

On Property and Freedom:

An Evaluation of Lockean Theory

We fight to live. We fight to find food, to drink water, to survive against an opponent.

John Locke, ever aware of these truths, speaks to personal freedom in terms of survival in his *Second Treatise of Government*. Human beings, as rational creatures, have the freedom of choice and yet are bound to the pressures of longevity the same as any creature. Our methods to this end of a long life, however, reflect our superior abilities, including our establishment of property. The concept of property, as defined by Locke, is best descriptive of both our freedoms and our restrictions. It is through his arguments for property that we see freedom as both a prescriptive and descriptive force. To John Locke, freedom leads with our calculating rationality and adds on respect. If we want live beyond the same as any creature, though, we must start with respect for others and move forward.

John Locke begins chapter five, article 26 of his *Second Treatise of Government* with the claim that "God, who hath given the world to men in common, hath also given them reason to make use of it to the best advantage of life, and convenience." That we have the natural right as rational beings to rule ourselves is a presupposition of this claim. As biological beings, we have a desire to continue our lives through food, water, and shelter. Humans and dogs share this drive, and in some ways, so do humans and plants. As understood by many philosophers, the aspect of human life that separates humans from dogs or plants is our rationality. We are therefore above other beings and may use them as resources, much like the rabbit uses the grass, and the grass uses the dirt. A byproduct of our rationality is freedom. Driven purely by the force to live, other beings do not contain the capacity to choose and, therefore, cannot be free to act as they please.

To speak of the right to property, we must first see that ruling over ourselves with the goal of longevity gives us access, as well as the right, to the means to this end. A farmer's freedom to work the field becomes the freedom to take ownership of the field she acted upon, as well as the crops that grew from her labor. The farmer needs food to live, as all humans do. She needs the land to grow the food and has the freedom over her own body to cause it to act upon the field, producing the food. Ownership then transfers from within humans, through them, and onto the world God gave "to mankind in common." To Locke, this means that we can have ownership over land as individuals through our actions upon it. Someone who has worked to produce a fence around a perimeter of land has done enough action on all the land to qualify it as owned. For, "his *labour* hath taken it out of the hands of nature, where it was common, and belonged equally to all her children, and hath thereby *appropriated it* to himself" (Chap. 5, section 29).

As we are free, we may choose to kill ourselves, sacrifice our life for another's, or engage in unhealthy practices like smoking cigarettes. All choices an animal could never make; humans go beyond what may be instinctually best for our survival, even if our actions may be morally wrong. However, through his ideas on property, Locke shows us something beyond the animalistic. As rational beings, humans have methods of survival that reach past those of other creatures, each requiring specific moral codes to work. The act of owning property, justified under Locke as a method of securing the means to our end, requires the moral precept of respecting our neighbor's boundaries. Locke's moral sphere, while selfish in many ways, is still concerned with what we owe each other. As free beings, we may or may not infringe on one another's rights. As moral beings, we ought to give each other respect.

A wooden fence, in itself, does little to stop a person from entering. We could easily step or climb over it if we desired to find ourselves on the other side. The ease with which we can breach it means that the fence is truly a signal, a designation, of what is right and what is wrong, rather than an impediment to action. The fence declares that if someone other than who built it chooses to step beyond it, that is an act of disrespect towards the owner's property, the owner's right to the means of her survival, and is a threat to her freedom to pursue her end. Respect, a step above the calculating rationality with which we may decide we could steal another's resources without consequence, is, then, a firm moral requirement for freedom. Because we are operating not from innate desire but from rationality, we can reason that respecting others through mutual agreement is insurance that our freedoms will not be taken away by someone else, but this is not insured. To operate in respect is to go above this calculation and act with a motivation towards the ends of others. Freedom that emerges from the correct treatment of resources is also in this domain of respect. Working to cultivate a lasting survival, the farmer has the right to all she produces. However, if she has more field than it is possible till and more crops than it is possible to eat before spoiling, she has "offended against the common law of nature" because she "invaded her neighbour's share" (Chap V, section 37) by taking and leaving it to waste. To take away resources without them increasing our longevity is a limit to the freedom of another. It is an act of disrespect to waste the resources another could have benefitted from.

Freedom that grows out of mutual respect is not self-serving. It requires thought for other people. Because Locke believed in putting personal gains first and humanity's gain second, however, because of its base in property, this respect is uneven, and our ends often cancel out much of what might be considered human decency. Our respect for others is limited to that

which is at least neutral, if not beneficial, towards us. Even if an action is neutral, it would likely be considered unwise. Charity, for instance, the giving away of a resource that does not spoil and gaining nothing of value to the life force in return, is foolish under Locke. Taking a romantic partner for a night at the theatre or throwing a surprise party is out of the bounds of Lockean respect. While we have unlimited access to money, the uncertainty of the future and the incessant demands of the life force suggest we must be continually working to obtain it. We become reduced, beings capable of more than others that still only strive for the same end. To be human, however, is to have a choice, and those choices can reach above simply what continues our survival. In small ways, we may work against our longevity by saving up money for a vacation or going on a service trip, but the odds are not stacked so highly against us. We typically spend money when we are sure to receive more, and when we do not, we often have others to assist us when we are in need. Such bonds do not exist if we are only concerned with waking up the next day.

Respect is a byproduct for Locke. We start with a desire to continue living, make rational calculations towards this goal, and respect others when it benefits us. Because we are above other creatures in our capacity, however, this suggests we should be above them in our actions. Dogs can steal bones away from one another, attack smaller creatures and avoid larger ones. When we choose not to steal or attack for our own benefit, our motivations are still in line with the dog, it is simply our methods that differ. Respect is a choice, and therefore unavailable to any living being except humans. No others can love as we do, care as we do, and experience the joy of relationships, all of which develop out of respect for human being as human being, not as

means to an end. When we lead with respect and compliment it with calculation, we give up some of our preoccupation with a long life, but what we gain is a life well lived.

Because of civil society, to live is not merely to fight. Most people are confident in their ability to secure food, water, and shelter for themselves in the future. This is not because we are drones, working to earn money at every moment. Instead, it is because we have built a trusting world, one that mixes independence and reliance on others. Not only do we respect others' property with the hopes that others will do the same, but we also give away our money to the sick, the poor, and the unfortunate. We strengthen bonds with our loved ones, and these bonds fuel us to help one another in times of need. On our own, we fight to live, but together, we live to experience the world much more richly than any other creature is capable. We are human because we are rational, and as rational beings, we can choose to live above survival, in communion with one another.

Reference

Locke, J. (1980). *Second treatise of government*. Indianapolis: Hackett.