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## Response to *Locke's Image of the World*

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### *Abstract:*

This is a revised version of a paper presented at the APA Eastern Division's 115th annual meeting in New York on Monday January 07, 2019. It was presented at session 20 Author Meets Critics: Michael Jacovides, *Locke's Image of the World*. The session chair was Antonia LoLordo (University of Virginia), the critics were Robert Pasnau (University of Colorado Boulder) and Kathryn Tabb (Bard College), and the author was Michael Jacovides (Purdue University).

*Keywords:* John Locke, natural philosophy, medical philosophy, *De Arte Medica*, medical skepticism, perceptual judgement, habit

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## 1. Introduction

“What we think we see depends on what we expect to see,” Jacovides writes in *Locke’s Image of the World*, “And, when it comes to our ideas, what we think we see is what we actually see.”<sup>1</sup> When he looks at Locke, Jacovides’s image is of a natural philosopher; his book is a sustained argument aimed at helping the reader to appreciate Locke as such, too. Jacovides expertly brings Locke’s fascination with the science of his day into view, having realized a while ago that in order to explain what drives Locke to his enigmatic views on, for example, primary and secondary qualities, Locke’s scientific commitments have to be articulated and made sympathetic for his contemporary critic. Jacovides’s Locke is, then, “up to his elbows in natural philosophy.”<sup>2</sup> My own Locke is up to his elbows in medicine, psychology, and moral science. I can, without much squinting, bring our two Lockes into focus as a single, more dimensional figure, since Locke’s interest in natural philosophy was not independent of his medical, psychological, and moral projects. I’ll try to do that in what follows. This is in line with Jacovides’s vision, which is far from relativistic or fatalistic about the hope for progress in philosophy (and its history), despite his Kuhnian allegiances. His is a sympathetic vision in which, by working to bring Locke’s reasons and motivations into view, we not only chart some of his more exotic landscapes but also open up new vistas for ourselves as philosophers. So, my aim in this response is to expand on some of Jacovides’s insights by considering these other dimensions of Locke as an intellectual and actor in his day—dimensions that, for me, once seen can’t be unseen.

I found myself wondering as I read to what extent Locke would have been sympathetic with Jacovides’s analysis. The answer would not, of course, be reason to adopt or reject Jacovides’s claims, but I don’t think it’s a silly question, or not a silly question *only*. It strikes me that Locke actually had the conceptual tools to assess and defend himself against some of Jacovides’s charges. In particular, I think there are two fronts on which Locke was more self-aware than Jacovides gives him credit for when he writes that “Locke assumes that his descriptions of appearances proceed independently of considerations of anatomy, chemistry, and optics” or that Locke “presents his premises as if they were self-evident,” rather than depending on “time, place, and project.”<sup>3</sup> The first of these has to do with Locke’s views on medical explanation and methodology. I want to suggest that there, Locke recognizes that his commitments *as a doctor* lead him to see anatomy differently than if he were (merely) a natural philosopher. Nonetheless his is not a pluralism about medical ontology; it is a recognition that the practice of medicine will reveal the limitations of our understanding of the human body, when it is done right. When Locke claims he cannot conceive of the living body in mechanistic terms, he means that he cannot conceive of it being explained in mechanistic terms *as a medical object*. This leads to a self-conscious skepticism about the adoption of certain sorts of explanations about health and disease, but in a way that is intentionally contextual, without being relativistic. The second set of commitments that Locke has which would lead him to be, I think, amenable to some of Jacovides’s judgments on him are his views on habituation, learning,

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Jacovides, *Locke’s Image of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 149.

<sup>2</sup> Jacovides, *Locke’s Image*, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Jacovides, *Locke’s Image*, 3.

and perception. I want to suggest that Locke's theory of perceptual judgment relies crucially on his account of habit, which he envisions as commonly generating something close to what today we might call cognitive bias. As such, he would have his own theoretical reasons to endorse Jacovides's view that the malleability of perception allows us, sometimes, to see what we expect to see. And not only we, but he.

## 2. Locke on the Inconceivability of Medical Explanations

Jacovides's contention is that Locke's "preferred physical theories" shape his metaphysics and epistemology—not explicitly as part of an architectonic but by way of the examples he picks, the hypotheses he takes as foundational, and the analogies he draws. Locke's scientific commitments are those of a seventeenth-century man of the new natural philosophy, a member of the Royal Society, and friend and confidante of the "master-builders" of his time, the likes of Isaac Newton and Robert Boyle. Yet Jacovides avoids the easy trap of seeing Locke as more forward-looking than he in fact was, and of buying into Locke's own rhetoric about having shaken off the Scholastic frameworks within which he was educated. To make sense of Locke's views is to observe the braiding together of old and new threads. Jacovides shows how Locke was first influenced by and then ultimately won over to Boyle's corpuscularianism, the view that natural bodies work mechanistically, like artifacts. In the later chapters of the book Jacovides shows how Locke twists the threads of corpuscularianism and Aristotelianism together to generate his novel accounts of primary and secondary qualities. But this metaphor of weaving is perhaps too active, working against Jacovides's subtle and important insight about how allegiance to a tradition can be, in early-modern parlance, more passion than action.

One place where Locke seems more self-conscious about his own allegiances is in medicine. This is a third thread that Jacovides describes as constraining and constructing Locke's ideas, though he does not recognize it as a distinct tradition in the way he does Scholastic or corpuscularian thought. The book begins with a treatment of Locke's medical philosophy. Despite the importance for Locke of the corpuscularian tradition, he was also friendly to the vitalist approaches of Paracelsus, Jan Baptista van Helmont, and Thomas Willis, who posited the importance of seminal principles capable of causing the chemical transformations that differentiated living organisms from machines. But as Jacovides notes, Locke's *practical* experience with medicine complicates this story. Locke never received a doctorate in medicine but nonetheless practiced, most famously as the in-house physician for his benefactor Lord Shaftesbury. He was deeply invested in questions of medical methodology, and we have two early fragments that hint at his loyalties here. And I think they are loyalties, ones that allow for a stronger claim about the roots of Locke's medical skepticism. I've argued elsewhere that Locke models himself after the empirical school of medicine, which can be traced back to the early Pyrrhonian physicians and which was in a millennia-long death grip with rationalist approaches.<sup>4</sup>

The ancient Pyrrhonist sources of his orientation come through in Locke's sneering dismissal of the "romance way of the physick," which includes for him even the very

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<sup>4</sup> Kathryn Tabb, "The Skeptical Physitian: Locke, Pyrrhonism, and the Case against Innate Ideas," in *Epistemology After Sextus Empiricus*, eds. Katja Maria Vogt and Justin Vlasits (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 195–212.

modest speculation that comes from hypothesizing about pathophysiology on the basis of anatomical dissection.<sup>5</sup> It is important to stress the radical extent of the position that Locke developed in the 1660s, working closely with the physician Thomas Sydenham. As Jacovides puts it, “Working with Sydenham convinces Locke to be skeptical about our prospects for formulating practically useful explanations of how nature produces biological effects.”<sup>6</sup> While there is much debate over the actual direction of the influence, it is clear that in Locke’s medical writings—written in close collaboration with Sydenham—there is a dismissal of the value of positing of disease entities, instead of just acting on the basis of observed correlations between symptoms and outcomes. I agree with Jacovides that Locke does not make exceptions for *chemical* (as opposed to mechanical) speculation. When it comes to medical explanation, Locke is as dismissive of the vitalism, which is attractive to him in Willis and others, as he is of a Boylean-inspired metaphysics of the body, which he elsewhere enthuses about. Locke’s is not just a skepticism of causal explanation, but a skepticism of speculative entities—humors, corpuscles, you name it.

Locke’s medical skepticism leads him to make some claims that have the kind of whiff of inconceivability, suggests they are ripe for what we might call the Jacovides treatment. “All that anatomy can doe,” Locke writes, “is only to shew us the grosse & sensible parts of the body, or the vapid & dead juices, all which after the most diligent search will be noe more able to direct a physitian how to cure a disease then how to make a man.”<sup>7</sup> *De Arte Medica* broadens this strange claim beyond just anatomy, arguing that physicians have wasted their time by not resting content “to observe the operacon of nature & the event of things” but rather being “very inquisitive after their cause,” have developed “useless speculations, & diverted their enquirys from the true & advantageous knowledg of things.”<sup>8</sup> Locke is simply unable to conceive of physiological explanations as relevant for medical decision-making. This seems very weird for us moderns, deeply imbedded in the biomedical paradigm, in which reductionist causal explanations are the common currency. The Jacovides treatment can help us here.

Locke attributed disease states to a “particular ferment” because of his Helmontian loyalties. Because the powers of such ferments would be only recognizable at the microlevel, Locke cannot conceive of medical explanations found at the level of disease entities. This is not to say he cannot conceive of the essence of diseases in corpuscularian terms, but he is convinced that such theories would be categorically irrelevant for medicine because they would occur at the wrong level of analysis. Like noncorpuscularian accounts of interactions between bodies, physiological accounts of disease cannot be rejected, but they cannot be relied upon either by the practicing physician. It is helpful here to look at a passage from the *Essay*, where Locke describes how, even if “by the help

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<sup>5</sup> Jacovides, *Locke’s Image*, 9.

<sup>6</sup> Jacovides, *Locke’s Image*, 11.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Craig Walmsley, 2014. “John Locke’s ‘Anatomia’ and ‘De Arte Medica’: New Transcriptions,” *Medium*, 26 March 2014, [https://medium.com/@craig\\_walmsley/john-lockes-anatomia-and-de-arte-medica-new-transcriptions-fe368fb5c5b0](https://medium.com/@craig_walmsley/john-lockes-anatomia-and-de-arte-medica-new-transcriptions-fe368fb5c5b0).

<sup>8</sup> Walmsley, “New Transcriptions.”

of such Microscopical Eyes . . . a Man could penetrate farther than ordinary into the secret Composition, and radical Texture of Bodies, he would not make any great advantage by the change, if such an acute Sight would not serve to conduct him to the Market and Exchange; If he could not see things, he was to avoid, at a convenient distance; nor distinguish things he had to do with, by those sensible Qualities others do.”<sup>9</sup> Locke imagines such a man able to see every particle of a spring or Clock, but no longer able to tell the time. The physician with microscopical eyes would find himself in a similar bind; he would excel at anatomy but not be able to heal. In explaining why a doctor has no need of chymical knowledge, Locke analogizes him to a cook, who does not owe “his skill in roasting and boyling to his study of the elements” and indeed would be held back by such purported “knowledge.”<sup>10</sup>

The fierce opposition to speculation in medicine cannot be explained solely by bearing in mind Locke’s broader recognition that corpuscularianism, the metaphysics he considers the best bet, has limited explanatory power for us. After all, Locke supported and engaged in corpuscularian natural philosophy in other arenas, where he seemed to think it valuable, or at least better than saying nothing at all. And his famous commitment to not meddling “with the Physical Consideration of the Mind” in the *Essay*<sup>11</sup> makes it hard to tell neat story where his radical skepticism mellowed with age. It is better to read him as maintaining that the art of medicine—and, relatedly, the *mental hygiene*<sup>12</sup> that is a central theme of the *Essay*—calls for an unusually forceful suppression of natural-philosophical inquiry, more radical than just an agnosticism about its value; and this is due to a constraint on Locke’s vision of what medicine should be. In Locke’s day, medicine was divorced from science in a way it can be hard for us now to get our heads around. Clinical medicine was generally practiced by a different constituency than anatomical and physiological research (though certainly there were exceptions). Both physicians and physiologists were separated by a chasm of education and class from surgeons, who provided the bulk of care that actually involved touching the body, rather than just suggesting lifestyle interventions on the basis of sniffing urine and observing other signs and symptoms.

Accordingly, for Locke it was just unthinkable that the clinical mission could extend to what we might now think of as biomedical research, because the two projects had different epistemic foundations. This epistemic stance has a long lineage. Sextus Empiricus argued that skepticism keeps the practice of medicine honest, by keeping the physician focused on “what is apparent.” This allows him to do his work—curing. Locke agrees that maintaining such skepticism is the only way to realize medicine’s important aims. “Length of life with freedome from infirmity & pain as much as the constitution of our fraile composure is capable of is of soe great concernmt to man kinde,” he writes, “that

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<sup>9</sup> John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), II.xxiii.12, 303.

<sup>10</sup> Walmsley, “New Transcriptions.”

<sup>11</sup> Locke, *Essay*, I.i.2, 43.

<sup>12</sup> The term is Sorana Corneanu’s. See her *Regimens of the Mind: Boyle, Locke, and the Early Modern Cultura Animi Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

there can scarce be found any greater undertakeing then the profession to cure diseases.”<sup>13</sup> I’ll say more about this later, but I think Locke’s metaphysical and epistemic commitments are often obscured because critics ignore the constraint his obsession with the afterlife puts on his thinking. He often implies that the care of the body, like the care of the soul, is of paramount importance for this Christian project. This is an example, then, of a nonscientific constraint that can flesh out Jacovides’s compelling reconstructed rationale for Locke’s theory of medicine. These constraints are not simply due to Locke’s scientific loyalties; they are constraints of principle that he subscribes to because of his medico-moral agenda.

In general, I don’t think Jacovides is at all wrong about the seriousness of the constraints Locke’s scientific commitments put on his theorizing. But I do think that these constraints are mediated by Locke’s significant nonscientific commitments, which include things like his understanding of what it means to be a doctor, and far more influentially, what it means to be a Christian. It is as a result of these commitments operating in the medical context that the lure of chemistry—which Locke certainly was subject to, even for understanding physiological processes, like respiration—had to be ignored. In this sense I think Jacovides’s claim that “whereas [Locke] was once on the forefront of research into respiration, he now concludes that such inquiries are a waste of time”<sup>14</sup> is not quite right. Locke never stops thinking that we can ask about whether “respiration serve to coole the bloud, or give vent to its vapors”—it is just that such disputations are useless, even dangerous, when one is trying to practice medicine. Even after Locke presents himself as a committed corpuscularian (and his vitalist language has fallen away), he does keep one alternative to corpuscularianism open despite his “official” rejection of the conceivability of other options. That alternative is skepticism, and it is out in full force early on in his philosophy of medicine. But it also remains present in his approach to medical psychology throughout his life. Knowing about animal spirits does not help one regulate the conduct of the understanding, but attending to the ideas that pass through one’s mind—which one need not speculate about but can simply perceive via reflection—will.

Locke’s medical Pyrrhonism is more potent than the generally skeptical orientation that, Jacovides observes, Locke “retains throughout his life” and that “takes the form of doubting that we can discover the particular corpuscularian textures that explain visible phenomena.”<sup>15</sup> It shows that the value of even a minimal corpuscularianism is far from universally self-evident for Locke; rather, the value of the approach is context relative. Natural philosophy should strive to be more like mathematics; medicine cannot, and therefore should not. Locke subscribed to that opinion consistently throughout his life. Therefore, Locke’s skepticism about medical entities does not render his enthusiasm for corpuscularianism incoherent—it just helps us see where it was natural for him to appeal to it and where it was not due to his broader commitments. As Jacovides has it, “Locke is

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<sup>13</sup> Walmsley, “New Transcriptions.”

<sup>14</sup> Jacovides, *Locke’s Image*, 12.

<sup>15</sup> Jacovides, *Locke’s Image*, 12.

complicated, and his work contains multitudes.”<sup>16</sup> There does not seem to be anything philosophically embarrassing about this prudential approach to regulating belief. In any event, Locke’s early philosophy of medicine is an interesting moment where he acknowledges the limits conceivability *should* put on thought—on his and every other doctor’s.

### 3. Locke on the Relationship Between Intellectual Bias and Conceivability

As students of art know, honing the capacity for seeing color patches (or, inversely, seeing negative space) instead of objects is, ironically, the most effective way to learn how to represent three-dimensional objects with a pen, pencil, or brush. Once this perceptual switch is achieved, one needn’t rely on one’s representations of things in the world, which are usually pretty junky. Knowing a hand has five fingers, for example, can be of more hindrance than help for someone trying to draw a hand as it appears dangling by a person’s side. When seeing in two dimensions, one simply has to reproduce, faithfully and dumbly, the array before one, until an image of the object emerges that exceeds our intellectual grasp on its dimensionality. In this manner we can trick our brains into being better artists.

Jacovides argues that seeing objects two-dimensionally in this way is not something Locke would have had to have practiced; like most of his contemporaries, he did not think objects are immediately perceived as having depth. Jacovides shares a fascinating history of the shift from a widespread assumption that we first see a flat array, dominant through the nineteenth century, to our contemporary, equally powerful commitment to the immediacy of object perception, a commitment that, for most people, can only be unlearned with effort. Locke was thinking about vision under a diverse set of influences that would have been impossible for him to ignore, situated as he was. In his pursuit of perfection in his projects of astronomical measurement, Kepler investigated the experimental artifact of refraction in his mentor Brahe’s data and discovered the retinal image. While as Jacovides notes, Locke was slow to embrace other breakthroughs in optics, he adopted the contemporary stance that bodies produce appearances on an extended retina, like a screen or a canvas. Thus, when Locke writes that a globe “is only a Plain variously colored, as is evident in Painting,” Jacovides interprets that “evident in” as something like “as is visible in”—or we might say, “as is the case in.” In *trompe l’oeil* paintings, we are tricked when we treat the painting the way we would our “inner canvas” and judge its objects to be three-dimensional.

As Jacovides notes, paint that betrays us is good proof that the mind can be beguiled into turning flat circles variously shaded into globes. It is not, however, evidentiary for the claim that we see globes first as flat circles.<sup>17</sup> So why does Locke keep talking about painting when he talks about perception of actual three-dimensional objects? Here is a glorious application of the Jacovides treatment, in which a puzzling stance of Locke’s—which has caused various commentators to gallantly try to save him from himself—suddenly makes sense. He does not need to make a case for the primacy of a two-dimensional visual array because he sees it as obvious. It’s just how perception works, and

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<sup>16</sup> Jacovides, *Locke’s Image*, 13.

<sup>17</sup> Jacovides, *Locke’s Image*, 142.

if you don't like it, you can take it up with Kepler. But Jacovides also notes how Locke's own system of ideas would have made the view plausible to him, or perhaps rather should convince his critics that it was always plausible for him. Locke considers ideas to be the immediate objects of perception, "objects" not in the sense of the external objects that cause those ideas but in the sense of what we experience ourselves to perceive. Jacovides draws a very useful connection here to Anscombe's "intentional objects." Locke is dedicated to the view that the component ideas of these objects come to us first as simples. Still, Jacovides concludes, "I don't think that he has shown that ideas of a two-dimensional array are always present or that they are temporally or epistemically prior to our perceptions of three-dimensional objects."<sup>18</sup>

In other words, Jacovides explains Locke's regular invocation of painting not as proof but rather as one of Locke's analogies drawn up between a scientific phenomenon (in his mind, universally affirmed) and a philosophical posit. Taking seriously Locke's commitment to the two-dimensional visual array helps us understand why Locke insists on the additional step of judgment in, for example, the case of Molyneux's problem. Nonetheless, especially for those who have never painted using color patches, the feeling might linger that a second and distinct step of judgment is asking an unrealistic amount of the understanding and is at odds with our phenomenology. What remains counterintuitive, after the Jacovides treatment, is why Locke does not recognize that the primacy of the perception of objects as two-dimensional arrays is just not *feasible* given how perception operates in real life. Jacovides imagines a batter eyeing a pitch in such a fashion or an urbanite trying to make their way down a busy street while maintaining a dutifully two-dimensional outlook. Another way to put the puzzle, in more Lockean terms: when I form the complex idea of a sphere, why not think I just include the idea of dimensionality, or depth, with the cluster of simple ideas that I combine, through an act of the understanding, into a complex? Why claim I make a distinct act of judgment, when my own experience suggests depth perception to be immediate? As Jacovides notes, one could start where Locke does, with a commitment to the flatness of visual perception and still think the first "conscious upshot" (he quotes A.D. Smith here) is an experience of three-dimensionality.<sup>19</sup>

Of course one of Locke's most constraining commitments is that we are conscious of all our ideas, so unconscious perception of depth is not an option. But why not just consider depth an idea that could be combined, upon perception, with the ideas of the two-dimensional form? Various commentators have argued that Locke thinks we can passively perceive complex ideas, in addition to simple ones.<sup>20</sup> This seems to me easily disproved by an appeal to the *Essay*, where Locke writes, "Though the Mind be wholly passive, in respect to its simple Ideas: Yet, I think, we may say, it is not so, in respect to its complex Ideas: For those being Combinations of simple Ideas, put together, and united under one general Name; 'tis plain, that the Mind of Man uses some kind of Liberty, in

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<sup>18</sup> Jacovides, *Locke's Image*, 146.

<sup>19</sup> Jacovides, *Locke's Image*, 140.

<sup>20</sup> For example, see Vere Chappell, "Locke's Theory of Ideas," in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke*, ed. Vere Chappell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 26–55.



forming those complex Ideas.”<sup>21</sup> This liberty is at work when we form the idea of a variously-shaded circle. So why is a separate act of judgment, rather than just the (active, conscious) addition of another simple idea or two, required to have the idea of a sphere? One might think with Jacovides that Locke has not “shown that ideas of a two-dimensional array are always present or that they are temporarily or epistemically prior to our perceptions of three-dimensional objects.”<sup>22</sup>

But there is a sense in which Locke would completely agree with Jacovides that “only when he sits down to do epistemology does he see what’s before him as an array of color patches.” Jacovides says that there are “two faculties . . . involved in Locke’s story: perception and judgment.”<sup>23</sup> But there is a third component—habit—which lurks, for example, in a quote that Jacovides provides in which Locke writes to Malebranche, “I have in another place shown, how the idea we have from a regular solid, is not the true idea of that solid, but such an one as by custom . . . serves to excite our judgment to form such an one.”<sup>24</sup> It is important to note that this custom is not, as Jacovides would have it, “unthinking.”<sup>25</sup> The kind of practiced judgment that converts a set of simple ideas into a complex idea that the understanding ultimately can, “by an instantaneous legerdemain,” substitute for the original ideas requires a lot of front-loaded effort.<sup>26</sup> Locke’s obsession with children and how they learn is in large part due to his attentiveness to the demands of this process. The effort of parsing, comparing, and combining the simple ideas that enter the sensorium from without is so exhausting that the early years of life “are usually employ’d and diverted looking abroad”<sup>27</sup>—one reason, Locke suggests, that children are not very introspective. Every complex idea must be produced through an act of the understanding, even the most fundamental ideas of perception. When Locke first describes, for example, the process of generating the idea of a sphere through a judgment about the complex idea of a flat circle “variously shadow’d,” that complex idea is itself produced through attention to the differing visual sensations of light and shadow received by our eyes. After a period, “having by use been accustomed to perceive, what kind of appearance convex Bodies are wont to make in us . . . the Judgment presently, by habitual custom, alters the Appearances into their Causes.”<sup>28</sup> Think of the infant, frowning with frustration as she reaches for a sippy cup. It’s not obvious to her where the object begins and ends, how far away from her it is, etc. She is forming a complex idea of the cup but

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<sup>21</sup> Locke, *Essay*, II.xxx.3, 373.

<sup>22</sup> Jacovides, *Locke’s Image*, 146.

<sup>23</sup> Jacovides, *Locke’s Image*, 136.

<sup>24</sup> Jacovides, *Locke’s Image*, 139.

<sup>25</sup> Jacovides, *Locke’s Image*, 142.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Schuurman, “*Of the Conduct of the Understanding* by John Locke, Edited with General Introduction, Historical, and Philosophical Apparatus,” (PhD diss., University of Keele, 2000), 231.

<sup>27</sup> Locke, *Essay*, II.i.8, 108.

<sup>28</sup> Locke, *Essay*, II.ix.8, 145.

also making new judgments about the cup's relations to the world. She is doing work on both these levels.

Habit, for Locke, is expediency. It is what allows us to move with confidence through three-dimensional space, instead of with the halting steps of a toddler. And I think it is playing a significant role in Jacovides's story. Locke is not insisting that we actually *see* color patches. He's rather saying that the fact that we usually *do not* is because of the power of habituation. Habit is the way in which, through our efforts, we can change the relationship between our faculty of attention and our faculties of judgment and perception:

That there are Ideas, some or other, always present in the mind of a waking Man, every one's Experience convinces him; though the mind employs it self about them with several degrees of Attention. Sometimes the mind fixes it self with so much earnestness on the Contemplation of some Objects, that it turns their Ideas on all sides; remarks their Relations and Circumstances; and views every part so nicely, and with such intention, that it shuts out all other Thoughts, and takes no notice of the ordinary Impressions made then on the Senses, which at another Season would produce very sensible Perceptions: At other times, it barely observes the train of Ideas, that succeed in the Understanding, without directing, and pursuing any of them: And at other times, it lets them pass almost quite unregarded, as faint shadows, that make no Impression.<sup>29</sup>

I have found the relationship between habit and attention to be generally underappreciated in Locke scholarship, so I was delighted to see Jacovides acknowledge the importance of attention for Locke.<sup>30</sup> But the Jacovides treatment can help right this wrong in even more ambitious ways. Once we adopt Locke's view that thought becomes more holistic when it is habituated—insofar as the simple ideas that make up complex ones no longer need to be attended to—his entire picture becomes more sympathetic. It helps us avoid some strange implications of Locke's epistemology as it is usually understood, in which it seems like the understanding must be active in even its simplest routines, like seeing a basic three-dimensional object. Habit is thus another way in which Locke modifies what Jacovides calls Descartes's "basic psycho-physical principle" that ideas enter the mind simply and singly, along with sensory adaptation and our capacity to perceive with more or less attention. It is also habit that, for Locke, explains how even demonstrative knowledge can be achieved without attention. Just like childhood perception is slow and laborious because habitual judgments have to be learned, while in adulthood we reach easily for a wine bottle, we can even bring to mind, without much effort, the postulates of Euclid and know them to be true without reviewing the proofs. Once a demonstration has been completed, relations between complex ideas themselves can be overlooked by the understanding with no ill effect: a proposition becomes "so lodg'd [in] Memory, that whenever that Proposition comes again to be reflected on, [the

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<sup>29</sup> Locke, *Essay*, II.ix.3, 228.

<sup>30</sup> Jacovides, *Locke's Image*, 129.

thinker], without doubt or hesitation, embraces the right side, assents to, and is certain of the truth of it.”<sup>31</sup>

But habitual judgment is not all good for Locke—far from it. In considering Locke’s discussion of perception, we should bear in mind that the passages Jacovides draws on from the *Conduct* are part of Locke’s case for the danger of the association of ideas, a kind of pathological connection that can form between ideas leading to what he believes, quite literally, to be a form of mental illness.<sup>32</sup> Habitual judgment is of concern for Locke because if ideas “not ally’d by Nature”<sup>33</sup> are allowed to become connected in this way, such that one follows the other outside of the ambit of attention and without oversight from the faculties of the understanding, associations can form. In his notebooks Locke describes how if sufficient attention is not paid, perceptions can deceive us in ways that have lasting effects: he describes a man “in a towne where he has not been long resident let him come into a street that he is pretty well acquainted with at the contrary end to what he imagined he will finde all his reasonings about it soe out of order & soe inconsistent with the truth that should he enter into debate upon the situation of the houses the turning on the right or left hand etc. with one who knew the place perfectly & had the right Ideas wch way he was going, he would seem little better than frantique.”<sup>34</sup> Here someone who has recently moved to a new town can be fooled by their own judgments about the town’s layout so thoroughly that they sound, to a local, off their rocker—and, Locke goes on to say, they may find themselves unable to ever correct this first faulty impression. The deception functions the same way here as it does in a painting. A judgment is misapplied to a set of complex ideas that the understanding has made for itself.

Our level of control over our judgments about which of our complex ideas are applicable on the basis of our sensory input is a charged normative question for Locke—something we can do better or worse at. Our ability to successfully navigate our environment and our means of doing so are contingent, the result of our native capacities, the customs we have been exposed to, the habits we have developed, and the efforts we have put into managing our understanding. Locke has an explanation, then, for why he, Jacovides, and I can all see in two-dimensional arrays, but Eric Schwitzgebel (Jacovides’s example in the book) cannot. Without hearing the particulars about our early childhoods, it would be hard to identify the precise difference makers, but in theory our diverse perceptual commitments can be explained just like our diverse theological or metaphysical commitments: as the product of our upbringing, education, experience, and conduct of our understandings. Locke would be delighted by the evidence for this that Jacovides marshals, such as children seeing more bunnies than ducks on Easter Sunday when faced with the duck-rabbit illusion. He would agree that “the fat fingers of

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<sup>31</sup> Locke, *Essay*, IV.i.8, 528.

<sup>32</sup> Locke, *Essay*, II.xxxiii.

<sup>33</sup> Locke, *Essay*, II.xxxiii.6, 396.

<sup>34</sup> John Locke, “Madness,” Journal Entry, 26 October / 5 November 1677, Lovelace Collection, MS Locke f.2, p. 319, Bodleian Library, Oxford University.

introspection aren't supple enough to pick up unmodified perceptions,"<sup>35</sup> but would attribute the shortcoming to what he refers to as the "empire of habit."

In this sense Locke has means to respond to Jacovides's claim that his thinking is constrained by his scientific commitments. Not that he needs really to defend himself; Jacovides praises him for doing the best he could under the circumstances. After all, as the book's gorgeous concluding paragraph describes, we are *all* so compromised. But Locke could at least point out that he, of all people, thought a good deal about "fashions in phenomenology."<sup>36</sup> His own theories also aim to demonstrate that "our ability to see color patches is a product of civilization—painting, optics, and epistemology."<sup>37</sup> Indeed, what does his attack on innatism amount to other than a case for resisting the unjustified cognitive biases that come about through culturally induced loyalties and lazy thinking, and which then are mistaken for truths? People insist their maxims are God-given because they cannot justify their certainty about them otherwise. Locke's way of ideas is constructed to block this argumentative move by showing how easy it is for justified certainty to be aped through the habituation of judgment, the association of ideas, the submission to epistemic authorities, and other misfortunes. While Locke might acknowledge that his "pessimism about finding successful explanations of the properties of bodies deprives him of a device that would allow his cognitive theory to capture a great range of human thought,"<sup>38</sup> I don't think he would find this cost is too high. It is not as high as the possibility of enthusiasm and delusion that comes with a credulous attitude towards the existence of speculative entities. In his acknowledgement of the situatedness of knowledge and the empire of habit and custom, Locke can be read as something of a Kuhnian, too.

#### 4. Conclusion

Failures of judgment that lead to error and zealotry are, for Locke, necessary for the same reason all forms of sin are necessary—they must be possible if we are to be properly free. As Jacovides puts it, "In Locke's theology, God gives us capacities to discover and create things on our own."<sup>39</sup> Locke's way of ideas is austere for prudential reasons; it is our task, as Christians, to assemble out of the simple ideas we receive through sensation and reflection all the complex ideas and propositions we need to know divine law. Just like in medicine, it is critically important when it comes to caring for our souls that we do not grope in the dark after useless metaphysics instead of acting on the basis of what we can see in the clear light of experience. Locke insists that we have the tools we need for this divinely ordained task. We were built to be able to know what we need to know—in

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<sup>35</sup> Jacovides, *Locke's Image*, 149.

<sup>36</sup> Jacovides, *Locke's Image*, 135.

<sup>37</sup> Jacovides, *Locke's Image*, 147.

<sup>38</sup> Jacovides, *Locke's Image*, 30.

<sup>39</sup> Jacovides, *Locke's Image*, 50.

another beautiful phrase of Jacovides's, "the Lockean God cares about epistemology."<sup>40</sup> Insofar as the constraints on our understanding are part of God's plan, Locke would say that there is nothing arbitrary about the cognitive limits we find ourselves acting under. Some are a result of the kind of fallen creatures we are, which is in turn responsible for our particular modes of sinning. Jacovides's characterization of Locke as "the dupe of his circumstances, describing phenomena as universal that are actually local products of his commitments or contingent recent discoveries"<sup>41</sup> applies to us all, in Locke's view, because of his understanding of how God made us. To my mind this theological stance about our faculties is Locke's greatest, and most indelible, constraint on his philosophy. It motivates his theory of perception more powerfully than any scientific theory, though it might be harder for the contemporary reader to take onboard as a Jacovidian "background circumstance."<sup>42</sup> And of course different sources of constraint can work in tandem, requiring even greater finesse of interpretation—as in, for example, Locke's strange stance on mind-body dualism, which so puzzles people assuming he has the same ideas about both substance and the resurrection as Descartes.

I would like to close by saying I think Locke would love this book as much as I did, because of his commitment to the role of philosophical analysis in both breaking down preconceived maxims and justifying the modes of thinking that are required for our moral projects. But given how awful Locke was to his best critics in his own day, I worry he would be less than gracious despite Jacovides's generous and affectionate stance toward *him*. So, I will just thank Jacovides for the book on my own behalf, for the honor of being invited to give these reflections on it, and for a new scholarly mantra: "That's Locke's view. Now let us be puzzled by it."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Jacovides, *Locke's Image*, 124.

<sup>41</sup> Jacovides, *Locke's Image*, 185.

<sup>42</sup> Jacovides, *Locke's Image*, 204.

<sup>43</sup> Jacovides, *Locke's Image*, 136.

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