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Classical Liberalism

A Paper

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by
John P. Heaphy
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Introduction

John Locke is widely considered one of the most important and influential philosophers in history. While he has greatly influenced future thinkers with ideas such as the famous “tabula rasa” (blank slate) perception of the mind, his most important contributions may be those in the area of political philosophy. It is here where he left an indelible mark on Western civilization and the world as a whole.¹ According to Neal Wood, Professor of Political Science at the University of York, “Philosophy for him was not the esoteric prerogative of the ivory-tower thinker but an important instrument for effecting social change.”² Locke did not just ponder about the problems and evils of the world, but made an effort to change them. Perhaps one of Locke’s most famous philosophical works is *The Two Treatises of Government*, which calls for a society based on natural rights and social contract. It is in this work along with others where Locke outlines his paramount political philosophy rooted in classical liberalism. Adopted by our founding fathers, Locke’s classical liberalism, entrenched in Christianity and *laissez-faire* economics, would go on to shape the development of the United States and set itself apart as the most effective form of government.

John Locke

John Locke, son of John and Agnes Locke, was born in Wrington, England, on August 29, 1632.³ His upbringing was rooted in Calvinism, and it is undoubted that his politics and philosophies were derived from his religious beliefs. His father, John Locke senior, was a

1. Paul Strathern, *Locke in 90 Minutes* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 1999), 8.

2. Neal Wood, *The Politics of Locke’s Philosophy: A Social Study of “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding”* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), 3.

3. R. S. Woolhouse, *Locke: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 5.

country lawyer and served as a captain of cavalry for Parliamentary forces during The English Civil War. This war, fought over the idea of divine monarchy, is said to have “brought about the first successful revolution in European history.”⁴ Because of his father’s parliamentary ties, Locke was able to start his studies at Westminster School in London, considered “the finest school in the land at the time.”⁵ Following his initial schooling, Locke enrolled as an undergraduate at Christ Church College in Oxford.⁶ It is here where Locke’s life begins to get particularly interesting. Bored with the monotonous traditionalism of a medieval school, Locke found his love first in rational science, and eventually in the rational philosophy of Descartes.⁷ Locke’s interest and passion for philosophy would only ameliorate throughout his studies and eventually past his schooling—and the world would never be the same.

Locke would gain prominent positions at Christ Church College, and then go on to serve Anthony Ashley Cooper, the first Earl of Shaftesbury.⁸ Locke began developing his political theories, and was first able to implement these theories when he helped draft the constitution for the American colony of Carolina.⁹ Locke soon realized that he ought to transcribe all of his theories in coherent form, and thus began writing down his thoughts and philosophies, mostly between the years of 1668 and 1686. In the year 1689, works such as *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, *Two Treatises of Government*, and *A Letter Concerning Toleration* were

4. Strathern, 12.

5. Ibid., 14.

6. Ibid., 17.

7. Ibid., 24.

8. Wood, 24.

9. Strathern, 3.

all drafted and published.¹⁰ Through these works amongst others, Locke would formulate some of the most profound and persuasive theories relating to religion, humanity, and government.

Classical Liberalism

Classical liberalism was the bedrock of John Locke's political theory and countered the patriarchal government of his day. Locke lived in turbulent times, witnessing the inherent contradiction and implicit dangers that resulted from the idea of a "divine right of kings." To Locke, a government derived from the consent of the governed was the better system, as it not only correlated with the laws of nature, but also the nature of God.¹¹ Classical liberalism focused heavily on this idea of social contract as well as natural rights—ideals that stemmed from Christianity.

Locke's political theories begin and end with Christian principles. According to Neal Wood, "Locke was a dedicated Christian who took his faith very seriously and devoted much attention to religious and theological questions."¹² These religious beliefs are the grounds upon which his arguments stand. For example, the Christian principle of the Golden Rule guided his ideology that all men are created equal, a key aspect of his political philosophy. Other facets of Locke's faith that contributed to his theories included: a commitment to reasonableness, moderation, and toleration.¹³

Locke openly speaks out against the fallibility of "divinely appointed monarchs" while infusing his Christian beliefs in in the second treatise of his *Two Treatises of Government*. In this

10. Wood, 25.

11. John Locke, *Two Tracts on Government*, ed. Philip Abrams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 123.

12. Wood, 28.

13. *Ibid.*, 28.

example, Locke describes the authority that Adam *did not* have, authority over the world, because it was not given by either natural right or positive donation by God. Locke goes on to say “it is impossible that the rulers now on earth should make any benefit, or derive any the least shadow of authority from that, which is held to be the fountain of all power.”¹⁴ Locke unequivocally founded his governmental theories upon Christianity.

As mentioned earlier, a key component of Locke’s theory is individual rights, which are derived from the natural law (which is from God), not kings or any other form of government.¹⁵ Locke believed that these rights were “plain and intelligible to all rational creatures.”¹⁶ Locke closely followed the teachings of the Roman philosopher Cicero when it came to the protection of natural law and individual rights. Nate Wood in *The Politics of Locke’s Philosophy* references Locke’s shared belief with Cicero that “each of us has a moral duty to maximize his own interest as long as it does not threaten or harm our neighbor.”¹⁷ Locke also was affected by the individualistic ideal of Cicero that held that a private citizen has the role of resisting governments that violate nature by infringing upon natural rights.

Lastly, Locke believed that social contract was the necessary step for men because of his view on the state of nature. Locke believes that the state of nature can only be theoretical because of mankind’s selfish nature, the difficulty of arbitrating the differences that would arise, and the lack of authority to enforce it.¹⁸ According to Locke, this led to a conclusion: a society in the

14. John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 100.

15. Ed., L. Miller, *Questions That Matter: An Invitation to Philosophy*, 6th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009), 443.

16. Miller, 443.

17. Wood, 30.

18. Miller, 444.

form of social contract. According to Ed Miller, a social contract is an agreement between members of a society according to which each forfeits certain rights and privileges in order to preserve others.”¹⁹ In Locke’s mind, this social contract would comprise of citizens submitting to the government and its laws, in order to secure “fundamental freedoms and rights.”²⁰ This contract is necessary to promote order and maintain a theoretical balance between government and constituents—but unfortunately this balance can be compromised.

The United States of America

The shining example of the implementation of classical liberalism is the United States of America. The United States’ success as a nation and influence abroad provides thousands of reasons as to why classical liberalism is the best form of government. John Locke’s political theories had a direct influence on the creation of the United States government and he should be honored as a vital reason for this country’s success. According to Ed Miller, “Locke is called the spiritual father of the U.S. Constitution.”²¹ Miller also notes that Thomas Jefferson’s goal was to have the Declaration of Independence “embody the social and political principles of Locke.”²² This is obvious if one simply reads the Declaration of Independence. Key phrases in it, such as “all men created equal,” “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights,” and governments are instituted among men to “derive their just powers from the consent of the governed,” validate its Christian and Lockean foundation.

The United States took these ideals and became the most successful nation in the history of mankind. It became nation where the Bill of Rights (the first ten amendments of the

19. Ibid., 444.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid., 448.

22. Ibid., 449.

Constitution) would guide the freedom of its citizens. There were not monarchs unjustly exercising their power, dictators suppressing the people, or an anarchical spirit in the U.S. No, the government ruled with the rights of the people in mind, and the people submitted not blindly, but respectfully to the government that secured their natural and God-given rights.

The United States also implemented Locke's political theories in the realm of economics. Locke valued the importance of labor and hard work—a trait that described many of the early founders and citizens of the United States.²³ His support of free market capitalism with little government regulation was a key component of the United States' success and set it apart from other nations. Capitalism has proved to be the most natural and successful form of economic theory, supporting the notion that Locke's political theory serves as the best overall form of government observable.

One of the best ways to prove the superiority of classical liberalism is by comparing nations that implement it to those that do not. Look at nations such as the former communist Soviet Union and fascist Germany. These nations controlled nearly all aspects of life and did not place a premium on individual rights, resulting in serious atrocities. One just has to compare the success of nations that implement the communistic ideal of shared wealth versus capitalist nations to see that Locke's theory reigns supreme. Admittedly, the United States' implementation of classical liberalism is far from perfect and has gotten worse. The U.S. government has also taken extreme liberty in stretching the Constitution and often interpreting it as a "living, growing document."²⁴ It is this interpretation along with the decay of morality that has proven detrimental to the integrity of the U.S. Yet all in all, despite its imperfections, the

23. Wood, 34.

24. Ibid., slide 11.

United States of America has served as an arsenal of democracy for over two hundred years and has exemplified the best form of government in classical liberalism.

Conclusion

John Locke is considered the father of classical liberalism, the governmental theory implemented by the founding fathers of the United States of America and that has proven to be the best form of government. This political theory is founded upon Christian principles and places a premium on natural law, individual rights, and social contract. The United States' Bill of Rights, capitalist economics, and execution of social contract are examples of what John Locke had in mind when he created his political theory. While the United States has not been perfect in the implementation of this theory, it still stands as the most successful nation in world history, proving that classical liberalism is the best form of government.

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