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PIETAS

A Journal of Tradition, Place, and Things Divine



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Suiting the “Relish of our Minds”: Locke’s Account of Reason and Happiness

Michael Driscoll

*John Locke is widely regarded as a defender of the right of individuals to pursue happiness, but scholars disagree about whether Locke imposes any limits on that pursuit or if he thinks the pursuit should be informed by any other consideration or standard. The range of interpretations is as wide as can be, with some arguing that Locke does not provide any such standard, while others say that he is a bona fide natural lawyer. An additional wrinkle, especially challenging to those who hold the latter position, is Locke’s famous rejection of a highest good. In this paper, I provide an interpretation of Locke’s treatment of happiness in the *Essay* that seeks to address some of the interpretive problems. My primary contention is three-fold: first, that Locke thinks there are degrees of happiness; second, that Locke thinks men should train themselves to pursue higher goods; and third, that his rejection of the concept of a “summum bonum” is not a repudiation of the argument that there are goods that are more or less conducive to happiness.*

I. INTRODUCTION¹

To ask about the foundations and ends of John Locke’s political philosophy and of his natural law is to invite controversy, and after decades of scholarly debate, several interpretive camps have emerged. Some are based on a premise from which, it is purported, the rest of Locke’s political theory flows. For some, Locke subscribes to a politics of “voluntarism” predicated upon the “unfettered and autonomous choice of individuals” and therefore rejects the notion that individuals ought to limit their choices on account of their obligations to their “community,” the “created order,” or “God.”² For others, Locke is a bona fide “Reformed” natural lawyer, i.e., “a practitioner of the Protestant natural law tradition of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.”³ Additionally, interpretations differ between those who

¹ References to Locke’s works will be to the following editions and in the following formats: *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Niddich (Oxford University Press, 1979), hereafter abbreviated as “*Essay*” followed by the book, chapter, and section (e.g., *Essay*, 1.1.1); *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge University Press, 1988), hereafter as “*First Treatise*” or “*Second Treatise*” followed by the section number (e.g., *Second Treatise*, §6); *Some Thoughts Concerning Education and Of the Conduct of the Understanding*, ed. Ruth W. Grant and Nathan Tarcov (Hackett, 1996), hereafter as either “*Education*” or “*Conduct*,” followed by the section number (e.g., *Education*, §1); and John Locke, *Locke: Political Essays*, ed. Mark Goldie (Cambridge University Press, 2008), hereafter as *Political Essays* followed by the page number.

² Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (Yale University Press, 2018), 31 and 34.

³ Graedon Zorzi, “Natural Teleology in John Locke’s Ethics,” *The Historical Journal* 67, no. 3 (2024): 387.

make dedicated studies of Locke himself, and those who are critical of liberalism simply and study Locke as “the first philosopher of liberalism.”⁴ To some degree, one can say that interpretations of Locke are related to the author’s feelings about Locke or the subjects about which he writes. To appropriate a line from Locke himself, interpretations of Locke’s political thought are a function of the “Principles, Notions, and Relishes” of men, which are “so different that it is hard to find [an interpretation] which pleases or displeases all.”⁵ For the sake of this essay, I wish to distinguish three interpretive positions that have emerged that implicate Locke’s understanding of ethics and happiness.

First, in spite of challenges over the years, there persists a view that Locke’s theory of natural rights amounts to “all rights and no duties.” This long-standing view has been invigorated in recent years among the so-called “post-liberals” who see Locke, in Graedon Zorzi’s summation, as the “pivotal subverter” of the traditional approach to the natural law.⁶ Such scholars have argued that Locke is an arch liberal whose arguments on behalf of natural rights untether men from all limitations.⁷ One of the earliest articulations of this view came from Willmoore Kendall, who thought that Locke’s argument for self-preservation was “ideological, not philosophical... born out of defiance of the norms of philosophical discourse, because it claims a right that has no correlative duties.”⁸ More recently, in the words of Peter Lawler, Locke’s project was to “redefine all of human life in terms of personal sovereignty, and... to free the individual from all experiences of indebtedness to others, nature, or God.”⁹ Similarly, Pierre Manent has argued that in the Lockean view of human nature, “man and the rights of man form a perfect and self-sufficient circle that contains the promise of an absolutely unprecedented liberation of man.”¹⁰

⁴ Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 32. Likewise, Ruth Grant, “John Locke on Custom’s Power and Reason’s Authority,” *The Review of Politics* 74, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 608n2, has noted that the individualist view of Locke has been reinforced by studies that “associate Locke with liberal individualism, Enlightenment individualism, or modern individualism.” For examples of such studies, consider Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2007) and Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Harvard University Press, 1989).

⁵ *Essay*, Epistle to the Reader, 9

⁶ Zorzi, “Natural Teleology,” 388.

⁷ At present, Patrick Deneen’s book *Why Liberalism Failed* is arguably the best-known statement of this view in the United States.

⁸ Willmoore Kendall, “John Locke Revisited,” in *Willmoore Kendall Contra Mundum*, ed. Nellie D. Kendall (Arlington House, 1971), 439.

⁹ Peter Augustine Lawler, “Natural Law, Our Constitution, and Our Democracy,” in *Modern America and the Legacy of the Founding*, ed. Ronald J. Pestritto and Thomas G. West (Lexington Books, 2007), 207.

¹⁰ Pierre Manent, *The City of Man*, trans. Marc A. LePain (Princeton University Press, 2000), 138. Another recent scholar of this persuasion is D.C. Schindler, *Freedom from Reality: The Diabolical Character of Modern Liberty*

A second camp, antithetical to the first, build on John Dunn in arguing that Locke's political thought rests on a more or less orthodox Protestant understanding of natural law.¹¹ These theorists have sought to challenge the arguments made above, but have struggled to win adherents due to the challenge of defending a Lockean view of natural teleology that, for example, squares with Locke's rejection of the summum bonum.¹² Zorzi has attempted to address this shortcoming by arguing that Locke's view of the human person as a "relational self" can be used to ground a coherent natural teleology.¹³ Yet while Zorzi's focus on man's relation to others and to God helps to refute aspects of the post-liberal critique, his argument has little to say about the reality of meaningful human differences and their implications for the pursuit of earthly happiness (a point to which I will return later in this article). It might be said that the chief shortcoming of this position is methodologically similar to that of the first camp, namely, it puts too much weight on certain elements of Locke's presentation while paying insufficient attention to others.

The followers of Leo Strauss have carved out a third position with multiple variations. Some, more closely following Strauss's argument in *Natural Right and History*, argue that Locke builds his project upon the Hobbesian (or a refined Hobbesian) view of self-preservation with an emphasis on natural rights.¹⁴ Others say that Locke's political thought requires a stronger moral basis and depends (to give some examples) upon a view of man as

(University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), 48 and 50, who argues that Locke conceives of the human will as a "self-determining power" that is an "end in itself," which, consequently, makes "the question of God [and the requisite moral limitations such a God would demand]... more or less a matter of indifference." For an argument similar to Schindler's, see Michael Pakaluk, "From Natural Law to Natural Rights," in Michael Rohlf et al., *The Modern Turn* (The Catholic University of America Press, 2017), 89-111.

¹¹ I borrow this categorization from Zorzi, which includes John Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke: An Historical Account of the Argument of the "Two Treatises of Government"* (Cambridge University Press, 1969); Jeremy Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality: Christian Foundations in Locke's Political Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 2002); and Diego Lucci, *John Locke's Christianity* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), among others. See Zorzi, "Natural Teleology," 387-88.

¹² See *Essay*, 2.21.55. Zorzi states this problem helpfully (see "Natural Teleology," 388).

¹³ Zorzi, "Natural Teleology," 390.

¹⁴ See Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (University of Chicago Press, 1953); Patrick Coby, "The Law of Nature in Locke's *Second Treatise*: Is Locke a Hobbesian?," *The Review of Politics* 49, no. 1 (1987): 3-28; and Thomas L. Pangle, *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism: The Moral Vision of the American Founders and the Philosophy of Locke* (University of Chicago Press, 1988).

a “self-owner”¹⁵ or on the priority Locke gives to reason over custom and desire.¹⁶ As an interpretive block, the Straussians are generally united in their opposition to the first two camps, as they would say that 1) Locke does put at least some limits on human freedom, and that 2) Dunn and his followers conflate reason and revelation and thereby paper over important problems in Locke’s arguments. In turn, the proponents of the reformed natural law interpretation see the Straussian Locke as a “secularizer,” but a more charitable reading might be that the Straussians understand Locke as continuing an effort, arguably initiated in early modern political philosophy, to lower the aim of politics in a way that deescalates tensions and bloodshed that could and did arise from a religiously motivated politics.¹⁷ Additionally, some Straussians view Locke’s natural law and religious allusions as insincere or carefully crafted “noble lies” that place his allegedly novel arguments on traditional and, therefore, familiar foundations.¹⁸

Recently, Daniel Burns has taken a position that rejects the esoteric assumptions of other Straussians and relies instead on Locke’s explicit statements concerning the natural law. Burns suggests that while Locke does provide an argument for natural rights that resembles that of Hobbes, the Straussians err in their effort to discredit 1) Locke’s distinction between the state of nature and the state of war, and 2) his several arguments insisting that all men are in a relationship to “some type of deity” that made them and thus set bounds for their conduct towards each other.¹⁹ Burns believes that establishing the grounds of the natural law

¹⁵ Michael P. Zuckert, *Launching Liberalism: On Lockean Political Philosophy* (University Press of Kansas, 2002). Some critics have questioned how each person’s claim to self-ownership could generate mutual obligations (see Thomas G. West, “Nature and Happiness in Locke,” *Claremont Review of Books* 4, no. 2 (2004): 54. Others contend that Locke’s view of self-ownership should be modified due, in part, to his arguments for divine ownership (e.g., Johan Olsthoorn, “Self-Ownership and Despotism: Locke on Property in the Person, Divine Dominion of Human Life, and Rights-Forfeiture,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 36, no. 2 (2019): 242–63).

¹⁶ Ruth Grant, “Reason’s Authority,” especially 621–26. See also Peter C. Myers, *Our Only Star and Compass: Locke and the Struggle for Political Rationality* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1998).

¹⁷ For example, compare Zorzi, “Natural Teleology,” 389, n. 12 and Zuckert, *Launching Liberalism*, 12, 14, 153, and 305.

¹⁸ Pangle provides a good example of this approach. After arguing that Locke subtly reinterprets Scripture to fit his purposes, Pangle adds the following note: “Locke continues to employ biblical language and references not merely to elude persecution, and avoid offending pious potential adherents, but also because of his conviction that among the vast majority of men reason, and the god reason discovers, will always need strong reinforcements if it is to be effective as the guide of life” (See *Modern Republicanism*, 150).

¹⁹ Daniel E. Burns, “Hobbes and God in Locke’s Law of Nature,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 32, no. 5 (2024): 1001 and 1008.

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must be done first before scholars can address other contentious issues, such as Locke's hedonism or his arguments regarding innate ideas.²⁰

While recent accounts have offered correctives to many of the problems in earlier interpretations, I think many of these arguments fail to get to what Locke terms the "bottom."²¹ Despite their nuances, these accounts still do not address the grounds upon which Locke's arguments for natural law are founded. Instead, the debates focus on the proper way to construe Locke's various teachings, or "doctrines" as Strauss called them, with many focusing on the natural law. While not a problem in itself and acknowledging that not every article or book can address every possible contingency, such approaches tend not to appreciate the arguments for natural law as a conclusion that depends on other assumptions. For example, while Burns may be a careful reader of Locke's natural law teaching, his argument does not address the ultimate purpose of the natural law. For Locke the natural law, like all law, aims at promoting happiness:

For Law, in its true Notion, is not so much a Limitation as the direction of a free and intelligent Agent to his proper Interest... Could they be happier without it, the Law, as a useless thing would of it self vanish; and that ill deserves the Name of Confinement which hedges us in only from Bogs and Precipices.²²

The argument here assumes that Locke thinks man has some end which the natural law helps him achieve. But by implicating happiness, Locke is nudging us to other places in his writings where he takes on that subject. Hence, it is necessary to address topics such as Locke's treatment of happiness in the *Essay* before addressing his view of the natural law.²³

A few scholars have attempted to specifically address the role of happiness in Locke's view of natural law. Elliot Rossiter argues that Lockean man can identify a path to happiness by reflecting upon his own experience of pleasure and pain. This is achieved through what Rossiter calls Locke's idea of "Convenientia," which says that God sows pleasure and pain into our lives to "function as signposts of divine intent," and to "give us incentives to act

²⁰ Burns, "Hobbes and God in Locke's Law of Nature," 1001.

²¹ See Locke, *Conduct*, §44.

²² Locke, *Second Treatise*, §57.

²³ In reading Locke in this way, I follow the insight of Thomas G. West, that Locke, like Plato, forces you to consider his works alongside one another in order to see the breadth and depth of his thought. See West, "The Ground of Locke's Law of Nature," *Social Philosophy & Policy* 29, no. 2 (July 2012): 49.

morally.”²⁴ Moreover, Rossiter argues that God “harmonizes” the duties that man must observe to achieve heaven “with our temporal happiness.”²⁵ However, despite thoughtfully attending to Locke’s treatment of experience, Rossiter’s approach is heavily dependent upon the same assumptions as the reformed natural law camp and therefore open to similar critiques.

More comprehensive is the argument provided by Thomas West. West argues that the foundation for Locke’s teaching on the law of nature is “his understanding of the conditions of human happiness.”²⁶ When “reason is doing its proper job,” says West, each person is able to pursue his own “idiosyncratic path to happiness” and to pursue “common goods—such as life and procreation of offspring.”²⁷ What sets West’s interpretation apart is his treatment of Locke’s account of human differences and the importance of those differences for the pursuit of happiness of particular men. Moreover, West’s argument for the “idiosyncratic” path to happiness provides the most plausible explanation for Locke’s famous rejection of the “summum bonum” that I have encountered. Still, as I will show, West’s account might overemphasize the significance of human differences, and his treatment deemphasizes Locke’s insistence that men should train themselves to enjoy greater goods here on earth.

Following interpreters like West and Rossiter, this essay seeks to provide an account of Locke’s view of happiness in the *Essay* that can serve to illuminate his teachings on natural law.²⁸ Focusing on the arguments in Locke’s mature works, I provide overview and analysis of Locke’s treatments of pleasure, pain, man’s ability to suspend his immediate desires for

²⁴ Elliot Rossiter, “Hedonism and Natural Law in Locke’s Moral Philosophy,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 54, no. 2 (2016): 210.

²⁵ Rossiter, “Hedonism and Natural Law,” 214. Likewise, Alex Scott Tuckness, “The Coherence of a Mind: John Locke and the Law of Nature,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 37, no. 1 (1999): 86, argues that “[i]f there is an expectation of future rewards for compliance to the law of God, then those who disobey that law act irrationally and in a manner that is morally reprehensible since they are not using the tool God has given them for decision making, reason, properly” (86).

²⁶ West, “Ground of Locke’s Law of Nature,” 2. Similarly, Eric R. Claeys, “The Private Society and the Liberal Public Good in John Locke’s Thought,” *Social Philosophy & Policy* 25, no. 2 (2008): 208, says that Locke is a “‘eudaimonistic’ consequentialist,” who “measures good consequences in reference to happiness” and understands such happiness to refer “primarily to a state of moral well-being of the sort people associate with ‘mature’ or ‘virtuous’ individuals.”

²⁷ West, “Ground of Locke’s Law of Nature,” 49.

²⁸ Due to the scope of my argument, I will not devote time to the natural law itself in this essay, although I will make some cursory remarks in the conclusion. Additionally, many of the scholarly debates regarding this section of the essay are the purview of those studying philosophy, epistemology, metaphysics, and ethical theory. I will point to some of their views in the course of my discussion but will come back to the debates outlined in the introduction when discussing Locke’s rejection of the summum bonum.

the sake of future happiness, and his rejection of the *summum bonum*.²⁹ My key contribution to the debates described above is two-fold. First, I argue that Locke recognizes that there are degrees of happiness that are attached to things themselves and, second, that his statement rejecting the *summum bonum* is not a denial that some goods are better than others (or an endorsement of relativism). Rather, Locke's famous discussion in *Essay* 2.21.55 is an assessment that most men follow their native constitutions or passions, rather than reason, in their pursuit of happiness. However, as I will show, Locke insists that men can (and should) employ their reasons and train their desires, not only with a view to attaining heavenly bliss (as the Christian interpreters of Locke point out), but because it tends to greater degrees of pleasure here on earth. In my conclusion, I consider some unresolved tensions in Locke's thought on happiness, especially the tension between his insistence that men can train themselves to enjoy greater goods and his recognition of human differences and the limits this may place on their capacity for improvement.

To clarify my core argument, two additional point should be stated at the outset. Firstly, my interpretation rests on the presupposition that by studying nature, Lockean man can learn about how he ought to live in order to pursue and attain some degree of happiness.³⁰ Locke says that all the "materials of Reason and Knowledge" are derived from our perception of and reflection upon our "Experience."³¹ If happiness is the aim, then a Lockean approach would begin with an investigation into the "nature of things"³² with the aim of properly identifying the "true intrinsick good or ill" of the things investigated.³³ In so doing, a man might come to understand which activities and goods most conduce to happiness and which accordingly ought to receive his preference. For Locke, a proper examination of the world

²⁹ Two points on methodology. First, I share Burns's concern that some have overstated and taken liberties when interpreting Locke esoterically. Instead, I, like Burns, think any argument about Locke needs to begin with the words on the page, "which even Strauss claimed (at least) was the right way to interpret Locke's works" (see Burns, "Hobbes and God in Locke's Natural Law," 1001). Second, my primary concern is with Locke's mature, published works (i.e., those published around or after 1689). When I discuss unpublished writings, I mostly focus on those that are written in the same general timeframe that help to clarify themes found in the published works. As a result, I do not enter debates regarding the significance of the revisions Locke made to the *Essay*, for example (e.g., Matthew Stuart, "Agency: The Revised Account," in *Locke's Metaphysics*, ed. Matthew Stuart (Oxford University Press, 2013).

³⁰ This is akin to Rossiter's argument for "Convenientia" insofar as Locke believes nature to be intelligible.

³¹ Locke, *Essay*, 2.1.2.

³² In the *Essay*, Locke makes frequent use of this phrase to critique academic explanations that do not adequately attend to the nature of the thing in question, e.g., 2.13.18 and 20. For other examples of this phrase see 2.21.37 and 2.23.32.

³³ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.53.

will prompt man to virtuous action, because it is the surest way to happiness in this world (and possibly in the next).³⁴

Secondly, as a consequence of Locke's insistence that all knowledge comes from experience and rational reflections upon experience, my essay seeks to avoid conflating reason and revelation in Locke's arguments concerning happiness in the *Essay*. Interpretations of Locke's natural law have been divided on this point. As Burns notes, while Locke insists that the natural law is "knowable by the light of Nature... without the help of positive Revelation," many scholars (mostly following Dunn) believe Locke's natural law relies upon "the specifically Christian morality of his age or of his personal conviction."³⁵ In a similar way, while Locke makes frequent reference to the Bible when discussing happiness in the *Essay*, he states in the conclusion to the book that discovering how to pursue happiness falls "within the compass of Humane Understanding."³⁶ Moreover, in the same conclusion, Locke defines "Ethicks" as a species of practical science, which seeks to discover the "Rules, and Measures of Humane actions, which lead to Happiness and the Means to practise them."³⁷ Accordingly, while I do not pass any judgment concerning the reasons for which Locke may invoke the authority of Scripture, my focus is on his treatment of how men can pursue happiness by utilizing reason to reflect upon the phenomena they experience.

II. PLEASURE: THE CORE OF HAPPINESS

For Locke, the essential components of happiness and misery are pleasure and pain. When we say that something makes us happy or miserable, we mean that it gives us some sort of pleasure or pain. He provides the following definitions:

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 ... what has an aptness to produce Pleasure in us, is that we call Good, and what is apt to

³⁴ It is worth noting that while Locke will sometimes speak of the "knowledge" we can gain regarding our pursuit of happiness, it is not "knowledge" in the sense in which Locke strictly defines it in book four of the *Essay*. Many scholars have noted that Locke is fairly pessimistic when it comes to obtaining "certainty" on questions of morality (E.g., Patrick J. Connolly, "Locke's Theory of Demonstration and Demonstrative Morality," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 98, no. 2 (2019): 435–51). Rather, Locke's argument that being a student of nature can help man to achieve happiness, would seem to rest more on his understanding of "Assurance," i.e., the "highest degree of Probability" (See *Essay*, 4.16.6).

³⁵ See Locke, *Essay*, 1.3.13 and Burns, "Hobbes and God in Locke's Law of Nature," 999–1000.

³⁶ *Essay*, 4.21.1.

³⁷ *Essay*, 4.21.3.

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produce Pain in us, we call *Evil*, for no other reason, but for its aptness to produce Pleasure and Pain in us, wherein consists our Happiness and Misery.³⁸

Some interpreters consider statements of this type as indicative of a kind of relativism regarding happiness. For example, D.C. Schindler finds it significant that Locke's definition allows for things to be good or evil based on one's peculiar perception.³⁹ In contrast, others believe that Locke's treatment of happiness is too nuanced and evocative of classical arguments to reduce to simple relativism.⁴⁰

For our purposes, it is sufficient to highlight the fact that Locke recognizes degrees of happiness. The lowest degree is characterized merely by the absence of all pain and the possession of enough pleasure to be content. The zenith, or happiness in the complete sense, is unknown to us, according to Locke. "Happiness and Misery are the names of two extremes, the utmost bounds whereof we know not; 'tis what *Eye hath not seen, Ear hath not heard, nor hath it entered into the Heart of Man to conceive*."⁴¹ Nevertheless, while these extremes are unknowable and unavailable in this life, "several instances of Delight and Joy on the one side and Torment and Sorrow on the other," have provided us with a sufficient grasp of the different degrees (and perhaps kinds) of happiness and misery.⁴² One of the clearest discussions illustrating the different degrees of happiness comes in Locke's discussion of "Love" and "Joy" in the *Essay*.

Locke defines Love as the "Delight, which any present, or absent thing is apt to produce in him."⁴³ Taking the example of grapes, Locke says that man will say that he loves them, i.e.,

³⁸ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.42.

³⁹ Schindler, *Freedom from Reality*, 29. See also James W. Byrne, "The Basis of the Natural Law in Locke's Philosophy," *The Catholic Lawyer* 10, no. 1 (1964), 59.

⁴⁰ For example, Douglas John Casson, *Liberating Judgment: Fanatics, Skeptics, and John Locke's Politics of Probability* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 169, asserts that Locke does not conceive of happiness in "purely subjective terms" and that Locke thinks "certain tastes or relishes simply do not lead to happiness." Likewise, Steven Forde, *Locke, Science, and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 120, says that Locke is able to "escape relativism" by distinguishing between the goods to which one would be prompted by "raw appetite" and those that are conducive to more stable happiness. Even more striking, Phillip Mitsis, "Locke on Pleasure, Law, and Moral Motivation," in *Moral Motivation: A History*, ed. Iakovos Vasilou (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 158, thinks that there is merit to reading Locke's hedonism "within the teleological and eudaimonist perspective of ancient ethical theory" (though he does acknowledge some differences).

⁴¹ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.41, emphasis in the original. The italicized section is quoted from I Corinthians 2:9. While Locke's reference speaks of the Christian promise of heavenly bliss, it is noteworthy that he employs the quotation to emphasize that perfect happiness is unknown to us. To translate the biblical text into the Lockean lexicon, experience cannot help us to comprehend perfect happiness or misery. At most, in this life, men can dimly consider what it would be like to experience these extremes.

⁴² Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.41.

⁴³ Locke, *Essay*, 2.20.4.

“the taste of Grapes delights him,” while he is eating them or when he is thinking about them while they are out of season. However, if the same man by a change in his health or palate ceases to be pleased by their taste “he then can be said to *love* Grapes no longer.”⁴⁴ This statement is instructive for understanding Locke’s view of the pleasures we can receive from “inanimate insensible beings,” namely, that none of them can produce perpetual pleasure, and what pleasure we do gain from such goods is heavily dependent upon our constitutions. Conversely, our love for human beings is of a different character.⁴⁵

When discussing the love that we feel for other people, Locke says that we are referring to the “Delight, which we find in ourselves arising from a consideration of their very Being, or Happiness.” In other words, our happiness is contingent upon their happiness. This is the kind of delight a man takes in the “Being and Welfare” of his “Children or Friends,” whom he loves. It seems that this kind of pleasure is qualitatively different from the delight which a man may take in grapes. Locke says that the delight produced by the love for another human is on account of their “very Being, or Happiness” and is a “constant Delight.”⁴⁶ This is in contrast to the delight taken in eating the grape which provides the pleasure only while being eaten or reflecting upon the prospect of tasting a grape in the future. The same distinction is made in Locke’s description of another passion, “Joy.”

“Joy” is the “delight of the Mind” stemming from our reflection upon “the present or assured approaching possession of a Good.”⁴⁷ Locke again gives two examples, one pertaining to the satisfaction received from an inanimate good and one describing how man takes joy in other human beings. For the first, he says that a man “almost starved, has Joy in the arrival of Relief” even if his hunger is not yet (but will soon be) satiated. This is again in contrast to the second type of joy, that taken in human beings. Locke says that a Father delights in the “well-being of his Children,” which is a constant possession of his so long as his children persist in “such a State” of well-being.⁴⁸ The possession he has in his delight in his children’s well-being is special because it is an endless source of pleasure, “for he needs but to reflect on it to have that pleasure.”⁴⁹ Given his treatments of love and joy, it would

⁴⁴ Locke, *Essay*, 2.20.4.

⁴⁵ Locke, *Essay*, 2.20.5.

⁴⁶ Locke, *Essay*, 2.20.5.

⁴⁷ Locke, *Essay*, 2.20.7.

⁴⁸ Locke, *Essay*, 2.20.7.

⁴⁹ *Essay*, 2.20.7.

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seem that Locke thinks there is a higher kind of pleasure to be taken in one's children or friends by reflecting upon their welfare than in perishable goods such as food.

In an unpublished essay written in 1692, Locke builds upon this theme, arguing that if we wish to attain happiness, we must prioritize the right kind of pleasures:

If then happiness be our interest, end, and business 'tis evident the way to it is to love our neighbour as ourself, for by that means we enlarge and secure our pleasures, since then all the good we do to them redoubles upon ourselves and gives us an undecaying and uninterrupted pleasure. Whoever spared a meal to save the life of a starving man, much more a friend, which all men are to us who we love, but had more and much more lasting pleasure in it than he that ate it. The other's pleasure died as he ate and ended his meal. But to him that give it him 'tis a feast as often as he reflects on it.⁵⁰

This statement is a clear example of Locke's view of the superiority of certain pleasures. Rossiter, commenting on Locke's argument, summarizes the case clearly saying that the person who "forgoes material pleasures for the sake of others obtains immaterial pleasures that are longer lasting and greater in magnitude than the glutton or libertine."⁵¹ While Rossiter argues that acts of charity provide the "the greatest pleasure that can be found in this life," Locke makes other statements indicating that friendship and philosophy should share the podium.⁵²

FRIENDSHIP, PHILOSOPHY, AND HAPPINESS

While Locke does not have a definitive treatment of friendship, that friendship is an obvious source of happiness is evident throughout Locke's career.⁵³ Perhaps the strongest statement Locke makes on the pleasure derived from friendship comes from the dedication of *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* to his friend Sir Edward Clarke: "For I know no greater pleasure in this life, or a better remembrance to be left behind one [after his death], than a long friendship with an honest, useful, and worthy man and lover of his Country."⁵⁴ A more

⁵⁰ Locke, "Ethica A," in *Political Essays*, 319.

⁵¹ Rossiter, "Hedonism and Natural Law in Locke," 212

⁵² Rossiter, "Hedonism and Natural Law in Locke," 212.

⁵³ In "Essays on the Laws of Nature VIII," in *Political Essays*, 133, Locke says that the "observance of this [the natural law] gives rise to peace, harmonious relations, *friendship*, freedom from punishment, security, possession of our property, and—to sum it all up in one word—happiness" (my emphasis). Myers also recognizes that friendship is an important component of Lockean happiness and shares my lament that Locke did not treat of it more fully (see Myers, *Star and Compass*, 158–60).

⁵⁴ Locke, *Education*, Dedication, 9.

subtle, but instructive praise for friendship is found in the argument of the *Education* itself. The possibility for friendship between father and son is one of the crowning achievements of Locke's educational recommendations.

Another thing of greater consequence, which you will obtain by such a way of treating him [your son], will be *his friendship*. Many fathers, though they proportion to their sons liberal allowances, according to their age and condition; yet they keep the knowledge of their estates and concerns from them with as much reservedness, as if they were guarding a secret of state from a spy or an enemy. This, if it looks not like jealousy, yet it wants those marks of kindness and intimacy, which a father should show to his son; and, no doubt, often hinders, or abates that cheerfulness and satisfaction, wherewith a son should address himself to, and rely upon his father. And I cannot but often wonder to see fathers, who love their sons very well, yet so order the matter, by a constant stiffness, and a mien of authority and distance to them all their lives, as if they were never to enjoy or have any comfort from those they love best in the world, till they have lost them by being removed into another. Nothing cements and establishes friendship and good-will, so much as *confident communication* of concerns and affairs.⁵⁵

Here, Locke suggests that friendship should be the fulfillment of the love between a father and son. The educational program Locke prescribes is meant to facilitate the son's maturation to adulthood, which ultimately means he is a capable equal and therefore potential friend to his father. By admitting the son into his counsels and the affairs of his life and business, the father can cement the education his son has received, and he can "enjoy" and have "comfort" from his son, one of the persons whom he "love[s] best in the world." Moreover, friends are also companions with whom one can engage in the pursuit of knowledge. In fact, Locke says that it was conversations with his "Friends" that gave the "first Occasion" for his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, and the pleasures that accompanied that philosophical inquiry.⁵⁶

Locke extolls the endless pleasures to be gained through philosophy and the improvement of our knowledge. Locke calls the "UNDERSTANDING" the "most elevated Faculty of the Soul," the use of which produces "greater, and more constant Delight than any of the other [faculties of the soul]." The philosopher enjoys the "Hunter's Satisfaction," because at "every moment of his Pursuit" he is rewarded with some delight. Indeed, the very

⁵⁵ Locke, *Education*, §96, emphases in the original.

⁵⁶ Locke, *Essay*, Epistle to the Reader, 9.

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“Progress towards knowledge” is as pleasant if not more so, than its acquisition.⁵⁷ Locke elsewhere develops a similar point when discussing the perpetual pleasures that can be gained from the study of theology. While some may only have the “time and industry” to study the “most necessary parts” of theology, those with leisure and ability “may be enabled to go on to the more abstruse parts of it, and penetrate into those infinite depths dilled with the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”⁵⁸ On this point, Locke continues in the tradition that sees intellectual activity as the source of the most rarified earthly happiness. For example, Locke agrees both with Hobbes who says that the good derived from the pursuit of knowledge is “Indefatigable,”⁵⁹ and with Aristotle, who says that attached to philosophy are “pleasures that are wondrous in purity and stability.”⁶⁰

However, while Locke suggests that such actions are a source of great pleasure, he also recognizes that most people are not moved to pursue higher goods even if they acknowledge that those goods are productive of more rarified happiness. To understand this dynamic, we must attend to Locke's understanding of pain.⁶¹

III. PAIN, DESIRE, AND THE IMPETUS TO HAPPINESS

In contrast to pleasure, which is the most elemental part of “happiness” and “good”, pain is the most fundamental part of “misery” and “evil.”⁶² Locke defines evil as that which “is apt to produce or increase any Pain, or diminish any Pleasure in us; or else to procure us any Evil, or deprive us of any Good.”⁶³ Similar to pleasure, Locke says that pain has the “same efficacy and use to set us on work,” or to lead us to choose one course of action over another in order to avoid the pain.⁶⁴ There are two related but distinguishable reasons for which pain motivates actions. First, pain warns us that continued exposure to certain objects will cause

⁵⁷ Locke, *Essay*, Epistle to the Reader, 6.

⁵⁸ Locke, *Conduct*, §23.

⁵⁹ See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge University Press, 1996), Ch. 6, 42.

⁶⁰ See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (University of Chicago Press, 2011), 1176a20–28.

⁶¹ My account explores the dynamic Locke describes without attempting to illustrate the plausibility or implausibility of his theory or to determine whether men are free or determined when acting to remove pain or satisfy desires. It is sufficient to note that these are questions of interest to scholars approaching Locke from the disciplinary perspective of philosophy. For example, see Mitsis, 169–78 and Valtteri Viljanen, “[Locke on Freedom, Moral Agency, and the Space of Reasons](#),” *Locke Studies* 24 (2024): 1–20.

⁶² Locke, *Essay*, 2.7.2.

⁶³ Locke, *Essay*, 2.20.2.

⁶⁴ Locke, *Essay*, 2.7.4.

us harm and second, pain indicates that something essential is missing from our happiness. The first concept is evident whenever we touch something sharp: we pull our hand away on account of the pain, which protects us from a deeper and more serious wound. Pain can also serve as a warning that too much of a good thing would be bad for us, since it is “often produced by the same Objects and Ideas, that produce Pleasure in us.” From the manner in which pain serves as a warning, Locke concludes that pain not only protects us from superficial injuries, but it is indicative of nature’s intention to promote the health of each “part [of the body] and organ in its perfection.”⁶⁵

Locke uses the examples of heat and light to show how the excess of a pleasant thing can be harmful to us. Even though heat is very “agreeable to us in one degree,” when the temperature rises even slightly, it is “no ordinary torment.” Likewise, light, “the most pleasant of all sensible Objects... causes a very painful sensation” when it is too intense.⁶⁶ Reflecting on these phenomena, Locke comes to his conclusion about the “end or use of pain.” It has been “ordered by Nature,” Locke says, that when an object would harm us, “by the vehemency of its operation,” the pain we feel warns us to escape to protect our organs “for the future.”⁶⁷ Pain preserves man by informing him about what is “necessary to the preservation of life, and the exercise of the several functions of the Body,” and thereby the body’s perfection. Thus, for Locke, man is able, upon proper reflection, to perceive how the natural order directs him away from what would do him harm. In the same way, Locke says that the pain a man feels when he lacks something integral to his happiness also indicates nature’s intention to direct man to his good.

The passion that motivates man to pursue goods that he lacks is “desire.” Locke defines “desire” as an “uneasiness of the Mind for want of some absent good.”⁶⁸ Such uneasiness could stem from present experience of pain or the acknowledgement of some good that we do not presently have but are “in pain for it.”⁶⁹ However, while we always desire to be rid of present physical or mental discomfort, we do not always pine after goods that we do not possess, “because the absence of good is not always a pain, as the presence of pain is. And

⁶⁵ Locke, *Essay*, 2.7.4.

⁶⁶ Locke, *Essay*, 2.7.4.

⁶⁷ Locke, *Essay*, 2.7.4.

⁶⁸ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.31.

⁶⁹ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.31.

therefore, absent good may be... considered without desire.”⁷⁰ Experience confirms that desire or uneasiness is pain, because when one tries to delay the satisfaction of desire, he becomes “Heart sick.”⁷¹ Thus, Locke says that even “Life it self, and all its Enjoyments” are a “burden” when oppressed by “uneasiness.”⁷²

The efficacy of pain to motivate us to act leads Locke to the conclusion that uneasiness alone moves the human will.⁷³ It is only due to the uneasiness a man feels in his present circumstances that motivates him to change his station. Locke's reflection upon the pain brought about by desire re-introduces the “All-wise Maker” and man's natural condition regarding pleasure and pain. God has put into man “the uneasiness of hunger and thirst, and other natural desires, that return at their Seasons, to move and determine their Wills, for the preservation of themselves and the preservation of their Species.”⁷⁴ These natural desires motivate the will because of their strength; man is not free to ignore them. To illustrate this, Locke points to a man who delights in study, but is accosted by the pangs of hunger. Although his will was “never determined... by the pleasant taste” of food and drink, yet due to his hunger and thirst, he is “presently determined to Eating and Drinking.”⁷⁵ These “natural desires,” as Locke calls them, seem to carry with them their own force, that is, no one needs to be coerced or encouraged to eat, drink, satisfy sexual appetite, etc. For most people, “greater goods,” such as study, do not carry with them their own force.

Consequently, greater goods do not motivate the will on their own. Contrary to the “general consent of Mankind... the greater good, though apprehended and acknowledged to be so, does not determine the will, until our desire, raised proportionably to it, makes us

⁷⁰ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.31.

⁷¹ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.32.

⁷² Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.32.

⁷³ See Locke, *Essay*, 2.20.6 and 2.21.33–35. Locke comes to this conclusion by arguing against the freedom of the human will. However, this does not mean men do not have liberty. For Locke, only agents can be free, so the real question is not “Whether the will be free, but whether a Man be free” (2.21.20). The word “will” stands for a “faculty” or “power,” that denotes the ability of an agent to prefer one thing to another, but there is not necessarily liberty to be exercised in this preference. For example, Locke says that a man falling into water is under the necessity of falling and is not free to stop though he would prefer not to fall (2.21.9). Similarly, the mind of “A Man on the Rack” is unable to focus on anything else despite his preference for comfort (2.21.12). Liberty, on the other hand is “the power a Man has to do or forbear doing any particular Action, according as its doing or forbearance has the actual preference in the Mind,” i.e., accords to his own will (2.21.15). Thus, “will” merely describes the thing a man wants while “liberty” consists in the “power to act, or not to act” (2.21.23).

⁷⁴ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.34. This allusion to God does not appear to be to the God of Christian Revelation, per se. Rather, it seems to be another way of invoking providence or the intelligibility of nature.

⁷⁵ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.43.

uneasy” due to our lack of that same good.⁷⁶ To illustrate this point, Locke provides the example of the drunkard who experiences uneasiness for his “cup” and drinking “Companions,” which “drives him to the Tavern.” This man recognizes that there may be greater goods, such as virtue, financial security, good reputation, or “the joys of another life,” and he even makes “resolutions to pursue the greater good” in the future. However, no good will be able to overcome the strength of his “habitual thirst,” until his desire for drink—“the tickling of his palate with a glass of Wine”—is replaced by the desire for a greater good.⁷⁷ Contentment, and especially the lack of it, proves to be the greatest force motivating the will.

To reiterate what was said above, “the lowest degree of what can be called Happiness” is contentment, that is, sufficient “ease from all Pain” and the enjoyment of “present pleasure.”⁷⁸ This desire to be at ease from pain is what Locke means when he says that only uneasiness moves the will. “Pain and uneasiness,” are for everyone, “inconsistent with happiness; spoiling the relish... [and] serving to marr all the pleasure” we might have.⁷⁹ Thus, the “first and necessary step towards happiness,” is “always” the removal of pain.⁸⁰ Notably, however, the desire to remove pain does not necessarily lead to a pursuit of genuinely higher pleasures. Indeed, so long as man is plagued with the pain of various lower passions, he is distracted from the consideration of better pleasures. Even when vividly presented, the “unspeakable joys of heaven”⁸¹ fail to motivate those enslaved to bodily pain, the pangs of love, or the “impatient desire for revenge.”⁸² Thus, since men “in this life [are] beset with sundry uneasinesses, [and] distracted with different desires,” they tend to satisfy those desires that will remove immediately pressing pains.⁸³ A simple example is hunger, an all-consuming sensation that can be simply removed by eating.⁸⁴

What follows from these reflections is that ordinary life consists of a relentless train of desires that prevent us from focusing on higher goods. There are the “natural” desires such as “Hunger, Thirst, Heat, Cold, Weariness with labour, and Sleepiness,” which can never

⁷⁶ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.35.

⁷⁷ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.35.

⁷⁸ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.42.

⁷⁹ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.36.

⁸⁰ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.36.

⁸¹ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.37.

⁸² Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.38.

⁸³ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.40.

⁸⁴ Consider the studious man described earlier, who is distracted from his work by hunger. See Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.43.

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be fully removed.⁸⁵ There are also “adopted” desires such as the “itch after Honour, Power, or Riches,” which Locke calls “habits” acquired by “Fashion, Example, and Education,” i.e., by “custom.”⁸⁶ With this bevy of desires constantly bombarding him, man is “seldom at ease, and free enough from [their] solicitation,” and is, therefore, unable to pursue “absent goods” that are higher and unrelated to the appeasement of his immediate needs and wants.⁸⁷ Locke suggests that the only way to overcome this situation is for man to exercise his reason.

IV. RATIONALITY: THE SOURCE OF HUMAN LIBERTY

To elevate our minds to greater pursuits, man must exercise his rational faculty and make those distant goods more proximate.⁸⁸ Locke says that this is accomplished, by “repeated Contemplation,” which can provide the good with some “relish” whereby we begin to consider the good in question to be necessary to our happiness and make it “stand[] upon fair terms with the rest” of our desires.⁸⁹ Locke describes the process for raising our estimation of a good as follows: “[B]y 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... it may come to work upon the will, and be pursued.”⁹⁰ It would appear that this process is impossible since man could never have the “leisure” for such contemplation given the existence of the many passions and desires that plague his life.⁹¹ However, Locke says that man, as a rational and intelligent being, has the power to “suspend the execution and

⁸⁵ While they serve as distractions, it is important to remember that these natural desires are not bad in Locke's view. On the contrary, these natural pains serve to teach men how to preserve themselves and are a foundation from which we can move to consider the goodness of God. This last point will be discussed later. See Locke, *Essay*, 2.7.5-6.

⁸⁶ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.45. In this same section, Locke says that these customary habits are “made natural to us” by virtue of their being practiced.

⁸⁷ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.45. It is arguments like this where Locke highlights man's preoccupation with present discomfort and the constant intrusion of desires that leads Manent (wrongly in my view) to conclude that Locke's description of human action makes man a “prisoner of the present” who “never has the time to desire the good for its own sake” (See Manent, *The City of Man*, 131). Manent's conclusion echoes Strauss's “joyless quest for joy” (See *Natural Right and History*, 250).

⁸⁸ Again, recent theorists who approach this material often do so with an eye toward Locke's philosophical contributions to theories of human freedom of choice, such as Locke's suspension theory (e.g., Viljanen, “Space for Reasons,” 7) or his treatment of man's “weakness of will” or Akrasia (e.g., Matthew A. Leisinger, “[Locke's Diagnosis of Akrasia](#),” *Journal of Modern Philosophy* vol. 2, no. 6 (2020) and Samuel C. Rickless and Leonardo Moauro, “[Locke's Diagnosis of Akrasia Revisited](#),” *Journal of Modern Philosophy* vol. 6, no. 0 (2024)).

⁸⁹ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.45.

⁹⁰ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.46.

⁹¹ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.45-46.

satisfaction of any of [his] desires” and thus, has the “liberty” to consider each desire and weigh them against each other.⁹²

For Locke, it is the “perfection of our nature to desire, will, and act” according to our judgment concerning happiness.⁹³ In fact, Locke thinks that the failure to use this liberty rightly leads to all “variety of mistakes, errors, and faults,” and even to our “Misery and Slavery.”⁹⁴ For example, the man who fails to examine his conduct is tossed about by his passions and is therefore enslaved to them, such as the drunkard described above.⁹⁵ This is unbecoming of a human being with an intellect who is capable of reasoning and freely choosing to act for the sake of what is good for him. In other words, those who do not act consciously in their interest are “under the determination of some other than himself, which is a want of liberty.”⁹⁶ According to Locke, the fact that man is a reasoning being puts him “under a necessity... to be determined in willing by his own Thought and Judgement, what is best for him to do.”⁹⁷

His logic is simple: If man has the ability to evaluate and choose that which will make him happy, it would be absurd for him not to take advantage of that power.⁹⁸ In a parallel way, God and the “superior Beings... who enjoy perfect Happiness,” are also determined by what is best, i.e., it is not a limitation on God’s freedom that He is always happy.⁹⁹ Man’s liberty to pursue happiness is the same, since no one would say that he who acts for happiness is not free and, thus that “mad Men and Fools are the only Freemen.”¹⁰⁰ Man’s ability to “suspend any particular desire” and to follow the “Guide,” his reason, allows him to consider his circumstances and do what is most conducive to his happiness.¹⁰¹ Thus, as this section of

⁹² Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.47.

⁹³ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.47.

⁹⁴ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.47 and 48.

⁹⁵ See Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.35. For a similar interpretation of Locke’s use of the drunkard, see Forde, *Locke, Science, and Politics*, 120–21. See also, Leisinger, “Locke’s Diagnosis of Akrasia.”

⁹⁶ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.48.

⁹⁷ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.48.

⁹⁸ Locke uses the language of “necessity” and “duty” to describe man’s responsibility to act toward his happiness. Of course, there is no fixed law in nature requiring that he do so. The closest thing to an efficacious natural law in Locke’s thought would seem to be the reality of natural consequences. Locke says that one of the reasons men do not choose rightly concerning their happiness is that they do not adequately consider how the consequences of any present action or good will conduce to happiness or misery in the future (See Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.66.)

⁹⁹ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.49.

¹⁰⁰ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.50.

¹⁰¹ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.50.

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the argument draws to a close, Locke lays out the following program for those who wish to overcome their desires in order to achieve, “true and solid happiness”:¹⁰²

In this we should take pains to suit the relish of our Minds to the true intrinsick good or ill, that is in things; and not permit an allow'd or supposed possible great and weighty good to slip out of our thoughts, without leaving any relish, any desire of it self there, till, by a due consideration of its true worth, we have formed appetites in our Minds suitable to it, and made our selves uneasie in the want of it, or in the fear of losing it... Nor let any one say he cannot govern his Passions, nor hinder them from breaking out, and carrying him into action; for what he can do before a Prince, or a great Man, he can do alone, or in the presence of God, if he will.¹⁰³

With this rousing conclusion that seemingly points to some conception of eudaimonia, it comes as some surprise that what follows is a rejection of the concept of a “summum bonum”—a single greatest good for all men. However, it is essential we keep in mind the passage just quoted as we turn to address Locke's famous argument.

V. ON THE NATURE OF BEES, BEETLES, AND MEN

The premise upon which Locke issues his rejection of the “summum bonum” is that men have different natural tastes and aptitudes. Locke famously likens the human “mind” to the human “palate,” an analogy that seeks to explain why some men pursue such diverse things as “Study,” “Hunting,” “Debauchery,” and “Riches,” in their pursuits of happiness.¹⁰⁴ Locke's argument is that the constitutions of particular men lead them to pursue different ways of life in their quest for happiness, since activities that might be “agreeable” to some will be “extremely nauseous and offensive” to others.¹⁰⁵ Thus, it was “in vain,” says Locke, that the older philosophers sought the “Summum bonum” in “Riches, or bodily Delights, or Virtue, or Contemplation,” because just as food tastes pleasant to one with the palate for it, so “the greatest Happiness consists, in the having those things, which produce the greatest Pleasure” which are different for different people.¹⁰⁶ This relativism regarding happiness is what one must conclude, according to Locke, if men are likened to a “Company of poor Insects” with

¹⁰² Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.55.

¹⁰³ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.53.

¹⁰⁴ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.55 and 2.21.54.

¹⁰⁵ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.55.

¹⁰⁶ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.55.

“no Prospect beyond the Grave.”¹⁰⁷ In this view, some men are bees “delighted with flowers and their sweetness,” while others are “beetles, delighted with other kinds of Viands,” which they enjoy before they perish and “exist no more forever.”¹⁰⁸ What should be made of this argument? Scholars give several interpretations.

A predictable and reasonable interpretation of this passage is that it lends support for the argument that Locke is a relativist when it comes to the different ways of life men can lead. For example, Thomas Pangle connects Locke’s argument about human tastes with his rejection of innate practical principles.¹⁰⁹ For Pangle, Locke’s deemphasis of innate moral ideas, and his emphasis on natural differences in human tastes in the “pursuit of happiness,” means that “agreement on the ultimate goals or greatest pleasures and goods of life,” i.e., is impossible.¹¹⁰ Similarly, Manent laments Locke’s “deliberate coarseness” in “reducing the question of the sovereign good to a choice among apples, plumbs, and oranges.”¹¹¹ Following Manent, Schindler contends that Locke’s reduction of happiness to human tastes precludes Locke from articulating a conception of the good life.¹¹² In a view I share with others, such interpretations fail to explain why Locke would spend the previous sections unpacking such an intricate line of reasoning about the pursuit of happiness only to “endorse a simplistic relativism” in the final analysis.¹¹³ There are at least three more satisfying conclusions that help to make sense of Locke’s rejection of a highest good and his insect metaphor (Graedon Zorzi and Thomas West will help to explain the first two, and I will provide the third). Additionally, in the remainder of this section and in the conclusion, I will identify some of the short comings in the three interpretations as well as some of the deeper problems they reveal.

¹⁰⁷ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.55.

¹⁰⁸ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.55.

¹⁰⁹ See Locke, *Essay*, 1.3.

¹¹⁰ Thomas L. Pangle, *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism: The Moral Vision of the American Founders and the Philosophy of Locke* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 183 (see also, 176–183). In a parallel manner, J. Budziszewski objects 1) to Locke’s view of the mind as a “blank slate” that must be engraved upon through sense experience (*Essay*, 2.1.2) and 2) to Locke’s argument in the *Second Treatise* that reason only teaches those “who will but consult it” (*Second Treatise*, §6), which he argues means that “poor reasoners have no conscience” (J. Budziszewski, *Written on the Heart: The Case for Natural Law* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 1997), 193).

¹¹¹ Manent, *The City of Man*, 169. See also 130.

¹¹² Schindler, *Freedom from Reality*, 29–30.

¹¹³ West, “Locke’s Law of Nature,” 33.

CHRISTIAN REVELATION'S HARMONIZING HIGHEST GOOD

Zorzi has recently revived the argument that the above interpretation ignores Locke's disclaimer about man's future state in *Essay* 2.21.55. When Locke argues that the inference—"let us enjoy what we delight in, *for tomorrow we shall die*"—is "certainly right," scholars like Zorzi point out that the inference is predicated on the presumption that men are "only like a Company of poor Insects... which having enjoyed for a season... cease to be, and exist no more for ever."¹¹⁴ Thus, as Zorzi argues, "Locke's point in this section is not... that there is no summum bonum," but that the pagan philosophers "did not properly acknowledge the relationship between man as a reasonable, dependent creature and his Creator."¹¹⁵ For Zorzi, Locke avoids the trap of relativism by appealing to the afterlife promised by Christian Revelation and reason can be shown to support that conclusion.

Zorzi provides a good example of Locke's effort to harmonize reason and revelation in the *Essay*. After explaining that the natural effect of our experience of pain is to help preserve the various organs of the body, Locke points to "another reason" for which "God hath scattered up and down *several degrees of Pleasure and Pain, in all the things that environ and affect us*," namely, so that we might recognize the "imperfection, dissatisfaction, and want of complete happiness, in all the enjoyments which the creatures can afford us," and so we might seek "[happiness] in the enjoyment of him, *with whom there is fullness of joy, and at whose right hand are pleasures for evermore*."¹¹⁶ Importantly, while not cited by Zorzi, Locke offers a comment regarding the unique conclusion that one can only draw from the experience of pain when one reflects upon it in light of revelation. After citing the passage from the *Psalms*, Locke says that while the addition of revelation "may not... make the *Ideas of Pleasure and Pain* clearer to us, than our own Experience does," it serves to give us "due sentiments of the Wisdom and Goodness of the Sovereign Disposer of all Things... The knowledge and veneration of Him, being the chief end of all our Thoughts, and the proper business of all Understandings."¹¹⁷ Accordingly, we see that Zorzi's interpretation

¹¹⁴ Zorzi, "Natural Teleology," 398.

¹¹⁵ Zorzi, "Natural Teleology," 398. See also, Mitsis, "Locke on Pleasure, Law, and Moral Motivation," in *Moral Motivation: A History*, 166.

¹¹⁶ Locke, *Essay*, 2.7.5, emphases in the original. The second italicized text is a quotation Locke takes from Psalm 16:11. See also, Zorzi, "Natural Teleology," 400.

¹¹⁷ Locke, *Essay*, 2.7.6, emphasis in original. In a similar passage from *Conduct*, §23, while arguing for the merits of studying theology, Locke says that the "true end" of "all other knowledge," is "the honor and veneration of the Creator and the happiness of mankind." This seems to be related to part of Locke's project in the *Essay* to drive home the

harmonizing Locke's arguments from reason and revelation can be legitimately derived from the text of the *Essay*. Moreover, his view can be shown to dovetail nicely with some of the conclusions in Locke's other writings, especially his religious writings and earlier unpublished works.¹¹⁸

Still a problem remains, as Locke never provides an argument from reason alone for an afterlife. When he does appeal to the afterlife in the *Essay* it is almost always the case that he blends rational arguments with revelation (mostly by means of biblical references).¹¹⁹ In the chapter from the *Essay*, "Of Power," the most Locke is willing to defend by reason alone is that the afterlife is an irrefutable possibility. As a result, Locke thinks the rational man should behave as if God and Heaven exist even if he is without belief, because the "bare possibility" of their existence cannot be disproven:

He that will allow exquisite and endless Happiness to be but the possible consequence of a good Life here, and the contrary state the possible Reward of a bad one, must own himself to judge very much amiss, if he does not conclude that a vertuous Life, with the certain expectation of everlasting bliss, which may come, is to be preferred to a vicious one, with the fear of that dreadful state of Misery.¹²⁰

For added emphasis, in his follow-up to this passage, Locke reiterates that if "a future Life is at least possible," it would be wrong to prefer "the short pleasures of a vicious life," even if one has not attempted to achieve certainty regarding eternity.¹²¹ Thus, for Locke, this assumption is sound whether or not we can rationally demonstrate any relationship to God.

Beyond this, a second limitation of Zorzi's argument is that it does not address the reality of human differences that Locke draws our attention to time and again.¹²² It is true, as Zorzi states, that Locke says men share a "greatest interest, *i.e.*, the Condition of our eternal

importance of living well. When men have eternal life as their aim, they will recognize the importance of "Virtue and Religion," because "God the righteous Judge... render[s] to every Man according to his Deeds." This argument conforms with another of Locke's statements in the *Essay*, that says it is rational for men to take care of their "Behaviour here," since their conduct determines whether they will spend eternity in a "State of perfect Happiness or Misery" (see *Essay*, 2.21.60).

¹¹⁸ E.g., see Zorzi, "Natural Teleology," 398–403.

¹¹⁹ For examples, consider Locke, *Essay*, 2.7.5, cf. Ps. 16:11; *Essay*, 2.21.41, cf. I Cor. 2:9; and even *Essay*, 2.21.55, cf. Isa. 22:13 and I Cor. 15:32.

¹²⁰ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.70.

¹²¹ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.70. See also Rossiter, "Hedonism and Natural Law," 215.

¹²² I will discuss Locke's treatment of two such types (the studious man and the Epicurean) below, but consider the insect metaphor itself and his discussion of the "hunter" in the Epistle to the Reader. See also West, "Locke's Natural Law," 33–34.

Estate,” and therefore “*Morality is the proper Science, and Business of Mankind in general; who are both concerned, and fitted to search out their *Summum Bonum*.*”¹²³ Yet just as morality is mankind’s general business, Locke says that “several Arts, conversant about several parts of Nature, are the Lot and private Talent of particular Men, for the common use of humane Life, and their own particular Subsistence in this World.”¹²⁴ In other words, while revelation teaches that men share a unifying highest good, certain earthly pursuits or “Arts” are reserved to certain persons only and then only by happenstance. This corresponds to the different human types implicit in Locke’s dichotomy between bees and beetles and points us to a different set of considerations.

AN “IDIOSYNCRATIC” HIGHEST GOOD FOR EACH

Thomas West has a unique interpretation of Locke’s rejection of the *summum bonum* that directly addresses the issue of human differences. For West, the key to Locke’s argument depends on a joint recognition that while some ways of life are better than others, there are different human types, and these differences preclude men from pursuing happiness in the same manner. Thus, some men are like bees who enjoy sweeter things like philosophy, while others are beetles who enjoy other “viands” (West notes the significance of the allusion to “beetles,” which “often feed on decaying organic matter such as feces”).¹²⁵ In making this argument, West thinks that Locke means to reaffirm a classical insight—“that the philosophic life is best for those few who have the talent and inclination for it”—but unlike the classics, Locke chooses to be subtle and “refuses to insult those whose natures or conditions make them incapable of such a life.”¹²⁶ Accordingly, this framework should inform our reading of Locke’s insistence that men pursue “their *Summum Bonum*,” that is, the highest good suited to each person’s own natural capacities.¹²⁷

¹²³ Locke, *Essay*, 4.12.11, emphasis in original. See also, Zorzi, “Natural Teleology,” 399. West interprets this passage differently, arguing that the statement “their *Summum Bonum*,” refers to a highest good for each individual person according to his capacities (see West, “Locke’s Natural Law,” 37). I describe his view in more detail below.

¹²⁴ Locke, *Essay*, 4.12.11.

¹²⁵ West, “Locke’s Law of Nature,” 34.

¹²⁶ West, “Locke’s Law of Nature,” 38. Similarly, see Clayes, “The Private Society and the Public Good in John Locke’s Political Thought,” 210, and Myers, *Star and Compass*, 149–55.

¹²⁷ See Locke, *Essay*, 4.12.11 and West, “Locke’s Law of Nature,” 37. For West’s full discussion of this topic, see 29–33, 36–38. In this reading, whereas Zorzi’s argument seeks to harmonize some of the challenges posed by Locke’s rejection of a highest good for all men, West sees Locke as a qualified relativist on the question of happiness on account of the intractableness of the differences between certain human types. This is not a radical relativism that seeks to reject

West's argument for the "idiosyncratic" pursuit of each person's own highest good helps clarify Locke's argument regarding the pursuit of happiness. West correctly shows that Locke is imploring men to seek more rarified earthly happiness, not just because it may lead to heavenly bliss, but because it will improve their earthly lives. This is confirmed by Locke himself when he implies that a virtuous man is better off on earth compared to "wicked Men" who "all things rightly considered, have... even the worst part here [on earth]."¹²⁸ But, while West may be right to emphasize the relationship between the differences in human types and the pursuit of happiness, he may overread Locke's insistence on the intractability of human differences (a point West himself admits).¹²⁹

EXHORTING MEN TO "CORRECT THEIR PALATES"

To address this point, we need to return to Locke's insect metaphor. Locke suggests that some men are "bees" while others are "beetles," the implication being that you are unlikely to turn one into the other. Locke confirms this point in *Conduct of the Understanding*, saying that there is "great variety in men's understandings, and their natural constitutions," which education cannot fully overcome. Even for those who have been similarly educated, "there is great inequality of parts."¹³⁰ In another place, Locke says that some men will be better suited to excellence in their pursuits on account of their natural constitution.¹³¹ Yet, despite these natural obstacles, Locke suggests that man's constitution is malleable to a point. Indeed, in several places, he argues that men should strive to "rectify" any ill "habits" they have received by "common Opinion... education[,] and custom."¹³² To return to the insect analogy, while a beetle may not be made to love flowers for their own sake, as a bee does, there may at least be some beetles who can come to appreciate sweeter things.¹³³

or resist reality, but one which recognizes that "belittling the nonphilosopher... is like criticizing a beetle for not being a bee" (37).

¹²⁸ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.70.

¹²⁹ West says that "[Locke's] argument about human diversity is only part of the truth" and that men also share important things, such as common human natures, which allows Locke to make sense of the natural law and the possibility of common public goods (West, "Locke's Law of Nature," 39). According to West, some of the goods that men hold in common include life, property, children, liberty, friendship, and virtue, and most communities seek to cultivate or protect them (39).

¹³⁰ Locke, *Conduct*, §2.

¹³¹ Locke, *Education*, §1.

¹³² Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.69.

¹³³ In *Conduct*, Locke suggests how beetles could become more bee-like. He says that "most men come very short of what they might attain unto in their several degrees [of knowledge] by a neglect of their understandings" (*Conduct*, §2). In other words, Locke is optimistic about the general intellectual capacity of mankind, provided that they practice using

LOCKE'S ACCOUNT OF REASON AND HAPPINESS

Locke's example of the Epicurean can help to illuminate this interpretation. Although the Epicure is motivated to take up studying, he does not love it for the delight it provides. Rather, he "buckles to study," because his reputation depends on it, both in the public eye and in that of "his mistress."¹³⁴ The choice of word is telling. The fact that he "buckles" indicates that he does not enjoy the activity, but he receives "new Gusto" for the work on account of its pleasant consequences.¹³⁵ Thus, while there are unchangeable differences in human nature, some men of meaner capacities, the beetles, may come to appreciate (if only begrudgingly) higher goods such as study and virtue.

In sum, while I agree with West concerning the importance of human types in Locke's thought, we must keep two points in mind. First, Locke thinks different goods are productive of different degrees of happiness in themselves, a point he returns to consistently throughout the discourse on happiness.¹³⁶ Second, men (at least in theory) are capable of elevating their desires by training and accustoming themselves to higher things:

Men may and should correct their palates, and give relish to what either has, or they suppose has none. The relish of the mind is as various as that of the Body, and like that too may be alter'd; and 'tis a mistake to think, that Men cannot change the displeasingness, or indifferency, that is in actions, into pleasure and desire, if they will do but what is in their power. A due consideration will do it in some cases; and practice, application, and custom in most.¹³⁷

Moreover, this reading helps to clarify Locke's pivot from his discussion of happiness to his rejection of a highest good. When Locke says that "it is easie to give an account... [about how] though all Men desire Happiness, *yet their wills carry them so contrarily*, and

their intellects. This is not to say that someone will overcome natural differences, but someone might become more adept and even enjoy intellectual activities if he trains himself. However, as we will see, the optimism expressed here must be weighed against some of Locke's other statements.

¹³⁴ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.43.

¹³⁵ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.69. However, while one might receive "new gusto" for something unpleasant on account of its pleasant consequences, Locke suggests that this method is ultimately less effective and that "the pleasure of the action itself is best acquir'd, or increased, by use and practice." It is in overcoming "trials" repeatedly that "wears us into a liking" of what previously "displeased us" (2.21.69).

¹³⁶ I will list a few of the most striking passages here (some of which I have already referenced): Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.53, says we should "suit the relish of our Minds to the ture intrinsick good or ill, that is in things"; 2.21.55, "Happiness consists, in the having those things, which produce the greatest Pleasure"; and in 2.21.56, "The eternal Law and Nature of things, must not be alter'd to comply with his [a man's] ill-order'd choice. If the neglect or abuse of the Liberty he has, to examine what would really and truly make for his Happiness, misleads him, the miscarriages that follow on it, must be imputed to his own election."

¹³⁷ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.69.

consequently some of them to what is Evil,” he means that most men do not allow their reason to guide them along the way to happiness.¹³⁸ But Locke thinks this is wrong, because men have the power of “Examination,” which is like “*consulting a guide*” who can help us not to “mistake true felicity.”¹³⁹

VI. CONCLUSION

I will review the ground covered before concluding. This paper has argued that Locke recognizes higher and lower degrees and even kinds of happiness that correspond to different sorts of goods and that men should utilize their reason to suspend their desires for immediate gratification so as to desire goods that are of superior quality. I then set out to reconcile this argument with Locke’s rejection of the concept of the *summum bonum*. While the statement in *Essay* 2.21.55 seems to repudiate the implications of Locke’s different degrees of happiness, the reality is more complicated. What I have argued is that Locke’s statement is an acknowledgement that most people, though capable of pursuing higher goods on account of their possessing reason, do not adequately train themselves and therefore do not improve their desires as they should.

A few comments regarding what we should take away from the foregoing are in order. First, I think it is helpful to establish Locke’s understanding of happiness before addressing his treatment of the natural law. As noted above, Burns has suggested that one should first clarify Locke’s natural law before attempting to understand other themes, such as his hedonism.¹⁴⁰ However, it may be more fruitful to consider the natural law, which Locke equates with reason in the *Two Treatises*, as an example of the dynamic of evaluating what is best for man to do—of “consulting a guide.”¹⁴¹ This approach may, for example, augment challenges to the extreme libertarianism or libertinism ascribed to Locke by his “post-liberal”

¹³⁸ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.54, emphasis in the original.

¹³⁹ Locke, *Essay*, 2.21.50, emphasis in the original. My addendum to West also applies to the argument raised by Peter Myers that Locke’s rejection of the *summum bonum* constitutes an attempt to “steer us away from extreme expressions of... perfectionism... [a]s a fixation upon the most perfect imaginable happiness is likely to make one’s present life seem miserable” (See *Star and Compass*, 166). While there may be some truth in Myers’ view that Locke aims to instill a sort of “moderation” in the pursuit of happiness (208), such an argument would seem to contradict Locke’s insistence that men can and should improve their desires.

¹⁴⁰ Burns, “Hobbes and God in Locke’s law of nature,” 1001.

¹⁴¹ Locke, *Second Treatise*, §6. West, “Locke’s Law of Nature,” 18, makes this point implicitly when interpreting Locke’s argument for the strong desires that serve as the basis for the natural law in the *First Treatise*: “reason must evaluate the [given] desire and pronounce it to be good.” Cf. *First Treatise*, §86. For a fuller discussion, see West, “Locke’s Law of Nature,” 15–19.

interpreters.¹⁴² If one can show, as I have attempted to do here, that Locke acknowledges superior and inferior degrees of happiness, it cannot be said that he believes that all ways of life are equally good.¹⁴³ Future research should strive to ascertain whether considering Locke's treatment of happiness alongside his natural law reveals a hierarchy of goods such as the hierarchy presented in other natural law thinkers.¹⁴⁴

Second, while I have argued that Locke's *Essay* can be shown to support a range of different interpretations that qualify his rejection of a highest good for men, it is worth noting that West's argument for an "idiosyncratic" pursuit of happiness, or a "*Summum Bonum*" relative to each person points to deeper questions.¹⁴⁵ I have emphasized Locke's often-overlooked arguments regarding the superior degrees of happiness that certain goods provide and his insistence that men train themselves to pursue those higher goods. Yet, while Locke at times expresses a certain level of confidence that beetles could train themselves to act more like bees, other statements suggest that some may be permanently doomed to "beetledom." For example, while critiquing the concept of "*Man*" as a "rational Animal capable of Conversation," Locke observes that there are "Naturals amongst us, that have perfectly our shape, but want Reason, and some of them Language too."¹⁴⁶ Locke describes the situation of such individuals in the *Second Treatise*, when he argues that "*Lunaticks*" and "*Ideots*" must be ruled by a superior as perpetual children, due to their lack of reason.¹⁴⁷ Is any sort of happiness available to such persons if they lack reason but reason is necessary for pursuing happiness?

Or consider a less dramatic, but nonetheless problematic example. What of the people who have the capacity, but do not properly apply their rational faculties, as those who fail to follow the natural law due to ignorance or excessive self-interest?¹⁴⁸ Is Locke indifferent to

¹⁴² For a recent account that ably challenges the pervasive libertarian reading of Locke, see David Azerrad, "Is Locke a Libertarian?," *The Political Science Reviewer* 50, no. 1 (2026). Azerrad ultimately rejects the libertarian interpretation of Locke but also admits that the "libertarian flavor" of his arguments may have exposed him to exploitation by libertarian thinkers.

¹⁴³ See also, West, "Locke's Law of Nature," 29–33, and Myers, *Star and Compass*, 155–60.

¹⁴⁴ While he does not attempt to make this exact argument, David Braybrooke argues that there is a "basic convergence" in their natural law teachings of Locke and St. Thomas Aquinas (See David Braybrooke, *Natural Law Modernized* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 29). Braybrooke argues that despite the clear influence of Christianity on both authors, each articulates a natural law teaching that does not explicitly depend on Christian Revelation (See, Braybrooke, *Natural Law Modernized*, Ch. 2).

¹⁴⁵ E.g., West, "Locke's Natural Law," 49 and Locke, *Essay*, 4.12.11, emphasis in the original.

¹⁴⁶ Locke, *Essay*, 3.6.21 and 22, emphasis in the original.

¹⁴⁷ Locke, *Second Treatise*, §60, emphasis in the original.

¹⁴⁸ Locke, *Second Treatise*, §124.

the prospects of happiness for such people? In sum, while Locke does make forceful statements concerning the potential for men's rational improvement, as I have shown, it would be wrong to conclude from this that Locke is sanguine about the prospects for general enlightenment.¹⁴⁹ In a view I share with others, my reading is that Locke thinks such improvement is unlikely.¹⁵⁰ I think West is right to point to moral law and education in morality as Locke's typical solutions to the problem of human error.¹⁵¹ Further, as I argue elsewhere, Locke believes public policy should be crafted with an eye to cultivating the moral conditions happiness requires.¹⁵² Explicating more fully how Locke's arguments for the rational pursuit of happiness relate to his arguments for moral instruction and law is a project for further research.

¹⁴⁹ Examples of those who believe Locke seeks to bring about "enlightenment" include Peter A. Schouls, *Reasoned Freedom: John Locke and Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), and, to a lesser extent, Peter Myers, *Star and Compass*, 171. While he does not claim that Locke necessarily believes in general enlightenment, Zorzi seems to imply that Locke thought natural law reasoning should come easily to most people: "Because Locke thought humans quite capable of grasping the natural teleology of the relational self, his view of natural law was contiguous with rather than disruptive of the pre-modern teleological view of humanity... Locke did not think humans have any such difficulty grasping our final cause and our teleological orientation toward it, because Locke thought that we could quite easily recognize ourselves to be persons" (See "Natural Teleology," 403).

¹⁵⁰ Ruth Grant flatly rejects the possibility of general enlightenment and argues that for Locke, "[p]rereational, nonrational, and irrational social forces will affect opinions and behavior always" ("Custom's Power and Reason's Authority," 627-28). In a similar vein, Casson argues that part of Locke's project was to cool rather than stoke the enlightenment optimism of his context (See Casson, *Liberating Judgement*, 134). See also West, "Locke's Natural Law," 43-44, and Steven Forde, *Locke, Science, and Politics*, 193-94.

¹⁵¹ West, "Locke's Natural Law," 45-48. In particular, West thinks that one of Locke's overarching aims is to improve the law of opinion: "All of Locke's books are devoted to changing the 'law of fashion' among his readers. He aims to create a climate of moral opinion that will shame the immoral, the quarrelsome, and the contentious, and honor the decent, the rational, and the industrious. In particular, Locke's books are designed to change elite opinion, which in turn shapes common opinion" (47).

¹⁵² Michael J. Driscoll, "Curbing the 'Corruption of Manners': John Locke, Domestic Policy, and the Moral Conditions of Happiness," *The Political Science Reviewer* 50, no. 1 (2026), forthcoming.