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HUM 3306: History of Ideas--The Age of Enlightenment to the Age of Anxiety

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Three Minute Philosophy - John Locke 3 min 22 sec - Sep 30, 2009

JOHN LOCKE'S SECOND TREATISE

The Enlightenment overlaps, more or less, with the eighteenth century, the century in which scientific discoveries and scientific disciplines (in chemistry, geology, and so forth) consolidated the efforts and thinking of the previous Scientific Revolution (Newton's discovery of gravity, for instance), which established the scientific, rational method and outlook that is still with us as the primary way we see the world. The entire time period from the late Renaissance (think Shakespeare and Elizabethan England) to the end of the Enlightenment era (the French Revolution), however, is transitional, both in the adoption of a scientific world-view and more egalitarian political systems. In respect to the latter: John Locke is writing at the end of the seventeenth century, and so, although he is very modern--in the sense of setting up the ideology that undergirds representational, constitutional democracy and the rights of every individual to own property and to have that property secured by the state (i.e., government)--he is also just a generation removed from the end of the Renaissance period, which was lavishly devoted to protecting not your property, but your position within the hierarchical social ladder: i.e., some get to rule and others get to be ruled.

Locke is a very logical thinker; but sometimes his splitting of a main point into several subpoints, or his charting out all the nuances of a political idea, will make him sound repetitious. And sometimes the sentences will seem never to end. In the past, however, I have found that if you patiently read and re-read, even the most seemingly knotted-up passages make sense, and that much of the prose is actually a pleasure to read once you get the hang of it.

BACKGROUND AND CHRONOLOGY

Before you begin reading Locke, you should reflect on how, although we often want our

philosophers and social thinkers and genius scientists--from Plato to Einstein--to be articulating "universal" arguments or theories, good for any era, they are also deeply embedded within their own time period. This course introduces you to key ideas that will, if you attend to them with care, shape your thinking. But you should also ponder the history of the ideas; how thinkers, whatever their trans-historical pertinence, are a product of their age.

And so it is with John Locke. His Second Treatise has shaped democracies around the world, yet his ideas emerged from a very contentious, bloody civil war in the middle of the 17th-century in his native England. When Locke talks about the protection of property and personal liberty, he implicitly recollects the tumultuous politics of his age. The Second Treatise shows his distrust and dislike of arbitrary monarchical rule and yet also his anxiety over mob-like social disorder.

Political theorists of the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries often sought to explain and justify their desired political systems (in which there are rulers, judges, written laws, police, and so on) by envisioning the so-called "state of nature" that hypothetically came before such systems. "To understand political power right, and derive it from its original," Locke writes, "we must consider, what state all men are naturally in" (paragraph #4).

Thomas Hobbes, a British philosopher living roughly a generation before Locke, in his well-known political treatise, Leviathan (1651), said life in the state of nature was "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." He theorized that we should bond together via a social compact or contract, and relinquish all power and freedom into the hands of an absolute monarch, who supposedly will adjudicate disputes and maintain the general welfare of everyone. Hobbes thought that this ruler must have unrestricted, absolute power, for only thus could order be maintained over our otherwise "brutish" inclinations. Once established, the sovereignty of the monarch could not be contested (the "leviathan" of the title refers to the power of the monarch). Hobbes' argument is a pragmatic one, based on the necessity to secure peace through strong rule. Locke, although also worried that in a “state of nature” we are prone to idiosyncratic passion and unruly dispute (thus requiring us to move out of a “state of nature” to “civil” society (i.e. government), has a much more benign vision of human nature—he believes that, even in the “state of nature,” we are ruled by reason etc.

Sir Robert Filmer, the man Locke is arguing against at the beginning of the Second Treatise, used a more theological argument. Filmer said that kings are divinely appointed because they are Adam's heirs. Locke and his aristocratic patron, the Earl of Shaftesbury, felt that the British king (Charles II) was tyrannical, abusing the citizens of the kingdom and infringing upon their various rights. And so Locke begins the Second Treatise by undermining the divine right notion, which otherwise legitimized Charles II's rule.

You don't need to memorize the dates below, but try to get a sense of the time period in which Locke is writing.

1517 Martin Luther's 95 Theses. The Protestant Reformation begins. Increasingly, major

thinkers will challenge authority and put into question received traditions in politics, religion, and science.

1521 Conquest of Mexico by Cortez. In one section of Locke's book, he refers to "America" as a land of undeveloped natural resources--implying that imperial takeover of such land is justified.

1603 Queen Elizabeth dies; James I rules until 1625; Charles I until 1649.

1607 Founding of Jamestown in Virginia.

1616 Shakespeare dies.

1620 "Pilgrim Fathers," a sect of British Puritans, land at Plymouth.

1632 Locke born in Somerset, England.

1637 Descartes' Meditations published (in which appears the most famous line in philosophy, "I think, therefore I am").

1642 The English Civil War begins. The country is divided between those loyal to Charles I (they are mostly pro-Catholic and aristocratic) and those rebelling against him (Protestant middle-classes and Protestant noblemen).

1649 Charles I is beheaded; Cromwell, a radical Puritan, leads the parliamentary Commonwealth until 1660.

1651 Hobbes' Leviathan (a famous political treatise defending absolute monarchy) is published.

1652 Locke begins study of philosophy and medicine at Oxford.

1660 Restoration of monarchy in England; Charles II rules.

1667 Locke enters the Earl of Shaftesbury's service.

1682 After conspiring to rebel against Charles II, Shaftesbury must flee to Holland.

1683 Locke also flees to Holland.

1685 Charles II, on the throne since 1660, dies; James II (a Catholic) becomes king.

1687 Newton's Principia Mathematica. The Einstein of his age, Newton's th eories of matter and motion seem to explain the workings of the universe--an optimistic sense of being able to control and predict nature ensues. God no longer perceived as routinely intervening in the cosmos; instead, the Deity has created a perfectly rational, harmonious

universe (like a super-complex watch), and he is best known by understanding its mechanisms. The latter philosophy is called "Deism" and was what many 18th-century intellectuals (such as B. Franklin) believed.

1688 England's "Glorious Revolution." William III (Protestant) usurps the throne, by invitation of Parliament (future kings & queens of England become increasingly only symbolic figureheads, with the real governmental power residing in the Parliament).

1689 Parliament issues Bill of Rights--no law can be suspended by the King.

1690 Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding published. Main theory is that our minds are "blank slates" when we are born. There are no inborn ideas (the traditional Christian notion of innate depravity, the inheritance of Adam and Eve's sin, loses validity for intellectuals of the period); we gain knowledge only through experience and our environment. Consequently, education becomes very important--perhaps humankind can be perfected as history progresses. Locke's educational ideas combined with Newton's scientific ideas provide the optimistic intellectual foundation for the "Age of Enlightenment." Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and company--all considered "Enlightenment" thinkers--read Locke and took him to heart.

1690 Two Treatises on Civil Government is published, to legitimate the overthrow of James II.

1702 William III dies. Queen Anne reigns to 1714.

1704 Locke dies.

STUDY/REVIEW QUESTIONS FOR CHAPTERS ONE-TEN

CHAPTER ONE

1-3 In the First Treatise (later referred to as the "foregoing discourse" in Chapter 1 of the Second Treatise), Locke argues against the notion of the divine right of kings. Locke sums up his argument in Chapter I of the Second Treatise: what does he say about the relationship between present rulers' authority and Adam's rule?

CHAPTER TWO

4-6 Imagine you are the director of a movie-documentary on Locke's treatise: what opening scenes would you shoot to illustrate the state of nature, as Locke describes it here? How does he describe the way individuals interacted, before governments existed? Is the state of nature lawless? If it is not lawless, how are its laws known? Do we have any obligations or responsibilities in the state of nature?

7 How do you relate Locke's earlier idea about the state of nature being "a state of perfect freedom" (paragraph #4) to the idea here about the need for "all men to be

restrained from invading others' rights"? What does he mean when he writes "the execution of the law of nature is ... put into every man's hands"?

11 Why do you think Locke compares murderers and vicious transgressors to animals?

12 According to Locke, in the state of nature, how much can you punish a transgressor? Imagine you live in the state of nature, without government: you discover your neighbor has stolen your favorite pig. What do you do? What would an appropriate punishment be?

13 Does Locke seem to think that every individual having "executive" power in the state of nature would lead to a Mad Max sort of world Go to this site if you do not know this reference? What does Locke refer to when he speaks of the "inconveniences of the state of nature"? Does Locke seem to envision the state of nature in this section in the same way that he did earlier in Chapter I?

CHAPTER THREE

19 Locke says that the state of nature and the state of war are distinct from each other. On what basis does he make this distinction? What does he mean in this section when he uses the phrases "common superior" or "common judge"?

20 Locke gives a "great reason for men's putting themselves into society and quitting the state of nature": that is, for creating a community with an explicit government. What is this reason?

CHAPTER FOUR

23 When, according to Locke, is slavery justified?

CHAPTER FIVE

25 Initially, in the state of nature, who owns property? Restate for yourself what Locke proposes to "shew" at the end of this paragraph.

26-30 According to Locke, what gives an individual the right to own property? Is this right conferred by society-at-large, by government, or if by neither, by what?

31 In the state of nature, how much property can you accumulate? Should you be able to kill, say, three deer if you and your kin could only eat one deer for dinner?

32 How does land become private property?

33 & 36
Why, initially, would there be little competition for land?

37 Try to envision how a society without money would function. Why, before the invention of money, was it more or less "impossible for any man" to acquire so much property as to harm his neighbor?

37 & 40-44
These sections comprise the key argument for Locke's thesis that the right to keep the fruits of one's labor (property) is for the common benefit, and is not merely one person getting wealthy at the expense of others. Pay attention to Locke's references to Indians (the inhabitants of the "Americas") in #37 and #41: what point is he making? What sort of countries do you think would find Locke's ideas in these sections the most useful?

46-50 How have we "agreed to a disproportionate and unequal possession of the earth" (#50)? A final question to ponder: go back to #37--according to Locke, does the invention of money allow us to satisfy an innate acquisitive urge, or does it rather create greed in the first place? What do you think Locke would say about the Donald Trumps of the world?

CHAPTER SIX

73 "But if they will enjoy the inheritance of their ancestors, they must….". Wait a second, Locke values labor (it seems), so why should anybody get an inheritance? If we all consented to civil authority (taking us out of the State of Nature), I, today, don't recollect doing that!? Locke solves both problems here: if you want inheritance, you must accept the social compact/civil authority your forefathers/father did.

CHAPTER EIGHT

100-1 Why does Locke here ponder the historical moment in which we supposedly collectively consented to government? Notice how nervous he is here and waffles: he at once wants the transition from the State of Nature to civil authority to be anthropological (an event that actually happened before recorded history) and, in effect, wants his argument to be a logical/rhetorical one. There are three key moments in which Locke waffles: when we all actually consent to government, when we "tacitly consent" to the invention/meaning of money, and when, precisely, we have a legit reason to revolt from government (see below).

SUMMARY OF LOCKE'S ARGUMENT ABOUT PROPERTY

• You own your body and by extension you own the labor of your body. This IS a key idea--keep it in mind when you read Equiano in a week or two from now!

• Mixing your labor with nature's stuff removes it from common ownership (granted by the Bible, Locke says, in the lines about Adam getting dominion of the earth and its creatures) and makes it your own.

• This makes sense because it is through labor activity that natural resources obtain their true value (e.g., a coconut has no use until you pick it up or climb a palm tree to get it).

• Because Locke is so preoccupied with individualistic labor and individualistic acquisition, he does not have a strong concept of ecological stewardship or communal labor.

• He does say, though, that you only get to convert to private property what can be used without spoiling. (Do you think the no-spoiling rule could be applied against Locke himself and modern conspicuous consumption: i.e. if Donald Trump's many mansions lay vacant?)

• Labor in the form of tillage, farming, development, etc. = what Locke phrases as "inclose it from the common": i.e., you can acquire real estate.

• In the foggy historical beginning of this land acquisition, all the world "was America" (i.e. there was a lot of land, seemingly unowned), and so acquisition does not infringe on somebody else's capacity to acquire. There is no scarcity of land to own.

• "God gave the world ...to the use of the industrious and rational" i.e. not Indians.

• Locke does not explain in detail how a barter economy would work; he only says surplus goods are exchanged for needed goods, which also avoids the problem of spoiling because the surplus is used.

• He jumps to the invention of money: "it is plain, that men have agreed to a disproportionate and unequal possession of the earth, they having, by a tacit and voluntary consent, found out a way how a man may fairly possess more land than he himself can use the product of, by receiving in exchange for the overplus gold and silver, which may be hoarded up without injury to any one; these metals not spoiling or decaying in the hands of the possessor".

• Did the desire to hoard (beyond immediate use) create the need for gold? Locke is ambiguous.

• Or did the capacity of gold to permit hoarding create the hoarding desire? Locke is ambiguous (his brief puzzlement is an example of the classic nature/nurture debate: do we indulge certain behaviors, which "civilization"/culture then codifies or aids in the satisfaction of; or, are we only nurtured, via "civilization"/culture, to have certain desires?). Note that the "invention" of gold/money occurs before we leave the "state of nature." <u>This means that a somewhat big discrepancy in wealth could occur in the "state of nature," which civil society/government will be required to secure!!!! (pay attention to this point!!!)</u>.

<u>SUMMARY OF LOCKE'S IDEAS ABOUT REVOLUTION: A GUIDEBOOK TO WHEN YOU CAN JUSTLY REVOLT</u>

1) Has the ruler made his/her will or ambition more important than preserving the law and, in turn, the citizens that the law protects (section 199)? If you answer "yes," continue.

2) Can you appeal to a court system that might address how you feel violated (207)? If "yes," you can't revolt. If "no," continue.

3) Are only a few individuals abused by the ruler (208)? (Locke gets fuzzy here: would he have a serious problem with, say, the pre-Civil Rights era?)

4) Can the majority see a train of abuses leading towards tyranny (209-210)? Hmmm … starting to get tricky. Abuse by governmental power might only be in the eye of the beholder!

5) Is the ruling power/gov't malfunctioning = misusing its power (219)? Again: requires interpretation. If I lived in New Orleans several years ago, I might say gov't malfunctioned, hugely!

6) You must be able to escape before you are fully under the heal of the tyrant, so, rather tricky yet again, you should revolt against a tyrant before full tyranny has become manifest (which sort of contradicts # 4 above) (220).

7) Ultimately, whether you are righteously revolting against a bad ruler, or are recklessly rebelling and are simply a beastly "discontent" is unclear: only "impartial history" can determine (230). Example: John Brown, the pre-Civil War radical abolitionist, was thought to be a madman in his day and was hung for sedition; today, he's a hero.

*Please note: Locke offers some very sensible guidelines to when revolt is legitimate, but as a careful reader you should start to try to see tensions (Locke's nervousness about revolt; his puzzlement and curiosity over money) in his writing. Try to maintain analytical appreciation **and** analytical skepticism with all our authors in this course--they are, truly, profound thinkers, but they are also human, and therefore subject to many conflicts. When you read Equiano next week, especially exercise this bi-focal analytical appreciation/skepticism!*

REVIEW OF LOCKE'S ENTIRE ARGUMENT

1) In the state of nature no one is subordinate to another: all have equal rights (life/liberty) and executive/judge power.

• our reason lets us know this (We "hold these truths to be self evident"Jefferson says in the Dec. of Ind.).

• the divine right of kings/absolute monarchy, based on genealogical descent from Adam, is bogus.

2) But peace is precarious: much insecurity because we might not use our power rationally.

• might punish too much.

• some (lacking reason) might attempt to dominate others (Locke does not have a psychological vocabulary for the irregular use of power: maybe we need Freud to pathologize power? Or our irrational lust for treasure/money?).

3) Social contract emerges: we transfer our power to the state /gov't by consent.

• gov't then assumes executive/judge power.

• this takes care of what Locke calls the "inconveniences" of the state of nature.

• Locke's is an analytical/theoretical rather than strictly or realistic anthropological/temporal-historical argument. Antecedent rights are needed to validate a state that protects those rights or to condemn a state that doesn't. Let me say this more emphatically: it is very difficult to condemn racism or torture if you don't believe that fundamental trans-cultural, universal human rights exist. "Proving" that such rights exist, without a transcendental deity notion (Locke begins his Second Treatise by speaking of our God-given reason), is almost impossible.

4) In return, the individual gains security (life, liberty, property).

5) Do you remember consenting to the social contract explicitly? Thus Chapters VI, VII, VIII in which such elements as children's acceptance of the social contract by virtue of inheritance are argued (Locke could have said that inheritance is bad, based on the initially-argued importance of labor value, but instead he makes inheritance the glue that binds the social contract thru time … very convenient for the accumulation of capital generation to generation!!!).

6) Sure, you can revolt, but the rules are tricky!