

Philsoc Student Essay Prize – Michaelmas 2013: Joint First Prize

On Locke's Labor Mixing Argument

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That there exists such a thing as *private ownership of land* may sound *today* as a statement of the obvious. Upon further thought, however, the realization may hit that at some point in the distant past the very same land privately owned today belonged to none: somebody acquired ownership rights over land whose violation has come to be judged today as wrong, *possibly immoral*. How does private ownership come into being? How ought private property to be justly regulated? It was Locke that firstly set out to provide a sound rational basis to ownership rights, and did so by appealing to the transformational power of *human agency over a plentiful land*. The chief purpose of the present is to examine Locke's arguments to establish whether his endeavor was successful.

Why do men have any right to initial acquisition at all? A moral account of any sort would be problematic if it failed to explain whence specific rights originate to start with. According to Locke, it is to God that one should turn for answers. Quoting a passage in King David's Psalm, Locke (Rosen, 1999, p. 190) writes that "*God... 'has given the earth to the children of men', given it to mankind in common*"; mankind is *the exclusive recipient* of the right to initial acquisition of earthly land. God's benevolence thus explains why *all human beings in common* have an innate right to ownership.

That a right is commonly shared, however, does not help in establishing how it should be justly exercised: how do men come to actualize their individual ownership rights?

Locke's answer is straightforward. The *individual acquisition* of land is justified by the labor that anyone puts in it. As Locke suggests in regards to man (Ibid, p. 190), "*the labor of his body and the 'work' of his hands...are properly his.*" The labor of land is equated to the "mixing operation" of something that one owns with something one does not: that is, '*A labors B*' is *strictly equated to 'A mixes A1 with B'* to make it A2, where A1, A2..., An are A's ownerships. It is apparent that, if Locke's logic were to be strictly followed, all sorts of acquisition claims could be put forward given that anyone is constantly interacting with the external world via his own properties. *Nozick's tomato juice* (Ibid, p. 210) exemplifies best this sort of objection. One may find it difficult to believe that the mechanisms of acquisition could be so straightforwardly settled.

As Wolff suggests, it is perhaps uncharitable to dismiss the argument solely on this basis. Later in the essay Locke attributes to labor a *quasi Marxian interpretation* as a human value-adding activity: to labor *is to add value* to something, and the value-adding operation makes of something one's own. In other words, the *value-adding agent* comes to own that something upon which value is added. This is however less straightforward than it seems since it could be argued that as much as one adds value to land by laboring it, one's value is also increased *through the action of labor by the labored object*: is not man's value also augmented by experience via labor? The directionality of the ownership relation (who owns what) seems not entirely settled. Notwithstanding this objection, does Locke accomplish his mission? The answer is negative.

Locke's argument may perhaps work in justifying the acquisition of the fruits of one's labor but not of the land itself. And even if it were to support *initial acquisition of land*, it would still not justify the transfer of one's land to another: simply put, it would not justify the right to private property as per which one can dispose of what is owned as wished.

Regardless of the above, doubts still remain as to why Locke's ownership principle should be a principle of justice at all. One may imagine in fact that at some point in time land will come to be the object of competition amongst agents equally willing to labor it. How could competition *amongst potential value-adding agents* be justly regulated? Locke's answer is that there is little chance for competition since land is "plentiful". Locke seems to realize justice simply by removing the root cause of injustice i.e. scarcity.

Whether or not one agrees with the statement that *land is now scarce* shall not matter for the mere knowledge that land *may become scarce* at some point in time *renders the argument inapplicable*. As Nozick points out (Ibid, p. 211), a hypothetical person Y should refrain from taking over the last available plot of land since, in doing that, he would come to violate the rights of Z. But then Y's decision should prompt X to abstain and so on in a backward domino that shall prompt the abandonment of the very first acquisition. In other words, the process of private acquisition, if scarcity could be forecasted at some point in time, should not even start.

Lastly, a final objection should have become apparent by now: the plentitude premise does in actuality render justice meaningless by and large. As Hume pointed out, questions of justice in a world inhabited by rational beings are meaningful only in between the extremes of scarcity and plentitude. The mere presupposition of plentitude does therefore void Locke's argument of any moral ambition: there can be no convincing claim of distributive justice in a scenario wherein land could be envisaged to be infinitely plentiful as compared to the number of potential users. The 'infinitely plentiful' feature of land is an inference to the best explanation of the words Locke uses to refer to such a scenario (Ibid, p. 192), "*And thus considering the plenty of natural provisions..., and the few spenders...*" certainly points to a large enough imbalance that ensures "*little room for quarrels or contentions...*".

In conclusion, Locke's account of private ownership is neither tenable nor feasible. Although it may justify the initial acquisition of land as a mere principle of rationality, it fails to provide reasons that support positively the just transfer of what is acquired. Its moral standing is rendered null by its plentitude assumption, and so is its feasibility by the observation that land does become scarce at some point in time. Despite the criticism, Locke's should be granted the merit of establishing a rational basis of argumentation to ownership as opposed to views that consider it merely as an axiomatic truth. Sound arguments are needed to justly settle not only present competing claims of individuals but also to prevent future clashes amongst nations over territories currently awaiting discovery.

Bibliography

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3. Nozick, R. "Difficulties with Mixing Labour" in Rosen, M., Wolff, J. (1999), *Political Thought*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 210 – 213