

John Locke
An Essay Concerning Recreation,
In answer to D. G's DESIRE,
(1677)

As for my recreation, thus I think; that recreation being a thing ordained, not for itself, but for a certain end, that end is to be the rule and measure of it.

Recreation then seeming to me to be the doing of some easy or at least delightful thing to restore the mind or body, tired with labour, to its former strength and vigour, and thereby fit it for new labour, it seems to me:

1. That there can be no general rule set to different persons concerning the time, manner, duration, or sort of recreation that is to be used, but only that it be such as their experience tells them is suited to them, and proper to refresh the part tired.

2nd. That if it be applied to the mind, it ought certainly to be delightful, because it being restore and enliven that which is done by relaxing and composing the agitation of the spirits, that which delights it without employing it much, is not only the fittest to do so, but also the contrary, *i.e.* what is ungrateful doth certainly most discompose and tire it.

3rd. That it is impossible to set a standing rule of recreation to one's self; because not only the unsteady fleeting condition of our bodies and spirits require more at one time than another, which is plain in other more fixed refreshments, as food and sleep, and likewise requires very different according to the employment that hath preceded the present temper of our bodies and inclination of our minds; but also because variety in most constitutions is so necessary to delight, and the mind is so naturally tender of its freedom, that the most pleasant diversions become nauseous and troublesome to us when we are forced to repeat them in a continued fixed round.

It is farther to be considered:

1st. That in things not absolutely commanded nor forbidden by the law of God, such as is the material part of recreation, he in his mercy considering our ignorance and frail constitution, hath not tied us to an indivisible point, nor confined us to a way so narrow that allows no latitude at all in things in their own nature indifferent; there is the liberty of great choice, great variety, within the bounds of innocence.

2nd. That God delights not to have us miserable either in this or the other world, but having given us all things richly to enjoy, we cannot imagine that in our recreations we should be denied delight, which is the only necessary and useful part of it.

This supposed, I imagine:

1st. That recreation supposes labour and weariness, and therefore that he that labours not, hath no title to it.

2nd. That it very seldom happens that our constitutions (though there be some tender ones that require a great deal,) require more time to be spent in recreation than in labour.

3rd. We must beware that custom and the fashion of the world, or some other by-interest, doth not make that pass with us for recreation which is indeed labour to us, though it be not our business; as playing at cards, though no otherwise allowable but as a recreation, is so far from fitting some men for their business and giving them refreshment, that it more discomposes them than their ordinary labour.

So that God not tying us up of time, place, kind, &c. in our recreations, if a

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secure our main duty, which is in sincerity to do our duty in our calling as far as the frailty of our bodies or minds will allow us, (beyond which we cannot think any thing should be required of us,) and that we design our diversions to put us in a condition to do our duty, we need not perplex ourselves with too scrupulous an inquiry into the precise bounds of them; for we cannot be supposed to be obliged to rules which we cannot know; for I doubt first whether there be any such exact proportion of recreation to our present state of body and mind, that much is exactly enough, and whatsoever is under is too little, whatsoever is over is too much; but be it so or no, this I am very confident of, that no one can say in his own or another man's case, that thus much is the precise dose; hitherto you must go and no farther; - so that it is not duly our privilege, but we are under a necessity of using a latitude, and where we can discover no determined, precise rule, it is unavoidable for us to go sometimes beyond, and some times to stop short of, that which is, I will not say the exact, but nearest proportion; and in such cases we can only govern ourselves by the discoverable bounds on the one hand or the other, which is only when we find that our recreation by excess or defect, serves not to the proper end for which we are to use it, only with this caution, that we are to suspect ourselves most on that side to which we find ourselves most inclined. The cautious, devout, studious man, is to fear that he allows not himself enough; the gay, careless, and idle, that he takes too much; to which I can only add these following directions as to some particulars:

1st. That the properest time for recreating the mind is when it feels itself weary and flagging; it may be wearied with a thing when it is not weary of it,

2nd. That the properest recreation of studious, sedentary persons, whose labour is of the thought, is bodily exercise; to those of bustling employment, sedentary recreations.

3rd. That in all bodily exercise, those in the open air are best for health.

4th. It may often be so ordered that one business may be made a recreation to another, visiting a friend, to study.

These are my sudden extemporary thoughts upon this subject, which will deserve to be better considered when I am in better circumstances of freedom, of thought and leisure. Vale, March 77.

From King, Peter King, Lord. *The Life of John Locke: with extracts from his correspondence, journals, and common-place books*, London: H. Colburn, 1829, pp. 323-325. (Available on-line in pdf through Thomson-Gale database.)