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# Locke Defence For A Right To Private Property And The Unlimited Accumulation Of Goods

John Locke was an English philosopher and physician widely regarded as one of the most influential of Enlightenment thinkers, commonly known as the 'Father of Liberalism'. Locke's most famous work 'Second Treatise', sets out a liberal premise of a community of free, equal individuals, all possessed of natural rights. Since these individuals will want to acquire goods and will come into inevitable conflict, he invokes a natural law of morality to govern them before they enter into society.

There is a presumption that people will understand, that in order to protect themselves and their property, they must come together into some sort of political body and agree to adhere to certain standards of behaviour. They therefore relinquish some of their natural rights to enter into a social compact. This view is in opposition to Hobbes who argues that human beings pursue their own self-interest relentlessly, mechanically avoiding pain and pursuing pleasure. As a result, life is 'nasty, brutish and short'.

Defining the right to private property is difficult because the concept means different things in different countries and as R.H Tawney argues, 'It is idle to present a case for or against private property without specifying the particular forms of property to which the reference is made.' Many argue that the concept itself defies definition. The concept of ownership itself is defined differently in different countries. For example, in the US, an owner can leave his goods in his will to more or less anyone he pleases but the owner's liberty is less in England and is even more curtailed by statute law in New Zealand.

For the purposes of this essay, I will use Locke's definition of the property of a person. Each person owns his or her own body, and all the labour that they perform with the body. Locke argues that when an individual adds their own labour, their own property, to a foreign object or good, that object becomes their own because they have added their labour. This constitutes Locke's labour theory of property. These ideas are first proposed in 'The Second Treatise of Government' (1690). The theory is rooted in laws of nature that Locke identifies, which permit individuals to appropriate and exercise control rights over things in the world, like land and other material resources. He uses the example of picking an apple. The apple becomes the property of the person when they pick it, because they have added their labour to it. This appropriation of goods does not demand the consent of humankind in general because each person has the license to appropriate things in this way by individual initiative.

John Locke justifies private property and the unlimited right of acquisition because God gave humans the earth to share in common and therefore nobody has a natural right to own property and exclude others. However, Locke places a bound on this type of acquisition. A person may only acquire as many things in this way as he or she can reasonably use to their advantage. Firstly, everyone has a right to the products of their labour insofar as there is enough left for everyone else. Secondly, no one has the right to more than one can personally make use of before it spoils. This relates to his conception of nature as a gift from God. It was given to us not to destroy or ruin but cultivate and enjoy. As described in Chapter V, paragraph 31, 'Nothing was made by God for Man to spoil or destroy.' Locke applies these rules to land: a person in a

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state of nature can claim land by adding labour to it, for example, building a house on it or farming on it. However, only so much as that person can reasonably use without waste. Locke then defines labour as the determining factor of value, the tool by which humans make their world a more advantageous and rewarding place to inhabit.

However, Locke's idea is unhelpful when considering a country in which all the land and resources are enclosed. Does this mean that after the initial enclosure of resources and land, all subsequent transferrals and changes of wealth are legitimate? Currently, there is great wealth inequality in the world. Given that the world's richest 1%, those with more than \$1 million, own 45% of the world's wealth whereas adults with less than \$10,000 in wealth make up 64% of the world's population but hold less than 2% of global wealth. Is this all perfectly legitimate?

Locke attempts to counteract this criticism using the concept of money to counteract his 'spoilage limitation'. The spoilage limitation does not limit the amount of property one may justly acquire; it merely prohibits claims of ownership to perishable goods that will spoil while in one's possession: 'the exceeding of the bounds of his just Property not lying in the largeness of his Possession, but in the perishing of anything uselessly in it'. Therefore, one may expand one's stock of private property by exchanging perishable goods that one cannot use for useful goods, as barter. Or one may exchange perishable goods for durable goods that will not spoil, such as precious metals. Therefore, according to Locke, as precious metals were widely accepted as money, it became possible to accumulate potentially unlimited amounts of property without violating the spoilage limitation. Using the system of money, we have tacitly consented to allow people to have more than that which won't spoil. We have implicitly agreed to the consequences of this system by using money. The inequality is 'fair' and just because it was said to arise from men's 'differ(ing) degrees of industry'. It is argued that since some work harder, they have a legitimate right to lay claim to a quantity of property in excess of that which they, with their own labour, could use. However, it could be argued that there is a lingering tension between Locke's conclusion and his previous caveat of accumulation of goods, so long as there is enough for everyone else. He never explains why anyone should ever find himself with a greater quantity of a good than he could use himself; there is no rationale for such accumulation. He argues that it would be 'foolish... to hoard up more than one could make use of'. Moreover, Locke failed to argue that production was undertaken for the purpose of exchange rather than exchange emerging as a consequence of surplus production. This means that it is unclear why anyone would labour to acquire more of a thing than he could use before it would spoil. Without established markets, it would be risky to specialise. Everyone would have to believe that others would specialise in the various necessities of life before committing to specialisation themselves. Even if one could rationalise specialisation, it is difficult to see why anyone would choose to specialise in the production of perishables, for example, producing nuts which are more long lasting than plums. Therefore, 11

Locke's attempt to respond to the criticism of his theory fails. Locke's labour theory of property has been criticised by modern academics who doubt that mixing something owned with something unowned could imbue the object with ownership. For example, Robert Nozick gives the example of 'if I own a can of tomato juice and spill it in the sea so that its molecules (made radioactive, so I can check this) mingle evenly throughout the sea, do I thereby come to own the sea, or have I foolishly dissipated my tomato juice.' Instead, mixing one's labour with 12 something in nature causes one to lose one's labour without making any gain. Therefore, what Locke really was arguing is that what one ought to own is not the full resulting product of one's labour, but rather the value added to the original product before the labouring took place.

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Another objection to Locke's theory is posited by Marx who argues that he represents two contrary conceptions. First, he fails to acknowledge that the means of production is privately owned by every producer. Secondly, the capitalist relations of production prevail. These two presumptions are 13 common to the whole succeeding political economy. Another thinker who failed to recognise these facts, integral to the political economy, is Adam Smith whose account of primitive-original accumulation depicted a peaceful process, in which some workers laboured more diligently than others and gradually built up wealth, eventually leaving the less diligent workers to accept living wages for their labour. Marx also rejected this account as 'childish', instead stating that, in the words of David Harvey, primitive accumulation 'entailed taking land, say, enclosing it, and expelling a resident population to create a landless proletariat, and then releasing the land into the privatised mainstream of capital accumulation'. This would be accomplished through violence, war, enslavement and colonialism. According to Marx, the whole purpose of primitive accumulation is to privatise the means of production, so that the exploiting owners can make money from the surplus labour of those who, lacking other means, must work for them. Primitive accumulation is simply the expropriation of the direct producers. As he said in an essay entitled 'On the Jewish Question', 'the right of man to property is the right to enjoy his possessions and dispose of the same arbitrarily without regard for other men, independently, from society, the right or selfishness'. Therefore, Marx argues that Locke's theory fails because it doesn't recognise two necessary truths about a modern economy.

Instead, Marx employed a theory of value which holds that the value of a commodity is the socially necessary labour time invested in it. According to this model, capitalists compensate the worker for the necessary labour only instead of paying the workers the full value of the commodities they produce. Marx theorised that the gap between the value a worker produces and his wage is a form of unpaid labour, known as surplus value. Markets tend to obscure the social relationships and processes of production but people are usually only highly aware of commodities and therefore don't think about the relationships and labour they represent. Defining the bourgeoisie as the middle class with particular reference to its perceived materialistic values or conventional attitudes, Marx aims to resolve the bourgeois contradiction between the ownership of the means of production and the 'social act' of production itself by proposing socialisation of the means of production. To remove the 'disturbances' of capitalist economy, Marx postulated 'rational management' of the economy, which would replace the 'chaotic' market forces driven by a 'sum of individual preferences'.

In conclusion, Locke's theory is not sufficient in explaining a modern economy. In a modern country, all land and resources are enclosed. Does this mean any subsequent changes in wealth are legitimate? A recent statistic, released by the House of Commons, states that by 2030, the richest 1% will own two-thirds of global wealth. The vast inequality that exists in the global economy cannot be well founded. There is still a tension between Locke's caveat and his conclusion, even after he tries and defends his point using the concept of money. Additionally, Locke's theory does not stand up to criticism posed by Marx. Failure to acknowledge realities of the modern political economy, like privately owned means of production or the capitalist relations of production, means his theory is lacking in many respects.

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