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Locke, Active Power, and a Puzzle about Ascription

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Article abstract

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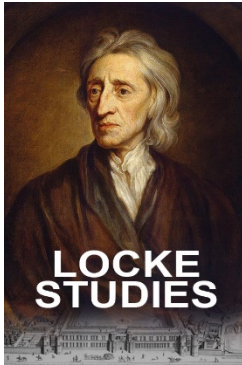
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Locke, Active Power, and a Puzzle about Ascription

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Abstract:

Locke traces the concept of active power to the experience of voluntary action in ourselves. I argue that Locke does not find in voluntary action a necessary connection binding volition and action. I defend the application of Locke's regularity theory of causal judgment to the operation of the will. The will is classified as a cause because it is regularly accompanied by a movement in our limbs or a change in our thoughts. I argue that Locke does not equate the concepts of cause and active power. He maintains that something can serve as a cause, and so bring about change, in virtue of activity or in virtue of its susceptibility to external influence. I go on to develop what I refer to as the ascription puzzle. Locke, who provides a criterion for classifying something as a cause, does not develop a criterion of for classifying causes as either active or passive in nature. The ascription puzzle is vexing because Locke has no principled way to establish, among other things, that humans, in acting voluntarily, exercise active power. The result is that Locke should not be taken to identify the experience of voluntary action as the origin of the concept of active power because of any metaphysical considerations bearing on human agency.

Keywords: Locke, agency, active power, voluntary action, causation, volition, occasionalism

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1. Introduction

Empiricism holds that a contentful or meaningful concept must stem from experience. Locke applies this principle to the concept of active power, which he refers to interchangeably as the “*Idea of Active Power*” and the “*Idea of the beginning of motion*.” He is clear about which experience serves as its origin: “The *Idea* of the beginning of motion, we have only from reflection on what passes in our selves, where we find by Experience, that barely by willing it, barely by the thought of the Mind, we can move the parts of our Bodies, which were before at rest.”¹ Locke holds that the experience of acting voluntarily is more than a possible origin of the concept of active power. It is the only relevant origin. However, it is not obvious why Locke takes reflection on the experience of voluntary action to serve as the origin of this concept. There is a variety of ways in which scholars have addressed this issue. I wish to focus on just one of them. Some scholars allege that Locke appeals to the experience of voluntary action because it is only here that we discover a *necessary connection* binding a cause to its associated effect.² Attention to this reading of Locke will serve as a starting point for clarifying some important elements of Locke’s theory of causation.

I argue that this reading of Locke’s genetic account of the concept of active power cannot possibly be correct. Locke’s concept of active power does not implicate necessity, and his theory of causation does not utilize necessary connections. According to Locke, the only basis we have for deeming one thing to be the cause of another is that the former is regularly accompanied by the latter. I present and defend the controversial view that Locke’s regularity theory of causal judgment applies in the case of voluntary action. We come to classify the will as a cause because it is regularly accompanied by a movement in our limbs or a change in our thoughts. However, as I argue, classifying something as a cause is not the same as classifying something as an active power. This is contrary to the view, suggested by some scholars, that Locke takes the concept of active power to be synonymous with the concept of a cause.³

I argue that active power is, for Locke, tantamount to nonderivative activity or, equally, the raw efficacy by which any change takes place. At the same time, both active and passive powers function as causes in the sense that we, by means of the regularity

¹ *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* ed. P. H. Nidditch, The Clarendon Edition of the Works of John Locke (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), II.xxi.4. Subsequent citations will appear in-text, according to the book, chapter, and section number(s) of this edition.

² The following scholars are addressed in Sections 2 and 3. Allison, Henry. *Custom and Reason in Hume: A Kantian Reading of the First Book of the Treatise*. New York: Oxford, 2008. Bennett, Jonathan. *Locke, Berkeley, Hume: Central Themes*. New York: Oxford, 1971. Connolly, John. “David Hume and the Concept of Volition: The Will as Impression.” *Hume Studies* 13, no. 2 (1987): 276–305. Mabbott, J. D. *John Locke*. London: Macmillan Press, 1973.

³ In Section 3.2 I speak to contributions from the following scholars. Jacovides, Michael. “Locke’s Construction of the Idea of Power.” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 34 (2003): 329–50. Mattern, R. M. “Locke on Active Power and the Obscure Idea of Active Power from Bodies.” *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science* 11, no. 1 (1980): 39–77. Yaffe, Gideon. *Liberty Worth the Name*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.

guiding our causal judgments, have as much reason to attribute a causal status to an object that brings about change in virtue of its activity as we do to an object that brings about change in virtue of its susceptibility to external influence. If I am right about Locke's distinction between active powers and causes, then a vexing puzzle emerges. I refer to this as the ASCRIPTION PUZZLE. A cause, for Locke, is something we take to bring about change. By contrast, the concepts of activity and passivity are used to categorize the manner in which a cause brings about change. But Locke, who has a criterion for classifying something as a cause, has no principled way to classify a given cause as either active or passive. Locke, it seems, appeals to the experience of voluntary action in ourselves as the origin of the concept of active power despite the fact that his theory of causation provides no basis upon which to assert that voluntary action implicates or exhibits active power as well as no basis upon which to deny active power to causal operations among material bodies.⁴

2. Does Locke Find a Necessary Connection in Voluntary Action?

Some scholars suggest that what draws Locke's attention to the experience of voluntary action is that it involves a necessary connection. For example, J. D. Mabbott attributes the following view to Locke: "when I decide . . . to move my arm . . . and my arm moves, I do not need repeated experience to *know* that my decision and [this event] are necessarily connected, and that the connection is causal."⁵ Jonathan Bennett constructs a similar view which he then obliquely ascribes to Locke: "I am conscious within myself of a necessary or more-than-inductive connexion between the act of my will and the willed upshot."⁶ Henry Allison claims that, for Locke, reflection on the experience of voluntary

⁴ Two potential solutions to the ascription puzzle stand out to me. These two methods import metaphysical and epistemological claims from elsewhere in Locke's writings. It could be maintained that, according to Locke, the mind is inherently active. If this is the case for Locke, then, while other causes may have an ambiguous status as either active or passive, the mind, by its very nature, necessarily exhibits active power in its voluntary acts. For example, Antonia LoLordo maintains that "active power...is unique to spirits" such that "only spirits can serve as original sources of motion." *Locke's Moral Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 33, 33n15. Alternatively, it could be argued that, according to Locke, reflection on the experience of voluntary action directly acquaints us with active power and, so, renders certain the judgment that humans possess active power. Again, taking LoLordo as an example, she suggests that reflection on the experience of voluntary action is, for Locke, an instance in which "[causal] production can literally be observed" and that such reflection constitutes "a theoretical justification for our certainty that we possess active power." *Locke's Moral Man*, 30-31. I find these two interpretations of Locke to be very interesting. However, on the basis of arguments I cannot elaborate here, I am not confident that they successfully resolve the ascription puzzle. Indeed, one of the main goals of the present article is to clarify the concept of active power and some of the constraints stemming from Locke's theory of causation so that elsewhere I may give these two interpretations the careful analysis they deserve.

⁵ *John Locke* (London: MacMillan Press, 1973), 40.

⁶ *Locke, Berkeley, Hume: Central Themes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 160.

action provides “a direct awareness of a necessary connection.”⁷ The suggestion, as I understand it, is that, unlike other experiences, reflection on the experience of voluntary action reveals a necessary connection of the kind that is required to generate the concept of active power. But this reading is problematic because Locke does not incorporate necessary connections into his theory of causation. This is a consequence of his commitment to the claim that no two events, even those pairings of events we deem to be causes and effects, are related by necessity. I will argue that this claim from Locke extends to his understanding of the relationship between volition and action. According to Locke, as I hope to demonstrate, we take the will to be a cause for no other reason than that it so often precedes or accompanies change in our thoughts and movement in our body.

2.1 The Nature of Necessary Connections

Locke takes necessary connections to be both *a priori* and *immutable*. Necessary connections are *a priori* in that they are discoverable features inherent in certain ideas. Hence Locke writes: “In some of our *Ideas* there are certain Relations, Habitues, and Connexions, so visibly included in the Nature of the *Ideas* themselves, that we cannot conceive them separable from them, by any Power whatsoever” (*Essay*, IV.iii.29). Necessary connections, where they occur, are also constitutive and so immutable features of ideas. Where a necessary connection between two ideas or between two features within the same idea occurs, we have no choice but to think of one in combination with the other. For example, as philosophers of the period often explain this specific relationship, when we think of a mountain we must, by necessity, also think of a valley. The point here may be that we cannot think of a line inclined in one direction without also thinking of this line declined in the opposite direction, or that we cannot think of a raised parcel of land without also thinking of the low-lying parcel of land against which the former appears to us as elevated. But Locke’s position is slightly stronger than this. These constitutive features of our ideas are also immutable insofar as they are neither creatable nor alterable by a divine will. On this point Locke considers our idea of a triangle:

the *Idea* of a right-lined Triangle necessarily carries with it an equality of its Angles to two right ones. Nor can we conceive this Relation, this connexion of these two *Ideas*, to be possibly mutable, or to depend on any arbitrary Power, which of choice made it thus, or could make it otherwise. (*Essay*, IV.iii.29)

According to Locke, not even God, referred to as an “arbitrary Power,” can make it the case that the sum of a triangle’s interior angles deviates from 180 degrees, and, as Locke suggests, the fact that the concept of a triangle has this particular structure seems to hold independently of God’s wishes.

⁷ *Custom and Reason in Hume: A Kantian Reading of the First Book of the Treatise* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2008), 185.

2.2 Necessity, Regularity, and Causal Relations

Causal relations obtain by virtue of God alone, that is, in virtue of an arbitrary will rather than in virtue of a constraining logical necessity. Hence Locke characterizes causal relations as being thoroughly mutable: “we can attribute their connexion to nothing else, but the arbitrary Determination of that All-wise Agent, who has made them to be” (*Essay*, IV.iii.28). It is a claim that Locke repeats elsewhere: “the original Rules and Communication of Motion being such, wherein we can discover no natural connexion with any *Ideas* we have, we cannot but ascribe them to the arbitrary Will and good Pleasure of the Wise Architect” (*Essay*, IV.iii.29). The point I want to extract from these passages is that, for Locke, causal relations are purely contingent features of the world.⁸ Therefore the reason that causal relations obtain at all, namely, a divine decree or “arbitrary Determination,” deprives these relations of the immutability Locke attributes to necessary connections. God cannot alter the relationship between a triangle and the property of having three interior angles adding up to 180 degrees. But, so far as our ideas serve as a guide in the matter, God *can* arrange a seemingly endless variety of causal relationships between objects or events.

The contingent nature of causal relationships pushes us to consider the related issue of what serves as the basis of causal judgment. According to Locke, we come to see two objects as causally related as a result of experience rather than as a result of metaphysical insight or demonstrative reasoning. For example, he writes in Draft A, composed sometime in 1671, “that . . . a load stone will . . . draw iron, of this I have noe certain knowledg.”⁹ Locke, in the published *Essay*, discusses a similar example: “whatever alteration a *Load-stone* has the Power to make in the minute Particles of Iron, we should have no Notion of any Power it had at all to operate on Iron, did not its sensible Motion discover it” (*Essay*, II.xxiii.9). This appeal to experience is made somewhat sharper in other passages. It is specifically the *repeated experience* of one event preceding or accompanying another that serves as the basis for causal judgment. For example, the reason we identify heat as the cause responsible for melting the wax is that “Fluidity [in wax] is constantly produced by the Application of a certain degree of Heat” (*Essay*,

⁸ Perhaps this is true, however, only with respect to the humble epistemological tools with which humans experience the world and, in specialized cases, conduct scientific inquiry. I do not intend to challenge M. R. Ayers, who has argued that, for Locke, a “Demonstrative science is impossible because of our ignorance, not because there is nothing there to know.” *Locke: Epistemology and Ontology*, vol. 2, *Ontology* (London, Routledge, 1991), 149. The suggestion from Ayers is that Locke is committed to no more than that humans, either by means of experience or by a consideration of ideas in the space of imagination, are unable to discern the necessary connections binding causes to their effects. Consequently, according to Ayers, Locke is not committed to the much stronger view that there exist no necessary connections between causes and their effects. For a reading that does challenge Ayers’s view that epistemological considerations restrict the import of Locke’s remarks, see Matthew Stuart, *Locke’s Metaphysics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 264–68.

⁹ Draft A, in *Drafts A and B*, ed. Peter Nidditch and G. A. J. Rogers, vol. 1 of *John Locke: Drafts for the Essay Concerning Human Understanding and Other Philosophical Writings* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 30.

II.xxvi.1). When Locke opens his chapter “*Of Cause and Effect, and other Relations*” he immediately refers us to “the notice, that our Senses take of the constant Vicissitude of Things” (*Essay*, II.xxvi.1). Locke, speaking on our inability to explain the “connexion” that may seem to bind a purported cause to its associated effect, points out that we are nevertheless sensitive to their having a “constant and regular connexion, in the ordinary course of Things” (*Essay*, IV.iii.28). Locke consistently emphasizes the relevance of repeated experience to causal judgment: “The Things that, as far as our Observation reaches, we constantly find to proceed regularly, we may conclude, do act by a Law set them; but yet by a Law, that we know not” (*Essay*, IV.iii.29).¹⁰

Here in these passages referring to regularities and constancies between events we find strong indication that Locke holds a regularity theory of causal judgment. This is his explanation for why it is that we feel so compelled to claim or feel so justified in claiming that one event constitutes a cause of some other event. His explanation is that we have often had experience of one event preceding or accompanying the other.¹¹ It may be

¹⁰ Locke, it should be noted, is using repeated experience to explain the basis for causal judgments and not for identifying the experiential origin of causal concepts. His genetic account of causal concepts is altogether separate from his account of causal judgment that concerns when and why we feel compelled to think of something as a cause or as participating in a causal relationship. I believe Ayers is mistaken when he reports the following of Locke’s view: “It is not observation of mere change, but of repeated, regular change, that is said to give us the idea of power.” “The Ideas of Power and Substance in Locke’s Philosophy,” in *Locke on Human Understanding: Selected Essays*, ed. I. C. Tipton (London: Oxford University Press), 81. The same mistake may be found in Jacovides: “we normally construct the idea of power out of observations of causal processes.” “Locke’s Construction of the Idea of Power,” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 34 (2003): 334. We see, again, a view much like this in Walter Ott, where we learn that, according to Locke, the idea of power “arises in us on repeated exposure to changes in the natural world.” *Causation and Laws of Nature in Early Modern Philosophy*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 169. One possible motivation for this reading is the following passage from Locke: “whatever Change is observed, the Mind must collect a Power somewhere, able to make that Change, as well as a possibility in the thing it self to receive it” (*Essay*, II.xxi.4). It sounds as though Locke is deriving, in some genetic fashion, the concept of power from repeated experience. However, contrary to what the passage appears to say, we ought, as Yaffe suggests, to take Locke to be speaking of the basis we have for ascribing powers to things: “To ‘collect a Power’ in an object is to ascribe a power to the object.” *Liberty Worth the Name* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 83. (I believe a similar explanation can be given for an analogous passage in II.vii.8.) Scholars who do not distinguish between Locke’s genetic account of power, on the one hand, and his account of causal judgment, on the other, run the risk of rendering Locke’s position incoherent. It does not make sense, at least not for an empiricist such as Locke, to say that the concept of power originates in or arises as a consequence of judgments that employ the concept in question. This is pushing the cart alongside the horse. Empiricist method holds, at a minimum, that judgments employing causal concepts are possible only after we have come to possess, by some other experiential means, the concepts in question.

¹¹ There are many ways in which we might distinguish the theories of causation developed by Locke and David Hume. However, I believe we must grant that they share the view that regularities in experience serve as the basis for causal judgment. Hume provides an associationist account according to which our experience of constant conjunction and our passive susceptibility to the influence of custom leads us to the belief that some object operates as a cause. Hume attributes to Locke an account of causal judgment according to which our experience of regularities serves as a rational basis for inferring that something

tempting to think that Locke, who speaks of our discovering a *law* on the basis of two constantly occurring events, holds that experienced regularities justify the derivation of some robust causal laws. But consider his related discussion of the “Principles” that thinkers propose in order to help us explain natural phenomena:

we [should] take care, that the Name of *Principles* deceive us not, nor impose on us, by making us receive that for an unquestionable Truth, which is really, at best, but a very doubtful conjecture, such as are most (I had almost said all) of the *Hypotheses* in natural Philosophy. (*Essay*, IV.xii.13)

What Locke says about “Principles” in this passage applies equally to his view of our knowledge concerning the “Laws” governing causal relationships. We learn in the *Essay* that any form of knowledge other than intuition or demonstration “is but Faith, or Opinion, but not Knowledge, at least in all general Truths” (*Essay*, IV.ii.14). Causal judgments fit into this category. A longer passage in Draft A applies this epistemic distinction to causal relationships: “all that our understandings can attain to in the enquire into [a thing’s] nature & operations, is but præsumption belief, conjecture, & confidence but not certain knowledg[.] And therefor all the [general] propositions about them...are but probable...& our assent to them faith.”¹² This topic arises in the *Essay* but there Locke chooses to soften the appearance of his commitment: “the Load-stone draws Iron; and the parts of a Candle successively melting, turn into flame, and give us both light and heat. These and the like Effects we see and know: but the causes that operate, and the manner they are produced in, we can only guess, and probably conjecture” (*Essay*, IV.xvi.12). What we find in Locke is the view that our causal judgments—despite their sometimes being cast in stronger terms such as “Laws” or “Principles” concerning natural phenomena—are fragile *conjectures* whose humble origins are no more than our superficial experience of regularly occurring events. Locke’s regularity theory of causal judgment helps him to explain why, despite the poverty of our understanding of natural events as well as the irrelevance of metaphysical insight and demonstration to such cases,

operates as a cause. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press), I.iii.14, 157. This strikes me as erroneous. It is worth adding here, as we consider the differences between Locke and Hume, that a regularity theory of causal judgment is, of course, far from a complete theory of causation. Regularity itself does not tell us anything about what it is in virtue of which an object brings about change or, as Hume would interject, whether a particular object bears any causal responsibility for the change in question. Regularity merely tells us that we have or may have some basis for thinking that an object functions as a cause with respect to some other object or event. Both Locke and Hume go on to discuss other elements of causation such as what we mean when we employ the concept of causal efficacy and what experience, if any, gives rise to this concept. It is in these discussions that we find sharp differences between Locke and Hume. Therefore, even if it turns out, by some chance, that Locke himself provides an associationist account of causal judgment—that is, an account concerning when and why we ascribe a causal status to some object—it remains true that he offers a distinct genetic account of causal concepts and that he, in his theoretical discussion of active and passive powers, has more to say about what a cause does if and when it brings about change.

¹² Draft A of the *Essay*, 61.

we nevertheless come to hold that one thing constitutes a cause and another its associated effect.¹³

2.3 Necessity, Regularity, and Voluntary Action

Let us focus on the causal relationship that purportedly obtains between volition and action. We have seen that, according to Locke, our judgments about causal relations are probable conjectures based on regularities in experience. This is consonant with his view, discussed in connection with necessity, that particular causal relations are neither known *a priori* nor constitute immutable features of the objects so related. These two aspects of Locke's view show up in his discussion of voluntary action. If Locke takes voluntary action to involve a necessary connection, then he should attribute apriority and immutability to the relationship obtaining between volition and action. This necessary connection should be discoverable upon inspecting the ideas themselves and should not prove alterable in imagined cases.

According to Locke, the relationship between volition and action is not discernible *a priori* in any constitutive features of these ideas: "How any thought should produce motion in Body is...remote from the nature of our *Ideas*" (*Essay*, IV.iii.28). Locke tells us that, directing our attention to "the *Ideas* themselves," we find that they appear "to have no necessary dependance one on another" (*Essay*, IV.iii.28). Locke, in his correspondence with Philippus van Limborch, which took place in 1701 and 1702, presents a case in which he demonstrates that there is no necessary connection obtaining between volition and action: "when a paralytic wills to move his palsied hand . . . the act of willing is in this case just as complete as it was . . . when the hand complied with the volition."¹⁴ The suggestion here is that it is possible for an act of volition to occur without being accompanied by

¹³ Mattern argues that Locke does not limit himself to a regularity theory of causal judgment. The support for this reading is the claim that despite Locke's repeated insistence that regularity serves as the basis for causal judgment, regularities are not the *only* basis for causal judgment: sometimes our causal judgments "are based on experience of the causal processes" themselves. "Locke on Active Power and the Obscure Idea of Active Power from Bodies," *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science* 11, no. 1 (1980), 48. I myself do not know of any passage that supports this view. As it seems to me, Locke's emphasis on the "incomprehensibility" of causal relationships undermines Mattern's view. See *Essay*, II.xxiii.24, II.xxiii.26, II.xxxii.14, IV.x.19; *Mr. Locke's Reply to the Bishop of Worcester's Answer to his Second Letter* in vol. 4 of *The Works of John Locke* (London, 1823), 463, and elsewhere throughout Locke's writings. Note that when Locke delves into the particulars of a given causal relationship, as he is occasionally wont to do and which may serve as evidence for Mattern's reading, he sometimes draws our attention to regularities: "it is certain I have [visual experiences]; but the manner how I come by them, how it is that I perceive, I confess I understand not; though it be plain motion has to do in the producing of them: and motion, so modified, is appointed to be the cause of our having them; as appears by the curious and artificial structure of the eye, accommodated to all the rules of refraction and dioptrics, that so visible objects might be exactly and *regularly* painted on the bottom of the eye." *An Examination of P. Malebranche's Opinion*, in vol. 9 of *The Works of John Locke* (London, 1823), 217; emphasis added.

¹⁴ John Locke to Philippus van Limborch, 12 August 1701, in *The Correspondence of John Locke*, Ed. E. S. de Beer, *The Clarendon Edition of the Works of John Locke* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1981), no. 2979, 7:404.

action, a scenario that would be impossible to conceive were it the case that volition bore a necessary connection to action. Therefore, Locke does not take the relationship between volition and action to be immutable.

Why, according to Locke, do we take the will to be the source of change in our thoughts and movements? We have seen that, according to Locke, the inner workings of this relationship are “remote from the nature of our *Ideas*” (*Essay*, IV.iii.28). But let us take note of just how “remote” this relationship is from any *a priori* considerations: “if Experience did not convince us, the Consideration of the Things themselves would never be able, in the least, to discover to us” (*Essay*, IV.iii.28). What Locke states here bears considerable resemblance to a claim we find in Robert Bragge’s 1725 *A Brief Essay concerning the Soul of Man*. It is a version of Locke’s view in which Bragge places the proper emphasis on the mysteriousness of the relationship between volition and action: “Was it not Matter of every Day’s Experience, the moving of the Hand by a meer *Volition*, would be as strange a Thing as an *Apparition*.”¹⁵ What Locke suggests, and what Bragge captures well, is that it is repeated experience rather than either metaphysical insight or demonstration that serves as a basis for the ordinary judgment that the will is a cause. Were it not for repeated experience we would have no foundation for the judgment that the will bears any relationship to our thoughts or bodily movements. Locke goes on to say of voluntary action and the effects brought upon the mind by external objects:

These, and the like, though they have a constant and regular connexion, in the ordinary course of Things . . . we can attribute their connexion to nothing else, but the arbitrary Determination of that All-wise Agent, who has made them to be, and to operate as they do, in a way wholly above our weak Understandings to conceive. (*Essay*, IV.iii.28)

Locke does not explicitly state in these passages that it is on the basis of constancy, or the regular succession of volition and action, that we are compelled to think of the will as a cause. A plausible reading, however, is that, for Locke, the connection between volition and action is sufficiently remote from our understanding that all we have to go on in developing the conviction that there is some causal connection between them is the fact that one regularly proceeds or accompanies the other. Locke has starved the relationship between volition and action to the same extent that he has treated sparingly the relationship between causes and effects among external objects.

Therefore, I believe Locke holds, if only implicitly, the view that the will, like *any* object we deem to be a cause, constitutes a cause for no other reason than that its operation is regularly accompanied by a change in our thoughts or a movement in our limbs. Richard I. Aaron hesitates to draw this conclusion. He says of Locke’s view that, despite the important function served by regularity in our experience of bodies, it is something else that serves as the basis of the view that the will is a cause: “in reflection

¹⁵ *A Brief Essay concerning the Soul of Man* (London, 1725), 23.

we gain, it seems, a deeper insight into causal activity.”¹⁶ But here Aaron departs from his otherwise compelling interpretation of Locke: “Natural science cannot be certain, for it does not provide knowledge of the necessary causal connexions between things. It is a system built up of inductively established generalizations which at best are only probable. Locke never wavers on this point.”¹⁷ R.M. Mattern is right, in my estimation, when she points out that if we take seriously the passages that serve as evidence for Locke’s regularity theory of causal judgment, then “they would also compel one to adopt a parallel interpretation of his views on mental causation.”¹⁸

3. What Does Locke Mean by Active Power?

Clarifying what Locke means by the “*Idea* of Active Power” and the “*Idea* of the beginning of motion” is an important step in our attempt to understand his genetic investigation.¹⁹ We need to know what concept Locke traces to the experience of voluntary action. As we have seen, some scholars assume that what guides Locke’s genetic account of the concept of active power is the conviction that causal relations are necessary or implicate necessity in some way. John Connolly suggests that Locke, in offering a genetic account of the concept of causal power, is looking for “the source of our idea of the *necessary* relationship between cause and effect.”²⁰ However, as I have argued above, this cannot be correct, as necessity is not implicated in Locke’s theory of causation. I agree with Mattern when she writes: “Locke is not looking for an impression of necessary connection.”²¹

¹⁶ John Locke (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 187.

¹⁷ John Locke, 188.

¹⁸ “Locke on Active Power,” 49. Mattern takes this very consequence to constitute a *reductio* against any interpretation that commits Locke to a regularity theory of causal judgment. Mattern warns us that stretching Locke’s regularity theory of causal judgment beyond the scope of material objects to explain our causal judgments pertaining to minds will preclude him from appealing to the experience of voluntary action to explain the origin of the concept of active power. For regularities abound in nature and would not be unique to the relationship between volition and action. However, this is only true if Locke, when searching about for an experiential origin of this concept, limits himself to a consideration of *regularities*. There is more to the experience of voluntary action than the regularity with which volition is accompanied by a movement in our limbs or a change in our thoughts. It is a phenomenologically rich experience that may differ from other competing experiential origins in important ways. One small goal of the present article is to encourage scholars to earnestly revisit the experience of voluntary action and to rethink its relevance for Locke’s genetic explanation for the concept of active power.

¹⁹ I will not take up the issue of whether the concept of active power is simple or complex. For a defense of the view that the concept of active power is simple, see Patrick Connolly, “The Idea of Power and Locke’s Taxonomy of Ideas,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 95, no. 1 (2017): 1–16.

²⁰ “David Hume and the Concept of Volition: The Will as Impression,” *Hume Studies* 13, no. 2 (1987): 292.

²¹ “Locke on Active Power,” 54.

Locke has something other than necessity in mind when he refers to the concept of active power.

In what follows I will carefully disambiguate some related concepts Locke employs throughout his discussion of causation—active power, passive power, and cause. These terms may seem somewhat tangled. As Gerd Buchdahl remarks about Locke’s genetic account of the concept of active power: “it is never made *clear* what we are searching for.”²² With some effort we can determine that, for Locke, the concept of active power refers to that by virtue of which any change is brought into the world.²³ Michael Jacovides, who provides a dispositional account of Locke’s concept of active power, suggests that Locke excludes from it characteristics such as “pushes, causes, or strivings.”²⁴ However, as I hope to make clearer below, I think that it is precisely substantive characteristics of this kind, appropriately qualified as an emphasis on *efficacy*, that are most central to Locke’s concept of active power.

²² *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1969), 263.

²³ Mattern takes Locke to hold a “mentalistic” conception of active power according to which active power is “defined as a capacity to do something by one’s own choice” or “voluntary control over motion and thought.” “Locke on Active Power,” 71, 73. The same appears to be true of LoLordo, who holds that, for Locke, “All exercises of active powers are volitions, and all volitions are the exercise of active power.” *Locke’s Moral Man*, 34. I fear this interpretation of Locke assigns too much weight to the passages where he, endeavoring to communicate the conceptual difference between active power and passive power, appeals to the convenient and illustrative *examples* of God and voluntary action in humans. His intention, however, is not to restrict the exercise of active power to those things that exert it *consciously*. Samuel C. Rickless argues, persuasively, that, for Locke, “some exercises of active power . . . are quite clearly not volitions.” “Locke on Active Power, Freedom, and Moral Agency,” *Locke Studies*, 13 (2013), 41. As it seems to me, Locke, contrary to what Mattern and LoLordo suggest, does not develop a “mentalistic” conception of active power but rather puts forward a view that captures the prevailing doctrine of active and passive powers during his time. Therefore, I agree with Vere Chappell when he writes of Locke’s discussion of active and passive powers: “Locke takes most of [this] doctrine and language for granted. Many of his seventeenth-century contemporaries and most of his medieval predecessors held the same opinions and used the same vocabulary.” “Power in Locke’s *Essay*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke’s Essay*, ed. Lex Newman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 131. Additionally, Martha Brandt Bolton notes the influence of Aristotle on Locke’s distinction between active and passive powers. See “Locke and Leibniz on the Structure of Substance and Powers: The Metaphysics of Moral Subjects,” in *Studies on Locke: Sources, Contemporaries, and Legacy in Honour of G.A.J. Rogers*, ed. Sarah Hutton and Paul Schuurman (Dordrecht, NL: Springer, 2008), 110. Though this is not the place to argue the point, I believe that attention to the historical and contemporary context significantly diminishes any evidence that might be proffered in support of the claim, as some scholars allege, that Locke’s view of active power underwent important changes during the course of his life. See especially Mattern, in “Locke on Active Power,” who zealously defends this reading. What, to some scholars, look like modifications of his view, as it is articulated in various forms between the early Drafts and the fourth edition of the *Essay*, is, I believe, a consistent and conceptually stable discussion of active power, one, moreover, that is not intended to be philosophically pathbreaking. It is truncated or hastily sketched in some places while in others its nuances are more fully explained.

²⁴ “Locke’s “Construction of the Idea of Power,” 332.

3.1 Distinguishing Active and Passive Powers

An object operating on the basis of *passive power* is “impelled by another” (*Essay*, II.xxi.4). For example, Locke writes, “when the Ball obeys the stroke of a Billiard-stick, it is not any action of the Ball, but bare passion” (*Essay*, II.xxi.4). The motion of the ball in this case, a motion that takes place by virtue of a passive power to succumb to external influence, is a mere “continuation” of the action communicated to it by the stick. The ball certainly moves. However, the point in this case is that the ball, exercising passive power, moves by virtue of its capacity to continue motion imparted to it rather than by virtue of motion that the ball itself initiates and sustains. An object exercising *active power* is said to “produce” motion (*Essay*, II.xxi.4). Lacking a causal antecedent, motion in the case of active power is equivalent to a spontaneous “beginning of motion.” Activity, therefore, marks a wholesale introduction of motion or change where there was none before. It is *this* which interests Locke when he sets out to identify an experiential origin of the “*Idea* of Active Power” or the “*Idea* of the beginning of motion.”

Active power, which Locke takes to be the “more proper signification of the word *Power*,” is tantamount to what I will sometimes refer to as *nonderivative activity* (*Essay*, II.xxi.4). Therefore, I shall take it that when Locke appeals to voluntary action as an experiential origin of the concept of active power, he is offering a genetic account of the concept of active power specifically understood as nonderivative activity. Here Locke, as it seems to me, offers us a conception of active power that is significantly more robust in content than is afforded by either a dispositional or deflationary account of this concept.²⁵ Locke is talking about more than the mere and so unexercised *capacity* or *disposition* for change. Admittedly, he has not particularized the concept in a way that draws upon pushes or strivings. However, he is talking about an equally chunky notion of raw efficacy that, unprompted by any antecedent, brings about change in the world.

3.2 Distinguishing Causes and Active Powers

Locke also distinguishes *causes* from *active powers*. This distinction is less than intuitive, and some scholars have missed it entirely. Gideon Yaffe characterizes the difference between active and passive powers in terms of causes and effects: “Whenever we say that one state or change caused another, we presuppose that there is an active power in the subject of the first to cause such states or changes in the second, and there is a passive power in the subject of the second to receive such states or changes.”²⁶ Jacovides, in a similar vein, holds that, for Locke, “causes are a subclass of actions” such that “every time an object causes an effect, it acts.”²⁷ However, it is well worth our time to carefully

²⁵ See Ott for a deflationary reading of Locke’s concept of active power. According to Ott, Locke follows “Boyle’s basic strategy [wherein the goal] is to sanitize powers by treating them as relations and then offering some version of a reductive account of those relations.” *Causation and the Laws of Nature*, 159.

²⁶ *Liberty Worth the Name*, 82–83.

²⁷ “Locke’s Constructions of the Idea of Power,” 342.

disentangle active powers from causes. A failure to draw this distinction may lead us to believe that Locke is committed to the view that wherever we have reason, on the basis of repeated experience, for classifying something as a cause, we also have reason to classify that thing as bringing about change in virtue of an active power. As we will see, causes can bring about change actively or passively.

According to Locke, “Sometimes the Substance, or Agent, puts it self into *Action* by its own Power, and this is properly *Active Power*” (*Essay*, II.xxi.72). In such cases an object constitutes a cause by virtue of its own capacity for action. Yet there are also cases in which a cause brings about an effect passively, as when a leaf, carried by the wind, disturbs the surface of a pond. This is a case in which an object “is put into that *Action* purely from without, and so acts merely by the capacity it has to receive . . . an impression from some external Agent” (*Essay*, II.xxi.72). Consequently, where a passive power brings about change, Locke is careful to state that it is “not properly an *Active Power*,” but this does not mean that a passive power fails to constitute a cause (*Essay*, II.xxi.72). For the leaf does indeed bring about a disturbance in the surface of the water. Locke, perhaps for the sake of convenience, does not always speak precisely. He sometimes writes in a way that might suggest that *all* causes exert active power:

Power being that Source from whence all Action proceeds, the Substances wherein these Powers are, when they exert this Power into Act, are called *Causes*; and the Substances which thereupon are produced, or the simple *Ideas* which are introduced into any subject by the exerting of that Power, are called *Effects*. (*Essay*, II.xxii.11)

However, Locke, in this passage, is not talking about active power specifically. He is referring to *any* power, whether active or passive, that is in some way implicated in bringing about change. I submit that Locke, in referring to something that “exert[s] this Power into Act,” is speaking generally of what a thing does when we classify it as a source of change or, equally, as a cause. Even a passive cause “acts,” according to Locke, albeit in the attenuated sense of “act[ing] merely by the capacity it has to receive” external influence. Furthermore, it will be true of both causes that bring about change in virtue of their own activity and causes that bring about change passively as a result of succumbing to external influence, that they give expression to some active power which has set this process in motion. There will be, underlying both cases, some “*efficacy*” at work, albeit directly in the case of active powers bringing about change and indirectly in the case of passive powers bringing about change (*Essay*, II.xxii.11).

Locke’s definition of a cause is much too broad to imply a restriction to active powers: “a *Cause* is that which makes any other thing, either simple *Idea*, Substance, or Mode, begin to be” (*Essay*, II.xxvi.2). The definition of a cause is intentionally thin. It occurs in a passage where Locke is attempting to demonstrate how little is needed to develop an example or instance of causation. His explanation is as follows: “For to have the *Idea* of *Cause* and *Effect*, it suffices to consider any simple *Idea*, or Substance, as beginning to exist, by the Operation of some other, without knowing the manner of that Operation” (*Essay*, II.xxvi.2). The exercise of generating an example of causation in the space of

imagination or pointing to one in our field of view is not particularly restrictive. The reason is that, for Locke, the concept of a cause is applicable to any object that we take to be responsible for bringing about change. And it is applicable in such cases, provided repeated experience motivates such an attribution, independently of any consideration of the manner in which the change was brought about or the metaphysical status of the object that brought about the change. We can make causal judgments, which, taking notice of regularly occurring alterations in the world, necessarily implicate the bearing of some active power on the present case, without implying that the object we classify as a cause itself exercises active power. Classifying something as a cause is something distinct from classifying something as operating either actively or passively.

Mattern, who does not make use of the distinction between active powers and causes, appears to think that Locke is bound to the view that bodies *must* possess and exercise active powers. For, as she explains, without the presence and operation of active powers in bodies Locke would be forced to “den[y] efficacy in the mechanical realm.”²⁸ The worry seems to be that if bodies do not themselves exercise active powers, then they could not possibly function as causes or enter into causal relationships. Obviously, we have reason to believe that bodies enter into causal relationships, since regularities are evident among them. Any view that would prevent bodies from entering into causal relationships would be deeply unsatisfactory. However, this worry is easily resolved once we take into consideration Locke’s distinction between active powers and causes. Where we have an active power, a cause itself exercises the efficacy that is responsible for bringing about some effect. In such cases an active power introduces into existence an action or principle of change that did not before exist. In other cases, where we have a passive power, a cause is subject to and operates in virtue of an independent and already existing act or principle of change. And so passive powers do indeed constitute causes. Yet they exert causal influence, as when the leaf disturbs the water surface, in virtue of an act or efficacy that it does not itself generate. Therefore, Locke has no need of any prior commitment to the view that bodies necessarily possess and exercise active powers. If we happen to discover,

²⁸ “Locke on Active Power,” 71. This claim is a fixed feature of Mattern’s interpretation of Locke. However, it may be difficult to trace it through the many steps of her argument. Mattern divides Locke’s view of active power into two periods. There is, on her reading, an early period in which Locke takes active powers to be present in bodies and takes their absence in bodies to entail their inability to enter into causal relationships. There is, secondly, a later period in which Locke denies active powers to bodies. However, concerning this later period, Mattern argues that Locke excludes active powers from bodies specifically because he adopts a “mentalistic” conception of active power. On Mattern’s reading, Locke comes to recognize that a “mentalistic” conception of active power is formally entailed by his commitment to a separate view according to which active power is necessarily restricted to minds. Therefore, on Mattern’s reading, Locke, despite the phases through which his view of active power passes, consistently maintains that bodies possess active power in the earlier and weaker sense of bare participation in causal relationships: “With the [later and] stronger [mentalistic] definition of active power, Locke’s [account of] active power can now advance to explicit *exclusion* of motion transfer. Active power is now sharply *distinguished* from mere causal capacities, so that denying motion transfer the title ‘active power’ [in the stronger sense of the term] still leaves one free to affirm the efficacy of bodies.” “Locke on Active Power,” 71. Mattern is keen to preserve the claim that, for Locke, bodies enter into causal relations strictly in virtue of their possessing active powers in *some* sense.

upon some final analysis, that all bodies coincidentally lack active powers, then this will not alter their status as causes in the world.

4. Activity and Passivity in Instances of Causation

At this point, there emerges a fascinating consequence of Locke's theory of causation. We know that, according to Locke, repeated experience underlies our causal judgments. It is repeated experience that is solely responsible for our coming to the belief that a given object operates as a cause. However, Locke is not at all clear about the criterion for distinguishing between causes that bring about change in virtue of nonderivative activity and causes that bring about change in virtue of being subject to the influence of an external agent. This is something about which Locke takes no principled stand. He does claim that it is "manifestly" the case that bodies bring about change in us and in one another "*by impulse*," that is, through the passive communication of motion (*Essay*, II.viii.11). And he does claim that specific cases of thinking exhibit activity: "to be able to bring into view *Ideas* out of sight, at one's own choice, and to compare which of them one thinks fit, this is an *Active Power*" (*Essay*, II.xxi.72). But his final view seems to be far more modest: "it is worth our consideration, whether active power be not the proper attribute of Spirits, and passive power of Matter" (*Essay*, II.xxiii.28). This is a claim that Locke offers up for *consideration*. I submit that it is not a claim for which Locke has argued and is not a claim he himself endorses beyond the tentative and perhaps temporary convenience of distinguishing material from immaterial substance.

4.1 Ascriptions of Active Power

When it comes to active powers, Locke, again for the sake of convenience, "mention[s] them . . . according to common apprehension" (*Essay*, II.xxi.2). Locke is comfortable indulging certain ordinary assumptions. He immediately adds that, despite the seemingly intuitive and reliable ascriptions of active power, some objects are "not, perhaps, so truly *active Powers*, as our hasty Thoughts are apt to represent them" (*Essay*, II.xxi.2). He touches on this issue again elsewhere in the *Essay*. There Locke tells us that "we have *Ideas* but of two sorts of *Action*, viz. *Motion* and *Thinking*" (*Essay*, II.xxi.72). He warns us that "there are instances of both kinds, which, upon due consideration, will be found rather *Passions* than *Actions*, and consequently so far the effects barely of passive Powers in those subjects" (*Essay*, II.xxi.72). Therefore, Locke is aware of the possibility of error in the absence of "due consideration." He cautions us against mistaking intuitive assumptions about passivity and activity for defensible positions. However, Locke is not interested in the ambitious project of developing rigorous criteria to justify his or any other ascriptions of passivity and activity.

Perhaps because the lines of investigation undertaken in the *Essay* are already plentiful and ambitious, Locke takes certain metaphysical claims to be acceptable albeit in principle revisable starting points. The most he has to say about ascriptions of passivity and activity in the *Essay* is the following: "Whether Matter be not wholly destitute of *active Power*, as its Author GOD is truly above all *passive Power*; and whether the intermediate state of created Spirits be not that alone, which is capable of both *active* and

passive Power, may be worth consideration” (*Essay*, II.xxi.2). Of course, Locke finds it both plausible and highly intuitive to claim that the mind exhibits activity in its influence over thoughts and bodily movement. However, he has no way to secure—and seems to have no interest in securing—the conclusion that the mind, in cases of voluntary action, necessarily exercises activity. And Locke pushes right past the issue: “I shall not now enter into that Enquiry, my present Business being not to search into the original of Power, but how we come by the *Idea* of it” (*Essay*, II.xxi.2). By “original of Power,” I take Locke to refer to the origin of that efficacy that is responsible for the diversity of change we experience. It is a beginning of change that must exist, since change evidentially exists, and active power is in some way implicated in all instances of change. However, within the parameters of Locke’s theory of causation, the precise location of active power remains indeterminate and should not be taken for granted. Active power may be concentrated solely in God and entirely denied to created beings, may be possessed by God as well as by all created beings, or may be such that God and only some created beings exercise active power.

4.2 Locke and Occasionalism

Locke’s theory of causation fails to close off a number of possibilities. Two of these are related to the doctrine of occasionalism. The first possibility concerns our discovering that all bodies lack active power. The second concerns our discovering, upon some final analysis, that the mind, like a leaf carried by the wind, is ultimately passive in all its operations. And Locke is likely aware of the fact that his theory of causation is open to such discoveries. An earlier source of the above passage concerning the distribution of active powers, found in the 1685 Draft C of the *Essay*, reveals that Locke had himself considered this outcome: “I think it is a cleare truth that God alone has power to change all other things but is not capeable of any change in himself. And that all the creatures are capeable of change but have not in themselves an active power to produce it.”²⁹ Here Locke does not shy away from the possibility that every created being, including immaterial substance such as human minds, ultimately brings about change as a result of passive receptivity to external influence. Although this passage is crossed out in the draft manuscript and excluded from the published *Essay*, it is nonetheless a logical consequence that Locke did not rule out in his published view.³⁰

²⁹ Draft C, in *Draft C*, ed. Peter Nidditch and G. A. J. Rogers, vol. 2 of *John Locke: Drafts for the Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2021), 189.

³⁰ Mattern takes Locke’s crossing out this passage to indicate that he has rejected the view. Her argument is that if Locke accepted the truth of this view, then he would be committed to the absurd consequence that bodies and minds lack active power. “Locke on Active Power,” 62. This is, at least for Mattern, absurd because she insists that exercising active power is a necessary prerequisite for entering into causal relationships. But, as I have argued above, both bodies and minds can enter into relationships that we take to be causal in nature without any need for their exercising active power. I think a likelier explanation for Locke’s crossing out the passage and for his failure to include it in the published *Essay* is that he was uncomfortable stating so starkly this consequence of his theory of causation. It is a theory that

However, Locke is not an occasionalist. When we look at Locke's discussion of occasionalism in his *An Examination of P. Malebranche's Opinion* as well as his *Remarks upon Some of Mr. Norris's Books*, both of which were composed in 1693, what we find is that he takes issue with the strength of the metaphysical claims put forward by the theory. Occasionalism holds, at the very least, that only God has the capacity to exercise active power. Locke is not offended by the possibility that bodies and minds may lack active power. Rather Locke, in *Remarks*, is bothered by the restriction occasionalism places on God, namely, that bodies and minds *must* lack active power: "This is to set very narrow bounds to the power of God, and, by pretending to extend it, takes it away."³¹ A better approach to the issue of how active powers are distributed among created beings is one in which we "acknowledge our ignorance" and refrain from speaking "boldly of the Holy One of Israel."³² Turning to Locke's *An Examination of P. Malebranche*, we find a similar hesitation: "God is not bound in all he does to subject his ways of operation to the scrutiny of our thoughts, and confine himself to do nothing but what we must comprehend."³³ Locke goes on to develop a considerable number of criticisms of occasionalist doctrines in the manuscript, but none of these criticisms touch on Elucidation Fifteen of *The Search after Truth* in which Malebranche's view of human agency, specifically as this relates to active power or efficacy, is concentrated.³⁴ Locke, it seems, finds many faults in occasionalism. But these faults do not point to the fact that, for Locke, it was unacceptable to allow for the bare possibility that all bodies and minds operate passively in response to the influence of an external agent.

There is one nettlesome issue that must be addressed. Locke, despite what I have argued up to this point, does claim in *Remarks* that occasionalism entails that human agency is enfolded by an "irresistible fatal necessity."³⁵ This is an interesting and complex claim from Locke. This is a problem for my reading only if Locke holds that the presence of active power in humans is a necessary prerequisite for a satisfactory account of human agency, an account that, presumably, avoids an "irresistible fatal necessity." I do not think

relies on regularity to establish causal judgments and leaves unexplained the basis for our classifying causes as either active or passive in nature. These features of his theory of causation are already evident in the *Essay*, but there Locke refrains from explicitly identifying this troublesome implication, namely, that, setting God aside, we cannot know in any principled way what does and what does not exercise active power.

³¹ *Some Remarks upon Some of Mr. Norris's Books*, in vol. 10 of *The Works of John Locke* (London, 1823), 255.

³² *Remarks*, 256.

³³ *An Examination of P. Malebranche's Opinion*, in vol. 9 of *The Works of John Locke* (London, 1823), 212.

³⁴ Nicholas Malebranche, *The Search after Truth: With Elucidations of The Search after Truth*, trans. and ed. Thomas M. Lennon and Paul J. Olscamp. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

³⁵ *Remarks*, 256.

Locke holds this view. What Locke says about human agency throughout his writings may very well add up, as is indicated by compatibilist interpretations of his position, to a thoroughly passive account of voluntary action. Locke, in this manuscript, seems to suggest that occasionalism renders even *this* type of explanation impossible. Occasionalism would seem to entail, for Locke, more than that everything apart from God lacks active powers; it entails that everything apart from God lacks both active and passive powers. Objects, as Locke appears to understand the doctrine of occasionalism, lack even the capacity to transfer motion or to respond to external influence. For God serves in this role as well as that of exercising all active powers in virtue of which anything suffers influence.

When Locke complains, in this text, that, according to occasionalism, “the man is altogether passive in the whole business of thinking,” I take him not to complain of passivity as such but rather of the fact that God, as opposed to being distantly influential in virtue of having set the world in motion, is *directly* responsible for *all* the changes that befall us in voluntary action.³⁶ For Locke, in the same paragraph, asks us to consider two scenarios, each characterizing God’s relationship to events in the world, and to choose which is “the perfectest power.”³⁷ The first option is a divine creator who has the power “to make a machine, a watch, for example, that . . . shall go and strike by the fit contrivance of the parts.”³⁸ The second is a divine creator that, having made the watch, “requires that whenever the hand, by pointing to the hours, minds him of it, he should strike twelve upon the bell.”³⁹ He favors the first scenario despite the fact that both options concern a “machine” operating passively, and he sees the first scenario as one that avoids the undesirable outcome in which “the creatures have no power,” a consequence best interpreted as having *neither active nor passive power* rather than specifically lacking active power.⁴⁰ We must take this step in order to capture the point expressed by Mariangela Priarolo that Locke rejects occasionalism because it “reduces nature to a ghost.”⁴¹ For merely depriving something of active power, which may make that thing inert, is insufficient to render it ghostly in the relevant sense, namely, a thing which makes no contribution whatsoever to causal relationships. It must also be deprived of passive power. Therefore, as I understand it, the “irresistible fatal necessity” that Locke sees in occasionalism consists in the fact that God is manifest in every feature of causal relationships: their efficacious antecedents, their operation, and, more broadly, every

³⁶ *Remarks*, 255.

³⁷ *Remarks*, 255.

³⁸ *Remarks*, 255.

³⁹ *Remarks*, 255.

⁴⁰ *Remarks*, 255.

⁴¹ Mariangela Priarolo, “Rethinking Occasionalism: John Locke and the Power(s) of Nature,” *Studi Lockiani* 2 (2021): 184.

attribute passively susceptible to external influence (no matter how small the parts of the watch, for example) in virtue of which any change takes place.

5. The Ascription Puzzle

I believe Locke's reluctance to develop a rigorous criterion against which to evaluate ascriptions of passivity and activity introduces a significant exegetical obstacle for an analysis of his genetic account of the concept of active power. Let us call this the ASCRIPTION PUZZLE. Activity may or may not be directly ascribable to a given cause, but, according to Locke, this activity, whatever its origin, is ultimately responsible for bringing about change in all instances of causation. Active power is the engine of change or, as Locke expresses it, the "beginning" or the "original" of change. Locke, taking some causes to bring about change in virtue of their susceptibility to external influence, does not hold that all causes necessarily exercise active power. And, as we have seen, Locke accepts the possibility of being mistaken about attributions of activity in otherwise intuitive and compelling cases at the opening (*Essay*, II.xxi.2) and then again at the closing (*Essay*, II.xxi.72) of his chapter "Of Power." When Locke declines to take up the issue of "the original of Power," that is, the question of what agents are ultimately responsible for setting a system of natural phenomena in motion, he is effectively declining to undertake the project of rigorously determining what things are nonderivatively active. Therefore, Locke's theory of causation offers no way to rule out the possibility that the mind itself is thoroughly passive in its operation.

Vere Chappell does not detect a problem here: "powers themselves [are] never [observable]: their presence in the doing or suffering substance must be inferred; and if a substance does do or suffer something, then the inference to its having the corresponding power is immediate and certain."⁴² The suggestion from Chappell is that, on Locke's view, we can see for ourselves what does and does not exercise active power. But if Locke holds that powers and their manner of operation are themselves never directly observable, as Chappell concedes, then what could possibly be the basis of such an inference and what could possibly ensure that such an inference carries us to an 'immediate and certain' view of the metaphysical status of some power as either active or passive in its operation? This is to assume that the ascription puzzle is squared away. For to see some change in the world and to recognize *that* change as a product of doing or suffering is to already possess and deploy some criterion for activity and passivity. Locke gives us no such criterion. I agree with Jerome B. Schneewind, who suggests that Locke classifies some things as active and other things as passive "without making a fuss about it."⁴³ Locke, as it seems

⁴² "Power in Locke's *Essay*," 131.

⁴³ "The Active Powers," in *The Cambridge History of 18th-Century Philosophy*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 557. Priarolo has noted something similar in Locke: "we can only be certain that we have ideas of powers but not that powers are really within the beings we know." "Rethinking Occasionalism," 189. One immediate implication is that we cannot know whether and *which* powers are responsible for the changes among various natural phenomena. However, Priarolo restricts our inability to distinguish between the operation of passive and active powers to material objects, since,

to me, has left it to future inquiry to settle the issue of what serves to justify our ascriptions of active and passive power.

The ascription puzzle introduces the following constraint on any interpretation of Locke's genetic account of the concept of active power. Locke, who traces this concept to reflection on the experience of voluntary action, cannot establish conclusively that the mind is active. Nor can he establish conclusively that any other natural phenomenon does not exercise active power. Therefore, as it seems to me, it is necessary that a reading of Locke's genetic account of active power must avoid building on the assumption that the human mind exercises active power or that material objects are incapable of exercising active power. Reflection on the experience of voluntary action must, for Locke, be uniquely capable of yielding the concept of active power even if the mind, in all its voluntary actions, never acts nonderivatively; even if the mind as well as every other object we encounter exercises active power; and, finally, even if the mind is thoroughly passive in its operations and yet all material objects in our field of view act nonderivatively. This result may give us pause. However, the result of the ascription puzzle enables us to clearly state the empiricist commitment implicit in Locke's claim that the experience of voluntary action in ourselves is the only relevant origin of the concept of active power. A resolute application of empiricist principles, as this shapes the genetic investigation of a given concept, strictly concerns the content of experience rather than the metaphysical nature of objects, internal or external, supposedly responsible for our having one experience or another. The only thing pertaining to this element of empiricist methodology is the immediate contents of experience. And, therefore, what must motivate Locke's appeal to the experience of voluntary action is some unique characteristic of this phenomenologically rich experience. What cannot serve as a justification for Locke's appeal to the experience of voluntary action is some separate feature of the metaphysics of human agency.

6. Conclusion

I have argued that Locke's concept of active power, rather than drawing upon or implicating necessity, concerns the raw efficacy of bringing change into existence unassisted by an antecedent. Hence, I take the concept of active power to be the concept of nonderivative activity. By contrast, Locke's concept of a cause is much more modest such that it is ascribable to an object that is regularly accompanied by some event. Both active powers and passive powers can be classified as a cause in that an object can bring about change in virtue of the activity it exercises directly or, as in the case of passivity, in virtue of the activity that is imparted to it by an external agent. However, Locke does not take it upon himself to determine which criterion might serve to justify our ascriptions of activity and passivity to causes. We can, on the basis of repeated experience, come to the

according to her, the mind, unlike material objects, "appears to actually possess [active] power." "Rethinking Occasionalism," 187. I am arguing for the view that this consequence of Locke's discussion of passivity and activity, one that leaves us unable to conclusively ascribe active and passive powers, applies as much to the mind, even our own mind, as it does to the operations of material objects.

view that some object operates as a cause. But it seems we have no basis on which to classify this cause as either active or passive in nature. This is what I call the ascription puzzle.

As Locke himself seems to recognize, any ascription of active power as well as any reluctance to attribute active power to some object, despite passing for an intuitive or natural judgment, is always provisional in the absence of a strict criterion of nonderivative activity. The ascription puzzle entails, for Locke's overall theory of causation, that we cannot be certain whether *anything* apart from God exercises active power. It may turn out on some final analysis that all created things, be they minds or bodies, operate passively. But the opposite follows as well. We have no principled way to rule out the possibility that all created things may, in fact, bring about change, including familiar natural phenomena such as leaves settling on the surface of a pond, through some form of nonderivative activity. Therefore, a fully satisfactory reading of Locke's genetic account of the concept of active power, taking into consideration the strict parameters of his theory of causation, must explain why the experience of voluntary action in ourselves is an origin despite the fact that we have no principled way to establish that our voluntary acts exercise active power. I do not take this result to pose a problem for Locke's claim that the concept of active power stems from reflection on the experience of voluntary action. Rather, I take this result to have implications for how scholars understand his appeal to the experience of voluntary action. We must now take up the issue of whether and how the qualitative content of our experience of voluntary action serves as an origin of Locke's concept of active power.⁴⁴

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