

Discussion Guide, Beginner

Episode 4

Freedom, equality, property rights, and government by consent—each of these ideas figures prominently in contemporary political thought. And each idea was central to the political thought of John Locke.

Locke thought that people have certain unalienable rights, which they can never give away. He thought that people were by nature free and equal, that private property was the extension of a man's labor, and that government must be limited and founded on consent. Did Locke get it right? Did he come to the right answer for the right reasons?

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Locke thought that people had come to have rights to private property even before the institution of government. Is this possible? What is a right to private property anyway? Isn't property a legal convention?

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According to Locke, an unowned thing becomes your property if you "mix your labor" with it. Is that right? If you pick some flowers in an open field, do you have a claim to them? What if you build a fence around the open ocean? Does the ocean become your property? If not, what is the connection between property and labor?

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Is labor necessary for someone to have a claim to private property? What if a disabled person needs a wheelchair but can't buy or build one herself? Does she have a right to the wheelchair anyway? If so, what is the basis of this right? If not, what should happen to her?

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Money allows people to accumulate great wealth and thereby creates inequality. Is Locke right to think that people "consent" to the use of money when they accept it as payment?

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Locke thinks that, to be legitimate, government must be by consent. But what counts as consent? Must every single person agree to be governed? What if some people hold out unreasonably?

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Locke also suggests that a government is legitimate if everyone *could* agree to it without making his own condition worse. Is that right? Is a government legitimate if everyone *could* agree to it? What if you never *in fact* agreed to it, but just happened to find yourself living here? Does merely living somewhere count as (tacit) consent? What if you have no place else to go?

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For Locke, to be legitimate, government must protect your rights. Is that enough? What if you never get to have a say in what government does?

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According to Locke, your natural right to life is “unalienable”: you must never give it up, and therefore you must never commit suicide. Is he right? Is it morally wrong to commit suicide, even if one is terminally ill and in endless pain?

1.

According to Locke, we are born with an “unalienable right” to life, which no government may take away arbitrarily. However, for Locke, the existence of this right does *not* mean that the death penalty is always impermissible. Is Locke right to think that the unalienable right to life is compatible with some types of capital punishment?

1.

According to Locke, we are born with an “unalienable right” to liberty, which no government may take away arbitrarily. However, for Locke, the existence of this right does *not* mean that military conscription is always impermissible. Is Locke right to think that the unalienable right to liberty is compatible with some kinds of conscription?

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You are free by nature, thinks Locke, but there is a difference between freedom and “license.” Is Locke right to argue that it is possible to abuse a freedom that one has a right to?

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Locke thinks that government should be guided by majority rule. He also thinks that government exists to protect the unalienable right to property. Are these ideas in conflict? What if a poor majority wants to tax a rich minority?