

## Remote Learning Module for 6 April 2020

### Lecture Notes: John Locke – Life, Times & Political Thought

Last time we concluded our tour of Leibniz's metaphysics in the *Monadology*. Today, as we begin shifting our attention to the British Empiricists, let's recall that we owe to Kant the familiar bundling of philosophies in the modern period into two camps: Rationalism and Empiricism. Of course, there is warrant for this; unfortunately, however, it does tend to obscure the ways in which the likes of Leibniz and Lock had understood their own places in the history of ideas. This is especially true of Locke, who, despite his resistance to Descartes' recourse to innate ideas as requisite for reliable knowledge, is quite content to accept the Cartesian and Galilean distinction between the physical and sensory qualities of material things.

Nevertheless, we can make good sense of the fact that the terms, *Rationalism* and *Empiricism*, have served subsequent historical understanding well into our own time by contrasting the views of Locke, Berkeley, and Hume with the two principles Leibniz codified in *Monadology* as foundational for philosophical analysis.

#### Rationalism:

- [A] *The Law of Contradiction*: what implies a contradiction must be false; and whatever is implied by a tautology must be true.
- [B] *The Principle of Sufficient Reason*: Every truth is either an axiom (self-evidently true), or a theorem (follows logically from an axiom or theorem); in other words, there are *no* brute facts.

#### Empiricism:

- [A] The *Law of Contradiction* is about words, not things, about propositions, not facts.
- [B] The *Principle of Sufficient Reason* lacks universal application: there *are* brute facts.

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### — Life & Times —

(1) Locke and Spinoza were both born in 1632. Locke died in 1704, surviving Spinoza by 27 years. Locke is often called the theorist of the Glorious Revolution in England (1688), which brought an end to the three-year reign of James II, and placed William of Orange (by way of his marriage to James' daughter, Mary) to the throne. His political thought mightily influenced the intellectual framework for the American Revolution of 1776.

(2) Like Hobbes, Locke was born in the West Country (Somerset). His father was a middle-class land owner and an attorney who, unlike Hobbes, sided and fought with the Parliamentarians

against Charles I. Accordingly, young Locke grew up in an atmosphere saturated with Puritan values.

(3) In 1652, two years after Descartes' death, Locke entered Christ Church College, Oxford; he took his B.A. in 1656. At Oxford, his primary studies were focused on the Scholastics—the same Neo-Aristotelians that Descartes, Hobbes and Galileo all rejected as both wrong (about the nature of perception and the existence of final causes in nature) and outdated (as regards the proper methods for philosophical investigation). No wonder then, that as an undergraduate, Locke was impatient with his curriculum, disrespectful of his teachers, and known as a troublemaker. All the same, he persevered through graduate training, and received his Master's Degree in short order, whereupon he lectured in Latin and Greek on topics in moral philosophy.

At the same time, he took intellectual stimulation from Descartes' writings and the new, *modern* philosophies of the Post-Cartesians. He became a close friend and associate of Robert Boyle, author of *The Sceptical Chemist*, renowned even today for his work on the expansion and contraction of gases with respect to temperature and pressure. Locke's post-graduate studies also included medicine, and although he did not take his medical degree until 1674, he collaborated with Thomas Sydenham, a celebrated London physician, and Richard Lower, who first demonstrated the transfusion of blood, in 1665 at Westminster, Oxford.

(4) Locke had a distinguished political career, a good deal of it in the service of Lord Anthony Ashley Cooper, for whom Locke began serving as a household physician at Exeter House in London as early as the spring of 1667. Later in the year, Cooper and Locke began working together on the Grand Model for the Province of Carolina, and its founding document, the *Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina*. Locke would go on to serve as Cooper's secretary and Commissioner to the Board of Trade & Plantations (one of whose functions was to manage the slave trade). One of the founders of the Whig Party in the British Parliament, Ashley Cooper would be made Earl of Shaftsbury in 1672. When, in May of 1688, Ashley came to suffer from a liver disease caused by a hydatid cyst (formed by a parasitic tapeworm), it was Locke who suggested the operation that saved the future Earl from certain death. The operation, however, left an abscess which needed constant drainage by way of a tube capped with a copper tap. It was thus that Shaftsbury came to be called "Tapski" by his opponents among the Tories. You'll note the Polish spelling; this was adopted to mock Shaftsbury's Whig sympathies for the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, whose government was an elective monarchy.

(5) In 1660, the Stuarts were restored (after the regicide of Charles I and the Commonwealth instituted by Oliver Cromwell); and Charles II took the throne. In 1681, Shaftsbury, one of the leaders of the Parliamentary opposition to Charles' Catholic leanings (as well as to the lavish and lascivious doings at court), was suspected of treason, and, although he was acquitted, nevertheless fled to Holland. Locke perjured at Oxford until his liberal notions got him suspected of treason as well, and so in 1683, he left for Holland, to join Shaftsbury; Locke remained in Holland until 1689. These were six exceptionally fertile years for Locke, yielding his *Epistola de Tolerantia* and much of his masterwork, the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

(6) Deeply engaged in the plot to bring William of Orange to the English throne, Locke eventually returned to England in 1698, escorting Mary, Princess of Orange, to take her place as Queen of England. Locke thereafter lived out his years in declining health, working on the Board of Trade and Plantations whilst living in the country estate at Oates of Sir Francis and

Lady Masham. It's said that when he died on October 28<sup>th</sup> in 1704, Lady Masham was at his bedside, reading the Psalms to him.

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— **Political Thought** —

(1) Locke's primary writings on political philosophy appear in the early *Essays on the Law of Nature*, and his mature *First & Second Treatises of Government*. There is a great deal of controversy among scholars as to the dates of composition of these two treatises. The *First Treatise* was probably written about 1683, either immediately before or shortly after Shaftsbury's departure for Holland. In either case, the primary purport of the *First Treatise* was to advance the Shaftsbury's Whig cause against the Tories and their advocacy of absolute monarchy. The *Second Treatise* may have been written either in 1689 (the orthodox view), or much earlier, between 1679 and 1681. The point of the dispute is whether the *Second Treatise* was intended as a revolutionary document to support Shaftsbury against Charles II, or, since it was only published in 1690 (anonymously), to defend the Glorious Revolution and the ascension of William of Orange.

(2) The *First Treatise of Government* offers a sustained critique of Sir Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha* (or, *Divine Right of Kings Traced to Adam's Appointment by God to Rule over the Earth*). Locke's arguments against Filmer were as follows:

- (i) Adam was not give absolute power over Eve or their descendants, since parents have authority over their children *only* until the children reach their maturity.
- (ii) If Filmer were right, all men would be born slaves.
- (iii) Even if Filmer were right, the Kings of England couldn't possibly trace a bloodline all the way back to Adam and Eve.

(3) **The State of Nature.** In formulating the basis of his *Second Treatise of Government*, Locke departs radically from Hobbes. Recall that Hobbes claimed that in the state of nature there is "no justice or injustice, no right and wrong"; life in the natural condition is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short"; it is a state of scarcity and competition. But for Locke, the state of nature is a *moral state*: men are endowed by God with the natural rights of "Life, health, liberty, and possessions." According to Locke, these rights are discovered by Reason, but put into our very natures by God (so that uncovering these rights is just a matter of carrying out a philosophical anthropology). Moreover, the natural condition is a *state of abundance*: there are lots of resources and not many folks.

(4) **Theory of Property.** Locke disagreed with Hobbes on this score as well (for Hobbes there are no natural possessions). We have, on Locke's view, a natural, God-given right to whatever part of nature with which we "mix" our labor. If I till the soil, and cut down trees to build a house, then the farm and farmhouse are *mine*, and may be inherited by my children. The principle behind this notion is that all natural resources are, in the beginning, held in common (given by God to the species); it is *labor* that removes things from the state of nature, and establishes the *right of ownership*.

There are restrictions, however. You can have as much property as your labor can touch provided that: (a) it doesn't spoil in its accumulation, (b) there is enough left for others, and (c) its accumulation isn't harmful to others. Let us note in passing that gold and silver may be hoarded up without injury to anyone.

**(5) The Social Contract.** Unfortunately, not all people respect each other's natural rights, or obey the restrictions; so men form *by contract* a *body politic* (contracts for Locke are *among* people, not *between* a ruler and the ruled). The body politic consists of all and only free men, and it promulgates a government by majority voice.

Accordingly, the role of government is simple: to protect the *natural* rights of each individual, especially the right to own property. The government is just the agent of the people; it is the people who are sovereign. If anyone tries to gain power over another, then a state of war exists between the two. If it is an administrative ruler who seeks power, then the ruler is a tyrant, and rebellion is not only justified, but morally *obligated*.

**(6) Slavery.** Locke justified slavery (remember, he was Commissioner to the Board of Trade and Plantations) on the grounds that those who become slaves were originally in a state of war with their conquerors; thus they forfeited their freedom.

**(7) Rebellion.** Revolution is called for whenever an appointed ruler (administrator serving to execute the will of the body politic) turns tyrant, or in the event that a usurper takes power. However, rebellion is warranted *only* when all other means of redress have failed. As the colonies in the Americas would soon enough discover, in order to seek redress or to agree that all means of achieving redress have been exhausted, people need to have the right of assembly. If this right is denied, then rebellion is *ipso facto*—that is, the ruler is in a state of war with the people, whereupon sovereignty automatically reverts to the body politic.

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On Wednesday, we'll turn our attention to Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Be well everyone, and remember: social distancing saves lives, which is presumably why we are still not in JUB 202 presently.