

Handout 3

Who was John Locke and what was His Big Idea?

By M.A. Long

John Locke was a philosopher who lived hundreds of years ago and believed that people needed a system of government and laws to protect them from what he called “living in a state of nature.” A state of nature means that people live naturally, with no laws or government to guide their decisions or tell them what to do. At first, you might think this sounds great—after all, who wants rules? Who wants to be told what to do? Well, John Locke believed that without a government, life would be very challenging. There would be violence and fighting, and the more dominant (stronger people) would take over and force the weaker people to follow their will. He also felt that the natural rights of people would be threatened—even the right to life itself.

John Locke believed that in order to prevent this “state of nature” there needed to be a system of government for the purpose of protecting three basic rights. He called this system a “social contract” because it was a contract agreed upon by the people in order to protect their rights. What were these three basic rights? He believed all people should have: 1) the right to life, 2) liberty and 3) the right to own property. The founders of the United States really seemed to agree with Locke’s ideas. Perhaps they felt this way this because they had seen these rights taken away by King George III of England.

So, if a social contract means you have to agree to give up certain freedoms, how can it possibly be good? Well, throughout history, we have seen that when people can do whatever they want, the strongest people tend to “take over” and force their will upon others. By agreeing to a reasonable system of rules for everyone to follow, this can be avoided and people gain protection of their rights. In other words, the main purpose of a social contract is to protect you! And guess what America’s social contract is called? You’ve got it: the Constitution of the United States.

Discussion and Evaluation

Now it’s up to you to decide: was John Locke right? Do you think living in a state of nature would really be dangerous and challenging? And what about the need for a social contract? Do you think people need to agree to a set of rules in order to protect their most basic rights? Finally, what rights do you think are the most important? Do you agree that life, liberty and the right to own property should be a basis for our Constitution? Why?

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