

The Enough and as Good Principle

Nor was this appropriation of any parcel of land, by improving it, any prejudice to any other man, since there was still enough and as good left, and more than the yet unprovided could use. So that, in effect, there was never the less left for others because of his enclosure for himself. For he that leaves as much as another can make use of does as good as take nothing at all. Nobody could think himself injured by the drinking of another man, though he took a good draught, who had a whole river of the same water left him to quench his thirst. And the case of land and water, where there is enough of both, is perfectly the same.

John Locke

—The Second Treatise of Civil Government, Chapter V, paragraph 33

John Locke had some great insights concerning private property ownership. While I do not agree with some of his specific arguments, I believe that his general sentiment on the matter is mostly correct. So, I wish to bolster his arguments a bit, and defend that general sentiment. I should make clear, however, that this is a position that is inspired by Locke's arguments, not necessarily the views of Locke himself. In other words, I am not arguing for a specific interpretation of Locke's position, I am simply acknowledging that his ideas on private property have greatly influenced my own view on the matter, which I will now explain.

We will start where one should start, which is at the beginning. The very beginning, in fact, with Adam and Eve. Locke spends most of his time in the treatises on government arguing against two people: Robert Filmer, and Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes' views are more philosophically interesting, but for this discussion we need to focus on Filmer because of his influence on Locke's arguments. Filmer's main goal was to justify the divine right of kings by arguing that since God gave the earth to Adam to rule over, this right of sovereignty would be passed on to future kings as Adam's descendants. Well, of course this seems like a rather weak argument to us in modern times. Part of the reason is because it is based upon the Bible and religion, and for a secular society that is not very convincing; but there are also significant problems with the argument itself, which Locke points out. But in Locke's day, Filmer's argument seems to have been quite influential. Not surprising, I suppose, since its conclusion was pleasing to the monarchy, and so it was pushed by the monarchy and the clergy, and Locke felt the need to strongly oppose it mostly because so many people were persuaded by it.

Locke showed the flaws in Filmer's position by turning the argument around on him. He agreed that God had given Adam dominion over the earth, a position backed by the authority of the Bible (see Gen 1:28), but he argued that God had given the world to men in common. Because we are all descendants of Adam and Eve, we are joint-heirs. No one has any more of a right to the earth, and the earth's resources, than anyone else does.

Now maybe this argument is not very convincing to those who are not religious and who don't even believe that there ever was such a person as "Adam". But even if that is the case, I don't

think it hurts the argument that much. You could make essentially the same claim by just saying that since we are all human beings, and we are all equal, that we all have an equal claim to the earth, and the earth's resources, simply in virtue of being a human being. Therefore, we are all joint-heirs to the earth along with all other human beings.

But perhaps you will want to argue that we are not equal. Well, it is true that some of us are more attractive, or smarter, or taller than others, but it would be quite an unjust and cruel parent that would give an inheritance based upon such trivial differences as these. One would hope that our ancestors and/or God would be more fair than that. Favoritism in terms of inheritance could be shown only with certain conditions; in ancient Israel, for example, it is true that the eldest son got a larger portion of the inheritance, but he was then expected to take care of the rest of the family with it if necessary. Other than that, they all got an equal portion, which really seems like the only way it could be if one is going to be just. Unless, of course, you want to argue something equivalent to Filmer's position, i.e. for a class system with an elitist nobility and an underclass, and with the nobility inheriting a larger portion than others for some reason. But what reason would that be? Greater intelligence? We don't treat people differently in terms of the law because one has more intelligence, or money, or good looks than another person (or at least we aren't supposed to) and I cannot imagine anyone arguing that we should, or that it would be rationally consistent, or just, if we did. So why would we want to differentiate between people when it comes to inheritance? Locke is on the right side of this argument, and Filmer is not.

Nevertheless, Locke is not arguing for socialism. He does believe that people should be able to hold private property, but only under certain conditions. One of those, as is apparent in the quotation at the beginning of this essay, is the "enough and as good" principle, also now commonly called the *Lockean proviso*. The idea is that one can earn the right to hold some private property through his labor, but only with the stipulation that he cannot take more than a fair portion. If he takes so much that it causes a shortage for others, then this is unjust. I will now present three analogies to show that most of us already apply the enough and as good principle in other contexts, and why it should be applied to the subject of economic justice as well.

For the first, I must tell a quick story from Boy Scouts. I wasn't very active with the Boy Scouts, but I do remember a fishing trip to the Bighorn Mountains of Wyoming when I was twelve or thirteen. We had fun camping out, but the real highlight of the trip was the trout fishing. We all drove up to the crick (in Wyoming small streams are called "cricks" not "creeks" like on the East Coast; you would only call it a "creek" if you wanted to get beat up) in a caravan of assorted vans and pickups. Once we were at the crick, I remember seeing my friend Curtis racing another kid to a fishing spot. This naturally commanded my attention because I figured it must be a really good spot. Curtis won the race, and they laughed a little about it, and then the other kid moved on. By the time I had made it over there, Curtis had already caught his first little trout. As he was taking the hook out of the fish's mouth, I congratulated him, and then with a big grin, I threw my line out only a foot or two away from where he had caught the fish.

He looked at me in utter astonishment, then out to my fishing line, and then back to me, and just stared in horror for a few seconds before he could even think of how to respond. Finally he said, “But Dave, this is my fishin’ spot.”

I didn’t respond. Deep down, I kind of knew that what I was doing was not right. I couldn’t think of how to justify my actions to him, but I really wanted to catch a fish, so I just tried to ignore him and hoped that would work. It didn’t. He watched me cast a few more times, and then said, this time a little more firmly, “Dave, this is where I’m fishin’.”

That was all he said. He didn’t provide me with a long list of reasons for why he deserved to have that spot instead of me, but he didn’t need to. I realized that he had a legitimate claim to be there, and I didn’t, so I finally left, and I didn’t even argue with him. I didn’t apologize, as I probably should have, but I left him to his fishing hole.

Incidentally, I was far from the first kid to get into a little bit of a frenzy and attempt to take over a good fishing hole. My dad likes to tell a similar story from when he went fishing with a friend as adults. As his friend was in the process of landing a fish, a boy of about 9 or 10 years old, standing directly behind him, threw out his line into the exact spot where the fish had been hooked, and the line came to rest right on the man’s shoulder while he was still reeling his fish in. My dad got quite a kick out of that, and said to his friend, “Well, it looks like you just lost your fishin’ hole.” They had both caught a lot of fish in their lives by that point, and they thought it was so cute that they went ahead and let the kid have that spot, and they moved on down the river. But, of course, they wouldn’t have had to do that. This man would have been well within his rights, according to the unofficial fisherman’s code of ethics, to politely tell that kid that this was his spot, he had gotten there first, and that he would just have to go find his own fishing hole somewhere else.

Of course, everyone knows that as a fisherman you do not truly “own” that particular spot on the river, but on this trip, at this particular time, and for the purposes of fishing, you do. And other fishermen on the river recognize that. If I get there first, then it is “my spot”, and once I have it, it remains mine until I decide to give it up. I can stay there all day, if I like, and it doesn’t really matter how many fish I catch, or how much you want it, it is mine until I decide that I don’t want it anymore, and move on. Once I have given it up, then you can do what you like with it, but not until then. Why is this practice considered just among fishermen? I think it is because everyone knows that there are many other good fishing spots on the river that are reasonably equivalent to that one, so it seems only fair that if that fishermen is already in that spot, and he wants to stay there, that you just put in a little work and go find your own spot. It is what you would expect if the situation were reversed.

Well, of course, all of this talk of fishing holes makes for a very informal type of “ownership” claim. But I use it as an analogy to illustrate what we consider fair in other contexts. I would be curious to know what socialists would say about all this; maybe some of them would think that everyone should be equal and we should all be able to fish in the same spot whenever we want to

(I'm being a little cheeky here, in case you didn't notice); but I doubt very many people would want to go along with that. After all, it does take some skill to find the best fishing spots, and it takes years of experience and often a great deal of trial and error in order to learn what to look for. If someone could just come along and take it from you once they realized that you had a good one, then it would seem like they were essentially stealing some of your best ideas even though they have not put in nearly the work that you have. That does not seem very fair at all. A person should have some reward for hard work. Not only that, but you did get there first. Yes, I know, you hear that all the time when children are arguing with one another, but there is some merit to it. You laid claim to that fishing spot before anyone else found it, or recognized its value; it seems only fitting that you have more of a claim to it than others do.

Nonetheless, even though it is legitimate for a fisherman to lay claim to one fishing hole that he is currently occupying, there are limits to how much he can reasonably claim. Imagine, for example, if my friend Curtis had instead gotten up earlier than all of the rest of us, and then said once we arrived at the crick, "Sorry guys. You snooze, you lose. I got here first, and now this is my crick." And then, perhaps after hearing murmurings from around 30 or 40 boys, about to rip him limb from limb, he conceded, "Well, okay. I am feeling generous today, so I will give you this little overfished spot right here next to the road. Have fun deciding who gets it first. Now, if you will excuse me, I'm going fishing on my river."

What would you think of that ownership claim, if you were there? Would you say that because he had worked a little harder than you, that he now deserved to have the entire fishing crick all to himself? Perhaps if you pressed him and gave him more trouble over it he would try to argue something about how his owning virtually the entire river somehow created jobs for everyone, because that is the usual fallback argument used to placate the rest of society when they don't want to cooperate while being robbed (ditto on the cheekiness) but hopefully we would not fall for that bullshit.

Curtis' original ownership claim to his fishing spot was legitimate, but this imaginary one is not. The difference between them is that in the real life example, he was not taking more than his fair share. There were other fishing spots on that crick that I could have found with a little effort. I may not have known exactly what to look for, but at least the opportunity was available to me to find another fairly equivalent spot. Curtis was taking a reasonable portion, and he left "enough and as good" for me, and for everybody else.

Here is another example. Imagine yourself as a parent, and you bought three boxes of brownie mix on your last trip to the grocery store. You return home after a long day at work to find your four children fighting with each other. After some investigation, and hearing testimony from all sides, you come to find out that the dispute is because John, your oldest teenage son, has made two full boxes of brownies, and he has only given half a brownie each to his younger siblings. The younger children claim that he has hogged all of those brownies, and that he should leave more for them. John's argument is that he was the one who put in the work required to make the brownies, so why shouldn't he have them? From his point of view, the other children are just a

bunch of freeloaders. They haven't done any work, why should they get a handout? But Hannah, your second oldest, points out that she offered to make the last box of brownies for herself, and the younger children, but John won't let her. He is hoarding that last box in his room for when he wants more. He has threatened anyone who attempts to take that box of brownies out of his room with a nasty swirly and a horrific arm burn. As a parent, what would you feel is the most fair solution? If it were me, I would tell John to give those brownies to the other kids right now. Those brownies were meant for the whole family, not just him, and he doesn't have the right to keep them all for himself. He is being self-centered and greedy. If you are inclined to think the same way concerning this rather trivial example, then imagine what God must think of the inequality and injustice present in the world on such a grand scale amongst his children. No wonder Christ said that "a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. And again, I say unto you, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God."¹

The last scenario I would like to consider is a survival situation. Imagine that you have 6 men traveling together and their van breaks down in the middle of the desert. One of these individuals bought a 6 pack of 16 oz bottled water at a convenience store the last time they had stopped for gas. He purchased the water with his own money, so he owns it. But the question is whether he should be able to keep all of that water for himself even if it means that the other 5 men will be extremely uncomfortable, or perhaps even die. Well, of course, in a true survival situation, it may come down to who is the strongest. But, suppose that it hasn't gotten quite that bad yet, and these men are still concerned with justice, and an equitable distribution of goods. What would a fair distribution be? I would argue that because this individual cannot claim private ownership to the water while still leaving enough and as good for everyone else, that the water should revert back to common ownership. This means that either they could simply share the water as a group based upon each person's needs, or each member could take one bottle of water for himself. In this case, each person can claim ownership of one bottle of water, if he wishes to do so, because if he takes one bottle then he is only claiming his rightful portion and is leaving enough and as good for everyone else.

I wish to be clear about what I am arguing for. I am not arguing for a form of eminent domain where one's private property is seized for the good of the group if the group has need of it; rather, I am arguing that the enough and as good principle is, and should be, a necessary condition that has to be met in order for a private property ownership claim to be legitimate at all. The default position is common ownership of the earth's resources, because, as stated earlier, we are all equal. Therefore, we should have an equal claim to the earth's resources through inheritance, and simply by virtue of the fact that we are all human beings. We can hold private property, but only if we leave enough and as good for others. If this condition is not, or cannot be met, then our claim to private ownership is void. Thus, the property remains commonly held, or reverts back to common ownership if it was privately held. This is the only way that private property ownership is just.

¹ Matt 19: 23-24

But perhaps you object to the idea that those who were less prepared get the same portion of water as the one who brought it in the first place. In fact, assume for the sake of this example that the man was not acting on behalf of the group when buying the water, and that it was not just dumb luck that he happened to be the one that had the water when it was needed; we will stipulate for this example that actually he had warned his friends to get some extra water in order to be prepared as they went into the desert, and yet they had only mocked him and had neglected to act upon those warnings. If those were the circumstances, then perhaps he should get a larger portion than the others. I am sympathetic to that idea, but it has to be within reason. I would not think it unjust if this man got perhaps a double portion of the water because of his diligence. So, if he got two bottles of water, and the other 5 men shared the 4 remaining bottles amongst themselves, then that would be just if it really was the case that he had been more responsible and it was only because of him that they had any water at all. Either an equal portion, or a double portion, or anything in between, would be acceptable. However, one thing I am certain of is that it would not be just for one man to keep all of the water for himself, or for him to keep a grotesquely large portion for himself, even if the others had not acted as responsibly as they should have.

There are two main competing intuitions that we all have when discussing economic justice. One is that it is unjust to have such an enormous discrepancy between how much property the rich have in comparison to the poor. It just doesn't seem fair that a few people have so much more than they will ever need, even to the point of ridiculous extravagance and wastefulness, while many others are in extreme need. But it is also unjust for people to be freeloaders and live off of the labor of others. The real problem with socialist systems and complete equality in terms of wealth is that people have no natural motivation to work hard because they do not get any personal advantage from doing so. In fact, from a pure self-interest point of view, it would actually be better to be as lazy and unproductive as possible. If one has no personal incentive for working, then the only way to get people to do it is to scare them into it. Thus, socialist governments tend to be very authoritarian because the people can only be motivated to work by fear and intimidation. There are other reasons these governments tend to be oppressive as well, but this is a big part of it.

The real solution to all of this, though, is that both of these seemingly inconsistent intuitions that we have about wealth distribution are in fact not inconsistent, and both are correct. To have a huge disparity between rich and poor is one way of going wrong; to have those who are lazy and refuse to work or help themselves receive exactly the same reward as those who do work hard is another way of going wrong. What we need is an Aristotelian mean position between these two extremes of radical economic equality and radical economic disparity. I believe that this mean position is a loose interpretation of the enough and as good principle.

There are, of course, a few ways one could interpret the enough and as good principle. One way would be a completely equal distribution of goods. We could divide up the world exactly evenly with every single person receiving a perfectly equal allotment through inheritance from our

common ancestors. But this would certainly be unfeasible. Each day, for example, your allotment would shrink a tiny bit as the population increased, and you would have to constantly redistribute. Also, some would be unhappy because their land would be in the desert while someone's else's was in fertile ground, and there would be major disagreements over how much desert property was equivalent to fertile land, etc. It could never really work, interpreted that way.

The looser interpretation that I have in mind is more for the *Lockean proviso* to act as a general guideline in helping to decide if one's holdings are just. It used to be that the standard family farm was anywhere from 40 to 80 acres. This was all the land that one could reasonably work without modern farm equipment, and it provided enough food and income to meet the average family's needs fairly comfortably. I would not think it immoral if a family had either of these amounts of land, or even a little more if they had need of it. An amount like that is reasonable as long as it is used efficiently. But ranches and farms with 10,000 acres, or even 100,000 acres? That is just ridiculous.

If a family saves up enough money or property to meet their basic needs for up to the next ten years in case of potential hardship, I have no problem with that. In fact, I think it would be quite smart to do that very thing. But if you have so much wealth that you are wasting it on frivolous things like a toilet made of pure gold, a \$250,000 manicure, or you are buying your own private island, then you obviously have far more than you need, and you are taking much more than a fair portion for yourself. You should give what you would have wasted on those silly things to those who really do need it. We have to remember that property is a scarce resource and we should be wise stewards over our portion, no matter how big our portion is. Using the enough and as good principle as a general guideline in taking a reasonable portion to begin with is a far better solution than constantly redistributing as we would have to do with a perfectly equal distribution.

I think Aristotle is right that it is not easy for a generous man to be rich,² and it follows from this that most who become extremely rich are not very generous by nature, or they never would have been able to acquire all of that wealth to begin with. And, while not all millionaires and billionaires are selfish and greedy people (there are a few exceptions who are quite generous) many of them are, and those are the ones that create the most problems. It is not good to allow the most avaricious among us to collect all of that wealth because they become obsessed with it, and they will do just about anything, including some very immoral things, to get more of it. It would be like giving a raging alcoholic the key to the wine cellar and then walking away and expecting to have no problems. The alcoholic may think that is what he wants at the time, but it is not in his long-term best interests, or in the interests of the rest of society.

What is it that causes a person to even want far more than what is necessary to meet their needs? No one would want to store up 50 million tomatoes in a warehouse somewhere while others were

² 1120b15

starving. That would, of course, seem quite illogical. Yet, that very thing is often done if it is dollars instead of tomatoes. I realize, of course, that money is not perishable, as tomatoes are, but you can't take it with you when you die, so in some ways it is more perishable than one might think. The point is, if you have far more than you can possibly ever use, then why continue to store up more? Perhaps it adds some security to one's life to have wealth. But this cannot be the whole story, because saving up enough to provide for yourself for the next few years adds about as much security to one's life as can be added. We are all still mortal, and subject to the various misfortunes possible in mortality, whether wealthy or not. So, I believe it mostly comes down to status and prestige. Some people love to compare themselves and feel superior to others, and they love the power and influence that having a lot of money can give them. But all of that is quite stupid to seek for as an end. No one who values you because of your money really values *you* at all. They value the money, and the influence, that comes from you, not you. You are merely the tool they are using to serve their own interests. All of that feigned love is just an illusion so that they can use you. So, why would you care about the misguided and warped opinions of people like that? Only a fool spends his life attempting to impress other fools. True friendship is what will make you happy, and what you should seek, not a hollow counterfeit.

The proper use of money is simply as an instrumental good in obtaining what is required to meet our needs. It shouldn't be used for getting greater self-esteem, or power, or happiness. If you believe that wealth will give you those things, then you are placing an inordinate amount of value upon it, and then you have a problem, just like an alcoholic has a drinking problem. If we place a disproportionate amount of value upon wealth or bodily pleasures it is easy to become fixated upon them, so we would all be wise to guard ourselves against this.

The desire to be uberwealthy is, in my mind, akin to gluttony, as both are simply forms of greed. It is like the 800 pound man who is never full and eats for entertainment and comfort rather than to get full. It is a character flaw that holds a person back. "For the love of money is the root of all evil" as we have on good authority. And why is it so? Because when you place an inordinate value upon money, and seek it for more than its natural use, you can easily become so obsessed with it that you will do the most despicable and horrific things in order to get it. These are classic signs of addiction. Locke's principle of leaving enough and as good for others, and only taking a reasonable and fair portion for ourselves would go a long way in controlling these bad tendencies, and would allow us to have a more balanced, fair, and moral society.