

Locke's Rationalism and the Future of Political Theory

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I am grateful to Ethan Alexander-Davey, David Conway, Paul Gottfried, and Michael Harding for their attention to my book in this symposium and for their generous comments and useful criticism. Since the most extensive area of disagreement is over my treatment of Locke, I will focus my reply on this important matter.

In the *Virtue of Nationalism* and other writings, I seek to challenge the dominant place of rationalist Enlightenment thought in present-day political discourse. Although Locke is an important thinker, my criticism is directed not only against his *Second Treatise of Government* (1689) but also against this entire genre of political theory, which includes the social-contract writings of Hobbes, Spinoza, Rousseau, and Kant and continues to dominate both research and education in political theory down to our own time. I claim that this tradition is of poor quality as political theory, affording little understanding of political phenomena both at home and abroad, and that it is in fact doing great harm to the Western nations as they try to force the political world to conform to its dogmas.

The poor quality of such political theory stems, first and foremost, from the fact that it is a subspecies within the failed philosophical enterprise of Cartesian *rationalism*. For Descartes, reason is universal, infallible, and a priori, beginning with self-evident premises (which he calls “clear and distinct ideas”) and proceeding by means of infallible deductions to attain unassailable conclusions. Descartes’ magnum opus, *The Principles of Philosophy* (1644), claims to have reached a final determination of the nature of the physical universe by this method. In its day, it was considered a masterpiece, and it

became the principal textbook of the school of Cartesian science for decades. But of course it was all folly. There is no way to reach a final determination of the nature of the physical universe by moving from self-evident premises through infallible deductions to unassailable conclusions. Descartes' *Principles of Philosophy* is today regarded as such an embarrassment that it is not studied anywhere. In the physical sciences, the Cartesian method was swept away, after a prolonged struggle, by the success of Newton's *Principia* (1687).

Newton's *empiricism* taught that in natural science, first principles must be gathered from phenomena by induction. Such induction from experience does not produce universal truths, and it is not infallible either.¹ As Newton wrote in his *Opticks*, "although the arguing from experiments and observations by induction be no demonstration of general conclusions, yet it is the best way of arguing which the nature of things admits of."²

But while physical science concluded that the method of Cartesian rationalism is worthless, political theory has embraced it with enthusiasm and shows no sign of letting go. Descartes' method was adopted by Hobbes and Locke in England and later imported back into France by Rousseau's *The Social Contract* and into Germany in the form of Kant's political essays such as *Perpetual Peace*.³ A long line of empiricist political philosophers—including Selden, Montesquieu, Hume, Smith, Ferguson, Burke, and Mill—has sought to dislodge this discredited method from political theory, often appealing explicitly to Newton's empiricism for support. But thus far, they have not succeeded in making a dent in the prestige of the Cartesian rationalist school in political theory, which still frequently provides the framework for political discussion as though empirical political theory had never existed.

In their reviews, David Conway and Michael Harding make a number of points that are helpful in gaining a more complete understanding of Locke's philosophy. But they have not addressed the heart of my argument against Locke and the Cartesian rationalist school in political theory. A central claim in *The Virtue of Nationalism* is that rationalist political theory has failed for the same reason that Descartes' rationalist physics failed: that

its premises are based on imagination and fantasy rather than on experience. In the book, I propose that the strongest force in the empirical political world, overwhelming all others, is the tendency of human beings to bind themselves into strongly cohesive collectives: “The mutual loyalty of individuals to one another is the most powerful force operative in the political realm. Feelings of mutual loyalty pull individuals tightly together, forming them into families, clans, tribes, and nations, in much the way that the force of gravitation pulls molecules together, forming them into planets, star systems, galaxies, and systems of galaxies” (69). Such mutual loyalty is not the only motive for human actions, but in public affairs it is the most significant one: “Human beings constantly experience what happens to collectives to which they are loyal as things that are happening to themselves. ... As a consequence, human individuals are ceaselessly concerned to advance the health and prosperity of the family, clan, tribe, or nation to which they are loyal” (71), where the health and prosperity of the collective is defined as “its material prosperity, its internal integrity, and the strength and quality of the cultural inheritance that it passes from one generation to the next” (73). Moreover, “no universal ideology—not Christianity or Islam, not liberalism or Marxism—has succeeded in eliminating this intense desire to protect and strengthen the collective, or even in diminishing it much” (74–75).

These, I submit, are the empirical causes that establish tribes and nations, states and empires, making them the stable and enduring entities that are the subjects of competent political theory and analysis. Although not in agreement on all points, earlier empiricist political theorists, from Selden to Mill, approached an understanding of the political realm like that described in *The Virtue of Nationalism* because they too were concerned about deriving their views from experience. Rationalist political theory, of which Locke is the most highly regarded exemplar in English-speaking countries, fails to approach these truths. This is because it is preoccupied with describing what it takes to be the constructs of “reason,” although they are in fact nothing but fictions. These include, in Locke’s case, the existence of a universal reason, which “teaches all mankind, who

will but consult it";⁴ the assertion that "by nature" human individuals enjoy "perfect freedom" and "perfect equality";⁵ and the claim that human individuals do not become members of, and so have no obligations to, political institutions until "by their own consents they make themselves members of some politic society."⁶

None of the axioms from which Locke builds his system are empirically true. In saying this, I do not mean only to dispute Locke's account of the way in which states have historically been founded. Rather, my observation concerns empirical human nature in general: There is no historical context in which Locke's premises can be said to have been true. Nowhere in history do we find conditions in which human beings are all capable of attaining universal political insight by means of reason alone; are all blessed with perfect freedom and equality; and are all without membership in, and obligation to, any political collectives except those that they have consented to join. And if these things are not empirically true even in a single case, they cannot serve as the foundations for a political theory whose purpose is to understand the political world.

Harding and a number of my other readers seem to think that this point is irrelevant, because (it is suggested) Locke is not proposing a descriptive political theory but a normative one. In other words, his aim is not to discover what political institutions are like but what they *ought* to be like. As Harding writes: Locke "suggests what a government must do in order to *become* morally legitimate. One realizes that for Locke no contemporaneous regimes are actually legitimate, but [he] lays out the means by which the unjust foundations of actual regimes can be overcome and existing regimes can become just regimes."⁷

This argument is often made in defense of Locke and other rationalist political thinkers. But it is hard to understand how it can be right. Words such as "normative" and "ought to be" are not a magic wand that can, simply by waving it, turn an argument that is entirely detached from reality into one that is competent and true. For instance, if it is empirically untrue that human beings can sprout wings and fly about if they choose to do so, then it is nonsensical to say that, as a normative matter, human beings "ought to"

sprout wings and fly about. In the same way, an argument does not become a competent exercise in “normative political theory” by detaching itself from everything we know about human nature and political order from experience. In the example before us, one may claim that all human beings *ought* to be capable of attaining universal political insight by means of reason alone; that they all *ought* to live in perfect freedom and equality; and that they all *ought* to be without membership in, and obligation to, any political collectives except those that they have consented to join. But this is all just playing at make-believe. These things are so far removed from anything human beings are actually capable of, and from the way they actually live, that one might as well say that they all ought to sprout wings and fly to the moon and back at least once each year.

So no, there is no way to save Locke’s *Second Treatise* by claiming its aims are normative and not descriptive. To be successful, even normative political theory must be carefully constructed on the basis of an understanding of the constraints imposed by empirical human nature and of the possibilities for political order that this nature allows.

Considering how detached from reality Locke’s premises are, it is downright frightening to realize that many today believe these premises should be used to judge the legitimacy of all existing governments—and to attempt to reshape them on this basis so that “existing regimes can become just regimes.” It is just this kind of out-of-touch rationalism that brought America and other Western countries into the last generation of costly and unsuccessful wars seeking to bring Enlightenment political philosophy to the Balkans, the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa. At its root, these recurring failures reflect the inability of Western statesmen, steeped in Enlightenment rationalist political theory, to imagine that there may be societies that will resist, with all their might, the effort to overthrow their traditions and their way of life and replace them with an American understanding of what constitutes a just regime. By the same token, it is just this kind of out-of-touch rationalism that has led American jurists, steeped in Enlightenment political theory, to imagine they can repeatedly overthrow the centuries-old

religious and national traditions of their countrymen without ill consequences—and this on the basis of nothing but a deduction from a supposedly universal “right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe.”⁸

The Lockean claim to be able to judge all existing institutions wanting on the basis of an Enlightenment-rationalist political theory has brought America and the Western nations to the brink of perpetual revolution. I say “perpetual” because no human society can ever, in reality, live up to the ideal image of Locke’s state of nature, no matter how much force is applied in the attempt to reshape it. This means that the revolution must continue its work of uprooting and overthrowing, both at home and abroad, for as long as the Enlightenment-rationalist political theory continues to guide the public life of nations. I do not believe that Locke would have taken any pleasure in this outcome. But this fact neither ameliorates the harm that has been done nor in any way excuses those who continue to feed the flames by endorsing his doctrines now.

For political theory to become a discipline capable of doing more than inspiring reckless political activity, it will have to undergo the same difficult transition that visited the physical sciences three centuries ago under the impact of Newton’s *Principia*. On the way there, we will have to become accustomed to regarding Locke’s *Second Treatise* in the same way that we see Descartes’ *Principles of Philosophy*—as a well-intentioned but wholly misguided attempt to build up human knowledge on the basis of a priori, rather than empirical, reasoning. Once this happens, the discipline of political theory will be able to return to the methods of the great thinkers of antiquity and modernity, who sought to derive the general causes of things, including the principles of human nature, political society, and government, from experience by induction.

Notes

1. Newtonian induction is not a version of the “enumerative induction” that grounds the search for statistical correlations in much of social science today. Rather, it is a method of deriving concepts that can be regarded as the “general causes” of the phenomena. For more on Cartesian and Newtonian science, see Yoram Hazony, “Newtonian Explanatory Reduction and Hume’s System of the Sciences,” in Zvi Biener and Eric Schliesser, eds., *Newton and Empiricism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 138–70.
2. Isaac Newton, *Opticks* (Amherst, MA: Prometheus, 2003), 404.
3. On the history of rationalism in political philosophy, see Anthony Quinton, *The Politics of Imperfection* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978).
4. *Second Treatise*, §6.
5. *Ibid.*, §4, 7, 87, and 95.
6. *Ibid.*, §15; cf.: “Men being, as has been said, by nature, all free, equal, and independent, no one can be put out of this estate and subjected to the political power of another, without his own consent” (§95).
7. Michael Harding, “An Unjust Treatment of Locke,” *The Political Science Reviewer*, vol. 43, no. 1 (2019): 249–55.
8. In the words of Justices Kennedy, Souter, and O’Connor in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, 505 U.S. 833 (1992).