

John Baltes  
*The Empire of Habit;*  
*John Locke, Discipline, and the Origins of Liberalism*  
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Recent literature on “habit” in early modern philosophy<sup>1</sup> has shown the importance of custom and habit in theories on morals, aesthetics, epistemology, and psychology of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. For British empiricists, custom and habit ground moral principles, social virtues, taste, and sustain social interaction (as for John Gay, Francis Hutcheson, David Hartley, and David Hume). They also constitute an efficient epistemic tool against scepticism (see the role of custom in binding visible and tangible ideas in George Berkeley’s principles of knowledge, and the recent debate on Hume’s account of causality which includes the power of our customary associations of ideas). Furthermore and surprisingly, despite the grounding of human laws in Nature, and men’s duty established by God’s providence, for John Locke, discipline and education still play an essential role in his ideal liberal society. Raising people into good habits entails the social contract, the application of civic laws among men, the acceptance of moral obligations, and faith in God. Thus, habituation renders reason – supposed to guide human lives – useless for the most part in men.

In his latest book entitled *The Empire of Habit: John Locke, Discipline, and the Origins of Liberalism*, John Baltes asks “how can society be fashioned to enable and sustain contract and ‘laissez-faire’ systems of power?” Showing how and why habit is such an important component of John Locke’s political thinking, the author explains how it also problematizes the fundamental notion of freedom. He uses the Foucaultian concept of governmentality as a tool for observing the conditions of possibility of the self-regulating liberal subjects, which Locke required for his ideal pacific society. For Baltes, from the *Second Treatise* to the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke puts the coherence of his thought at risk: it is problematic to consider the laws of nature and morals as unquestionable, while believing there are no inborn dispositions, nor innate ideas. In other terms, it can hardly be sustained that men are not all naturally led to the same conclusions about God and human duty, when it is simultane-

<sup>1</sup> Such as Wright 2011; Laursen 2011; Sparrow and Hutchinson 2013; Carlisle 2014.

ously claimed that there are, in final analysis, some immediately available metaphysical truths. Why are there rules? Where do they come from, and how can one follow them all, while remaining free? Baltes stresses that Foucault took a significant step in understanding Locke's thought, when he saw the emerging rationalities of government more than the perspective of contract and consent. As suggested in his volume, the tension inherent in the theory of liberal government is to be resolved in considering the role of habit in Locke's epistemology and practical philosophy.

In Locke's ideal world, children's minds are like blank slates: at birth, there is nothing but the desire to avoid pain and to seek pleasure, which are what he calls "practical principles". With time and experience, sense perceptions are inscribed as ideas into the mind, and childhood is the period in which the parents and tutors form most of the child's thought, settling thinking and motor mechanisms in his brain, with or without his consent. This education makes him internalize the virtuous habits (industry, thrift, honesty, and piety) that are useful for the type of work he is meant to do later on in society: the tendency is that children of the wealthy will work with their minds, while children of the poor will work with their hands. This inegalitarian program aims to overcome the economic crisis of Britain, which is deeply in debt after the Second Dutch War (p.69). For Locke, "nine parts of ten are what they are, good or evil, useful or not, by their education" (Locke, *Education*, sec. 1; hereafter cited in text *Education* followed by section number). Forming the adequate subjects requires inscription of habits early and often on the malleable minds of children. Habits of thinking and habits of determining the will are considered as a natural development of the child's mind, since "[r]epetition builds habit, and habit gives not a veneer, but the solid substance of the conditioned subject, a second nature where there was no first" (p. 50).

After the plague, able-bodied idle poor are seen as a threat in respect to the industrious labourers and to the rest of the people, including the elite, because they bear a vice that impedes any improvement. For Locke, as for Paul Slacks and Edward VI, the vice of idleness is contrary to the Calvinist requirements, to morals, to economic wealth, and even to human health, thus the use of medical vocabulary to compare vice to a sanitary disease. This stereotype linking the medical plague to the moral one, results in techniques of inverted quarantine, individual examination and specific treatment against idleness (p. 83, n. 106). These conditions of education for the idle poor are the same as for the children of the wealthy. In Locke's view, neither the pauper, nor the elite are expected to think rationally on their own, because want, work, sense and lust all preclude proper reasoning. They are not expected to discover true good, or to become virtuous by themselves; this is why a whole process of discipline is necessary,

being most effectively pictured with the model of the *panopticon*, that Baltes takes from Foucault.

Locke's conception of morals as an artifice relies upon the double meaning of his notion of "thing": there are substances, and mixed modes. God created the substances (such as trees, stones... etc.), thus our knowledge of them is probabilistic. Mixed-modes such as geometrical entities, maths or... morals, are created by the rational human mind, so our knowledge of them is certain. Since, by Locke, we can know only what we have made ourselves (Locke, *Essay*, book 1, ch. 4, §23; hereafter cited in text *Essay* followed by book, chapter and paragraph numbers), the conception of morals as a mixed mode ascertains that we both produce them, and believe in them. But the bridge between nature and artifice has to overcome political atomism resulting from the visceral quality of our various notions of happiness. Since passion, sense, lust, and work preclude reasoning, how can we discover morals, and man's duty? Locke reveals his moral scepticism when recognising the fact that virtue and vice change along with geography and times. However, as morals and justice remain relatively homogeneous within each fashioned unity, the role of habit is manifestly powerful. Despite theism, Locke holds in tune with Hobbes that the moral and political turn from nature to artifice happens because humans have needs and will (pp. 23-24). Moral rules and man's duty are not discovered, but built by human understanding, with human language, in order to satisfy purposes; thus, language keeps changing to fit the situation (*Essay*, 2.22.7), as well as morals. So even in Locke's acceptance of Grotian naturalism, what appears to be a "natural law" is actually a product of artifice: power, habit, and custom, altogether "clothe education in the guise of common sense and nature" (p. 20), rendering it immediate and certain for the liberal subject, who has discipline printed onto his mind. Habit is ambivalent: it is bad as long as it is not reformed (i.e. dogmatism, prejudice), but it becomes good if it is used as a tool for education and reform – especially for the reform of the poor.

According to Locke, among the three referential regimes for the judgment of moral rectitude, neither God, nor the sovereign can mould a good self-regulated society. The only effective apparatus is the law of fashion, because it puts the people under the watchful gaze of each other, so that they behave like the models they were given during childhood. Locke considers that pleasure and pain can be formed and altered through habit, and he also sustains that man is more concerned with his reputation than with his eternal life or the legality of his acts. In other terms, fashion is more powerful than God or civic laws, in regulating human passions (*Essay*, 2.28.12). According to Baltes, Lockean subjects are characterised by the fact that they are "sticky". Evolving between power and freedom, the malleable subject is inevitably stuck to a specific background,

since his actual (and possible) existence always depends on habit, custom, and fashion, which vary according to times and places. But in the liberal society, the fight between freedom and power is not necessarily obvious. On a governmental level, Locke, who thinks that Hobbes's Leviathan can not make people obey, stresses restriction of physical punishment, as bodily inclinations are to be subdued and mastered, and the tutor is not to be feared (p. 53; *Education*, 55). He enhances the efficacy of non-violent apolitical parental power relations. Good and evil must be established by the will of the law-maker, in such a way that it produces enthusiasm, which is necessary for the people to believe in the goodness of the laws (*Essay*, 2.28.5). As a result, Locke suggests the replacement of the power to punish with a much more effective strategy: discipline.

Along with Foucault and Mark Bevir, Baltes admits that even when submitted to the sovereign power of his background, the Lockean subject keeps his agency, in the sense that he can express his creativity through any act of resistance, but always influenced by social conditions (p. 12, n. 32; p. 14, n. 40). But if the sticky subject undergoes interference from society, through his submission to the law of fashion, is it still possible to speak of a free assent? Baltes shows that since discipline is internalized, liberty is actually circumscribed by habit on all sides. In Douglas Casson's book review, *The Empire of Habit* is perceived as a provocation towards the readers, because it questions this crucial notion of liberty in Locke's philosophy. "Though assent ought to be driven by reason and probability," writes Baltes, "Locke knows that it is not" (p. 41). Taking in Carrig's objection about freedom and choice, he means that if there cannot be a contract at the basis of society, it is because we do not have free assent: our choice is led by our passions and emotions, or by our education. Therefore, assent is never free. This claim is so decisive in the philosophy of habit that, later on, David Hume will use it as the foundation for the development of his own position. The argument goes even further when Baltes assumes that what Locke means with words such as "assent", "agency", or "license", is only our capacity to scrutinize our will, and to choose whether or not to fulfil whichever desire. But if we consider his reflection on custom and habit, we clearly see that conditioning modifies will *and* sensibility, thus the ability to experience pleasure and pain (*Essay*, 2.21.69). As a result, not only will, but also the conception of what is desirable, is determined. The modern liberal subject's "agency" must not be mistaken for "autonomy". Since for Baltes, education precludes freedom, it seems that the assent only consists in an arbitrary oscillation between passion and habit. And for most of these subjects (and for most of *us*) – who are sensible, who experience lust, or who are working –, reason is not even a possibility... But as Baltes notes, the fact that this influenced agency is actually not free doesn't seem to be a problem

for Locke, who concerns himself with forming good subjects, not free ones.

Notwithstanding caring for children, the able-bodied idle poor are the main targets of Locke's program of reform. The discordance between the notion of fundamental equality of men (structuring the argument of the *Two Treatises*), and the subjection of the idle poor to panoptic visibility is that despite being adults, men are treated like children. Baltes intends to introduce a change in the common view: he contests the egalitarian and democratic portrait of Locke, discussing his political commitments. Considered the economy of Britain, the idle able-bodied poor subjects are seen as perfect candidates for discipline: they must be transformed into industrious, decent, self-governing citizens. This socially conservative attitude makes Locke an apologist for the gentry, who limits his radicalism to anti-absolutism (p. 91). As a close confidant of the Earl of Shaftesbury, he expresses his master's principles in the *Second Treatise*, showing his long-standing commitment to anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian politics that are even more manifest in his correspondence about the political program in Carolina. The epistemological grounding of Locke's politics problematizes the question of the truth: if it is by deductive and demonstrative reasoning that men discover God and moral principles, why do these notions vary so significantly from place to place? Morals are mixed modes anyway, the knowledge of which depends entirely on the productions of the mind, and on circumstances, and all men are not equal in the knowledge of good and evil. If theism pretends to scientifically demonstrate the existence of God, the belief that he is also benevolent and provident doesn't appeal to pure theory. Baltes stresses that if God has a plan for human race, "gay marriage, physician-assisted suicide, non-procreative sex" and "atheism" shall be banished from Locke's ideal society (p. 111). Laws built in a teleological outlook mean inequality regarding needs, works, and knowledge. Baltes's volume is somewhat provocative on two levels. First, it counters the common view we have of Locke as a democratic contractarian egalitarian. Second, with some precise examples, it showcases how modern discipline is still moulding us today for liberal government, unbeknownst to us, through early-age habituation and life-long submission to the law of fashion. This second point makes Baltes's book relevant for philosophical reflections today. Reformed or not, habit has the empire on our minds and bodies, on our beliefs and desires. Although it can still be countered by our passions on a personal scale; on a broader scale, however, fashion and the watchful eye of our neighbours still have great power over them.

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