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Revisiting John Locke's Religious Commitment

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Abstract:

The paper is a reappraisal of Locke's political philosophy through a comparative reading of John Dunn, Leo Strauss and Elizabeth Pritchard concerning the extent to which Locke's work can be considered as a secular foundation. While Locke is considered as a precursor of secular political theory, a sincere reading of the religious concepts in his 'Two Treatises' casts some doubt over the success of his liberalism as purely secular. This paper is accordingly an explication of the conceptual challenges of subtracting the religious notions from modern political philosophy.

Key Words: political, Locke, religion, secular

Introduction

There are two readings of John Locke's political philosophy. On one side we have scholars who find him as a modern political thinker, who has subtracted the entire religious foundation in political reasoning. They present him as a step towards secular political reasoning. The other side there are those who find in Locke's political philosophy a continuity of pre-modern concepts in the form of religious notions at the background which makes his political reasoning intelligible. The first two readings in this paper are represented by Leo Strauss and John Dunn respectively. Then there is another reading offered by Elizabeth Pritchard. This paper presents Elizabeth Pritchard's argument as a middle path in reading Locke, offering a reading which differs from both Strauss and Dunn who represent two opposite readings.

The success of liberalism is widely accredited to Locke. However, liberalism as a philosophy faces the challenge of conceptualizing its fundamental precepts, namely the equality of mankind and freedom as a purely secular notion. If the concepts of liberalism rely upon narrow religious presumptions, then its universality may be in question. It is here that Locke remains an important figure. To rest our political reasoning and conclusions upon Locke's work in either of the opposite readings offered by Strauss and Dunn take us in different understandings of liberalism.

Crucial to the discussion is the notion of 'secular' and 'modern'. Even though Locke did not discuss it in his *Two Treatises of Government*, these precepts underlies his political teaching. When we say Locke is a modern thinker, by 'modern' or 'secular' the definition may be confined to a distancing of one's theory from the shackles of religious premises and to rely more on the rational interpretation of human nature and deriving political principles by 'reason.' The paper revolves around the issue on how to read Locke and evaluate the success of his political philosophy as secular or modern by discussing how Pritchard's reading

presents the manner in which Locke can be seen as retaining the religious premises while subtracting the essence of religion itself in his *Two Treatises of Government*.

The case for secularism in Locke

As mentioned, one reading of Locke finds in his arguments the necessity and essentiality of undoing religious notions from political reasoning which is the case offered by Leo Strauss. Strauss in his work '*Natural Law and History*', suggests that Locke proceeded with the idea that religion and its truth must be confined outside of the political domain. He suggests that the philosophic spirit behind the discovery of *natural right* is critical and it began with a quest for truth, a quest for what he calls the 'principles of all things' which is in contradiction to religion namely Christianity. This is justified by his claim that Locke's refutation of Robert Filmer's exegesis in the *First Treatise* by appealing to the 'law of nature' rather than what is directly available in the Bible has shown that Locke's position is a secular conception of nature.¹ to quote Locke,

To understand political power right, and derive it from its original, we must consider what state all men are naturally in, and that is, a state of perfect freedom to order their actions and dispose of their possessions and persons, as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of nature; without asking leave, or depending upon the will of any other man.²

This implicates that Locke conceives nature in a certain way as having law and order based on some objective principle discoverable by intellect. This presumption regarding the idea of 'nature' is according to Strauss, inconsistent with the Biblical teaching itself. He says

The Old Testament, whose basic premise may be said to be the implicit rejection of philosophy, does not know 'nature': the Hebrew term for nature is unknown to the Hebrew Bible. It goes without saying that 'heaven and earth,' for example, is not the same thing as 'nature.' There is then no knowledge of natural right as such in the Old Testament.³

What Strauss points out here is that Locke did not appeal to scripture to refute or even justify his claim regarding liberty. According to him, throughout the *First Treatise* Locke was endorsing 'the natural' which is a concept that lies beyond Biblical framework. According to Strauss, since the discovery of nature and the principles of the natural world is the task of philosophy Locke is not committed to religious notions.

Thus, from the above points it follows that by employing the very term 'natural', Locke has already taken a different path from the Biblical spirit. Strauss position indicates that if Locke in any way presumes religious postulate, he will face a problem of finding his critical spirit in opposition to the traditions, myth, and customs derived from the Bible.

¹ This is mainly about how he refuted *Patriarchalism* a book by Robert Filmer and its relation to the divine right of kings.

² John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government: And a Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. Ian Shapiro (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2003), 101

³ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953),81

The case for religion in Locke

John Dunn accuses Strauss of presuming that the religious premises can be bracketed out from political arguments. He says,

There is a tendency in the writings of both Strauss and Mac Pherson to describe Locke's theories as though they were packaged in a sort of theological 'Polythene' which has only to be torn off to lay bare the comfortable secular contours beneath and which is so exquisitely fitted and so morally transparent that Locke's contemporaries and still more we ourselves can gauge its corrupt availability without disturbing the packaging at all.⁴

Dunn claims that the 'theological' cannot be unpacked without harming Locke's argument and the true intention of his political work. This renders Locke unfit as a modern thinker in the true sense. According to him, the idea that God created mankind and they are his property, is one of the most apparent premises for those who find Locke's commitment to theology and aims to make a case for Locke's political theology.⁵ Locke expresses in his *Treatises*,

For Men being all the workmanship of one Omnipotent, and infinitely wise Maker; All the Servants of one Sovereign Master, sent into the world by his order and about his business, they are his property, whose Workmanship they are, made to last during his, not one another's pleasure.⁶

This theological axiom of human beings as a property of God served to refute Locke's opponent Filmer's attribution of absolute power to an individual and the divinization of political power over others. The words of Locke as quoted above defines the relation between mankind themselves and the natural world. It is also an anchor to defend a truth claim that all men are equal and free.

'The Great Chain of Being' establishes the relation between the different species of creations. It is a worldview in a very general manner. It answers the fundamental question of the order of things. It implicates that before the political relation, there is the relation of hierarchy as established by the Divine. 'Hierarchy' exists in between species.⁷ Humanity is placed above all other creations, and yet within the species of humanity, there is equality. Locke's words in the *Second Treatise* testifies to this. He says,

And being furnished with like faculties, sharing all in one community of Nature, there cannot be supposed any such *Subordination* among us that may authorize us to destroy one another as if we were made for one another's uses, as the inferior ranks of creatures are for ours.⁸

According to Dunn, Biblical history may have already left Locke's arguments, however in the *Second Treatise*, the idea that God created the cosmos and placed a man with duties to preserve creations remains to be the anchor for the normativity in Locke's natural rights. According to the 'Great Chain of Being', the relation between man and other created things is different from the relationship between the individual and his own species. Equality and liberty of all individuals are thus anchored upon this idea.

From Dunn's argument the 'Great Chain of Being' constitutes a very important place in Locke's argument. The 'Great chain of being' explains the sense in which there is no one higher in status among mankind, setting the stage for Locke's idea of the world of creation as property available for the use of

⁴ John Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 222

⁵ Most Scholars who argue for Locke's relation to Biblical roots refer to this such as, Jeremy Waldron, John Dunn, Parry etc. The idea that the king's power is divine and absolute is refuted by Locke's conception of every individual as a creature of God with duty. The king is no more a special divinely appointed individual.

⁶ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government: And a Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. Ian Shapiro (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2003), 102

⁷ John Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 87

⁸ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government: And a Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. Ian Shapiro (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2003), 102.

mankind. His religious notions serve as the canvas for claiming the equal right that man has to claim the natural world.

Thus, Dunn presents the case that the theological notions in Locke's *Treatises* as effective and essential in justifying his liberalism. This claim presents Locke as impossible to understand without theological background.

The above two interpretations disagree on the purity of Locke's conception and argument with regard to religious notions. From the two opposite cases considered above, we now turn to the possibility that Locke indeed retain religious concepts but uses them in a political sense. Elizabeth Pritchard argues that Locke's religious premises need not necessarily mean his theological framework encapsulate his politics. She claims that the presence of religious premises in Locke's political theory on the other hand has made political use of religious postulates.

Pritchard's case

Differing from Dunn and Strauss, Pritchard finds in Locke that the theological premises only serve his theoretical interest in politics and do not really function as they would have in a theological enterprise. She acknowledges that Locke, in the *Two Treatises* uses Biblical words such as God as the creator of human beings and to use this, as Dunn suggested, has theological and normative implications. However, she is interested in the sense in which Locke may be said to be distancing himself from religion while acknowledging these religious presumptions. Is it not essential to do away with the essentiality of his religious premises? Pritchard suggests that rather than discarding the religious premises, we need to examine the manner in which these premises are not really functioning as they would in a theological context. She illustrated why the employment of religious premises do not provide sufficient justification for saying that religion encapsulates Locke's political theory.

Pritchard begins with her book with the reconceptualization of 'secularism'.⁹ If Locke is said to be a modern thinker, which in a way is equivalent to saying being a secular thinker, we need to specify what secularism means. So, by reconceptualizing the notion of secularism, she claims that despite the presence of religious premises, Locke can be considered as contributing to secularism. She says,

Stories of secularization routinely read as enormously cleanup operation. Mixed-up religious and political powers are finally extricated and confined to their respective rooms, possessive spirits are sent packing, liminal and festive orgies are curtailed, and, boundaries are installed all around....In this book I turn this conventional wisdom on its head and offer a reading of secularization as the promotion of worldliness of religion. I argue that secularization is religion placed into circulation. Moreover, I argue that such a project is advocated by John Locke (1632-1704) as part of a political theology¹⁰

By reconceptualizing the meaning of secular, Pritchard set the stage for re-evaluating Locke's political philosophy. The next critical step is how one would understand the premises that are religious in nature as contributing to a 'secularization of the political' in Locke's political philosophy.

In particular reference to Locke's refutation of Filmer in the *First Treatise* and the significance of it, she claims that he has somewhat secularized the Biblical concepts. She claims that there is a turn away from true theology in this move and argue that Locke's religious premises do not add religious impulse to his political argument. She claims that they are instead used in a limited sense and that they merely serve to support his political claim. Pritchard claims,

⁹ Elizabeth A. Pritchard, *Religion In Public: Locke's Political Theology* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2014), 1-2

¹⁰ Pritchard, *Religion in Public*, 1

Locke distributes sacrality, as a portion of a perfect property, to each person qua a creature of God. Locke also balances this individuality by linking humans as God's common property, as God's body, so to speak. This sacrality, however, is to remain transcendent; that is, it cannot be embodied in any persons, group or political regimes.¹¹

She has brilliantly brought our attention to the further conceptual changes Locke has made in making use of this particular line. She suggests that the 'creaturehood' of man implicates that the claim such as the divinity of a particular body or individual as to stand above the state, or even the claim that the state is a divine institution amounts to nothing but an undermining of the equal status of mankind under one creator with the same obligation.

It follows that Locke's argument has reduced the concepts of religion as to simply say that no body has excess to divine as has been claimed. Everyone is sacred or a creature of God such that we are all far from God in the same sense. If we follow Pritchard's argument, Locke's argument take us to the position that human beings are equally far from divinity as to say he or she has dominance and divine confinement of power. All are at the same time creatures of God. This claim rejects the claim of divine authority and divine embodiment in kings and princes.

Thus, Pritchard characterizes the relation between man and God in Locke's argument as a distant one, with no divine intimacy. The divine intimacy that the kings have was the root of the problem in Filmer's *Patriarcha*. If one claims to be more intimate with the divine or have the direct conferment of political power as in Filmer's case, there is the possibility of misusing it for justifying divine appointments. However, by the simple axiom that mankind is as created by God, Locke concludes that this axiom suffices to explain the obligations and equal status of mankind. It is in Locke's refutation of Filmer that Pritchard accuses Locke of subtracting all that religious experience of transcendence has to do with mankind in the process of his argument. To quote Pritchard

Although Locke's God is distant, we are allowed to console ourselves with the thought of being all God's children. The price of Locke's political theology is that one can no longer claim intimacy with the divine (there can be no visible installation of God's body on earth) or personal (Locke will not countenance "the god within" of so-called enthusiasts). Locke resembles an exorcist; convinced that divine imposters pose a threat to the bodies of others, he casts out the spirits of the possessed bodies of the kings and enthusiasts¹²

Thus, Pritchard's allegation concerns what is absent in Locke's theological precepts. According to her allegation, what is omitted may be what would be expected of religion in its true essence. Beyond the mere relational aspect of human obligation in the social sphere, the concept of God does not provide the mystical aspect of religion.

From Pritchard's standpoint we can conclude that Locke did not derive the political conclusions from the implication of religious premises, but instead employ them as to suit his purpose. To quote Pritchard,

Contra to those who insist that liberalism represent the official end of political theology, Locke makes his theological claims do political work. First, Locke and writers almost too numerous to mention the claim that God is utterly transcendent, and moreover, they exploit this claim as a way to curb human pretensions to divine illumination and thus the potentially intolerant and coercive measures such as conviction might engender. Locke's insistence that the deity does not inhere in the

¹¹ Pritchard, *Religion in Public*, 62

¹² Pritchard, *Religion in Public*, 67

kings or scriptures or consecrated hosts voids attempts to wrap state power in a sacred cloak of divine right.¹³

It is also important to notice the indication which Pritchard's point has made. With this position on the nature of man's relation with God, one cannot claim that a particular body such as the church has a divine appointment of overseeing the political activities and the power to override the legislation of the political heads. Even though the basis of rights is the relation between God and man, the transcendent God does not endow political right as such. Pritchard understood it as an outcome of the case that all are equally far from the transcendent God and this relational aspect provides the basis of equality and liberty for all. It takes away the transcendental force from the divinely ordained institutions.

Conclusion

Upon the whole Locke's work seems to be intelligible only with the Biblical background that serve his political purpose of saying all are equal and at liberty. However, the absence of the intimate relation of individual and God and the mere distribution of the creaturehood of all without an account of the theological 'Fall' of man from the grace of God suggest that Locke has indeed secularized the sacred. Pritchard concludes that Locke's notion of individual retains the equality by virtue of being God's creatures, yet do not have any characteristic of intimacy that religious conception of individual would have with God which is why her argument is in between Strauss' and Dunn's reading of Locke offering a middle path in reading Locke.

Thus, Pritchard has offered the case that Locke indeed has distanced his political thought from the core theological issue. At the same time, she also helps to present Locke as retaining Biblical premises for his project while acknowledging Locke's use of religious notions and premises. According to her, the *Two Treatises* set the political project as primary task and conclude political postulates by using theological implications.

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¹³ Pritchard, *Religion in Public*, 78