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Freedom and Obligation in Locke’s Account of Belief¹

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Locke’s account of belief formation poses a number of philosophical and practical difficulties. As John Passmore and others have shown, Locke appears to hold both that belief is involuntary (in the sense that assent is determined by the balance of available probabilities), and that it is in significant measure voluntary (insofar as we are sometimes free to disregard even the most suggestive evidence). In this paper, I argue that Locke’s aim was neither to defend an involuntary nor a voluntary conception of belief, but rather to emphasize our God-given obligations with respect to our beliefs, in our paradoxical condition as beings both created and free. Once this perspective is adopted, it becomes clear that Locke’s account of belief formation is both internally consistent and (contrary to claims made by Jeremy Waldron) compatible with the requirements of his case for religious toleration. Where this account breaks down, however, is in demonstrating that we do, in fact, have the ability (and not just the duty) to regulate our beliefs – a power which Locke is ultimately only able to establish by appealing to the justice and omnipotence of God.

Keywords: John Locke; belief; will; toleration; freedom

Word count: 10,184 words (including abstract, notes, and bibliography).

I

In an article published in 1978 (‘Locke and the Ethics of Belief’), John Passmore highlighted an important tension within John Locke’s conception of belief. On the one hand, according to Passmore, Locke’s epistemology was shaped by an instinctive optimism about human rationality, as well by his commitment to religious toleration. In the *Epistola de tolerantia* (1689) and certain key passages of the *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690), Locke therefore argued that belief is involuntary, assent being determined by the available grounds of probability. This view implied that, as rational creatures, human beings have no choice but to calibrate their beliefs according

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3 to their honest assessment of the available evidence. Moreover, it entailed that belief
4 cannot be coerced, being swayed only by the inward persuasion of the mind and not by
5 the inducements offered by threats of persecution and other penalties. On Passmore's
6 account, however, Locke's concern to identify and condemn instances of 'wrong assent'
7 (*Essay*, IV.xx, title) stood in direct tension with this involuntary conception of belief.²
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9 His attack on 'enthusiasm' in the fourth edition of the *Essay* (1700), in particular, led
10 him to argue that we are sometimes free to disregard even the most suggestive evidence
11 (Locke, *Essay*, IV.xix). The result was an antithetical conception of belief as a product
12 of passion, analogous to desire rather than perception, and therefore largely voluntary.
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16 Passmore's paper paved the way for several further efforts to clarify the
17 uncertain position of human power in Locke's account of belief. In a well-known essay
18 published in 1988 ('Locke: Toleration'), Jeremy Waldron argued that Locke's most
19 important argument for toleration – that coercion is ineffective as a means of instilling
20 true religion – is fatally undermined by what he, like Passmore, saw as fundamental
21 inconsistencies within his conception of belief. Writing in the early 1990s, Michael
22 Ayers sought to defend the coherence of Locke's account by disputing Passmore's
23 claim that he ultimately abandoned his intellectualist intuitions for an emotivist account
24 of belief (*Locke: Epistemology and Ontology*, vol. I, pt. II). Ayers argued that such an
25 account would itself be 'incoherent and absurd' and that Locke 'never wavered in his
26 theoretical adherence' to a rationalist conception of belief, grounded in involuntary
27 assent to probability (*Locke: Epistemology and Ontology*, 148 and 150). Michael
28 Losonsky was next to weigh in on this debate in 2001 (*Enlightenment and Action*, ch.
29 4). Whereas Ayers and Passmore essentially agreed in reading Locke primarily as an
30 intellectualist on belief, albeit a more or less successful and convinced one, Losonsky
31 presented Locke as consistently endorsing a passionate and therefore voluntary account
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of belief, not only in his late chapter on enthusiasm but also in the earlier versions of the *Essay*, as well as in his unfinished and posthumously published work, *Of the Conduct of the Understanding* (1706). Indifferent receptivity to the evidence, on this reading, can only be achieved by cultivating a passionate ‘love of truth’ capable of overpowering our other appetites and interests (Losonsky, *Enlightenment and Action*, 89-92).

This paper aims to revisit this contested issue from a fresh perspective, by looking at Locke’s account of belief through the lens of his understanding of human beings as at once created and free – that is, as agents endowed by God with certain natural faculties *and* with the freedom to either use or abuse them. Despite their significant differences, the interpretations discussed above all share a common assumption, originally made by Passmore and, as far as I am aware, adopted by most recent commentators. This is the assumption that Locke’s account of belief formation is to be understood in terms of a choice between two conceptions of belief: one in which belief is a passionate (and therefore voluntary) act, and one in which it is an intellectual (and therefore involuntary) process. The question of the respective roles of the will, external evidence, and the passions within belief acquisition certainly occupies an important position in Locke’s account. However, this approach can also lead us to lose sight of important aspects of what Locke was trying to achieve – namely, an account of our God-given obligations (and therefore power) with respect to our beliefs.³

Locke’s principal concern in the *Essay* was not to defend the idea that belief cannot be affected by the will, but rather to show that we have the duty and capacity to take possession of our ideas in a manner appropriate to us as thinking but finite beings, *i.e.*, to the best of our ability and according to rational standards alone. It is true that the *Essay* lacks the ‘directive ambition’ of texts such as Bacon’s *Novum organum*, Descartes’s *Regulae ad directionem ingenii*, Spinoza’s *Tractatus de emendatione*

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3 *intellectus* and Locke's own *Of the Conduct of the Understanding*, in that it does not
4 supply 'rules or precepts to tell the understanding how it should operate' (Serjeantson,
5 'Human Understanding', 169). Its declared purpose, however, is not merely to *describe*
6 the operations of the mind but to 'search out the *Bounds* between Opinion and
7 Knowledge; and examine by what Measures, in things, whereof we have no certain
8 Knowledge, we ought to regulate our Assent, and moderate our Perswasions' (*Essay*,
9 I.i.3). From this perspective, reason and the will converge in our duty to work towards
10 truth, since 'in any Case or Matter whatsoever', it is the 'direct[ion]' of 'Reason' that
11 we must follow if we are to 'govern [our] Assent right, and place it as [we] should'
12 (*Essay*, IV.xvii.24). As we will see below, Locke was consistently committed both to an
13 evidential conception of belief as a judgement properly (or, in the case of false beliefs,
14 putatively) grounded in probability, *and* to the principle that the regulation of belief
15 according to such grounds is a duty which we are free either to fulfil or to neglect.

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17 The problem of belief formation and regulation is central to Locke's conception
18 of our epistemic and moral capacities as rational but fallible beings, designed by a
19 perfect and omnipotent creator yet endowed with freedom (and therefore responsibility)
20 in our opinions and actions. As he put it in *Of the Conduct of the Understanding*: 'in
21 these two things, viz. an equal Indifferency for all Truth... and in the Examination of
22 our Principles... consists that Freedom of the Understanding which is necessary to a
23 rational Creature, and without which it is not truly an Understanding' (§12, 44-45).
24 Locke's aim was thus to explain both how the understanding can operate successfully in
25 its quest for truth, and why it so frequently fails in practice. As John Dunn has
26 emphasized,

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28 both these preoccupations were essential to Locke. If human beings could not in
29 principle know what they needed to know, their predicament would place in doubt
30 either the good will or the power of a divine Creator. But if they could not help

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3 acting as they did, not only would they be unfree, and hence not responsible for
4 their apparent actions; but God himself would be the cause of all that Locke most
5 loathed in human beings. (*Locke*, 64)
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9 Locke's endorsement of probability as 'sufficient to govern all our Concernments'
10 (*Essay*, I.i.5) needs to be understood in this context, as part of his endeavour to secure
11 acceptance of the limited scope of certain knowledge without surrender to the impious
12 facility of 'perfect Scepticism' (*Essay*, I.i.7). Despite the prevalence of error and
13 disagreement among human opinions, Locke holds that
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22 men have Reason to be well satisfied with what God hath thought fit for them,
23 since he has given them (as *St. Peter* says,) ... Whatsoever is necessary for the
24 Conveniences of Life, and Information of Vertue, and has put within the reach of
25 their Discovery the comfortable Provision for this Life and the Way that leads to a
26 better. (*Essay*, I.i.5)
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31 Human fallibility and rationality play a jointly indispensable role in Locke's account of
32 our understanding and its powers. On the one hand, we must be naturally capable of
33 rational belief. On the other, we must be free not only to work towards truth, but also to
34 subscribe to unexamined and fallacious opinions. So far from reflecting inconsistencies
35 in his approach to belief, the perceived ambiguities of Locke's account stemmed from
36 this paradox inherent in what he was trying to capture.
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45 Once this perspective is adopted, it becomes clear that some of our assumptions
46 about Locke's intentions and the nature of the problem he was dealing with need to be
47 revised. As I hope to show, it is vital to recognize that, for Locke, volition must involve
48 something more than desire and passion, that belief is the product of an individual's free
49 efforts towards truth, and that the rationality of the human intellect and the power of our
50 volitions represent complementary rather than conflicting forces. And if this is the case,
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then the equation of volition and passion and the opposition between volition and evidential judgement underlying most modern analyses of Locke cannot be sustained.

This paper proceeds in three steps. First, I take a closer look at Locke's claim that belief is involuntary and suggest that this argument does not in fact preclude a significant measure of control over our beliefs. Secondly, I consider the implications of Locke's account of belief for his case against religious persecution, responding to Waldron's claim that the latter relies on an involuntary conception of belief which Locke himself undermines in the *Essay*. Finally, having defended the internal consistency of Locke's account of belief and its compatibility with his case for toleration, I examine some of the difficulties Locke faced in justifying his claim that we have the power, as well as the duty, to regulate our beliefs.

II

In what sense does Locke consider belief involuntary? In the *Epistola de tolerantia*, he argues that 'to believe this or that to be true is not within the scope of our will [*in nostra voluntate non situm est*]' (Locke, *Epistola*, 121). In the *Essay*, he claims that belief is determined by our assessment of the evidence: 'what upon full Examination I find the most probable, I cannot deny my Assent to' (Locke, *Essay*, IV.xx.16). Taken in isolation, these passages would appear to exclude any role for the will in the formation of our beliefs. On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that belief is only involuntary for Locke in two, limited senses.

First, we are never free to believe something in defiance of our own (subjective and fallible) estimate of the relevant probabilities. This argument finds its fullest expression in Locke's writings on toleration, and will be examined further in the next section. For now, it will be enough to note that Locke defines belief as 'the admitting or

receiving any Proposition for true, upon Arguments or Proofs that are found to persuade us to receive it as true, without certain Knowledge that it is so' (*Essay*, IV.xv.3). To believe a proposition p is thus, by definition, to be in possession of *reasons* ('Arguments or Proofs') that convince us of its veracity.⁴ It follows that, for Locke, there can be no such thing as a wholly groundless belief.⁵ The grounds on which I believe p may, of course, be fundamentally flawed or incomplete. However, it is never in my power to believe something 'just like that', merely because I want to: I am not free to believe p (as opposed to merely professing it), if I myself consider my reasons for doing so to be inadequate.

The second sense in which belief is involuntary for Locke, and the one on which I wish to focus in this section, is that we are not free to 'hinder' our assent 'where the Probability manifestly appears upon due Consideration of all the Measures of it' (*Essay*, IV.xx.16). At first sight, this would appear to make it difficult for Locke to explain 'how Men come to give their Assents contrary to Probability' (*Essay*, IV.xx.1). As I will now show, however, this claim is in fact consistent with an important role being reserved for the will not only in initiating and directing the process of 'due Consideration' itself, but also in aligning assent with the evidence in all those cases where probability is not so 'manifest' and unambiguous.

It is true that Locke is ambivalent on this point, and that he sometimes appears to posit an intrinsic disposition of the understanding 'constantly to close with the more probable side' (*Essay*, IV.xx.12). Locke's case for the sufficiency of probability in compensating for the narrow scope of our knowledge and underpinning most of our decisions to act leads him to emphasize the forceful character of many of our beliefs, 'some of [which] border so near upon Certainty, that we make no doubt at all about them; but *assent* to them as firmly, and act, according to that Assent, as resolutely, as if

they were infallibly demonstrated' (*Essay*, IV.xv.2). Nowhere does he claim, however, that probability is always (or even usually) clear-cut enough to determine assent infallibly, without any input from the will. On the contrary, Locke was acutely aware of the fact that probability can only rarely be established with enough certainty and clarity to overcome the natural obstinacy and conservatism of most human beings (*Essay*, IV.xvi.3), and that we are, if anything, disposed towards ignoring and dismissing new, albeit objectively significant, evidence: 'Earthly Minds, like Mud-Walls, resist the strongest Batteries' (*Essay*, IV.xx.12).

There are only a limited number of cases in which assent to a proposition *p* is considered by Locke to be unavoidable, regardless of whether one wills to believe *p*. He cites three different situations where belief concerning 'particular matter of fact' is effectively compelled by the sheer strength of immediately available evidence and concurrent testimony in its favour. These are: (1) when the fact in question conforms to 'the constant Observation of our selves and others' (for example, that fire generates heat); (2) when it is an instance of a wider phenomenon, generally held 'to be, for the most part, so' and in this specific case 'attested by many and undoubted Witnesses' (for example, that Tiberius, in common with 'most Men', put his own advantage over that of the public); and (3) when 'in the nature of the thing, there be nothing for, nor against it', and yet it is 'vouched by the concurrent Testimony of unsuspected Witnesses' (for example, 'that there is such a City in *Italy* as *Rome*: That about 1700 years ago, there lived in it a Man, called *Julius Caesar*; that he was a General, and that he won a Battel against another called *Pompey*') (Locke, *Essay*, IV.xvi.6-8). In such cases, we cannot help but assent to the truth of the matter, because 'Probability upon such grounds carries so much evidence with it, that it naturally determines the Judgment, and leaves us as

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3 little liberty to believe, or disbelieve, as a Demonstration does, whether we will know,
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5 or be ignorant' (Locke, *Essay*, IV.xvi.9).
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8 In the vast majority of cases, however, the will plays an important role in
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10 determining our beliefs. In the first place, where 'Testimonies contradict common
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12 Experience, and the reports of History and Witnesses clash with the ordinary course of
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14 Nature, or with one or another', the rival claims of each side must be carefully weighed
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16 and the strength of our assent 'proportion[ed]' to that of the probable judgement in
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18 question (Locke, *Essay*, IV.xvi.9). Moreover, in the case of matters lying beyond the
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20 scope of the senses (and therefore of human observation and testimony), comparison
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22 with the 'Truths that are established in our Minds' and analogy 'to other parts of our
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24 Knowledge and Observation' provide the only grounds of probability (Locke, *Essay*,
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26 IV.xvi.12). In all these instances, the force of the greatest probability, once perceived
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28 clearly, cannot be resisted: 'that a Man should afford his Assent to that side, on which
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30 the less Probability appears to him' is for Locke 'utterly impracticable, and as
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32 impossible, as it is to believe the same thing probable and improbable at the same time'
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34 (*Essay*, IV.xx.15). However, we cannot rely on the immediate availability of
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36 probabilities powerful enough to direct our judgment beyond doubt and, if necessary,
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38 against our will. Probable evidence is irresistible only where 'there are not sufficient
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40 grounds to suspect' that it relies on fallacious connections or distinctions, or that it is in
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42 any sense incomplete (Locke, *Essay*, IV.xx.15). In all other cases, 'Assent, Suspense, or
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44 Dissent, are often voluntary Actions', leaving us free to '*evad[e] the most apparent*
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46 *Probabilities*' by 'suspend[ing] and restrain[ing]' our enquiries, and preventing 'a full
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48 and satisfactory Examination' of the evidence (Locke, *Essay*, IV.xx.15). Indeed, this
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50 holds true not only in matters of probable belief but also in matters of knowledge: '[w]e
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3 *can hinder both Knowledge and Assent by stopping our Enquiry*, and not imploying our
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5 Faculties in search of any Truth' (Locke, *Essay*, IV.xx.16).
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8 Locke's account of our freedom and determination with respect to our opinions
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10 thus far appears consistent. Its guiding assumption is that it is psychologically
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12 impossible for us to hold beliefs which we do not ourselves consider to be adequately
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14 grounded. Our assent is determined whenever we are faced by evidence that is
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16 powerful, cogent, and comprehensive enough to support a judgement of probability
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18 lying beyond all reasonable doubt. Belief is fundamentally, however, a matter of both
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20 will and freedom, insofar as we have a power and duty to moderate the firmness of our
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22 beliefs according to probability, in all cases in which the evidence is not (or not yet)
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24 strong enough to determine probability and therefore our assent. In all but a minority of
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26 cases, it is up to us to judge whether the evidence which we are using represents a fully
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28 satisfactory measure of the relevant probabilities, and up to us to undertake further
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30 enquiry into the proposition in question, if it does not. There is thus no inconsistency
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32 between Locke's emphasis on the determining force of manifest probability and his
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34 insistence that we are nonetheless responsible for regulating our beliefs.
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44 III

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46 Where does this leave Locke's case for toleration? I now want to turn to examine
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48 Jeremy Waldron's suggestion that Locke's reliance on a strictly involuntary conception
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50 of belief introduces a 'fatal crack' ('Locke: Toleration', 105) into his case against
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52 religious persecution.
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56 A number of attempts have been made to defend Locke against this critique,
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58 using one of two strategies. The first has been to point out (as Locke himself did in his
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60 initial reply to Jonas Proast) that the argument from belief constitutes just 'one beam'

(‘Second Letter’, 67) in the edifice he builds against persecution, contrary to Waldron’s contention that it represents the *Epistola*’s ‘main line of argument’, ‘crux’, and ‘essence’ (‘Locke: Toleration’, 62 and 67). Among other key elements in this edifice, we might draw attention to Locke’s defence of toleration as an application of Christian charity and humility, and thus as ‘the chief distinguishing mark of a true church’ (*Epistola*, 59). Alternatively, we might emphasize the numerous arguments which he deploys ‘to mark the true bounds between the church and the commonwealth’ (*Epistola*, 65) and establish that the magistrate has neither the authority nor the competence to prescribe the scope of true religion (Dunn, ‘The Claim to Freedom of Conscience’, *passim*). Finally, we might point to his contention that a duty to worship God publicly, in whatever manner and religious society we ourselves believe appropriate, is acknowledged by and imposed on all human beings by natural law (*Epistola*, 101; Harris, ‘Locke and Natural Law’, 64 and 70–71). The claim that belief cannot be compelled does, to be sure, take Locke’s argument one important step further, by showing that persecution is not merely wrong but irrational. It is not in itself, however, indispensable to Locke’s case for toleration. Without the further arguments listed above, in fact, it would be hard to make sense of the *limits* of this defence, in particular its notorious exclusion of atheists and Catholics (Locke, *Epistola*, 133 and 135).⁶

The second strategy has been to focus attention on *sincere* belief (and worship) as the only form of piety acceptable to God – an argument which Locke himself identifies as ‘the chief point’ of the *Epistola* and as ‘what absolutely determines this controversy’ (99). From this perspective, Locke need not show that belief in general is immune to coercion, but only that *saving* belief cannot be produced through force (Bou-Habib, ‘Sincerity’; Jolley, *Toleration and Understanding*, ch. 5). Even supposing that coercion were able to change a person’s beliefs (and not merely their outward

profession of them), the resulting faith could not provide a basis for salvation, for ‘true and saving religion consists in the inward persuasion of the mind, without which nothing has any value with God’ (*Epistola*, 69). Moreover, each individual is sovereign over the cause of his or her own salvation, in the sense that we alone can assume responsibility for the rectitude of our opinions and of the actions which flow from them: ‘regarding his salvation every man has the supreme and final power of judging for himself, because he alone is concerned, and nobody else can take any harm from his conduct’ (*Epistola*, 125).

While both strategies are persuasive, each involves salvaging Locke’s case for toleration at the expense of his argument from belief. Indeed most commentators seem to agree with Waldron that this argument is neither credible nor wholly consistent with what Locke says in the *Essay* about assent.⁷ What I would like to do here is to offer a different line of defence, by questioning the assumption that Locke’s case for toleration relies on an involuntary account of belief in the first place.⁸

Locke’s contention, to quote it in full, is that ‘no man, even if he would, can believe at another’s dictation’ (*Epistola*, 67), that it is in ‘the nature of human understanding, that it cannot be compelled by any outward force’ (*Epistola*, 69), and that ‘to believe this or that to be true is not within the scope of our will’ (*Epistola*, 121). For Waldron, these statements amount to claiming ‘that belief and understanding are not subject to the human will, and that one cannot acquire a belief simply by intending or deciding to believe’, or, briefly put, that ‘belief cannot be affected by the will’ (‘Locke: Toleration’, 67 and 80). As we began to see in section I, however, to argue that belief cannot be coerced is simply to draw attention to the fact that I cannot believe something merely because the law prescribes it, or because I expect punishment if I fail to obey. Waldron is right that, for Locke, I cannot believe something ‘simply’ because I ‘intend’

or ‘decide’ to (*i.e.*, if the *only* thing supporting such a belief is my will for it to be true). But that is not to say that the will cannot, in combination with evidence, play an important role in facilitating or preventing the formation of a belief. Locke’s point is not that we have no control whatsoever over the formation of our beliefs – an implication that would indeed sit uneasily with his recognition, in the *Essay*, of our ability to influence our beliefs by deciding their objects and sources – but only that we cannot choose to believe *against* our own assessment of the evidence. As he explained in his earlier ‘Essay concerning Toleration’ (1667):

that a man cannot command his owne understanding, or positively determin today what opinion he will be of tomorrow, is evident from experience, & the nature of the understanding, which can noe more apprehend things otherwise then they appeare to it, then the eye see other colours then it doth in the rainbow whether those colours be really there or noe. (272)

The same point is made in a fragment dated 1679, where Locke writes that ‘noe compulsion can make a man beleive against his present light & perswasion be it what it will’ (‘Toleratio’, 125). Locke’s case against persecution does not require him to show that belief is wholly immune to the will’s influence, but only that belief is not the kind of thing that can be swayed by non-evidential motives and inducements: ‘penalties are ... obviously futile and inappropriate for convincing the mind ... Light is needed to change men’s opinions, and light can by no means accrue from corporal suffering’ (*Epistola*, 69 and 71).

There is thus no inconsistency between Locke’s claim in the *Epistola* that belief cannot be coerced and his claim in the *Essay* that it is in our power both to regulate our beliefs and to ‘hinder’ our assent ‘*by stopping our Enquiry*, and not imploying our Faculties in search of any Truth’ (IV.xx.16). Nor is the latter admission so damaging to Locke’s case against persecution as Waldron claims. According to Waldron, the

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3 *Epistola* fails to address ‘the epistemic apparatus that surrounds and supports belief –
4 the apparatus of selection, attention, concentration, and so on’ (‘Locke: Toleration’, 82),
5 an oversight which, he contends, leaves the door open to indirect means of belief
6 coercion and manipulation such as censoring heretical texts, making the study of true
7 doctrine compulsory, and forcing people to conform to the rituals of the authorized
8 church. However, this is once again to over-simplify Locke’s case.

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17 As well as denying that belief is subject to direct coercion, Locke also uses
18 another, slightly different argument in support of toleration – one which is consistent
19 with the complex relationship between belief and the will set out in the *Essay*. This is
20 the claim, first made in the ‘Essay concerning Toleration’, that the use of coercion to
21 change someone’s opinions is invariably counter-productive because, far from making
22 us want to believe, it leads us to ‘hate’ our persecutors and resist the very opinions they
23 seek to enforce (296-7). So far from requiring an involuntary conception of belief, this
24 argument relies precisely on it being possible for the will to obstruct the formation of
25 new opinions. Unlike charitable efforts to persuade us to correct our errors, Locke
26 suggests, the ‘forcible introducing of opinions’ gives us ‘unavoidable jealousys, that it
27 is not truth that is thus carried on, but interest & dominion that is sought in makeing
28 prosylites by compulsion’ (‘Essay concerning Toleration’, 296). Far from inviting us to
29 question our existing beliefs, any attempt to pressure us into abandoning our existing
30 beliefs simply reinforces the obstinacy of our assent to them, ‘soe chary is humane
31 nature to preserve the liberty of that part where in lyes the dignity of a man, which
32 could it be imposd on, would make him but little different from a beast’ (‘Essay
33 concerning Toleration’, 294).

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This psychological argument is not used in the *Epistola*, but it is re-stated in a
crucial section of the *Essay*, as part of Locke’s plea for us to uphold ‘*Peace*, and the

common Offices of Humanity, *and Friendship, in the diversity of Opinions*' (IV.xvi.4). Locke first re-affirms his claim that beliefs can only be brought about on the basis of grounds rather than non-evidential motives, since the understanding 'can own no other Guide but Reason, nor blindly submit to the Will and Dictates of another' (*Essay*, IV.xvi.4). He then expands on the natural stubbornness and pride of most human beings: even those in the habit of examining before they assent may well not think it worth their effort to re-assess their beliefs when confronted with other people's opinions and evidence, 'especially if there be any suspicion of Interest, or Design, as there never fails to be, where Men find themselves ill treated' (*Essay*, IV.xvi.4). Under such conditions, Locke concludes, forceful or even merely tactless imposition of one's opinions on others cannot hope to achieve anything.

The upshot of this analysis is to establish the futility and irrationality of *all* forms of coercion, whether direct or indirect, whether used in place of persuasion or in combination with it. In instances of coercion, it is important to stress, the pressure that is brought to bear on my beliefs originates not in my own will but in that of my persecutor – that is why coercion is deemed necessary in the first place. For such coercion to be effective, what matters is not so much that my own will be able to affect my beliefs, but that threats of punishment be capable of making me *want* to believe in the first place (as opposed to wanting to avoid the threatened penalties). It is true, as Waldron points out, that indoctrination, censorship and enforced conformity 'can at least lead [dissenters] to water' and 'compel them to turn their attention in the direction' of true belief and worship ('Locke: Toleration', 81). For Locke, however, the mere fact of knowing myself to be coerced is enough, in itself, to prevent me from responding indifferently to the evidence thus presented to me.

Locke's claim that 'compulsion... cannot alter men's minds' ('Essay concerning Toleration', 278) does not, therefore, require that belief lie beyond our voluntary control. It is anchored, instead, in his grounding of belief in an individual's subjective evaluation of the evidence, and in his sensitivity to the role of the will in shaping our receptivity to probability. There is thus no inconsistency between Locke's epistemological account of belief and the requirements of his case against persecution.

IV

So far, then, Locke's account of belief appears to be vindicated. Its strength lies in establishing the compulsive force of incorrigible probable evidence while reserving an important role for the will in enabling or preventing a full and fair examination of the evidence. At this conceptual level, Locke's understanding of our power over our beliefs is basically coherent. It does not rely on placing especially strong emphasis on the deterministic qualities of probability. It is founded instead on the conviction that regulating our beliefs is part of 'the Obedience due [by each man] to his Maker, who would have him use those discerning Faculties he has given him, to keep him out of Mistake and Errour' (*Essay*, IV.xvii.24). This obligation in turn presupposed that all human beings have the capacity, at least in principle, to govern their assent rightly, if not in all matters then at least in those of greatest 'Concernment' (*i.e.*, those pertaining to morality and religion).⁹ As I will now set out to show, it is this final conviction which Locke seems to have found difficult to justify in practice.

As James Tully has emphasized, Locke's epistemology – with its attack on innate ideas and the inspired knowledge of enthusiasts – involves a 'rejection of any theory that assent or belief is governed by a natural disposition (or telic faculty) to the true or the good' ('Governing Conduct', 183). The result, as is well known, is a ground-

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3 breaking conception of the mind as a *tabula rasa*, such that ‘Men, barely by the Use of
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5 their natural powers, may attain to all the Knowledge they have, without the help of any
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7 ‘innate Impressions’ (Locke, *Essay*, I.ii.1).¹⁰ Intellectual activity is, for Locke, a form of
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9 *work*: being ‘born ignorant of every thing’, all our knowledge must be acquired through
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11 ‘Labour, Attention and Industry’, and with ‘Toil and Pains’ (‘Conduct’, §37, 109-10;
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13 Losonsky, *Enlightenment and Action*, 87). This emphasis on the voluntary labour of the
14
15 mind further underpins Locke’s claim that assent can and ought to be governed by the
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17 weight of evidence alone, a task which requires ‘Diligence, Attention, and Exactness’
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19 (*Essay*, IV.xvi.9) as well as ‘wary Reasoning’ (IV.xvi.12). It is up to us to direct our
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21 minds to consider certain propositions and the evidence in their support, just as it is up
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23 to us to direct our senses towards external objects if we are to perceive them (Locke,
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25 *Essay*, IV.xx.16). Without this basic freedom to either use or abuse our natural
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27 capacities in search of evidence and probability, ‘Ignorance, Error, or Infidelity could
28
29 not in any Case be a Fault’ (Locke, *Essay*, IV.xx.16).

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31 For Locke, it follows that someone who fails to use the faculties God has given
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33 him ‘to the best of his Power’ is ‘accountable for whatever Mistakes he runs into’
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35 (*Essay*, IV.xvii.24). In a fragment dated 1677, he goes so far as to assign all serious
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37 errors in moral judgement to failures of will, claiming that ‘there are few if any that
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39 dreadfully mistake who are willing to be in the right’ (Locke, ‘Understanding’, 49). In
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41 the *Essay*, he even appears to suggest that what matters is not, or at least not only, that
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43 our opinions should conform to the truth, but that they should be the result of our own
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45 efforts of examination and enquiry – even if, despite our best intentions, such efforts
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47 should lead us astray.¹¹ In the difficult case of someone who is ‘in the right but by
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49 chance’, Locke ‘know[s] not whether the luckiness of the Accident will excuse the
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51 irregularity of his proceeding’ (*Essay*, IV.xvii.24). What is ‘certain’, however, is that
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3 whoever 'makes use of the Light and Faculties GOD has given him, and seeks sincerely
4 to discover Truth, by those Helps and Abilities he has, may have this satisfaction in
5 doing his Duty as a rational Creature, that though he should miss Truth, he will not miss
6 the Reward of it' (Locke, *Essay*, IV.xvii.24).
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12 Locke is thus committed to the idea that we are accountable for our beliefs,
13 whether true or false. Indeed, he holds that 'in the whole conduct of the understanding
14 there is nothing of more moment than to know when and where, and how far, to give
15 assent' (*Conduct*, §32, 99). It is down to us to seek the truth by all means available to us
16 and to proportion our beliefs in relation to the evidence. If, as is so often the case, we
17 fail in this duty and place our assent precipitously or improperly, the fault lies not with
18 our rational faculties, but with our neglect and misuse of them. But do we, in fact,
19 always have the power to use our God-given faculties appropriately?
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30 A first set of possible difficulties arises in circumstances where, through no fault
31 of our own, our capacity to examine our opinions is seriously impaired. Poverty and
32 hard labour, on the one hand, and the narrowness and intolerance of society, on the
33 other, may deprive us of '*the Liberty and Opportunities of a fair Enquiry*', wholly
34 preventing us from searching out the evidence needed to determine our assent (Locke,
35 *Essay*, IV.xx.2-4). Under such conditions, Locke is clear that we lack the freedom
36 needed to govern our opinions adequately, being 'enslaved to the Necessity of [our]
37 mean Condition' (Locke, *Essay*, IV.xx.2) and 'enslaved in that which should be the
38 freest part of man, [our] Understandings' (Locke, *Essay*, IV.xx.4). 'Without doing
39 injury to Mankind', moreover, some people lack the intellectual rigour and stamina
40 required to 'constantly follow that which in it self is the more probable Opinion'
41 (Locke, *Essay*, IV.xx.5). Nor are these circumstances exceptional or unusual: the
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3 limitations imposed by poverty, for example, affect ‘the greatest part of Mankind’
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5 (*Essay*, IV.xx.2).
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8 It would appear, then, that only some individuals, in some conditions, are able to
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10 fulfil their epistemic duties with respect to belief. Ultimately, however, this admission
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12 can be accommodated within Locke’s larger argument about obligation and assent.
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14 Recall that all that God requires is that we seek the truth ‘to the best of [our] Power’ and
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16 ‘by those Helps and Abilities that [we have]’ (Locke, *Essay*, IV.xvii.24), and only in
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18 those matters of greatest ‘Concernment’ (Locke, *Essay*, IV.xx.3). To the best of my
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20 knowledge, Locke does not anywhere undertake to justify these claims, which he seems
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22 to regard as axiomatically true. Where our power to examine our beliefs is limited by
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24 circumstances beyond our control, however, it is at least open to him to argue that we
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26 are discharged of blame for any resulting mistakes, since we were never in a position to
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28 avoid them. His basic thesis – ‘[t]hat God has furnished Men with Faculties sufficient to
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30 direct them in the Way they should take, if they will but seriously employ them that
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32 Way’ (Locke, *Essay*, IV.xx.3) – can thus be preserved intact.
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38 A second set of problems arises in those cases where individuals have the
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40 leisure, access to evidence, and intellectual skill needed to govern their assent
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42 appropriately, and yet still fail to do so. Once again, it is clear that Locke thinks of this
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44 as an all-too-common, indeed typical, occurrence. From this perspective, enthusiasm is
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46 simply an egregious example of the dangerously unreflective attitude that many of us
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48 adopt in matters of belief. Its fanatical adherents rely on circular ‘proofs’ amounting to
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50 nothing more than that ‘they are sure, because they are sure: and their Perswasions ...
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52 right, only because they are strong in them’ (Locke, *Essay*, IV.xix.9). More generally,
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54 people are too often content to accept unexamined opinions on trust, preferring to
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56 ‘enslav[e] their minds, to the Dictates and Dominion of others’ (*Essay*, I.iv.22) even
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3 where the probabilities 'lie so much within their view, that to be convinced of them,
4 they need but turn their Eyes that way' (*Essay*, IV.xx.6). That they do not do so is partly
5 due to laziness, distraction, and reverence for custom, and partly because their existing
6 opinions are convenient to their 'Prejudices, Lives, and Designs' (Locke, *Essay*,
7 IV.xx.6). Even where people choose to examine the evidence, moreover, many still fail
8 to reach probable conclusions, because their '*measures of Probability*' are distorted by
9 false principles entrenched since childhood, long-standing hypotheses now shown to be
10 obsolete, or opinions embraced out of party loyalty (Locke, *Essay*, IV.xx.10-11, 17).

21 In all these cases, Locke insists that it is in our power (though perhaps not
22 always easy) to overcome our complacency and prejudices, and 'keep a perfect
23 indifferency for all Opinions' ('Conduct', §33, 101). Those who fail in this duty have
24 'put colour'd Spectacles before their Eyes, and look on things through false Glasses'
25 ('Conduct', §33, 101), and have no one but themselves to blame for their
26 'Mismanagement' of their faculties ('Conduct', §33, 102). Once again, these statements
27 take the form of assertions, the validity of which Locke seems to take as given. Nor is it
28 clear just how plausible it is, in practice, to expect human beings to correct these
29 manifold distortions. Most people, on Locke's account, are 'conten[t]' to clothe their
30 minds in 'a piebald livery of coarse patches and borrowed shreds', patched together by
31 'chance' and the force of 'common opinion' (*Essay*, IV.xx.6). Yet much of this mental
32 clutter is acquired in infancy and childhood, before the full development of our rational
33 faculties. Indeed at one point Locke suggests that, once entrenched, such unexamined
34 opinions can no longer be uprooted, being 'riveted there by long Custom and Education
35 beyond all possibility of being pull'd out again' (*Essay*, IV.xx.9). For the most part,
36 however, he maintains that any difficulties encountered in policing our beliefs are
37 wholly self-incurred: with a 'very few' exceptions, it is not 'any natural Defect that
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3 makes Men incapable of examining their own Principles' but rather 'the ill habit of
4 never exerting their Thoughts', such that '[t]he powers of their Minds are starved by
5 disuse, and have lost that Reach and Strength which Nature fitted them to receive from
6 Exercise' ('Conduct', §12, 43-44). Again, Locke does not attempt to argue this point,
7 beyond reaffirming the seriousness of our epistemic obligations. Even where wrong
8 assent is unavoidable, however, he is at least able to *claim* that it is blameworthy. So on
9 this count too, his argument about epistemic duty can just about be sustained.

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12 Where this argument runs into serious difficulties is in considering a third set of
13 obstacles which may prevent us from using our rational faculties appropriately. The key
14 example here is that of a lover who refuses to accept he has been jilted by his mistress,
15 despite being in possession of powerful evidence in favour of this conclusion: 'three
16 kind Words' from the woman he loves are sufficient to outweigh 'a score' of
17 independent and concurrent testimonies of her infidelity (Locke, *Essay*, IV.xx.12). As in
18 the case of enthusiasm, this situation is simply an extreme version of what Locke
19 elsewhere acknowledges to be the normal epistemic condition of most human beings.
20 As we saw in section I, he holds that certainty is rarely available and probability only
21 occasionally strong enough to prove determining and irresistible. In the majority of
22 cases, then, the evidence leaves some room, however minimal, for suspicion and doubt.
23 In such circumstances, whenever we have a will to believe X rather than Y or Z, our
24 appetites can easily prevent us from accurately measuring the probabilities available to
25 us: '*quod volumus, facile credimus*; what suits our Wishes, is forwardly believed'
26 (Locke, *Essay*, IV.xx.12). That this is frequently the case is confirmed, as we saw in
27 section II, by what Locke says about the stubbornness of the human mind and the
28 impact of even indirect coercion on our resistance to new beliefs.

The problem with this particular concession to human irrationality is that it seems to leave both our control over our opinions and our capacity for any kind of objectivity seriously undermined. Without an adequate account of how we can suppress the influence of our more distortive passions and interests in order to respond correctly to the probabilities in hand, it is hard to see how we can justly be held to account for our intellectual failings and considered free in any meaningful sense (Dunn, *Locke*, 60). This implication has grave consequences for the regulation not only of belief but also of our conduct. 'The Ideas and Images in Mens Minds are the invisible Powers that constantly govern them', and to which 'they all universally pay a ready Submission' (Locke, 'Conduct', §1, 4). Yet it is precisely in our judgments of good and evil that our ability to undertake proper examination matters most, and precisely in these matters of great 'moment' that our passions are most likely to deceive us. As we have by now come to expect, Locke insists that the fault lies not in our faculties themselves but only in our 'want of will to use them' (Locke, *Essay*, IV.xx.6). But what if that 'want of will' is itself beyond our control?

At this point it is important to stress that voluntariness is not the same thing as freedom for Locke. On his account, as we have seen, belief is only in exceptional circumstances involuntary: in most cases, the probabilities are sufficiently open to accord the will an important role in either encouraging or preventing a fair examination of the evidence. But that is not to say that we are *free* to govern our assent more or less correctly. For Locke, a free action, whether mental or physical, is not merely one that I have willed, but one that I have as much power to avoid as to perform (*Essay*, II.xxi.8; II.xxi.21). All involuntary actions, but also all voluntary actions which I cannot avoid doing, are actions in respect of which I am necessitated, not free (Chappell, 'Locke on the Freedom of the Will', 104). In light of this it is hard to see how Losonsky can treat

conceptions of belief as a passionate process and conceptions of the mind as ‘a human artifact for which we have to accept responsibility’ (*Enlightenment and Action*, 73) as convergent forces in Locke’s thought. Once again, the issue is not that the will should play a role in shaping our beliefs, but that that will may itself be necessitated, and thus incompatible with the freedom and obligation that are integral to Locke’s ethics of belief.

The question of whether we can control our desires, what it is that determines the will, and whether we can be said to be free to will, is one which Locke struggled with at length, as his extensive revisions to the *Essay*’s chapter ‘On Power’ (II.xxi) reveal. In the second (1694) edition of the *Essay*, Locke replaced his earlier claim that the will is determined by a cognitive judgement as to the ‘greater Good’ with the idea that the will is instead moved by the passion of ‘uneasiness’, which always accompanies (and is sometimes even conflated with) desire (II.xxi.29 and 31). This claim drove a wedge between intellect and will, suggesting that the latter might sometimes be enslaved to our depraved and irrational passions. Earlier on in this chapter, moreover, Locke endorses a form of volitional determinism, arguing that it is absurd to ask whether ‘a Man be at liberty to will either Motion, or Rest; Speaking, or Silence, which he pleases’, as this would entail a viciously infinite succession of wills (*Essay*, II.xxi.25; Chappell, ‘Locke on the Freedom of the Will’, 108-112). If our volitions are themselves necessitated, and if it is uneasiness rather than judgement which determines them, it is difficult to see how any of our actions, for all their voluntary character, can at the same time be described by Locke as free.

Locke was anxious, however, to avoid a Hobbesian reduction of volition to passion. He therefore argued that we always have the power to suspend the execution of our desires until we have adequately examined the objects before it (Locke, *Essay*,

II.xxi.47). This power of suspension is for Locke ‘the hinge on which turns the *liberty* of intellectual Beings’, allowing us ‘to hold our *wills* undetermined, till we have *examin’d* the good and evil of what we desire’ (*Essay*, II.xxi.52). This claim largely fails, however, to demonstrate that our desires, and the moral judgments which shape them, are ultimately within our control. As Susan James has emphasized, the will’s power to suspend action and open a space for deliberation is in itself no guarantee of our ability to deliberate at all, let alone effectively, or of our freedom to act on the fruits of our deliberation (*Passion and Action*, 286-87). ‘The first... and great use of Liberty, is to hinder blind Precipitancy’ (Locke, *Essay*, II.xxi.67), yet people will only exercise their power of suspension if they already see reason to do so. Alternatively, as Locke himself admits, they may believe that they should suspend action and yet not be able to, because great physical pain or vehement passion drives all other thoughts from their minds (*Essay*, II.xxi.53 and 57). So even when we want to discharge our duties towards truth and reason, doing so might still not be in our power.

The central tension exhibited by Locke’s account of belief, then, is not between involuntary and voluntary dimensions of assent. Rather, it is between his conviction that we ought to believe (and act) only after a full and fair examination of the evidence, and his admission that such an examination is in all too many instances not merely difficult but impossible. On the one hand, our duty and happiness lie in ‘the forbearance of a too hasty compliance with our desires, [and] the moderation and restraint of our Passions, so that our Understandings may be *free* to examine, and reason unbiassed give its judgment’ (Locke, *Essay*, II.xxi.53). However, Locke himself concedes the contradictory position that strong passion ‘allows us not the liberty of thought, and [that] we are not Masters enough of our own Minds to consider thoroughly, and examine fairly’ (*Essay*, II.xxi.53). In this condition of powerlessness, we have no resort other

than to the mercy of 'God, who knows our frailty, pities our weakness, and requires of us no more than we are able to do' (Locke, *Essay*, II.xxi.53).

We are therefore brought back, once again, to the paradoxical condition of human beings as entities at once created and free. As Locke readily admitted, our understanding of human liberty under God is beset with difficulties:

We having but imperfect *Ideas* of the Operations of our Minds, and of the Beginning of Motion or Thought how the Mind produces either of them in us, and much imperfecter yet, of the Operation of GOD, run into great Difficulties about free created Agents, which Reason cannot well extricate it self out of. (*Essay*, IV.xvii.10)

The very act of writing *Of the Conduct of the Understanding* testifies to Locke's confidence in our ability to govern our beliefs. Yet our duty to pursue the truth independently of all determinations and dispositions is in itself no proof that we actually have the power to overcome the weaknesses and limitations of our state – except insofar as we are able to trust in divine justice as well as omnipotence, and hold fast to the conviction that God would not impose an obligation on us unless it were also in our power to fulfil it.

V

Locke's understanding of belief cannot adequately be approached in terms of a clear-cut opposition between volition and evidential judgement, or a simple identification of volition and passion. He sought instead to explain the convergent influence of probability and voluntary effort in guiding our assent. Neither his defence of toleration, nor his commitment to the rationality of probable judgement, required that he see belief as involuntary in any fundamental or all-encompassing sense. Instead, his account

emphasized above all our ability, or more accurately our duty, to examine our opinions and govern our beliefs in accordance with the evidence. In practice, however, Locke found it difficult to justify this conviction and establish that it is indeed within our power to free our judgements from the distortive influence of our prejudices, passions and interests. Locke's confidence in our ability to regulate our beliefs was thus, in the final instance, itself a matter of faith rather than probable evidence.

For Peer Review Only

¹ The core of this article originated in a paper written over ten years ago for a graduate seminar led by Hannah Dawson. Hannah's vast knowledge of Locke and infectious enthusiasm for early modern philosophy were, and remain, a great inspiration to me. The ideas in this article could not have come to fruition without her guidance and encouragement. I would also like to thank Mogens Laerke and Beth Lord for inviting me to speak at the Scottish Seminar for Early Modern Philosophy held at the University of Aberdeen in May 2018, which gave me an opportunity to revisit my ideas about belief in Locke. I am most grateful to them, to all the conference participants, and to the two anonymous reviewers for this journal, for their helpful questions and comments.

² For the avoidance of ambiguity, the short title *Essay* is used throughout to refer to Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, as distinct from his early treatise on toleration, the 'Essay concerning Toleration' (1667), for which the full title will be given.

³ In adopting this perspective, I have been guided by Nicholas Wolterstorff's reading of the *Essay* as an exercise in doxastic ethics as much as epistemology, and by his emphasis on the role of the will in Locke's account of belief formation (*Locke and the Ethics of Belief*, 92-118). At the same time, the analysis offered here differs from Wolterstorff's in a few important ways. First, although Wolterstorff notes in passing that he considers Passmore's interpretation 'seriously misguided' (xxi), he does not attempt to show if and how Locke's emphasis on belief regulation can be reconciled with his apparent commitment to an involuntary conception of belief. Secondly, although he delineates the 'wounds of the mind' which may prevent us from governing our assent correctly (*Locke and the Ethics of Belief*, 94-97), his focus is on exploring how, according to Locke, we *ought* to regulate our beliefs, not on our *freedom* to fulfil this obligation. Thirdly, I take issue with Wolterstorff's Hegelian interpretation of Locke as offering a distinctively modern solution to a 'fracturing' of moral and religious authority in the aftermath of the Reformation (227), based on a wholesale repudiation of tradition in favour of autonomous reason. Instead I take my lead from recent scholarship emphasising the centrality of natural law to Locke's conception of human beings as both free *and* subject to God (Harris, 'Locke and Natural Law'; Stanton, 'Locke and the Fable of Liberalism').

⁴ Locke sometimes expresses this point in normative rather than descriptive terms, for instance when he identifies probability as ‘the proper Object and Motive of our Assent’ (*Essay*, IV.xx.1) or when he states that ‘he governs his Assent right, and places it as he should, who in any Case or Matter whatsoever, believes or disbelieves, according as Reason directs him’ (*Essay*, IV.xvii.24). As will become apparent below, however, there is no inconsistency or redundancy between (a) stipulating that assent is determined by our estimate of the probabilities (belief *is* based on reasons) and (b) recognizing that that estimate may, in many if not most cases, be contaminated by errors (belief *ought* to be based on the *right* reasons).

⁵ Locke was well aware, of course, that people may frequently *profess* views for which they are unable to provide any justification. However, he seems to have regarded such professions as instances of simulated rather than actual belief. In the concluding paragraphs of his chapter on ‘Wrong Assent, or Errour’, he argues that ‘[t]here are not so many Men in *Errours, and Wrong Opinions, as it commonly supposed*’, not because ‘they embrace the Truth; but indeed, because, concerning those Doctrines they keep such a stir about, they have no Thought, no Opinion at all’, proclaiming views which ‘they were never convinced of, nor Proselytes to; no, nor ever had so much as floating in their Heads’ (*Essay*, IV.xx.18). By definition, then, for Locke, belief requires inward assent and understanding, not the mere parroting of catechisms and other received ideas. For further confirmation of this point, see the passage from Locke’s fragment ‘Error’ (1698) quoted in note 10 below, with its distinction between embracing a belief, and embracing the profession of a belief.

⁶ In his 1988 paper, Waldron briefly discusses Locke’s argument from the gospel and his argument from the nature of the commonwealth (*i.e.*, the first two arguments discussed above), but dismisses both as subordinate to, and less philosophically interesting than, his argument from belief (‘Locke: Toleration’, 62-64). In more recent work, however, Waldron has revised his view, arguing that ‘the main argument of the *Letter* does have to rest on its distinctively Christian foundations’ (*God, Locke and Equality*, 210).

⁷ John Dunn, for example, comments that this was ‘a point on which Locke was perhaps a trifle over-optimistic and on which his antagonist Jonas Proast pressed him uncomfortably hard’ (‘The Claim to Freedom of Conscience’, 112).

- ⁸ A further but complementary argument is offered by Adam Wolfson, for whom ‘[Locke’s] argument from belief is not, as it first comes to light, about the impregnability of our beliefs, but instead about our vulnerability to coercion and our dependence upon others in the beliefs that we come to hold’ (*Persecution or Toleration*, 7).
- ⁹ Locke acknowledges that it is impossible for anyone to subject each of their beliefs to full examination. Indeed ‘the conduct of our Lives, and the management of our great Concerns’ frequently require us ‘to determine ourselves on the one side or the other’ with only the most minimal scrutiny: ‘[w]ho almost is there, that hath the leisure, patience, and means, to collect together all the Proofs concerning most of the Opinions he has, so as safely to conclude, that he hath a clear and full view; and that there is no more to be alledged for his better information?’ (*Essay*, IV.xvi.3; see also ‘Conduct’, §33, 101-2). Locke insists, however, that ‘[n]o Man is so wholly taken up with the Attendance on the Means of Living, as to have no spare time at all to think of his Soul, and inform himself in Matters of Religion’, and that ‘[w]ere Men as intent upon this, as they are on Things of lower Concernment, there are none so enslaved to the Necessities of Life, who might not find many Vacancies, that might be husbanded to this Advantage of their Knowledge’ (*Essay*, IV.xx.3).
- ¹⁰ The term *rasa tabula* occurs in Drafts A and B of the *Essay* (Locke, *Drafts for the Essay*, 7-8 and 128), but not in the published version of the treatise, where Locke uses instead the image of ‘white paper, void of all Characters’ (*Essay*, II.i.2). See Duschinsky, ‘*Tabula Rasa*’, 515-18.
- ¹¹ This inference is made explicit in a 1698 entry in Locke’s commonplace book, where he argues that ‘he that Examins, and upon a fair examination imbraces an error for a truth, has done this duty, more than he who imbraces the profession (for the truths them selves he does not imbrace) of the Truth without haveing examined whether it be true or noe’ (‘Error’, 320).

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