiness is in fact wrapped up in theirs.

**Conclusion**

The person who is best able to retain a vision of not just the greater good but of the *greatest* good, and who can adhere to the demands of ascetic hedonism through the suspension of their will and turn their volition away from the causes of both immediate and greater goods, will be the one who will be most assured of a positive Judgment and the greatest Reward.

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1. Kroll says two substantial drafts were completed in 1671, which include the material of greatest relevance (1984). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Locke does not help matters by sometimes using “greater good” when context suggests that he means the Eternal sort. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. It is tempting to find evidence for Locke’s theological commitment in his use of what is called reverential capitalization—the use of capitalization for nouns and pronouns that reference the divine. Common examples of this are the capitalization of God, He or Him (when referencing God), and Heaven. In the chapter in question, there are plenty of examples where Locke appears to use reverential capitalization with words such as good, evil, happiness, etc. However, further examination shows that Locke is remarkably inconsistent. For example, we might see the use of reverential capitalization here: “From what has been said, it is easie to give an account, how it comes to pass, that though all Men desire Happiness, yet their *wills carry them so contrarily*, and consequently some of them to what is Evil.” But then, this passage from the same section would appear to undermine that interpretation: “…why one chose Luxury and Debauchery, and another Sobriety and Riches, would not be, because every one of these did not aim at his own happiness; but because their *Happiness* was placed in different things” (§54). This inconsistency makes it impossible to sustain a claim that reverential capitalization demonstrates Locke’s theological commitments. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Kroll argues that Epicureanism was ascendant as a philosophy in Locke’s time, and that it influenced a variety of thinkers, including Boyle and Hooker, as well as Locke and even Hobbes (1984). The line of dispersion would have started with Gassendi, who sought to Christianize Epicureanism (primarily in the works of Diogenes Laertius and Lucretius), which was fairly well-known by the 1650s. The “rehabilitation” of Epicurus had begun as early as the 15th century (Sarasohn 1996). Johnson argues that Gassendi is more appropriately considered a critic than a disciple of Epicurus, although he acknowledges that he “advocates the enlightened hedonism of Epicurus” (Johnson 2003). Most of the disagreements Johnson discusses between Epicurus and Gassendi are cosmological and theological. Gassendi’s discussion of Epicurus’ ethical theory seems fairly accurate (Gassendi, 1699). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Rosenbaum reflects this when he says that “Moral philosophers may react with surprise and perhaps disbelief to the idea that Epicurus left any moral theory worthy of contemporary interest” (1996). This difference can lead to interpretive problems, for example with Feldman, who analyzes Epicurus’ theory from a modern perspective but runs into a number of difficulties as a result (2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. “To qualify as hedonists, we must be exclusively interested in the pursuit of happiness and must regard pleasure or happiness as the sole intrinsic good” (Edwards 1979). (Edwards, 1979, p. 19) For Feldman, this means that it has to do with the “amount of welfare, or well-being, that an individual enjoys” (2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. It is, as will be seen, a mild sort of asceticism, but it is ascetic nonetheless. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. Rosenbaum notes that, despite “scholarly controversy” with respect to the relationship between kinetic and katastematic pleasure in Epicurus, “it is widely agreed that Epicurus took the good for people to be katastematic hedone” (1996). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. What this means is that, despite the fact that Epicurus was clearly a materialist in that he held that everything in the Universe, including souls and spiritual phenomena, could be explained through the movements of atoms, in its ethics Epicureanism may best be understood, paradoxically, as a profoundly anti-materialist philosophy, both in the sense that material goods are not the primary source of happiness, and that material (i.e., bodily) pleasures are seen as a lesser form. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. All this said, Epicurus admits that, “There is also a limit in simple living. He who fails to heed this limit falls into an error as great as that of the man who gives way to extravagance” (Epicurus n.d.-c). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. Virtually quoting this passage, Cicero has his Epicurean interlocutor refer to this as the “royal road to happiness” (Cicero 1931). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. Cf. Gassendi: “For when any pain happens to us, whether by Hunger, or by any other Desire, we are naturally carried to that Action, by which we may remove that Pain” (1699). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)