

Phil 114, February 13, 2007
Locke: Did God make us slaves?

Locke's *first* treatise is a response to Sir Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha*.

Filmer on Hobbes:

"I... praise his building and yet dislike his foundation" (184–5).

Like Hobbes, Filmer is anxious to defend royal absolutism: the unique, unlimited, and unconditional right of kings to command their subjects.

However, Hobbes defends this undemocratic conclusion from democratic premises. He believes that men are naturally free and equal and therefore that men have no political obligations to which they have not consented.

Filmer believes, first, that these premises are mistaken and, second, that they cannot support absolutism. (As we saw, he may be right about the second point.)

Filmer's theory:

The source of all of our rights and duties is God's will.

By God's will, the first man, Adam, had an unlimited, unconditional, and unique right to *rule* over all of his progeny: including Eve and their children. Adam also had an unlimited, unconditional, and unique right to *do* whatever he liked. The world and its inhabitants were his property.

This right to rule and to do then passed to certain of Adam's descendants.

Therefore, absolute monarchy is legitimate, insofar as the candidate monarch

- (i) is in fact one of Adam's heirs and
- (ii) inherited a right to rule over, specifically, the candidate subjects.

Therefore, men are not naturally equal. Some—namely, the heirs of Adam's rights—have the right to rule over others. And apart from those heirs, men are not naturally free. As Locke describes Filmer's view: "We are all born slaves" (I, 4).

Therefore, the consent of the governed is completely irrelevant. Relations of authority and obedience are settled quite independently of the choices of men.

Filmer's argument:

Two kinds of evidence of God's will:

Revealed, scriptural: God's particular pronouncements to men, which we know from the Bible.

Natural: The way God made things, which we know simply by observing His creation.

The argument from donation: God gave the world to Adam, as we read in Genesis I:28.

The argument from fatherhood: The Decalogue commands "Honor thy father," and it is, at any rate, uncontroversial that fathers have some natural rights to certain things from their children.

Locke's Reply

All duties derive from God's will, but the scriptural and natural evidence does not support Filmer's claims about what God's will is.

The argument from donation fails to show that Adam had the right in the first place:

- First, in Genesis, God does not give Adam the right to rule over other men or to do to them what he pleases, only rights to use inferior creatures.
- Second, God does not give Adam a unique right to use inferior creatures. Since God said unto *them*, He was including Eve. Moreover, there is clear *natural* evidence that God gave men the world in common.
- Finally, even if God *did* give Adam a unique right to use inferior creatures, this does not imply a right to rule over men.
 - (i) “Charity gives every Man a Title to so much out of another’s Plenty...” (IV, 42).
 - (ii) And “should any one be Cruel and Uncharitable to that extremity...the Subjection of the Needy Beggar began...from... the Consent of the poor Man, who preferr’d being his Subject to starving” (IV, 43).

The argument from fatherhood fails to show that Adam had the right in the first place:

- First, it is God who really creates children.
- Second, at any rate, mothers also do some (!) of the work. And: “Honor thy father *and thy mother*.”
- Third, a right to be honored is not a right to rule or a right to do of the kind that Filmer imagines. Not unlimited: you can’t eat your children! Not transferable (VI, 64; IX, 100).
- Finally, why would this give Adam a right over his grandchildren? Wouldn’t Adam’s grandchildren be subject to their fathers? And isn’t it a contradiction to suppose that a father and a grandfather both have a *unique* right to rule over the same person?

Even if Adam had the right to rule, the argument from donation fails to show that anyone else could come to have it:

- If the right to rule came by donation, then God must donate it to the heir too.
- The right that God actually gave us was a right to use the world to sustain ourselves. This right is not transferable.
- But if so, how is there ever inheritance of property? Isn’t this the transfer of our right to use the world? It is a natural principle that parents’ property should go to their children.
- And this, in turn, shows that Filmer’s theory cannot be right. For even if Adam had the whole world as his property, *all* of his children would have inherited it.

Even if Adam had the right to rule, the argument from fatherhood fails to show that anyone else could come to have it:

- The right to rule by fatherhood can’t be inherited any more than fatherhood can be inherited.

Locke’s conclusions thus far are

- (i) that Adam himself had no unique, unlimited, and unconditional right to rule and
- (ii) that even if he had, his heirs had no such right.

For good measure, Locke adds

- (iii) that even if his heirs had such a right, there is no way to determine an heir in certain cases, which must have often have arisen in the past, and
- (iv) that even if all of these problems are waived, there is no way to determine who among those presently alive is heir: the eldest in eldest line of Adam’s descendents.

Objection: “This doesn’t show that Filmer’s theory is false, only that we cannot apply it in practice.”

A possible reply for Locke: If we cannot apply it in practice, then it cannot be God’s will, and so it must be false.