No chapter of Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* is longer than Chapter 21 of Book 2, entitled “Of Power,” and no chapter of the first edition was revised more extensively by its author for the second and succeeding editions. Of the seventy-three sections of its final version, all but the initial four and the final two are devoted in one way or another to the will and its exercise. Yet despite the considerable detail of Locke’s treatment of the will and his repeated refinements to it—indeed, partly because of them—few chapters of the *Essay* have produced greater consternation or starker interpretive disagreement among his readers. The source of the greatest difficulty lies in the seeming incompatibility between the claims he makes about liberty and the will early in the chapter, mostly from the first edition onwards, and the claims he makes about “suspending choice” in later parts of the chapter, added in the second and subsequent editions.

Early in the chapter, for example, Locke writes:

The question Whether Man’s Will be free, or no [is] unreasonable, because unintelligible; … Liberty … cannot be an attribute or modification of the Will.

(2.21.14)
This then is evident, That in all proposals of present Action, *a Man is not at liberty to will, or not to will, because he cannot forebear willing*: Liberty consisting in a power to act, or to forbear acting, and in that only….

The next thing demanded is, *Whether a man be at liberty to will which of the two he pleases, Motion or Rest*. This Question carries the absurdity of it … manifestly in itself…. [T]hey who can make a Question of it, must suppose one Will to determine the Acts of another, another to determine that; and so on *in infinitum*. (2.21.24-25; all italic in original)

He nevertheless goes on later in the chapter to affirm:

But yet there is a case wherein a Man is at Liberty in respect of *willing*, and that is the chusing of a remote Good as an end to be pursued. Here a Man may suspend the act of his choice from being determined for or against the thing proposed, till he has examined, whether it be really of a nature in it self and consequences to make him happy, or no. (2.21.56)

and

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 …. This seems to me the source of all liberty; in this seems to consist that, which is (as I think improperly) call’d *Free will*. (2.21.47)

Thus, Locke seems
(i) both to deny and to affirm that the mind is at least sometimes at liberty with respect to willing the performance of actions;

(ii) to offer two different characterizations of what liberty is, first as consisting only in the power to do and to forbear by volition, and then instead as lying in a power to suspend the execution of desire in order to deliberate; and

(iii) to insist that freedom cannot intelligibly be predicated of a will before going on to affirm that having free will (in at least an “improper” sense) consists in the power to suspend the execution of desire in order to deliberate.

As James Harris (2005) has recently documented, Locke’s own contemporaries and successors, whether self-identified as necessitarians or libertarians, frequently hoped to interpret him as an ally but often despaired of finding any consistent view of liberty and the will in the Essay at all. Thus, Joseph Priestley stated:

It is universally acknowledged that [Locke’s] chapter on power is … remarkably confused; all his general maxims being perfectly consistent with, and implying, the doctrine of necessity, and being manifestly inconsistent with the liberty which, after writing a long time like a Necessitarian, he attributes to man.

Dugald Stewart concluded with disappointment:

On the subject of Free Will, Locke is more indistinct, undecided, and inconsistent, than might have been expected from his powerful mind, when directed to so important a question.

William Belsham put the matter more bluntly: “Surely the hypothesis of Philosophical Liberty never had a more imbecile advocate!” The nature and consistency of Locke’s
views about liberty and suspension, as well as their bearing on what is now called determinism, remain matters of controversy—and sometimes, despair.

While Locke freely acknowledges changing his account on one point for the second and subsequent editions—namely, what it is that “determines the will”—he gives no indication that he regards his final version of the chapter as inconsistent in any respect. In order to assess the coherence of his position however, it is necessary first to understand several of his key concepts and doctrines. I will begin, therefore, by briefly explaining some of the central terms he employs and the meanings he assigns them. In doing so, I will be following Locke’s own lead, for he emphasizes in the chapter that “to avoid … absurdities, nothing can be of greater use, than to establish in our Mind determined Ideas of the things under Consideration” (2.21.26). Next, I will cite and explain some of the main doctrines that he formulates using that terminology. In light of these explanations, I will then critically examine two recent interpretations of Locke’s doctrines about liberty, suspension, and the will. The first of these, offered by Vere Chappell (1994), convicts Locke of inconsistency; the second, offered by Gideon Yaffe (2000), proposes a way to acquit him. Although each interpretation has attractions, neither is entirely satisfactory. Finally, drawing on the lessons of those examinations, I will present and develop what I believe is a consistent and more satisfying interpretation of Locke’s treatments of liberty and suspension in relation to the will. I will conclude with brief reflections on Locke’s relation to determinism.
1. Locke’s Key Concepts

The key terms, or sets of terms, in Locke’s discussion are (i) “power”; (ii) :will,” “volition” (or “willing”), and “voluntary”; (iii) “liberty” (or “freedom”) and “necessity”; and (iv) “good,” “evil,” “desire,” and “unease.”

Power. Although Book II, Chapter xxi is entitled “Of Power,” Locke does not endeavor to define the term. The reason is simple: he holds that only terms standing for complex ideas are definable, and he classifies the idea of power as simple. He does, however, explain in the first section of the chapter how the simple idea of power arises in the mind. First, the mind observes causal activity or action—that is, it perceives alterations being brought about by causes either in external bodies or in the mind itself. Second, the mind concludes that “like Changes will for the future be made, in the same things, by like Agents and by the Like Ways.” Third, in consequence of concluding this, the mind “comes by” the idea of Power. In fact, on his view, the mind acquires ideas of two kinds of power, “as able to make, or able to receive any change: the One may be called Active and the other Passive Power” (2.21.2). Thus, the mind observes something producing a change either in itself or in something else; the mind infers the existence of an enduring feature in the producer whereby it is able to produce the change, and an enduring feature of the second whereby it is able to undergo it; and the mind thereby acquires the idea of “power,” both active and passive.

Hume objected to this derivation—with considerable apparent justice—on the grounds that it violates Locke’s own principle that reasoning cannot give rise to any new idea. Nevertheless, the inference is meant to be one that leads the mind to conceive and recognize the existence of genuine modifications of substances, modifications that can
play an essential role in causal explanation. Locke does not intend the existence of all powers to be reducible to the truth of conditionals, as is sometimes proposed—at least not if the truth of these conditionals is thought to be underwritten ultimately just by laws of nature understood as a certain kind of universal generalization. The most fundamental powers, at least—such as the power to move parts of one’s body or the power to call up ideas—are to be understood as real attributes of the things that have them, attributes that can therefore explain the activity of those things. Less fundamental powers, such as powers to produce further effects by moving one’s body or by calling up an idea—depend in turn on those fundamental powers. If anything, it is the sharing of particular kinds of powers by objects of particular kinds that explains the laws of nature for Locke, and not vice versa.

*Will, Volition (Willing), and the Voluntary.* The will, according to Locke, is a particular kind of power. He characterizes it, along with its relation to volition (also called willing) and the voluntary, as follows:

[The] *Power* to begin or forbear, continue or end several actions of our minds, and motions of our Bodies, barely by a thought or preference of the mind ordering, or as it were commanding the doing or not doing such and such a particular action … is that which we call the *Will.* The actual exercise of that power, by directing any particular action, or its forbearance, is that which we call *Volition* or *Willing.* The forbearance or performance of that action, consequent to such order or command of the mind is called *Voluntary.* (2.21.5)

“Volition” is another indefinable term standing for a simple idea, according to Locke, and he emphasizes that such various and potentially broader or analogous alternative terms as
“preferring,” “ordering,” and “commanding” are liable to be misunderstood if one does not know from one’s own experience what is distinctive about volition. In particular, it is essential that volitions be distinguished from mere wishes or even desires.

As the quoted passage indicates, Lockean volitions extend to forbearances as well as to performances, to the withholding or prevention of changes as well as to their production; and he is explicit that, when discussing the will, he includes both performances and forbearances within the scope of the term ‘action’. A Lockean volition may take as its intentional object (or its intentional “target,” as one might say) the immediate motion or rest of some part of the body or the immediate initiation or forbearance of some thought or other feature of the mind; or it may be directed to one or more consequences of such immediate action, such as leaving a room or solving a puzzle. It is limited, however, to potential actions that are—whether rightly or wrongly—“taken” by the mind to be within its power (2.21.15). Volition that successfully results in action brings with it knowledge of the Mind’s (or self’s) activity in doing so. Just as perception, for Locke, carries with it a “perceiving that [one] does [oneself] perceive” (2.27.9) so too voluntary action brings with it the perception that one does oneself act. Both of these kinds of consciousness, by involving thoughts of self, are crucial to personal identity, self-concern, and susceptibility to law as Locke understand them.

Liberty (Freedom) and Necessity. Liberty (also called freedom) is for Locke a specific further power, and necessity is its absence. Thus he writes:

The Idea of Liberty is the Idea of a Power in any Agent to do or forbear any particular Action, according to the determination or thought of the mind, whereby either of them is preferr’d to the other; where either of them is not in
the power of the Agent to be produced by him according to his *Volition*, there he is not at *Liberty*, that Agent is under *Necessity*. (2.21.8)

Liberty so understood requires two powers—a power to do and a power to forbear—each of which depends for its exercise on volition. Because liberty is in the first instance a power to do and a power to forbear some “particular Action” by means of volition, one has at any given time liberty with respect to some particular actions while lacking it with respect to others; and for any proposed action one simply *has or lacks* the liberty to do it. Nevertheless, one can also speaking of having more or less liberty overall insofar as there are more or fewer things, or more or fewer important things, that one is at liberty to do. Similarly, one might have more or less liberty even in relation to a particular action insofar as there are more or fewer other things, or more or fewer important other things, that one is at liberty to do in relation to that action.

*Good and Evil, Desire and Unease.* Locke understands *good* and *evil* entirely in terms of pleasure and pain:

What has an aptness to produce Pleasure in us, is that we call *Good*, and what is apt to 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*. (2.21.42; see also, 2.21.60)

In a relative sense, Locke adds, a pain can also be called “good,” in comparison with a greater pain, and a pleasure can be called “evil” in comparison with a greater pleasure. The highest degree of “happiness” is “the utmost Pleasure we are capable of,” as
“misery” is “the utmost pain.” The *minimum* degree of happiness, however, is “contentment,” understood as a lack of any “unease.”

Locke then goes on to explain *desire* and *unease* in terms of good and evil:

*Desire* [is] an *uneasiness* of the Mind for want of some absent good. All pain of the body of what sort soever, and disquiet of the mind, is *uneasiness*. And with this is always join’d Desire, equal to the pain or *uneasiness* felt; and is scarce distinguishable from it. For *desire* being nothing but an *uneasiness* in the want of an absent good, in reference to any pain felt, ease is that absent good; and till that ease be obtained, we may call it *desire*, no body feeling pain, that he wishes not to be eased of, with a desire equal to that pain, and inseparable from it.

(2.21.151)

It is sometimes suggested that Locke contradicts himself by distinguishing between desire and unease at some times while simply identifying them at other times. In fact, however, he quite consistently treats desire and ordinary pain as two different kinds of unease. Unlike the unease of ordinary pain (such as a throbbing toothache), the unease of desire is always for, and involves the thought of, *some absent good*. It is for Locke a basic fact of human psychology, however, that pain always *produces* a desire for its cessation—that cessation itself being an absent good. In consequence, pain always involves a *further* unease, besides itself, that is nevertheless effectively inseparable from it. Many other passions besides desire, Locke indicates, are also themselves kinds of unease, and these, too, often inspire desire (and hence a *further* unease) for their satisfaction or removal.
II. Locke’s Key Doctrines

Among the key doctrines in Locke’s discussion of the will, three concern limits on liberty; three concern the etiology of volition; and three concern values and consequences.

**Limits on Liberty.** Locke’s first limitation on liberty is that it applies only to some but not all voluntary actions. While voluntary action requires only that the agent possess and exercise the power to perform the action in question by means of volition, acting with liberty requires the possession of both a power to perform the action by volition and a power to forbear performing it by volition. In Locke’s own well known example, a prisoner may remain in what is (unbeknownst to him) a locked room *voluntarily* but without *liberty*. As Locke puts it:

*Voluntariness without Liberty Doctrine* There may be Thought, there may be Will, there may be Volition, where there is no Liberty. (2.21.8)

Locke holds that powers, as real attributes or modifications of things, can belong only to substances, not to other powers. Because he defines both the will and liberty as powers, he therefore also affirms:

*No Free Wills Doctrine* Liberty, which is but a power, belongs only to Agents, and cannot be an attribute or modification of the *Will*, which is also but a Power.

(2.21.14)

Moreover, because it is only agents and not wills that can be free, Locke proposes that what people really mean to ask when they dispute “whether the will be free” is “*Whether a Man be free to will*” (2.21.22). In response to this question, he argues that an
action proposed for present action must then either be done or forborne, although which of these occurs will depend on which the agent prefers and hence wills. To this it might, of course, be objected that the agent to whom the action is proposed for present action can allow it not to occur without willing either way; but Locke’s view seems to be that when an action is under active consideration for present action with the understanding that it will not be done unless willed, one cannot allow it to pass undone without also willing (that is, preferring in an effective way) that it not be done. Thus Locke propounds:

[Necessity of Willing Doctrine] A Man in respect of willing, or the act of Volition when any Action in his power is once proposed to his Thoughts, as presently to be done, cannot be free. (2.21.23)

The Etiology of Volition. Immediately after proposing and defending the Necessity of Willing Doctrine, Locke takes up, as “the next thing to be demanded,” the question of “Whether a Man be at liberty to will which of the two he pleases, Motion or Rest?” While this, too, is in a way a question about the scope of liberty, it proves at the same time to have implications for the etiology of willing. Rather than answer this question, however, he pronounces it “absurd,” claiming both (i) that it amounts to asking “whether a Man can will what he wills; or be pleased with what he is pleased with” and (ii) that “they who can make a Question of it, must suppose one Will to determine the Acts of another, and another to determine that; and so on in infinitum.” On this basis, he asserts:

[Absurd Question Doctrine] Whether a Man be at liberty to will which of the two he pleases, Motion or Rest … carries the absurdity of it … manifestly in it self … [and] needs no answer. (2.21.25).
Despite the dismissal of this question, however, there remains for Locke another entirely legitimate question about the determinants of volition. Because the will is a power, this question is improperly expressed as: “What determines the will?” It is, strictly speaking, the agent that is determined to will, not the will itself (2.21.29). Once this point is properly understood, however, Locke allows for the sake of brevity the locution ‘determination of the will’ in place of ‘determination of the agent to will’. His defense of the Absurd Question Doctrine implies that the will is not determined by “another” will. In the first edition version of the chapter, Locke maintained that the will is determined instead by “the greatest good in view” as judged by the agent. In the second and later editions, however, Locke argues that an agent can fully acknowledge something to be a greater good (that is, as noted, a greater source of pleasure to the agent) than any available alternative and yet not be motivated to pursue it, so long as the agent is content without it; it is only when the thought of some absent good makes the agent uneasy that he or she is motivated to pursue it. Furthermore, since voluntary action must have some intentional object, it is specifically the unease of desire that directly motivates voluntary action; other uneases motivate indirectly by contributing to desires. And since volition can extend only to what is “taken” to be in one’s power, Locke concludes:

[ Determination by Unease Doctrine] It is this uneasiness [i.e., “the uneasiness of desire”] that determines the Will to the successive voluntary actions, whereof the greatest part of our Lives is made up (2.21.33) … that ordinarily, which is the most pressing of those, that are judged then capable of being removed.

(2.21.40)
Locke limits the formulation of the Determination by Unease Doctrine in this way to the “voluntarily actions, whereof the greatest part of our Lives is made up,” and to what is “ordinarily” or “for the most part” the case, because from the second edition on he holds that the mind also has a “power to suspend the prosecution of this or that desire, as every one daily may Experiment in himself” (2.21.47). During this suspension, the agent has “the opportunity to examine, view, and judge, of the good or evil” of what he or she is going to do or pursue. Accordingly, he endorses:

>Suspension Doctrine] In most cases a Man is not at Liberty to forbear the act of volition; he must exert an act of his will, whereby the action proposed, is made to exist, or not to exist. But yet there is a case wherein a Man is at Liberty in respect of willing, and that is the chusing of a remote Good as an end to be pursued. Here a Man may suspend the act of his choice from being determined for or against the thing proposed, till he has examined whether it be really of a nature in it self and consequences to make him happy, or no. (2.21.56)

Values and Consequences. Locke identifies the use and value of liberty as lying in its allowing individuals to obtain goods through volition:

>End of Liberty Doctrine] [T]he very end of our Freedom [is] that we might attain the good we chuse. (2.21.48)

Given the end of attaining the good we choose, it is a “perfection” in a mind to be “indifferent” to the performance of an act prior to finding any good or evil in its performance; but given that same end, an “indifference” that remained even after one had reached a final judgment about the good would clearly be a defect rather than an enhancement:
[Imperfection of Indifference Doctrine] A perfect Indifferency of the Mind, not determinable by its last judgment of the Good or Evil, that is thought to attend its Choice, would be so far from being an advantage and excellency of any intellectual Nature, that it would be as great an imperfection, as the want of Indifferency to act, or not to act, till determined by the Will, would be an imperfection of the other side. (2.21.48)

Locke regards the ability to suspend choice (or the “prosecution of desire”) in order to deliberate further about good and evil to be particularly conducive to achieving the end of liberty because it enables the mind to acquire and develop (the unease of) desire for absent goods that it would otherwise not be motivated to pursue. In addition, however, he holds that the liberty of suspension and deliberation makes justified punishment possible:

[No Excuse Doctrine] [A] Man may justly incur punishment, though it be certain that in all the particular actions that he wills, he does, and necessarily does will that, which he then judges to be good. For though his will be always determined by that, which is judg’d good by his Understanding, yet it excuses him not; Because, by a too hasty choice of his own making, he has imposed on himself wrong measures of good and evil; which however false and fallacious, have the same influence on all his future conduct, as if they were true and right. (2.21.56)

III. “Motivational Determinism” and the “Elusive Something”

“Motivational Determinism.” As remarked at the outset, Locke seems both to deny and to affirm that the mind is at least sometimes at liberty with respect to willing the
performance of actions. For it is easy to read Locke’s statements of the Necessity of Willing Doctrine and the Absurd Question Doctrine as denying that a person can be at liberty with respect to willing, while his statement of the Suspension Doctrine explicitly includes the claim that “there is a case wherein a Man is at Liberty in respect of willing.” Vere Chappell calls the denial that a person can be at liberty with respect to willing Volitional Determinism, and he proposes that Locke ultimately came to concede, prior to the fifth edition and as the result of correspondence with Phillippus van Limborch, that Volitional Determinism, affirmed from the first edition on, is incompatible with the Suspension Doctrine introduced in the second edition. As a consequence, Chappell (1994) argues, Locke abandoned Volitional Determinism after the fourth edition, making changes in the fifth edition (published posthumously) to reflect this fact. These changes did not extend to the statement or defense of the Absurd Question Doctrine itself (in 2.21.25), however, with the result that the final text was left inconsistent, Chappell holds, at least as Locke himself understood it. Chappell explicitly restricts his attention to this inconsistency and does not venture judgments about such further problems as Locke’s apparent two definitions of liberty or his seeming ambivalence about “free will.”

Chappell argues quite correctly that the Necessity of Willing Doctrine—in its final form, as stated in sections 23-24 of the chapter in the second and later editions—does not in itself entail Volitional Determinism, in part because the former is explicitly limited to only a certain class of actions, namely, those proposed as “presently to be done,” rather than those proposed for later action. It is because of this limitation that Locke’s summary statement that “a Man is not at liberty, whether he will Will or no” in introducing the Absurd Question Doctrine is likewise restricted to “most cases.” (For, he claims, “of
Voluntary actions … there are but few of them that are thought on or proposed to the Will, ’till the time they are to be done.”) Instead, Chappell regards Locke’s discussion of the Absurd Question Doctrine as the one clear remaining endorsement of Volitional Determinism in the text. Locke’s paragraph is difficult to interpret, and it is therefore worth citing in full:

Since then it is plain, that in most cases a Man is not at liberty, whether he will Will, or no; the next thing demanded is, Whether a Man be at liberty to will which of the two he pleases, Motion or Rest. This Question carries the absurdity of it so manifestly in it self, that one might thereby sufficiently be convinced, that Liberty concerns not the Will. For to ask, whether a man be at liberty to will either Motion, or Rest; Speaking or Silence; which he pleases, is to ask, whether a Man can will what he wills; or be pleased with what he is pleased with. A Question, which, I think, needs no answer: and they, who can make a Question of it, must suppose one Will to determine the Acts of another, and another to determine that; and so on in infinitum. (2.21.25)

It is initially quite plausible to take Locke’s answer to the “absurd” question posed to be “No, of course not,” as Chappell does and as most readers have. That answer—or perhaps the answer “Neither”—is naturally suggested by Locke’s characterization of the question as “carrying an absurdity.” Nevertheless, as Samuel Rickless (2000) has rightly observed, a question can also be characterized as absurd because the answer to it is so obviously “Yes.” Locke’s further remark that the question “needs no answer” is more suggestive of an obvious “Yes”—or perhaps of “Neither”—than of “No.” The definitive key to interpreting the paragraph, however, lies in Locke’s assertion that the question
amounts to asking “whether a man can will what he wills or be pleased with what he is pleased with”—both of which are questions about the truth of tautologies, to which the answer is “Yes, obviously.” It might be possible, at a stretch, to read the question “whether a man can will what he wills” as asking, non-tautologously, whether a man can will that he wills; but it is quite impossible to read the question “whether a man can be pleased with what he is pleased with” as asking, non-tautologously, whether a man can be pleased with being pleased with something—and even if it could be read that way, the answer would still be “Yes.”

What, then, does Locke mean when he continues the paragraph by writing: “they, who can make a Question of it, must suppose one Will to determine the Acts of another, and another to determine that; and so on in infinitum?” As Rickless also suggests, there are two ways in which someone who maintains that one can will to will an action might think of the relation between willing an action and willing to will that same action. If these are two distinct occurrences, then the willing of the action would be supposed to be determined to occur through an earlier act of willing that willing—contrary, we might note, to Locke’s own Determination by Unease Doctrine. But if a volition is thus to be determined to occur, at least sometimes, by a prior distinct volition having this subsequent volition as its object, then the prior volition is an exercise of a power to produce volitions by volitions—in effect, another “will” besides the original will that was a power to produce ordinary actions by volition. Furthermore, such prior volitions are then themselves presumably capable of being produced by yet prior volitions, and so on in infinitum, as Locke says. If, in addition, a prior volition is actually required in order to
produce any given volition, then voluntary action becomes impossible, and the point of appealing to volitions to explain voluntary action is entirely lost.

To think that one can will to will, however, one needn’t regard the willing to will as distinct from willing the action. Rickless himself proposes simply that, for Locke, willing to will an action is “tantamount” to willing it, without suggesting why Locke should think so. We can begin render this idea more plausible, though, by observing that volitions take intentional objects—objects of the mind’s “preference” or “ordering”—that may either be basic actions or necessary concomitants of basic actions. For example, one may will to close one’s fingers and lift one’s arm; or one may will the intended consequences of these actions, such as grasping and lifting a glass, or making a toast. While beginners at some activity must often direct their volition at basic actions, practiced experts typically will (that is, mentally “order,” as Locke says) an outcome without even thinking of the specific basic actions involved. In other cases, presumably, one may will multiple elements of a process with a single act of thought: for example, one specifically wills or “orders” that one’s fingers close and one’s arm rise so as to lift a glass.

In addition to willing basic bodily motions and their consequences, or basic kinds of thinking and their consequences, however, one may also intend and will concomitants that are thought to be necessary antecedents for a basic action. For example, if one knows that one’s arm moves voluntarily only if the needed volition causes the firing of motor neurons connected to the muscles of the arm, then one can voluntarily produce the firing of motor neurons connected to the muscles of the arm—not by trying directly to fire such nerves as a basic action, of course, but rather by trying to move one’s arm so as also to fire motor neurons. Similarly, in the present case at issue, if one knows that one can
voluntarily move one’s arm only by willing to move one’s arm, then one can also will to will to move one’s arm—again not by trying directly to perform this willing as a basic action, but rather by directly willing to move one’s arm so as also to bring about that very willing as a known necessary antecedent of the arm motion. Indeed, one can imagine a depraved but psychologically sophisticated individual voluntarily committing a theft not at all from a desire to acquire the stolen goods or even to perform an act of stealing, but rather just from a desire to taste the illicit volition to steal. Likewise, one can voluntarily will to forbear an action just by knowingly and voluntarily forbearing it. If this is right, then we can see how Locke thinks it obvious that we have the liberty to will volitions just because we are able to “will what we will”—especially in light of his view that we cannot act voluntarily without being conscious that we are doing so.

A further question remains, however: How can it be that Locke thinks that we are so obviously at liberty to “will which of the two we please,” as implied in his discussion of the Absurd Question Doctrine, if we are usually not “at liberty to will,” as implied in his treatment of the Necessity of Willing Doctrine? The answer is that these two doctrines are responses to two quite different questions and concern liberty to do quite different things. The question to which Necessity of Willing is the answer asks whether, when an action is proposed for action, we are at liberty as to whether or not to engage in willing concerning its performance or forbearance. To this, Locke’s answer is “No” when the action is proposed specifically for present action, such as raising one’s arm now: instead, one must will something, either the doing or the forbearing. And in most cases, actions are proposed for present action. In at least some cases of an action proposed for possibly subsequent performance, however, he thinks that one does have the dual power either to
will right now about ever doing it or to forebear willing right now about ever doing it; and since whichever of these occurs will itself be determined by volition, the agent is at liberty with respect to it. In contrast, the question to which the Absurd Question Doctrine is the answer is whether, when one is at liberty with respect to doing an action, one is also at liberty with respect to willing to do it. The answer to this question is always “Yes,” because one is then able to will or forbear willing the action simply by performing or forbearing the action while considering the volition as necessary to it. Compare: When the question of firing one’s motor neurons by raising one’s arm is proposed for present action, the choice is forced, so that one must necessarily will something about it; nevertheless, one is still at liberty to will to fire them whenever one is at liberty—even now—to fire them. I conclude that Locke does not contradict himself by both affirming and denying that the mind is at least sometimes at liberty to will.

The “Elusive Something.”” In his provocative and original 2000 book, Liberty Worth the Name, Gideon Yaffe offers an overall interpretation of Locke’s treatment of liberty, suspension, and the will that seeks to reconcile its apparent inconsistencies. Its leading idea is that Locke regards “full-fledged free agency” as demanding two things:

(i) liberty as Locke himself originally defines it, namely, as the dual power to perform an action by volition and to forbear it by volition (Yaffe also calls this “freedom of action”); and

(ii) a further Elusive Something that is not properly a kind of liberty at all (in terms of Locke’s definitions) but is nevertheless what is often mistakenly called “free will” by those who appreciate its importance to free agency but
do not understand its nature, and which we can therefore also agree to call “liberty” or “free will.”

This Elusive Something, on Yaffe’s reading, is *not* the liberty to suspend and deliberate ascribed by the Suspension Doctrine. Nor, he argues, is it to be identified with the kind of conformity between one’s own volitions and *one’s own judgments* of the good that suspension and deliberation promote. Rather, it is something an agent has if and only if “either her volitions are determined by the good [itself], or she has the power to bring it about that her volitions are determined by the good [itself]” (Yaffe 2000, 54). He emphasizes that this Elusive Something is not merely *self-expression*—which consists simply in liberty itself, as Locke originally defines it—but is rather a kind of *self-transcendence*, a further element of free-agency that makes the agent god- or angel-like in his or her voluntary action. According to Yaffe, the power to suspend choice (the execution of desire) and deliberate is for Locke at most a *means* to the achievement of this end of self-transcendence.

On the basis of this interpretation, Yaffe in effect proposes to reconcile the three seeming contradictions or tensions in Locke’s treatment of liberty, suspension, and the will identified previously. The third of these (working backwards) was Locke’s seeming ambivalence about the existence of “free will.” As Yaffe interprets him, Locke reluctantly agrees to *call* the Elusive Something “free will” because (a) it has been so-called by others who understood the need for it but misunderstood its nature and (b) it is a genuine precondition for full-fledged free agency, even though (c) it is not itself a kind of freedom (as freedom of action is) and (d) wills are themselves, by the No Free Wills Doctrine, not the sorts of things that could literally be free.
The second seeming contradiction was Locke’s apparent recognition of competing definitions of ‘liberty’—first as the power to do and to forbear by volition, and then again as instead lying in a power to suspend the execution of desire and deliberate. But although Locke may seem to refer (in 2.21.47) to the “liberty that Man has” as lying in the power of suspension and deliberation, this is really, according to Yaffe, a reference to the Elusive Something—namely, determination by the good or power to be determined by the good—that this power of suspension and deliberation merely facilitates, an Elusive Something that Locke is willing to call “liberty” for the same reason that he is willing to call it “free will.” Finally, Yaffe seeks to defuse the apparent initial contradiction between the Suspension Doctrine and the Absurd Question Doctrine by denying that Locke has any investment in the question of whether the mind has a liberty to will. Locke’s references to a “liberty to will” in connection with the Suspension Doctrine are interpreted as concerning instead the Elusive Something, now passing under the name “free will,” while the discussion of the Absurd Question Doctrine is interpreted simply as an argument that a literal liberty to will, even if possible, could not satisfactorily be recruited to serve as the crucial Elusive Something needed to supplement freedom of action, because the liberty to will would then simply generate an infinite regress of prior volitions with respect to which the agent would presumably also have to be free.

Yaffe cites at least seven passages to support elements of his interpretation, and it is not possible to consider them all here. In his review of Liberty Worth the Name, Rickless examines all of these passages and argues, persuasively to my mind, that they are not best interpreted as requiring determination by the good or the power to be so determined as a
condition for free agency.\(^1\) Setting the details of the passages aside, however, there are several more general reasons to be wary of this interpretation and to hope that a different reconciliation of the texts is possible.

First, it remains somewhat surprising that Locke should decide to call anything by the name of “free will” and even “liberty” that (a) does not answer to any of the versions of the question, “Is the will of man free?” that he has sought to formulate earlier in the chapter and (b) does not qualify even as a kind of liberty according to his official and oft-repeated definition of that term (indeed, repeated even in the second half of the chapter).

Second, Yaffe’s interpretation of Locke’s statement of the Absurd Question Doctrine must treat it as declaring to be absurd a specific answer to the question of what could qualify as the Elusive Something, whereas the passage itself gives little indication that it is so intended. Rather, the passage directly affirms the absurdity of the question itself of whether human beings do or do not have the liberty to will alternatives that they have the liberty to perform—a question that on the present interpretation is evidently not itself absurd.

Third, on this interpretation, Locke values the power of suspension and deliberation as the “source” or “foundation” of liberty on the grounds that it bestows on the agent the power to be motivated by the actual good, as required for the Elusive Something. Yet while possession of the power to suspend and deliberate is certainly conducive to being motivated by the actual good in many circumstances, it is by no means sufficient for the power to be so motivated, even when combined with the original Lockean liberty that

\(^1\) I would add to Rickless’s analysis only that Yaffe sometimes interprets as claims about the need for his Elusive Something what are in fact claims about the lack of value in having a will that was indifferent even after some determination of preference on the part of the agent had been made.
Yaffe calls “freedom of action”; for one who suspends judgment to deliberate will still often be victimized by inadequate evidence, misleading evidence, or even stupidity beyond his or her power to remove. This makes the interpretation difficult to reconcile with the passages in which, as Yaffe acknowledges, Locke seems to say that liberty lies in the power of suspension.

Finally, the Elusive Something, if incorporated into Locke’s theory of motivation, is not really a kind of self-transcendence at all, given that the “good” for Locke consists in what promises most pleasure specifically for the agent, and it is specifically this self-concerning feature of it that motivates, as Chappell notes. It is true, as Yaffe observes, that God’s providential rewards and punishments guarantee that what is in accordance with divine law is also good for the agent, but it does not follow, as he proposes, that what is good for one agent is also good for all others—or even for any others. Loyalty to Jesus would have been both good for Judas and in accordance with divine law, Locke would allow; but he could still hold that Judas’s betrayal, while clearly evil for Judas, arguably resulted in far more good to others in virtue of its essential role in bringing about the atonement and the availability of salvation.


Fortunately, I believe, a more satisfying interpretation of Locke on liberty, suspension, and the will is possible, one that reconciles the three apparent contradictions without being subject to the difficulties just surveyed.

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3 Yaffe, op. cit., page 33.
We have already seen why there is no contradiction between the Suspension Doctrine and the Absurd Question Doctrine on the issue of whether one has liberty to will what one has liberty to do: Locke’s consistent view is that one does have this liberty to will, although it is exercised not by performing a prior volition but rather by acting so as to bring about the willing as a necessary antecedent of the action willed. Nor is there any contradiction between the Suspension Doctrine and the Necessity of Willing Doctrine. For although human beings lack the power to forbear willing altogether in the case of actions proposed for present action, this leaves intact the power to suspend or not to suspend the execution of desire for purposes of deliberation with respect to actions that are proposed for action at some time or other; and this implies a dual power either to will now about the action as proposed for some time or to forbear willing now about the action as proposed for some time. Granted, voluntarily suspending choice so as to deliberate now presumably implies willing to forbear willing the action now (as well as positively willing the actual deliberation now); but this does not constitute willing to forbear the action as proposed at some time or other. One can, for example, forbear to will right now about whether to have-lunch-sometime-this-afternoon, without thereby willing to forbear having-lunch-sometime-this-afternoon.

The second and third apparent contradictions concerned Locke’s remark about the ability to suspend and deliberate that “in this lies the liberty Man has” that is (though “improperly”) called “free will.” Why does he say this, given that he has already defined ‘liberty’ in a different way and argued against attributing freedom to the will? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to understand the main problem to which Locke’s
Suspension Doctrine is the solution and the positive contributions that the doctrine makes to his theory of the will.

William Molyneux commented on the first edition version of the chapter “Of Power” in the letter that evidently motivated Locke’s most important revisions:

[Y]ou seem to make all Sins to proceed from our Understandings, or to be against Conscience; and not at all from the Depravity of our Wills. Now it seems harsh to say, that a Man shall be Damn’d, because he understands no better than he does.⁴

Although Locke does not introduce the term ‘depravity of will’ into the second edition, he does seek to explain the phenomenon of seeing the better but choosing the worse (2.21.56-60), and he also seems sensitive to Molyneux’s second suggestion, that it is unduly harsh to punish agents for actions that are determined directly or indirectly by their understandings—at least if the agents are not also responsible for their beliefs. We have seen this view of Locke’s in his No Excuse Doctrine: it is only because an agent acting on false beliefs has done so “by a too hasty choice of his own making” that he is “without excuse” and so subject to just punishment on Locke’s final view.

By introducing the liberty to suspend and deliberate—about good and evil, and about other topics as well—Locke makes belief itself, which is of course not under one’s direct voluntary control, nevertheless a proper object of responsibility. This is because responsibility for something, for Locke, requires making it a proper subject of law (whether divine, civil, or social) by making the attachment of rewards or punishments

motivationally effective for an agent, who must therefore be at liberty with respect to what the law requires (E II.xxviii.4-20). Having the liberty to suspend and deliberate makes agents responsible for many of their beliefs by putting them at liberty either to continue accepting what now seems true or to replace it with what will seem true after further deliberation. In making human beings responsible for their beliefs, the liberty to suspend and deliberate at the same time acquits God of injustice for punishing them for the actions they perform in consequence of their beliefs. It is at least partly because he holds that the freedom of intellectual beings should extend to their beliefs as well as to their actions that Locke writes of suspension and deliberation as “the hinge upon which turns the liberty of intellectual Beings” (2.21.52).

While even non-human animals presumably have both volition and liberty, with their wills determined by their greatest present unease, only human beings have the kind of intellectual liberty that is constituted by the freedom to deliberate. In this way, human beings have a wider range of liberty with respect to a given action: they have liberty to perform it or not, but they also have liberty with respect to how they will understand the good that will determine their wills to perform the action or forbear it. God and “probably” the angels have all of their knowledge always fully present to their minds, on Locke’s view (E II.10.9), and so have no need to deliberate. Human liberty, in contrast—that, is the kind of “liberty Man has,” in Locke’s phrase in the passage under consideration—is something going beyond animal liberty, but is also something falling short of the divine, and it indeed lies most distinctively in the freedom to deliberate that puts human beings at liberty with respect to the beliefs that help to determine their voluntary actions.
While the liberty to deliberate provides a kind of intellectual liberty with respect to the beliefs that will lead to the determination of the will, the liberty to suspend choice in order to deliberate is at the same time yet a further kind of liberty with respect to the willing of actions. For in freely willing to suspend the execution of desires (that is, willing to forbear for the present the next act to be suggested by one’s greatest present unease), one also freely wills to forbear willing the next act, as a necessary antecedent of that suspension. Because this is a kind of liberty that pertains specifically to willing, it is entirely understandable that it should be improperly called “free will.” For although it is not literally the possession of a will that is free, it is kind of freedom with respect to willing of precisely the kind that Locke claimed people actually have in mind in asking about “free will”—namely, “whether a Man be free to will or no.”

In expanding the range of human liberty with respect to both belief and willing, Locke’s Suspension Doctrine allows him to deny in two different ways that the human will is necessarily (that is, without liberty) determined by its greatest present unease. First, a human agent is often at liberty whether or not to act on a most pressing unease at all; and second, a human agent often has liberty with respect to whether he or she will be determined by the particular present unease or instead by whatever unease will result from deliberation. It remains true, however, as Locke also emphasizes, that human beings are not at liberty to change their basic psychology; that is, they are not at liberty with respect to whether or not they will be creatures whose wills, when determined and not suspended, are determined by the greatest present unease.

Locke can regard the liberty to suspend and deliberate as the “source” of human liberty, as well that in which human liberty “lies,” both because it is distinctive of our
human liberty and because it concerns a stage of free judgment that *precedes* free action. It is also, of course, a main source of the *value* of human liberty more generally. For the Determination by Unease Doctrine notwithstanding, it allows us to align more closely our motivating desires with what we judge to be the true good—and thereby to attain “the good we choose,” in accordance with the End of Liberty Doctrine. In this respect, it is at the same time also a “source” of all our liberty by serving as a precondition for the decision of a providential God to give us any *other* kind of liberty at all. Yaffe is right, then, that Locke requires more for “full-fledged free agency” than merely freedom of action with respect to the act in question—but what Locke requires is just a greater range of freedom with respect to that act, encompassing *other* acts that are related to its production.

If what I have argued is correct, Locke does not contradict himself in his discussions of liberty, suspension and the will. Instead, he cleverly defines *liberty* as a two-way power, with *necessity* as simply its absence, and then distinguishes in detail exactly what is a matter of liberty and what is a matter of necessity in human belief and action, arguing that what liberty we have is *enough*. There remains, nonetheless, one notable lacuna in his theory of the will: he neglects to specify exactly what, if anything, determines the will to suspend the execution of desires and to deliberate instead. The obvious suggestion would be that it is simply a greater second-order unease: namely, unease at the thought that one might miss out on greater goods by not stopping to deliberate. Yet not only does Locke not say this explicitly, he explicitly treats suspension and deliberation as exceptions to the Determination by Unease Doctrine, a doctrine that he therefore limits to what is true “ordinarily” and “for the most part.”
Those who characterize Locke as a compatibilist about liberty and determinism are surely in the right, inasmuch as he maintains that human beings are free and responsible without ever denying causal determinism. In declining to offer any theory of what determines the will to suspension and deliberation, he is not necessarily denying that *something* determines it, nor—what is a further claim—that what determines it does so causally, in accordance with laws of nature. Nevertheless, if causal determinism is the doctrine that every event is fully determined by the laws of nature plus previous conditions, then Locke cannot be said to *defend* causal determinism about all human actions.


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5 Locke does suggest at 2.21.51-52 that we are “necessitated” to suspend and deliberate by the same “necessity” that determines us to pursue true happiness. I take this to mean only that we are unable to render ourselves beings whose psychologies do not allow suspension and deliberation, for the same reason that we cannot make ourselves beings who do not pursue happiness.