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# Claiming Time: Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Adam Smith on Freedom and Futurity

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CLAIMING TIME:

THOMAS HOBBS, JOHN LOCKE, AND ADAM SMITH ON FUTURITY AND FREEDOM

by

JENNIFER CORBY

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2016

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This manuscript has been read and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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## **Abstract**

Claiming Time:  
Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Adam Smith on Freedom and Futurity

by

Jennifer Corby

Advisor: Susan Buck-Morss

This dissertation engages the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Adam Smith through the lens of time. By first analyzing their earlier works on the nature of self-consciousness, it demonstrates that each offers a theory of subjectivity that, despite important differences, shares a singular point of distinction from those that typified early modern thought. Against the predominant view that human freedom necessitates immaterial agency, each theorizes a materialist agent that is able to overcome the determinism of the material world by way of the temporal nature of subjectivity. Each understands self-consciousness to be constituted by an extension of memory into the past and imagination into the future, which, they argue, allows humans to act beyond, or in spite of, the present that would otherwise determine behavior. In conceiving subjectivity materially and temporally, their theories of freedom center equally on the futurity that makes freedom possible and the social context of its expression. As such, rather than simply being the implicit foundations for political thought, this dissertation demonstrates that their theories of subjectivity are necessarily political concepts—political concepts that are foundational to liberal thought. Through analyzing the particular methods each employs in theorizing the relationship between freedom and futurity, this dissertation offers new interpretations of their work, while charting movements between their ideas in the interest of opening the historical, neoliberal present to temporal analysis.

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*For Jamie.*

*This leap of faith is for, and because of, you.*

## Table of Contents

<u>Introduction</u>	<u>1</u>
Project Inspiration	1
The Materialist Turn of the Early Modern Moment	2
Chapter Outline	8
<u>Paradoxes of Possibility: Empowerment and Anxiety in Thomas Hobbes's Materialist Subject</u>	<u>14</u>
Introduction	14
Hobbes's Break with the Past: The Annihilation Hypothesis	21
Finding Common Ground	25
Hobbes's Modern Mechanism	31
Materialist Subjectivity: The Temporal Subject	34
Locating Materialist Agency: Supplanting the Will with Imagination	39
Of Futures Insecure: The State of Nature & The Kingdom of Darkness	46
Towards Futures Secure	54
Conclusion	65
<u>Internalizing the Eternal: The Moral and Material Temporality of John Locke's Subject</u>	<u>67</u>
Introduction	67
Foundations of Locke's philosophy	70
Moral implications of Locke's critiques	85
Science, history, morality: Locke's modern temporalities	89
Subjectivity: The time of personhood	98
Power: The time of agency	113
	ix

Morality and Happiness	126
Morality and Politics	132
<u>Adam Smith’s “Circles of Sympathy” and “Dangerous Disorders”: Virtue, Vice, and Timescales of Interaction</u>	<u>137</u>
Introduction	137
Contextualizing Smith: Empiricism, Sentimentalism, and Historicism	143
Theory of Consciousness	156
Theory of Action	171
Justice and Politics	175
Prudence and Politics	180
Social Corruption and Political Salvation	194
<u>Reclaiming Time: The Future is Making a Comeback</u>	<u>209</u>
<u>Bibliography</u>	<u>218</u>

## Introduction

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### Project Inspiration

There is something at once compelling and confusing about the neoliberal experience. It is an experience saturated in a narrative of possibility, expressed in the language of pursuit, and relentlessly affirmative of the future. And all this remains true despite counter narratives of decline, despite perpetual threats of economic and ecological devastation, and despite a present that can often seem intractable and disconnected from the possibilities embodied in ideas of the future. This conflicted experience is one steeped in time—both its promise and its paralysis stem from the manifold ways we interpret our present and try to think beyond it. The desire to decipher the chaotic temporality of neoliberal subjectivity is the inspiration for this project, but one that prompted an investigation not into the present, but into the past. For although the experience of this present appears at once to be the product of forces distinct to late stage capitalism, such as globalization and technological development, it nevertheless simultaneously appears as part of a larger story. As novel as life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is, in some ways it feels like this novel is a tale as old as time. Or at least, a tale as old as modern time. That perpetually echoed language of pursuit is old, but at one time it was new. So what changed?

Although new ideas ways of thinking about time can be broadly identified as a modern phenomenon, the impetus for this inquiry stems from an experience of time that is not merely modern, but specifically neoliberal. This project therefore intervenes into the early modern moment, investigating how and why new ways of thought impacted the philosophy of the progenitors of political and economic liberalism to which contemporary Western, and especially American, society is greatly indebted.

The central argument herein is that reading the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Adam Smith through the lens of time opens their thought in a number of new and

important ways. Beginning not with the political works each published later in life, but their earlier works exploring the nature of self-consciousness and agency, it finds each to offer a theory of subjectivity that, despite important differences, shares a singular point of distinction from those that typified early modern thought. Against the predominant view that freedom required an immaterial agency, each theorizes a material subject who overcomes the determinism of the material world by virtue of a temporal theory of consciousness. That is, they conceive of human freedom as a function of time, which makes temporality an important point of connection between their earlier works concerning the self and their later political works concerning the political subject. Through analyzing the particular methods Hobbes, Locke, and Smith, employ in theorizing the relationship between freedom and futurity, each chapter offers a new interpretation of their work that both reconciles elements of their thought often seen in tension, while problematizing existing interpretations. It also moves beyond their shared conception of subjectivity to chart movements between their work that reflect crucial developments in modern thought and modern society more broadly, in the interest of opening the historical present to temporal analysis.

### **The Materialist Turn of the Early Modern Moment**

The early modern moment was marked by a conscientious turn away from the past. Its philosophers questioned not only the possibility of finding truth within the dominant philosophical paradigm of Scholasticism that typified the Medieval epoch, but the possibility of finding truth by looking to the past at all. Instead, they saw the present as the location of philosophic knowledge; they did not seek to return to *the* beginning, but to establish a *new* beginning. In 1620, Francis Bacon first captured the sentiment of philosophic and historical newness quite succinctly in his *New Organon* when he declared,

It is futile to expect a great advancement in the sciences from overlaying and implanting new things on the old; a new beginning has to be made from the lowest foundations unless one is content to go round in circles for ever, with meager, almost negligible, progress.<sup>1</sup>

Bacon's choice of title was not incidental, but an intentional challenge to Aristotle's *Organon*, which was the foundation for Scholastic natural philosophy and scientific inquiry. Bacon and his contemporaries were particularly critical of the persistence of Ancient notions of Forms,<sup>2</sup> which may initially be surprising, as Aristotle was himself deeply critical of Plato's Forms. In *Physics*, Aristotle details an empirical approach to understanding contra Plato's rationalism. Whereas Plato contends that Forms have real existence apart from the material world, Aristotle counters that Forms have no real existence apart from the particulars that embody them; particulars are prior to universals. The mind, he further argues, does not have the innate cognition of universals as Plato postulates, but is designed to recognize them through experience,<sup>3</sup> which subsequently allows for the ordering of particulars that constitutes science. However, despite beginning with experience rather than reason, the process of recognition by which knowledge is obtained that Aristotle outlines is qualitatively different from sense perception. It is an intellectual rather than empirical grasp of an object's essence. As such, the ultimate source of understanding for Aristotle and his Scholastic successors is fundamentally intellectual, as it is for Plato. This means that although Aristotle offered alternative conceptions of, and relations between, the ideal and the real, and the universal and particular, he challenges

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, ed. Lisa Jardine and Michael Silverthorne, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 39 (i.13).

<sup>2</sup> One of the most enduring aspects of the theory Forms was its ability to account for the order observed in nature and connect it to the human ability to grasp that order. Observing that human perception and experience is not chaotic, or Hericlitean, but rather ordered and relational, Plato postulates that nature produces things in accordance with rational patters, that must necessarily be distinct from and prior to particulars.

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *Prior Analytics*, trans. Gisela Striker, Clarendon Aristotle Series (New York: Clarendon Press, 2009), 2.19.

neither the premises that make these distinctions necessary, nor the epistemological and ontological rationalism necessarily entailed by them.<sup>4</sup>

Bacon, however, countered that to assume that logic reflects the structure of reality, and can therefore uncover permanent relations among real objects is to mistake reason for reality. He argued, “forms are figments of the human mind, unless you call those laws of actions forms,” and as such, “[m]atter rather than forms should be the object of our attention.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, there are no forms to grasp; matter, motion, and the laws regulating their relations cause the regularity of reality. Consequently, knowledge of nature can be arrived at neither by intuition nor a direct connection between our minds and nature. Instead, Bacon contends that if empirical data is painstakingly collected, while the temptation to generalize is resisted, and disconfirming evidence is constantly sought, it is possible to arrive at generalizations that are true to nature and that may eventually produce a “summary law of nature” to explain the natural world.

With *New Organon*, Bacon fired the opening salvo against previous traditions of thought, be they Ancient or Scholastic, and ushered in a modern era of thought typified by a mechanist ontology and empiricist epistemology. Although mechanism is a rationalist ontology insofar as it assumes a rule-bound order of the material world is intelligible, it is distinct from Ancient rationalism in that the principles are perceptible in the functioning mechanics of the natural world. And, because mechanism relies on the actual perception of machinery, it is well-suited to empirical epistemologies in which sense-perception provides the raw materials of understanding. There is great variability in the extent to which early modern philosophers subscribe to

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<sup>4</sup> Ontological rationalism essentially assumes that change occurs in accordance to fundamental rules that are necessary and can be grasped *a priori* by the mind, though perhaps not the finite mind. Epistemological rationalism contends there is some method that can be employed by human intellect to decipher necessary laws of change.

<sup>5</sup> Bacon, *The New Organon*, 52 (i.51).

empiricism, but even those identified as rationalists like Descartes subscribe to the notion that experience is the primary source of ideas. Descartes rationalism is nevertheless important to note, as it marks an epistemological divide that provides the necessary context for understanding how Hobbes, Locke, and Smith each develop their philosophies by way of critiquing competing methods. For Hobbes, this occurs primarily by way of challenges he poses to Aristotle and Descartes, for Locke, by way of a triangulation between Hobbes and Descartes, and for Smith by a rejection of both the English traditions of rationalism and empiricism in favor of sentimentalism. In this way, epistemology is also useful for charting important differences between their thought, despite their shared concern for developing a materialist subject.

Epistemological variation aside, early moderns shared a common endeavor to establish a new philosophical foundation that reflects a disposition both historical *and* temporal. That is, their proclamations of a new epoch entailed not merely a rejection of a historical tradition, but also a metaphysical rejection of a way of thinking about time. This is because the mechanist ontology adopted by early moderns is a worldview inextricably tied to the time of matter and motion—a notion of time that is unidirectional, linear, objective, and future oriented. Such a system cannot accommodate concepts that function within alternative temporalities, which means such concepts must therefore be either reconceptualized or abandoned.

The context for classical moral concepts, for example, is the cyclical temporality of nature. As Jason Segal explains, it is owing to the Ancient belief that the time of human experience is typified by the inherent destructiveness of nature, that “classical thought equated the good with a transcendental or atemporal value that was linked to the permanent structure of



political life.”<sup>6</sup> In this way, finite existence could be infused with the meaning of the eternal through political forms. In other words, classical morality consisted not only of transcendental, eternal concepts; it also entailed an experiential temporality of decline, in which meaning could be accessed insofar as action transcended the futility of one’s earthly existence. The fundamental temporal structure of this model was largely unchanged by the Scholastics, if it did undergo a religious conversion of sorts.

The mechanist turn undermines these conceptions in important ways. In the first, it conceives of the material world as a source of knowledge, which can establish the authority of human knowledge. For, if truths can be discovered in the world by the human mind, authority is wrested from external sources of knowledge, be they theological or ideal. Moreover, if the order of the world can be discerned in the causal forces of matter and motion rather than in the universal forms or divine structure, knowledge of the natural world can assume a predictive quality, which brings the world under human control. As philosophers developed laws of matter and motion, they simultaneously asserted the authority of human knowledge in ways that had far reaching moral and political consequences. As Schneewind explains, during this period, “established notions of morality as obedience came increasingly to be contested by emerging conceptions of morality as self-governance.”<sup>7</sup> Early moderns established the authority of human knowledge by way of a temporal system of validation—future outcomes are a source of

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<sup>6</sup> Segal offers an excellent summary of the identity between individual and political order in classical political thought, and the difficulties that stem from the elimination of “the rational certainty of a purposeful universe” and liberating “the idea of the good from the fixed structure of common life.” Jacob Segal, “A Storm from Paradise: Liberalism and the Problem of Time,” *Critical Review* 8, no. 1 (January 1994): 24.

<sup>7</sup> Schneewind notes this phenomenon not as a result of mechanism per se, but rather in the service of demonstrating the connection between moral law and natural law in early modern thought. J. B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 4.

verification. This not only makes the future a new object of thought, but the sudden appearance of an open and actionable future raised important questions regarding the source and meaning of freedom.

Yet even as the material world emerged as a source of human knowledge, it did not necessarily appear as either the source or the site of human freedom. For the material world, governed as it is by causal, material forces, is itself a determined world. So even as scientific knowledge was a source of empowerment, and even as the prospect of predictive knowledge simultaneously expanded the horizon of its future while bringing its authorship under human control, human freedom, it seemed, must not be of this world. This is a helpful way to frame theories of subjectivity that emerged in this period, most notably that of Descartes, whose dualism located human freedom in immaterial agency. Though assuming a number of forms, the prevailing argument of the time was that since the world of matter is determined, the realm of human freedom lies not in the material world of the body, but in the immaterial realm of the mind.

However, the key insight revealed in a temporal analysis of Hobbes, Locke, and Smith, is that they find a conception of immaterial agency problematic for beings that live in the material world. The freedom available to an immaterial being is an atemporal one—it is conceptual and immediate, not actionable and temporal. Against this supposition, they counter that human life is *lived*; it is an experience fundamentally material and finite, which renders freedom a necessarily temporal concept. As such, each develops a materialist theory of subjectivity, in which behavior is determined not cognitively, by rational agency, but affectively, in response to the present. They do accept that human agency cannot be divorced from the material context of one's life, which renders it determined in some respects. Yet each posits that insofar as we are able to

overcome the determinism of the material world, it is by virtue of the temporal nature of subjectivity, which allows us to live beyond the present. It is because each understands self-consciousness to be constituted by an extension of memory into the past and imagination into the future that humans can act beyond, or in spite of, the present that would otherwise determine behavior. In conceiving subjectivity materially and temporally, these theories of freedom center equally on the futurity that makes freedom possible and the social context of its expression. In other words, because these concepts are rooted in the lived world, they compel political thought in ways that Cartesian models do not. As such, rather than simply being the implicit foundation for political thought, their subjectivities are necessarily political concepts. Collectively, we therefore find that the mechanist turn in modernity compelled for them not only a reconfiguration in the relationship between morality and time, but a transformation in the relationship between time and the political.

### **Chapter Outline**

The first chapter, entitled *Paradoxes of Possibility: Empowerment and Anxiety in Thomas Hobbes's Materialist Subject*, critically engages Hobbes's materialist concept of subjectivity, and in so doing counters prevailing interpretations that either reject the possibility of materialist agency or that conclude that his theory is philosophically unintelligible. It demonstrates that Hobbes rejects Cartesian dualism in favor of material dualism in which meaningful agency is possible. It reveals that he understands humans not to simply be bodies acted on by external forces, but reactive bodies that respond not only to the present, but to their own unique history and futural imagination. Rather than seeing humans as beings that all inhabit a singular, shared, uniform time, he conceptualizes each person as a distinct time. It is for this reason, he argues, that human interaction remains uncertain and undetermined. Moreover, it argues that properly

understanding the temporality of his subject illuminates his political philosophy in new ways. Specifically, it finds that state of nature to be not a place but a time—a time of anxiety and insecurity that he conceives temporally. It is precisely because the particular history and future trajectory of others are unknown that we find ourselves unable to imagine future outcomes of interaction. When we are unable to act for the future, he argues, we attempt to secure ourselves by dominating the present. Hobbes's political imaginary represents his attempt to overcome this problem, by resurrecting the concept of the eternal, politically. The Leviathan embodies an artificial eternity that stabilizes the future, which frees us from the domination of the present, and which makes trust and cooperation possible.

The second chapter, *Internalizing the Eternal, The Moral and Material Temporality of John Locke's Subject*, complicates traditional interpretations that ascribe an immaterial, rational agency to Locke's subject, by showing how his theory of identity and action are fundamentally temporal. It establishes an affinity between his thought and Hobbes, as both understand human behavior to be determined by feelings produced by the experience of the present. Distinctive of Locke's thought is that he locates human freedom in the ability to suspend the will, which momentarily frees us from the pressures of the present, thereby allowing the imagined pressures of the future to determine the will in the present. However, this chapter identifies a tension between Locke's empirically based, affective theory of agency, and his moral rationalism. For, he argues that subjectivity cannot be divorced from the material context that informs motivation, yet moral responsibility and judgment is neither reflected in, nor affected by, material conditions. The crucial intervention made herein, is that Locke bridges competing material and moral sources of motivation through temporal concepts. Like Hobbes, he does so by way of the eternal, however Locke's eternity is neither external nor secular, but internal and divine—the temporality

of his subject is both material, on account of our finite existence, and moral, on account of our rationality. In this way, Locke is able to inscribe subjects with a moral responsibility for material outcomes that nevertheless precludes consideration for particular material contexts. This analysis demonstrates that the lens of temporality reveals the fundamentally inegalitarian nature of his concept of subjectivity. This gestures towards important consequences for his political thought, as it reveals that he understands the material inequality manifested under his egalitarian political institutions to accurately reflect a latent moral hierarchy. The role of the state can therefore be understood as protecting those with the “right time” from those with the “wrong time”—from those whose temporal subjectivity fails to extend into the divine future.

The third substantive chapter, *Adam Smith’s “Circles of Sympathy” and “Dangerous Disorders”*: *Virtue, Vice, and Timescales of Interaction*, demonstrates that Smith also articulates a materialist subject, for whom freedom is a temporal concept. However, although he shares with Hobbes and Locke the position that the material foundation of human subjectivity makes consciousness future oriented, the material context for Smith’s subject is society itself. This means that not only is his subject necessarily social—as it is by dint of others that we become intelligible to ourselves, but so too is the temporality of the subject social. In other words, it is not the causal system of nature that primarily governs our ideas of the future, but the causal forces of society—our expectations relate to others. And, it is because thinking about ourselves entails thinking about others that he develops a concept of subjectivity that is necessarily moral. It is because we desire to be approval worthy and because we recognize our responsibility to others, he argues, that we are compelled to develop a faculty of judgment he conceives as “the impartial spectator.” By transcending the biases and pressures of the present by assuming a position equidistant from the present and future, the impartial spectator makes free, moral action

possible. In demonstrating the necessarily social and moral nature of Smith's subject, a concept of self-interest is revealed that challenges traditional liberal interpretations, as he understands both the self and the interests of the self to be formed in response to, and with responsibility to, society.

This chapter further shows an important point of distinction between his and Locke's thought, as Smith offers both a material source of moral knowledge, and a moral motivation that is not informed by a personal relationship with an afterlife, but a personal relationship with the past and future of society. This idea, that agency entails not merely acting for the future we individually imagine, but that the ideas of the future we act for are socially constructed, is distinctive of his thought. It is this idea that leads Smith to analyze how social organization can inhibit or expand the perception of possibilities, and to designate a uniquely temporal role for political institutions. For him, government does not secure an eternal future or even a singular future, but rather acts in the service of expanding the timescales of interaction—by promoting economic relations that facilitate acting for a more distant future. This entails the creation of legal structures that allow people to enter into arrangements that allow them to mutually and equitably extend their expectations of one another into a more distant future, which makes it possible for each to imagine, and to act for, a future of greater possibility. It also entails intervention into forms of economic organization that incentivize private speculation, and the offsetting of the risks of such endeavors to the public—of economic arrangements that encourage the sacrifice of the long-term, public future, for short-term, private gain.

The concluding chapter, *Reclaiming Time: The Future is Making a Comeback*, draws the analysis of the preceding chapters into the present. The analysis of the previous three chapters traces a transformation from one in which the temporal nature of subjectivity renders individuals

fundamentally antisocial to one in which both time and the self are socially constituted. That is, there is a movement from an individual to a social conception of the moral, material self. In Hobbes, we find a temporal subject understood in causal, mechanist, individual terms, whose uniqueness engenders antisocial behavior characterized as a war of all against all. With Locke, we have a temporal subject understood in terms both causal and divine, who has a natural community with those who share this temporality, but which engenders a conflict with those who do not, producing a war of some against some. And with Smith, we have a subject whose identity and temporal imagination result from a reciprocal relationship with society, and which locates the source of conflict not within or even between individuals, but as a byproduct of the dynamic nature of social organization broadly. This development parallels a developing in their political thought, insofar as Hobbes can be read as proto-liberal, Locke as foundationally liberal, and Smith as reacting to the realization of liberal political and economic institutions.

Smith's lived experience of liberalism is crucial, for even as he contributes to the development of liberal thought, maintaining its futural and acquisitive features, he is uniquely able to investigate how economic and political organizations fundamentally shape our ideas of the future. He argues that what is possible, and how far we can plan, are all shaped by the timescales of organizational arrangements. This means that what is preventing acting for the long-term future is not, for him, a missing eternity as it is for Hobbes and Locke, but rather an appreciation for how social organization can incentivize behavior that is amoral, short-term, and antisocial. His criticism is exceptionally astute and relevant, as the society he principally analyzes is, like ours, a commercial one.

Turning to our contemporary experience, the final chapter highlights how the lens of time employed by Hobbes, Locke, and Smith can illuminate facets of our present. Exploring examples

ranging from the environment to the economy, it demonstrates how the destabilizing relationship Hobbes discerns between power and anxiety, and the atemporality of Locke's liberal political institutions can help render contemporary political discourse and behavior more intelligible. It further considers the implications of Smith's critique—of economic organizations that incentivize maximum risk seeking and maximum security seeking in ways that sacrifice public futures for personal gain—in a commercial society typified by such organizations. These connections can be hard to see, but the lens of time reveals our present. And by seeing the temporal source and nature of its paralysis more clearly, we can begin to see new possibilities for reclaiming time.



## **Paradoxes of Possibility: Empowerment and Anxiety in Thomas Hobbes's Materialist Subject**

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### **Introduction**

The central argument of this chapter is that reading Thomas Hobbes through the lens of time renders a number of tensions in his work intelligible, and simultaneously opens his thought to forms of inquiry that speak directly to our time. Specifically, I demonstrate that it is time that liberates his subject from the determinism that governs the rest of the material world, as human behavior is affected not only by the material conditions of the present, but also by memories of the past and imagination regarding the future. This gives humans the unique ability to imagine futures different from the past and to shape the material world of existence accordingly. In this way, Hobbes's radically expands the possibilities of freedom. At the same time, however, materialist subjectivity allows us to recognize not only our own agency, but that of others, which disrupts our ability to think about the future. That is, our material existence engenders ideas about time that simultaneously enable and undermine agency. I argue that this is the central paradox around which Hobbes's philosophy pivots, and it is fundamental to interpreting his political imagination. To this end, I demonstrate that he conceptualizes insecurity as a fundamentally temporal problem—it reflects an inability to think beyond the present moment, which compels domination in it. The primary purpose of political institutions is then to project an eternal, stable future that makes meaningful agency and sociable behavior possible in the present.

This chapter begins by situating Hobbes historically, locating him within the early modern tradition, and charting the evolution of his own ideas about time. The early modern moment in which Hobbes wrote was a time of upheaval, characterized by a conscientious severing from inherited intellectual traditions and philosophic methods, and by reevaluations of

the nature and value of history. In addition to changing dispositions towards the past, it was also a period in which mechanist philosophy identified matter and motion as the source of knowledge, which carries with it a fundamentally new way of thinking about time—the time of the material world, causal, linear, predictive, and devoid of meaning. In short, Hobbes’s time was one carefully rethinking time. The first section explores the relationship between ideas about time and philosophy, to demonstrate the significance of reevaluating them. In one sense, ideas about time are central to human questions of meaning—the eternal cyclicity of the Ancients and the eternal divinity of the Scholastics both served to imbue the finite nature of human existence with meaning purpose. Aside from questions of meaning, the pursuit of knowledge is also often attended by temporal concepts. This is most evident in the treatment of history as a source of ethical or practical knowledge—a practice dating back to Thucydides. But history also shapes philosophic ideas, insofar as ideas have an intellectual history that is shaped over time. This is all to say, time is a through line that runs through the most powerful and essential features of human life. The stakes to rethinking time are high, yet amidst the scientific and philosophic revolution of the early modern moment, seemingly unavoidable.

The impact of this revolution are evident within Hobbes’s work, as a transition is evident in his own thought, as he shifts the source of knowledge from the narrative, moral time of history to the causal, linear time of science. The impetus for this shift stems from his desire to avoid what he sees as the Scholastic and Ancient tendency to extend the scope of human knowledge into unknowable realms, resulting in speculation and confusion. Hobbes therefore limits the scope of human knowledge to that which could be produced by philosophic inquiry into the mechanist nature of the world—a closed system in which all material causes and effects could be understood by the laws governing matter and motion. He distinguishes himself from other

mechanists, however, by denying not simply the ability to speak intelligibly about immaterial substances, but their very existence. All things, he argues, even those that seem to exist independent of material objects, have a material cause. He thus articulates a philosophy of nature, man, and society that was materialist and mechanist, fusing the predictive certainty of the natural world with the philosophy of the human world. In this way, he employs temporal concepts to establish a new foundation of knowledge and agency, and seeks to develop a way of thinking that freed the future from the past.

Despite this promise, Hobbes's philosophy poses significant challenges to questions of human authority and autonomy, and the second section concentrates on the challenges posed by Hobbes's temporal reevaluations. Essentially, in the new and isolated moment he envisions—one unmoored from the past and detached from traditional meaning the question he must confront is: how can we find common ground? How can we make sense of our own experience and the experience of one another? Hobbes draws on a scientific understanding of time to develop a theory of knowledge in which a common interpretive framework is made possible by innate causal reasoning. It is, he argues, our temporal recognition of before and after that allows us to recognize the causal nature of ourselves and the world, and which compels us to develop knowledge by seeking validation from others. In this way, he collectively elevates the possibilities of human understanding while undermining individual or abstract reason. Reason is, for Hobbes, mediated by our material and temporal existence, and knowledge is a necessarily social endeavor.

Subsequent sections of this chapter turn to Hobbes's materialist subject. In his day and in ours, it is Hobbes's materialism that draws the most sustained criticism. His contemporaries

tended to focus on his flawed understanding of optics and mechanics.<sup>8</sup> However, contemporary scholarship is less concerned with his scientific errors and rather finds his materialism to be a deeply problematic foundation for political thought. Most interpretations of Hobbes's subject find an irreconcilable tension between his mechanism and agency, as the determinism of the former would seem to elide any possible freedom of the latter. This has led some, like Peters and Tajfel to conclude that Hobbes's materialism indeed precludes any meaningful agency, because the behavior of his subject is compelled by a crude determinism.<sup>9</sup> Tom Sorell offers a richer and more generous reading of Hobbes, but he too ultimately concludes that Hobbes's subjects do not "qualify as fully-fledged thinkers,"<sup>10</sup> because, the "relation between agents and actions...tends to be reduced to a relation between events that take place *in* agents."<sup>11</sup> In other words, materialism precludes the possibility of an agent being the *source* rather than the *site* of her actions. The heart of Sorell's critique is that Hobbes's materialism prevents us from being agents of our own thoughts. And if we are not the agents of our thoughts, we are not the agents of our behavior. However, since such determinism is a politically useless concept, many conclude that Hobbes simply did not intend to incorporate human volition into the sphere of determinism—that because meaningful materialist subjectivity is untenable, it is either an "embarrassing"<sup>12</sup> accident, an "oversimplification,"<sup>13</sup> or simply philosophically unintelligible. This skepticism regarding Hobbes's mechanism informs the two most common readings of Hobbes's political philosophy, both of which attempt to bridge the chasm perceived between his stated materialism

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<sup>8</sup> Rogers, "Hobbes and His Contemporaries."

<sup>9</sup> R. S. Peters and H. Tajfel, "Hobbes and Hull - Metaphysicians of Behaviour," *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* VIII, no. 29 (1957): 30–44, doi:10.1093/bjps/VIII.29.30.

<sup>10</sup> Tom Sorell, *Hobbes, The Arguments of the Philosophers* (New York: Routledge: Kegan Paul, 1986), 85.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

and his political objectives. The first is that reflected in Sorell's reading, and largely interprets his work through the lens of reason, replacing Hobbes's materialist subject with a rational self-interested individual.<sup>14</sup> The second interpretation is that offered by Quentin Skinner, who claims that Hobbes's political writings are rhetorically, not philosophically mechanist. That is, that Hobbes invokes materialist rhetoric in an act of philosophic misdirection, which allows him to obscure his true intentions and engage in polemical argument.<sup>15</sup>

These criticisms are not without merit, however I wish to problematize such interpretations of Hobbes's materialism, and to demonstrate that it indeed contains a conception of subjectivity and agency that makes political thought possible. The apparent contradiction between materialism and agency is made intelligible if the unique temporality engendered by Hobbes's subject is properly understood. I first explore his conception of time, which is distinct from his mechanist peers because he understands it to be ideational, having no objective existence. However, I argue that it is precisely this subjectively constituted concept of time that allows him to develop a materialist subjectivity in which agency is possible. Against Cartesian models in which self-consciousness arises through introspection and the immaterial agent directs the material body, Hobbes outlines a temporal subject whose self-consciousness stems from retrospection and whose agency is exercised not in the immediate present but through imagination. Though he incorporates human volition into a schema of material cause and effect, he understands humans to be not merely passive recipients of causes, but reactive "thinking bodies"—each human body bears and reacts to his own history, and his own ideas about the future. There is not for Hobbes one time humans inhabit. Rather, each person is living

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<sup>14</sup> Tom Sorell, "The Science in Hobbes's Politics," in *Perspectives on Thomas Hobbes*, ed. G. A. J. Rogers and Alan Ryan (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 1988).

<sup>15</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

embodiment of distinct temporal systems in which memory and imagination are themselves causal forces. This means that for Hobbes, the causal forces of human experience are neither singular nor exclusively external. Though material beings, it is the uniquely temporal nature of human subjectivity that allows us to transcend the mechanistic forces that determine the rest of the natural world. Unlike the determined nature that characterizes the world of passive bodies, the human world is rather one of interdependence and contingency. It is a world that is simultaneously determined by forces and therefore predictable, yet uncertain, precisely because the world has not one causal temporal framework, but is instead animated by the multiplicity of human temporal trajectories constantly colliding. This is what makes human interaction unpredictable, and what makes futures different from the past possible.

It is within the context of multiple, particular temporalities that Hobbes locates the paradox of human existence—coexistence creates the possibility of a future that is undetermined by the past and under human control, yet its openness produces a profound anxiety that undermines the possibility for deliberative action. These concerns are addressed in the final sections, as Hobbes describes how the presence of others, who embody temporalities like but distinct from our own, causes anxiety and insecurity that arrests the imagination, causing the present to be a location not of freedom but domination. Though the tension between individuals and society is a well-known feature of Hobbes's thought, a proper understanding of his subject illuminates this tension in novel ways. Specifically, it reveals that the anti-social qualities he describes are neither innate nor inevitable, but stem from a temporal problem. Encountering others, each of whom has a discrete history and unknown trajectory, hinders our ability to

imagine futures. He describes the state of nature not as a place, but as “a tract of time,”<sup>16</sup> characterized by insecurity and anxiety—both of which Hobbes understands to be fundamentally temporal, insofar as they reflect an inability to locate oneself in the future.

This paradox—that the ideas about time engendered by material conditions simultaneously enables and undermines agency—is the proper context for understanding Hobbes’s political imagination. It shows how his political project is thus concerned with controlling the environment so that interaction produces trust rather than anxiety. Security has been well-established as a primary concern for Hobbes, but what is often missed is that Hobbes understands security as a primarily *temporal* concept—mitigating the anxiety that prevents cooperation and long-term planning requires the creation of an illusion of eternity, continually reinforced by the state. He presents the Leviathan as “an artificial man” comprised of all, but “greater in stature and strength than the natural.”<sup>17</sup> The artificiality of the Leviathan allows it to overcome human limitations, the most crucial of which is mortality. Because it is not enough “for the security, which men desire should last all of the time of their life,”<sup>18</sup> “the artificial man [must have] an artificial eternity of life.”<sup>19</sup> Embodying an eternal hope, the Leviathan projects a stable future, which allows for the present anxieties and insecurities that inhibit both meaningful agency and social behavior to be overcome.

This reconceptualization of time signifies a marked shift in notions of the individual and society, most notably because it allows for the future to become not merely *an* object, but the primary object of thought, both personally and collectively. Of course, upon this soil of

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Noel Malcolm, vol. 4, The Clarendon Edition of the Works of Thomas Hobbes (New York: Clarendon Press, 2012), 192 (I.xiii). In the interest of clarity, all Hobbes quotes have been updated to reflect modern spellings.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:16.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:258 (II.xvii).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:298 (II.xix).

expanded possibility, Hobbes constructs a political vision primarily identified by its limitations. A temporal reading does not thoroughly undo the conservatism of Hobbes's authoritarian state, but it does allow for an interpretational shift in which the state can be viewed not as an instrument of control over people, but an attempt to control the environment such that people can exercise a greater degree of freedom and autonomy.

Time is the loophole through which Hobbes first postulates and then overcomes what appears to be an utterly determined human world. And, I argue, we are well-served by reading his political philosophy as an attempt to open the future by securing the future. This work opens Hobbes's theory to not only to new, but to relevant, insights. Though in many ways compelling, one need not adopt his mechanism to appreciate how material conditions shape ideas about the future. In particular, his work is helpful for thinking through insecurity and anxiety not as purely material or psychological concepts, but as materially conditioned temporal ideas. Moreover, his understanding of the arresting nature of these temporal concepts vis-à-vis agency provide a framework for thinking through the production, experience, and behavioral impact of insecurity in today's world.

### **Hobbes's Break with the Past: The Annihilation Hypothesis**

Hobbes's philosophic response to Scholasticism makes an implicit connection between systems of knowledge and historical possibility. Articulating a new kind of philosophy that was accessible and demonstrable would, he thought, create new possibilities—because creating a framework of mutual intelligibility could bring the conditions of possibility necessary for peace into existence. Consequently, a new kind of historical development could be forged. Understanding philosophy to be deeply tied to questions of history, he seeks to make a forcible break from both history and philosophy.



Hobbes was part of the early modern movement that was explicitly engaged in a project of severing connections to the past and establishing a new foundation for knowledge and society. This fact gives the opening lines of “The First Grounds of Philosophy” in *De Corpore* added significance. He writes:

In the teaching of natural philosophy, I cannot begin better...than from *privation*; that is, from feigning the world to be annihilated. But, if such annihilation of all things be supposed, it may perhaps be asked, what would remain for any man (whom only I except from this universal annihilation of things) to consider as the subject of philosophy, or at all to reason upon; or what to give names unto for ratiocination’s sake.<sup>20</sup>

This passage, generally referred to as the “annihilation hypothesis,” serves a number of purposes, and reveals a number of dimensions crucial to understanding Hobbes’s thought and project. Though not the first to employ the annihilation hypothesis,<sup>21</sup> his use serves new and varied functions. This tactic of imbuing traditional devices with new meaning is common of his work, as he repurposes the annihilation hypothesis to convey not just a philosophical method, but a historical disposition. Regarding the latter, one of the reasons we imagine the end of the world is so that we can separate ourselves from the knowledge about it that we have inherited. That is, when he asks his reader to inhabit the mental landscape of the lone survivor, he is not just asking us to imagine the end of *the* material world, but the end of our *human* world, and the intellectual history we have inherited. By creating an artificial intellectual distance, he implies, we are better able to give sober appraisal of this world and our experience of it, unencumbered by the mistakes, bias, and dogma of inherited knowledge, religious truths, and cultural objects.

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<sup>20</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, ed. William Molesworth, vol. 1 (London: John Bohn, 1839), 92 (II.vii.1).

<sup>21</sup> Cees Leijenhorst, *The Mechanisation of Aristotelianism: The Late Aristotelian Setting of Thomas Hobbes’ Natural Philosophy* (Boston: Brill, 2002), 109 (fn 13) Referring to Aversa, Phil. Q27, S2, p.787.

In this sense, the annihilation of the world is the annihilation of history, and we, like the lone survivor, are left to contemplate existence isolated and “in the dark.”<sup>22</sup> But unlike the fictional lone survivor whose state of isolation is terminal and whose contemplation is ultimately impotent, our separation from past knowledge is followed by a return to a world we share. The world we return to is, however, no longer as it was before, by virtue of our newly obtained sobriety, which allows us to not merely appraise the world and our experience of it, but to shape it as well. Though it may seem contradictory at first, Hobbes's condemnation of much of prior philosophy is simultaneously an affirmation of the relationship between history and the present, insofar as errors in present thinking can be understood to have their origin in a flawed past. Rather than focusing on reshaping the present to restore the validity of foundations of thought established in the past, Hobbes focuses on the present as a foundation for the future—an approach that affirms history, even as it breaks from it. In such a present, severed from the past, Hobbes works to establish a new historical trajectory by way of a new kind of time—the time of matter and motion, cause and effect, the linear time of science which imparts no meaning and is not prescriptive but predictive. And, the predictive quality of this time turns the mind to the future. This philosophic disposition, oriented, as it is, to the future, is also mirrored in Hobbes's theory of subjectivity. It further parallels a reorientation in Hobbes' own thought from the past to the future.

Although his later, more eminently political works are markedly ahistorical, his most notable early work was a full translation and annotation of Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War*. He embarked on this project in order to extract its political truths. In it, he explains, “the principle and proper work of history, [is] to instruct and enable men, by the knowledge of actions past, to

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<sup>22</sup> Hobbes, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, 1839, 1:92 (II.vii.1).

bear themselves prudently in the present and providently towards the future.”<sup>23</sup> Yet even as he advocates for historical instruction, he is weary of what seem to be unavoidable misfires. He notes, “For in history, actions of *honour* and *dishonour* do not appear plainly and distinctly, which are which; but in the present age they are so disguised, that few there be, and those very careful, that be not grossly mistaken in them.”<sup>24</sup> Here, the present is not illuminated but hidden, and judgments regarding its truth are only evident retrospectively. Though the past is a source of knowledge, insofar as its meaning is clear in the present, that knowledge is largely unactionable because the present can only be properly assessed in the future. By the time he writes *Leviathan*, this unease has given way to a formal split, and he explains that there are two kinds of knowledge:

one is knowledge of fact; the other, knowledge of the consequence of one affirmation to another. The former is nothing but sense and memory, and is absolute knowledge...and this is the knowledge required in a witness. The latter is called science, is conditional; as when we know that: if the figure shown be a circle, then any straight line through the center shall divide it into two equal parts. And this [scientific knowledge] is the knowledge required in a philosophy.<sup>25</sup>

Here, he presents history as the post hoc affirmation of a series of consequences made by witnesses. Scientific causality, however, requires no witness. Whereas history affirms past truths, science offers axiomatic truths that can be projected into the future. In this way, the present can become a time of certainty.

The transition in the role of history in his thought essentially signifies a change in his understanding of the meaning of history and its relationship to truth. The problem for Hobbes is that at its best, history’s value is prudential not predictive. Its lessons can help develop a more providential *disposition* in individuals, but regarding the future with mere caution and informed

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<sup>23</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, ed. William Molesworth, Elibron Classics Replica Edition, vol. 8 (London: John Bohn, 1843), vii.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 8:vi.

<sup>25</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 2012, 4:124 (I.ix).

speculation is an insufficient foundation for political knowledge, let alone a systematized political philosophy. In order to be lasting, he argues, political knowledge must be based on a foundation of predictive certainty. Science, and its causal laws of motion, provides Hobbes with the kind of predictive certainty he was looking for. Upon a new foundation of knowledge, a new history could emerge. Or put differently, Hobbes believed that producing a future that was different from the past required not just injecting new ideas into an existing system, but rather required establishing a foundation for thinking and for grounding truth claims that was rigorously ahistorical. For him, liberating the future from the errors of the past requires a causal system whose temporality operated independently of history, thus allowing history to develop without distorting or invalidating philosophy. As such, despite his implicit recognition of the ways in which history *cannot* be divorced from politics so long as people have a history, because Hobbes understands historic knowledge to be insufficient, and because he understands science itself to be ahistorical, history is excluded from his political philosophy entirely. In its stead, the ahistorical temporality of science, understood in terms of cause and affect allows him to consider temporality divorced from history, and to expose what he views as the true nature of the human psyche, and, consequently, the real possibilities and limitations of human life.

### **Finding Common Ground**

Hobbes's philosophical and historical separation is not without consequences, however. Samantha Frost points out that "when neither God nor nature provide us with an indubitable cosmological map according to which we place ourselves in the universe...actions and events can mean radically different things to each of us."<sup>26</sup> What this indicates to Hobbes, is that without a common interpretive framework, individuals become convinced and indignant

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<sup>26</sup> Samantha Frost, "Faking It: Hobbes's Thinking-Bodies and the Ethics of Dissimulation," *Political Theory* 29, no. 1 (February 1, 2001): 32.

regarding their own claims to right reason, and violence is the result. Hobbes's argument, then, is that uses of reason that are either wholly abstract or independently held are exclusionary and inaccessible, and therefore, socially destructive. Philosophic inquiry must therefore be limited to the realm of the demonstrable, lest we continue to fall victim to the myth making and fear-mongering of the philosophers and theologians who, Hobbes believes, have used their powers of reason to build consensus around nonsense. Thus, any society that has hope of survival must have an inferential framework for mutual intelligibility that is at least provisionally available to all, and oriented to a good desired by all. Within these limitations, he argues, it is possible to create a system of knowledge that is universal, logical, and predictive. The whole of Hobbes mechanistic metaphysics can be understood as the "science of causes," which makes mutual intelligibility possible through methods by which the "dependence of connexion" between "antecedent and subsequent event" are mutually experienced, demonstrated, affirmed.<sup>27</sup> In this way, Hobbes postulates a new cosmological map that allows people to situate themselves in the universe, free from God or history, and grounded in temporal reason—the common ability to make connections between before and after is the key to his philosophy.

The annihilation hypothesis can be read not only as highlighting the shift in Hobbes's thought wherein the time of science supplants history as the source of philosophic truth. It is also a demonstration of the method by which he grounds and validates knowledge. It is an intersubjective method that appeals to the common experience of consciousness to establish self-evident truths. Hobbes expects us to immediately identify with, and to understand, the experience of the lone survivor on account of the features of consciousness common to humans. His invitation to consider the mind of the lone survivor is intended to direct our attention to the inner

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<sup>27</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 2012, 4:168 (I.xii).

working of our consciousness. He seeks not to have a reader recognize and identify not what or he thinks, but how *we* think. He continues his annihilation exegesis:

For seeing, that after the destruction of all other things, I suppose man still remaining, and namely that he thinks, imagines, and remembers, there can be nothing for him to think of but what is past; nay, if we do but observe diligently what it is we do when we consider and reason, we shall find, that though all things be still remaining in the world, yet we compute nothing but our own phantasms. For when we calculate...we do not ascent into heaven that we may divide it into parts...but we do it sitting still in our closets or in the dark.<sup>28</sup>

Hobbes entreats us to recognize that human consciousness is inherently temporal, as the ideas that constitute consciousness are born of past perceptions, and that reason is embedded in the temporality of ideas and experience. We, like the lone survivor, have only ideas of the world produced by past experience to contemplate. This is a truth, he argues, we can recognize to be true not only of ourselves, but all human minds. Even as Hobbes invokes this commonality, he does so in the service of subverting common sense. That is, rather than affirming what common sense *tells* us is our immediate experience of the world, Hobbes seeks to reveal that our experience is not of the world, but of the representations given to us by the world. That is, our experience is not of objects in themselves, but of the way objects appear to us, as mediated by our senses. By asking us to imagine the world after its annihilation, Hobbes is really asking us to see that our minds are non-identical to the world that produces them. This is why, he argues, that other minds are essential to philosophic knowledge. Individual reason and experience are insufficient grounds of knowledge, their validation requires the corroboration of others. This is the same approach he later echoes in the *Leviathan*, which Hobbes opens by declaring,

for the similitude of the thoughts and passions of one man, to the thoughts and passions of another, *whosoever looketh into himself, and considerate what he doth*, when he does think, opine, reason, hope, fear, &c. and upon what grounds;

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<sup>28</sup> Hobbes, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, 1839, 1:92 (II.vii).

he shall thereby read and know, what are the thoughts and passions of all other men upon like occasions.<sup>29</sup>

By reflecting on the nature of our own consciousness, he argues, we identify qualities that are not particular to ourselves, but general features of consciousness, which makes others' consciousness intelligible. Some argue these instances are ones in which Hobbes abandons his scientific methods for methods of persuasion and rhetorical manipulation.<sup>30</sup> However, despite the rhetorical turn in Hobbes's later, explicitly polemical work, we would be remiss to overlook the appeals to our commonality that are present throughout his work, because they demonstrate that his entire system of knowledge is consistently and exclusively validated by intersubjective appeals. This is an intentional move on his part, for the solipsism and abstraction of Scholasticism, is only prevented by a philosophy that can be demonstrable to, and verified by, others. It is, he argues, the causal reasoning innate to humans that makes such a philosophy possible.

It is because Hobbes understands causal reasoning to be the source of knowledge that he defines philosophy as, "the knowledge, acquired by right reasoning, of the qualities of bodies known by means of a conception of their generation, and conversely of possible generations from correct reasoning from their known properties."<sup>31</sup> Or put differently, philosophy is

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<sup>29</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 2012, 4:18.

<sup>30</sup> Quentin Skinner argues that prior to writing *Leviathan*, Hobbes underwent a transformation whereby his writing became much more rhetorical and persuasive. He highlights the second quote as an example of Hobbes shamelessly appealing to the vanity of the common people. On the whole, his argument is substantiated, but this quote, which reads as a reiteration of the earlier quote from *De Corpore*, cannot be seen as a new and entirely instrumental tactic. Rather, it is consistent with Hobbes's continual affirmation that knowledge of others is made possible through our own experience. Cf. Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*, chap. 10.

<sup>31</sup> Manuscript version of *De Corpore*, cited in Quentin Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Chapter 10.. Published version reads as follows, "Philosophy is such knowledge of effects or appearances, as we acquire by true ratiocination from the knowledge we have first of their causes or generation: and again,

reasoning from apparent effect to possible cause, or from known causes to possible effects. Hobbes' outlines two methods of "right reason," the analytic and the synthetic, which are designed to develop a common and accessible interpretive framework by demonstrating a reproducible system of connectedness.<sup>32</sup> Hobbes's insistence on demonstration that connects generative definitions (i.e. maker's knowledge) rather than merely conventional definitions, prevents his system from having a merely internal logic that lacks reproducibility.

The first method he describes, the analytic method, moves from effects to causes, or more specifically, from sensory effects (ideas), to material causes. He offers an example of the former by analyzing gold, which is a composite idea that must be resolved into more basic ideas such as "solid, visible, and heavy,"<sup>33</sup> which are further resolved until the most universal concepts are reached. The synthetic method on the other hand, begins from causes to find possible effects, and is, therefore, a much more generative and open-ended method. However, it is also a method that requires analytic knowledge. In the case of civil and moral philosophy, Hobbes stresses that the philosopher applies the synthetic method to the analytic principles discovered in first philosophy in order to develop an entire system of thought. Crucial to his argument, however, is that *everyone* can analytically affirm, individually, these synthetically derived principles. This is

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of such causes or generations as may be from knowing first their effects." Hobbes, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, 1839, 1:3 (I.i).

<sup>32</sup> Hobbes does not make any claims that his system is *true*, only that it is *functional*. He is in this sense, merely creating a matrix much like the fictional one of the movies. However, while it is possible to interpret Hobbes as the progenitor of relativism, I interpret his framework as universally oriented, but couched in relative terms to prevent it from directly challenging the universal claims to truth made by religions. This universalism is evident in *Leviathan*, where Hobbes notes, "the laws of nature are eternal...the true doctrine of the laws of nature is the true moral philosophy." Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 2012, 4:241–2 (I.xv).

<sup>33</sup> Hobbes, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, 1839, 1:69 (I.6).



because analytic principles are ultimately either “self-evident”<sup>34</sup> or essentially evident in ourselves.

Hobbes’s position that causal reasoning is innate is tied to his particular conception of materialist subjectivity. It is, he argues, fundamentally self-evident that the cause of all conceptions is body and motion.<sup>35</sup> Humans are unique, in that we are not simply the recipients of external causes, but reactive, each person is a contingent system of cause and effects. Our constitution means that we do not have to apply reason to understand the actions and reactions of our bodies, they are evident merely by observation. As he explains, unlike the non-human bodies of the world, “the causes of the motions of the mind are known, *not only by ratiocination*, but also *by the experience of every man* that takes the pains to *observe those motions within himself*.”<sup>36</sup> This essentially means that although discovering and systematizing all the principles of civil philosophy requires applying a synthetic method to the analytic principles of first philosophy, these principles can be affirmed analytically even by those lacking philosophic training, by simply consulting one’s own mind. Hobbes offers an example in which a person can determine the justice or injustice of a particular action, by consulting his own experience and arriving at the same conclusion as the philosophic principle that would compel the same action.<sup>37</sup> Hobbes’s intention here is to demonstrate that neither reason alone nor my status as a sentient animal are sufficient grounds for validation, which requires the corroboration of others. He is developing a system in which reason does not have independent authority, but is always

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<sup>34</sup> Talaska, “Analytic and Synthetic Method According to Hobbes,” 319.

<sup>35</sup> Hobbes offers various explanations for this, but the most recurring is that these are two causes for which no material causes can be conceived. They are, in effect, the first movers of all material causality and cannot be further reduced.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, ed. William Molesworth, Elibron Classics Replica Edition, vol. 1 (London: John Bohn, 1839), 73. Emphasis in mine.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:74.

mediated in its use by the temporality and materiality of the agent. Its validation stems from congruency with other similarly mediated agents, and it is this commonality that is also what makes mutual intelligibility possible. Hobbes reinforces this point when he concludes his introduction to *Leviathan* as follows:

He that is to govern a whole nation, *must read in himself, not this or that particular man; but mankind*: which though it be hard to do, harder than to learn any language or science; yet when I shall have set down my own reading orderly, and perspicuously, the pains left another, will be only to consider, if he also find not the same in himself. *For this kind of doctrine admitteth no other demonstration.*<sup>38</sup>

Hobbes's annihilation hypothesis is similarly intended to help us reach this point of common identification.

### **Hobbes's Modern Mechanism**

The first step to understanding how Hobbes liberates his material subject through time, is his rejection of the objective existence of time. Like his early modern peers, Hobbes is engaged in a project of explaining the human world in mechanist terms. However, unlike his contemporaries, his mechanism is totalizing. Where others such as Descartes maintain that laws of matter and motion are the proper source of knowledge of the material world, but knowledge of immaterial substances can only be discovered through reason, Hobbes denies the existence of immaterial substances wholecloth. He instead argues that matter and motion are all that exist. As such, he endeavors to explain the material causes of all ideas, and how ideas that have no material existence can be conceived.

In *De Corpore*, Hobbes offers a fairly typical mechanist account of perception. All ideas, he explains, have their origin in material objects, whose qualities press on our senses, causing motions that are then propagated through our bodily organs, which react to produce a phantasm

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<sup>38</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 2012, 4:18.

or appearance of an object.<sup>39</sup> This explanation is largely consistent with other mechanist ideas of perception, with one crucial exception. When it come to ideas of time and space produced by objects, Hobbes's contemporaries find them to be immaterial, self-sufficient, substance-like entities. That is, they find time and space to be real. Hobbes denies the objective existence of time and space, and blames others' errors on the human tendency towards abstraction. In this case, the experience of material particulars (i.e. things with real space) gives rise to imaginary universals (i.e. infinite space). Likewise, motion provides examples of particular instances of time, which gives rise to the idea of time as an infinite, singular, universal. However, Hobbes argues that since phantasmata are, like all other ideas, mediated by perception, nothing universal can be said of the external objects that give rise to them.

Yet Hobbes does view time as unique, because it is not the property of an object, but of an object's motion. Whereas space is a quality of objects that is largely static and independent, time requires a subject.<sup>40</sup> Or put differently, although our knowledge of material objects is mediated by perception, we nonetheless know that objects exist spatially, independent of our measurement. The same cannot be said for time, which is a process of the mind with no objective existence. With this move, Hobbes lays the foundation for a theory of human subjectivity in temporal terms. In his treatment of time, however, he seems particularly sensitive to the fact that his position regarding time has radical implications for philosophy. And this helps to explain

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<sup>39</sup> Hobbes, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, 1839, 1:389–91 (IV.25.2).

<sup>40</sup> Hobbes addresses those who would claim the objective existence of time directly when he writes, "And as for those that say, days, years, and months are the motions of the sun and moon, seeing it is all one to say, motion past and motion destroyed, and that future motion is the same with motion which is not yet begun, they say that, which they do not mean, that there either is, nor has ben, nor shall be any time; for of whatsoever it may be said, it has been or it shall be, of the same also it might have been said heretofore, or may be said hereafter, it is. What then can days, months, and years, be, but the names of such computations made in our mind? Time therefore is a phantasm, but a phantasm of motion..." Ibid., 1:94–5 (II.7).

why, despite elsewhere expressing no shortage of derision for the “Darknesse from Vain Philosophy and Fabulous Traditions”<sup>41</sup> caused by the Scholastic tradition generally and Aristotle specifically, in *De Corpore*, he employs Aristotle as an unlikely ally. He begins by explaining that his idea “is that, which (without receding much from the common opinion, or from Aristotle’s definition) I call *Time*.”<sup>42</sup> However, he fundamentally alters the meanings of the concepts he appropriates in ways that allow him to reject central Aristotelian conclusions.<sup>43</sup>

He then offers more “complete definition” explaining that, “time is the phantasm of before and after in motion; which agrees with this definition of Aristotle, time is the number of motion according to the former and latter...”<sup>44</sup> And, he explains, these concepts of before and after are not attributable to objects or time—time is an idea produced by material stimulus in the mind, yet has no independent existence. A past motion no longer exists, a future motion does not

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<sup>41</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Noel Malcolm, vol. 5, The Clarendon Edition of the Works of Thomas Hobbes (New York: Clarendon Press, 2012), 1052–1131 (IV.46).

<sup>42</sup> Hobbes, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, 1839, 1:94 (II.7).

<sup>43</sup> Aristotle divided philosophy into that which was “on being” (metaphysics) and that which was “of bodies” (physics), the former being the subject of his *Philosophia Prima*, and the latter the subject of *Physica Principalis*. However, Hobbes reduced all being to corporeal being, which limited the realm of philosophic understanding to matter and motion, thereby effectively eliminating Aristotelian notions of metaphysics. Thus, the work in question was intended as a response to Aristotle’s *Philosophia Prima* in name, and *Physica Principalis* in substance. For an extended discussion of this move in Hobbes’s thought, see: Cees Leijenhorst, *The Mechanisation of Aristotelianism: The Late Aristotelian Setting of Thomas Hobbes’ Natural Philosophy* (Boston: Brill, 2002).

<sup>44</sup> Hobbes, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, 1839, 1:95 (II.7). A better translation of the original Aristotle is, “the number of change in respect of the before and after.” Aristotle, *Physics*, ed. David Bostock, trans. Robin Waterfield, Oxford World’s Classics (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), Bk IV, Ch XI, 219a14–19. In his treatment, Hobbes sidesteps the long-standing debate regarding the location and reality of time. Both Scholastic interpreters of Aristotle and early modern critiques of the Scholastic tradition were engaged in a debate regarding the ontological status of time—is it objective and soul-independent, entirely subjective, or some combination of the two? For an excellent overview of this debate, often framed as whether time is end-ratios—an object of knowledge that is a mental construction but does not exist in the material world or end-real—a real, rational thing. Cf. Leijenhorst, *The Mechanisation of Aristotelianism*, 2002.

yet exist, and the present is a frozen, isolated moment that lacks the successive element of time, which means it axiomatically is not time. It is *only* within the human mind that movement caused by past and present perceptions combine to give us the idea of a successive, continuous time. He thus concludes that time does not objectively exist, but is instead the “phantasmata of motion, insofar as we *imagine* prior and posterior or succession in motion.”<sup>45</sup> He finds further support by elaborating the clause, “the number of change,” in Aristotle’s definition. If time *is* the numbering—the actual *counting* of change, it is not a property of the moving bodies, but a property of the mind that measures them. That is, numbers and the process of counting numbers exists only in the rational mind and not in the empirical world, so to define time as “the number of change” implies that time is a product of the numbering process of the mind, and hence an idea which has no objective reality. Hobbes claims Aristotle’s statement that “time is neither movement nor independent of movement,”<sup>46</sup> provides still more support for the unreality of time.

### **Materialist Subjectivity: The Temporal Subject**

Hobbes was not the only philosopher to argue against the objective existence of time. Yet an ideational, and therefore subject dependent, conception of time would seem to be precluded by his extension of mechanism into the sphere of human volition. And indeed, whereas his contemporaries argued that matter was determined and the mind was free, Hobbes argued that the mind was matter, and as such, determined.<sup>47</sup> How can time be subjective while the subject determined? One possible answer is that our tendency to view this dimension of Hobbes’s thought as paradoxical may simply reflect our own Cartesian bias. As Samantha Frost explains in

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<sup>45</sup> Hobbes, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, 1839, 1:95 (II.7). Emphasis mine.

<sup>46</sup> Aristotle, *Physics*, Bk IV, Ch XI, 219a8–9.

<sup>47</sup> Thomas Hobbes, “Short Tract on First Principles,” in *The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic*, ed. Ferdinand Tönnies, Elibron Classics Replica Edition (London: Simpkin, Marshall, and Co., 1889).

her provocative recent book, *Lessons from a Materialist Thinker*, the violent, calculating, and authoritarian iconography that has become emblematic of Hobbes's work stems from a de facto rejection of his materialist subject in favor of a Cartesian subject. It is, she argues, “Descartes’s rendering of the self as split into two ontologically distinct but practically related entities of mind and body that gives to the iconic Hobbes his hard-core individualism and the accounts of rationality, desire, and political absolutism that are its corollary.”<sup>48</sup> If, she continues, we attempt to read Hobbes in his own terms, the iconographic Hobbes is undermined, and an ethical subject emerges.

For Frost, Hobbes not only challenges the Cartesian subject, but does so successfully, and in so doing, he radically undermines some of the most uncontested assumptions about contemporary political philosophy, such as agency and the individual. While fascinating, this conclusion is not without difficulties,<sup>49</sup> and more to the point, it takes us further than required. It is not necessary to abandon the Cartesian subject in order to faithfully read Hobbes. Rather, we must merely suspend the Cartesian bias that renders Hobbes's philosophy unintelligible—a bias that is the source of the apparent paradox at hand between Hobbes's materialism and his ideational idea of time.

Against the Cartesian model in which “this *I* which is thinking is *an immaterial substance* with no bodily element,”<sup>50</sup> Hobbes posited the idea of a wholly embodied subject. Crucially,

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<sup>48</sup> The discussion of the distinction between Hobbes’s materialism and Descartes’, and the ramification of this distinction on Hobbes’s idea of self-consciousness in the following paragraphs was shaped and aided greatly by Frost.

<sup>49</sup> Rejecting the immaterial self entirely, lends itself quickly to concepts of agency that are entirely scientific, and thus plagued with the problems stemming from the scientific study of the body, and all the attendant problems of biopolitics.

<sup>50</sup> René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, ed. John Cottingham, Dugald Murdoch, and Robert Stoothoff, vol. 3 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 159.

Hobbes distinguishes these “thinking-bodies”<sup>51</sup> from mere *automata*—a distinction that cannot be understood from the materialist armature of the Cartesian model, in which bodies are uniform, as is the motion that determines them. This perspective implicitly informs reactions to Hobbes that depict him as essentially reducing humans to machines,<sup>52</sup> or alternatively, elevating rocks to thinking matter.<sup>53</sup> But what does this distinction really mean? Does materialism not require Hobbes to argue that humans lack independence and agency—that all our behavior is determined? Yes and no. As a general point, it would make little sense for Hobbes to commit so much of his life to writing about thinking, reasoning, abstraction, and philosophy, let alone politics, if human behavior were mechanically determined. However, it is true that Hobbes posits a wholly embodied subject, fully enmeshed in the material world—a condition that renders our thinking unfree in some respects. Despite these limitations, he consistently and repeatedly explains that we are thinking subjects, capable of the self-awareness and self-knowledge that comprise subjectivity—not through the immediacy of Cartesian introspection, but through temporally constructed retrospection.

When Hobbes likens us to the lone survivor for whom “there can be nothing...to think of but what is past,”<sup>54</sup> his point is that all of our ideas stem from perceptions that have already passed, and therefore what we take to be our immediate experience is an illusion, as is its introspective corollary. Experience is instead mediated not only by the process of perception that produces appearances, but also by the process of temporal mediation in which newly received perceptions are compared to previous perceptions. In *De Corpore* he describes sense as a

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<sup>51</sup> Hobbes, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, 1839, 1:34 (I.3).

<sup>52</sup> Thomas Hobbes and John Bramhall, *Hobbes and Bramhall: On Liberty and Necessity*, ed. V. C. Chappell, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>53</sup> Sorell, *Hobbes*.

<sup>54</sup> Hobbes, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, 1839, 1:34 (I.3).

particular kind of reaction in a sentient body that is provoked by external stimuli. He explains that “sense...must necessarily have in it a perpetual variety of phantasms, that they may be discerned one from another...it being almost all one for a man to be always sensible of one and the same thing, and not to be sensible at all of anything.”<sup>55</sup> Here he suggests that perception shares a central component with the rest of his philosophy—it does not exist independently, and its existence is conditioned by its context. Recognition is thus a process of *distinction*, in which *this* is distinguished from *that*.

To be clear, Hobbes is not referring to the variety of perceptions owing to the differing sensory organs, but to the variety of perceptions over time. Perceiving the same smell for the duration of one’s life is essentially tantamount, in Hobbes's argument, to lacking an olfactory sense all together—that singular scent would be unrecognizable, as would a singular touch, taste, sight, or sound. Our ability to identify different perceptions stems from our ability to compare the most recent perception to the one that preceded it, a process that implies the temporal category memory. Similarly, the ideas that comprise thought are themselves partially constituted by the ideas that preceded them and followed them in the past. Or put differently, just as perception is rendered decipherable only through the context of variety, so too are ideas shaped by the context that creates them—even if imperceptibly. For a contemporary example, the smell of sunscreen is made possible by the coexisting smell of the ocean, after which the smell of one creates a subtle expectation for the smell of the other. Ideas are likewise born in a context that becomes surreptitiously embedded in them. It is perhaps easiest to understand this argument in the context of day dreaming, or what he terms “unguided thought,” wherein “in the Imagining of

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 1:394 (IV.25.5).



any thing, there is no certainty what we shall Imagine next.”<sup>56</sup> However, uncertainty does not imply randomness. To the contrary, what appears to us as random actually has a structure, and we can be sure that each thought, “shall be something that succeeded the same before, at one time or another.”<sup>57</sup> Likewise, when we engage intentional, guided thought, we do not immediately, actively dictate the sequence of our ideas—their past context continues to impact our thinking.

Hobbes’s assertion that “one conception followeth another, not according to our election,”<sup>58</sup> likely stirs some resistance, yet is also quite apparent to anyone who has sought to express complex ideas in writing, only to find a maelstrom of ideas were orderly ones had been masquerading seconds prior. This example is meant merely to highlight a central point in Hobbes work—knowledge often appears to us as present where it is not, and the process of finding it is, in some respects, a dialogue with the *past*. To wit, writing is a process in which the production of knowledge is most visibly tied to the past, as going forward requires a constant re-examination and re-articulation of past expressions.

The process by which discrete memory threads are woven into a fabric of experience is simultaneously a process that shapes how new threads will be spun. As he explains, our ideas are not always the same; but that new ones appear to us, and old ones vanish, according as we apply our organize of sense, now to one object, now to

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<sup>56</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 2012, 4:38 (I.iii).

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. He also offers an example of the determinate structure of a seemingly nonsensical train of thought in *Human Nature*. In it, he shows how seemingly random ideas are connecting, and he offers a personal example, connecting ideas that appeared in his own stream of consciousness: St. Andrew, St. Peter, stone, foundation, church, people, tumult, are structured by the sequential contiguity of prior sensory precepts. Thomas Hobbes, “Liberty, Necessity, and Chance,” in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, ed. William Molesworth, Elibron Classics Replica Edition, vol. 5 (London: John Bohn, 1841), 15.

<sup>58</sup> Thomas Hobbes, “Of Liberty and Necessity,” in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, ed. William Molesworth, vol. 4 (London: John Bohn, 1840), 19.

another... And from hence it is manifest, that [*ideas*] are some change or mutation in the sentient.<sup>59</sup>

In other words, because Hobbes understands thinking subjects to be reactive matter, human sentience has universal qualities, but produces unique subjectivities and trajectories. His explanation for this uniqueness stems not from a simple mechanical determinism, but from a complicated interplay between external forces and the internal, temporally complex forces of human sentience.<sup>60</sup> Otherwise, human thought itself would be rote and unsurprising, akin to a simple computer program, to offer an apt, if not anachronistic, metaphor. For Hobbes, memory does not function as a mere rote transcription service, cataloguing various stimuli, but as part of a dynamic temporal network of memory and expectation that is itself a causal force. Memory interprets the present in terms of the past thereby making experience intelligible, while recognition makes selfhood possible.

### **Locating Materialist Agency: Supplanting the Will with Imagination**

Against concepts of consciousness, deliberation, will, and action derived from an incorporeal agency that is thus intrinsically free, Hobbes offers an agent that is neither immediate nor free from necessity—an idea that gives rise to the question, in our time as in his:<sup>61</sup> how can a material subject will? Theories of immaterial agency generally locate freedom in the exercise of deliberation that precedes and determines the will. For Hobbes, however, deliberation and willing are not prior and distinct from action; they are part of action. So, his assertion that “no

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<sup>59</sup> Hobbes, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, 1839, 1:389 (IV.25.1).

<sup>60</sup> Though it bears notation that even invoking an “internal/external” distinction reinforces the same dichotomy against which Hobbes argued.

<sup>61</sup> In his own time, Hobbes was frequently challenged for his extending determinism into the realm of the will. Hobbes and Bramhall, *Hobbes and Bramhall*; Thomas Hobbes, *The Correspondence*, ed. Noel Malcolm, vol. 6, The Clarendon Edition of the Works of Thomas Hobbes (New York: Clarendon Press, 1994).

man can determine his own will,”<sup>62</sup> does not in itself foreclose the possibilities of human agency, because he locates agency not in the will, but in the temporal category of imagination.

Just as guided and unguided thought are shaped by material and temporal interdependence, so too is the deliberative thought that precedes action. Deliberation is distinctive among the modes of thought Hobbes identifies, because it concerns the relationship between the passions caused by stimuli. He explains that, “external objects cause conceptions, and conceptions [cause] appetites and fear, which are the first unperceived beginnings of our actions.”<sup>63</sup> Sometimes, action immediately follows from the first appetite, and in this case, no deliberation occurs. However, sometimes an immediate appetite is followed by a fear that prevents us from proceeding, and this “alternate succession of appetite and fear during all the time the action is in our power to do or not to do, is that we call deliberation.”<sup>64</sup> This process of deliberation is one in which the full spectrum of passions face one another in a kind of bracket tournament until one remains; the remaining appetite constitutes the will. Hobbes is unwavering in his insistence that neither passions, nor deliberation, nor willing is voluntary. We cannot help but to react to the world, or to be drawn to or averse to different experiences. Yet his varying explanations are telling. In some instances, he explains determination in terms of the passions, “for where there is appetite, the entire cause of the appetite hath preceded; and, consequently, the act of appetite could not choose but follow, that is, hath of necessity followed.”<sup>65</sup> Elsewhere he frames necessity in terms of the will itself, “every volition or act of the will...had a *sufficient*,

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<sup>62</sup> Hobbes, “Liberty, Necessity, and Chance,” 34.

<sup>63</sup> Thomas Hobbes, “Human Nature, or the Fundamental Elements of Policy,” in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, ed. William Molesworth, vol. 4 (London: John Bohn, 1840), 67 (XII.i).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 68 (XII.i).

<sup>65</sup> Hobbes, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, 1839, 1:409 (IV.25.13).

and therefore *necessary* cause, and consequently every *voluntary* action was *necessitated*.”<sup>66</sup>

These explanations are essentially the same, which raises the question, how or in what way does the will *differ* from the passions? The somewhat surprising answer is, they do not, and this is precisely why Hobbes's demotes the will to the involuntary. He explains, “no man can determine his own will, for the will is appetite; nor can a man more determine his will than any other appetite, that is, more than he can determine when he shall be hungry or when not.”<sup>67</sup> In other words, willing is wanting, and wanting is involuntary. To be clear, Hobbes's claim is that *all* appetite is will; the will is not simply a kind of appetite (e.g. the rational appetite) that competes with others. Rather, the will is simply the movement from appetite into action. It is, “the last Appetite, or Aversion, immediately adhering to the action, or to the omission thereof.”<sup>68</sup>

Despite the determined nature of the Hobbes's conception of the will, it possesses two temporal features that prevent it from reducing the subject to mere automata—memory of the past and imagination of the future. Memory is a force that contributes to the “continual mutation” of the embodied subject, which makes “it impossible that all the same things should always cause in him the same appetites and aversions.”<sup>69</sup> Moreover, while some passions “are born with men...the rest, which are Appetites of particular things, proceed from experience.”<sup>70</sup> In other words, Hobbes understands a person's desires and fears to be determined, not directly by external stimuli, but by her own utterly unique and constantly evolving history and body. This discussion is as much about the past as it is about the future, however, as the appetites and

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<sup>66</sup> Hobbes, “Of Liberty and Necessity,” 260.

<sup>67</sup> Hobbes, “Liberty, Necessity, and Chance,” 34.

<sup>68</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 2012, 4:92 (I.vi).

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:80 (I.vi).

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

aversions that memory determines are themselves the first stages of action. Hobbes addresses this point explicitly when he notes,

fancy [i.e. imagination] and memory differ only in this, that memory supposeth the time past, which fancy doth not. In memory, the phantasms we consider are as if they were worn out with time; but in fancy we consider them as they are; which distinction is not of the things themselves, but the considerations of the sentient.<sup>71</sup>

Like memory, imagination, is the consideration of a body that is not in the present, and imagination *requires* memory, as the ideas available to imagination are made intelligible by memory. Yet unlike memory, which points to a past that is largely closed to us, and whose contents “are by length of time decayed and lost,”<sup>72</sup> imagination points to a future that represents an enduring possibility of newness—a possibility that also conditions perception and shapes desire. As he explains, “living creatures have sometimes appetite and sometimes aversion to the same thing, as they think it will either be for their good or for their hurt.”<sup>73</sup> Here he ascribes the variability of desire to expectations of the future. While memories past provides our imagination with context and experience, it is our idea of the future that most profoundly shapes behavior.

Hobbes elaborates this point in *Leviathan*, distinguishing voluntary “animal” motion from involuntary “vital” motion. Vital motions are “begun in generation, and continued without interruption through their whole life; such as are the course of the blood, the pulse, the breathing...&c; to which motions there needs no help of imagination.”<sup>74</sup> In more modern language, these are the involuntary actions of bodies, which occur independent of thought. Animal motions, on the other hand, are “voluntary...in such manner as is first fancied in our minds” such as speech and movement of limbs.<sup>75</sup> Because, any voluntary action relies on a

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<sup>71</sup> Hobbes, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, 1839, 1:398 (IV.25.8).

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:399 (IV.25.8).

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:408 (IV.25.13).

<sup>74</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 2012, 4:78 (I.vi).

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:38 (I.iii).

precedent thought, he concludes that “imagination is the first internal beginning of all voluntary motions.”<sup>76</sup>

It is the quality of human imagination that, for Hobbes, truly separates the voluntary movements of humans from other sentient beings. He stipulates that voluntary action requires causal reasoning, and concedes that all animals thus have basic memory structures, by which before and after can be noted. All thinking bodies engage in a deliberative process whereing from “an effect imagined we seek the causes or means to produce it.”<sup>77</sup> For example, when motions in the body give rise to hunger, deliberation seeks to find a cause of action that will yield the desired effect, which is an end of that hunger. This process, he explains is “common to man and beast.”<sup>78</sup>

However, unlike animals, who instinctively search for causes that will yield desired effects, humans are *aware* that they search for causes, which means that we, unlike animals are aware of the temporal nature of thinking. Without this awareness, animals remain in the present, “having little or no foresight of the time to come, for want of observation and *memory of order, consequence, and dependence of the things they see.*”<sup>79</sup> Animal life is rendered utterly dependent, because theirs is a deliberative process limited to instinct and habituation—they lack the ability to *recognize* their memory, which, in turn, prohibits them from recognizing their *selves*, and consequently, their futures. But our deliberative process does not end when we identify the object of our desire. Instead, we “[imagine]...all the possible effects that can by it be produced, that is to say, we imagine what we can do with it when we can do with it when we

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 4:40 (I.iii).

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 4:41 (I.iii).

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 4:164 (I.xii).

have it.”<sup>80</sup> The identification of desire is in some ways just the beginning. Even in the most mundane deliberation, such as midday hunger, triggers a deliberation that does not end when a suitable meal is identified, but triggers additional deliberations such as where to eat that meal, with whom, and how these choices will affect dinner plans, and so on. The human thinking-body is compelled not only by the necessity of the present, but also by the *possibility* of the future. Animals engage in causal logic, but their limited memories preclude the kind of imagination that futures different from the past would require; their temporal logic operates entirely within the realm of known causes and known effects.<sup>81</sup> But we can combine present conditions with past experiences to postulate *new* effects. Moreover, this imaginative process reveals the possibilities of our own agency, precisely, for Hobbes, because it is not abstract or otherwise detached from the material world, but born of it.

This means that while Hobbes understands subjectivity to be fundamentally rooted in the past, he also describes a subject that is necessarily preoccupied with the future. This preoccupation stems from the very same memory and causal reasoning that constitute selfhood—having knowledge not simply of discrete facts, but the “dependence of one fact upon another,”<sup>82</sup> allows us to consider the present as a future’s past. Moreover, it is by dint of the future that we come to recognize the possibilities born of our own actions, which imbues us with *actionable* selfhood. As he explains:

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 4:40–1 (I.iii).

<sup>81</sup> There is a resonance here between Hobbes and Rousseau on what we can learn about ourselves through consideration of other animals. Rousseau frames the inability of animals to choose or imagine different futures as a product of their lack of freedom (their inability to choose against their nature), which is a very different explanation, but seeks to demonstrate the same kind of point—human uniqueness is tied to the futurity of human thought. Cf. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men or Second Discourse,” in *The Discourses and Other Political Writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>82</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 2012, 4:72 (I.v).

Wherefore all conception of the future, is conception of power able to produce something; whosoever therefore expecteth pleasure to come, must conceive withal some power in himself by which the same may be attained.<sup>83</sup>

This means that the desires that lead to the appetites and aversions that determine action are not only comprised of past experience and present stimuli, but also of a *perception of the possibility* of attaining them in the future. In other words, it is the consideration of the future, guided by memory and causal reasoning, that we come to recognize ourselves as a causal force. The recognition of our power does not entail the ability to direct it, in the unmediated present, unaffected by any other causal forces, as Cartesian models of agency suggest. Rather, the ability to direct actions instead occurs in the imagination that precedes deliberation. It is in the imagination of all possible effects that precedes deliberation that agency lies, but it is an agency that cannot escape material conditions—it is made possible but also limited by our finite memories and speculation regarding future conditions. However, possibilities must be tangible for them to spark deliberation. He explains, in order for deliberation to take place “there must be hope of doing it, or possibility of not doing it; for, appetite and fear are expectations of the future.”<sup>84</sup> Once the material conditions of possibility are perceived, deliberation follows; it is neither a choice nor an exercise of freedom. Imagination, on the other hand, is an exercise in postulating possible conditions and subsequent effects such that the ability to perceive possibility is expanded. Because imagination is least constrained by the material present, and the source of the ideas that will constitute deliberation, it is where Hobbes locates agency.

For example, Hobbes’s theory would stipulate that a prison inmate’s confinement may well produce the desire for escape, and this desire will shape her perceptions and memories. In this state of pre-deliberation, before the possibility of escape presents itself, she can imagine the

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<sup>83</sup> Hobbes, “Human Nature, or the Fundamental Elements of Policy,” 37 (VIII.3).

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 68 (XII.2).



circumstances required for freedom and the potential consequences of an escape attempt. This imaginative work has the effect of both heightening her ability to perceive the possibility for escape, and will also inform the deliberative process that takes over should such a possibility ever materialize. The link between the possibilities we can imagine and the ones that emerges is crucial to understanding Hobbes's political thought, as he views the primary task of statehood as constructing environments that shape the perception of possibility, so as to encourage trust and cooperation.

### **Of Futures Insecure: The State of Nature & The Kingdom of Darkness**

Hobbes's temporal model of subjectivity and agency does not yet lead in any obvious way to the state of nature described in his political works. In fact, his discussion of memory and imagination lacks any hint of the anxiety and violence emblematic of those works. However, as Hobbes shifts his consideration from a context in which every person is by himself “without relation to others”<sup>85</sup> to a consideration of our social existence, problems quickly emerge.

Although Hobbes's conception of agency is fundamentally born of material interdependence, the context of other thinking-bodies has the potential to disrupt our capacity to predict outcomes, to disastrous effect.

In short, Hobbes's state of nature is an analogy designed to show how material conditions of insecurity dramatically restrict the temporal imagination, which induces violent behavior. When we find ourselves unable to account for all contingencies, future conditions, and the actions of others, we are essentially rendered impotent and vulnerable. This experience of precarity, Hobbes explains, foreshortens the horizon of the future, and without the ability to imagine a different future, the possibilities of the present become much narrower. Or put

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 70 (XIII.i).

differently, the anxiety produced by insecurity prevents deliberation, and in its stead we act in the immediacy of fear. Essentially, it is not *our* nature, but the physical state *of* nature that causes the war of all against all.

It is worth taking a momentary step back from the state of nature, to note that however important it is to Hobbes's political thought, it is not where he begins his discussion of human cohabitation. The state of nature appears not in the first chapter of *Leviathan*, but the fourteenth. And the three chapters that precede it are crucial to understanding the paradoxical role that temporality plays in creating the promise and the problems of human coexistence. Even a seasoned reader may be surprised to realize that he begins his discussion of communal living by stating that “living together in peace, and unity”<sup>86</sup> requires thinking about the nature of human happiness. In earlier works, he rejected Ancient notions of happiness, explaining, “there is no such thing in this world” as the “utmost end, in which the Ancient philosophers have placed felicity...for while we live, we have desires, and desire presupposeth a further end.”<sup>87</sup> There is, for Hobbes, something profoundly unattainable, perhaps even morbid, about prevailing notions of happiness, for they describe a condition of cessation that is possible only in death. For him, viewing happiness as a terminus, as a state of satisfaction marked by the absence of desire and anticipation, is a terminal diagnosis for a materially and temporally constituted subject. Opposed to this, he introduces a notion of happiness that was as radical in his time as it is familiar in ours. He describes happiness as, “continual prospering”<sup>88</sup> that can be understood as

a continual progress of the desire, from one object to another; the attaining of the former, being still but the way to the latter. The cause whereof is, that the object

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<sup>86</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 2012, 4:85 (I.xi).

<sup>87</sup> Hobbes, “Human Nature, or the Fundamental Elements of Policy,” 33 (VII.5).

<sup>88</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 2012, 4:96 (I.6).

of man's desire, is not to enjoy once only, and for one instant of time; but to assure for ever, the way of his future desire.<sup>89</sup>

In other words, because human consciousness keeps moving, and this motion is intelligible to us as time, happiness cannot be understood as a *state* of satisfaction, but rather as a *process* of continual satisfaction. This means that happiness is itself divided temporally, requiring both the ability to fulfill desires in the present, and the ability to imagine oneself fulfilling future desires.

In its relation to happiness, the future has a liberating quality in Hobbes's work. It is not the fixed present, but in the contemplation of future possibilities that happiness and freedom are made apparent to consciousness. However, in the state of nature, the future lacks this liberating quality. Here, it is not the innate curiosity spurred by the futurity of happiness that causes men to inquire into causes, but "*anxiety* for the future."<sup>90</sup> Moreover, this inquiry is not motivated by a desire to fulfill individual needs, but rather "because the knowledge of them, maketh men the better able to order the present to their best *advantage*."<sup>91</sup> This description of human behavior lacks reference to desire or any individual proclivity at all, but rather reflects a calculation made against others.

For Hobbes, human agency is rooted in the ability to *know* possible outcomes and to *predict* with certainty. The decision I make to cross the street, despite oncoming traffic, is one I could not make without a basic causal framework in which velocity, distance, my choice of footwear, and the drivers' attentiveness are all at play. If I decide not to cross it is either because I predict injury, or because I am unable to predict. To be clear, there is no guarantee that my prediction will bear out. I may very well decide to cross and lose my footing or be hit by an unseen cyclist. The key here is rather that action requires not just prediction but a feeling of

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 4:150 (I.xi).

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 4:160 (I.xi).

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

confidence born of locating oneself among known variables. I may encounter unexpected variables, but they will not deceive me—I can be reasonably confident that a car will behave as a car and not a bird. The problem encountered in the state of nature, Hobbes explains, is that we find ourselves in the context of countless, *unpredictable* variables. Although others are *like us*, the particular history that provides the context for their actions is both unknown to us and further concealed through “counterfeit”<sup>92</sup> uses of speech. So without the means to property access and assess the intentions of others, we are forced to deduce their motives from the most base conception possible—the lowest common denominator of the will—survival.

Mere survival, for humans and animals alike, requires continual acquisition, yet Hobbes describes a process in which the human *awareness* of this condition creates a psychological paradox in which actions in the present become dominated by fears of the future. Specifically, awareness of our perpetuity of need creates a desire for security that spurs contemplation of the future. However, since ignorance of all future causes make it impossible to locate security in the future, such contemplation has a paralyzing effect in the present—a torment Hobbes likens to that of Prometheus:

For...it is impossible for a man, who continually endeavoreth to secure himself against the evil he fears, and procure the good he desireth, not to be in a perpetual solicitude of the time to come; so that every man, especially those that are over provident, are in a state like that of Prometheus. For as Prometheus...was bound to the hill...an eagle feeding on his liver...so that man, which looks too far before him, in the care of future time, hath his heart all the day long, gnawed on by fear of death, poverty, or other calamity; and has no repose, nor pause of his anxiety, but in sleep.<sup>93</sup>

Like Prometheus, whose giving of possibility to human life is punished with eternal torment, our ability to contemplate the future similarly creates possibilities for human life, yet it also creates an incessant torment; it is an ability simultaneously liberating and inhibiting.

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<sup>92</sup> Hobbes, “Human Nature, or the Fundamental Elements of Policy,” 71 (XIII.1).

<sup>93</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 2012, 4:165–6 (I.xii).

The same faculty that allows us to imagine and create futures different from the past also creates a perpetual state of limbo. Attempting to imagine and account for all possible futures can create anxiety that undermines the purposeful creation of *any* future. Moreover, in such situations, the behaviors of both the provident man and the truly ignorant man are similarly determined. In the face of a truly open future, the knowledge of causes possessed by the former is overwhelming, making deliberation impossible. And the man who is ignorant of causes, be they remote or natural, attributes everything to the immediate, and is incapable of detecting the possibility required for deliberation.<sup>94</sup> In this way, knowledge and ignorance, strength and weakness are all rendered equal in the context of fear. Thus, Hobbes opens his discussion of the state of nature by asserting just such an equality<sup>95</sup>—it is the fear and immediacy of the present that similarly determines the actions all. Recognizing that preservation requires the continual acquisition of material resources, when we cannot extend ourselves into the future, we try to acquire everything in the present. It is not innate greed, but a conditioned fear that spurs this acquisitive behavior. He reinforces this point when he writes that,

is not always that a man hopes for a more intensive delight, than he has already attained to; or that he cannot be content with a more moderate power: but because he cannot assure the power and means to live well, which he hath present, without the acquisition of more.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 4:158–160 (I.xi).

<sup>95</sup> “Nature hath made men so equal, in the faculties of the body, and mind; as that though there be found one man sometimes manifestly stronger in body, or of quicker mind than another; yet when all is reckoned together, the difference between man, and man, is not so considerable, as that one man can thereupon claim to himself any benefit, to which another may not pretend, as well as he.” Ibid., 4:188 (I.xiii).

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 4:152 (I.xi).

The “perpetual and restless desire for power after power,”<sup>97</sup> he describes is does not stem from egoism or a will to dominate, but rather reflect deliberations that occur in the context of uncertainty, and consequently, anxiety.

This psychological foregrounding is essential to understanding Hobbes's state of nature, as it is a state in which humans cannot help but to attempt to create security through the endless accumulation of resources. Of course, it is never enough. Although the experience of insecurity often presents itself materially as a deficiency of resources, it is, for him, a principally temporal problem. In fact, Hobbes, like other early modern thinkers, is quite certain of the abundance of material resources.<sup>98</sup> And when he introduces us to the state of nature in the fourteenth chapter, he is not introducing us to a *place* but to a *time*—a time of insecurity that produces misery. It is, he explains “*during the time* that men live without a common power” that they are at war, “for war consisteth not only in battle, or the act of fighting; *but in the tract of time*,” in which there is both a known disposition to violence and “no assurance to the contrary.” It is during such “a time of war” when every man is enemy to every man, because “they live without other security.”<sup>99</sup> This violence is neither the product of moral defect *nor* irrationality.<sup>100</sup> When tomorrow’s meal is

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 4:150 (I.xi).

<sup>98</sup> Although England may be facing problems of scarcity, Hobbes outlines a colonial strategy to alleviate crowding and poverty, while capitalizing on the material abundance of the world, taken as a whole. He notes, “The multitude of poor, and yet strong people still increasing, they are to be transported into Countries not sufficiently inhabited: where nevertheless, they are not to exterminate those they find there; but constrain them to inhabit closer together, and not range a great deal of ground, to snatch what they find; but to court each little Plot with art and labour, to give them their sustenance in due season.” Although he concedes that “when all the world is overcharged with Inhabitants, then the last remedy of all is Warre” this is a future that is far into the distance. Ibid., 4:540 (II.30).

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 4:190–2 (I.xiii).

<sup>100</sup> Hobbes makes it clear that this behavior is not the result of any inherent evil, but it is the behavior compelled by helplessness and alienation. We cannot see ourselves in the future, cannot trust others, there is nothing by which we can rightly claim security. It is argued that Hobbes already understands men to be acquisitive and competitive, and this is a solid critique. Once in

uncertain, gorging and hoarding today *is* rational. That is, reason itself is conditioned by ideas about the future, which are themselves materially conditioned in a very real way. Of course, acting on ideas about the future that are divorced from material conditions is certainly possible, and it is this—acting for a future that cannot exist—that Hobbes deems irrational. And so when the horizon of the future extends only into the night, abundant resources will appear scarce, making others’ needs appear as a direct threat to one’s own survival, hence violence towards others becomes rational.

The *long-term* inviability of behaviors exhibited in the state of nature may tempt us to reject Hobbes’s assertion that they are rational, but this is precisely his point—reason is conditioned by temporality. We can only act for the future that is possible. Hobbes makes this point explicitly when he explains that in the context of insecurity “there is no place for industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain.”<sup>101</sup> Yet while this behavior is determined by a certain set of conditions, it is *not* the only possibility. This is an important point of distinction, for it can be tempting to read the kind of “brute” mechanics determining human behavior in the state of nature into his philosophy of human nature more broadly. And the tendency of prevailing interpretations to do just this prevents reading the impossibility of nature as a foil to the possibility of the state.

In fact, the very title of this chapter discloses possibility, “The Natural Condition of Mankind Concerning Their Felicity and Misery.” Misery makes sense—the entire chapter is an explication for the “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short”<sup>102</sup> lives produced by conditions of insecurity. Aside from its appearance in the title, however, felicity is nowhere to be found in this

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society, he quickly turns to explanations of social class that reify hierarchy and privilege. Nonetheless, his argument about the destabilizing nature of insecurity is sharp.

<sup>101</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 2012, 4:192 (I.xiii).

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:193 (I.xiii).

chapter. And yet, despite lacking any explicit reference to happiness, its presence can be found in its absence. Happiness haunts the state of nature; it is a state of loss. As Hobbes pulls back from the individual to depict the broader implications of insecurity, the depth and breadth of this loss comes into focus. Of course, for individuals in such a state, personal death appears as the largest threat, but in the aggregate, insecurity means,

no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious buildings; no instruments of moving, and removing, such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society.<sup>103</sup>

The loss is not lives, but life, as the possibility for happiness or meaning, or culture or history all but disappears. This means, however, that although Hobbes employs insecurity to illustrate the value of security, misery and felicity are not quite foils. If absolute insecurity essentially strips a person of the complex temporal fabric that *constitutes* subjectivity, it is a condition that precludes subjectivity. As such, it is within the state of nature that human behavior becomes most determined and least recognizable. And worse, it represents not a time past—this is not an origin story, but an enduring possibility for the present. The importance of this assertion in Hobbes's political thought cannot be overstated. The stakes are higher than we can imagine—more than money, power, religion, or culture, what is at stake is the very capacity to be human.

Security is a well-known feature of Hobbes's political imagination, but its temporal dimension is largely under-theorized. Perhaps it is his perpetual assertion that peace requires a “force to overawe them all”<sup>104</sup> that has led to security being largely understood merely in terms of force itself. However, force alone cannot produce security. There is an objective material prerequisite for security—too few resources make people insecure, regardless of power. But, even in the context of material abundance, force cannot produce security, as humans only feel

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 4:194 (I.xiii).



secure when the safety of the moment is anticipated to continue in the time to come. In other words, because Hobbes understands subjectivity materially and temporally, security is likewise understood in these terms. And, he concludes, the kind of action that can be identified as truly human—the kind that originates in the imagination of a thinking-subject known to itself through memory, causal reason, and anticipation—is truly possible only when the future is secure. And, he argues, in the context of security, the forces that determine behavior create possibility, as opposed to the impossibility created by insecurity.

### **Towards Futures Secure**

So what does determinism look like in the context of security? It is true that Hobbes maintains that human behavior is always determined by the sum of all forces, but he is careful to stipulate that it is not “one simple *chain* or concatenation, but an innumerable number of chains, joined together...and consequently the whole cause of an event, doth not always depend on one single chain, but on many together.”<sup>105</sup> Moreover, any particular person’s inclinations “arise from a six-fold source: namely from the constitution of the body, from experience, from habit, from the goods of fortune, from the opinion one hath of oneself, and from authorities.”<sup>106</sup> The particularity of each body itself tops his list, because its constitution and its “continual change” give rise to the singularity of each person’s experience—a singularity made further unique by the additional dimensions he enumerates. The forces that constitute any one person’s experience are indeed so complex that they often appear mysterious.

The kind of determinism that would truly render human life without agency would require a single, universal temporal structure. However, Hobbes’s world is populated by a

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<sup>105</sup> Hobbes, “Liberty, Necessity, and Chance,” 105.

<sup>106</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Man and Citizen: De Homine and De Cive*, ed. Bernard Gert, trans. Charles T. Wood, T. S. K. Scott-Craig, and Bernard Gert (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 1991), 63.

multiplicity of distinct temporalities, which renders his determinism distinct from destiny. Behavior may be determined by the intersection of one's personal history and external conditions, but there are always other possibilities available through alternate intersections. He explains, each person has a particular lived history that has its own causal trajectory, distinct from the historical determinate of the world. When these innumerable, overlapping, trajectories coincide, the results are *unpredictable*. In other words, though causal trajectories are determined, humans are not simply matter inserted into one universal chain of events. Rather, each embodies a particular history, itself constituted by manifold forces, and as such the world is characterized by its multiplicity of temporalities—the overlap, exchange, and intersection of which produce unforeseen effects. And it is, he suggests, for the sake of these unknown possibilities that humans truly live. Life is miserable in the state of nature not only because it is limited in quantity (that is, duration), but because it is limited in quality. A life solely determined by the immediate imperatives of survival eliminates the possibility of meaning, for it precludes creativity, curiosity, and industry.<sup>107</sup> In short, it lacks the production of knowledge and culture made possible only through “the greatest of human powers,” in which each person’s “present means to obtain some future apparent good” is combined, compounded, and thereby amplified.<sup>108</sup> Read in this light, it is easier to see that the fear that permeates Hobbes's state of nature is really his own.

Fear is often identified as the connective tissue that animates Hobbes's *Leviathan*—in the state of nature people fear one another, which leads to war; in the civil state people fear the ruler,

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<sup>107</sup> Perhaps the reader believes Hobbes to underestimate the creativity and perseverance of humans, after all, the history of powerless people attests to the ability to create beauty in the darkest of places. But Hobbes is not describing a situation of power and powerlessness, of master and slave. His state of nature represents an absolute powerlessness, and totalizing, unending fear of death. Though predating dialectic theories of labor, there is a resonance between these later ideas and Hobbes's materialist subjects who create a meaningful existence by making their imaginations manifest in the world.

<sup>108</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 2012, vol. 4, chap. X.

which leads to peace. His depiction of human nature is often characterized as an ad hoc argument intended to preserve existing English political structures. To this end, Hobbes's politics are often characterized as essentially dogmatic theory constructed to serve a proto-conservative agenda.<sup>109</sup> Yet even if security and a strong state ultimately came to represent an important component of conservatism, this reading of Hobbes's thought is not merely anachronistic. By essentializing Hobbes's fear as particular to his personal experience, it precludes the possibility that his philosophy and psychology are in any way legitimate. While it is certainly true that the geopolitical and socio-economic tumult that contextualized Hobbes's life shaped his concerns, his fear is not reducible to the personal. Despite whatever personal motivations and prejudices inflected in his work, the overarching fear that animates Hobbes's work is universal, not particular. He fears losing the capacity for being human itself, and he perceived two primary threats to this capacity, both of which undermine the foundation of society, thereby undermining the conditions required to develop the subjectivity required for meaningful agency. The first, discussed above, is the threat posed by insecurity, conceived in material and temporal terms. The second, is the threat posed by ignorance, which is a different kind of insecurity, conceived of in intellectual and temporal terms.

Within the tendency towards absurdist philosophy in Scholasticism, Hobbes deduced a political motive. He builds his case in the chapter “Of the Darkness from Vain Philosophy and Fabulous Traditions,” which begins with his most strident critique of Aristotle, charging him with the development of an artificial philosophic framework and meaningless philosophic questions. However, he immediately parlays this critique into one against the Church. After all, Scholasticism itself was a tradition developed within the Church, and in such a setting Aristotle’s

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<sup>109</sup> It is not mere coincidence that has Hobbes looming large in the thought and imagination of 20th century conservatives such as Schmitt, Strauss, and Oakeshott.

metaphysics were “mingled with the Scripture to make School divinity”—the means by which separated essences disseminated to the public.<sup>110</sup> Rather than interpret metaphysics as “books written or placed after his natural philosophy...schools take them for books of supernatural philosophy,”<sup>111</sup> and ontological status is thereby conferred on spirits and souls. This creates quite a problem for a thoroughly material world occupied by thinking subjects whose agency stems from the predictive powers of causal reasoning. Namely, it has created a world governed, in the literal sense, by those who possess a faux-knowledge that is inaccessible to, and therefore inviolable by, the public. The unsurprising result was states of domination. One might reasonably ask, so what—does Hobbes not argue for a strong state too? He does indeed argue for a strong state maintained by a “confederacy of deceivers.”<sup>112</sup> However, Hobbes does not consider the “Kingdom of Darkness” to be a strong state, because it employs domination and deception in ways that do now foster public trust but instead reproduces the instability of the state of nature.

Hobbes takes issue neither with the exploitation of religious authority for political gain nor the instrumental use of religion—any casual reader of *Leviathan* knows that religion is an important source of political power. Instead, his problem is that the *kind* of ignorance fostered by Scholasticism, which creates the very conditions of the state of nature. As he notes, some may wonder why he addresses matters of theological doctrine in a political discourse, but the connection is clear to him—“this doctrine of *separated essences*, built on the vain philosophy of Aristotle, [frights citizens] from obeying the laws of their country, with empty names; as men fright birds from the corn with an empty doublet, a hate, and a crooked stick.”<sup>113</sup> Moreover, Hobbes's charges the church with purposively appropriating Aristotle's thinking in order to

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<sup>110</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 2012, 5:1076 (IV.46).

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 5:956 (IV.44).

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 5:1081 (IV.46).

corroborate religion *and* to exact an unassailable obedience from people. For who, he asks, “will not obey a priest, that can make a God, rather than his sovereign?”<sup>114</sup> It can certainly be argued that Hobbes's did not seek to liberate subjects politically or from their fear; he rather sought a different kind of obedience—to the sovereign rather than the priest. His primary critique of the church, however, is that it maintains obedience through forceful ignorance. He sought to replace this system, with one of a learned obedience—a possibility that would only arise under conditions that fostered the development of subjectivity. In other words, his central indictment of church doctrine is that it extracts obedience at the expense of subjectivity.

As has already been made clear, Hobbes understands humans to be thinking subjects whose agency is fundamentally rooted in material reality and causal reasoning. If this most basic framework is supplanted by one that is independent from and alien to the thinking subject, so too do the means of self-knowledge and understanding become alien. The resulting anxiety produced by the Kingdom of Darkness parallels the anxiety of the state of nature; the former is the intellectual foil for the materiality of the latter. He argues that the *initial* creation of “one God, eternal, infinite, and omnipotent, may have more easily been derived, from the desire men have to know the causes of natural bodies... than from the fear of what was to befall them in the time to come.”<sup>115</sup> However, establishing an unintelligible progenitor of all material causality, whose eternal intervention essentially suspends all rules and all certainty, changes the nature of our expectation. Rather than scanning the horizon in search of future causes, the anxiety of God “both inclines to fear, and hinders [people] from the search of the causes of other things.”<sup>116</sup> This is the role that religion plays in shaping the public mind—a public comprised of people no less

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 2012, 4:166 (I.xii).

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

compelled to find causes, but perhaps, less equipped than the philosophers to find them. As he explains, the fear that accompanies our Promethean state, “must have needs for object something.”<sup>117</sup> In other words, out of concern for our own fortune, we are compelled to understand causes and end our ignorance in order to gain control over our lives. But ignorance cannot be escaped entirely, and its continual presence evokes an ever-present fear—a fear that we seek to end by properly understanding its causes. Yet *seeing* nothing that can be identified as the cause of fear, we turn to invisible agents, and a doctrine that offers certainty at the price of understanding. This exchange, Hobbes admits, makes civil society possible in so far as religion makes men “more apt to obedience, laws, peace, [and] charity.”<sup>118</sup> However, since religious acculturation is a human endeavor of unequal power, it is easily manipulated for personal gain, and he charges “unpleasing priests,” both Catholic and Protestant with engendering an ignorance that is counterproductive to civil society.<sup>119</sup>

Though sympathetic to the psychological needs that compel religious belief, Hobbes finds the total supplanting of material understanding with religious doctrine to have profound and cascading effects. When superstition replaces reason, people are left ignorant of the “causes, and original constitution of right, equity, law, and justice,”<sup>120</sup> which is why societies so often follow custom rather than law. The problem, of course, is that customs are completely arbitrary, lack internal logic, make no universal claims, and therefore require external force to maintain. In a parallel argument that highlights the paradox of perpetuating ignorance as a means to preserving power, Hobbes explains that ignorance is also responsible for causing sedition, for lacking the ability to identify remote or complex causes, “disposeth men to attribute all events, to

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 4:170 (I.xii).

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 4:186 (I.xii).

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 4:158 (I.xi).

the causes immediate, and instrumental: for these are all the causes they perceive.”<sup>121</sup> The example he offers has striking contemporary resonance—when it comes time for people to pay for public services, the immediate experience is unpleasant, and causes anger against the person immediately responsible for the offense, the tax collector. But there is no satisfaction to be found in this anger, and it grows to indict all public officials and finally the government itself.<sup>122</sup> Lacking the ability to identify with the public, maintenance of the public is experienced as persecution.

Ignorance also functions at the interpersonal level, with important political effects. Because knowledge of causes allows us to perceive possibility, ignorance makes men gullible, “being unable to detect impossibility.”<sup>123</sup> This inability creates profound problems for the individual and society. An ignorant person’s gullibility makes her not only passively accept lies, but also actively create them, owing to an inability to judge. At the aggregate, this creates an uncritical, superstitious, fearful society, that lacks the tools for any kind of self-governance, and is therefore perpetually at the mercy of the powerful. And though Hobbes was certainly critical of the self-governance required by democracy, his political ideas hinged on a framework of mutual intelligibility that required autonomy. Moreover, his identification of ignorance as an “inability to detect impossibility” emphasizes the role of temporality in his understanding of subjectivity and its role in autonomy. As ignorance inhibits a person’s ability to detect causal relationships, it upsets his ability to interpret experience, which impedes his ability to act. This is because one of the forces that shapes imagination prior to deliberation is prudence or foresight,

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<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:160 (I.xi).

<sup>122</sup> This is not to suggest that England’s taxation policies in the 17th century were as egalitarian and equitable as progressive taxation systems. Nonetheless, England was, at the time, the least taxed nation in Europe, lacking any kind of regular direct taxation. Cf. Pauline Gregg, *King Charles I* (London: Phoenix Press, 2000).

<sup>123</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 2012, 4:160 (I.xi).

which “is a presumption of the future, contracted from the experience of time past.”<sup>124</sup> Though it is impossible to observe all circumstances and to predict with certainty, nevertheless, as one acquires experience and develops prudence, he finds his “expectations the seldomer fail.”<sup>125</sup> The result of which is a kind of “well grounded confidence” that “begetteth attempt.”<sup>126</sup> Here, memory and prudence appear as the reciprocal forces that constitute both subjectivity and agency; memory is the means by which we access self-understanding, and prudence is the means by which we engage our agency. One’s own personal history is a source of empowerment, as it helps sensitize us to possibility. To this end, the inhibition of experiential knowledge under conditions of acculturated ignorance is also the inhibition of possibility, both individually and collectively.

There is something strikingly and strangely non-elitist in this summation. For unlike reason, which requires industry to attain, prudence is “naturally planted” in all and requires nothing other than “to be born a man, and live with the use of his five senses.”<sup>127</sup> Although Hobbes has made it clear that scientific, political, and philosophic knowledge must be grounded in reason, he has also consistently offered two methods of validation—one scientific and grounded in reason, and one experiential and grounded in intersubjectivity. The latter of these methods is insufficient on its own, but sufficient to develop the kind of understanding required for citizenship in a civil society. Moreover, he argues that although the combination of prudence and science produces nearly infallible predictions, if the two must be separated, natural prudence is more reliable than abstract reasoning, which leads to the creation of “false and absurd general

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 4:44 (I.iii).

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 4:88 (I.vi).

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 4:44 (I.iii).



rules.”<sup>128</sup> From this perspective, prudence acts as the layperson’s reason—it is the faculty by which the empirical data of experience can be drawn on to help people determine how to act. So while Hobbes can rightly be criticized for not elevating all to the level of philosopher, and for constructing metaphors for understanding that do not hold up to scientific scrutiny, these criticisms tend to overlook how radical his method and message is.

At its most elemental, his argument is that political stability can only be constructed upon an accurate understanding of the human subject—divorced from speculative, abstract, or theological considerations. Such analysis reveals human thought, psychology, and action to be fundamentally temporal and conditioned by the material world. Insecurity is, for Hobbes, *the* problem that political institutions must solve, and since the ultimate source of insecurity is temporal, so too must the solution. Force alone is insufficient to solving insecurity, as we only feel secure when the safety of the moment is anticipated to continue in the time to come. Political institutions must therefore replace the temporality of nature marked by an eternity of chaos and short-term thinking with the temporality of the state, which projects an eternity of order that makes duration possible. He argues that it is a state’s projection into the future that allows citizens to feel safe participating in long-term projects that extend over and beyond a single person’s life— such as city planning, creating a family, or contributing the development of science and industry. For these activities to be a worthwhile investment of a person’s life, he needs to feel that the future is secured not only for his lifetime, but for future generations to come.

Turning to the limitations of Hobbes’s political thought, it is useful to consider the historical context in which he wrote, as his own consideration of the future became possible only

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 4:74 (I.v).

as future possibilities expanded in England. As people within his own society began to reject the rigid hierarchies that had gone unquestioned for so long, Hobbes responds not with a celebration but with a warning, going so far as to argue against rebellion and for an absolute sovereign. Yet his criticism of rebellions within England do not stem from a belief in absolute hierarchies, the divine right of kings, or the inherent intellectual inferiority of the peasants. Rather, he sees these rebellions as short-sighted because they misjudge what they risk—society itself, and they do not propose a solution to the central problem of modernity—the insecurity created by an open future. Ancient and medieval societies did not face this problem, as their futures were closed by eternal cyclicity or divine eternity, respectively. Disabused of these older concepts of eternity, Hobbes nevertheless resuscitates the concept of eternity, with one important difference: the creation of the state marks the conscientious creation of the illusion of eternity. The state itself is a surrogate for eternity—its continued existence provides the temporal security required for meaningful civic participation. Moreover, because “felicity...(by which we mean continual delight), consisteth not in having prospered, but in prospering,”<sup>129</sup> the temporal order and stability of the state brings happiness into the realm of the possible. This is also, incidentally, why he does not extend the universal, rational consensus beyond the moment of state creation; to alter the state is to jeopardize the future.

Although offering a state in which human happiness becomes tangible, Hobbes's vision seriously curtails the depth and meaning of the human experience. Because Hobbes's solution to the anxiety caused by an uncertain future is the resurrection of eternity, it is imbued with all the trappings that previous notions of eternity had. It is inflexible and impermeable, and its expanse has a similarly stultifying effect. So while he attempts to create a state in which cooperation and

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<sup>129</sup> Hobbes, “Human Nature, or the Fundamental Elements of Policy,” 33 (VII.6).

progress are possible, the rigid, imposed temporality of his state require such force to maintain that it stifles the very creativity it seeks to engender. Despite attempting to overthrow systems of knowledge that distort reality and whose power depends on popular ignorance, Hobbes's solution is essentially that we agree to trick ourselves—to distort our own reality. Which is, in the end, a rather unsatisfying proposition.

Moreover, even as possibilities for meaningful action expand in Hobbes's state, the actions never move far beyond acquisition and accumulation, and ethical agency is largely lacking. What meaning there is to be had is found in objects not others. Others do play an integral, if not instrumental, role in society, however, as they make the development of industry possible, by which individual can be happy continually satisfying his accumulative desires. As property itself can only exist in civil society,<sup>130</sup> the sovereign is charged not only with the immanent physical security of citizens, but the protracted security that will allow the development of industry. Thus, he concludes sovereigns “can confer no more to their civil happiness than that being preserved from foreign and civil wars, they may quietly enjoy that wealth which they have purchased by their own industry.”<sup>131</sup> In contradistinction to the state of nature, producing misery due to its lack of commodious buildings, industry, arts, and culture, civil society creates the structure that affords “commodious living” and “liv[ing] well.”<sup>132</sup>

Despite mechanisms that carry hints of authoritarianism, the core of Hobbes's philosophy is

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<sup>130</sup> Hobbes argues that a resource becomes private property only with the construction of the concept of an exclusionary right to ownership that is a civil right. Since acknowledging such a right would require restricting one's own actions, it cannot be recognized outside of civil society the natural right of everyman to everything is primary, and precludes the recognition of civil rights and natural laws. These concepts may be universally knowable through reason, but they are not universally applicable. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 2012, vol. 4, chap. XIII.

<sup>131</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *De Cive*, ed. Howard Warrender, The Clarendon Edition of the Philosophical Works of Thomas Hobbes 3 (New York: Clarendon Press, 1983), 159.

<sup>132</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 2012, 4:192 (I.xiii).

centered on the idea that humans need government, but not one that is forced upon them. Rather, we can recognize our own tendencies towards rash thinking caused by an uncertain future, and come together to create institutions that will allow us to feel safe enough to create a civil society in which our individual power, and therefore our potential for happiness, is multiplied. In this light, the role of government is to engender trust between people.

## **Conclusion**

There are two important points regarding Hobbes that have hopefully been made apparent. The first is that we cannot will ourselves to act differently—we must change our environment. The second is that we cannot will ourselves not to think of the future. Futurity defines human thought and action, both of which are deeply enmeshed in/determined by a complex material reality. Later thinkers will rely on more Cartesian models, but will largely keep these two points. Yet for all the liberating potential of his thought, limitations remain. The most salient of which is that Hobbes wants the dynamism of collective industry, but creates a society that cannot truly allow it. His fear leads to a repressive state that is suffocating. It also cannot be overlooked that Hobbes's state of nature is a vehicle by which common goods are made to appear as inducing irrational behavior—the violence compelled by mistrust and unknowns of shared goods, lead men to enter into a civil state where individual property can exist.

By shifting the purpose of philosophy from the question of truth to the question of peace, Hobbes provides a standard for a framework of mutual intelligibility available to all through the use of causal reason. This framework empowers people with the ability to confront and overcome their anxiety, but life is terminally fearful for Hobbes, and it ultimately limits his political imagination. Creating a political institution that is charged, above all else, with the construction of an illusion of a secure future is ultimately stultifying, even as it allows for some

kinds of development, and even if the trust between citizens is created by transferring the fear of one another to the fear of the sovereign.

## **Internalizing the Eternal: The Moral and Material Temporality of John Locke's Subject**

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### **Introduction**

As the progenitor of liberalism, it makes sense to read Locke through the lens of liberalism—focusing on the abstract individual, self-interest, and limited government. However, while these are essential components of Locke's political thought, something is missed in this approach. Namely, the nature of the self that inhabits his political world. This is not a speculative question, however, as he develops a complex theory of subjectivity in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. In this work, Locke, like Hobbes, moves against Cartesian conceptions of the self in which the immaterial agent directs the body through the rational will. And, in fact, Locke's project overlaps with Hobbes's in significant ways, as both offer theories of subjectivity rooted in the material present, affective theories of behavior, and temporal concepts of freedom. For both, the future is a source of human liberation, as the ability to bring it under control radically expands the possibilities of freedom. And both understand such expanded possibility as potentially destabilizing in a society, which causes both of them to employ the temporal concept of eternity to bolster security. Yet, whereas Hobbes reinforces the uncertain future with a secular eternity embodied by the state, Locke maps divine eternity onto the causal, material temporality of subjectivity. As a result, his theory of subjectivity and agency has a moral dimension that Hobbes's lacks. This is important because Locke's subject reflects tensions that are endemic to his philosophy, and which have significant repercussions for his political thought.

As such, I argue that the *Essay*, in which Locke's unique epistemology and moral philosophy are brought to bear on human nature, cannot be divorced from his political thought. For it is here that we find Locke struggling to reconcile an empirically based affective theory of human behavior with moral rationalism. There is a tension between these dimensions of his

thought, as human subjectivity cannot be separated from the material context that informs motivation, yet moral responsibility and judgment is neither reflected in nor affected by material conditions. Despite the materiality of Locke's subject, he inscribes his subject with a moral responsibility that both precludes consideration for a person's particular material context, and supersedes material considerations. The net effect of this is that Locke opens subjectivity itself to moral judgment, which allows him to conclude that because actions reflect a person's moral character, the consequences of such actions are deserved, in a moral sense. In this way, I demonstrate that Locke attempts to bridge the competing material and moral sources of motivation through temporal concepts. This is important, because it is only through synthesizing Locke's work in this way that the inequality that manifests in his egalitarian political imagination can be properly understood as the result of an inegalitarian theory of subjectivity.

In order to demonstrate this argument, it is necessary to first grapple with the ideal mechanism of Locke's ontology and the particular amalgam of empiricism and rationalism that comprises his empiricism. It is only by understanding these dimensions of his thought that the significance of their consequences can be grasped. For, Locke's philosophy undermines nearly all prevailing approaches to knowledge. He rejects both pure empiricism and rationalism, on the grounds that they claim to discover ordering systems that are beyond the scope of human knowledge. We are precluded from knowing the essences or mechanics of things, he argues, because our knowledge is limited, exclusively and exhaustively, to ideas about things given by perception. As such, our knowledge relates only to ideas, and does not extend to objects, which renders any system of categorization or organization fundamentally arbitrary.

Though not immediately obvious, when taken cumulatively, these elements of Locke's thought represent a crisis for moral thought, as he rejects the foundation upon which all

prevailing moral philosophies are based. He denies the possibility of deriving moral truths from the empirical world, because our knowledge of it is mediated and therefore contingent and incomplete, and because the systems we develop for organizing it have no ontological truth. In this way, he undermines traditional conceptions for morality, such as that of Plato's Forms, in which universal ideals inscribe moral meaning and purpose into human life. He further rejects rationalist approaches to moral thought that appeal to innate rational or moral ideas, because, he maintains, all ideas come from experience. It would therefore seem that Locke, having upended rational and empirical foundations for moral inquiry, and having limited human knowledge to an empirical world about which nothing certain can be claimed and in which moral truths are not revealed, would need resign himself to moral relativism. Yet by taking in the breadth of his moral criticism, the moral imperative of his thought is illuminated. For Locke is assiduously committed not just to moral certainty, but moral responsibility—a fact made evident by even a cursory reading of his *Second Treatise*.

It is through his theory of subjectivity that Locke attempts to overcome the moral crisis endemic to his philosophy. Here, he articulates a subject who exercises freedom over the forces that determine the material present by way of a temporal identity and agency. It is the ability to suspend the will in the present so that future pleasures may be made to pressure agents as strongly as present pleasures that allows more rational, long-term desires determine the will. Yet it is not just the material future that impacts deliberation, for though Locke understands all ideas to have an empirical source, it is reason that discerns relationships between ideas and thus produces all knowledge. Because our ideas are not *of* objects but *about* objects, our knowledge of the world remains only probable. However, Locke argued that because moral ideas have no material corollary, reason can be used to develop certain moral truths, which makes it possible to



extend deliberation not simply into the material future, but into the divine future. Though presented as a possibility, it is for Locke, also a mandate. He interprets all actions as conscious moral choices, and their consequences as reflecting proper moral judgments. With this move, Locke is able to link social hierarchy to moral hierarchy—social inequality is a manifestation of unequal subjectivities. It is not a material problem.

Where Hobbes engendered stability by making the state responsible for eternity, Locke internalizes eternal responsibility. He similarly finds divine eternity to be a source of stability, insofar as it properly structures the motivations and actions of a moral persons, whose can consequently form a community in need of no additional security. The divine eternity inscribed by morality precedes the state and supersedes its authority, and as such there are no grounds for ethical or temporal interventions by political institutions. They are rather needed when society develops to the point that the moral, rational pursuit of material gains must be protected from those whose moral constitution is too weak to resist the pressure of the material present.

## **Foundations of Locke's philosophy**

### **Mechanism**

A mechanist ontology is often ascribed to Locke. There is good reason for this, as he frequently offers explanations by way of Robert Boyle's corpuscularianism—a straightforward account of mechanical change in the physical world. Yet, as G.A.J. Rogers notes, "To argue, as many have, that Locke's epistemology presupposes the *truth* of mechanism is to entirely misconstrue the relationship between his philosophy as we have seen it in the *Essay* and his wider beliefs about the natural world."<sup>133</sup> Here, Rogers refers to the tendency of scholars to

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<sup>133</sup> G. A. J. Rogers, "The Intellectual Setting and Aims of the Essay," in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke's "Essay Concerning Human Understanding"* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 22. Emphasis mine.

simply ascribe Boyle's corpuscularianism to Locke, owing to Locke's frequent invocation of corpuscularian theories in his explanation of various material relationships. However, Locke does not accept corpuscularianism as true, it is merely the best available hypothesis for understanding the mechanical world. He writes,

Though the world be full of systems...I cannot say I know any one which can be taught a young man as a science wherein he may find truth and certainty, ...I think *the systems of natural philosophy* that have obtained in this part of the world, *are to be read more to know hypothesis...than with hopes to gain thereby a comprehensive, [scientific] and satisfactory knowledge of the works of nature.* Only this may be said, that the modern Corpuscularians talk in most things more intelligibly than the Peripateticks who possessed the schools immediately before them.<sup>134</sup>

Herein, Locke affirms that the world is indeed ordered by systems, however he challenges our ability to fully comprehend any of them, let alone develop a comprehensive system capable of producing certain knowledge. In relation to the nature, structure, and function of the natural world, Locke argues that human knowledge must therefore remain hypothetical. However, though Locke's adoption of corpuscularianism may be tentative, his mechanism is not. There is no question *that* the world is mechanically ordered according to laws of matter and motion, the only question, and it is an unanswerable one, is *how*. Though incapable of producing comprehensive knowledge, science is capable of improving hypothesis through investigation. Locke affirms both his mechanism and the development of knowledge available to science when he writes,

I have here instanced in the corpuscularian hypothesis, as that which is thought to go farthest in an intelligible explication of the qualities of bodies; and I fear the weakness of human understanding is scarce able to substitute another, which will afford us a fuller and clearer discovery of the necessary connexion, and co-

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<sup>134</sup> John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, The Clarendon Edition of the Works of John Locke (New York: Clarendon Press, 1989), 247–8 §193. Emphasis mine.

existence, of the powers which are to be observed united in several sorts of them.<sup>135</sup>

Any replacement for corpuscularianism would still have to explain the “necessary connexion” of bodies. Such a hypothesis would have to better explain the precise relationship between mechanism and thought. For, that “two bodies at a distance will put one another into motion by the force of attraction” is certain, and “made evident to us by experience,” yet it is nevertheless “inexplicable” how the mechanics of thought production operate.<sup>136</sup> He argues that the boundaries of human knowledge provide us with only a glimpse of the true mechanical operations of the world. As such, we must be content with hypothetical knowledge of the world’s ordering forces. This means that Locke’s ontology *is* a mechanist, but his commitment is formal rather than material—he does not commit to any existing mechanist theory—his position is one Michael Ayers describes as “pure ideal mechanism.”<sup>137</sup> Locke’s insistence that we are limited to hypothetical ontological claims is quite distinctive of this thought, and results from a position that fundamentally structures his philosophy. We cannot speak with any certainty regarding the true nature or mechanics of the world, he argues, on account of our epistemic condition, in which our experience of the world is mediated by sense perception. Though his understanding of our epistemic condition is not unique, indeed it is one of the central justifications for rationalism. But Locke takes the somewhat radical move of developing an empiricist epistemology, while rejecting the premise that reason or innate ideas can be the source of knowledge. Yet he also distanced himself from other empiricists, by embracing its limitations and, in fact, using those

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<sup>135</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 547–8 (IV.iii.16).

<sup>136</sup> John Locke, “Elements of Natural Philosophy,” in *The Works of John Locke in Nine Volumes*, 12th ed., vol. 2 (Rivington: London, 1824), [oll.libertyfund.org/titles/762](http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/762) II.417.

<sup>137</sup> Michael Ayers, *Locke: Epistemology and Ontology*, vol. 2 (New York: Routledge, 1993), 152.

limitations to undermine the ontological claims and ordering systems, be they natural or moral, in prevailing philosophies.

## Empiricism

Locke argues that human knowledge is limited to that which can be derived from experience through sense perception, in which “external objects furnish the mind with the ideas of sensible qualities,” and through reflection “the mind furnishes the understanding with ideas of its own operations.”<sup>138</sup> And, he explains, “when we have taken a full survey of them, and their several modes, combinations, and relations,” all our ideas will be accounted for and we will find “that we have nothing in our minds, which did not come in, one of these two ways,” perception or reflection.<sup>139</sup> Although sense perceptions “convince us, that there are solid extended substances; and reflection, that there are thinking ones,” and experience “every moment furnishes us with the clear ideas, both of the one and the other,” nevertheless “beyond these ideas, as received from their proper sources, our faculties will not reach.”<sup>140</sup> This means that for Locke, experience confirms the *existence* of objects, but our knowledge is limited to ideas about

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<sup>138</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 106 (II.i.5).

<sup>139</sup> Ibid. Locke does go on to *liken* the mechanics of the natural world to that of the intellectual world, describing a person’s “world of his own understanding” as “being much what the same, as the great visible world of things” because he cannot create “new matter, or destroy one atom of what is already in being.” Ibid., 49 (II.ii.2). Also, “This shows man’s power and its way of operation to be much what the same in the material and intellectual world For the materials in both being such as he has no power over, either to make or destroy, all that man can do is either to unite them together, or to set them by one another, or wholly separate them.” (II.xii.1) Though he ascribes general mechanical principles to both realms, his analogy functions as a descriptive account of consciousness rather than an explanatory hypothesis. An analogy that almost immediately breaks down, as Locke does not understand ideas as “particles” of experience. See Michael Ayers, *Locke: Epistemology and Ontology*, vol. 1, 2 vols. (New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>140</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 312 (II.xxiii.29).

an object's "sensible qualities," and precludes knowledge of an object's essence. Our knowledge therefore pertains only to ideas about things, not to things in themselves.<sup>141</sup>

Locke argues that our epistemic condition prevents us from having a clear understanding of the objects in the world, and the mechanical forces that govern them, including how objects actually stimulate perception or how senses transmit them to the mind. Yet the limitations of knowledge do not lead Locke to doubt either the existence of mechanical forces or the authority of sense perception. He is resolute on this point—sense perception and reflection provide the mind with ideas that accurately capture reality. In this way, Locke distances himself from the skepticism of Descartes in two ways. In the first, Descartes argued that ideas are only material for rational judgment because the senses cannot be trusted as they are capable of being improperly formed. And in the second, Descartes argued that a rational mechanical explanation for the mechanism of perception is required to affirm the existence of rational objects. These are important points of distinction between the two thinkers, with repercussions that will be born out in Locke's theory of subjectivity, but here it is important only to note that Locke works against Descartes rationalism to affirm an empirical source of all ideas, and the accuracy and trustworthiness of the senses that transmit these ideas.

As such, Locke counters Descartes by arguing that "we cannot act any thing, but by our faculties; nor talk of knowledge itself, but by the help of those faculties, which are fitted to apprehend even what knowledge is."<sup>142</sup> It is, for him, impossible to genuinely doubt perceptual knowledge at a practical level, and mistrust of the senses is a mistrust of the basic cognitive

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<sup>141</sup> "Since the mind, in all its thoughts and reasonings, hath no other immediate object but its own ideas, which it alone does or can contemplate, it is evident, that our knowledge is only conversant about them."<sup>141</sup> The objects of the mind are ideas, hence knowledge pertains only to ideas. *Ibid.*, 525 (IV.i.1).

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 631–2 (IV.xi.3).

faculty that makes the whole concept of knowledge meaningless. He further rejects the possibility of perception leading us astray,<sup>143</sup> by arguing that senses “do not err in the information they give us, of the existence of things without them.”<sup>144</sup>

He thus affords independent authority to perception, as the simple ideas it gives to the mind,

must *necessarily* be the product of things operating on the mind in a natural way...[they] are not fictions of our fancies, but the natural and *regular production of things without us, really operating on us*; and so carry with them all the conformity which is intended...for they *represent to us things under those appearances*.<sup>145</sup>

Here, Locke affirms a relationship between perception and objects, which consists of the latter exerting some sort of power over the former, because, “the mind knows not things immediately, but only by the intervention of the ideas it has of them.”<sup>146</sup> Moreover, the authenticity of these ideas is certain for Locke, for our discernment and interaction with the material world would be impossible if the ideas we had of objects did not in some way confirm to their actuality. Of less concern for Locke is the actual “how” of this process.<sup>147</sup> Unlike Hobbes, who was compelled to

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<sup>143</sup> Locke demonstrates this by reframing a situation that ostensibly demonstrates the fallibility of sense. That the same cup of water may feel cold to one hand and warm to the other is not, he argues, evidence of the improperly formed senses. Rather, both are true, relational perceptions. The idea of hot or cold produced does not refer to the objective temperature of the water, but refers to the difference in temperature between the hand and the water. See *Ibid.*, 139 (II.viii.21).

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 631 (IV.xi.3).

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 563–4 (IV.iv.4). Emphasis mine.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 530 (IV.ii.1).

<sup>147</sup> For Lisa Downing, Locke’s refusal to commit to corpuscularianism as a theory rather than a hypothesis is indicative of ontological commitments that are metaphysical rather than mechanical, insofar as Locke can be read as vacillating between materialism and a dualism, and makes ontological claims regarding God that can be difficult to square with materialism. Downing does not argue that these positions are irreconcilable, and in fact attempts to resolve Locke’s vacillation in favor of a more skeptical, humble reading. My reading of Locke does not entail any such contradiction to resolve—any perceived vacillation stems from his formal mechanism and material skepticism, not hidden metaphysical commitments. See, Downing, Lisa, “Locke’s Ontology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke’s “Essay Concerning Human Understanding,”* ed. Lex Newman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 357.

develop a mechanist theory of perception, Locke is content to generally affirm the corpuscularian hypothesis that:

‘Tis evident, that *some motion* must be thence continued by our nerves...by some parts of our bodies, to the brains or the seat of sensation, there to produce in our minds the particular ideas we have of them....[S]ome singly imperceptible bodies must come from them to the eyes, and thereby convey to the brain some motion, which produces these ideas, which we have of them in us.<sup>148</sup>

Locke subsequently develops a causal theory of representation,<sup>149</sup> locating the “power to produce any idea in our mind” within the “quality” of an object.<sup>150</sup> Such qualities may be divided into two categories, primary and secondary.<sup>151</sup> Primary may “be called real qualities,” because they are “resemblances of [the body]” that are and “utterly inseparable from the body.”<sup>152</sup> These qualities are, for Locke intrinsic, mind-independent, real qualities.<sup>153</sup> Secondary qualities, on the other hand, “have no resemblance of [bodies] at all.”<sup>154</sup> They reveal “nothing in the objects themselves, but [are] powers to produce various sensations in us, and depend on those primary

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<sup>148</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 132 (II.viii.2). Emphasis mine.

<sup>149</sup> “whatsoever is so constituted in nature, [is] able, by affecting our senses, to cause any perception in the mind, [and to] produce in the understanding a simple idea.” Ibid. (II.vii.1).

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 134 (II.viii.8).

<sup>151</sup> The distinction between primary and secondary qualities can be traced back to Aristotle, whose four elements produce the four sensible “first qualities” of hot, cold, dry and wet. Later, Locke’s contemporary Boyle adopted Aristotle’s first qualities whole cloth, but introduced primary modes as the more fundamental attributes of size, shape, motion, and rest, from which first qualities are derived. Locke departs from Boyle by arguing that primary qualities are not determinate but determinable. That is, an object’s particular length is not a primary quality, but rather length generally. Cf. Aristotle, *Aristotle on Generation and Corruption*, ed. Frans de Haas and Jaap Mansfeld, vol. 1, Symposium Aristotelicum (New York: Clarendon Press, 2004); Robert Boyle, “New Experiments,” in *The Works of Robert Boyle*, ed. Michael Hunter and Edward Bradford Davis, vol. 6, 14 vols. (Charlottesville, Va.: InteLex Corporation, 2003).

<sup>152</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 134–137 (II.viii.9,15,17).

<sup>153</sup> Michael Jacovides explains that Locke generally presumes that ideas do not resemble something in bodies, but primary qualities overcome this presumption because the only way a theory can intelligibly “explain the workings of bodies is if our ideas resemble the explanatory qualities in that theory.” Michael Jacovides, “Locke’s Distinctions between Primary and Secondary Qualities,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke’s “Essay Concerning Human Understanding,”* ed. Lex Newman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 109.

<sup>154</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 137 (II.viii.15).

qualities.”<sup>155</sup> These qualities have no objective existence, they are mind-dependent and relational. One example Locke offers is are the ideas of warmth or pain produced by fire. These ideas are produced by the secondary qualities, because they are caused by fire but do not resemble the fire itself. In this way, the mind is given ideas by the external world that have no objective existence.

Despite refraining from committing to a corpuscularian theory of perception as Hobbes does, Locke’s description of sense perception broadly resonates with Hobbes’s. Not unlike Hobbes, the ideas given by sense perception are mediated, the essence, which is “the very being of any thing, whereby it is, what it is” is also “unknown,” but accessible via their “discoverable qualities” which depend on the essence.<sup>156</sup> Locke also similarly understands perception to produce the concept of power, not just of the particular power of qualities, but power as such. Power is not an idea given to the senses immediately, however, but is a function of the “perception of constant and dependable change in recurrent observable circumstances.”<sup>157</sup> That is, the idea of power is, for Locke, a fundamentally temporal idea. It is an idea only available to a being whose perception extends over the time in question and who is aware of the temporal categories of continuity and change. The importance of which will be fully elaborated in the next section. As it pertains to qualities, however, the relevant aspect is that duration of experience produces the concept of power that consequently, allows for the distinction primary and secondary kinds to be recognizable to the human mind. This is true despite the fact that Locke’s varied use of power in his description of sense perception lack positive content. They are

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid. (II.viii.14).

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 417 (III.iii.15).

<sup>157</sup> Ayers, *Locke*, 1993, 1:163.



placeholders for a mechanical process that Locke understands as necessary, but beyond the realm of human knowledge.

### Nominalism

It is owing to Locke's understanding of our epistemic condition that he adopts nominalism—the position that universals are characteristics of ideas, not objects. That is, that general terms exist, but the objects that seem to correspond to these terms do not. Locke is joined in his nominalism by Hobbes, who similarly understands human knowledge to be grounded in experience and consequently limited to particulars. For both, this limitation does not reflect the inability of the human mind to access universals, but rather the fact that universals do not exist. Both recognize that the mind cannot help but to establish relationships between ideas and group them, which gives rise to abstractions that are purely lingual conventions. Yet insofar as such linguistic constructions can develop the understanding of particulars through the application of reason, both find nominal universals necessary to both philosophic critique and development.

Locke echoes Hobbes's critique on the misuse of language, which both believed caused a lack of clarity in ethical and scientific discourse. The previous chapter described how, for Hobbes, ideas are produced by experience in a relational, causal context that required nothing but experience to induce prudence. Science, on the other hand, has the potential to move beyond the specificity of particular contexts, by joining “names”—words that signify subjects or predicates, with propositions. Rejecting the concept of universal things or ideas, Hobbes argues the nominalist position that “there is nothing universal but names,”<sup>158</sup> and “this word universal is never the name of anything existent in nature.”<sup>159</sup> Unlike singular names that refer to one thing, a

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<sup>158</sup> Hobbes, “Human Nature, or the Fundamental Elements of Policy,” 22 (V.6).

<sup>159</sup> Thomas Hobbes, “Part First, or Logic,” in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury Volume 1*, ed. William Molesworth (London: John Bohn, 1839), 20 (II.9).

universal name applies to multiple things. For example, the universal name “man” is given “to every particular of mankind,”<sup>160</sup> based on some resemblance or equality between them. The problem for Hobbes, as for Locke, is that the universality of certain names has led some to think there are universal *things*:

besides Peter and John, and all the rest of the men that are, have been, or shall be in the world, there is yet something else that we call man, viz. man in general, deceiving themselves, by taking the universal, or general appellation, for the thing it signifieth.<sup>161</sup>

The concept of man, Hobbes argues, exists subsequent to particular things, yet many invert this relationship and presume that the universal precedes and therefore informs the particular. But because universals are purely lingual constructs, they have no objective truth. This is why Hobbes identifies truth and falsehood as attributes of propositions; when a predicate comprehends subject it is true. Though a relationship between two particulars may be recognized in a particular instance,<sup>162</sup> universal relationships are a function of language and true only insofar as a relationship is evident between particular images and concomitant ideas. For Hobbes, it is language that makes it possible to reason beyond the particular and to extend conclusions universally.<sup>163</sup> However, the fundamentally arbitrary association of words with ideas makes a

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<sup>160</sup> Hobbes, “Human Nature, or the Fundamental Elements of Policy,” 21 (V.5).

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 22 (V.6).

<sup>162</sup> Hobbes offers the example of a person without language having placed before him a triangle and two right angles and argues that “he may by meditation compare and find, that the three angles of that triangle, are equal to those two right angles that stand by it. But if another triangle be shown him different in shape from the former, he cannot know without a new labour, whether the three angles of that also be equal to the same.” Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 2012, 4:53 (I.iv).

<sup>163</sup> A person with language, Hobbes continues, can recognize that the equality between the triangle and two right angles is due to nothing particular in this triangle but on account of what makes it a triangle, “that the sides were straight, and the angles three.” As such we “will boldly conclude universally, that such equality of angles is in all triangles whatsoever; and register his invention in these general terms, every triangle hath its three angles equal to two right angles.” Ibid., 4:54 (I.iv).

priori reason impossible.<sup>164</sup> Like everything else in Hobbes's philosophy, reason is contextual and contingent, which means it cannot function as an independent arbiter or authority.

Though unmoved by Hobbes's preemption of intellect and associationist account of reasoning, Locke was clearly influenced by Hobbes's argument regarding universals vis-à-vis language. For his part, Locke first distinguishes the real existence of particulars from the ideational existence of universals:

the immediate object of all our reasoning and knowledge is nothing but particulars....So that the perception of the agreement or disagreement of our particular ideas, is the whole and utmost of our knowledge. Universality is but accidental to it, and consists only in this, that the particular ideas, about which it is, are such, as more than one particular thing can correspond with, and be represented by.<sup>165</sup>

He describes here how experience is constituted exclusively by particulars, and the appearance of commonality between particulars owes not to the objects themselves but to a purely intellectual process. It begins with abstraction, "whereby ideas are taken from particular beings" and separated from their observed context so as to create a principle or "name," by which to organize experience.<sup>166</sup> The mind, but more specifically, "the workmanship of understanding,"<sup>167</sup> draws its first abstractions from its simplest ideas, and arrives at notions of space, time, shape, extension, etc. From these simple abstractions, the mind assembles a type of complex idea Locke calls "modes." While modes "are considered as dependences on...substances,"<sup>168</sup> and do describe reality, they are themselves only types of ideas with no ontological existence; they carry no implication that they even correspond to real objects. Modes are universal insofar as they are a type of idea that represent particular aspects of objects. These universals are employed by a

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<sup>164</sup> Hobbes, "Part First, or Logic," 20 (II.9).

<sup>165</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 681 (IV.xvii.8).

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 159 (II.xi.9).

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 415 (III.iii.12).

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 165 (II.xii.4).

“natural tendency of the mind” towards knowledge. Since dwelling “upon only particular things, progress... would be very slow,”<sup>169</sup> the mind therefore shortens “its way to knowledge... [by binding] them into bundles, and [ranking] them so into sorts,” so that knowledge of one can “with assurance extend to all of that sort.”<sup>170</sup>

In this way, Locke argues that the human tendency to develop classification systems reveals not a truth about those systems, but a truth about human consciousness. We are compelled not to discover systems, but to create them. Generalizations relate to real aspects of things, but we may divide phenomena any number of ways, depending on our needs. This essentially renders all systems of classification and organization arbitrary. Locke himself views this not as a loss but as a liberation—philosophers can stop chasing imaginary universals and begin to construct categories that are flexible and functional. Against the traditional view that universals exist outside space and time, Locke abstracts from a particular instance. This means that Locke’s universal is not an atemporal, aspatial concept, but one extended beyond a particular spatial, temporal representation.

One consequence of Locke’s enmeshing universals in spatio-temporal particulars is that universal truths are conditional. It is only in this way they can be called eternal:

Not because they are eternal propositions actually formed, and antecedent to the understanding, that at any time makes them; nor because they are imprinted on the mind from any patterns, that are anywhere of them out of the mind, and existed before: but because being once made, about abstract ideas, so as to be true, they will, whenever they can be supposed to be made again at any time past or to come, by a mind having those ideas, always actually be true.<sup>171</sup>

Neither universal concepts nor universal truths exist. Both are preceded by particulars, which makes them contingent. They remain valid only so long as the particulars that precede

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 385 (II.xxxii.6).

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 385–6 (II.xxxii.6).

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 638 (IV.xii.14).

them and ideas produced by them remain unchanged. Locke's conclusion reads quite similarly to Hobbes's,<sup>172</sup> and does indeed reflect important parallels in their thought, as both develop theories of abstraction whereby universal, eternal truths can be known without impugning the sensory character of the ideas before the mind, and without affirming the objective existence of such truths.

### Rationalism

There is at this point little discernable difference between the empiricism of Hobbes and Locke. However, even as he vigorously defends the authority of perception against Descartes' skepticism, Locke affords it a far lesser position than his empiricist peers. Unlike Hobbes and Gassendi, for whom experience provides the acquisition of knowledge, for Locke, experience provides only for the acquisition of ideas. The acquisition of knowledge, he argues, requires the application of reason. Much of the uniqueness of Locke's epistemology stems from his absolute position that all ideas come from experience independent of reason, and yet all knowledge comes from reason—two positions that seem almost necessarily in conflict.

Locke reconciles rationalism and empiricism by employing the intuition/deduction thesis, which claims that some propositions can be known by intuition, and still more by deduction.<sup>173</sup> Empiricists generally accept the thesis so long as it is restricted to propositions pertaining to the relations between *concepts* or ideas rather than things in themselves. By examining concepts, the argument goes, we can grasp a relationship between them. For example, we can know by

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<sup>172</sup> "One universal name is imposed on many things," but "there [is] nothing universal but names." "For true and false are attributes of speech, not of things...truth consisteth in the right ordering of names." And "a universal rule...was found true here and now" but is also "true in all times and places." Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 2012, 4:52–5 (I.iv).

<sup>173</sup> Peter Markie, "Rationalism vs. Empiricism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2015, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/rationalism-empiricism/>.

intuition that our concept of animal includes the concept of body.<sup>174</sup> Prefiguring Hume, Locke develops his own defense of intuitive knowledge along empiricist lines, arguing that “sometimes the mind perceives the agreement or disagreement of two ideas immediately by themselves, without intervention of any other: and this, I think, we may call intuitive knowledge.”<sup>175</sup> For example, “without the intervention of any other ideas,” the “mind perceives, that white is not black” and that “a circle is not a triangle.”<sup>176</sup> Such an immediate perception of a relation is, for Locke, “the clearest, and most certain”<sup>177</sup> knowledge, because there is “no room for hesitation, doubt, or error.”<sup>178</sup>

For ideas whose relationship is not immediately perceived, Locke develops a rational method of demonstration by way of a chain of intuitively perceived steps. Each intermediate proof “has intuitive certainty,” insofar as “the agreement or disagreement of two ideas under examination is found.”<sup>179</sup> In a particularly sweeping summation, Locke contends that divine punishment necessarily entails free will:

The mind seeing the connection there is between the idea of men’s punishment in the other world, and the idea of God punishing, between God punishing, and the justice of the punishment; between justice of the punishment and guilt, between guilt and a power to do otherwise, between a power to do otherwise and freedom, and between freedom and self-determination, sees the connexion between men, and self-determination.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Descartes and other “pure” rationalists also adopt the intuition/deduction thesis, but claim that its propositions contain substantive information about the external world. Descartes argued that intuited premises are guaranteed to be true by God. Leibniz offers a more compelling rationalist defense of intuition in which intuition is validated by innate mathematical knowledge. For empiricists, such as Locke, neither of these defenses are successful.

<sup>175</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 530–1 (IV.ii.1).

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 531 (IV.ii.1).

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 618 (IV.ix.3).

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 534 (IV.ii.7).

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 673 (IV.xvii.4).

Each idea, from punishment to freedom has, for Locke, an empirical source, yet the relationship between these ideas is not made apparent by perception but reason. In this way, Locke develops a philosophy that retains an empirical foothold, while excluding the possibility of substantial knowledge about the world. It also overcomes the objections he raises to purely rational deductions while simultaneously elevating reason above perception, because the only knowledge available to the human mind is the relations between concepts, not substances. Perception gives us ideas, but only reason can make sense of them. Locke's coupling of rationalism and empiricism requires a natural faculty of reason that Hobbes's materialism does not. For Locke, sense perception and reason are distinct faculties that produce knowledge by acting in concert:

Sensation furnishing reason with the ideas of particular sense-objects and supplying the subject-matter of discourse, reason on the other hand guiding the faculty of sense, and arranging together the images of things derived from sense-perception, thence forming others and composing new ones...without reason, though actuated by our senses we scarcely rise to the standard of nature found in brute beasts...without help...of the senses, reason can achieve no more than a laborer working in darkness behind shuttered windows...The foundations...on which rests the whole of that knowledge that reason builds up are the objects of sense experience.<sup>181</sup>

Locke distinguishes himself from the rationalists by granting sense perception independent authority. However, he distinguishes himself from the empiricists by granting reason this same independence—it is free from the spatio-temporal context and conditioning that sense perception is. In this way, Locke weaves together a number of seemingly paradoxical positions—an empiricism that excludes the possibility of substantial knowledge of the world, and a rationalism that accesses knowledge not of the world. Locke's particular combination of empiricism and rationalism is unique to his thought, and significant. After all, others like Gassendi and Hobbes had already outlined empiricist or mechanical philosophies that required no such inclusion, and rationalists like Descartes outlined systems that excluded empirical methods. This suggests that

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 638 (IV.xi.14).

Locke's coupling is not for lack of alternatives, but rather a deliberate move away from existing philosophies. So the question then becomes why—what does rationalism afford Locke that pure empiricism could not, and vice versa?

The answer, in its most simplistic terms, is that Locke sought to develop a philosophy free from the dogmatism, in the Kantian sense, of *both* materialists and rationalists. Both of these approaches employed methods that presumed to uncover the real nature behind sensible qualities, and assert that a complete and demonstrable mechanics is possible. For Hobbes, since all knowledge is derived from the senses, and all sensible objects are material, the only intelligible world available to us is a materialist one. And through analyzing experience, a complete, scientific, mechanistic understanding of the world is possible. Descartes shares this understanding, though his method employs pure intellect. Prefiguring Kant, Locke assumes a much more skeptical position regarding the relationship between our sensible and intellectual faculties. Though he does not doubt the existence of the world, or that a real relationship exists between sensible and intellectual faculties, he does doubt the possibility of knowing the true nature of this relationship. The limitations of human understanding thus make the kind of systematic claims to certainty that Hobbes and Descartes make impossible. This means that at its core, Locke's philosophy is one that accepts a fundamental incompleteness and uncertainty that is a problematic foundation for moral and political thought, as it seems to necessarily entail relativism.

### **Moral implications of Locke's critiques**

One of the most significant challenges Locke's philosophy poses to traditional concepts of morality has its origin in his critique of science. He argues that like the Ancient Forms, the Scholastic concept of species are inherently teleological, dictating the ends of things, and



consequently infusing the material world with a normative dimension. The organizing principle of species separates qualities “from the objects they characterize” and mistakes them for “‘substantial forms’ that inform reality and are intuited by our minds.”<sup>182</sup> The problem with speciation is thus the same as that of the forms: arbitrary distinctions are developed into a universal schema that does not exist yet is nevertheless ascribed an ontological existence.<sup>183</sup> On Locke’s reading, the implicit logic of speciation is one in which instances of an immaterial form are brought into existence by formal causes. This essentially renders the study of the natural world as a process of classifying the material world according to atemporal, rational concepts—a normative system in so far as particulars are judged by universals. Moreover, since such a schema would need to not merely accommodate, but account for the change of the natural world, natural processes are inscribed with purpose insofar as they fulfill the “ideal” or end dictated by the concept.

Both the ordering and the normativity of this are problematic for Locke. The ascription of order reflects the same tendency to assume ontological truth is reflected in systems humans develop, and he further rejects the possibility of finding moral truths in the material world. In the classification of man, the moral implication of is perhaps most evident. As Forde describes it, “[t]he purpose, and duty, of individual men was to work toward the perfection implicit in the *form* man. The metaphysics of form imbued the human world, along with the cosmos as a whole,

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<sup>182</sup> Steven Forde, *Locke, Science and Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 87–8.

<sup>183</sup> Locke sees this same tendency in the analytic abstraction of his peers, insofar as abstracting from a particular gives rise to universal notions that are taken to have real, independent existence, which is a primary reason Locke adopts a nominalist position. Margaret Atherton also provides a quite thorough reading on Locke’s historical position vis-à-vis Scholasticism, as well as the contemporary debates surrounding the ontological implications of his division between real and nominal essences. See Margaret Atherton, “Locke on Essences and Classification,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke’s “Essay Concerning Human Understanding,”* ed. Lex Newman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 258–85.

with purpose.”<sup>184</sup> In declaring the species “human” an arbitrary distinction, Locke displaces the idea of perfection that anchors traditional concepts of human duty. Moreover, it effectively eliminates the possibility of establishing a new one—if there is no universal concept of man, how could a universal morality possibly exist? Initially, at least, Locke’s philosophy appears to offer no solutions, and in fact only deepens the crisis.

For, if Locke perceived a significant threat to philosophy stemming from nativist claims regarding the natural world, he found a still greater danger in nativist claims regarding the moral realm. And, in the case of moral nativists, the feeling was mutual, for they “held that knowledge of our duties is founded on innate ‘practical’ axioms, the absence of which seemed to make room for moral disagreement or relativism profound enough to destabilize societies.”<sup>185</sup> Locke shared this concern, but rejected the idea that relativism could only be avoided through nativism. To the contrary, his position is that claims of innate moral ideas are, “built on unverifiable claims regarding the content of those ideas, claims that were asserted and defended dogmatically,” that ultimately result in “a philosophy, and an education, based on little more than appeals to authority, clothed in unintelligible jargon.”<sup>186</sup> Locke recognizes the risks posed by moral relativism, yet nevertheless insists that prevailing systems of moral thought rely on abstract universals and innate moral ideas that are fundamentally arbitrary. The arbitrary nature of such systems paradoxically engenders that which they fear, he argues, as they are fundamentally unstable and therefore “constitute a danger to political stability and order.”<sup>187</sup> At the same time, however, he is sensitive to the danger that may come from disrupting traditional moral and social

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<sup>184</sup> Forde, *Locke, Science and Politics*, 16.

<sup>185</sup> Samuel C. Rickless, “Locke’s Polemic against Nativism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke’s “Essay Concerning Human Understanding,”* ed. Lex Newman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 34.

<sup>186</sup> Forde, *Locke, Science and Politics*, 75.

<sup>187</sup> Ayers, *Locke*, 1993, 1:13.

order. The task Locke therefore sets himself, is to develop a theory of knowledge that not merely resists both unverifiable knowledge claims and moral relativism, but also inculcates existing value systems, albeit on firmer philosophic grounds.

This predicament was not unique to Locke, indeed it was one of the defining features of 17<sup>th</sup> century European thought. The empirical, material turn in philosophy marked a crisis in moral authority, and philosophers took care to develop their ideas with an eye towards the ethical, sketching out new frontiers for the relationship between God and humans.<sup>188</sup> Each is essentially contending with the looming threat of social collapse and moral relativism that seemed to necessarily flow from a challenge to universal order generally, and particularly from a philosophy such as Locke's that precluded the existence of universal order or certain knowledge.

Descartes' answer to the problem of moral authority is an ontological proof of a voluntarist God, who ordered the human mind with a capacity to reason that allows it to understand the ordering of the natural world, and correct ethical behavior. Hobbes's answer is that though natural philosophy is perfectly agnostic, it nevertheless produces universal ethical truths insofar as all human life is served by peace. As Schneewind takes care to note, however, "[t]here is a tendency to assume that metaphysical or epistemological philosophic frameworks are first established, then ethics derived. This isn't particularly helpful or true when tracking moral thought. There are different relationships between theories of knowledge and theories of morality."<sup>189</sup> This is nowhere more clear, perhaps, than in the philosophy of Locke, and it would be a mischaracterization to portray the normative dimensions of his thought as somehow ancillary to his natural philosophy. Though both his natural and moral philosophy can, and

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<sup>188</sup> For an excellent summary on some of the more prominent thinkers of voluntarism and intellectualism in early 17<sup>th</sup> century, see Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy*.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

should be read together, it is important to recognize that Locke brings to his moral theory a need for certainty and divinity that precede his epistemological framing. That is, if Locke's moral thought were truly derived from his natural philosophy, it would indeed be relative. He goes to great and obvious pains to prevent this, however, by fusing reason with the divine law, and reincorporating it into his natural and political philosophy as natural law. In effect, combining reason with divine law allow Locke to shield morality from the destabilizing effects of his empirical rationalism. In this way, Locke presents a singular philosophy that produces a bifurcated system of knowledge—probable scientific knowledge and certain moral knowledge.

### **Science, history, morality: Locke's modern temporalities**

#### **Probability and Certainty**

Locke is a realist insofar as he claims it is possible to know that the material world exists. It is further possible to know that there is a mechanical structure to the world; in some instances, it is immediately intelligible to us in some instances, such as when we can discern which key will turn a lock.<sup>190</sup> However, because the knowledge given by the senses is limited to qualities, and does not reveal the real nature of things, we have “no knowledge of real existence at all.”<sup>191</sup> And because “we are destitute of senses acute enough” to discover the particles which would “give us ideas of their mechanical affections,” we therefore remain ignorant of “the particular mechanical affections of the minute parts of the bodies.”<sup>192</sup> Consequently, “we are not capable of scientific knowledge; nor shall [we] ever be able to discover general, instructive, unquestionable truths.”<sup>193</sup>

And so,

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<sup>190</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 556 (IV.iii.25).

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, 618 IV.iv.1.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 556–7 (IV.iii.25-26).

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 557 (IV.iii.26).

we must be content to be ignorant of their properties and ways of operation; nor can we be assured about them any farther, than some few trials we make, are able to reach. But whether they will succeed again another time, we cannot be certain. This hinders our certain knowledge of universal truths concerning natural bodies: and our reason carries us herein very little beyond particular matter of fact.<sup>194</sup>

Collectively, the mediated nature of sensory knowledge and definitions that are based on incomplete information, allow us to observe a chain of events and make predictions, but we can never be certain that we will obtain the same results in the future. Though our ideas are connected to the material in a real way, because we cannot permeate the nominal boundaries of human understanding to see *how*, scientific knowledge is terminally probable.

The inability of achieving certain scientific knowledge does not deter Locke from advocating for the development of less than certain science. His position is consistent with other early moderns, who established a new category in which a sufficiently high degree of probability can be called knowledge.<sup>195</sup> Empirical conclusions, Locke argues, will never be certain, but they can provide “an assurance, that deserves the name of knowledge,”<sup>196</sup> to which no rational person can refuse “assent.”<sup>197</sup> Lucky, though certain knowledge is in short supply, we “have light enough,”<sup>198</sup> and “insight enough,”<sup>199</sup> to determine the “probability suitable”<sup>200</sup> for general guidance through life. In short, probability is very often good enough.

There are real benefits to such a modest position. For one, by resisting the urge to make systematic, speculative claims, he is saved from the kinds of scientific refutations that often serve as the grounds for excluding other early moderns like Hobbes from contemporary discourse.

However, a philosophy of probable knowledge creates additional trouble for moral

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 556 (IV.iii.25).

<sup>195</sup> Ayers, *Locke*, 1993 Ch 13-14.

<sup>196</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (IV.xi.3).

<sup>197</sup> Ibid. (IV.XX.15-16).

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 45 (I.i.5).

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 302 (II.xxiii.12).

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 652 (IV.xiv.2).

understanding. Since Locke has continually affirmed that all knowledge is empirically derived, and has undermined all other modes of moral understanding for their non-empirical foundations, it would seem that to follow that for him morality must also be empirically derived, and therefore incapable of certainty. However, while Locke affirms the empirical source of moral ideas, he nevertheless claims that it is possible to establish certain knowledge in some instances.

Locke begins this line of argument by first distinguishing between “general and particular”<sup>201</sup> knowledge. Particular knowledge is founded upon “matter of fact, or history,” while “general knowledge is founded only upon true ideas.”<sup>202</sup> All knowledge of the material world is particular, and since our epistemic condition prevents “knowledge of natural bodies and their operations [from] reaching little further than bare matter of fact,”<sup>203</sup> neither history nor science is “capable of demonstration.”<sup>204</sup> In these arenas, prudence and probability are the best we can achieve. For Locke, facts, history, and science are collapsed into the probable realm, with only general ideas affording certainty—a position quite distinct from Hobbes, who distinguishes prudential history from predictive science.

As for general knowledge, Locke begins from the rather innocuous position that mathematical proofs demonstrate that “true ideas” are those that provide “certain knowledge.”<sup>205</sup> He first contemplates mathematical and geometric proofs such as Euclid’s, which are generally considered paradigms of demonstrative knowledge. For Descartes and other rationalists, certainty in the empirical world can be attained by reconstructing reality on the basis of

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<sup>201</sup> John Locke, “Knowledge B,” in *Locke: Political Essays*, ed. Mark Goldie, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 281.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

geometrical forms. Locke rejects this argument because it relies on innate knowledge<sup>206</sup> and presumes a connection between ideas and the world.<sup>207</sup> In fact, Locke counters that it is precisely because mathematics is concerned with relations among abstract ideas, or modes that it is capable of certainty—nothing that is of the empirical world may be certain. Only relations between ideas, and then only relations that can be demonstrated. As such, the certainty of general knowledge remains in the world of ideas, having no implications for the particular. Consequently, the certainty it provides is purely rational, not predictive. The certainty of mathematics is guaranteed by the fact that it consists of ideal models into which other things must fit, rather than some external archetype that we can only grasp inadequately.

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<sup>206</sup> The idea that certain innate principles are inscribed in the human mind was commonly argued by natural and moral philosophers in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The theory of innate knowledge has its origins in Plato's *Meno*, which he described as the a priori knowledge is part of our rational nature, so-called knowledge by recollection. Samuel Rickless describes how at the epistemological level, nativists maintain "that all knowledge of the natural and supernatural world available to humans is based on fundamental 'speculative' axioms," that are "theoretical principles that neither require nor are capable of proof." Rickless, "Locke's Polemic against Nativism," 33. Nativists maintain that innate principles are both universal and necessary yet unable to be derived from experience and not constructed out of simpler elements. Such nativist principles include the causal principle that nothing comes from nothing, and the non-contradiction principle that nothing can be and not be at the same time. Descartes was a prominent nativist, arguing that understand of "what a thing is, what truth is, and what thought is, seems to derive simply from [a person's] own nature," as do "the idea of God, mind, body, triangle, and in general all those which represent, true, immutable, and eternal essences." Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 1984, 3:183. The fact that theories claiming knowledge of universals and essences rely strongly on nativism likely explains Locke's strict, and nearly singular aversion to innate ideas—his anti-nativism is shared by Hobbes, to the exclusion of nearly all others. For Locke, nativism is a principle that ostensibly explains the world, but is axiomatically not of the world, and as such it facilitates the dogmatic claims Locke arrayed himself against.

<sup>207</sup> For example, in regards to the concept of infinity, "some mathematicians, perhaps, of advanced speculations, may have other ways to introduce into their minds ideas of infinity: but this hinders not, but that they themselves, as well as all other men, got the first ideas, which they had of infinity, from sensation and reflection, in the method we have here set down." Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 223 (II.xviii.22).

It is here that Locke's philosophy takes a moral turn, as he argues that all mathematical proofs are certain knowledge, but certain knowledge is not exhausted by mathematical proofs:

It has been generally taken for granted, that mathematics alone are capable of demonstrative certainty: But...it may possibly be the want of due method, and application in us...that demonstration has been thought to have so little to do in other parts of knowledge.<sup>208</sup>

He further elaborates that where the mind is “capable of intuitive knowledge...there the mind is capable of demonstration, *which is not limited to* ideas of extension, figure, number, and their modes.”<sup>209</sup> As these are the defining qualities of mathematics, what Locke is contending is that certain knowledge beyond mathematics is possible. This mere possibility becomes realized only a few pages later when he asserts that a “morality amongst our sciences capable of demonstration” is possible.<sup>210</sup> The moral certainty Locke proposes is a function of morality's status as a “mixed mode.”

For Locke, perception begets a mental process of abstraction that produces simple concepts or “modes,” which are intellectual constructs imposed by intellect and not inherent in nature. Locke enumerates space, time, shape, and unity among the first modes of consciousness. Modes describe reality, but they do exist. Combining simple modes yields the more complex “mixed modes.” Bowling is one such mixed mode—it confers meaning onto specific actions that they otherwise would not have. It also *directs* the actions of those engaged in pursuit of the concept. Like simple modes, mixed modes are social constructs that exist by convention, not nature—the actions that comprise bowling have no intrinsic significance. It therefore might seem strange that Locke determines moral ideas to be mixed modes. If mixed modes are free creations, how is morality *not* relative?

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 534 (IV.ii.9).

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 535 (IV.ii.9) Emphasis mine.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 549 (IV.iii.18).



Part of the answer lies in the fact that unlike simple modes that describe reality, mixed modes are prescriptive; they are imposed by intelligence on nature as law. The authority of the human legislator transforms the actions of bowling into a concept. The concept remains relative and arbitrary, however, on account of the specificity of one person's temporary existence in time and space. To prevent arbitrary moral reasoning, such as that which would occur if *each* intellect were imposing moral law, a universal lawgiver is required. The universal authority of the divine legislator transforms moral concepts into eternal measures. This means that unlike popular interpretations of Locke's theory in which his religious language is dismissed as a rhetorical ploy necessary to advance a political agenda, his appeals to God are sincere.<sup>211</sup> His moral claims require a divine legislator. This is quite distinct from Hobbes, who also constructs universal moral principles, but does not *need* God because all maxims are derived from the universally beneficial mandate to live peaceably together. Locke's morality is neither practical nor materially conditioned in this way. For Hobbes, all moral truths are evident in, and derived from experience. For Locke, mechanism precludes moral meaning, as there is no metaphysical structure by which moral meaning can be made intelligible in the natural world. The amorality of his morality mirrors the amorality of his materialism—quite a predicament for creatures both moral and material.

It is precisely by removing morality from a material foundation that Locke is capable of locating the certainty he is looking for. For, even as he restricts human authority over moral law,

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<sup>211</sup> Forde successfully argues that Locke's use of divine legislation is due neither to laziness nor lack of options. Secular and voluntarist moral argumentation existed from which Locke could have worked, yet he chose to develop his own dependence on divine law following Pufendorf's "moral modes." Forde, *Locke, Science and Politics*. Cf. John Dunn, "From Applied Theology to Social Analysis: The Break between John Locke and the Scottish Enlightenment," in *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

he expands access to moral knowledge by determining morality to be, like mathematics, capable of rational demonstration. This is because the divine will legislates what is knowable by reason.<sup>212</sup> From the “idea of a supreme being, infinite in power, goodness, and wisdom, whose workmanship we are, and on whom we depend” and the “idea of our selves, as understanding rational beings,” moral demonstration is possible “wherein I doubt not, but from self-evident propositions, by necessary consequences, as incontestable as those in mathematics.”<sup>213</sup> He then offers two examples of certain moral truths, which of all moral truths one could possibly wish to demonstrate are striking for their overt political resonance. It can be demonstrated, he argues, that “where there is no property, there is no injustice” and that “No government allows absolute liberty.”<sup>214</sup>

These examples are striking, but also easy to miss in a work largely preoccupied with systematically undermining prevailing philosophic assumptions and methodologies, in favor of far more limited framework of human understanding. Locke’s overt and extensive focus on natural philosophy can be somewhat misleading, however, as his limited musings on certain moral truths reveal that his moral understandings are quite political. Moreover, even as he asserts the practical equality of general and particular knowledge, much as he had asserted the independent authority of reason and sense, it is clear that Locke holds general knowledge in far greater esteem. His discussion of the pursuit of matters of fact are peppered with the terms “opinion,” “fact,” “history,” “confused,” “imperfect,” “lazy talking,” “prudence,” and

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<sup>212</sup>Locke is not a rationalist, but a voluntarist, so divine law is not an expression of reason, but of God’s will. It legislates what is knowable by reason, but does not itself *conform* to reason. See Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy*.

<sup>213</sup>Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 549 (IV.iii.18).

<sup>214</sup>Ibid., 549–550 (IV.iii.18).

“predictability.”<sup>215</sup> On the other hand, he describes certain knowledge, in terms of “justice,” “true,” “moral,” “happiness,” “mind,” “mathematics,” and “settled ideas.”<sup>216</sup>

James Tully argues that Locke’s word choice reflects a conscientious attempt to establish the “epistemological superiority [of normative thought] over the natural sciences,” which forces Locke to “place the knowledge of empirical correlations and analogies amongst contextual and historical social actions and states of affairs in an epistemologically inferior, yet practically equal, position.”<sup>217</sup> In so doing, he offers a modern twist on Plato’s superiority of reason. For Plato, what we know by reason alone is superior on the basis of its eternal, unchanging, perfect nature. Locke, rejects the metaphysical primacy of reason, but does view it as superior to empirical knowledge on account of its certainty. What is consistent across both his and Plato’s perspectives are that reason serves as tool for judgment. That is, the function of the Forms was not to predict the outcome, but to dictate an ought whereby the particulars could be judged. Similarly, Locke inscribes natural law with reason as means by which oughts could be deduced and outcomes judged. For both, reason it is prescriptive rather than predictive.

Another possible explanation for Locke’s elevation of general knowledge over particular knowledge comes from Charles Tarlton, who argues that Locke is at least partially compelled by

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<sup>215</sup> Locke, “Knowledge B,” 281–2.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> James Tully, *A Discourse on Property: John Locke and His Adversaries* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 33. Tully argues that Locke reinterprets the Ancient model of “maker’s knowledge” wherein an agent has knowledge of the normative ought that should come rather than a prescription about what will be, which allows the agent to judge the outcome. Tully argues that following the natural law theorist Vico, Locke takes social practice as themselves representative of divine regulative ideas rather than immediate intentionality on behalf of the actors. This makes mixed modes created by any particular society the starting point for knowledge, from which maker’s knowledge can be derived, following Locke’s empirical method. With this move, Locke legitimates moral theory vis-à-vis nature, and elevates it over natural philosophy.

the English political tradition of grounding arguments in historical precedents.<sup>218</sup> For example, Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha*, to which Locke's *Second Treatise* is a response, is a defense of the divine right of kings offered in biblical and historical terms. Folding history into empirical knowledge allows Locke to undermine its authority and make political arguments in purely rationalist terms. In so doing, Locke replaces the moral authority of history (conceived biblically or traditionally) with a moral authority that is universal, atemporal, and rational.

### **Moral Disjuncture**

Questions of how morality can be constituted in a mechanistic system, and of the extent to which practical action can be imbued with meaning is a more significant problem for Locke than it was for Hobbes. For Hobbes, reason cannot be divorced from its material context, and since space is always accompanied by time, and neither have an objective existence, temporality and reason are always linked. Additionally, because the certainty of reason and science are united in Hobbes's thought, the laws of nature that circumscribe human experience, much like laws of physics, have a predictive quality. Consequently, the break from history he seeks is not an absolute one, but a means to create a new historical arc—one made possible by quelling the futural anxieties inherent to human thinking bodies. As bold as Hobbes's temporal subject is, the means by which he proposes quelling anxiety harkens back to a very old idea of time. The political institutions charged with securing peace must be as impervious to change as the natural laws that compel people to seek peace. He thus resurrects the eternal politically—the Leviathan is conceptually eternal, outlasting any particular ruler. Moreover, it is through political participation, in the form of recognizing the political imperative of peace and forging its foundation, that individuals achieve well-being, though not perfection. In this way, Hobbes

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<sup>218</sup> Charles D. Tarlton, "Reason and History in Locke's *Second Treatise*," *Philosophy* 79, no. 02 (April 2004), [http://www.journals.cambridge.org/abstract\\_S0031819104000257](http://www.journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0031819104000257).

straddles the temporalities of the old and new epoch. Politics does create a permanent, timeless social order, but individuals do not forego their personal future for the sake of the transcendental. Rather, political permanence makes a personal future possible, albeit a potentially limited one. As such, Hobbes is the first to articulate a futural subjectivity that will become a standard feature of all modern notions, but the last to maintain a political space shielded from that time.<sup>219</sup>

For Locke, reason certainly plays a role in scientific discovery, but such knowledge possesses neither certain nor ethical content. Cleaving morality from the natural world allows Locke to retain a universal morality that is specifically Christian, and which subsequently reinforces traditional social norms. However, it also creates a significant hurdle, as he must then find a way for atemporal, rational morality to compel, without force, temporal, material creatures. Locke's solution to this problem, explored below, ultimately creates another—he folds moral reasoning into temporal reasoning, which results in an inegalitarian conception of subjectivity.

### **Subjectivity: The time of personhood**

Locke's relationship to Descartes is less contentious than Hobbes's, though both reject Descartes' claim that introspection guides understanding. Locke also rejects Descartes dualism, but on different grounds than Hobbes. As explained in the previous chapter, Hobbes rejects Cartesian dualism because he rejects the possibility of an immaterial substance and instead introduces a kind of substance dualism that conceives of the mind as a distinct kind of thinking, acting matter. Locke's position can seem more ambiguous—he generally adopts dualist rhetoric, though he entertains the possibility of a material agency akin to Hobbes, and occasionally

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<sup>219</sup> This theme of modern temporality is also explored in J. G. A. Pocock, "Civic Humanism and Its Role in Anglo-American Thought," in *Politics, Language, and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

declares either impossible. This has led to some interpretational confusion and disagreement regarding which position, if any, Locke truly holds, or if his philosophy is irreconcilable contradictory. However, as Han-Kyul Kim demonstrates, the problem stems from confusing Locke's nominalism with his realism. Locke is a dualist, but nominally—he understands things to be mentally and materially describable, not mentally and materially *constituted*.<sup>220</sup> In Locke's words, we know only “that we have in us something that thinks, . . . though we must content ourselves in the ignorance of what kind of being it is.”<sup>221</sup> He effectively postulates that the mind-body problem is an effect of our epistemological perspective—the unique structure of our perceptual faculties categorize ideas according to their perceived materiality and mentality. The error we make is assuming that a thesis of consciousness “must be true with regard to mentality and materiality, one way or the other.”<sup>222</sup> His rejection of both Descartes' immaterial subject as well as Hobbes' material subject is more accurately presented as a rejection of the possibility of knowing *whether* either of these accurately reflect reality. The task then becomes how to understand Locke's subject in his own terms.

Much like Descartes, Locke understands the self in terms of consciousness. Yet Locke challenged Descartes' claim that “thought [is] nothing else but thinking substance itself,”<sup>223</sup> because it “[begs] what is in question” rather than “prove it by reason.”<sup>224</sup> The fact of the matter, Locke argues, is that, “thinking is the action, and not the essence of the soul.”<sup>225</sup> He accuses

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<sup>220</sup> Han-Kyul Kim, “Locke and the Mind-Body Problem: An Interpretation of His Agnosticism,” *Philosophy* 83, no. 326 (October 2008): 439–58.

<sup>221</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 543 (IV.iii.6).

<sup>222</sup> Kim, “Locke and the Mind-Body Problem: An Interpretation of His Agnosticism,” 458.

<sup>223</sup> René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, vol. 1 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 2151.63.

<sup>224</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 109 (II.i.10).

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, 228 (II.xix.4).

Descartes of mistaking a perception with essence, which necessarily ties it to a particular conception of substance, which, in this case, is immaterial. Rather than understanding thought as what consciousness *is*, Locke proposes that we consider thought as what consciousness *does*. Approaching thought as the action rather than the essence of consciousness has at least two important implications. Namely, it allows him to postulate a dynamic, reflexive theory of consciousness and a temporal theory of personal identity.

## Identity

Descartes' theory of identity centers on consciousness relating each thought to the thing that thinks—to the “I.” Etienne Balibar argues that this theory is problematic, because it is not capable of “establishing a program of reflexive inquiry within this ‘consciousness’ in order to discover the faculties of the soul or to analyze its logical operations.”<sup>226</sup> That is, Descartes' consciousness is relentlessly and personally affirmative—I think, I am; I think, I am. It consists of a continual reiteration of the first moment of certainty, which allows no means of investigation into consciousness itself. Locke, on the other hand, does offer an avenue for investigating consciousness itself. He stipulates that all ideas have their origin in either sensation or reflection.<sup>227</sup> Where reflection refers not to the ideas of sensation, but on the mind itself. It is the “notice which the mind takes of its own operations, and the manner of them.”<sup>228</sup> Such reflexivity represents the identity of consciousness with itself, and forms the basis for Locke's identification

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<sup>226</sup> Balibar further argues that it is Locke and not Descartes who rightly holds the title of inventing consciousness in the modern sense, and that Descartes' philosophy is generally misunderstood to locate consciousness as the essence of subjectivity, when Descartes concern is in fact not subjectivity but certainty. Etienne Balibar, *Identity and Difference: John Locke and the Invention of Consciousness*, ed. Stella Sandford (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 2013), 28.

<sup>227</sup> Locke argues that “external objects furnish he mind with the ideas of sensible qualities” and “the mind furnishes the understanding with ideas of its own operations.” Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 106 (II.i.5).

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, 105 (II.i.4).

of consciousness with “the self,” insofar as consciousness *is* identity with itself *as* consciousness of thinking.<sup>229</sup>

Though Locke understands sensation and reflection to give ideas to the mind immediately, his understanding of consciousness always exists in the present moment, it “has no essential relation to memory and thus does not...constitute any psychological unity over time.”<sup>230</sup> An immediate and introspective consciousness lacks distance, perspective, history, or futurity, which raises serious questions for how such an atemporally conceived self could rightfully exercise agency. Against the atemporal sameness that typifies a Cartesian self, Locke posits a temporal self, understood in terms of distinction.

Locke’s theory of identity first appears in his theory of ideas, in which he describes the faculties of minds that produce new ideas. He identifies discerning as the “faculty of distinguishing one thing from another,” in which two ideas are perceived to be the same or different.<sup>231</sup> The faculty of “comparing” is the means by which we acquire our ideas of relations.<sup>232</sup> By comparing, for example, the idea of plate and the idea of a table, a new idea is generated that represents their relation—the plate *is on* the table. Through comparison, a specific relationship between particulars or a non-representational relationship between abstractions can be deduced. Each of these faculties produce ideas that are either atemporal because they lack a material dimension or are functionally atemporal because they relate only to a present moment,

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<sup>229</sup> Though Locke has no shortage of critics decrying his argument as circular, because he presupposes the identity of self that he sets out to explain, Balibar effectively argues that Locke in fact *discovers* the circle of consciousness and self. Etienne Balibar, *Identity and Difference: John Locke and the Invention of Consciousness*, ed. Stella Sandford (New York: Verso Books, 2013), 86–7.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>231</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 155 (II.xi.1).

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, 157 (II.xi.5).



without any connection to a past or future. However, Locke then introduces a special faculty of comparison that produces a special kind of idea. He writes,

Another occasion, the mind often takes of comparing, is the very being of things, when considering any thing as existing at any determined time and place, we compare it with it self existing at another time, and thereon form the ideas of identity and diversity.<sup>233</sup>

In order to acquire the idea of identity, we must compare it not to itself, but to a *distinct* instance of the same thing *at another time*. This means that not only is Locke's concept of identity relational and temporal, but it is therefore also a concept available only to kinds of consciousness that are themselves relationally and temporally constituted. That is, it is a temporal faculty of consciousness that makes the recognition of the temporal concept of identity possible.

Locke describes identity as resulting from considering a “former existence” and comparing it to “the present.”<sup>234</sup> Practically speaking, whenever we encounter an object, we implicitly ask if it is the same as an object that existed at an earlier point in time, and that was “certain, at that instant, [to be] the same with itself as no other.”<sup>235</sup> To even ask the question of sameness requires a determinate answer—the earlier instance must be singular. For example, in order to establish that *this* cake that has been knocked on the floor is *that* cake that was brought to the party, there must have only been one cake of a similar type brought to the party. If two visually identical cakes were brought and now one cake is on the floor, its identity is indeterminate. The question becomes, “which cake?” rather than “same cake?” Conversely, if one were to encounter a table with two cakes where there had been one, the identity of both vis-à-vis the former would be indeterminate. Thus Locke concludes that identity entails the principle that “one thing cannot have two beginnings,” nor conversely can “two things have one

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 328 (II.xxvii.1).

<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

beginning” because it is “impossible for two things of the same kind, to be or exist in the same instant, in the very same place.”<sup>236</sup> Locke’s inclusion of the qualifier “kind” is important, as it simultaneously leaves open the possibility of the mind and body, or God and the soul, to be present in an identical time and space, while rendering questions of how or why besides the point.

This is an important point of distinction in Locke’s theory of identity. Where other theories were stymied by the nature of human dualism, the location of the soul, and the essence of man, Locke is able to sidestep these problems by retaining a nominal understanding of classification, and the position that particular conditions of existence are varied.<sup>237</sup> That is, the criteria for determining identity vary, such that those that determine the identity of matter are different from, say, those necessary to determine the identity of an organism. Since we are without access to the essences of things, we are unable to consider any property to be essential to any category of idea. As such, when we are considering whether this cake is the same, we are not, Locke would say, appealing to essential properties of cake generally, but rather comparing previous particular qualities of existence to the present. Gideon Yaffe elaborates that for Locke, “to know what it is that makes a thing the particular individual it is at a time is to know what makes it capable of excluding others of its kind from its location; and to know that is to know

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

<sup>237</sup> The “Ship of Theseus” is a prominent example that preoccupied thinkers both ancient and modern. Plutarch was the first to apply a specific name to the ship, and posed the question: if had each of its planks replaced one by one would still be the same ship? The underlying question explicitly engages the relationship between matter in identity, and was explored prior to Plutarch by Heraclitus, Plato, and Socrates, and after by Hobbes and Locke, whose interest in the question is limited to human identity and how “sameness” can be established despite the flux (in terms of matter, ideas, and consciousness) that characterize human life. For both, the answer lies in the temporal nature of consciousness.

what makes it the same individual later.”<sup>238</sup> Identity is established by a sameness over time of particular qualities.

Locke enumerates the conditions of existence required to establish the identity of various ideas, from a single atom to masses of matter to organisms. This progression reveals an important difference from others. He argues that identity can be constituted in matter only insofar as that matter is not identifiable as an idea that encompasses qualities beyond those of matter. That is, atoms joined together may be considered “the same mass” so long as they consist of “the same atoms,” and have no qualities beyond this.<sup>239</sup> How the atoms are “jumbled” together may change, but “if one of these atoms be taken away, or a new one added, it is no longer the same mass.”<sup>240</sup> In the case of organisms, however, though they may be comprised of matter, the identity of “a living body” is not “the same thing” as “a mass of matter.”<sup>241</sup> Presuming, therefore, that an organism will not possess a sameness of matter, Locke considers an oak tree and asks how “an oak differs from a mass of matter,” in order to establish what has to remain the same in order for that tree to remain the same.<sup>242</sup> Locke surveys what an oak tree at a particular time is—a complex system comprised of various parts, that act in concert to “distribute nourishment, so as to continue...vegetable life;” and it remains the same so long as it “[partakes] in the same life.”<sup>243</sup> He thus concludes that the identity of an organism is not established by its atoms but by its organization. The difference between how the identity of matter and the identity of an organism is established does not, for Locke, stem from any real difference between the two, but

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<sup>238</sup> Gideon Yaffe, “Locke on Ideas of Identity and Diversity,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke’s “Essay Concerning Human Understanding,”* ed. Lex Newman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 197.

<sup>239</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 330 (II.xxvii.3).

<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 330 (II.xxvii.4).

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 331 (II.xxvii.4).

rather stems from a difference in our ideas. According to Yaffe, “since the ideas of the two kinds of things differ, so do the identity conditions for particulars falling under the respective ideas.”<sup>244</sup> In other words, the ideas by which we seek to determine identity reflect categories that have been arbitrarily drawn according to certain qualities, and those qualities determine identity particular to that idea. The same thing may or may not be the same depending on the parameters of identity applied to it. As such, the tree in question has identity as an organism, but not as matter.

Insofar as a human is a biological organism like that of an oak tree, it too possesses an identity understood in terms of physiological organization—“in nothing but a participation in the same continued life.”<sup>245</sup> Of course, biological identity does not, for Locke, exhaust the possible terms of identity for understanding a human being. He thus introduces the concept of personal identity. Like substance identity or organism identity, he establishes personal identity by considering the conditions for existence at two different times, and determining which are particular to personal sameness. Locke determines these qualities to be:

a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as it self, the same thinking thing in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness, which is inseparable from thinking, and as it seems to me essential to it.<sup>246</sup>

One thing made immediately apparent by this definition is that unlike the concepts of identity ascribed to things, personhood entails *self* identity. Locke argues that because identity is a temporal concept, it requires a consciousness of a higher order to perceive any kind of identity. To recognize personal identity requires a still more sophisticated kind of consciousness. In order to discern personal identity, a consciousness must recognize itself as a self, insofar as it “distinguishes [itself] from all other thinking things” and establishes a “sameness of rational

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<sup>244</sup> Yaffe, “Locke on Ideas of Identity and Diversity,” 205.

<sup>245</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 331 (II.xxvii.6).

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, 335 (II.xxvii.9).

being.”<sup>247</sup> The sameness Locke describes differs from Cartesian sameness, because it consists not of a continual reiteration of affirmation. Rather it is a “self-identity that is...reiterated through difference.”<sup>248</sup> It is by dint of the variation between sensations and reflections, activity and passivity, past and present, that the self is able to recognize and articulate itself.

After stipulating the nature of personal identity, Locke engages in a number of thought experiments, from which a few key elements are revealed. First, Locke asserts the question of “what makes the same person, and whether it be the same identical substance...matters not at all.”<sup>249</sup> Considering his previous differentiation between the identity of matter and of organisms, this declaration may seem unremarkable—a person is the same regardless of any physical changes to mass and matter. However, by “identical substance” Locke refers not only to material substance, but immaterial as well. By this, Locke means to establish that the immaterial substance of the soul factors not in the establishment of personal identity. He concludes that because souls are completely detached from the material world, it is possible to conceive of one soul inhabiting two bodies over time, or one body being inhabited by two souls over time. Either could be true or false, and neither would violate the principle of unity, insofar as two substances (souls) could conceivably occupy the same place at different times (body), or one substance could occupy two places at different times. Yet because we are precluded from knowing whether or how the souls occupy bodies, considerations of their immaterial substance cannot inform our judgments regarding personhood.

Having thus established that identity pertains only to objects that exist in both space and time, yet having rejected that the notion that it is constituted by a unity of substance (whether

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<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> Balibar, *Identity and Difference*, 55.

<sup>249</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 336 (II.xxvii.10).

material or immaterial), Locke concludes that personal identity is instead constituted by unity in time:

'tis plain [that] consciousness, as far as ever it can be extended, should it be to ages past, unites existences, and actions, very remote in time, into the same person, as well as it does the existence and actions of the immediately preceding moment: so that whatever as the consciousness of present and past actions, is the same person to whom they belong.<sup>250</sup>

Ayers notes that because temporal unity is a perception at the phenomenal level, it is a nominal idea from which no conclusions regarding substances can be drawn.<sup>251</sup> Yet it is precisely because Locke's unity does not pertain to essence that it can glide over gaps in temporality and changes in physicality that mire theories substantialist theories of consciousness. For these theories, mundane features of human life such as sleeping and aging, represent significant challenges to theories of consciousness and identity, to mention nothing of more esoteric questions like the immortality of the soul. The metaphysical essence of thinking substances is irrelevant to Locke's theory of personal identity, which is constituted only by a person's perceived unity in time.

Though the time of Locke's personhood is subjectively constituted, it indirectly relates to objective time. The problem, he argues, is that unlike space, where standard measurements such as "inches, feet, yards, etc." can be "marked out in permanent parcels of matter," "no two different parts" of time "can be put together to measure one another."<sup>252</sup> There is no "convenient measure of time" but rather arbitrary divisions of "apparently equal portions."<sup>253</sup> The sun and moon generally help to divide time, but other cultures "count their years by the coming of certain birds."<sup>254</sup> Because "two successive lengths of [time], however measured, can never be demonstrated to be equal," it is important to "carefully distinguish betwixt [time] itself, and the

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 340 (II.xxvii.16).

<sup>251</sup> Ayers, *Locke*, 1993, 2:205.

<sup>252</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 187 (II.xiv.18).

<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid., 188 (II.xiv.20).

measurements used to judge its length.”<sup>255</sup> The same epistemological position that prevents access to the essence of objects also prevents access to time. This means that Locke accepts the ontological existence of time, and does, in fact, assert that thought it cannot be directly accessed, time itself is “one constant, equal, uniform course.”

It is the inaccessibility of real time to the human mind that allows Locke to postulate a temporal identity that is not contiguous. For, objective time necessarily entails contiguity, a feature the time of consciousness lacks. Its temporal unity entails the subjective act of a consciousness that “unites existences, and actions, very remote in time into the same person.”<sup>256</sup> Two successive existing thinking substances are part of the same person if and only if the second is aware of the first. In light of Locke’s position regarding the changing bodies and subjective time of persons,<sup>257</sup> Christopher Hughes Conn concludes that Locke, “does not think persons need to exhibit spatio-temporal continuity, the way atoms and organisms (including men) do.”<sup>258</sup> When I ask if this cake on the floor is the same cake as the one I had placed on the table earlier, I am seeking to determine an identity that necessarily entails dimensions both spatial and temporal. However, because they are external to, and consequently determinate of, the thing in question, they require spatio-temporal continuity. The time and space of a person entails no such continuum and, in fact, Locke understands identity to be extended spatially and temporally in two distinct ways. Through memory, a person is extended backwards in time, and by sense

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<sup>255</sup> Ibid., 190 (xx.xiv.21).

<sup>256</sup> Ibid., 340 (II.xxvii.16).

<sup>257</sup> “In all which account of self, the same numerical substance is not considered, as making the same self...the same person [is] preserved under the change of various substances.” Ibid., 346 (II.xxvii.25).

<sup>258</sup> Christopher Hughes Conn, *Locke on Essence and Identity* (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2003), 113.

perception a person is extended spatially in the material present. In this way, a self unites the history of a particular body with the space of the material present.

All of which lead to Locke's most thorough summation:

Self is that conscious thinking thing, (whatever substance, made up of whether spiritual, or material, simple, or compounded, it matters not) which is sensible, or conscious of pleasure and pain, capable of happiness or misery, and so is concerned for it self as far as that consciousness extends...that with which the consciousness of this present thinking thing can join it self, makes the same person, and is one self with it, and with nothing else; and so attributes to it self, and owns all the actions of that thing, as its own, as far as that consciousness reaches, and no farther.<sup>259</sup>

Here it is most apparent that while identity is “an essentially temporal concept,”<sup>260</sup> what it actually unites across time, and is distinctive of personhood, is the capacity to recognize which parts of the present world, as well as the world of the future and past, are parts of oneself. Such consciousness makes possible the affirmation of self, and the ownership of actions. This faculty is guided not only by an awareness of one's body and one's desire, but also by an emotional or psychological relationship to oneself. We are “concerned” for the self, particularly regarding “the actions and states of future and past persons whom we take to be identical to ourselves.”<sup>261</sup> At the most basic level, Locke links concern to the capacity to feel pleasure and pain, though he immediately links such sensory states to the psychological ones of happiness and misery. Beyond merely uniting sensory experiences and memory, consciousness exhibits an emotional attachment to itself, with a concern that signifies a care that goes beyond mere survival. Locke argues that “a concern for happiness [is] the unavoidable concomitant of consciousness, [as] that which is conscious of pleasure and pain, [desires] that the self, that is conscious, should be

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<sup>259</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 341 (II.xxvii.17).

<sup>260</sup> Gary Wedeking, “Locke on Personal Identity and the Trinity Controversy of the 1690s,” *Dialogue* 29 (1990): 181.

<sup>261</sup> Yaffe, “Locke on Ideas of Identity and Diversity,” 224.



happy.”<sup>262</sup> Moreover, as a person extends herself into the past, she does not only identify her past actions but “becomes concerned and accountable” for them.<sup>263</sup> In other words, a self is not merely *constituted* by actions but *responsible* for them. Unlike mere existence, the responsibility Locke outlines entails ethical or moral commitments. Such commitments are capable of judgment, and Locke subsequently outlines just such a method of judging a person’s actions in terms of duty to oneself and others.

### **Hobbes and Locke on Animal and Human Identity**

How Locke understands the relationship between identity, action, and morality as well as its political implications will be unpacked momentarily. First, it is helpful to pause and consider a few similarities between his and Hobbes’s theory of consciousness, as well as a few important points of distinction. What is perhaps the most striking similarity is that both offer theories of consciousness that are explicit rejections of the Cartesian subject. Both reject an immaterial concept of self, and conceive of a self whose identity stems from variation over time rather than sameness. Both postulate a kind of temporal consciousness that enables a subject to understand the present in relation to the past. And both of their theories have arguably been stymied by a kind of reflexive Cartesian bias—Hobbes’s substance dualism is overlooked and his materialism is often interpreted through a Cartesian lens that results in a determined subject without agency, and the nominal dualism of Locke’s substance is similarly interpreted as Cartesian dualism, which ascribes to him an immaterial theory of agency. In both cases, their theories of agency are rendered irreconcilably contradictory, owing to a failure to interrogate the presumption that freedom requires an immaterial agent.

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<sup>262</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 346 (II.xxvii.26).

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, 341 (II.xxvii.17).

Despite the significant overlap in their intellectual projects and subsequent philosophy, a few key points of difference emerge from apparent similarities. One such difference is evident in their considerations of animals. Initially, it seems that Locke and Hobbes draw a similar conclusion regarding the possibility of animal subjectivity. Both ascribe cognitive functions to animals, and find them capable of some forms of thoughts, deliberation, and memory. However, they ultimately conclude that these faculties are insufficient to produce a self, because animals are incapable of recognizing concepts like causality. As Locke's explains, "[t]he other power of comparing, which may be observed in men, belonging to general ideas, and useful only to abstract reasonings, we may probably conjecture beasts have not."<sup>264</sup> Because animals lack reason, they lack the ability to create general ideas or to compare them; the world of animals is limited to particulars. A limited faculty of comparing likewise prevents the kind of comparison necessary to recognize identity generally, let alone personally. Moreover, Locke asserts that "[p]erson...is a forensick term appropriating actions and their merit; and so belongs only to intelligent agents capable of a law, and happiness and misery."<sup>265</sup> Here, he distinguishes the temporality of the animal mind from the temporality of the self. For though both may entail memory, animals are incapable of consciously living under law; because they cannot appropriate their memories or recognize them as their own. To appropriate an action requires more than simply remembering an action, it requires recognizing that *you* performed it. Such recognition constitutes the appropriation of an action, and makes accountability possible. In the animal mind, however, memory does not animate the present in a way that makes the recognition of self possible. This is why for Locke, as for Hobbes, animal life occurs entirely in the present, and why animals are largely unaware of time or its passage at all.

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<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 158 (II.xi.5).

<sup>265</sup> Ibid., 346 (II.xvii.26).

It is at this point that, Locke departs from Hobbes, as he asserts human identity to entail mere animal identity, and to be completely independent from personal identity, much the same as substantial identity is independent from physiological identity. For Locke, “the idea of man” is exhausted by a concept of identity that is “nothing else but an animal of such a certain form.”<sup>266</sup> This means that Locke’s theory of personal identity functions independently of the physiological identity of humans; to have personal identity one must not be human, but to be a *person*. A human can exist where a person does not, and vice versa. Human and personal identity are not mutually exclusive, but neither are they in any way co-dependent. Locke demonstrates this point by explicitly decoupling personhood from man and theorizing the possibility of a parrot as person:

... whoever should see a creature of his own shape and make, though it had no more reason all its life, than a cat or a parrot, would call him still a man; or whoever should hear a cat or a parrot discourse, reason, and philosophize, would call or think it nothing but a cat or parrot; and say, the one was a dull irrational man, and the other a very intelligent rational parrot.<sup>267</sup>

According to Locke, a human whose mental life is akin to a parrot is a *mere* human, not a person; likewise, he entertains the possibility of a parrot possessing the sort of intelligence that would qualify it as person. The implications of Locke’s position cannot be understated. Their gravity lies not in the theoretical possibilities of elevating animals to personhood, but in the very real consequences of categorically denying personhood to some humans, especially considering that political rights and protections are limited to persons. The crux of the distinction between animal and personal identity lies in the ability to appropriate past actions. But this is only one half of the equation. To fully grapple with the consequences of Locke’s concept of personal

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<sup>266</sup> Ibid., 333–5 (II.xxvii.8).

<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 333 (II.xxvii.8).

identity, his theory of agency—the performance of present actions and appropriation of future consequences, must also be examined.

### **Power: The time of agency**

In his chapter on identity, Locke identifies the self as an entity whose spatial and temporal extension is explicitly tied to appropriated past actions. His theory of agency—the relationship between the self, will, and action, is found in his chapter on power. Locke’s understanding of power is manifold, but Locke argues that we come to the idea of power itself by dint of sensation and reflection, whereby we observe that the qualities we perceive in objects change with some regularity, “and so come by that idea which we call power.”<sup>268</sup> Once we have the idea of power, we are consequently capable of recognizing at least three kinds of powers: those qualities of material substances, mental operations or faculties, and the power of willing and acting freely. Locke umbrellas each of these kinds of powers under a single definition, as a thing “able to make, or able to receive any change.”<sup>269</sup> This definition actually comprises two distinct kinds of power: the former, “able to make...any change,” are active powers, and the later, “able to receive any change,” are passive powers. Locke further clarifies that active powers entail not merely the power to act, but to do so “by its own power.”<sup>270</sup> So while all power can be understood in terms of causality, as Vere Chappell explains, “causing is built into the idea of active power, but causation is only implied in passive power.”<sup>271</sup> In other words, though all power entails causation, not all powers are *causal*.

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<sup>268</sup> Ibid., 234 (II.xxi.2).

<sup>269</sup> Ibid., 233 (II.xxi.1).

<sup>270</sup> Ibid., 285 (II.xxi.72).

<sup>271</sup> Vere Chappell, “Power in Locke’s Essay,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke’s “Essay Concerning Human Understanding,”* ed. Lex Newman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 132.

Locke argues that by the “continual flux” of experience, we are “abundantly furnished” with ideas of power.<sup>272</sup> These ideas are, however, nearly entirely of passive power, because the actions of natural bodies are not self-initiated. When, for example, we witness a pool ball strikes another ball, the striking ball “receives the impression, whereby it is put into action, purely from without...[It] acts merely by the capacity it has to receive such an impression from some external agent.”<sup>273</sup> As such it does not “produce” motion, but rather “transfers” or “communicates” the motion it has “received” from something else.<sup>274</sup> On Locke’s telling, this scenario effectively describes the entire world of sensible things, which is a world of changes received from without. The motion that typifies this world reflects “a mere passive capacity in”<sup>275</sup> the bodies that populate it, and consequently none of the objects that populate the world may rightly be called agents.

The only substances that may be called agents are those that can initiate change “by [their] own power.”<sup>276</sup> Locke stipulates that there are only two such substances in the world: God and “finite spirits,” or persons. Our own power to initiate change is the power we have to move our own bodies or direct our own thoughts, “barely by a thought of the mind.”<sup>277</sup> Locke identifies this power to direct our own minds and bodies as the will. Yet even as he understands the will as an expression of agency, he assumes a position similar to Hobbes regarding the possibility of freedom for the will. Locke deems the “question itself all together improper,” as asking “whether a man’s will be free” is like asking if “his virtue square,”<sup>278</sup> for liberty, and will are powers that

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<sup>272</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 234–5 (II.xxi.4).

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, 285 (II.xxi.72).

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*, 235 (II.xxi.4).

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, 285 (II.xxi.72).

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, 285 (II.xxi.72).

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, 235 (II.xxi.4).

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*, 240 (II.xxi.14).

“belongs only to agents,”<sup>279</sup> not to one another. To ask whether the will is free is tantamount to asking the “absurd” question, “whether one power has another power.”<sup>280</sup> In other words, to ascribe liberty to the will is to ascribe it an agency that would necessitate a real existence independent of the person whose power it is. This common error stems, on Locke’s view, from a tendency to describe mental powers, such as “the understanding” or “the will” as “clear and distinct” “real beings,” which as consequently led to “a confused notion of so many distinct agents in us.”<sup>281</sup> Freedom and the will are, he argues, not agents themselves, but the powers of agents. It is therefore not a contradiction to stipulate that a person may be free though his will is determined. And this is precisely Locke’s argument, the will, which constitutes the active power of selves, is nevertheless determined by something without ourselves—a position that requires some unpacking.

### **Determining the will**

Despite his assertion that the will is determined, Locke initially describes the will in almost Cartesian terms. He poses the question, “what determines the will?” and provides an uncharacteristically brief answer, “the mind.”<sup>282</sup> This certainly resonates with a conception of immediate, immaterial agency that simply directs the mind rather than a retrospective, material agency Hobbes describes. Yet Locke quickly acknowledges that he has not addressed the real question, which is “what moves the mind” and therefore “[determines] its general power of directing.”<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>279</sup> Ibid.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid., 241 (II.xxi.16).

<sup>281</sup> Ibid., 237 (II.xxi.6).

<sup>282</sup> Ibid., 249 (II.xxi.29).

<sup>283</sup> Ibid.

The answer to this question lies in the distinction Locke makes between willing, and acts of willing or volitions, which he describes as the acts “of the mind directing its thought to the production of any action.”<sup>284</sup> For Locke, every volition is a volition to act in some way, which means that every act of willing has an object that is also an action. For example, when I will myself to stand up, the act of standing up is the object of my volition. My volition is not itself the act of standing up, but rather precedes it. At the time when volition occurs, its object does not exist, it is present to the mind only as a projection into the future. I will myself to bring into existence the previously non-existent act of my standing up, and in so doing, I act as causal agent. The question then becomes, what determines the object of a volition, and Locke’s answer is that it is simply preference—“it is nothing but the being pleased more with the one, than the other.”<sup>285</sup> We do not choose to prefer one thing over another, we simply do; I do not choose to prefer standing up to sitting down, I simply do. Locke thus determines that “preference is determined by something without the self.”<sup>286</sup> In broad terms, Locke’s will operates much like Hobbes’s—both agree that agents cannot help but to will, and that willing entails acting for a future object, and bringing a desired future into existence. Despite these general overlaps, the role of preference in Locke’s argument creates a challenge that Hobbes avoids. For Hobbes, variations in preferences are attributable to the uniqueness of each person’s spatial-temporal existence. They are absolutely not determined without, but by and through oneself.

Locke’s material skepticism prevents him from ascribing a causal theory of preference such as Hobbes’s. Yet he does understand the determination of the will in causal terms—to determine the will of an agent is to cause the will be exercised and to cause the agent to perform

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<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, 248 (II.xxi.28).

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*, 248 (II.xxi.28–9).

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, 249 (II.xxi.29).

a volition with a specific object or intent.<sup>287</sup> However, if the will were entirely determined by preference, which is itself entirely random, Locke's theory of agency would ultimately be quite hollow—a self who merely executes preferences that are not self-legislated is quite an unsatisfying conclusion. The task before him then is to develop a theory of agency in which the will is determined though the agent responsible.

Locke reworks his theory of agency over many years before developing a means by which an agent may affect the determination of the will that fully coheres with his broader philosophy. In the first edition of the *Essay*, he argues that the “good alone determines the will.”<sup>288</sup> But by “the good” he refers not to an abstract or ideal notion, but to “what we *call* good,” which is that which “pleases us best,” as opposed to that which causes pain, which is what we call evil.<sup>289</sup> As such, the will is determined by a preference for pleasure. However, though we all desire happiness, which he defines as “the utmost pleasure we are capable of,”<sup>290</sup> the good that determines preference may or may not yield happiness. This is because it is actually the “*appearance* of good” that determines preference.<sup>291</sup> The qualifier “appearance” allows Locke to account for the ways in which temporal proximity shapes perception and preference. In “the present,” he explains, the “good or evil is really so much as it appears,”<sup>292</sup> and consequently, in regards to “present pain or pleasure... a man never chooses amiss: he knows what best pleases him, and that he actually prefers.”<sup>293</sup> This is why Locke argues that men may

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<sup>287</sup> Though Locke does not directly reference Aquinas, Chappell notes that Locke's distinction maps well onto Aquinas's insofar as Locke understands what determines the will to “serve both as an efficient cause... and as a formal cause.” Chappell, “Power in Locke's *Essay*,” 150.

<sup>288</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 251 (I II.xxi.29).

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*, 248 (I II.xxi.29). Emphasis mine.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*, 256 (I II.xxi.33) Emphasis mine.

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*, 268 (I II.xxi.37).

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*, 267–8 (I II.xxi.37).



choose different things, and yet “all choose right,”<sup>294</sup> and if actions had no consequences, we would “always infallibly prefer the best.”<sup>295</sup> In the immediacy of a suspended present, absent consequences and therefore judgment, pure instinctive preference is revealed and cannot err. But of course, actions do have consequences, and any apparent good thus “carries with it the expectation of addition to our happiness.”<sup>296</sup> In the context of expectation, we judge the present in terms of the future, and here, Locke argues, we may “err in choice.”<sup>297</sup> With this initial explanation of the will, Locke validates the variability of preference, while denying a relativity of judgment regarding outcomes of preference. He accomplishes this by essentially arguing that what *really* determines the will is not an unbidden preference, but a temporal judgment of expectation regarding apparent goods and anticipated pleasures. Though we have no control over what brings us pleasure, which renders our preferences imposed to a certain degree, we have many preferences and agency intercedes in the determination of the will by making a calculation to determine the full potential of pleasure for any particular preference.

In the “Epistle to the Reader,” Locke penned as a preface to subsequent editions, he concedes that he “found reason somewhat to alter the thoughts I formerly had concerning that, which gives the last determination to the will in all voluntary actions.”<sup>298</sup> He finds judgment to be an inadequate determinate of the will for two primary reasons. The first was pointed out to him in a correspondence with Molyneux and well-summarized by Chappell as essentially a problem of Locke’s “overintellectualizing motivation, of making an agent’s volitions depend too heavily on his judgments regarding the truth of certain propositions, even though these

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<sup>294</sup> Ibid., 265 (I II.xxi.36).

<sup>295</sup> Ibid., 268 (I II.xxi.37).

<sup>296</sup> Ibid., 271 (I II.xxi.38).

<sup>297</sup> Ibid., 269 (I II.xxi.37).

<sup>298</sup> Ibid., 11.

propositions concern the agent's own pleasure and pain."<sup>299</sup> Molyneux did not question Locke's assertion *that* there is an objectively good course of action for each individual, but rather questioned whether attributing evil to ignorance or error lets wrongdoers off the hook a little too easily—how can we reasonably be held responsible for ignorance?

Beyond this, a perhaps even more compelling criticism is that a will determined by judgment is inconsistent with Locke's broader philosophy. One of Locke's arguments against theologians and idealists is that ideas do not compel action. Knowing the good does not in any way entail *doing* the good, as there is no internal mechanism for moral enforcement. This criticism is just as applicable to Locke's first theory of action. Arguing that judgment determines the will entails that a person always chooses what she believes to be the good, and that wrong choices are the results of mistakes in judgment. Of course, one need not look very far to see that people very often make poor decisions despite correctly judging better ones. Locke only has to look as far as the tavern, where he contemplates the "drunkard" who "has in his view the loss of health and plenty."<sup>300</sup> That is, the will to drink in excess is not the result of a failure of judgment vis-à-vis the good, "for he sees it and acknowledges it, and, in the intervals of his drinking hours, will take resolutions to pursue the greater good."<sup>301</sup> The problem, is that resolutions, like judgments, do not oblige us. In subsequent editions therefore, Locke concedes that "upon stricter enquiry, I am forced to conclude that good, . . . though apprehended and acknowledged to be so, does not determine the will."<sup>302</sup>

After reconsideration, Locke concludes, that it is not judgments regarding the future that determines action, but the experience of the present, and more specifically, *uneasiness*.

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<sup>299</sup> Chappell, "Power in Locke's Essay," 151.

<sup>300</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 253 (II.xxi.35).

<sup>301</sup> Ibid.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

The motive for continuing in the same state or action, is only the present satisfaction in it; the motive of change is always some uneasiness: nothing setting us upon the change of state, or upon any new action, but some uneasiness.<sup>303</sup>

The will, as Locke now describes it, is determined by an affective rather than a cognitive state. The uneasiness that determines the will is the feeling of discomfort that accompanies desire for some absent pleasure or pain. He takes the man in the tavern to *correctly* judge the consequences of his actions and to *knowingly* choose wrong, which is possible because it is not cognitive judgment but affective uneasiness that determines preference. What Locke essentially argues is that the man drinks because his desire for a drink now makes him more uncomfortable than his desire for a future in which he is not compelled to drink. This means he is not ignorant; he is weak. And, not inconsequentially, so is the man who knows “that plenty has its advantages over poverty” yet he remains in “nasty penury” so long as he “finds no uneasiness” in it.<sup>304</sup> Not to put too fine a point on it, if the idea of the good or contemplation of the good were sufficient for determining the will, everyone would “constantly and steadily” direct their course “towards heaven.”<sup>305</sup>

Locke maintains that though “we constantly desire happiness,”<sup>306</sup> it is the experience of present uneasiness rather than judgment of the future that prevents its realization. He explains that “whilst we are under any uneasiness, we cannot apprehend ourselves happy.”<sup>307</sup> Consequently, the “removing of pain” and uneasiness is “the first and necessary [but insufficient] step towards happiness.”<sup>308</sup> However, though uneasiness determines all actions, and uneasiness is

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<sup>303</sup> Ibid., 249 (II.xxi.29).

<sup>304</sup> Ibid., 253 (II.xxi.35).

<sup>305</sup> Ibid., 255 (II.xxi.38).

<sup>306</sup> Ibid., 257 (II.xxi.39).

<sup>307</sup> Ibid., 254 (II.xxi.36).

<sup>308</sup> Ibid.

“inconsistent with happiness,”<sup>309</sup> yet not all actions yield happiness. One reason for this is the rather tortuous experience of the present in which we are “pressed with” a “constant succession of uneasinesses” so “that a very little part of our life is so vacant from these uneasinesses.”<sup>310</sup> Moreover, our manifold passions, such as “aversion, fear, anger, envy, shame, etc.”<sup>311</sup> all entail a desire for some object, and hence, produce uneasiness. Not only does this bombardment prevent us our will from moving beyond the fulfillment of the desires caused by the “ordinary necessities of our lives” such as hunger, thirst, or tiredness,<sup>312</sup> but it also prevents happiness. Since,

the first step in our endeavours after happiness being to get wholly out of the confines of misery... the will can be at leisure for nothing else, till every uneasiness we feel be perfectly removed: which in the multitude of wants, and desires, we are beset with in this imperfect state, we are not like to be ever freed from in this world.<sup>313</sup>

Where Hobbes invoked Prometheus to illuminate the modern paradox of empowerment and anxiety, Locke’s description of human experience conjures a Sisyphean existence—under the constant pressure of uneasinesses, we face an uphill struggle to free ourselves. But any reprieve, should we find it, is fleeting. We, like Sisyphus, find ourselves in an “imperfect state,” bound to a hillside existence. Finding ourselves “beset with sundry uneasiness,”<sup>314</sup> all vying to determine the will, Locke finds that what finally spurs action is the “most important and urgent uneasiness.”<sup>315</sup> The prevailing uneasiness is simply that which makes us *most* uncomfortable, which is often not the action that is most conducive to happiness. This reflects a temporal problem, as endeavors for happiness are best served by long-term considerations. And although an “absent good” can be “made present” through contemplation, “the object of bare unactive

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<sup>309</sup> Ibid., 254 (I.xxi.36).

<sup>310</sup> Ibid., 261–2 (II.xxi.45).

<sup>311</sup> Ibid., 257 (II.xxi.39).

<sup>312</sup> Ibid., 261 (II.xxi.45).

<sup>313</sup> Ibid., 263 (II.xxi.263).

<sup>314</sup> Ibid., 257 (II.xxi.39).

<sup>315</sup> Ibid., 258 (II.xxi.40).

speculation...operates not on the will, nor sets us on work” *unless* “it raises our desire,” to the point that it becomes the “prevailing uneasiness.”<sup>316</sup> Consequently, the will tends to be dominated by the present, for the proximity of its pleasures and pains make them more acutely felt than greater futural pleasures or pains.<sup>317</sup>

So far, Locke’s revised theory of agency, seems to possess little agency at all. Though we may see greater goods on the horizon, the relentless pressures of the present prevent acting for them. The situation he describes in fact looks strikingly similar to the passive, reactive actions that typify other forms of animal life. The only difference is that our experience of the present is made miserable by dint of the fact that we are aware that we are inhibited from executing meaningful agency. In his attempts to overcome the problems of an intellectually determined will, Locke confronts new problems born of the constraints imposed by a material present. He must, therefore, conceive of some way for a person to somehow intervene in the present—to stave off its pressures so that we may be left “free to the attraction of a remoter absent good.”<sup>318</sup>

### **Reason and the Suspension of Will**

Locke identifies two faculties of consciousness that make such intervention in the present possible. Together, reason and the ability to suspend the will are able to affect the will by expanding the temporal horizon of judgment beyond the present, and by temporarily escaping the urgency of the material present. At its most basic level, reason makes free action possible for Locke. He determines all minds to have some basic powers that allow the perception of ideas,

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<sup>316</sup> Ibid., 255 (II.xxi.37).

<sup>317</sup> Locke attempts to soften the blow of an oppressive present by arguing that the experiential prioritization of the present also prevents a life of total misery. For if all absent goods were felt as strongly as those in the present, “we should be constantly and infinitely miserable,” suffering from the loss of all the happiness “not in our possession.” Ibid., 260 (II.xxi.44).

<sup>318</sup> Ibid., 261–2 (II.xxi.45).

and the retention of them, independent of reason.<sup>319</sup> Beyond the knowledge given by perception, the powers of “discerning” or “distinguishing” one idea from another, of “combining [simple ideas] into complex ones,”<sup>320</sup> of determining the relations between ideas, and of abstracting “general signs for universal ideas”<sup>321</sup> are faculties that belong only to beings that can both direct and recognize their own thoughts.<sup>322</sup> The ideas produced by sensation are given to the mind independent of consciousness, and are thus not subject to judgment. However, each of the other faculties are acts of consciousness that produce new ideas, which are subject to investigation and judgment, which is guided by reason. Having the capacity to guide thought and evaluate knowledge, the mind is free. Locke identifies reason as a necessary condition for free agency. However reason alone is insufficient because reason does not direct the will, nor do rational judgments compel it.

Because the will is determined by uneasiness, Locke argues that if left unattended, it will be dominated by the present. This is because the will is not moved by the greatest pleasure or pain, but the nearest. The mind is equipped with a faculty that temporarily allows us to escape this condition, however, and that is the “power to suspend the execution and satisfaction of any of its desires.”<sup>323</sup> During such a state of suspension, we are “at liberty to consider the objects of [desire]; examine them on all sides, and weigh them with others.”<sup>324</sup> Suspending the will effectively arrests the present moment such that the mind is shielded from its urgency, which creates the space for contemplation. In such a suspended state, reason does not direct the will,

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<sup>319</sup> He concedes that “brutes have memory.” Ibid., 154 (II.x.10 section heading).

<sup>320</sup> Ibid., 158 (II.xi.6).

<sup>321</sup> Ibid., 160 (II.xi.10).

<sup>322</sup> By contrast, brutes have these faculties “not in any great degree,” they compare, “but imperfectly,” and “come far short of men” because “brutes abstract not.” Ibid., 157–159 (II.xi.5,7,10).

<sup>323</sup> Ibid., 263 (II.xxi.47).

<sup>324</sup> Ibid.

but can indirectly affect it. For when temporarily guarded against the necessity of the present, reason restructures the temporality that determines behavior.

By bringing distant pleasures “nearer to our mind,”<sup>325</sup> we can deliberate on “true happiness,” and “judge...the good or evil of what we are going to do” objectively.<sup>326</sup> Through contemplation, they are “made part of our present,”<sup>327</sup> which mitigates the advantage that other, lesser pleasures had by virtue of their proximity. On this more level playing field, these greater, distant pleasures may “[raise] in us some desire,” and become “a part of our present uneasiness.”<sup>328</sup> In other words, the deliberation and judgment that occurs when our wills are suspended changes desires because they create the space for cognitive states to influence affective ones. As such, we cannot change our wills by changing our opinions, but we can change our wills by deliberating our desires; by suspending our will, we create the possibility of being made uneasy by absent goods. This is why Locke identifies freedom not in willing, which is relentless and unending, but in its suspension. It creates the space to consider whether a “particular thing” is a means to the end of happiness—whether it makes “a real part of that which is their greatest good.”<sup>329</sup> Locke concludes that the suspension of will and reason are thus, “the source of all liberty...which is (as I think improperly) call’d free will.”<sup>330</sup>

Here, Locke’s triangulation between Hobbes and Descartes’ models of agency come more into focus. Like Hobbes, Locke understands the agent to be constantly compelled to action by his material existence, and incapable of the kind of immediate, rational direction of action of the Cartesian model. Yet whereas Hobbes’s conception of reason is inextricably conditioned by

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<sup>325</sup> Ibid., 262 (II.xxi.45).

<sup>326</sup> Ibid., 263 (II.xxi.47).

<sup>327</sup> Ibid., 262 (II.xxi.45).

<sup>328</sup> Ibid.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid., 266–7 (II.xxi.52).

<sup>330</sup> Ibid., 263 (I.xxi.47).

our material and temporal existence, Locke's conception of reason as an independent, a priori faculty, more closely tracts with Descartes and echoes Plato insofar as both identify appetites and reason as distinct determinates of the will.<sup>331</sup> In relation to freedom, however, Locke departs from the Cartesian and Platonic model in which the exercise of freedom equates to reason's forsaking of appetite, precisely because he recognizes the determinate nature of the material present. The exercise of freedom, he essentially argues, requires protection from other causal forces. For Hobbes, freedom happens through time and space. For Descartes, freedom happens regardless of time and space. For Locke, freedom happens when time and space are momentarily escaped.

### **Freedom: Practical and Moral**

Prior to his discussion of freedom in terms of reason and suspension of the will, Locke declares that in "so far as a man has power to think, or not to think; to move, or not to move, according to the preference or direction of his own mind, so far is he a free man."<sup>332</sup> Here, he seeks to distinguish practical freedom, referring the possibility of self-directed action, from necessity, referring to compelled actions. He stipulates that the requirements for such freedom are two-fold: the power to act *and* not to act must both be possibilities, regardless of what the agent wills. This is why, he argues, that a man who wakes to find himself in a locked room, yet prefers to stay in that room is not free. He wills himself to stay, but because he cannot will himself to leave, it is "evident he is not at liberty to stay, he has not freedom to be gone."<sup>333</sup> In this initial description freedom is presented as "a man's power" to do or not do that which is "the

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<sup>331</sup> This is an important point of distinction from Hobbes, who understands reason and appetites to both participate in the singular deliberative process that determines the will.

<sup>332</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 237 (II.xxi.8).

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*, 238 (II.xxi.10).



preference of his mind,” and lacks any reference to the reason and suspension he subsequently identifies with freedom.<sup>334</sup>

Locke’s subsequent inclusion of these factors owes to the fact that his conception of agency couples practical freedom with moral responsibility. Though his initial description of “active powers” lacks an explicit normative dimension, he reserves these powers for God and persons—beings distinct from others in their ability to assume responsibility for their actions. Moreover, his theory of personal identity entails a subject whose recognition of responsibility yields concepts of duty to oneself and others. As such, the will Locke seeks to understand is not merely that which leads to free action, but to free moral action. Moral agency is similar to practical freedom, insofar as it entails the power to act or not act in some way. However, practical freedom requires the actual presence of two opposing possibilities—the present moment must not compel (or must allow) either action or inaction. To be a free agent in the moral sense is to merely possess the capacities of reason and suspension of the will—their latent potential sufficiently establishes responsibility for their proper exercise and the consequences for any action.

### **Morality and Happiness**

Though the relationship between the responsibility agents have to moral action and the happiness that motivates action has not been fully developed as of yet, a few parallels can be drawn. Regarding morality, Lock has overcome relativist objections, arguing that a universal, legislating moral paradigm exists, and is knowable by reason. He argues along similar lines that all rational consciousness is concerned with its own happiness. Initially he concedes that people engage in a “variety of pursuits” that reveals “that every one does not place his happiness in the

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<sup>334</sup> Ibid., 237 (II.xxi.8).

same thing, or chuse the same way to it.”<sup>335</sup> Yet while Locke accepts the relativity of desire, he draws a distinction between the “imaginary” happiness of raw appetite and “true and solid happiness.”<sup>336</sup> In order to pursue “real bliss,” men must “chuse right” by following “a chain of consequences linked to one another.”<sup>337</sup> Just as for morality, Locke asserts that reason reveals a singular, correct path towards happiness. There is a potential conflict between these imperatives, however, if what is morally legislated conflicts with that which constitutes true happiness. This is an impossibility for Locke, however, because pursuing true happiness and acting morally are one in the same for him. The same reason that allows us to know and to be brought under moral law compels us to exercise rational discernment in our pursuit of happiness.

In the American imagination, the “pursuit of happiness” is often identified as a right. This is likely due, in no small part, to Jefferson’s assertion in the Declaration of Independence that all are “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, and that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”<sup>338</sup> Yet Locke himself understands this pursuit as a duty—as a duty to suspend appetites. He argues that “we have done our duty” when “in pursuit of our happiness,” we conduct a “fair examination” into what constitutes true happiness and then choose that path.<sup>339</sup> Thus, though all humans endeavor for happiness, moral responsibility is constituted by our duty to pursue happiness aright.<sup>340</sup> When someone fails to “to examine what

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<sup>335</sup> Ibid., 268 (II.xxi.54).

<sup>336</sup> Ibid., 266 (II.xxi.51).

<sup>337</sup> Ibid., 267–8 (II.xx.52-4).

<sup>338</sup> Jefferson combined both Locke’s assertion in the *Second Treatise* that political society exists for the sake of protecting persons, defined as “life, liberty, and estate” with his assertion in the *Essay* that, “the highest perfection of intellectual nature lies in a careful and constant pursuit of true and solid happiness.”

<sup>339</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 264 (II.xxi.48).

<sup>340</sup> There are several problems that stem from Locke’s mapping of happiness onto morality, not the least of which is that the essence of morality is conformity to law, which raises questions

would really and truly make for [ones] happiness,” the consequences suffered are not only deserved, but chosen.<sup>341</sup>

Hence, when the “drunkard” returns to the tavern, he is acting in pursuit of happiness, yet not in the pursuit of real happiness. He is nevertheless fully *responsible* for his choices, and subsequently deserving of any rewards or punishment. On this, Locke is unequivocal:

And here we may see how it comes to pass, that 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 judged 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.<sup>342</sup>

Since, for Locke, we all equally have the capacity, and capacity implies ability, to suspend our wills, and particular material conditions are relevant only insofar as they allow or preclude freedom, the individual is singularly and ultimately responsible for neglecting to “examine what would really and truly make for his happiness.”<sup>343</sup>

### Choosing wrong

Locke discerns two possible causes for choosing wrong in our endeavors for happiness. The first occurs on account of “pains of the body from want, disease, or outward injuries,” that “when present, and violent, operate for the most part forcibly on the will.”<sup>344</sup> Locke concedes that when possessed by such “bodily torments,” it becomes nearly impossible “to keep [the] will

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about what the motivation of moral agents should be. A number of these are explored in Forde’s chapter on Kant. Forde, *Locke, Science and Politics*.

<sup>341</sup>“If the neglect or abuse of the liberty he had, 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. “Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 271 III.xxi.56).

<sup>342</sup> Ibid., 271 (II.xxi.56).

<sup>343</sup> Ibid.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid., 271 (II.xxi.57).

steady in the choice of those actions, which lead to future happiness.”<sup>345</sup> Nevertheless, though the causes be out of our control, the inability to overcome their determinism on our wills is a personal failing—it is due to either “disuse” of reason or to an inability to reason that a person is unable to “raise in himself desires...strong enough to counter-balance the uneasiness” of the present.<sup>346</sup> So while acknowledging that extenuating material circumstance like injury or penury may cause, through no fault of one’s own, a present that is exceptionally dominating, and therefore, unequal conditions for agency, there is no room in Locke’s theory of agency to accommodate, offset, or overcome this unevenness. Each person is responsible for overcoming the present, which Locke presents as universally dominating and therefore an effectively equal condition. This buttresses his argument that the outcomes of a person’s attempts to overcome the present are deserved and one’s relative social position is not merely an accurate reflection of one’s effort, but because he links material outcomes with moral character, social position is imbued with moral judgment.

Aside from the mistakes we make under duress, Locke argues that we choose wrong on account of errors in judgment. The essential problem he pinpoints, is that we err when we fail to recognize the dual, temporal nature of judgment. “We must remember,” he explains, “that things are judged good or bad in a double sense.”<sup>347</sup> The first sense is the sense of the present, and regards mere pleasure or pain. We do not err in this sense, because “the greater pleasure, or the greater pain, is really just as it appears,”<sup>348</sup> and so we make no mistakes in our judgment. The second sense of judgment regards the future, and accounts for the consequences that any present pleasure or pain will produce. And, since “every intelligent being really seeks happiness,” a

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<sup>345</sup> Ibid., 272 (II.xxi.57).

<sup>346</sup> Ibid.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid., 274 (II.xxi.61).

<sup>348</sup> Ibid., 275 (II.xxi.63).

person fails in their endeavor “only by a wrong judgment” in this second sense.<sup>349</sup> One problem is that “when we compare present pleasure or pain with the future,” we often fail to account for their “different positions of distance,” and we are consequently “apt to judge a little in the hand better than a great deal to come.”<sup>350</sup> Yet though the future may seem small in the distance, Locke is clear that “that which is the future, will certainly come to be the present.”<sup>351</sup> Though the consequences that may follow particular actions are in the realm of probable knowledge, the passage of time and the necessity of acting beyond the present are rational certainties. Thus, when a person cannot raise in themselves a feeling of uneasiness regarding the future greater than those in the present, it indicates intellectual laziness or willful ignorance—both choices open to moral judgment.

Unlike Hobbes, whose material subject cannot help but to continually seek the future, Locke presents a subject with a much more ambivalent relationship to the future. Though he recognizes our existence to be undeniably and inextricably tied to a future both material and immaterial,<sup>352</sup> he understands human behavior to be determined more by the present than the future. In the event that the present is pleasurable, “what is present, obtains the preference as greater”<sup>353</sup> good than that which is absent, even if the absent good is objectively more conducive to ultimate happiness. Yet at the same time, we have so great an abhorrence of pain,” that “the pain that anyone actually feels,” is the worst, and “nothing can be so intolerable” as present

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<sup>349</sup> Ibid., 275 (II.xxi.62).

<sup>350</sup> Ibid., 275 (II.xxi.63).

<sup>351</sup> Ibid.

<sup>352</sup> The Christian concept of the afterlife remains crucial to his thought, as it offers an additional layer of rewards and punishments that will raise uneasiness where a purely material future may not.

<sup>353</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 276 (II.xxi.63).

pain.<sup>354</sup> Locke acknowledges that the tendency to prioritize the present and pursue short-term pleasures likely results from the fact that it can be difficult to endure pain in pursuit of a greater happiness. He attempts to soften the blow a bit by asserting that it is possible to make unpleasant things more pleasing to oneself through habit. Yet he is unwavering in his assertion that agency entails the execution of correct futural judgment, and wrong errors are symptomatic of a “weak and narrow”<sup>355</sup> mental constitution. Unlike Hobbes, for whom long-term action was prevented by external conditions, Locke locates such inhibiting conditions internally.

This distinction between Locke and Hobbes, regarding whether agency is inhibited by external or internal conditions, is paralleled by their location of certain knowledge. For both, certainty plays a central role in agency. Hobbes maintains that material causality can yield such a certainty, and agency cannot be divorced from external conditions. Locke, however, he finds material causality to be merely probable. Certain knowledge can be produced only through rational logic, which operates in the realm of abstraction, independent of the material world. Certain knowledge is produced independently of the material world, in the realm of reason and morality. Consequently, certain knowledge relates to the world only obliquely. Morality is not affected by material conditions, but moral agency exercised in the pursuit of happiness has consequences in the world. Locke maps the divine temporality of morality onto the finite temporality of the agent so that the temporal judgment that determines the will extends not just to considerations of rewards and punishments in this life, but the afterlife. Such considerations will ostensibly curtail the unbridled hedonism of the pursuit of pleasure—a position not easily reconciled with Locke’s conclusion that social status reflects moral character.

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<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.*, 276–7 (II.xxi.64).

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*, 276 (II.xxi.64).

## Morality and Politics

Though Locke provides notoriously few elaborations regarding examples of moral certainty, he does offer a few suggestions, interestingly enough, in the *Second Treatise*. Therein, he describes our imperfect knowledge of God, which is formed by abstraction and extrapolation from certain observed qualities. Our observed relationship to God is one of dependency—he is our creator; we are his “workmanship.” This relationship entails moral duties, which can be known via our status as “rational beings,” and it is only such beings that are consequently subject to God’s law. Moral agency entails, for Locke, the ability to know the duty to which one is bound, and is not entailed by the categories “natural being” or even “human being.” Here, the distinction between man and person fully takes shape. For, while rational capacity sufficiently establishes moral responsibility, it is only those who have developed this capacity to become rational beings who are capable of recognizing the nature of one’s duty to God and oneself. This duty is the duty to pursuit happiness, which constitutes the “perfection of our nature.”<sup>356</sup> This view—that the purpose of human appetites is perfection rather than preservation—not only distinguishes him from Hobbes, but from other liberal thinkers insofar as it reinscribes a fundamentally teleological morality into the sphere of human action.<sup>357</sup>

By fusing morality with happiness and the futurity of human thought, Locke attempts to preserve both traditional concepts of morality and burgeoning possibilities of modern science. In fact, he argues, the two are mutually reinforcing, as it is precisely the radically limited nature of our empirical knowledge that turns us to the pursuit of moral science, which is where our

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<sup>356</sup> Ibid., 264 (II.xxi.47).

<sup>357</sup> Both Hobbes and Locke present morality as a science that yields universal truth, but for Hobbes, the objective condition of peace is the standard by which actions are judged, whereas for Locke it is divine law.

*summum bonum* is discovered.<sup>358</sup> Though Locke's morality is inflected with ancient teleology, his is distinct and utterly modern on account of its end being simultaneously moral and material. By fulfilling our duty to pursue happiness, we fulfill our moral duty to ourselves and to God.<sup>359</sup> This, of course, creates a division between those who perform this duty adequately, and those who do not. Locke's infusion of morality with human appetites has a number of important consequences. Not only is morality inescapably tied to the acquisition and accumulation of objects (however rationally sought), but the successes of one's pursuits come to symbolize moral agency to others. Locke does not merely introduce the concept of ascribing personal moral success or failure to one's social or material position. Atop a pre-existing moral, economic, social hierarchy he overlays an egalitarian political vision that reinforces social inequality as a consequence of personal failure.

Chappell notes that Locke agrees with the rather common sentiment that "agents cannot be held morally responsible for their actions unless those actions are free." To the extent that there is a material dimension to Locke's conception of freedom, it is narrowly defined in terms of practical freedom—to be capable of doing or not doing some thing. Beyond this binary, material conditions are irrelevant. The exercise of free agency occurs in a suspended time and space outside material existence. In this realm, freedom consists of the "power to do otherwise," which is sufficiently established by being in possession of the capacities of reason and

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<sup>358</sup> As Forde notes, Locke's criticism of the classical notion of *summum bonum* is a rejection of the method, not the end. Forde, *Locke, Science and Politics*.

<sup>359</sup> It is perhaps still not clear why, precisely, morality must be mapped on to happiness in this way—why rational contemplation of the future alone is insufficient to produce true happiness and correct action. What does God provide that simple, long-term happiness, understood in purely material terms, cannot? The answer Locke provides is that human appetites are insufficiently motivated by material rewards and punishments. Some sacrifices only appeal to rational morality on account of rewards and punishments that extend beyond the material future and into the afterlife.



suspension of the will. Thus, when it comes to moral responsibility, Locke determines that if a man “could have done otherwise,” then “he did what he did freely” and is thus “guilty of that action” and “justly punished.”<sup>360</sup> Though Hobbes and Locke similarly conclude that an affective state determines the will, for Hobbes that state is produced by the interdependent material context of human life, and thus requires material interventions to facilitate it. For Locke, the psychological relationship to the material world is oblique, and the ability to alter the affective state that determines the will comes not from without, but from within. Material interventions are thus not only unnecessary, but material conditions are irrelevant to moral responsibility. Consequently, Locke is not concerned with structuring a material environment conducive to moral action. Rather, he is concerned with protecting persons—those who suspend their wills and act morally—from humans who choose not to, or are simply unable.

Unlike Hobbes for whom rights precede duties,<sup>361</sup> Locke understands rights as derivative from law. For Locke, the “state all men are naturally in” is one of “perfect freedom to order their actions...within the bounds of the law of nature,” and everyone subject to the law has the right to enforce the law by “punish[ing] transgressors.”<sup>362</sup> He thus argues that it is only those who are subject to law who are entitled to rights. That is, rights are only extended to moral beings. Further, Locke’s state of nature precedes his political imaginary, in that an individual is not entitled to political rights unless they are subject to moral law. When combined with the

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<sup>360</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 673 (IV.xvii.4).

<sup>361</sup> For Hobbes, “The right of nature...is the liberty each man hath to use his own power...for the preservation of his own nature,” and precedes any “law of nature [which] is a precept...found out by reason, by which a man is forbidden to do that, which is destructive of his life.” In Hobbes’s state of nature, “every man has a right to any thing” and only when others are willing can he be called upon to “lay down his right to all things” as the second law of nature commands. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 2012, 4:119–200 (II.xiv).

<sup>362</sup> John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988) (VI.61).

divisions between those who perform these duties adequately, the principles of equality he espouses in both the *Essay* and the *Second Treatise* can be called into question. When Locke asserts that, “we are born free, as we are born rational,” he does not describe an existing equality, but an existing potential—as we are born potentially rational, we are born potentially equal. Through the development of rationality, equality is earned. It is the objective rewards of rationality, visible to others, that divides the “industrious and rational” from the “quarrelsome and contentious,”<sup>363</sup> and is a litmus test for whom is entitled to political rights.

Of the many aspects of Locke’s philosophy that profoundly shape subsequent modern thinkers, it is his conception of moral duty as prior to, and *determinate of* political rights that perhaps casts the longest shadow. By reimagining Ancient and Christian notions of morality in materialist, futural terms, Locke imbues acquisition with personal meaning and social judgment. Understanding all human action to be motivated by future rewards or punishment, when people will for the pleasure physically nearest rather than greatest, they reveal an inability to act for the more distant, more rational future. They reveal a weak will that manifests itself in a social position that precedes government. He thus intends inequality not to be ameliorated by government, but rather reinforced by it, as “it is plain that the consent of men have agreed to a disproportionate and unequal possession of the earth...out of the bounds of society” and the role of government is but to create “laws [to] regulate it.”<sup>364</sup> Though reading Locke’s *Second Treatise* alone makes clear that he understands inequality to precede government, his defense of inequality remains shallow and superficial absent the moral philosophy of the *Essay*. Only together can we see Locke grappling with the old and the new, fearful of loss and emboldened by possibilities. Searching for new ways to preserve old ideas, he offers the beginnings of one of the

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<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*, (v.34).

<sup>364</sup> *Ibid.*, (v.50).

single most impactful political ideas of modernity. Yet as history makes apparent, his ideas do not merely preserve existing inequality, but serve to exacerbate and expand it. Moreover, he offers very little by way of correcting these problems, as he understands political power through the narrow lens of the “right of making laws with penalties of death.”<sup>365</sup>

This chapter has attempted to reconcile Locke’s ethical philosophy, specifically his ethical temporality, with his political philosophy, in order to complicate his political vision. It has also situated his ideas in the context of his predecessor Hobbes, in order to demonstrate how early modern philosophers struggled to reimagine human subjectivity and agency in material futural terms, and attempted to engage the successes and shortcomings of these theories and their political consequences. The following chapter will investigate the philosophy of Adam Smith along similar lines. What is perhaps most compelling about Smith’s philosophy is that he writes after considerable development of both liberalism and capitalism, which allows him to respond to realities Locke could only speculate about. Principle among these developments is the invention of the corporation, which poses a fundamental challenge to Locke’s conception of morality in terms of individual material acquisition. It is the rise of the corporation, and the subsequent offsetting of risk and punishment to the public, that causes Smith to reconsider the ethical temporality appropriate to the political realm.

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<sup>365</sup> Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (II.ii.3).

## **Adam Smith’s “Circles of Sympathy” and “Dangerous Disorders”: Virtue, Vice, and Timescales of Interaction**

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### **Introduction**

There is a particular understanding of human nature in which all behavior is understood in terms of self-interest. This conception dominates the liberal tradition, to a number of effects. By interpreting human behavior through the narrow lens of self-interest, other dimensions of the human experience such as feelings, judgments, morality, and social and historical context are rendered subsidiary or irrelevant. This approach takes self-interest to be an objective fact, representing something that is rationally true, independent of affect or context. Divorced, as this concept is, from human experience, it lends itself to analysis of abstract individuals in ahistorical societies, and consequently traffics in abstract concepts like freedom and markets that bear little resemblance to the lived present. Until recently, Adam Smith has been interpreted through this lens, yet as we have seen in previous chapters, this conception of human nature that is so identifiably liberal is at odds with theories of subjectivity articulated by the progenitors of liberal thought. For if we read Smith against the grain, we find that rather than defining the liberal tradition, it is the liberal tradition that has largely defined him. The major intervention of this chapter is to liberate Smith from this interpretation, by showing how he liberates his subject through time—a time that is lived, social, and moral. He offers a theory of subjectivity that is rooted in a social reality, a conception of freedom rooted in moral and temporal imagination, and a theory of agency that is affective rather than cognitive. In short, what Smith actually presents us with is not an individual understood in terms of rational self-interest, but one whose self-interest is a product of sentiments and moral judgments, both of which are formed in a social context. In other words, context matters—social organization matters, and historical development matters, because interests and agency appear to oneself not in the abstract but in the

time of the present. As material beings with finite existence, our actions are motivated by perceptions of possibility; we cannot help but to think through time, and what we think about the future is shaped by social context. In this way, this chapter demonstrates that Smith offers us a way to think through how society structures the time that is the context for both moral judgment and agency. It further shows that even as he understands the social future to be a source of liberation, he also finds it to be a source of domination. For, he discerns the ideas of the future that shape human behavior to be neither singular nor abstract, but created by manifold ways individuals are organized in society. And here he finds material inequality to lend itself to the creation of temporal inequalities. Particularly in the case of economic relations, he finds the powerful to use their power to affect timescales of interaction in ways that allow private individuals to offset risk to the public, while limiting the future possibilities of the less powerful. The net effect of this power to affect timescales of interaction is the creation of social relationships that pervert moral judgment and incentivizes socially destabilizing behaviors. Opening Smith's thought in this way challenges traditional interpretations of his work by uncovering a heretofore underdeveloped dimension of his political thought. Far from advocating for the kind of laissez-fair policies often ascribed to him, I find him to instead advance an interventionist role for the state. It is the duty of political institutions to intervene into timescales of social interaction to both expand the horizons of possibility for the less powerful, while preventing private attempts to offset future risks to the public.

This argument is demonstrated by first situating Smith within the context of the Scottish Enlightenment, highlighting the important differences between this philosophic movement and the rationalism and empiricism of their English contemporaries. It is by way of sentimentalism and sympathy that Smith develops a concept of agency that, like Hobbes and Locke, is grounded

in the material world, but unlike them is necessarily social. This social context is then revealed to allow Smith to develop a theory of subjectivity that is not only temporal but moral, and uniquely capable of self-judgment through the impartial spectator. He employs the impartial spectator to illustrate, in particular, the virtues of prudence and justice—both of which are principally concerned with a social future. These are not theories he develops in abstraction, but something he finds to be universally and historically evident. He then turns his attention to his own historical present and analyzes features of his own society. This investigation leads him to conclude that social organization to shape timescales of interaction, and certain forms of organization can pervert moral judgment and engender vice rather than virtue.

### **The Case for Re-Reading Smith**

In the past forty years, a number of historical events have renewed interest in Smith's work by economists and policy-makers alike, who, for whatever differences they might hold, converge on the conclusion that Adam Smith is an, if not the first, economic liberal. Keith Tribe charts some of these events, beginning with the bicentennial publication of the Glasgow Edition of the Works of Adam Smith, the collapse of communism in the 1980s, and the deregulation and privatization of the 1990s that seemed to vindicate Smith's arguments in favor of natural liberty, self-interest, and positive outcomes of market forces.<sup>366</sup> These events have served to cement his reputation as a "prophet of economic liberalism and of free trade" being internationally well established by the early nineteenth century<sup>367</sup>—a reputation that can be traced, as Teichgraeber argues, back to the initial reception of the *Wealth of Nations* in Britain in 1776,<sup>368</sup> and that led to

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<sup>366</sup> Keith Tribe, "Adam Smith: Critical Theorist?," *Journal of Economic Literature* 37, no. 2 (June 1999): 609–32.

<sup>367</sup> *Ibid.*, 613.

<sup>368</sup> Teichgraeber outlines how Books I and II of *Wealth of Nations* garnered the most attention, and they were read as a series of propositions about the benefits of free commerce, the nature of

Smith's legacy being largely determined by orthodox economists, for whom Smith is a harbinger and defender of neo-classical economics.<sup>369</sup>

One way that Adam Smith's decided status as a classical economist has impacted interpretations of his work is typified in what has come to be called, "Das Adam Smith problem." This problem was first identified by German economists who were critical of classical economics, and turned to Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* looking to find some relevance, or perhaps grounds for critique, for *Wealth of Nations*.<sup>370</sup> What they found was an apparent inconsistency in the psychological assumptions of the two books, as the former identifies "altruistic sympathy as the motive virtuous action, while *The Wealth of Nations* regards self-interest as the motive of all human action."<sup>371</sup> This framing reflects a two-fold misunderstanding. The first stems from the prevailing interpretation of Smith as economic liberal, and *The Wealth of Nations* as, according to George Stigler, "a stupendous palace erected upon the granite of self-interest."<sup>372</sup> The second misunderstanding suggests an instrumental and philosophically careless reading of *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. The crucial point missed by these first economic

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capital accumulation, the nature of value, and a theory of production and distribution. Books III and V, containing his argument regarding the stages of growth of civilization and the proper role of government in the economy, were largely ignored. Richard F. Teichgraber, "Less Abused Than I Had Reason to Expect: The Reception of the Wealth of Nations in Britain, 1776-90," *The Historical Journal* 30, no. 2 (June 1987): 337-66.

<sup>369</sup> For an excellent overview of the various foci of neo-classical schools of thought, such as equilibrium and self-interest, and how they appropriate Smith into their work, see Knud Haakonssen and Donald Winch, "The Legacy of Adam Smith," in *The Cambridge Companion to Adam Smith*, ed. Knud Haakonssen, Cambridge Companions to Philosophy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>370</sup> The term itself has been attributed to Carl Knies, who was particularly critical of the idea that the pursuit of self-interest redounds to the good of the community. See Tribe, "Adam Smith: Critical Theorist?," 613, fn18.

<sup>371</sup> D. D. Raphael, *The Impartial Spectator: Adam Smith's Moral Philosophy* (New York: Clarendon Press, 2007), 115.

<sup>372</sup> George Stigler, "Smith's Travels on the Ship of the State," *History of Political Economy* 3 (1971): 265.

commentators, and those who continue to work in the shadow of the so-called Adam Smith problem, is that the subject matter of *Theory of Moral Sentiments* was not merely a passing fancy for Smith, or reflective of youthful naïveté. Rather, it is the very foundation of his thought, and one he continued to work on for his entire life, publishing the sixth volume in 1790, well after *Wealth of Nations*.<sup>373</sup> What this means, as Alexander Broadie explains, is that Smith’s “economic theory was developed therefore within the context of a moral theory that goes wide and deep, a context that carries the message that an economic theory has to be developed within a moral framework.”<sup>374</sup> Essentially, “The Adam Smith Problem” stems from a failure to recognize the mutual moral symmetry between *Wealth of Nations* and *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

Despite the deeply entrenched misinterpretations and characterizations that have long plagued interpretations of Smith’s work,<sup>375</sup> recent scholarship indicates new interpretational directions. One reason for this is that the textual foundation for analysis of Smith has greatly expanded in the past forty years. The same bicentennial publication that renewed interest in Smith as an economic theorist, also introduced scholars access to writing beyond his two seminal books. These works, particularly *Lectures in Jurisprudence*, partially published in 1896, and fully only in 1978, made new connections in his work apparent for the first time. Chief among these was the systematic nature of Smith’s thought, and the role of history in it. New interpretations of Smith’s work were made possible not only by this expanded access, but by a

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<sup>373</sup> Smith wrote *The Wealth of Nations* one year after the second edition of *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and five years before the third.

<sup>374</sup> Alexander Broadie, “Sympathy and the Impartial Spectator,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Adam Smith*, ed. Knud Haakonssen, Cambridge Companions to Philosophy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>375</sup> Smith has not been singularly interpreted as a prophet of capitalism and champion of laissez faire—after all, he was admired and referenced by Thomas Paine and the French revolutionaries, Karl Marx and Gordon Brown. Yet these readings from the Left have had little traction against the prevailing view of Smith, which dominates both the popular and academic imagination.



parallel development in the methods of intellectual historians. Specifically, scholars like Pocock, Skinner, Dunn, and Tuck of the Cambridge school began rereading early modern thought paying close attention to language in order to avoid imposing modern understandings on distant context<sup>376</sup>—such as that of the anachronistic ascription of political liberalism to Smith. Collectively, these developments laid the groundwork for emerging trends in Smithian scholarship, as they revealed that not only is history central to Smith’s thought, it is also crucial to our reading of him. That is to say, one of the central problems of economically driven interpretations of Smith’s work is that they tend to be radically ahistorical, engaging Smith only to the extent that his arguments retain their validity.<sup>377</sup>

It is within these emerging trends of reinterpretation that this chapter is situated, as it seeks both to reveal a new connection between Smith’s moral and political thought, and to demonstrate the relevance his insights have for thinking about our political present. Specifically, it argues that Smith develops his moral thought by way of empirical and social conceptions of time in fundamentally new ways. Moreover, it is by way of these temporal concepts that he identifies tensions within and between individuals, and economic and political institutions. As such, this chapter argues that Smith’s political thought is not merely constructed in the context of his moral thought, but specifically in response to the temporal tensions inherent to moral and social life. This is an endeavor with contemporary relevance, as a number of central problems Smith identifies in modern society are not only fundamentally temporal, but have continued historically to threaten stability, security, and satisfaction—in some cases on an even greater and more accelerated scale.

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<sup>376</sup> Tribe, “Adam Smith: Critical Theorist?”

<sup>377</sup> This is Milton Friedman’s explicit approach. See Milton Friedman, “Adam Smith’s Relevance for 1976,” in *Adam Smith and the Wealth of Nations, 1776-1976 Bicentennial Essays*, ed. Fred R. Glahe (Bolder: Colorado Association University Press, 1978), 7–8.

## Contextualizing Smith: Empiricism, Sentimentalism, and Historicism

The most significant influences on Smith's work reflect the development of three important features of modern thought: empiricism, sentimentalism, and historicism. Philosophic empiricism as one of the central developments that established modernity as a distinct epoch, and focused on developing knowledge through causal explanations of the material world. These developments reverberated through moral and political thought, and are evident in Hobbes's tight focus on developing a mechanist theory of human behavior and morality, and Locke's attempts to reconcile scientific and divine causality within an empirically grounded inquiry. These developments were ultimately adopted by the Scottish University system in which Smith was educated, and which sought to employ scientific principles in the service of social science.<sup>378</sup> This is an important development, because unlike Locke and Hobbes, whose empirical investigation is rooted in the natural world, and which therefore produces a theory of human nature that necessitates a bridge to civil society, the site of Smith's investigation is society itself.

Although Smith shares with Locke and Hobbes the epistemological belief that causal explanations of the material world constitute human knowledge, his understanding of the human world as one that is inexorably social creates an important point of distinction. It further helps to illuminate the Smith's sharp departure from Locke regarding the source of moral knowledge.<sup>379</sup> The central animating fear of Locke's work is the risk of nihilism and relativism that are seemingly inherent to non-theologically grounded ethics. This is why, John Dunn argues, Locke's "*purpose* in setting himself up to vindicate epistemologically the theocentric framework

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<sup>378</sup> Christopher J. Berry, "Smith and Science," in *The Cambridge Companion to Adam Smith*, ed. Knud Haakonssen, Cambridge Companions to Philosophy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 113.

<sup>379</sup> Though the content and structure of Hobbes and Smith's moral theory significantly varies, both understand the source of moral knowledge to be the material world.

of his thought was precisely to uphold practical reason against the contingencies of society.”<sup>380</sup>

Though Locke certainly recognizes that social processes cause human belief, he rejects any conception which grants authority to such beliefs. Society is, for Locke, the site of moral corruption, a fact complicated by his affective moral psychology. Acknowledging that reason cannot compel action, he concludes that the feeling of uneasiness is the well-spring of human action. Yet though the will be determined by affect, Locke argues that actions are nevertheless inscribed with individual moral responsibility, insofar as every person has the cognitive ability to suspend the will, giving reason the ability to supplant the uneasiness of the present with an uneasiness that is rational, futural, and divine. As such, moral responsibility is arrayed *against* society, which is responsible for creating the paralyzing uneasiness that gives rise to the false beliefs that he nevertheless holds individuals responsible for holding. Whereas Locke’s moral philosophy employs empiricism to transcend society, because Smith understands society to produce morality, he employs empiricism to reveal it. Because he denies the independent existence of moral truths, whether discovered through reason or revealed by God, he seeks to uncover the social source of moral thought. This leads him to identify and explain the causal forces not of nature, but of society—to reveal not the what, but the how and why of morality.

This is an important point of distinction between Smith, Hobbes, and Locke. For although Hobbes and Smith bookend an era of British moral questioning aimed at wresting moral authority from political and religious leaders, and establishing an independent framework for determining right and wrong, English and Scottish philosophers approached this project very differently. English philosophers primarily pursued this end by way of rationalism or empiricism. Thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment, however, most prominently Francis Hutcheson, David

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<sup>380</sup> Dunn, “From Applied Theology to Social Analysis: The Break between John Locke and the Scottish Enlightenment,” 122.

Hume, and Adam Smith, rejected both approaches on a number of grounds. The first is an ontological critique, insofar as rationalist and empiricist philosophies purport to reveal independent, universal governing system. For his part, Smith finds the “cobweb science of ontology”<sup>381</sup> problematic because its primary motivation is to create comprehensive systems of order. Despite the explicitly moral subject matter of such philosophies, he views their moral concern as secondary to their ordering motive, which has significant consequences for the nature of the moral philosophy they produce. In the case of rationalist moral philosophy, this manifests itself as the belief that “the original judgments of mankind with regard to right and wrong were formed like the decisions of a court of judiciary, by considering first the general rule, and then, secondly, whether the particular action under consideration fell properly within its comprehension.”<sup>382</sup> Smith’s position here is that general rules proceed from initial particular judgments, but rationalist philosophers are “misled” when they ascribe a truth value independent of, and in judgment of, the particular. It is, for him, the belief in the truth of any system of thought that leads to rigid doctrines of behavior and philosophies that do little to actually explain the process of human judgment or to illuminate the human experience, but do much to restrict it.

Scottish Enlightenment thinkers also argue that rationalism misidentifies the governing force of human life as cognitive rather than affective.<sup>383</sup> Against this position, Smith posits that it

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<sup>381</sup> Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Vol. 2, ed. William B. Todd, The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith, Vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 771 (I.i.2.29).

<sup>382</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie, The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith, Vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 160 (III.iv.11).

<sup>383</sup> Smith’s psychological and emotional concern is not entirely dissimilar from Locke and Hobbes. Though much more invested in ontology than Smith, the mechanisms of human action Hobbes identifies are similarly affective, as both identify anxiety to be the most frequent and urgent of feelings. Though it plays a more determinative and negative role in human behavior for

is “altogether absurd and unintelligible to suppose that the first perceptions of right and wrong can be derived from reason,”<sup>384</sup> because they are rather the object “of immediate sense and feeling.”<sup>385</sup> Though “reason may show that this object is the means of obtaining some other which is naturally either pleasing or displeasing,” it “cannot render any particular object either agreeable or disagreeable for its own sake.”<sup>386</sup> And, in fact, “nothing can be agreeable or disagreeable for its own sake, which is not rendered such by immediate sense and feeling.”<sup>387</sup>

Finally, thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment find that these feelings have a fundamentally social source, which renders the individualism that is foundational to both rationalist and empiricist philosophies problematic. Rationalist theories begin from the standpoint of the moral agent, and empiricist theories presuppose an egoistic psychology.<sup>388</sup> Such individualism, they argued, led to moral theories grounded in self-interest, particularly that of Bernard Mandeville, who argued in *Fable of Bees* that all that is known as virtue arose from self-interest, and that all public benefits arose from vices. Further, these philosophers argue that whether rational or egoistic, the moral agent at the heart of English theories do not capture or reflect lived experience, and as such, lack an explanatory value. In response, they developed sentimentalism, a theory of moral sense rooted not in reason but feeling, and spectatorship, a necessarily social theory of moral judgment. In this way, they sought to both explain moral behavior and locate moral obligation within a necessarily social context.

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Hobbes than it does for Smith, for whom it acts more as a springboard for the imagination, with good and ill effects.

<sup>384</sup> Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 320 (VII.iii.2.7).

<sup>385</sup> Ibid.

<sup>386</sup> Ibid.

<sup>387</sup> Ibid.

<sup>388</sup> For an excellent overview of the intellectual history of spectator theory, to which my own overview is largely indebted, see chapter four of Raphael, *The Impartial Spectator*. See also James Buchan, *The Authentic Adam Smith: His Life and Ideas*, 1st American ed, Enterprise (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006); Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy*.

Collectively, the moral philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment is less concerned with explaining *why* an action is right, and more with showing *how* in a world that has dispensed with external moral authority, we come to feel that they are so. These thinkers by and large assume Hobbes's "practical atheism,"<sup>389</sup> the position that God's existence, such as it may or may not be, makes no practical difference in the conduct of human life. However, unlike Hobbes, for whom practical atheism was supplanted with a binding external source of obligation, they sought to establish a dependable source of obligation internal to society, and to show that even without a rational justification, "morality has a motivational hold on us...because it is tied to our nature—not our supposed nature as rational pursuers of the good, but to our nature as moved by non-rational Lockean desires,"<sup>390</sup> which simply urge us towards pleasure and away from pain.

Smith's sentimentalist predecessors significantly inform his thought, so it is worthwhile to briefly summarize their contributions to the philosophic movement. Hutcheson was a disciple of the English moralist Lord Shaftesbury, whom Locke responded to in his *Second Treatise*.<sup>391</sup> Hutcheson argues that emotions, or sentiments, are a more plausible source of action than reason, and more solid items of experience. As such, against moral theories rooted rational self-interest or logic, he theorizes that there is an innate moral sense that infallibly distinguishes good and evil. This moral sense does not contain innate ideas, knowledge, or propositions, but is rather an innate sensation of finding pleasure in things that are not necessarily to our advantage, such as

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<sup>389</sup> David Gauthier first describes Hobbes as "a practical atheist" in David Gauthier, "Why Ought One Obey God? Reflections on Hobbes and Locke," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 7 (1977): 425–46.

<sup>390</sup> Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy*, 379.

<sup>391</sup> Though Shaftesbury was a sentimentalist, he did view self-interest to be the ultimate motive for all action—a problem Hutcheson overcomes.

benevolence, beauty, or harmony.<sup>392</sup> Hutcheson also offers an account of moral judgment that allows the moral agent to judge from an impersonal standpoint. Though he was not the first empiricist to question egoistic psychology, he was the first to reframe moral judgment in terms of a disinterested spectator rather than in terms of the reason or psychology of the agent. On account of one's moral sense, he argues, when we come across the disinterested motive of benevolence, a disinterested feeling of approval for such actions are naturally evoked, uninfluenced by any thought of benefit to oneself.<sup>393</sup> It is the reaction of the disinterested spectator that is essential and novel to his thought.

Hume further develops the concept of the disinterested spectator, by delving into the nature of the moral sense's capacity to feel approval or disapproval. The nature of approval, he argues, arises from the feeling of sympathy with the pleasure or pain of the person that is affected by the action being judged. The value of a disinterested moral theory, Hume argues, is that it allows a person to,

depart from his private and particular situation [because] he must choose a point of view, common to him and others: He must move some universal principle of the human frame, and touch a string, to which all mankind have an accord and symphony.<sup>394</sup>

Together, Hutcheson and Hume established the Scottish Enlightenment not as an age of reason, but an age of feeling—a philosophy in which moral motive and judgment are determined by affect rather than cognition, yet are nevertheless also impartial on account of disinterest, and rational on account of their universality. Unlike morality derived from reason that relies on

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<sup>392</sup> Hutcheson Francis, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue in Two Treatises*, ed. Wolfgang Leidhold (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2004), I.VIII.

<sup>393</sup> Raphael, *The Impartial Spectator*, 28.

<sup>394</sup> David Hume, "The Sceptic," in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. E.F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1987), 75.

logical agreement, they argue that moral approval relies on an agreement of experience, which makes it necessarily relational and experiential.

Smith's application of the scientific method to uncover sociological truths means that the time, not just of science, but of society becomes relevant. That is, it is because he takes society to be the site of causal analysis that history plays a necessary and central role in his thought. In so far as causes precede effects, tracing a chain of causes and effects necessarily entails a temporal aspect, and when those causes are social, the temporality is historical. The scientific, sociological, and historical dimensions of Smith's thought are vividly apparent in his early essay, "The Principles Which Lead and Direct Philosophic Enquiries: Illustrated by the History of Astronomy."<sup>395</sup> He seeks to uncover the "nature and causes"<sup>396</sup> of the sentiments that prompt scientific inquiry in the first place, and to deduce a connection between disparate appearances by some principle itself derived from particulars.<sup>397</sup> He examines the processes by which cosmological systems are developed, and the processes by which one is replaced with another, and concludes the process to be driven by the mind's desire to find tranquility amid the chaos of nature. As such, science and philosophy actually represent,

the invisible chains which bind together all these disjointed objects, endeavours to introduce order into this chaos of jarring and discordant appearances, to allay this tumult of the imagination, and to restore it, when it surveys the great revolutions

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<sup>395</sup> Hereafter referred to as "History of Astronomy"

<sup>396</sup> Adam Smith, "The Principles Which Lead and Direct Philosophical Enquiries; Illustrated by the History of Astronomy," in *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, ed. W. P. D. Wightman, J. C. Bryce, and I.S. Ross, The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith, Vol. 3 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 34 (7).

<sup>397</sup> Smith understands this process as akin to "the Newtonian method," which he claims "is undoubtedly the most philosophical," not because it claims objective validity but because "it gives us pleasure to see the phaenomena which we reckoned the most unaccountable all deduced from some principle... and all united into one chain." Adam Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, ed. J. C. Bryce, The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith, Vol. 4 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 146 (XXIV.33–4).



of the universe, to that tone of tranquility and composure, which is both most agreeable in itself, and most suitable to its nature.<sup>398</sup>

It is, he finds, the experience of incoherence, which prompts the postulation of connecting principles that link together disjointed appearances, bridging one object to another. Smith determines imagination alone to insufficiently explain the emergence and development of philosophy, however, because though particular minds may be compelled to develop theories, individuals cannot be divorced from their social contexts. As such, Smith couples his psychological analysis with a sociological one. Seeking to determine a cause that made the emergence of a philosophic age from a pre-philosophic age possible, he argues that, only “when law has established order and security, and subsistence ceases to be precarious, the curiosity of mankind is increased, and their fears are diminished.”<sup>399</sup> In short, it is only a particular social context, one of security and leisure, that enables individuals to engage in projects of human knowledge; society is necessarily prior to philosophy and determinative to some extent.

Smith proceeds to trace a chain of causes and effects that directly connects the emergence of Greek philosophy to Newton, an approach that also plays a role in his moral philosophy. Since the object of Smith’s concern is feelings, the site of his empirical investigation is the source of feelings—the material and social conditions of human life. Further, for Smith, society is not only the source and site of moral feelings; it is the source of self. This point will be elaborated more fully, but it is sufficient here to simply note his postulation that a human who grew to adulthood devoid of contact with other humans “could no more think of his own character, of the propriety or deformity of his own mind, than of the beauty or deformity of his own face.”<sup>400</sup> The self and

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<sup>398</sup> Smith, “The Principles Which Lead and Direct Philosophical Enquiries; Illustrated by the History of Astronomy,” 45–6 (II.12).

<sup>399</sup> *Ibid.*, 50 (III.3). The connection Smith identifies between leisure and human curiosity resonate with Rousseau here.

<sup>400</sup> Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, (III.i.3).

morality mutually and necessarily develop, he argues, in the context of society—a system both material and causal, which may therefore be subject to empirical study. He thus commits himself to just such an analysis of society, developing a socially grounded theory of practical reason. The consequence of a scientific approach to a social context is that the time, not just of science, but of society becomes relevant.

Smith's interest in history also reflects a broader reevaluation of the nature, meaning, and value of history.<sup>401</sup> In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, causal analyses of society combined with an incredible expansion of historical artifacts, which led to inquiries that sought to understand the past causes of the present, an inquiry from which the concept of historical development emerged.<sup>402</sup> Previous understandings of history were largely instrumental insofar as they were narrative in nature, focusing on the exemplary actions of a single figure and designed to illuminate a moral truth.<sup>403</sup> Such was the concept of history known to Hobbes and Locke, and one reason both thinkers rejected it—narrative history is capable of producing prudence not prediction, and both prioritized the predictive nature of causal analysis. Despite his early fascination with history, Hobbes ultimately rejects it for a scientific approach, which simultaneously could bring the future under control and establish a new historical trajectory. Locke goes even further, offering a thoroughly ahistorical argument, and a moral philosophy that prioritizes divine temporality to guard against the material present. Both thinkers jettison the past and turn to the future. In comparison, Smith's commitment to a causal, systemic analysis of society renders the present understandable by virtue of its relationship to the past.

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<sup>401</sup> For an excellent summary of the transition from narrative history to erudition history and the implications for 18<sup>th</sup> century philosophy see: J. G. A. Pocock, "Adam Smith and History," in *The Cambridge Companion to Adam Smith*, ed. Knud Haakonssen, Cambridge Companions to Philosophy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>402</sup> Buchan, *The Authentic Adam Smith*, 34–6.

<sup>403</sup> Pocock, "Adam Smith and History," 271–2.

Smith brings empirical analysis to bear not on the chaos of nature, but on industry and institutions, which necessarily entails a human temporality distinct from nature. Such a historical analysis reveals, he argues, patterns and guiding principles that render human behavior and social organizations intelligible. He is particularly interested in the nature of moral personality, which he defines as “those features of the human mind and those modes of interaction between several minds which gave rise to moral practices in the human species.”<sup>404</sup> As such, he traces the patterns its practices assume in different social, economic, and political circumstances, and identifies universal, though historically variable, features of morality. Moreover, he finds morality to be not merely a universal feature of human society, but the ultimate causal force of historical organization.<sup>405</sup>

Smith departs from Hobbes and Locke, not only in his engagement with the past, but also in his evaluation of the future. This is due, in part, to the fact that the 18<sup>th</sup> century saw not only an intellectual reevaluation of history, but widespread changes to the experience of time—to how people understood their relationship to the past and expectations of the future. Jürgen Habermas describes this period as one in which the present is characterized “as a transition that is consumed in the consciousness of a speeding up and in the expectation of the differentness of the future.”<sup>406</sup> Reinhart Koselleck argues that spreading understandings of time as progress created a sense of acceleration that made it difficult for people to imagine the future because the “space of

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<sup>404</sup> Knud Haakonssen, “Introduction,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Adam Smith*, ed. Knud Haakonssen, Cambridge Companions to Philosophy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 5.

<sup>405</sup> Smith borrows this distinction from Hume, who identified physical causes to “work insensibly on the temper,” and moral causes to be “all circumstances which are fitted to work on the mind as motives or reasons and which render a particular set of manners habitual to us.” David Hume, “Of National Characters,” in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. E.F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1987), 198.

<sup>406</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 6.

experience” no longer matched the “horizon of expectation.”<sup>407</sup> Pocock posits that “the growth of public credit obliged capitalist society to develop as an ideology something society had never possessed before, the image of a secular and historical future.”<sup>408</sup>

The new and generalized anxiety regarding the future these three ascribe to Smith’s historical time, combined with his own theory of moral causation help to flesh out the more ambiguous relationship to the future he has in comparison to Hobbes and Locke. For, whereas Hobbes argued that society salves the individual’s anxiety for the unknown future, 18<sup>th</sup> century society was itself permeated with anxiety. Smith does not share in this anxiety wholeheartedly, but neither does he embrace the future uncritically as Locke does.<sup>409</sup> For although, dynamics of human nature, are presupposed in his theory of moral causation, unlike the hard determinism of physical causation, moral causes operate through habituation or socialization, and can accommodate change or variation. This is why, he argues, that though sociality is true of all humans, institutional expression is not uniform, but neither is it random. Rather, its particular expression results from the relation between the fixed principles of human nature and variable external circumstances. Smith’s historical analysis is primarily an attempt to reduce this variation to an intelligible pattern. The most essential manifestation of Smith’s analysis is the “four-stages theory” in which Smith maps Locke’s model of cognitive development (from infancy to

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<sup>407</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 21–38; 267–88.

<sup>408</sup> J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century*, Ideas in Context (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 98.

<sup>409</sup> Dunn argues that Locke’s theological framework indicates that he does not in fact uncritically embrace the future, but rather refuses to recognize “the future as it was to come to be.” Dunn, “From Applied Theology to Social Analysis: The Break between John Locke and the Scottish Enlightenment,” 122–3. This is certainly true insofar as Locke he rejected history as inherently disordered and transcended only through individual cognitive abilities. However, on my reading, despite his myopathy, Locke remained optimistic that such transcendence was possible.

maturity) on to society (from simple to complex) to explain the development from hunter/gatherer to commercial societies. A hard determinism or necessity is often ascribed to this theory, but a close reading of Smith reveals these stages to be independent from one another. Smith's more general point seems to be that the level of abstraction in society is reflected in social structures in predictable ways. For example, the inability to think of property in the abstract or distinct from oneself informs economic, political, aesthetic, and social arrangements.<sup>410</sup>

This essentially means that although he identifies morality as causal, its value is more explanatory than predictive. Morality is only predictive insofar as it can be predicted that different social experiences produce different social characters. Because the context in which morality expresses itself is a series of complex, overlapping systems that can never be thoroughly grasped in the present, its usefulness lies more in retrospective explanation rather than prospective prediction. Though greater understanding can aid in the further development of moral personality, Smith understands social change to largely be the result of unintended consequences rather than deliberate action. It is for this reason that he is particularly weary of deliberate attempts to produce specific futures, especially, as will be elaborated more fully, by politicians.

Taken collectively, Smith's thought reflects a number of intersecting ideas about time. His scientific approach necessarily entails a conception of time that is causal, empirical, and linear. This is in part why he rejects rationalism, which produces truths abstracted from material existence that are consequently atemporal. He further rejects eternal conceptions, be they framed

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<sup>410</sup>Adam Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, ed. Ronald L. Meek, D. D. Raphael, and Peter Stein, The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith, Vol. 5 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 459 (B.149).

theologically in divine right or class privilege, because they are similarly incommensurate with a materially grounded temporality. Thus far, the time of Smith's thought is quite resonate with Hobbes's. They divert, however, on the question of time itself. For Hobbes, time is subjectively constituted. Self-consciousness is, for him, a unique and distinct temporal landscape of memory and imagination. Time has no objective existence, and we do not inhabit or share a singular temporal experience. We also appear this way to one another—unique and indecipherable temporal trajectories, which leaves us anxious and engenders violence. For Smith, time is constituted socially—it is society that gives birth to the self which means both that we cannot help but to see ourselves through the eyes of others and to consider our past and future in terms of a shared temporality. Though Smith finds this temporal mapping of the self to society to be a largely positive phenomenon, it also produces tensions, and for Smith, as for Locke and Hobbes, political institutions appear as a means of temporal intervention. For Smith's analysis demonstrates how social institutions affect the perception of time. People do not blindly act for the future, they act for the future that is possible, and that perception of possibility is shaped by the way institutions of power, be they political or economic, orchestrate human interaction. Though not an unqualified good, Smith views political institutions as singularly capable of beneficial tinkering with temporal perceptions, of preventing the immediacy of the present from becoming a source of domination, and of protecting the public from the tendency of the economically powerful to offset future risks to them. The foundation upon which Smith makes this argument is a dialectic relationship between subjectivity and society, and it is here that we now turn.

## Theory of Consciousness

### Imagination

Like Hobbes and Locke, imagination is foundational to Smith's theory of consciousness. It is for him what distinguishes the human mind from other minds, and he finds the work of imagination is the necessary condition for the development of subjectivity. He argues that it is imagination that allows people to create a distinctly human sphere within the natural world, for it is only by way of imagination that we are capable of interpreting the chaotic nature of our experience. Our material existence, he writes,

seems to abound with events which appear solitary and incoherent with all that go before them, which therefore disturb the easy movement of the imagination... and which thus tend, in some measure, to introduce... confusions and distractions.<sup>411</sup>

Frustrated by the incoherence, confusion, and distraction of the events in the material world, imagination seeks to be soothed; it seeks tranquility.<sup>412</sup> He argues that such a motivation for tranquility prompts the primary activity of imagination—the spontaneous search for order, coherence, and agreement in the world. However, Smith is clear that it is the *perception* of order, the mere fact of order, that is inherently pleasurable and brings tranquility to the mind. The utility of order or the specific content of any particular system, is largely irrelevant. Smith develops this argument in “History of Astronomy,” which focuses neither the “absurdity or probability,” of particular cosmological systems, nor “their agreement or inconsistency with truth and reality.”<sup>413</sup> He is rather interested in determining “how far each [system] was fitted to sooth

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<sup>411</sup> Smith, “The Principles Which Lead and Direct Philosophical Enquiries; Illustrated by the History of Astronomy,” 45 (II.12).

<sup>412</sup> Smith's conception of tranquility is not the Aristotelian concept that Hobbes identified with the cessation of movement and criticized for being fundamentally impossible for material creatures; it is rather informed by a stoic conception of a state of psychic repose or comfort in the material world.

<sup>413</sup> Smith, “The Principles Which Lead and Direct Philosophical Enquiries; Illustrated by the History of Astronomy,” 46 (II.12). There is considerable debate about whether Smith's

the imagination,” by rendering “nature more coherent” than it previously appeared to be.<sup>414</sup>

Smith further argues that although each cosmological system is identified with an individual—be it Copernicus or Newton, the conception of a system is a fundamentally social phenomenon, for no system, no matter how well supported, will fail “gain any general credit in the world,” if its “connecting principles were not such as were familiar to all mankind.”<sup>415</sup> He chooses an explicitly scientific subject matter, and engages in causal analysis, but what he uncovers is not the nature of the material world, but the relationship between the material and social world. In this way, he aims to demonstrate that philosophy does not reveal the systems that order the world, but rather reveals the nature of human sentiments that give rise to systems of order.<sup>416</sup>

Smith begins “History of Astronomy” by identifying the three sentiments that prompt imagination to action. An encounter with the “unexpected” excites surprise, the “new and singular” stimulates wonder, and the “great and beautiful” rouse admiration.<sup>417</sup> The discontinuity and differentiation Hobbes, Locke, and Smith identify with idea generation are temporal concepts, as they entail both a general comparison of before and after, but also rely on personal

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philosophy of science reveals him to be an anti-realist, denying the real existence of any order and all knowledge to be an arbitrary product of imagination. Berry effectively summarizes and argues against these claims. At his most convincing, he places Smith alongside Kuhn, as viewing history as an accumulation of data that makes new gaps in knowledge evident, which creates a perpetual state of not knowing. This is not because there is nothing to know, but because development reveals greater complexity and unknowns, which make certainty and concreteness elusive if not impossible. See Berry, “Smith and Science.”

<sup>414</sup> Smith, “The Principles Which Lead and Direct Philosophical Enquiries; Illustrated by the History of Astronomy,” 46 (II.12).

<sup>415</sup> Ibid.

<sup>416</sup> Not incidentally, it is here that Smith first invokes his most well-known if not most misunderstood metaphor. He invokes “the invisible hand of Jupiter” to describe the yearning for coherence responsible for the development of systems of knowledge (though here Jupiter reflects the ignorant “savage’s” attempt at systemization). See Alec Macfie, “The Invisible Hand of Jupiter,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 32, no. 4 (October 1971): 595.

<sup>417</sup> Smith, “The Principles Which Lead and Direct Philosophical Enquiries; Illustrated by the History of Astronomy,” 34–9 (I.2–3).



memory and anticipation. However, where Hobbes and Locke describe this process as rather neutral, for Smith it is a profound source of anxiety, because it is temporally arresting. For when we encounter two objects or events that have an unexpected relationship, the “*progress of imagination*”<sup>418</sup> is interrupted. It “pauses on the brink,”<sup>419</sup> unable to move forward. Fixated on filling the “interval betwixt the two immediately succeeding objects” with “some chain of intermediate events,”<sup>420</sup> the imagination is unable to move beyond the present. Such an arresting state induces “uncertainty and anxious curiosity.”<sup>421</sup> Here, Smith rejoins Hobbes and Locke in determining anxiety to be the underlying cause of all action. It is the anxiety of wonder that spurs the imagination into action, because it is a state one wants to “get rid of.”<sup>422</sup>

Smith then divides the work of imagination into two categories, theoretical and practical. The theoretical work of imagination is concerned with creating harmony between things and events, and culminates in intellectual systems of aesthetics, sciences, and philosophy.<sup>423</sup> A system produced by the intellectual work of imagination, he argues, “is an imaginary machine invented to connect together in the fancy those different movements and effects which are already in reality performed.”<sup>424</sup> This is an important admission, because it affirms the reality of objective phenomenon, even as it denies philosophy the ability to accurately represent them. Hume’s influence on Smith is clear here, as Hume first proposed that reality is not nature, but

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<sup>418</sup> Smith, “The Principles Which Lead and Direct Philosophical Enquiries; Illustrated by the History of Astronomy,” 44 (II.11).

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid.*, 42–4 (II.8–11).

<sup>420</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>421</sup> *Ibid.*, 40 (II.4).

<sup>422</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>423</sup> In representing invisible chains that bind, such systems calm the imagination. Smith cites the invention of the “Equalizing Circle,” from whose center the movements of planets that otherwise appeared irregular would “appear perfectly equable.” “Nothing,” he argues, “can more evidently show, how much the repose and tranquility of the imagination is the ultimate end of philosophy, than the invention of this Equalizing Circle.” *Ibid.*, 61 (IV.12–13).

<sup>424</sup> *Ibid.*, 66 (IV.19).

fashioned by imaginations within nature.<sup>425</sup> However, Smith's position is neither that imagination creates the world, nor that philosophy is arbitrary; he argues that the world is made into a unified, coherent, intelligible whole by imagination, but not out of thin air. Smith's view regarding the relationship between philosophy and the mind-independent world parallels Locke's agnosticism regarding the true nature of things, given the mediated nature of perception. Yet, despite the importance Smith clearly ascribes to the production and evolution of the theoretical work of imagination, he is also clear that such work is secondary to its practical work, for it is epistemologically prior and experientially dominant.

### **Practical Imagination: Spectatorship and Sympathy**

Smith views the practical work of imagination as primary and prior to the theoretical, because it is compelled by the pressing nature of our social existence. Where intellectual work is concerned with creating harmony between objects by way of theoretical systems, the practical work of imagination is concerned with creating harmony through agreement. This means the practical work of imagination is moral in nature, and entails the development of moral judgment, which Smith develops by way of sentimentalist theories of spectatorship and sympathy.

For Smith, spectatorship results from the imagination's need to satisfy its desire for order. Unlike our experience of events that compels the theoretical work of imagination, however, we spontaneously see people as responsible for making some change in the environment. That is, we spontaneously ascribe actions to people, which allows us both to see them as coherent and identical over time, and to see them as purposeful agents. The agreement the imagination seeks therefore entails not objects or events, but others. However, without access into the interior

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<sup>425</sup>Hume writes, "If we can depend upon any principle, which we learn from philosophy, this, I think, may be considered as certain and undoubted, that there is nothing, in itself, valuable or despicable, desirable or hateful, beautiful or deformed, but that these attributes arise from the particular constitution and fabric of human sentiment and affection." Hume, "The Sceptic," 162.

world of others, the imagination uses the empirical data available—the other person’s observable circumstances and behavior, to create order in the observer’s perception by way of an imagined rational for behavior.<sup>426</sup> This is not a subject-object relationship, on account of Smith’s theory on the social origin and nature of consciousness and subjectivity, which makes our imagination of others sympathetic and self-reflective. He further develops his theory in order to expand the sphere of moral judgment to include oneself, which makes reciprocity between equals possible, thereby allowing him to overcome the limitations of Hutcheson and Hume’s sentimentalism, in which moral judgment is a purely disinterested or intellectual endeavor from an impersonal standpoint associated with agent neutrality.<sup>427</sup> Smith makes moral judgment an activity of the lived, moral present.

It is sympathetic imagination that allows us to bridge the gap between ourselves and others, a point he initially illustrates by evoking the traumatic witnessing of physical violence—“our brother upon the rack” or “a stroke aimed and just ready to fall upon the leg or arm of another person.”<sup>428</sup> While sympathy is perhaps most obviously felt when witnessing another’s pain or sorrow, it is not limited to pity or compassion, but rather denotes “our fellow-feeling with

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<sup>426</sup> On this point, Smith and Hobbes agree. However, because Hobbes understands the self as prior to society, the inaccessibility of others is alienating and anxiety inducing. Smith does not see others as necessarily anxiety inducing—they are the means by which become selves, through sympathetic acts of imagination.

<sup>427</sup> As Stephen Darwall explains, the morality of Hutcheson and Hume’s sentimentalism “has nothing essentially to do with judgments we render from *within* the moral life as agents and patients interacting with each other. . . . It is akin, rather, to aesthetics, and moral value is like a kind of beauty, as Hume explicitly says.” Stephen Darwall, “Sympathetic Liberalism: Recent Work on Adam Smith,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 28, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 141.

<sup>428</sup> Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 9–10 (I.i.I.2–3). The similarity between the imagery of Smith’s description of sympathy and Rousseau’s description of compassion are striking here. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men or Second Discourse,” in *The Discourses and Other Political Writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

any passion whatever.”<sup>429</sup> While our senses can never “carry us beyond our own person... by the imagination we place ourselves” in another’s situation and “thence form some idea” of what another may feel, and “though weaker in degree, [it] is not altogether unlike them.”<sup>430</sup> With this clarification, Smith distances himself from Hume’s conception of sympathy, in which the observer naturally feels identically to the observed. For Smith, the spectator often does not naturally sympathize with the agent, and his seeking to iron out the disagreement is actually an act of *will*.<sup>431</sup> Moreover, sympathy is not about getting “out” of oneself and “into” another. This common portrayal of Smith’s thought ascribes a Cartesian framing that Smith’s thought does not have, for it presumes selves to be isolated and independent units, whereas for Smith, we necessarily see ourselves through the eyes of others, and vice versa.

It is because Smith does not understand selves to be isolated monads that he understands sympathy not to join us with others’ *minds* but to others’ *worlds*. That is, sympathy seeks to render the point of view of the agent comprehensible, by evaluating and contextualizing a person’s circumstances and motivations. Because sympathy “does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites it,”<sup>432</sup> sympathy moves beyond representation or reproduction and allows us to comprehend the agent’s story and perspective, but in a way that is not limited to that perspective. It is precisely because sympathy bridges the gap between the agent and the spectator, while retaining the fundamental separateness between the two that judgment is made possible. However, though sympathy is an essential component of judgment, it is not in itself, judgment. We cannot get to the stage of judgment, of approving or disapproving a point of view, until we can see that it *is* a point of view. As such, sympathetic

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<sup>429</sup> Ibid., 10 (I.i.I.5).

<sup>430</sup> Ibid., 9 (I.i.I.2).

<sup>431</sup> Broadie, “Sympathy and the Impartial Spectator,” 171.

<sup>432</sup> Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 12 (I.i.I.10).

imagination is the necessary condition of assessment, and one intentionally cultivated by the spectator, who is not passive but active, engaged, and critical of the social world. It is the material stage of sympathetic imagination that produces moral judgments that must account for the causality and temporality of the world.

### **Judgment**

Because Smith understands judgment to be made possible by the exercise of sympathetic imagination, the primary form of judgment he identifies is that performed by a spectator on the motivations for action of another. He explains,

When the original passions of the person principally concerned are in perfect concord with the sympathetic emotions of the spectator, they necessarily appear to this last just and proper, and suitable to their objects; and, on the contrary, when, upon bringing the case home to himself, he finds that they do not coincide with what he feels, they necessarily appear to him unjust and improper, and unsuitable to the causes which excite them.<sup>433</sup>

Here, he reaffirms that the exercise of sympathy is one in which the spectator imagines herself in the agent's place, in order to understand the relational tableau of emotions and the objects they are tied to that form the context for the agent's actions. Imagining herself in the agent's place, the spectator compares the motivations and feelings of the agent with the feelings she would have in that same situation. The nature of the judgment made possible by this exercise is the propriety or impropriety of an action—where the spectator finds an agreement of feelings, there is a judgment of approval, where not, disapproval.

The relationship between sympathy and judgment is not one of identity, but of causality. Sympathy necessarily causes and determines judgments insofar as the spectator “must allow” or “cannot deny” their own agreement or disagreement with the sentiments of others.<sup>434</sup> This means

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<sup>433</sup> Ibid., 16 (I.i.3.I).

<sup>434</sup> Ibid., 17 (I.i.3.2).

that the development of judgment relies, not on the act of judging itself, for this is a process in which the spectator has little if any control. Rather, it is through the willful development of the sympathetic imagination that a person may in turn develop a more sophisticated moral sense. Because judgment is always derived from an exercise in perspective, not from a universal maxim, Smith's moral agent develops in the lived present.

One of the most significant implications of locating moral judgment in the lived, personal, social present, is that temporality of action uniquely factors into Smith's theory of judgment. He directly criticizes philosophers who "have, of late years, considered chiefly the tendency of affections, and given little attention to the relation which they stand in to the cause which excites them."<sup>435</sup> That is, he finds the moral theories of his contemporaries to contemplate moral judgment in a vacuum without considering the material and relational context that shapes motivation. Such an approach focuses on judging the consequences of actions, which is a problem because it neglects the motives that cause action. As a corrective, Smith argues that moral judgment entails a two-fold process of imagination—sympathizing with the agent to determine the propriety of his motive (the cause) and sympathizing with the recipient to determine the merit of the action (the effect).<sup>436</sup> In this way, sympathy constructs a complicated web of relations between agents and objects in the material world, and between the present and

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<sup>435</sup> *Ibid.*, 18 (I.i.3.8).

<sup>436</sup> D.D. Raphael argues that Smith fails to sufficiently address both the cause and effect of action, because the judgment of motive (propriety) is distinct from, and secondary to, the judgment of consequence (merit). On my reading, however, the distinction Smith draws between motive and consequence carries no value distinction or causal relationship. That is, his position is not that motive is neither that primary determinant of moral judgment, nor that it provides any necessary foundation for judging merit. The primacy of motive in Smith's theory rather reflects his position that in the practical act of making judgments, we first sympathize with (and therefore judge) the causal agent, and then the affected recipient. Both judgments combine to form a complete moral judgment regarding the right and wrong of the action, and the reward or punishment it deserves, but one functionally precedes the other, owing to our epistemic condition.

the future. It further enables the creation of a spectator who, unlike actual spectators in society, can bridge the multiple perspectives and multiple temporalities necessary to make a judgment that is truly impartial. And, it is this work of imagination, Smith argues, that allows us to develop an impartial spectator, which ultimately allows us to judge, and correct, our own motives.

### **The Impartial Spectator**

Contrary to Hume and Hutcheson, who posit that humans have a natural disposition of care, Smith argues that all feelings result from socialization, and that these feelings are only apparent to us through mediation of the other. Not only is our own consciousness is not transparent to us, but as Griswold notes, “we have no determinate moral selves ‘there’ waiting to be made transparent.” Smith illustrates this point by way of a thought experiment in which he supposes “a human creature could grow up to manhood in some solitary place, without any communication with his own species.”<sup>437</sup> He concludes that,

To a man who from his birth was a stranger to society, the objects of his passions, the external bodies which either pleased or hurt him, would occupy his whole attention. The *passions themselves*, the desires or aversions, the joys or sorrows, which those objects excited, though of all things the most immediately present to him, *could scarce ever be the objects of this thoughts*.<sup>438</sup>

For a truly isolated being, Smith argues, passions cannot become objects of reflection, but when brought into society, “he is immediately provided with the mirror which he wanted before...Bring him into society, and all his own passions will immediately become the causes of new passions.”<sup>439</sup> On becoming a spectator, the imagination is compelled to fill in the gap of understanding constituted by the purposeful agents it witnesses. Its first creation is thus the

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<sup>437</sup> Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 110 (III.I.3).

<sup>438</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added.

<sup>439</sup> Ibid., 110–1 (III.I.3).

creation of the idea of others, followed shortly by the idea of others' feelings, then the recognition of our own feelings, and finally reflection on them.

It is society alone that makes it possible for us to have a reflective relationship with ourselves, but what we realize in that reflection is that our desires and feelings, which are now apparent to ourselves, remain inextricably linked to society. We become aware that we are observers, but also observed—that we judge, but also are judged. And it is the effect on the agent of the reactions of the spectators that give rise to the impartial spectator. It is our twin recognition both of our own spectatorship of others' actions and others' spectatorship of our actions that lead us to imagine how a spectator with all the relevant information would judge us. The imagination of impartiality on our own behalf leads to the creation of the impartial spectator, who allows us to impartially judge ourselves, and the only position from which we can impartially judge ourselves, is from a distance. The imagination's ability to adopt a position free from particular desires is akin to Locke's insofar as both essentially argue that we are able to affect our own desires to the extent that we can temporarily escape the pressing experience of the present and the desires it necessarily compels. The difference for Smith, however, is that such imaginative acts retain their fundamentally social character.

The spectator Smith describes is impartial because he has no particular perspective, but is able to access any. He illustrates this point from the perspective of his own writing desk, which distorts “an immense landscape of lawns, and woods, and distant mountains,” making them appear to “do no more than cover the little window” nearby. In order to “form some judgment” of the “real proportions” of the “great objects” in the distance as compared to the “little objects” close at hand, it is necessary, he writes, to transport “myself at least in fancy, to a different



station, from whence I can survey both at nearly equal distance.”<sup>440</sup> However, the impartial spectator allows us to assume not only a perspective of equidistance in space, but also in time. For, judgment is not limited to present motives, but future consequences, and the impartial spectator thus assumes a position equidistant from both. In this way, we are freed not merely from the biases of society, but crucially, our present interests, whose proximity often overshadows the distant future. Adopting the disinterested perspective of the impartial spectator allows us to view our own motivations neutrally, and thus to judge them correctly. Moreover, it is because we desire to have desires the impartial spectator would approve of that gives our emotions the structure they need to change in response to these judgments.<sup>441</sup>

For Smith, the normative force of the impartial spectator stems from the fact that it defines an already latent moral point of view. The standards for impartial spectatorship are not independent of the impartial spectator, there is no further searching for spectator independent standards, no Platonic forms or independent moral order to which the impartial spectator’s judgments must cohere. The impartial spectator is the “natural and original measure”<sup>442</sup> of virtue, and its judgments are, themselves, morally defining. However, Smith understands the impartial spectator as superior to the actual spectators of society, because it is necessarily created in the

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<sup>440</sup> Ibid., 135 (III.3.4).

<sup>441</sup> Smith is careful to carve a distinction between wanting to be praised and wanting to be praiseworthy. “Many naturally desire,” he argues, “not only to be loved, but to be lovely; or to be that thing which is the natural and proper object of love.” Similarly, a person “desires, not only praise, but praiseworthiness; or to be that thing which, though it be praised by nobody, is, however, the natural and proper object of praise.” Determining our sentiments to be flexible and open to criticism, Smith argues that the judgments of the impartial spectator allows us to overcome desires for objects or impulses that do not cohere with the desire for being approval-worthy. As such, we have both the motivation and the reason to change our sentiments if they keep us from this aspiration. Ibid., 113–114 (III.2.1–2).

<sup>442</sup> Ibid., 306 (VII.ii.3.21).

context of a particular society, is not bound by pure reason, and does not correspond to any independent moral order. This is one of the most controversial dimensions of his thought.

A point modern commentators often miss,<sup>443</sup> however, is that Smith himself was quite sensitive to the relative nature of spectatorship, and the impartial spectator emerges in his work as a deliberate attempt to overcome the individual tendency to mirror social judgments. In fact, his early lectures on ethics that were the original source material for *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, lack any reference to an impartial spectator.<sup>444</sup> On its first publication, Sir Gilbert Elliot set Smith the task of explaining how moral judgment can ever go against popular opinion if its ultimate foundation is actual social attitudes. In response, Smith develops his theory of the impartial spectator and includes it in subsequent editions. Though society first informs moral judgment, the apparent partiality and ignorance of actual spectators compels the imagination to conceive of “a person quite candid and equitable, of one who has no particular relation...an impartial spectator who considers” conduct with “indifference.”<sup>445</sup> It is the work of imagination, that allows for the development of a perspective of impartiality that ultimately frees the impartial spectator from whatever social biases it may initially possess, and which thus makes it a superior arbiter.

A similar, if not more forceful criticism of the impartial spectator is aimed at the structure of Smith’s theory. It interrogates whether the impartial spectator allows us to evaluate our

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<sup>443</sup> One of the most enduring challenge comes from T.D. Campbell, who concludes that “to talk of *the* impartial spectator is simply a shorthand way of referring to the normal reaction of a member of a particular social group, or of a whole society, when he is in the position of observing the conduct of his fellows.” Tom Campbell, *Adam Smith’s Science of Morals* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1971), 145.

<sup>444</sup> Adam Smith, “Appendix II,” in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie, The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith, Vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

<sup>445</sup> Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 129 (III.ii.31.r). This text was added in the second edition, but removed in the sixth.

conduct from the perspective of any human being, as Smith would have us do. Using sentiments rather than reason as the basis for judgment, Smith wants us to be free not from all feelings nor to reach for a principle derived from reason independent from feeling. Rather, he wants us to be free of *partial* feelings, and feelings are inextricably shaped by societies.<sup>446</sup> Here, the absence of Kantian transcendental principles in favor of judgments rooted in everyday sentiments are made apparent—how can the impartial spectator judge differently from neighbors, let alone correct for systematic bias? Yet Smith says that we must “endeavor to examine our own conduct as we imagine *any other* fair and impartial spectator would imagine it,”<sup>447</sup> which, Amartya Sen, argues implies that the impartial spectator encompasses views outside of our own cultural context, and “is a requirement that can bring in judgments that would be made by disinterested people from other societies as well.”<sup>448</sup> Smith’s own work demonstrates his interest in moving beyond his particular social context, as he explicitly sought to bring non-Christian and non-Western ethical viewpoints into his thought. He incorporates examples from Ancient Grecian and Roman societies, and anthropological reports from around the world, particularly the indigenous inhabitants of North America, in the service of demonstrating a matter of empirical fact—that morality may simply be a human construct,<sup>449</sup> but it is universal insofar as it is the product of empirically observable generality. Though it is not reflective of independent truth, he finds that

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<sup>446</sup> Samuel Fleischacker, “Adam Smith’s Moral and Political Philosophy,” ed. Edward N. Zalta, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2015.

<sup>447</sup> Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 110 (III.i.2). Emphasis added.

<sup>448</sup> Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 125.

<sup>449</sup> Smith adopts Hume’s position that morality is not established by nature or the divine, but rather arises “from us.” Hume writes, “If we can depend upon any principle, which we learn from philosophy, this, I think, may be considered as certain and undoubted, that there is nothing, in itself, valuable or despicable, desirable or hateful, beautiful or deformed, but that these attributes arise from the particular constitution and fabric of human sentiment and affection.” Hume, “The Sceptic,” 162.

constructing morality is natural to mankind;<sup>450</sup> there are no conditions in which people do not generate moral conventions.

Moreover, he finds that human morality has hitherto had certain stable features that persist, because as Haakonssen and Winch argue, there is an “underlying pattern of reasoning” to them, namely, that “groups of people have found it difficult to avoid if they are to have a chance of remaining in a community.”<sup>451</sup> This is why although Smith concedes that “established custom” does potentially distort moral judgment, and “can give sanction” to dreadful violations of humanity,<sup>452</sup> he nevertheless argues that “the sentiments of moral approbation and disapprobation are founded on the strongest and most vigorous passions of human nature; and though they may be somewhat warped, cannot be entirely perverted.”<sup>453</sup> This reflects a concern Smith reinforces elsewhere, for the equal worth of every human being,<sup>454</sup> which is the ultimate basis of moral sentiments for “a man of humanity.”<sup>455</sup> And, it is through the imaginative capacity that produces the impartial spectator, that makes it possible to expand our sympathy, and the sympathy of the impartial spectator, beyond our own particular individual and social context.

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<sup>450</sup> By arguing that morality is a kind of natural artifice, Smith offers a resolution to a central debate between the Stoics and Epicureans that had been vigorously revived in early modern philosophy. Stoics argued that people have the capacity to govern their lives according to the orderliness that objectively structures the world. Epicureans argued that people are self-interested and morality is invented to regulate self-interest. Early moderns revived this debate, mostly by reviving the Stoic idea that morality is natural (also through Plato and Aristotle), but Christianized so morality is a divine gift, such is the case with the Cambridge Platonists and ethical rationalists. For Neo-Epicureans, like Hume, Hobbes, and Mandeville, morality is a contrivance and political institutions are necessary to reinforce rules. See Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy*.

<sup>451</sup> Haakonssen and Winch, “The Legacy of Adam Smith,” 387.

<sup>452</sup> Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 210 (V.2.15).

<sup>453</sup> *Ibid.*, (V.2.1).

<sup>454</sup> For more on Smith’s theory of human dignity see Remy Debes, “Adam Smith on Dignity and Equality,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 20, no. 1 (2012): 109–40; Darwall, “Sympathetic Liberalism: Recent Work on Adam Smith.”

<sup>455</sup> Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 90 (II.ii.3.II), also 137 (III.3.5).

The novelty and appeal of Smith's theory of impartial spectatorship is that it is rooted in empathetic view of existing society, but compelled both to extend that empathy beyond the familiar in ways that make critique of the familiar possible. In this way, moral judgment appears in his thought not simply as a faculty, but as a process that enables correction and development, both individually and historically. Smith is seeking to illuminate not only a process of personal development, but a possibility of social progress. At the individual level, he argues,

there exists in the mind of every man, an idea [of exact propriety and perfection] gradually formed from his observations upon the character and conduct both of himself and of other people. It is the slow, gradual, and progressive work of the great demigod within the breast, the great judge and arbiter of conduct.<sup>456</sup>

Yet while an individual's relationship to the impartial spectator may be motivated by an idea of perfect judgment, collective moral development is itself a process with no determined end. The goal of history is therefore progress, not perfection. Though Smith identifies stable features of morality, and evidence of moral progress, such progress is in no way necessary. The uncertainty and contingency of life renders predictions or planning for the future a fools' errand for Smith, and this is precisely where the urgency in his theory lies. The past can reveal gaps in our understanding, which can sharpen the critical inquiry of the impartial spectator in the present, but this is productive only insofar as the present remains the context for judgment, and the future, undeterminable as it is, is approached with caution.

One important consequence of Smith's approach is that unlike Hobbes and Locke, who are led to speculate about the emergence of consciousness in the abstract or pre-societal individual, Smith understands human nature to be not merely naturally social, but necessarily social. Thus, there is no need to create a bridge between man and society, historically or

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<sup>456</sup> Ibid., 247 (VI.iii.23).

conceptually, as they do. Since, there is no gap between natural society and artificial society, there is no need for a bridge such as the social contract Hobbes and Locke propose.

Another consequence of Smith's thought is that he makes the social present the actual context for moral life, and the actual context for moral judgment. This is a significant development in sentimentalist philosophy, as both Hume and Hutcheson theorize moral judgment abstractly in terms of an impersonal standpoint that is neither personally reflective nor practically actionable. Despite the social context that grounds spectatorship, it is not a theory that necessarily requires reciprocity or accountability in one's own life. As a theory of judgment rooted in observation, it is naturally suited to the judgment of others' actions, or past actions. Judging in the case of the first person, or in the present are much more difficult, and Smith's most significant contribution is developing spectatorship such that a person can judge her own actions, in a social context of equals, thereby making the lived present the domain of moral judgment.

## **Theory of Action**

### **Morality and Motivation**

Like Hobbes and Locke, Smith locates the cause of human action in motivation. Smith's theory is unique, however, in that he stresses that human motivations are heterogeneous, shaped by external factors that principally include the judgments of others, institutional organization, and incentives, and by internal forces of self-love, self-interest, and moral personality.

The final edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, includes an entirely new section, Part IV, in which he fully develops the relationship between morality and motivation. He contends that the standard of judgment employed by the impartial spectator is virtue. Though actual spectators often judge by a standard of "approximation," the impartial spectator's standard

is “exact propriety and perfection.”<sup>457</sup> He then identifies four primary virtues by which moral personality is developed: self-command,<sup>458</sup> benevolence,<sup>459</sup> justice, and prudence. Of these, justice and prudence are most important and germane to this inquiry, as they are fundamentally temporal, and because Smith identifies them as the foundation of social institutions.

Prudence consists of a union of two temporal qualities. Regarding the future, it entails “superior reason and understanding, by which we are capable of discerning the remote consequences of all our actions, and of foreseeing the advantage or detriment which is likely to result from them.”<sup>460</sup> It is bolstered by the virtue of self-command, which enables us to “abstain from present pleasure or endure present pain, in order to obtain a greater pleasure or to avoid a greater pain in some future time.”<sup>461</sup> Such actions will always be “supported and rewarded” by the impartial spectator because its judgment collapses the distance between the present and the future, standing equidistant from both. To the impartial spectator, an agent’s

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<sup>457</sup> Ibid.

<sup>458</sup> Insofar as self-command is embodied by one who “governs his whole...conduct according to those...corrected emotions which the great inmate...within the breast prescribes,” it is a virtue that functions as a kind of meta-virtue. Indeed, Smith stipulates that self-command “is not only a great virtue, but from it all other virtues seem to derive their principle lustre;” it is the virtue presupposed by the other virtues. Ibid., 245,7 (VI.iii.19,23).

<sup>459</sup> Smith defines benevolence as a positive virtue identified with the promotion of good for others. In daily interactions, it is exercised when a spectator attempts to heighten her sympathy to match the experience of the person principally concerned. Although he praises benevolence, he rejects Hutcheson’s claim that benevolence is the morally best motive. While benevolence may be a deity’s sole motivation, the “condition of human nature” is material and temporal. The finite nature of our existence necessarily gives rise to motives informed by our continual need for sustenance, the material present, and ideas of the future. Precluding any form of self-interest from being virtuous belies the reality of our human condition. Further, if self-love is categorically excluded from moral thought, all expressions are rendered equally corrupt, leaving no room for critical reflection.

<sup>460</sup> Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 189 (IV.2.6).

<sup>461</sup> Ibid.

present, and what is likely to be [his] future are very nearly the same: he sees them nearly at the same distance, and is affected by them nearly at the same distance, and is affected by them very nearly in the same manner.<sup>462</sup>

Yet the impartial spectator also knows that “the persons principally concerned, they are very far from being the same,” because they are far more strongly influenced by the present, and he therefore approves the ability “to act as if their present and their future situation affected them nearly in the same manner in which they affect him.”<sup>463</sup>

Though Smith concedes that prudence expresses itself in “the practice of frugality, industry, and application...directed to no other purpose than the acquisition of fortune,” he nevertheless argues that it is “the resolute firmness of the person who...in order to obtain a great though remote advantage, not only gives up all present pleasures, but endures the greatest labour both of mind and body” that “necessarily commands our approbation.”<sup>464</sup> Smith’s point here, is that it is not the material gains that the impartial spectator values, but what the physical and mental labor of deferment symbolize; it is the endurance that symbolizes praiseworthiness and commands approbation. In this way, prudence links the moral philosophic concept of self-love with the practical philosophic of self-interest, in a way that deters greed and selfishness. For prudent self-interest, concerned as it is with the approval of the impartial spectator, refuses to be “hurried...by any necessity, but has always time and leisure to deliberate soberly and coolly concerning what are likely to be”<sup>465</sup> the consequences of any decision. It is the approval of endurance and sacrifice that prevents an agent from succumbing to the pressures or incentives of the present. A person so oriented, Smith argues, is “rather cautious than enterprising, and more anxious to preserve the advantages which we already possess, than forward to prompt us to the

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<sup>462</sup> Ibid., 215 (VI.i.11).

<sup>463</sup> Ibid.

<sup>464</sup> Ibid., 189 (IV.2.6).

<sup>465</sup> Ibid., 215 (VI.i.12).



acquisition of still greater advantages.”<sup>466</sup> This means, Tribe argues, that a “Smithian conception of self-interest is not an injunction to act egoistically and without moral scruple,” but it is rather “embedded within a framework of social reciprocity that allows for the formation of moral judgment.”<sup>467</sup> In other words, self-interest, properly considered, is not free from moral judgment; is a product of it.

As for the virtue of justice, Smith argues that it entails the avoidance of injury to interests, and is unique among virtues because its violation causes a sharper reaction among spectators. Unlike benevolence, whose failure does “no real positive evil,” and consequently produces mere “dislike” or “disapprobation,” a failure of justice “does a real and positive hurt to some particular persons.”<sup>468</sup> As such, it is “the proper object of resentment,” among spectators, “and of punishment, which is the natural consequence of resentment.”<sup>469</sup> Like prudence, justice works against myopic self-interest, but whereas prudence helps an agent to overcome a perspective limited to the present, justice helps an agent overcome a failure to consider others. Smith writes that to the spectators, injustice is,

a violation of fair play, which they cannot admit of. This man is to them, in every respect, as good as he: they do not enter into that self-love by which he prefers himself so much to this other, and cannot go along with the motive from which he hurt them. They readily, therefore sympathize with the natural resentment of the injured, and the offender becomes the object of their hatred and indignation.<sup>470</sup>

The spectator’s rebuke stems from a violation of a sense of fairness that includes a notion of equality between people, and an excessive or imprudent self-love that is insufficiently limited. To the extent that an agent is able to internalize the impartial spectator, who similarly affirms these values, he is able to properly direct self-interest in consideration of equals. Because

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<sup>466</sup> Ibid., 213 (VI.i.6).

<sup>467</sup> Tribe, “Adam Smith: Critical Theorist?,” 621.

<sup>468</sup> Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 78–9 (II.ii.1.3–5).

<sup>469</sup> Ibid., 79 (II.ii.1.5).

<sup>470</sup> Ibid., 83 (II.ii.2.1).

violations of justice prompt a particular and atypically forceful moral reaction, it demands a more stringent obligation to conform than other virtues. This negative incentive thus compels the agent to judge not only her motivations, but their probable consequences more attentively.

### **Justice and Politics**

The four moral virtues Smith identifies are not only inherent to personal moral character, but are reflected socially as well. In the case of justice and prudence, they are not merely reflected, but are the very foundation of social institutions. Because Smith's conception of justice is "a negative virtue, and only hinders us from hurting our neighbour,"<sup>471</sup> it is unique in two respects. First, it is the very foundation of all social life, as no society could "subsist among those who are at all times ready to hurt and injure one another."<sup>472</sup> Justice is primary because it provides the security that is foundational to any other political, social, or economic dimension of human life. This is an important point, as the primacy of security is often overlooked in traditional interpretations of Smith's thought that focus on *The Wealth of Nations*, which portray economic freedom as primary in his thought. Yet Smith is clear that justice "is the main pillar that upholds the whole edifice [of society]. If it is removed, the great, the immense fabric of human society, ... must in a moment crumble into atoms."<sup>473</sup>

Secondly, the specificity of conduct required by justice make it uniquely capable of forming a body of general laws. The action guiding power of positive virtues like prudence or benevolence is much more uncertain than that of justice, making them an improper foundation for regulating moral conduct.<sup>474</sup> The requirements of justice, on the other hand, are precise,

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<sup>471</sup> Ibid., 82 (II.ii.1.9).

<sup>472</sup> Ibid., 86 (II.ii.3.3).

<sup>473</sup> Ibid., 86 (II.ii.4).

<sup>474</sup> This position is the heart of Smith's criticism of positive moral philosophy and theology, both of which seek to create exacting standards of moral behavior where none can be made, rendering

insofar as injury is considered an evil in any type of life. As such it can be the basis for law, regulating behavior between strangers who know nothing of one another other than they are capable of injuring and being injured. Smith thus concludes it is the negative character of virtue that allows it to be the subject of systematic treatment that can produce a “science of jurisprudence” or “natural jurisprudence.”

In Smith’s *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, the impartial spectator appears not to aid individual moral development, but rather serves a public facing role. In addition to instances in which the impartial spectator makes personal judgments pertaining to a particular situation, the standpoint of the impartial spectator can also judge society’s laws. In the case of justice, Smith argues that it “is violated whenever one is deprived of what he had a right to and could justly demand from others.”<sup>475</sup> Because the injury of injustice is a violation of rights, he employs the impartial spectator to develop conventional categories of rights in new ways, particularly in the case of property, contract, and delinquency, by recasting them in a relational, temporal framework.

Of the four appearances of the impartial spectator in *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, two of them appear in a discussion of property rights, and Smith invokes the impartial spectator to judge claims of occupation—the first instance of taking possession not previously privately owned, and prescription—exclusive usage for a long time. In both of these instances, the approval of the impartial spectator is gained insofar as the expectation of the right-holder is reasonable. Smith does not ground rights in the judgment of the spectator, but rather argues that the spectator confirms or disconfirms the judgment of the right holder vis-à-vis a particular, material context.

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them dogmatic, arbitrary, and repressive. Smith takes particular aim at Christian casuistry, which attempts “to lay down exact and precise rules for the direction of every circumstance of our behavior.” Ibid., 329 (VII.iv.7).

<sup>475</sup> Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, 1978, 7 (A.i.9).

He elaborates this point by way of an example that echoes Locke: gathering apples. Smith affirms that a person, “by pulling an apple” may be judged to correctly claim a right of occupation when, for example, another person can “go to the forest...and pull another”<sup>476</sup>—an argument that resonates with the “enough and as good” clause of Locke’s labor theory.<sup>477</sup> Unlike Locke, however, whose natural law results from amalgamating reason, divine law, and property rights, and whose state of nature is animated by abstract individuals, Smith is interested in how rights claims are judged in society. He consequently dispenses with Locke’s argument in which picking the apple is justified because “every man has a property in his own person,” the “labour of his body, and the work of his hands...are properly his.”<sup>478</sup> Smith rather begins by asking,

How is it that a man by pulling an apple should be imagined to have a right to that apple and a power of excluding all others from it—and that an injury should be conceived to be done when such a subject is taken [from] the possessor.<sup>479</sup>

In other words, why do *others* accept this property claim?

The answer, Smith argues, lies in the sympathetic imagination of the spectator, whose judgment hinges on the possessor’s “reasonable expectation.”<sup>480</sup> In the case of the apple, such an expectation is reasonable because “I have gone already and bestowed my time and pains in

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<sup>476</sup> Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 17 (i.36–7).

<sup>477</sup> “It being by him removed from the common state nature hath placed it in, it hath by this labour something annexed to it, that excludes the common right of other men: for this labour being the unquestionable property of the labourer, no man but he can have a right to what that is once joined to, at least where there is enough, and as good, left in common for others.” Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, (V.26).

<sup>478</sup> *Ibid.*, (V.27).

<sup>479</sup> Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, 1978, 16–17 (A.i.35).

<sup>480</sup> The spectator, “enters into [the agent’s] thoughts and concurs in his opinion that he may form a reasonable expectation of using the fruit or whatever it is in the manner he pleases.” Similarly, in the case of prescription, he argues that “the foundation of this right is the attachment the possessor may be supposed to have formed to what he has long possessed,” and “is derived from the opinion of the spectator that the possessor of a long standing has a just expectation that he may use what has been thus possessed.” Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, 1978, 16–17 (A.i.35–6).

procuring the fruit.”<sup>481</sup> Here Smith incorporates a temporal metric of judgment. It is not an abstract concepts of rights I appeal to when making a property claim, but my future expectations regarding a particular object. The reasonableness of these expectations is a function of my expenditures of time and labor. In other words, Smith argues that it the expenditure of one’s own time in the past or present that is the grounds for property claims. Such claims are affirmed and judged reasonable when expectations regarding the future are properly grounded in time spent. With this move, Smith offers a labor theory that parallels Locke’s, yet is explanatory rather than analytical, relational rather than ideational, causal rather than rational, and judged from the standpoint of a social rather than divine future.

Smith similarly develops the juridical concepts of contract and delinquency along temporal lines. The binding force of a contract, he argues, cannot come from a mere declaration of will. Such a declaration “means no more than that it is the present design of the person...to do so...and all that is required of him to make such a declaration be lawfull is...that it be really his intention at that time to do as he said.”<sup>482</sup> But sincerity regarding a present intention is an insufficient grounds for obligation because a person may “be induced by circumstances to alter his intention.”<sup>483</sup> In other words, though intention references the future, there is no necessary relationship between it and the present moment. Intentions are produced by and limited to the present moment; they express a sincere desire to some action, but do not entail a commitment. As such, Smith argues that obligation is rather established by promise, whereby another person is entreated to depend on the agent to produce what is promised at some future point. The impartial spectator enters to approve of contracts in which the expectations of both the promiser and the

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<sup>481</sup> Ibid., 17 (A.i.37).

<sup>482</sup> Ibid., 87 (A.ii.42–3).

<sup>483</sup> Ibid., 87 (A.ii.43).

promisee are reasonably set. Here again Smith is attentive to the social and temporal realities of human life, and is careful to theorize in terms of them. The essence of a contract, he reveals, is not an agreement between two people, but a commitment to produce a particular future shared by two people. It is time, but more specifically, appropriating ownership of time, that makes a contract more than wishful thinking or fleeting preference.

The temporality of delinquency, which Smith describes as the culpable causing of injury to another, is partially the inverse of contract. The injured party has resentment in the present, regarding the person who caused their injury in the past. The retaliatory impulse of the injured will only dissipate when their injury is somehow repaid. The impartial spectator is thus called upon not to judge expectations regarding the future, but resentment regarding the past. “Injury naturally excites the resentment of the spectator,” he argues, “and the punishment of the offender is reasonable as far as the indifferent spectator can go along with it.”<sup>484</sup> However, Smith also explores crimes that “do not immediately or directly hurt any particular person,” such as when a sentinel falls asleep on his watch.<sup>485</sup> Such delinquency is unique in that it does not relate to a past instance of injury, but is a crime of “remote consequence” that “produce a great disorder in the society.”<sup>486</sup> In such cases, real spectators find no injured party with which to sympathize, and may be inclined to forgive the crime. Alternatively, they may be compelled to condone harsh punishment on account of fear of the risk or severity of future danger. Neither of these affects the impartial spectator, who can adopt the perspective of the past and future, the individual and society. In this way, and in each instance of his appearance in Smith’s treatment of natural

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<sup>484</sup> Ibid., 475 (B.181).

<sup>485</sup> Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 90 (II.ii.3.11).

<sup>486</sup> Ibid.

jurisprudence, the impartial spectator serves as a means by which naturally occurring juridical practices can be corrected.

Justice is not only a necessarily temporal concept for Smith, but one changes over time. That is, he argues that history reveals not only how various institutional and social arrangements lend themselves to certain justifications for practices, but also how these justifications become untenable as those conditions change. This is one of the central arguments of Smith's "four stage" theory. In the area of property rights, for example, he argues that their variation is in part due to the fact that though justice is universally concerned with the prevention of injury, what constitutes injury is socially determined. However, he finds social change to often outpace juridical practices, which can lead to the enforcement of a concept of injury no longer relevant to society. For instance, he argues that the conditions of modern society have eroded the justification for primogeniture under allodial and feudal governments, which rendered their enforcement unjust and led to change, even if delayed.<sup>487</sup> Turning to his historical present, Smith argues that the foundation for certain regulations such as "exclusive privileges of corporation" have their basis in practices that were at the time of their introduction "necessary," yet are nevertheless "detrimental to the community" as it now exists.<sup>488</sup> In so doing, he employs history to make the lived present the site of judgment and critique, thereby making a critical stance towards the future possible.

### **Prudence and Politics**

Where Smith understands justice as the foundation for the primary objective of security in society, he determines prudence to be the basis for political economy. The link between *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations* is most evident in Smith's treatment of

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<sup>487</sup> Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, 1978, 55–61 (A.i.130–145).

<sup>488</sup> *Ibid.*, 85–6 (A.ii.39–41).

prudence. Like justice, “the first and the principle object if prudence” is security.<sup>489</sup> This end is attained through the proper exercise of self-love and self-interest, which orients a person to the present, making her anxious to preserve the present rather than grasp for a future of possible rewards. The prudent person is therefore fundamentally frugal and risk averse, not on account of fear, but as a function of “real knowledge and skill” and “assiduity and industry in the exercise of it,”<sup>490</sup> that results in careful calculations of the probability of success. Prudence nevertheless is drawn towards wealth, not for the sake of its utility, but because wealth constitutes a system of order appealing to the imagination.<sup>491</sup> The imagination attracts us to order, and for material creatures, that order is represented, at least partially, in objects. Thus, we labor not for objects as ends, but because objects are the means by which we can create environments that are soothing to the imagination. Prudence is the virtue that guides this pursuit.

Smith’s identification of imagination rather than self-interest as the well-spring of human action is important, because it allows him to argue that labor is an expression of will, which means it not only does not require coercion,<sup>492</sup> but is an expression of freedom.<sup>493</sup> However, even

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<sup>489</sup> Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 213 (VI.i.6).

<sup>490</sup> Ibid.

<sup>491</sup> He illustrates this claim by way of a wealthy person who enters a room to find that the servant has left all the chairs in the middle of the room and “rather than see them continue in that disorder, perhaps takes the trouble himself to set them all in their places with their backs to the wall.” In so doing, he voluntarily commits himself to needless labor, “since nothing was more easy, than to have set himself down upon one of them, which is probably what he does when his labour is over.” From this Smith concludes, that what the person actually wanted is “not so much this conveniency, as that arrangement of things which promotes it. Yet it is this conveniency which ultimately recommends that arrangement, and *bestows upon it the whole of its propriety and beauty.*” Ibid., 180 (IV.i.4). Emphasis added.

<sup>492</sup> The notion that labor required coercion was predominant during Smith’s time. Hutcheson argues that the general good requires labor, but labor is not secured through the pleasures of the moral senses, so it must be compelled. Mandeville argues that social harmony is achieved through violence that gives wealth to some at the expense of others—a fact that is concealed from society by the concept of virtue. However, Smith severed the connection between self-love



if labor is an essential part of freedom, it is also necessarily expressed within the confines of social arrangements. How relationships are structured fundamentally affects how prudence manifests itself, because human interactions are temporal. This is particularly true for economic relationships, in which contracts, labor, and wages all entail negotiations between the present and the future. Smith finds nothing inherently problematic such relations, and in fact one he views as mutually beneficial and socially productive. However, he acknowledges that power imbalances between the classes disrupt this reciprocity and produce an antagonism he frames in temporal terms. The problem, he explains, is that the interests of employers and labor align only in the abstract, or to be more precise, in the long term. “In the long-run,” he explains, “the workman may be as necessary to his master as his master is to him; but the necessity is not so immediate.”<sup>494</sup> In the present, where power is exercised, the relative power of the employer is always greater than the employed, which functionally arrests workers in the present, thereby largely certainly their ability to prudently pursue the future. However, the relative physical size of the labor force helps to conceal the temporal power held by employers, which helps to make employers seem vulnerable and, when workers begin to organize, in need of legal protection. Smith argues that it is at this point that employers will “call aloud for the assistance of the civil magistrate” to execute laws that prohibit labor organizing.<sup>495</sup> These laws and others that attempt “to regulate the differences between masters and their workmen” further demonstrate employers’

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and idleness, arguing that labor naturally results from imagination, as labor’s very process satisfies the imagination’s desire for order.

<sup>493</sup> Reflecting on the American experience, Smith writes that “to prohibit a great people... from employing their stock and industry in the way that they judge most advantageous to themselves, is a violation of the most sacred rights of mankind.” Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Vol. 2, 582 (IV.vvi.b.44).

<sup>494</sup> Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Vol. 1, ed. William B. Todd, The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith, Vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 84 (I.VIII.12).

<sup>495</sup> *Ibid.*, 84–5 (I.vii.13).

power, as the legislature's "counselors are always the masters,"<sup>496</sup> owing both to their social esteem and the social obscurity of workers.<sup>497</sup> Cumulatively, the combination of the power of employers, the intervention of the state on behalf of employers, and the necessity of "submitting for the sake of present subsistence," culminate in labor's capitulation.<sup>498</sup> Yet despite understanding legislatures to often act in ways that perpetuate an inequality of interests, Smith is also clear that these interventions merely exacerbate an inherent imbalance of power. Addressing this imbalance, paradoxically, requires political intervention into the temporality of economic relations.

At this point it is useful to bring Locke in as a point of comparison, as Smith shares with him two central positions regarding the economy and politics. Both understand society and economy to precede government, with Smith buttressing this position with historical and anthropological investigation. Both also understand government to emerge from the conflicts engendered by economic inequality. "Civil government," Smith writes, "so far as it is instituted for the security of property, is in reality instituted for the defence of the rich against the poor, or of those who have some property against those who have none at all."<sup>499</sup> For Locke, economic inequality reflects a real moral inequality among people, which makes government protection of it noble, or at least, positive. On this point, Smith emphatically disagrees, arguing that "the difference of natural talents in different men, is, in reality, much less than we are aware of," and the difference "between a philosopher and a common street porter, for example, seems to arise not so much from nature, as from habit, custom, and education."<sup>500</sup>

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<sup>496</sup> Ibid., 157 (I.X.II.61).

<sup>497</sup> Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Vol. 2, 795 (V.i.12).

<sup>498</sup> Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Vol. 1, 85 (I.viii.13).

<sup>499</sup> Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Vol. 2, 715 (V.i.12).

<sup>500</sup> Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Vol. 1, 25 (I.ii.2).

Understanding inequality to have a principally social rather than moral cause, his critique is informed by a care for the poor. At many points, Smith argues against poverty in the absolute sense, by way of a keen understanding of the relationship between labor and wages. Because “a man must always live by his work,” he explains,

his wages must at least be sufficient to maintain him. They must even upon most occasions be somewhat more...in order to bring up a family, the labour of the husband and wife together must, even in the lowest species of labour, be able to earn something more than what is precisely necessary for their own maintenance.<sup>501</sup>

His concern is not limited to absolute poverty, however, and he develops arguments for decreasing relative poverty as well. He directly challenges those who deny that laborers need not enjoy an elevated standard of living as the society in which they live becomes more wealthy—an argument that strikes the contemporary reader as quite akin to those who point to the common ownership of “luxuries” like televisions to deny the existence, or to downplay the burden, of poverty in industrial economies. Yet Smith argues that

no society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable. It is but equity, besides, that they who feed, cloth and lodge the whole body of the people, should have such a share of the produce of their own labour as to be themselves tolerably well fed, cloathed, and lodged.<sup>502</sup>

In this argument, made by way of considerations of collective happiness and equity, the moral dimensions of Smith’s economic thought come more sharply into focus. His concern for inequality is not fundamentally economic. It is not efficiency or sustainability that drives his argument, but a moral concern for human dignity, freedom, and equality in the context of social relations that collectively create greater possibilities for self-determination and happiness, while simultaneously and paradoxically undermining these same possibilities for most individuals.

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<sup>501</sup> Ibid., 85–6 (I.viii.15).

<sup>502</sup> Ibid., 96 (I.viii.35–6).

Despite attesting to a natural economic distribution that is illustrated in the most well-known appearance of the invisible hand,<sup>503</sup> Smith nevertheless concedes that moral sentiments are often dissatisfied with natural distribution, and “man is by nature directed to correct, in some measure, that distribution of things which she herself would otherwise have made.”<sup>504</sup> This means, Raphael argues, that because both economic tendencies and common moral sentiments are products of nature, “nature is inconsistent.”<sup>505</sup> For his part, Smith is not perplexed by this tension, as he posits that distribution, whether natural or augmented, “are calculated to promote the same great end, the order of the world, and the perfection and happiness of human nature.”<sup>506</sup> However, despite this stated parity, Smith clearly sees moral sentiments as a potentially positive corrective, to natural distribution. The problem, as he sees it, is that such interventions also have the potential to do more harm than good.

Nature, Smith posits, “bestows upon every virtue, and upon every vice, that precise reward or punishment which is best fitted to encourage the one, or to restrain the other.”<sup>507</sup> This is why naturally occurring economic distribution is just—outcomes are not random, but reflect a proper judgment of the virtue of any action. Human judgment is more complicated, however, because it considers not just propriety (intent), but merit (consequence), which brings a relational framework into judgment that nature lacks. This is why though nature would decide the

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<sup>503</sup> “By preferring the support of domestick to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it.” *Ibid.*, 456 (IV.ii.9).

<sup>504</sup> Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 168 (III.5.9).

<sup>505</sup> Raphael, *The Impartial Spectator*, 62.

<sup>506</sup> Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 168 (III.5.9).

<sup>507</sup> *Ibid.*

“industrious knave” that cultivates the harvest should reap the harvest, while the “indolent good man” who leaves it uncultivated should starve, human judgment may conclude that,

the good qualities of the one are greatly over-recompensed by those advantages which they procure him, and that the omissions of the other are by far too severely punished by the distress which they natural bring upon him.<sup>508</sup>

This inconsistency between the rewards and punishments of nature and moral sentiments leads to the creation of laws, the merit of which, for Smith, depends on whether they are motivated by virtue or by its corrupt counterpart, vice. And, unfortunately, he finds vice a far more prevalent motive.

One reason for this is explored by Nathan Rosenberg, who explains that in addition to articulating the conflicting forces that motive human behavior, Smith also ascribes an underlying unscrupulousness to human personality that will “quite willingly employ predatory practices so long as such practices are available to him.”<sup>509</sup> If left unattended, prudent self-interest is easily distorted into avarice, and the wealthy employ government to extend and protect their power. This is the tendency Smith diagnoses in his critique of modern government, which is a relatively new phenomenon, not open to pre-commercial societies. On the one hand, the loss of dependency relationships that typified traditional societies opens new horizons of freedom. However, this loss parallels a loss of a moral community of spectators, as commercial society is fluidly organized by the anonymity of wages. If moral theory depends on spectatorship, such anonymity poses a real challenge to moral action.

What this means is that in a commercial society, not only is the natural economic distribution inconsistent with moral judgment, but the mere absence of external restraints is insufficient to achieving a morally just distribution because of the human tendency towards

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<sup>508</sup> Ibid.

<sup>509</sup> Nathan Rosenberg, “Some Institutional Aspects of the Wealth of Nations,” *Journal of Political Economy* 68, no. 6 (December 1960): 558.

predatory behavior that is exacerbated by anonymity. So, however just the natural distribution Smith refers to is, it is a fundamentally theoretical notion, as actual humans are motivated to alter relationships and outcomes according to public or private interests. And, it is because private interests are socially esteemed and powerful that public institutions are routinely employed to protect private interests. The remedy for this problem is not less government per se, however, but correctly motivated institutional mechanisms and policies.

What is needed is institutional mechanisms that counteract the avarice of the rich and remedy the corruption of the poor, by, deterring actions that “hurt in any degree the interest of any one order of citizens, for no other purpose but to promote that of some other” and to instead promote “an equality of treatment” that respects interests equally.<sup>510</sup> This entails, for example, preventing regulations that curtail the power of labor<sup>511</sup> and fighting the enervation of workers through public education. In this way, laws that reflect the virtues of justice and benevolence can create the framework for an equality of interests that produces a just distribution of wealth that is different from that of the invisible hand, but no less natural and no less just. To the contrary, to the extent that moral spectators judge from the standpoint of the impartial spectator, they have the potential to create a system that is more just insofar as it expands the possibilities for happiness across all sectors of society.

As surprising as it may be to discover a positive role for government in economic relations, given Smith’s reputation attesting to the contrary, what is most fascinating about his thought is revealed by exploring the relationship between institutions and human behavior.

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<sup>510</sup> Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Vol. 2, 654 (IV.vii.30).

<sup>511</sup> “when the regulation, therefore, is in favour of the workmen, it is always just and equitable; but it is sometimes otherwise when in favour of the masters.” Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Vol. 1, 157–8 (I.X.ii.61).

Unlike Locke, for whom moral sufficiency depended on individual internal reason, Smith understands human reason, morality, and psychology to be inexorably conditioned by society. In short, how societies are organized affect how people act in them, and to this end, large portions of *The Wealth of Nations* are dedicated to analyzing various institutional frameworks. What this treatment reveals is that the real power of institutions lie in their ability to shape temporal perceptions. He consequently defends the importance of governing for public rather than private interest not for the sake of an abstract commitment to virtue or concept of morality. Rather, these interventions are virtuous because they structure relationships in ways that expand and stabilize the horizon of the future in such a way that encourages virtuous behavior from members of society.

These are the three primary ways Smith understands institutions to intervene in temporal perceptions: they give to structure the future, expand its horizon, and stabilize it. Institutions give structure to the future through incentives, by creating a framework of rewards and punishments that shape motivation. He explains that if a society wishes to cultivate the prudent pursuit of self-interest, an institutional order is required in which rewards for effort are neither too little nor too great. He illustrates this point with examples at both extremes—under conditions of slavery, in which labor is entirely severed from its rewards, Smith writes,

A person who can acquire no property, can have no other interest but to eat as much, and to labour as little as possible. Whatever work he does beyond what is sufficient to purchase his own maintenance, can be squeezed out of him by violence only, and not by any interest of his own.<sup>512</sup>

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<sup>512</sup> Ibid., 387–8 (III.ii.9). Also, “Slaves, however, are very seldom inventive; and all the most important improvements, either in machinery, or in the arrangement and distribution of work which facilitate and abridge labour, have been the discoveries of freemen. Should a slave propose any improvement of this kind, his master would be very apt to consider the proposal as the suggestion of laziness, and a desire to save his own labour at the master’s expence.” Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Vol. 2, 684 (IV.ix.47).

At the other extreme, if “a man of large revenue, whatever may be his profession, thinks he ought...to spend a great part of his time in festivity, in vanity, and in dissipation.”<sup>513</sup> Recall that for Smith, humans are compelled of their own volition to labor, for the order found in the process, and the object thereby produced. Moreover, he finds a causal relationship between labor and property, in which the time and effort of the former creates the latter, which means that ideas of the future inform labor in the present. The problem, as he sees it, is that institutions can disrupt or even sever this relationship. By arguing that indolence is a rational response to a context of either excessive reward or excessive punishment, Smith seeks to illuminate how the outcomes of one’s personal effort depend on the context in which they are expended, which reflexively shapes motivation. By structuring incentives, institutions structure the future in a way that informs the present—we act in the present on consideration of possible futures, and these futures are structured by social institutions in a very concrete way. It is therefore necessary to carefully consider how institutions implicitly and explicitly structure ideas about the future.

The determining factor for whether future incentives limit or expand possibilities in the future, for Smith, is whether they are structured in private or public interest. He illustrates the former by analyzing the history of apprenticeships, which he finds to be the necessary consequence of the European policy dividing skilled and common labor.<sup>514</sup> Though once an appropriate division, Smith argues that the system does not cohere with commercial society and can only be preserved by regulations that emerge from a mutually beneficial financial relationship between corporations and kingdoms.<sup>515</sup> He then analyzes these regulations in order

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<sup>513</sup> Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Vol. 2, 813–4 (V.i.3.42).

<sup>514</sup> Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Vol. 1, 119 (I.x.1.8).

<sup>515</sup> Corporations are granted exclusive privileges by the crown, in exchange for a fee. Companies then establish company by-laws dictating the terms of apprenticeships in order to control wages



to undermine defenses of apprenticeships. Smith's preoccupation in this discussion is the affect of the apprenticeship on the apprentice, and more specifically, the negative impacts of its duration. For the years spent as an apprentice, one's labor and wages belong to the master, disconnecting the expense of time in the present from future rewards. It is this separation, he argues that causes an apprentice to "likely be idle...because he has no immediate interest to be otherwise."<sup>516</sup> Because present interest is informed by ideas of the future, when the future is not one's own, the present is stultifying. Moreover, preserving such lengthy durations in a society in which innovation and change cause timescales to decrease only exacerbates this effect. Though designed to preserve past methods and averse to change, in a modern economy, the apprentice system is revealed to be one that forecloses or limits futures rather than expand them. This is why if they were removed, "the publick would be a gainer."<sup>517</sup>

Where Smith identifies the extended duration of apprenticeships to limit future possibilities, however, he identifies the emergence of extended lease durations with expanded future possibilities. This is because when "farmers have a lease for a term of years, they may sometimes find it in their interest to lay out part of their capital in the further improvement of the farm; because they may sometimes expect to recover it, with a large profit, before the expiration of the lease."<sup>518</sup> Unlike the duration of apprenticeships, in this case increased timescale makes it possible to endeavor for remote possibilities otherwise impossible. Moreover, Smith shows that

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and competition, and use their political influence to have these regulations "confirmed by a public law of the kingdom." Ibid., 136 (I.x.2.6). Later, Smith argues that it is to prevent the "reduction of price...that all corporations, and the greater part of corporation laws have been established." Ibid., 140 (X.i.2.16).

<sup>516</sup> Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations, Vol. 1*, 139 (I.x.2.14).

<sup>517</sup> Ibid., 140 (I.X.2.16).

<sup>518</sup> Ibid., 392 (III.ii.14).

though longer leases first emerged as a concession from landlord's demanding higher rents,<sup>519</sup> they subsequently became regulated in ways that provided greater security to tenants. This security came with the invention of ejectment that entitled damages and possessions to the tenant, in order to curtail eviction, and by protecting the validity of leases "against every future purchaser or proprietor of the land."<sup>520</sup> England offered more robust rights still, stipulating life long leases<sup>521</sup> and entitling every "lessee to vote for a member of parliament."<sup>522</sup> This is why, he argues, in England, the "security of the tenant is equal to that of the proprietor."<sup>523</sup> And, he concludes, it is the laws granting security, personal freedom, and equality to the less powerful class of tenants that "have perhaps contributed more to the present grandeur of England than all their boasted regulations of commerce taken together."<sup>524</sup>

Smith further argues that these laws benefit both tenants and landlords in the long run, and that the landlord's impulse to implement laws "calculated for what they supposed the interest of the proprietor," such as a preference for short leases that allow landlords to have full use of their land,<sup>525</sup> are misguided because they reflect a narrow conception of self-interest that fails to

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<sup>519</sup> Tenants would agree "upon one condition only, that they should be secured in their possession, for such a term of years as might give them time to recover with profit whatever they should lay out in the further improvement of the land...hence the origin of long leases." Ibid., 421 (III.iv.13).

<sup>520</sup> Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Vol. 2, 678 (IV.ix.38).

<sup>521</sup> As opposed to France, in which leases have been expanded to twenty-seven years, "a period still too short to encourage the tenant to make the most important improvements." Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Vol. 1, 392 (III.ii.16).

<sup>522</sup> Ibid., Vol 1 392 (III.ii.14).

<sup>523</sup> Ibid., 392 (III.ii.14). In an earlier draft, he writes, "the advantage which agriculture derives in England from the law which gives certain lease holders a right of voting for Members of Parliament, which thereby establishes a mutual dependence between the landlord and the tenant, and makes the former, if he has any regard to his interest in the county, very cautious of attempting to raise his rents, or of demanding any other oppressive exactions of the latter." Ibid., 392 (III.ii.fn43).

<sup>524</sup> Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Vol. 1, 392 (III.ii.14).

<sup>525</sup> Ibid., 392 (III.ii.16).

consider one's own position socially and impartially. As such, he argues, what the landlord's take to be their own self-interest is actually motivated by "avarice and injustice," which is problematic because they "are always short-sighted, and they did not foresee how much this regulation must obstruct improvement, and thereby hurt in the long-run the real interest of the landlord."<sup>526</sup>

Rosenberg argues that Smith is seeking an institutional arrangement that will "cut off all avenues (and they are many) along which wealth may be pursued without contributing to the welfare of society...and to make possible the pursuit of self-interest *only* in a socially beneficial fashion."<sup>527</sup> However, what is revealed in Smith's analysis of various institutional arrangements, is not so much the organization per se, but how organization shapes time perception, because it is temporal ideas that primarily incentivize short or long term, risk averse or risk-seeking behavior. By increasing the timescale of one's personal future and simultaneously securing that future, long leases expand the horizon of both the individual and the society. It is therefore emblematic of the kinds of policies that contribute to the common good, as it protects individual and collective long-term interests against individual short-term interests. Without such protections, the unknown future and present inequality would nearly always incentivize the kind of exploitative, short-term thinking that has, to Smith's mind, typified much of pre-commercial history, and continues to threaten commercial society. Smith's position here, in many ways echoes Hobbes—it is not personal moral failure that causes bad behavior, but uncertainty and

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<sup>526</sup> Ibid.

<sup>527</sup> Rosenberg, "Some Institutional Aspects of the Wealth of Nations," 560. Rosenberg's argument, focusing on the role of social organization in Smith's thought is novel and important. However, the effectiveness of his argument is limited by the determinism he reads into Smith's thought. There is no need to consider Smith's moral thought if behavior is entirely determined by organization. On my reading of Smith, Rosenberg misses a step—organization does not directly determine behavior, but it does powerfully shape ideas about the future, which in turn informs the motivation for behavior.

insecurity, and it is only once security extends beyond the night that long-term communal activities like agriculture become possible.

In addition to constructing incentives, and establishing an equality of interests, which respectively structure the future and expand its horizon, Smith also charged government institutions with aiding progress by stabilizing the present through public institutions. He determines the institution most essential to this goal to be a system of public schooling. Viewing education not as a source of social disorder but of stabilization, Smith argued strongly in favor of compulsory general education for all children. Education helps ameliorate the debilitating effects the division of labor, the specialization of which “confines the views of men,” and which must be much more the case when a person’s whole attention is bestowed on the 17<sup>th</sup> part of a pin or the 80<sup>th</sup> part of a button” and is why “in every commercial nation the low people are exceedingly stupid.”<sup>528</sup> We get hints of Smith’s ambivalence about capitalism here—the division of labor is essential to the development of industry that expands the possibilities of human existence. Yet, the increasing tedium of its specialization creates workers who are “mutilated and deformed” in their intellectual faculties.<sup>529</sup> Education is thus a moral good, insofar as education helps workers better understand their own interests. It is simultaneously a social good, for though the state,

derives no inconsiderable advantage from their instruction...the more they are instructed, the less liable they are to the delusions of enthusiasm and superstition...In free countries, where the safety of government depends very much upon the favourable judgment which the people may form of its conduct, it must surely be of the highest importance that they should not be disposed to judge rashly or capriciously concerning it.<sup>530</sup>

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<sup>528</sup> Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, 1978, 539 (B.328–9).

<sup>529</sup> Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Vol. 2, 778 (V.i.61).

<sup>530</sup> Ibid.

Here again, Smith illustrates how policies designed to create greater social equality and power, though they may first appear as anathema to the interest of the powerful, in truth simply contextualize self-interest in a social reality on a longer timescale.

### **Social Corruption and Political Salvation**

Smith identifies a dialectic relationship between moral development and economic progress that is historically evident, but not necessary due to corruption that stymies this progress. One of these is innate, stemming from the very foundation of human subjectivity, imagination. For although Smith understands imagination to make moral experience possible, its primary motivation is not to seek morality but order. The imagination's powerful drive for harmony entails the possibility of moral and political corruption, as it creates systems of order that imposes a sense of realism. The love of system thus opens us to the possibility of deception, for when imagination finds order it tends to produce moral or political conviction rooted in our mistaken belief in the objective validity or truth of a given system. This deception carries with it the risk of becoming a "man of system," who believes that adhering to the principles of a particular concept of order will make its latent truth manifest. This is problematic, Smith argues, as it often leads to attempts to wield this knowledge as power to bring the human world under control. Religiously, it manifests as an attempt to overly control others through the exaltation of precise systems of duty, that are a "perversion of our natural sentiments" and produce an "erroneous conscience."<sup>531</sup>

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<sup>531</sup> Smith offers an illustration in Voltaire's *Mahomet*, in which two young people are commanded to kill an enemy of their religion, and as they do so are tortured by the "struggle between the idea of the indispensableness of religious duty on the one side, and...love for humanity and virtue of the person whome they are going to destroy on the other." Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 176–7 (III.6.12).

“The same principle, the same love of system,” is also politically dangerous to “those institutions which tend to promote the public welfare.”<sup>532</sup> It is natural, Smith argues, to contemplate the “perfection” of a “great system of government,” because it “pleases us” to imagine “the wheels of the political machine” moving with “harmony and ease,” and “we are uneasy to remove any obstruction that can in the least disturb or encumber the regularity of its motions.”<sup>533</sup> Moreover, this “spirit of system” can help to rouse the “public spirit” in legislators who are otherwise unmoved by sympathy for humanity, and this is why “the study of politics” and “systems of government,” have a “useful” role in “promoting the happiness of society.”<sup>534</sup>

Despite the positive role that a “spirit of system” may play in politics, Smith nevertheless cautions against becoming a “man of system” who’s object of motivation is the system rather than the state.<sup>535</sup> Unlike the person of “public spirit,” who is motivated to “promote the happiness of our fellow-creatures” and whose behavior arises from “fellow-feeling” and “pure sympathy,”<sup>536</sup> the,

man of system...is often so enamoured with the supposed beauty of his own ideal plan of government, that he cannot suffer the smallest deviation from any part of it...He seems to imagine that he can arrange the different members of a great society with as much ease as the hand arranges the different pieces upon a chess-board. He does not consider that the pieces upon the chess-board have no other principle of motion besides that which the hand impresses upon them; but that, in the great chess-board of human society, every single piece has a principle motion of its own, altogether different from that which the legislature might chuse to impress upon it.<sup>537</sup>

Emboldened by a belief that his system is universal and complete, the man of system attempts to overly control the future. But, Smith argues, the future cannot be meticulously planned in this

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<sup>532</sup> Ibid., 185 (IV.i.11).

<sup>533</sup> Ibid.

<sup>534</sup> Ibid., 185–7 (IV.i.11).

<sup>535</sup> Ibid., 234 (VI.ii.2.18).

<sup>536</sup> Ibid., 185 (IV.1.11).

<sup>537</sup> Ibid., 234–5 (VI.ii.2.17).

way because though the world be a world of systems, it is a world of fundamental uncertainty, because these systems are complicated, overlapping, and often produce unintended consequences. Further, the causal force of history is neither ideational or material, but moral, and moral personality, which is materially and ideationally mediated, can be shaped, but not determined. This reflects Smith's position that history is a story of the unintended consequences of moral freedom, that are apparent only after the fact, which helps to illuminate the present, but offers no clear path to the future.

This is why he cautions against refusing to relinquish an ideal plan and adapt to reality—a criticism he brings directly to bear on Great Britain, the rulers of which “have, for more than a century past, amused the people with the imagination that they possessed a great empire on the west side of the Atlantic. This empire, however, has hitherto existed in imagination only.”<sup>538</sup> It is time, he continues, to awake from this “golden dream...and endeavor to accommodate her future views and designs to the real mediocrity of her circumstances.”<sup>539</sup> Though imagination may compel us to act for an idea that appears as real, this “intoxicated” impulse must be curbed, in favor of thinking that is rooted in the social and material present and which expands the timescale of assessment. In this way, both atemporal idealism, and short-term mercurial thinking can be guarded against.

The ordering imperative of the imagination also leads to another prevalent source of corruption, the love of wealth. Smith argues that “if we consider the real satisfaction” of any object “by itself and separated from the beauty of that arrangement which is fitted to promote it, it will always appear in the highest degree contemptible and trifling.”<sup>540</sup> Unfortunately,

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<sup>538</sup> Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Vol. 2, 947 (V.iii.92).

<sup>539</sup> Ibid.

<sup>540</sup> Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 183 (IV.i.9).

we rarely view it in this abstract and philosophical light. We naturally confound it in our imagination with the order, the regular and harmonious movement of the system...of which it is produced.<sup>541</sup>

This “confounding” occurs because we confuse the beauty of the system with the reality of things. In other words, we mistake our imagination’s satisfaction in the order of things for satisfaction found in objects themselves and are therefore driven towards accumulation. This mistake is compounded by our desire for the approval others, and spectators sympathize with the wealthy and powerful.<sup>542</sup> Consequently, we think a life filled with beautiful things will make us happy both because objects are personally satisfying and because others will approve of our beautifully ordered collection.

Unfortunately, though the “pleasures of wealth” may strike the imagination as “well worth all the toil and anxiety” required to attain them, Smith nevertheless concludes that this is a “deception,”<sup>543</sup> and one that leaves us “constantly dissatisfied.”<sup>544</sup> In contemplation of “the poor man son, whom heaven in its anger visited with ambition,” Smith writes that,

When he begins to look around him, admires the condition of the rich...He thinks if he had attained all these, he would sit still contentedly, and be quiet, enjoying himself in the thought of the happiness and tranquillity of his situation. He is enchanted with the *distant idea* of this felicity...to obtain the conveniences which these afford, he submits in the first year, nay in the first month of his application, to more fatigue of body and more uneasiness of mind than he could have suffered through the whole of his life from the want of them...For this purpose he makes his court to all mankind; he serves those whom he hates, and is obsequious to those whom he despises. Through the whole of his life he pursues the idea of a certain *artificial* and elegant repose which he may never arrive at, for which he sacrifices a real tranquillity that is at all times in his power, and if in the extremity

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<sup>541</sup> Ibid.

<sup>542</sup> Both actual spectators and the impartial spectator approval of wealth is “disinterested” because it is not a function of object’s utility but for “the ingenious and artful adjustment of those means to the end for which they were intended,” for their aesthetic beauty, the order of which equally satisfies the imagination. Ibid., 17 (I.i.3.2), 182 (IV.1.8), 180–181 (IV.1.4–7).

<sup>543</sup> Ibid., 183 (IV.i.9).

<sup>544</sup> Ibid., 261 (VI.iii.51).



of old age he should at last attain to it, he will find it to be in no respect preferable to that humble security and contentment which he had abandoned for it.<sup>545</sup>

Though the happiness wealth promises is both impossibly distant and illusory, its deception is nevertheless so great that we plunge ourselves into a world of unceasing work to obtain a “few trifling conveniences” that require “the labour of a life to raise” yet “which threaten every moment to overwhelm” a person and expose her to constant anxiety, fear, sorrow, disease, danger, and death.<sup>546</sup> The picture Smith paints is a bleak one, though one he is ambivalent about, as “it is this deception which rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind.”<sup>547</sup> This deception encourages the expenditure of more effort than necessary for satisfying our needs, induces us towards accumulation and drives the economy towards complexity. Thus, for Smith it is the context of our deception that leads to the creation of conditions that make possible the kinds of social and political improvements he seeks to promote.

The modern redemption of accumulation—what was then referred to as luxury,<sup>548</sup> was already well-established by Smith’s time. Earlier philosophers like Mandeville, were “experimenting with a new way of seeing things, where the limitlessness of desire, far from being the destruction of the world, is its salvation: the very force that runs through history and makes it intelligible.”<sup>549</sup> Though lacking this celebratory optimism, Smith could not fail to recognize that held a certain amount of truth—for better or for worse we are compelled to accumulate what we view as the means to happiness in a process that stunts our own happiness yet nevertheless leads to the general benefit of society. Smith was not oblivious to the potentially

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<sup>545</sup> Ibid., 181 (IV.i.8).

<sup>546</sup> Ibid., 182–3 (IV.i.9).

<sup>547</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie, The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 183 (IV.1.9).

<sup>548</sup> Against ancient and modern conceptions in which luxury was a mortal threat to the body and soul.

<sup>549</sup> Buchan, *The Authentic Adam Smith*, 94.

damaging consequences of advancing commercial society, yet he argues that internal mechanisms exist that promote rather than undermine virtuous conduct.<sup>550</sup> This does not allow him to resolve the paradox he identifies, however it does salve it—as with the “spirit of systems,” the personally damaging and socially destabilizing tendencies prompted by the illusions of imagination can be restrained through moral development.

Aside of the corruption stemming from the innate human tendencies to seek order and approval, both of which are combatted through personal moral development, Smith finds the greatest source of corruption to have a social cause. In tracing historical development, he finds the changing nature of economic relationships to alter the meaning of injury, which results in legislative changes. But this process is not synchronous, and political institutions are slow to respond. This results in the enforcement of outdated rules that no longer correspond to present conditions, and a political failure to consider the future consequences of social reorganization. It is the latter of these that Smith finds most troubling, as he finds emerging, and historically unprecedented forms of economic organization to engender the corruption of prudence in a way that is socially dangerous. In particular, he finds the organization of the corporation to affect the temporal calculation of prudence, by both severing cause from effect and by shrinking the timescale of calculation.

It is well-known that Smith was a critic of mercantilist and monopolistic policies, but these criticisms are often characterized as either being representative of his anti-statist, economic individualism, or rather made irrelevant by the supersession of late stage capitalism.<sup>551</sup> Though it

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<sup>550</sup> Tribe, “Adam Smith: Critical Theorist?,” 620.

<sup>551</sup> This tendency reflects the degree to which economists have determined Smith’s legacy. For an example of the former, see John Maloney, “Gladstone, Peel and the Corn Laws,” in *Free Trade and Its Reception 1815-1960*, ed. Andrew Marrison (London: Routledge, 1998), 28–47. For the latter, see Friedman, “Adam Smith’s Relevance for 1976,” 7–8.

may be true that the joint stock companies that drew Smith's sustained reproach are a feature of an obsolete economy, they are not, as Muthu demonstrates, "simply subunits of states," because "in Smith's view, joint stock companies concentrated, exercised, and abused their institutional power in unique ways."<sup>552</sup> And indeed, one of the most salient features of these companies is an organization structure that was fundamentally new in Smith's day, and archetypical in ours—the corporation. Though Smith is critical of state institutions and interventions, the driving force of his critique is rather the novel structure of corporations and the incentives created by its relations. By reexamining his critique with an eye towards the dynamic between economic relationships and personal motivation, new insights into his thought with striking relevance to contemporary life emerge.

In *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith describes prudence to be a virtue, the cultivation of which, helps a person to overcome the near universal human tendency to over-value reward and to under-value risk. He writes, that "the chance of gain is naturally over-valued, we may learn from the universal success of lotteries"<sup>553</sup> and "that the chance of loss is frequently under-valued...we may learn from the very moderate profit of insurers."<sup>554</sup> Prudence corrects this tendency by developing a faculty of temporal calculation rooted in the material present. Unlike the certainty of the present, the future is always uncertain, which therefore engenders caution in the pursuit of future rewards. As such, prudence makes a person fundamentally risk averse. However, the actions of members of a corporation are typified by risk-seeking behavior, a

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<sup>552</sup> Sankar Muthu, "Adam Smith's Critique of International Trading Companies: Theorizing 'Globalization' in the Age of Enlightenment," *Political Theory* 36, no. 2 (April 2008): 186.

<sup>553</sup> Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Vol. 1, 125 (I.x.27).

<sup>554</sup> *Ibid.*, 125 (I.x.28).

phenomenon Smith traces to a few key features of their organization, “which differ in several respects, not only from regulated companies, but from private copartners.”<sup>555</sup>

Essential among these features is the limited liability assumed by partners. Unlike other company structures in which “each partner is bound for the debts contracted by the company to the whole extent of his fortune,” in a corporation, “each partner is bound only by the extent of his share.”<sup>556</sup> Though prudence tempers reward seeking behavior by consideration of risk, limited liability entails a “total exemption from trouble and from risk, beyond a limited sum,” which upsets the relationship between risk and reward sufficiently enough so that people who would “upon no account, hazard their fortunes in a private copartnery” are nevertheless encouraged to “become adventurers” in a corporation.<sup>557</sup> Further, the actions of corporations are determined by a board of directors, who are similarly insulated from risk because they are “the managers rather of other people’s money than of their own.” For this reason, Smith argues, they do not “watch over it with the same anxious vigilance with which the partners in a private copartnery frequently watch over their own,” resulting in “negligence and profusion...in the management of the affairs of such a company.”<sup>558</sup> Collectively, these features of corporate organization make great personal rewards possible at little personal cost.

The severing of personal consequence from personal action engenders a particular pathology. Although Smith expends a considerable amount of energy critiquing the monopolistic practices of joint stock companies, it is the “organization and manner in which they operate” that

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<sup>555</sup> Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Vol. 2, 740 (V.i.e.15).

<sup>556</sup> *Ibid.*, 740–1 (V.i.e.17).

<sup>557</sup> *Ibid.*, 741 (V.i.e.18).

<sup>558</sup> *Ibid.*

compels monopoly seeking behavior.<sup>559</sup> Although corporations are structured in such a way that maximizes risk-seeking, this is not because its members are blind to risk. To the contrary, it is precisely their accurate assessment of risk that gives rise to aggressive risk-seeking's twin phenomenon, aggressive security seeking. That is, rather than overvaluing their own ability to turn a profit while turning a blind eye to the downsides of risky economic ventures, traders, in this instance, pursue security even more aggressively. In the context of accelerated anxiety, a kind of Hobbesian parallel emerges, as the actions engendered by an infinite security problem are socially destabilizing. The primary way in which corporations seek security is by manipulating systems to offset risk through government protections and offsetting its costs to others. Unlike the prudent man who brings risk under his control, the corporate man is a "man of system," who attempts to rework the system to prevent loss. Such endeavors are not only doomed to fail on account of Smith's aforementioned critique, but because this system is fundamentally untenable. Because risk and uncertainty are intrinsic features of the future, so too is loss. Therefore, a system that facilitates maximum personal gain insulated from risk does not eliminate risk, but rather transfers its losses. In so doing, the pathology of corporations engenders behavior that destabilizes the security that is the very precondition for commercial society.

Smith demonstrates the consequences of the pathology of corporations by way of a lengthy historical analysis, in which he focuses primarily on the joint stock companies

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<sup>559</sup> Muthu, "Adam Smith's Critique of International Trading Companies: Theorizing 'Globalization' in the Age of Enlightenment." Though Muthu does not argue for institutional determinism as Rosenberg, neither does he interrogate the necessity he attributes to the actions of corporations, leaving the relationship between social organization and personal motivation unexplored. This is likely a necessary omission, however, as the heart of his argument is an incredibly persuasive account of Smith's prescient critique of globalization.

established to develop trade.<sup>560</sup> These kinds of ventures, in so far as they develop new resources and routes, begin as de facto monopolies. Yet, he somewhat surprisingly concedes that it “may not be unreasonable” for the state to grant such a company exclusive trade rights for some number of years because “it is the easiest and most natural way in which the state can recompense them for hazarding a dangerous and expensive experiment, of which the publick is afterwards to reap the benefit.”<sup>561</sup> However, regardless of whether a corporation’s exclusivity is de facto or de jure, Smith notes that on account of the “folly, negligence, and profusion”<sup>562</sup> engendered by corporate organization, corporations are soon prompted to lobby the government for protection. The efforts of “merchants and master manufacturers” to gain legislative subsidies and trade protections are generally effective, because these they “commonly employ the largest capitals, and who by their wealth draw to themselves the greatest share of publick consideration.”<sup>563</sup> Unfortunately, the deception of wealth is compounded in the case of corporate interests. It is the ability to command large amounts of capital that garners public esteem, but the inefficiencies and injustices produced by corporate organization cause corporations to leverage

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<sup>560</sup> Smith marks a distinction between monopoly seeking corporations and ones that do not seem to require exclusivity from the state: banking, insurance, infrastructure management, and water trade. In an interesting underestimation, he argues that these industries have a kind of internal logic or “routine” that entail rules that are “extremely dangerous” to depart from, and which prevent “speculation of extraordinary gain” in banking, for example. He ascribes a kind of systemic logic to these operations that somehow supersedes the pathology he ascribes corporations. As the financial crisis of 2008 reveals, however, corporate pathology is not inhibited by reckless speculation, irrespective of systemic logic. Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Vol. 2, 756 (V.i.e.33).

<sup>561</sup> Ibid., 754 (V.i.e.30). Smith comments elsewhere on the usefulness of temporary monopolies and likens them to patent rights that can be granted for a temporary period on the ground of equity—a temporary protection allows the merit and profitability to the public to be accurately assessed and appropriate rewards apportioned. Cf. Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, 1982, 83 (A.ii.31–3).

<sup>562</sup> Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Vol. 2, 745 (V.i.e.22).

<sup>563</sup> Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Vol. 1, 266 (I.xi.p.10).

this esteem politically against the public—to conceal losses by extracting further capital from the public, thereby increasing wealth and public esteem.

Smith contends that the “interests of dealers, in any particular branch of trade or manufactures, is always in some respects different from, and even in opposite to, that of the publick.” This difference of interest manifests itself politically in dealers’ attempts to “raise their profits above what they naturally would be” by levying “an absurd tax upon the rest of their fellow-citizens.”<sup>564</sup> Merchants further seek to depress wages, by asserting that increased wages cause low foreign sales<sup>565</sup> and high domestic prices.<sup>566</sup> This, despite the fact that the relationship between prices and wages is akin to “simple interest” and that between price and profit “operates like compound interest.”<sup>567</sup> In addition to these domestic policies, corporations will seek to perpetuate their existence by seeking needless and wasteful colonies.<sup>568</sup> Each of these maneuvers reflect aggressive security seeking made possible by the organization of corporations. However, far from arguing a kind of structural determinism, in which behavior is necessarily compelled, Smith argues that these individuals engage in an intentional conspiracy, to “deceive and even

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<sup>564</sup> Ibid., 267 (I.xi.p.10).

<sup>565</sup> “Merchants frequently complain of the high wages of British labour as the cause of their manufactures being undersold in foreign markets; but they are silent about the high profits of stock. They complain of the extravagant gain of other people; but they say nothing of their own.” Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Vol. 2, 599 (IV.vii.c.29).

<sup>566</sup> “Our merchants and master-manufacturers complain much of the bad effects of high wages in raising the price... They say nothing concerning the bad effects of high profits. They are silent with regard to the pernicious effects of their own gains. They complain only of those of other people.” Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Vol. 1, 115 (I.ix.24).

<sup>567</sup> Ibid. For an extended discussion of Smith’s treatment of merchant’s and manufacturer’s deception of the public to increase profits see: David McNally, *Against the Market: Political Economy, Market Socialism and the Marxist Critique* (London: New York : Verso, 1993), 51–55.

<sup>568</sup> Though modern commercial societies have moved away from traditional colonial practices, reading Smith’s analysis conjures vivid parallels between the contemporary prison and military industrial complex.

oppress the publick, and who accordingly have, upon many occasions, both deceived and oppressed it.”<sup>569</sup> In this way, Smith describes with almost comic irony, how “a single order of men”<sup>570</sup> can orchestrate policies that are “very likely to bring on the most dangerous disorders upon the whole body politick.”<sup>571</sup>

Though Smith’s political critique is often framed as an paean of the free market, upon closer inspection it is clear that the true object of his criticism is not intervention but collusion. The problem is not that corporations are state run, but rather that they capture the state—the problem is political subservience to particular economic interests that necessarily undermine the public interest. On this topic, Smith writes in a letter, that trade regulations “may, I think, be demonstrated to be in every case a complete piece of dupery, by which the interest of the State and the nation is constantly sacrificed to that of some particular class of traders.”<sup>572</sup> The fundamental incongruity of private economic interests and public political interests is made all the more evident, he argues in foreign lands where joint stock companies serve as de facto sovereigns yet “still consider as their principle business, and by a strange absurdity, regard the character of sovereign as but an appendix to that of the merchant, as something which ought to be made subservient to it.”<sup>573</sup> It is precisely the subservience of politics to economic interests that Smith identifies as the problem. Such a context reveals both the devastation wrought by a

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<sup>569</sup> Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Vol. 1, 267 (I.xi.p.10). Cf. *Ibid.*, 145 (I.x.c.27). “People of the same trade seldom meet together...but the conversation ends in conspiracy against the publick, or some contrivance to raise price.”

<sup>570</sup> Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Vol. 2, 613 (IV.vii.c.62).

<sup>571</sup> *Ibid.*, 605 (IV.vii.43).

<sup>572</sup> Adam Smith, *The Correspondence of Adam Smith*, ed. Ernest Campbell Mossner, Ian Simpson Ross, and Adam Smith, *The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1977), 272 (233).

<sup>573</sup> Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Vol. 2, 637 (IV.vii.c.103).



government entirely run by those whose interests are “directly opposite...of the country which they govern,” because the primary objective of sovereignty is to increase the avenues by which people can pursue their own interests. This objective reflects not only a practical duty to increase the productivity of a society,<sup>574</sup> but a moral duty to “the right one has to the free use of his person and in a word to do what he has a mind when it does not prove detrimental to any other person.”<sup>575</sup> As such, Smith’s critique reflects a normative claim about the necessity, both moral and economic, of establishing a hierarchy in which political institutions are charged with protecting and promoting the equality of interests in the economy.

Though Smith’s critique of corporate interests is sharp, he reserves his moral indictment for the complicity of statesmen. He writes,

To found a great empire for the sole purpose of raising up a people of customers, may at first sight appear a project only fit for a nation of shopkeepers. It is, however, a project, altogether unfit for a nation of shopkeepers; but extremely fit for a nation whose government is influenced by shopkeepers. Such statesmen, and such statesmen only, are capable of fancying that they will find some advantage in employing the blood and treasure of their fellow citizens, to found and to maintain such an empire.<sup>576</sup>

His indignation reflects a normative position regarding political institutions, to which he ascribes a moral obligation to public interest. The merchants and manufacturers are, in some way, not the cause of the problem, but the effect of it. They cannot help but to pursue self-interest, but do not find themselves in an environment that supports prudent self-interest, they rather find themselves with incentives and opportunity for reckless behavior. This is a failure of statecraft, caused by legislatures that fail,” to resist “the clamorous importunity of partial interests,” as they

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<sup>574</sup> Although, Smith values productivity because he understands it to alter the social fabric in such a way that accommodates political and social progress.

<sup>575</sup> Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, 1978, 8 (A.i.13).

<sup>576</sup> Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Vol. 2, 613 (IV.vii.c.63).

“ought,”<sup>577</sup> and it further reflects a failure of moral duty to structure incentives to engender prudence.

One of the primary ways political institutions fulfill their primary objective of cultivating a prudent society is through security, which he understands along Hobbesian lines as a concept both material and temporal. However, unlike both Hobbes and Locke, the future Smith seeks to secure is neither a general idea or materially specific vision of the future. Smith talks little of the future at all, in fact, and does not echo the, by his time, well-established liberal narrative of progress.<sup>578</sup> For Smith, the future cannot be planned, is not inevitable, and though it has a trajectory, he is ambivalent about its character, because human interaction produces uneven results and unintended consequences. Although the future itself cannot be pursued, he nevertheless argues that greater security and opportunity can be created by shaping the timescale of social interaction, by extending the duration of leases, eliminating economic relationships of dependence like apprenticeships and slavery, which curtail the future, and preventing economic arrangements that incentivize short term logic by offsetting private risk to the public.

Smith understands political institutions to be singularly capable of this task, and argues that they can shape the future expectations that inform motivation by structuring social relations in ways that expand social horizons. This marks a departure from Hobbes and Locke, who deal with expectations at an individual level, with others appearing as existential or physical threats to a person’s ability to meaningfully contemplate the future. Smith’s ideas of time are, like everything else in his thought are produced in the context of society. By managing the timescale of interaction, whether through extending leases, eliminating apprenticeships, expanding

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<sup>577</sup> Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Vol. 1, 471–2 (IV.ii.44).

<sup>578</sup> My usage of liberal here is a bit anachronistic, but these narratives of progress have since been retroactively folded into a history of economic and political liberalism.

education opportunities, or city planning, political institutions can shape our expectations of other, which reflects back on personal motivations.

It is now perhaps unsurprising that the biggest threat to this enterprise that Smith identifies is also temporal. Inhibiting the development, both moral and practical, of society are contexts that shrink the timescale of interaction, which incentivizes short-term thinking and ones that make it possible to simultaneously create a future while claiming no responsibility for it. He finds both of these to be endemic to corporations, as their structure incentivizes short-term thinking, high-risk behavior, as well as the aggressive pursuit of protection from the consequences of these actions at the sake of the broader society.<sup>579</sup>

In this way, Smith's thought not only marks a sufficient point of development in thinking about how modern ideas of autonomy, morality, and politics are animated by time, but his thinking about time is further influenced by his thoroughly social perspective, which meaningfully pivots to our present in instructive ways. For in Smith, we have Hobbes's temporal multiplicity, Locke's linking of the moral and material through labor, but united and seen as the driving force of history towards an indeterminate future. It can nevertheless illuminate the present in so far as it provides an avenue for thinking about how the timescales of overlapping and often conflicting social relations and institutions of power can engender or inhibit the ability to locate one's agency.

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<sup>579</sup>Smith does not reject the concept of distributed risk per se, as he praises insurance, which "dividing among a great many that loss which would ruin an individual, makes it fall light and easy upon the whole society." In certain instances, distributing loss across society can be a force for good. Leveraging public credit in order to pursue greater risk, is however, quite a different beast. Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations, Vol. 2*, 757 (V.i.e.38).

## **Reclaiming Time: The Future is Making a Comeback**

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The early modern mind was captivated by a future that suddenly appeared as an indeterminate human creation—an object of thought tied to actions in the material present. This newly conceived connection between materiality and futurity constituted a new framework for understanding human freedom. It is for this reason that the modern preoccupation with freedom must also be understood as a preoccupation with the future. Despite their differences, Hobbes, Locke, and Smith each seek to expand the possibilities of human freedom by way of understanding the forces that shape our personal relationship with the future. In their work, we see the relationship between futurity and freedom first take shape, but in tracing this idea through their work we also find increasing complexity that reflects the increasingly complex world produced by those expanded possibilities. That is, their philosophy develops not in a vacuum, but in response to real world developments—developments that themselves are in response to expanded social, political, and economic landscapes reflective of new ways of thinking about the future. The paradox, of course, is that despite a preoccupation with expanding the horizon of the future, we are confronted with a present of much narrower possibilities. Hobbes, Locke, and Smith can help illuminate this foil between the promise of liberalism and the paralysis of neoliberalism of our present in manifold ways.

Locke is perhaps the best entry point into this discussion, as he offers a theory of subjectivity rooted in the material world and liberated through temporality, yet he also offers a state that does not intervene into the former and a society that does not intervene into the latter. The very nature of his subject lends itself to a political imaginary in which both the material present and ideas of the future are the domain of the individual. Political interventions into the material present upset a moral hierarchy, and social ideas regarding the future are morally

corrupting. Though well-hidden, temporal, social, and material disjuncture is endemic to Locke's liberal imagination. This makes Hobbes and Smith particular well-suited as counterpoints, as Hobbes reveals why the material is crucial and Smith why society is crucial, if we want to think about the future in a *real* way. That is, they help to reveal how although the future continues to play a central role in contemporary society, it has become untethered from the material present and the future we are collectively creating. It has become a future in name alone, but one that can be revealed for what it is—not the future, but an illusion. However, the present is increasingly being reclaimed as the site of reappraisal, for collective imaginations to contrast symbols and narratives of project with the actual trajectory of our collective behavior.

In recent years, we have witnessed a kind of sweeping realization that political narratives about the future are disconnected from the material present. However, this is a phenomena of much greater duration. In the 1970's the malaise of a generation sparked a punk subculture in England, whose anthem is often identified as the 1976 Sex Pistol's #1 hit song "God Save the Queen," which asserts, "There's no future...and England's dreaming"<sup>580</sup>—echoing, if not in more youthful and dire terms, Adam Smith's plea that England awake from its "golden dream...and endeavor to accommodate her future views and designs to the real mediocrity of her circumstances."<sup>581</sup> The political response to growing popular discontent, however, was to reaffirm the neoliberal future. In 1980, Margaret Thatcher argued that future prosperity demands present sacrifice that is unpopular but "sound," and moreover, "there is no alternative."<sup>582</sup> In the United States, President Reagan affirmed the same message, but in the language of renewal, asserting, "It's morning again in America...young men and women...can look forward with

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<sup>580</sup> The Sex Pistols, *God Save the Queen (no Future)* (Virgin, 1977).

<sup>581</sup> Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Vol. 2, 947 (V.iii.92).

<sup>582</sup> Margaret Thatcher, "Speech to Conservative Women's Conference" (Festival Hall, London, May 21, 1980).

confidence to the future.”<sup>583</sup> This dance between expressions of hopelessness and immobility from below and affirmations of present sacrifice or future promise from above continued in fits and starts over the intervening years. But recently, something has changed. It has become increasingly difficult to attribute feelings of paralysis or dislocation to personal failings—as a matter of an individual’s, or a generation’s, unwillingness to engage in hard work and sacrifice. Rather, it seems that people in great numbers are finding themselves unable locate themselves *or* society, in the future.

The political philosophy of early modern liberalism developed a concept of autonomy inextricably linked to the future that profoundly expanded the possibilities for the human future. Locke gave us a political rhetoric of pursuit, which Jefferson invoked to foment a political revolution in the name of radical democracy—by universally extend the right of self-determination. This language regarding the future is still echoed today, but what has been lost is the present. For while imagination shapes the world, so too does the world shape imagination. Returning to the early modern moment crucially reveals that freedom requires ideas of the future to be grounded in the material present. It was the advancements of early modernity, including the development of industry and the erosion of arbitrary hierarchies, that broadened the horizon of the future and expanded the possibilities of the future. Rather than expressing idealistic optimism divorced from reality, or a mere theoretical possibility, Jefferson’s declaration of the equal right of all to “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” reflected substantive hope in the possibilities of an existing present. That is, while early modern political philosophers clearly prioritized the future, the future they conceptualized was necessarily tied to the objective reality of the present—the future is a source of liberation only insofar as its promises can be made real. Yet

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<sup>583</sup> Hal Riney, “‘Prouder, Stronger, Better’ (Presidential Election Commercial),” 1984, [https://youtu.be/\\_fy-uhxiXcE](https://youtu.be/_fy-uhxiXcE).

today we find political discourse to be dominated by visions of the future quite disconnected from the material present.

Consider, for example, the state of environmental discourse in the United States. Despite the future that we are creating in an objective, material way—a future produced by overconsumption and climate change—political discourse is dominated by narratives that disregard the material and instead appeal to faith. Faith is fundamental to the liberal psyche, and one the Tocqueville wrote about with awe in *Democracy in America*. Finding a shipbuilder in the process of building a ship of poor quality, he inquired why and was told that, “the art of navigation is everyday making such rapid progress, that the finest vessel would become almost useless if it lasted beyond a certain number of years.”<sup>584</sup> The faith here is an expectation that the future will be different from, and better than, the past. Such faith is not, in and of itself, a bad thing, as faith can be a powerful source of empowerment itself. However, when faith becomes disconnected from the human agency that ostensibly produces it, it can be a source of alienation. Such is the case with environmental messaging that acknowledges that there is some kind of objective problem—that the climate is warming, fossil fuels are finite, and our means of extraction are damaging—but the steady wheel of progress will inevitably solve these problems. This messaging invokes faith to salve the reality of a present quite disconnected from the future it invokes. But what Hobbes crucially reveals is that the realization of agency requires the possibility of acting for a future we can imagine producing from the space of the present. Or phrased in the inverse, distorting the future can distort the present, thereby upsetting one’s ability to locate oneself in the world. Framed in this way, it is perhaps unsurprising to find political apathy to result from such a disjuncture.

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<sup>584</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Harvey Claflin Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago, Ill; London: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

Aside from these affirmative ecological narratives that invoke faith to prompt inaction, others invoke an alternative temporal logic, to spur it. Rather than appealing to the future, these focus on the present, which, they argue, is so insecure it precludes thinking for the future at all. Some argue, for example, that foreign oil dependence constitutes a security threat so dire that the most immediate solution must be pursued—no matter how costly, or damaging. Hobbes is useful here too, as he demonstrates how conditions of insecurity foreshorten the imagination. In the immediacy of fear, short-term planning is incentivized, while its long term costs and consequences are difficult to fathom. In this way, he helps to illuminate how cultivating crisis and emphasizing insecurity can be politically useful to those who most benefit from exploiting the present.

Smith is also helpful, as he can help us to think not about the political narratives designed to invoke apathy or fear in the people, but about how corporate structure itself incentivizes short-term thinking. That is, the finite nature of fossil fuels inherently demands that corporations like Exxon develop long-term alternative revenue plans. And indeed, it is for this reason that ExxonMobile invested in fossil fuel research that resulted in them discovering the link between fossil fuels and climate change in 1981—seven years before it became a public issue. Yet as reported in *The Guardian*, “the firm spent millions over the next 27 years to promote climate denial,”<sup>585</sup> rather than invest in renewable energy that would ensure long-term future for the corporation. According to Lenny Bernstein, Exxon’s former in-house climate expert stated, “Natural resource companies – oil, coal, minerals – have to make investments that have lifetimes

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<sup>585</sup> Suzanne Goldenberg, “Exxon Knew of Climate Change in 1981, Email Says - but It Funded Deniers for 27 More Years,” *The Guardian*, July 8, 2015.



of 50-100 years.”<sup>586</sup> The timescale of corporate futures, is measured by the lifetime, not of individuals or society, but of investments.

Smith can also help to expose a similar kind of counter-intuitive short-term logic in tech industries. The technology firms of Silicon Valley are largely comprised of young, socially progressive entrepreneurs that frequently affirm commitments to equality and diversity. Yet these firms are notoriously homogenous—when Twitter released its diversity staff, it showed their their tech staff to be 90% male, and 92% white and Asian.<sup>587</sup> Conversations about these statistics tend to center around political ideals. However, the problem may actually be temporal. Research has proven diversity to make for better problem-solving, because, quite simplistically, people with similar backgrounds and tend to use similar problem-solving strategies. The problem, however, is that the benefits of diversity require more time to materialize. As explained in a recent *Reply All* podcast that engaged diversity research and researchers, “when people have the same cultural background, the same educational background, they can communicate much more quickly, they can collaborate much more easily, there’s less misunderstanding.” And because tech startups face incredible pressure from their investors to grow and turn a profit quickly, they “don’t want to take the risk” of diversity. The problem with diversity, is that “the benefit comes later.”<sup>588</sup> Smith helps us to see this not as a problem of political ideas or irrationality, but as resulting from a temporal logic that is endemic to a particular form of economic arrangement.

These examples that explore how the temporal logic of corporations have high public costs, is a useful backdrop for returning to the social present, and examining its economic reality

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<sup>586</sup> Ibid.

<sup>587</sup> Tom Huddleston, “Twitter Workers: Mostly White, Mostly Male,” *Fortune*, July 23, 2014.

<sup>588</sup> Reply All, *Raising the Bar*, accessed January 20, 2016, <https://gimletmedia.com/episode/52-raising-the-bar/>.

through the lens of temporality. The global present is one increasingly characterized by an enduring state of immediacy and precarity, yet our dominant ideologies continue to assert narratives of modernity in which the future is fetishized at the expense of the present. The most common form this takes is austerity. In addition to the austerity policies adopted in response to the 2008 crisis, in the U.S., at the federal level, austerity has taken the form of the 2013 sequestration and the end of the payroll tax cut. At the state level, funding for universities,<sup>589</sup> schools, and public services have been cut,<sup>590</sup> while tuition costs have increased,<sup>591</sup> and the job security of teachers and public-sector employees has been continually threatened, if not dismantled.<sup>592</sup> Defenses of austerity measures take many forms, but all pivot on a temporal logic wherein the present is sacrificed for the future—in order to create a secure future, an already insecure present must be made *more* insecure. Unlike environmental narratives that obfuscate the causal link between the present and the future, neoliberal economic policies like austerity affirm the connection. However, they distort the relationship between present and future; rather than a free present producing ideas of the future, ideas of a free future renders the present subservient to that vision. Returning to the past is helpful here too. For Hobbes understood security as a prerequisite for meaningful agency, and we can extend his argument to see how increasing insecurity can increasingly alienate people from their agency. Moreover, he can help us to make sense of why those who would most benefit from revolutionary dispositions assume apathetic or

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<sup>589</sup> Thomas G. Mortenson, “State Funding: A Race to the Bottom,” *American Council on Education: The Presidency Winter* (2012).

<sup>590</sup> Nicholas Johnson, Phil Oliff, and Erica Williams, “An Update on State Budget Cuts” (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, February 9, 2011), <http://bit.ly/1zqGmgf>.

<sup>591</sup> College Board, “2014-15 In-State Tuition and Fees at Public Four-Year Institutions by State and Five-Year Percentage Change,” *Trends in Higher Education*, n.d., <http://bit.ly/1Hhc6us>.

<sup>592</sup> Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker and New Jersey Governor Chris Christie campaigned for the 2016 presidential nomination on their experience in weakening unions.

reactionary ones—a revolutionary disposition requires believing it is possible to act for a different future.

But the future is making a comeback. Recent years have seen an acceleration in the confronting and challenging of the futurelessness first expressed in the 1970's. The first stirrings of hope came in 2010, when a revolutionary wave of demonstrations swept the Arab world. The causes of the Arab Spring were many and complex, yet it was undeniably one in which a younger generation played a sizable role in the name of self-determination—of reclaiming a personal right to the future. In the U.S. in 2011, Zuccotti Park became a site of occupation, in protest against economic inequality. Here too the presence was youthful, and the messages temporal, with signs proclaiming, “This was supposed to be the future.” When it comes to thinking about the future, it seems, the young act as the canaries in the coal mine. In Zuccotti and elsewhere, they express a yearning for, and an inability to find, promise in *this* present. In a recent article, Corey Robin recounted a discussion with young magazine interns, each of whom thought the concept of a career was defunct. “The future was so uncertain, they said, the economy so broken, there was simply no point in devising a plan, much less trying to execute it.” Robin surmised that this is because “for the last forty years, we’ve been preparing for this generation without a future” as society has grown increasingly hopeless, the message we have passed on is that there are “no futures to be had.”<sup>593</sup> And yet, what is most remarkable is that the response to this message has not been lament but a new hope. In the end, the finality of futurelessness itself seems to be a source of radical possibility, of radically reenvisioning the present. And it is in the present, that we find a youthful optimism—a self-regarding optimism born of seeing oneself as an agent of change. And in this, we come full circle to the early modern

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<sup>593</sup> Corey Robin, “The Bernie Generation,” *Jacobin*, March 29, 2016, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/03/bernie-sanders-millennials-precarious-youth/>.

moment, destabilized by the loss of inherited sources of meaning and ideas of the future, but invigorated by the sense that it is with us, here, and now, that the future begins.

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