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Lockean Liberalism and the Declaration of Independence

Scholars and historians have continued to probe into the political theories behind our *Declaration of Independence* in an effort to locate the source of its inspiration. Although they have often held Lockean Liberalism as a central tenant of the *Declaration's* ideology, such scholars as Gary Wills and Stephen Lucas have attacked his influence, arguing instead for the important role of Scottish philosophers and the Dutch. Although the sway of Scottish moralist and the Dutch Oath of Abjuration may have influenced Thomas Jefferson, the central role of Locke's *Second Treatise* cannot be undermined. This paper will analyze and argue the important role Lockean Liberalism had in the development of the *Declaration* and its ideology by analyzing the *Declaration's* second paragraph along Lockean concepts of liberty, freedom, instituting government, and the right to alter that government.

Before we begin to analyze Lockean concepts within the *Declaration*, it is best to have a quick overview of its structure and purpose. Thomas G. West does a great job at summarizing the argument of the *Declaration* in the following five bulleted points:

- 1) All human beings are by nature equal.
- 2) The equality of human beings means that all have a right to liberty.
- 3) Since these rights are insecure when human beings live together in a state of nature...governments are established to provide that security.
- 4) Governments should be founded by popular consent, for two reasons (through majority rule, we retain collectively some of the natural liberty we possessed as individuals, and elections are an effective means by which the people can remove government officials who violate their rights).
- 5) Finally, because the right to liberty is strictly speaking inalienable, (West 95).

With this summary of its argument in mind, it is also mindful to point out that the *Declaration* reflects “three dominant ideologies present during the American revolution and the founding of the American republic. These political philosophies were British liberalism...Classical Republicanism...and Christianity,” (Sheldon 16). It is through these three perspectives that the power and meaning of the *Declaration*, as well as its intended language, really come alive.

Although scholars have tended to place more attention on one or another for whatever reason, one cannot ignore the importance all three had on Jefferson’s drafting of the *Declaration*. With this in mind, this paper will examine in particular the political philosophy of British liberalism, as found in John Locke’s *The Second Treatise of Government*, and how these ideas of Liberalism, Political Equality, Liberty, Freedom, Instituting Government, and the right to Alter Government effected the *Declaration of Independence*.

In addition to having observed a summary of the *Declaration*’s intended arguments, as well as an overview of the three perspectives that prevailed the document’s thoughts, it is also important to point out the documents intended purpose. “The declaration was essentially an attempt to prove that rebellion was not the proper word for what they were doing,” because suggesting the word rebellion insinuates that the government being rebelled against held some form of legitimate authority (Becker 7). Instead, “the primary purpose of the Declaration was not to declare independence, but to proclaim to the world the reasons for declaring independence,” (Becker 5). The English King lacked any authority as a government through breaking the social contract by acting tyrannical to the American colonies as we find in the *Declaration*’s list of grievances, which in the end work to justify the *Declaration* as casting off the illegitimate and tyrannical rule of the King in place of a new justified government on Lockean principles. “In political theory and in political practice the American Revolution drew its inspiration from the

parliamentary struggle of the seventeenth century,” (Becker 79).

Having observed a summary of its intended argument, as well as the three perspectives that inspire the *Declaration's* language and its intended purpose, we can now begin to analyze Lockean Liberalism as it applies to its language. In *The Second Treatise*, Locke argues “the classical social contract and natural rights theory of politics as well as the justification for revolution that prompted both the British Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the American Revolution of 1776,” (Sheldon 16). From this line of reasoning, and the language making up the second paragraph of the *Declaration* and the *Second Treatise*, we find it “provides the most striking verbal parallels of any thinker in the document,” (Sheldon 17). It is from this shared verbal parallel that we analyze the first influential Lockean idea: Political Equality.

In order to understand Locke's idea of equality, we must first examine the beginning of society. Locke argues in Chapter VII of his *Second Treatise* that upon Man's creation, God determined that it was not “good for him to be alone,” (Genesis 2:18). From here, we arrive to the first social unit of the husband and wife (Adam and Eve), followed by the family, then master and servant, and later political society. In this development of society, Locke argues that “a state of equality, wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal...there being nothing more evident, than that Creatures of the same species and rank promiscuously born to all the same advantages of Nature, and the use of the same faculties, should also be equal one amongst another,” (Locke). It is from this Lockean idea that we get the famous portion of the *Declaration* that declares, “all men are created equal,” (Sheldon 17). We find this Lockean idea of equality amongst men in the first paragraph of the *Declaration*, where it states: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain

unalienable rights,” (Jefferson, Becker 9). Having established this equality among men within society, we come to learn that the separation from the British was not only justified on general grounds (Stamp Act, Boston Port Bill, Declaratory Act), but more importantly on the grounds of the natural rights and freedoms of man, as they ignored his equal status (Becker 19-21). We will now observe this natural right of man’s liberty and freedom, and the role it played in formulating the political theory of government as argued in the *Declaration*.

Locke argues in his *Second Treatise* that mankind’s equality is found in physical ‘faculties’, and that these “free equal and independent” individuals follow material self-interests. Mankind, in this pursuit of self-interests, naturally finds social competition in his/her pursuit for property, goods, money, and status (Sheldon17). From this competition for such goods and property, it is no surprise to find the potential for conflicts between humans. Man, being a sinful and prideful creature (according to Locke’s Calvinism), has the natural tendency to come into conflicts with other prideful men and their liberties. “Locke ascribes a moral and spiritual dimension to human reason, or the ‘Law of Nature,’ that tells each person that he or she can exercise liberty only so far as it does not harm the rights of other people,” (Sheldon 17). In man’s natural state, man has the right for survival, or self-preservation, and within this right of survival includes “Life, Liberty, and Property,” which Jefferson later emulates in his *Declaration* when he mentions “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness,” (Sheldon 16). Locke attributes this to divine conscious, as one that God had sown within every individual (Romans 2:14-15). It is this moral conviction as created by God that allows man to live within the state of nature, while respecting one’s properties and freedoms. However, man in his sinful name, may at times ignore his conscious and step into the territory of criminal activity against other men. From here Locke argues the justification one has to punish those who go against this moral conviction and

conscious when they invade or violate the rights and properties of individuals. “Such Men are not under the ties of the Common Law of Reason [criminals], have no other Rule, but that of Force and Violence, and so may be treated as Beasts of Prey... a Wolf or a Lyon.” (Locke). In man’s created state, being equal with all others, God grants him the in-alienable right, as argued above by Locke, to pursue liberty and freedom, and may “defend oneself against oppression by others who do not respect one’s rights in the state of nature,” (Sheldon 18). However, in this state of God-given freedom, equality, and liberty certain issues arise in the form of judgment and punishment that lead to the necessity of civil society and political government, which thus gives us an idea of the role of the British government to the Americans, and their reasons for declaring independence.

In the Lockean model, man must defend himself, and punish those criminals who rob and assault his rights (Sheldon 18). The problem arises when “men [are] to be judges in their own cases, that Self-Love will make men partial to themselves...and, on the other side, that Ill nature, Passion and Revenge will carry them too far in punishing others,” (Locke). It is because of man’s sinful and selfish nature that another judge must be needed, for as he mentioned above, man cannot properly judge himself, and may, in the name of vengeance, unfairly punish someone who acts against him. It is within this state of Nature, which men living together in competition with each other, and with their prideful and self-absorbed natures, that man bands together to form the civil society, where they cluster authority in judgment on a sole individual. “As a consequence, government is created by the consent of the governed to provide an impartial judge to protect individual rights and adjudicate violations of life, property, and liberty.” (Sheldon 18). Locke argues that the state exists to “preserve his Property, that is his Life, Liberty and Estate, against the injuries of other men; but to judge of, and punish the breaches of that

Law...for the mutual preservation of their lives, Liberties and Estates,” (Locke). This is reflected in the *Declaration of Independence* where it states, “all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.” (Jefferson). It is of special note that Jefferson decides to supplement “pursuit of happiness” to Locke’s “Estate”. This may be an attempt by Jefferson to reference to Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* where he points out that the ultimate goal and end of life is happiness (Sheldon 18). In addition to the reference to Aristotle’s Classical Republicanism, Jefferson could also be referencing to Locke’s *Questions Concerning the Law of Nature*, where he says that life, liberty, and estate are all “embrace[d]...in a single word happiness,” and that it is the government’s job to protect this equal happiness (which the English did not). With all this in mind, it becomes clear that to Locke government exist for the sole purpose of protecting the God-given rights to human beings in the form of their lives, liberties, properties, and happiness. It becomes clear that “governments exist for men, not men for governments, all governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed,” (Becker 72). This type of government draws it’s legitimacy through those being governed through a social contract with the government, however if the government rejects it’s primary role of protecting the above-mentioned God-given rights, delegated power may be removed by such a broken contract. The State is created to protect the rights, and is limited in its function to doing so. Revolution from this government is thus justified in the Lockean view on grounds of the government not fulfilling it’s duties of protecting man’s “happiness”, or taking the step further to infringe upon man’s rights. “A change or political revolution will occur if the state deviates from that legitimate role, especially if it becomes a criminal itself, by invading the

citizens' natural rights of life, liberty, and property," (Sheldon 18). On these grounds, Locke argued that the revolution against the Monarchy of his time was justified. We can see this Lockean justification argued in the Declaration of Independence in its claim that British Rule did not only deviate from protecting the American's rights, but infringed upon them, and thus lost all authority as a government. With this concept of Lockean equality, right to liberty and freedom, birth of society, need for a civil society to offer fair judgment, a government to protect the commonwealth's "life, liberty, and property," and to administer justice, we arrive to the American's right to alter the British government as argued by the *Declarations* second paragraph.

This is called the Lockean "Right to Revolution". If a government does not protect the commonwealth for what it was intimately contracted for (protection of man's happiness as found in life, liberty, and property), then revolution is justified and appropriate (as in Jefferson and the United States case as argued in the *Declaration's* grievances). It is the commonwealth's duty to overthrow such an "oppressive yolk" and formulate a new social contract with a government dedicated to do thus protecting. "The Reason why Men enter into society is the preservation of their property... whenever the Legislature endeavors to take away, and destroy the property of the People, or reduce them to Slavery under Arbitrary Power, they put themselves into a state of war with the People, who are thereupon absolved from any further Obedience," (Locke). When leadership rules in a fashion that removes the God-given liberties, the state now moves from a government to a tyranny that forces its legitimacy not through the commonwealth contract, but through brute force. The *Declaration* summarizes Locke's "Right to Revolution" as follows: "Whenever any form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such

principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness,” (Jefferson). Here we find a clear reflection of Locke’s justification for revolution on the grounds of a broken contract between a tyrannical state (The King of England) and the commonwealth (The American Patriots). “Jefferson used the compact theory to justify revolution just as Locke did: the theory came with revolution in both cases.” (Becker 30).

In the end, I side to agreeing with Becker that Jefferson’s *Declaration* was heavily influenced by Lockean political theory, as well as John Locke’s situation with his own strives for independence with his Whig party.

By carefully comparing the sentiments voiced by Jefferson in the second paragraph of the Declaration with the political philosophy of Locke, Becker was able to pronounce America’s movement for independence an avowedly Lockean one. The common denominators, of course, were the shared commitment to natural rights, the social contract, and the legitimacy of resistance to despotic authority, (Huyler 2).

“...The Americans did not borrow [this philosophy], they inherited it. The lineage is direct...It was Locke’s conclusion that seemed to the colonists sheer common sense, needing no argument at all. Locke did not need to convince the colonists because they were already convinced,” (Becker 27, 79, 72-73). This stance among the colonists was confirmed by John Adams when he wrote in 1822 that “there is not an idea in it [the Declaration], but what had been hackneyed in Congress for two years before,” and when Richard Henry Lee “charged it as copied from Locke’s treatise on Government,” (Huyler 2-3). Jefferson himself also claims this aim when he admits that “All its authority rests then on the harmonizing sentiments of the day, whether expressed in conversation, in letters, printed essays, or the elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney, etc,” (Becker 25-26). For these self-admissions, as well as the comparisons drawn by Becker and this paper between Locke’s natural rights, social contract, and

legitimacy of resistance to a tyrannical ruler with Jefferson's second paragraph, I conclude that Locke played a substantial role in the justification for American independence.

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