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Locke on Leadership: The Abolishment of Privilege

*"Men living together according to reason, without a common superior on earth with authority to judge between them, is properly the state of nature."
—John Locke*

In our search for understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of leadership, the seventeenth century provides a most fertile environment for the exploration of new ideas. And by the time it drew to a close, an intellectual awakening of the Western mind had reached explosive proportions within the political arena of Europe. Within less than fifty years in England, for example, the parliament had defied the king; Cromwell had died; Charles II had returned to the throne; William of Orange had led the Glorious Revolution against James II; the crown had passed to William and Mary. A bill of rights had struggled through the British Parliament, and the divine right of British kings had been abolished. England had become the first major constitutional monarchy in the Western world. Power and authority had been pulled downward through the leadership dyad.

Deeply nestled in the spirit of this revolution were the writings of John Locke: *Two Treatises of Civil Government*. The first was written in response to Sir Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha*, a defense of the king, claiming that no person is born free, that all government is an absolute monarchy. The second was written to delineate a political philosophy that would serve as the inspiration for revolutions, not only in Europe, but also in America. Both served as major forces in altering our understanding of leadership.

Philosophically, Locke was a realist. Like Aristotle, he posited that man's knowledge comes only through his senses. There are no

innate *ideas* as Plato had suggested. As a dualist, however, he rejected Aristotle's proposition regarding the *oneness* of matter and form. Although he argued there are two types of substances, mind and body, he believed them to be distinct from one another. Thus, he taught that as we experience sensations, our thoughts and our body, our mind and our passions, interact with one another, and through this interaction, we begin to know and understand the laws of nature and the divine forces that set it in motion. In brief, to know the laws of nature is to know the laws of God. Consequently, his approach to the leadership dyad begins with his understanding of the nature of humankind.

Although his conclusions were markedly different from those of Thomas Hobbes, there were similarities among their observations. Both, for example, viewed civil society as an avenue for securing peace among men; both believed in a natural desire for self-preservation; both held that humans were free and equal within the primitive state of nature; both believed that an ordered society is in the best interest of all. However, while Hobbes based his ordered society on passions of fear, Locke viewed the nature of humans quite differently. He taught that in their natural state, humans are relatively peaceful. Reason, he believed, not fear, teaches us to seek life, liberty, and the protection of our possessions, not only for ourselves, but for all mankind. In his work *The Second Treatise on Civil Government* he explains,

The state of Nature has a law of Nature to govern it, which obliges every one, and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty or possessions: for men being all the workmanship of one omnipotent, and infinitely wise Maker; all the servants of one sovereign Master, sent into the world by His order, and about His business; they are His property, whose workmanship they are, made to last during His, not one another's pleasure: . . . Every one, as he is bound to preserve himself, and not to quit his station willfully, so by the like reason, when his own preservation comes not in competition, ought he as much as he can to preserve the rest of mankind, and not unless it be to do justice on an offender, take away, or impair the life, or what tends to the preservation of the life, the liberty, health, limb or goods of another.¹

Thus, in our natural state, we are not, as Hobbes had suggested, enemies to our neighbors. We are friends. No person exists for the pleasure of another. As creatures of God, humans not only seek to preserve themselves, reason teaches them to protect the lives of others as well. Although Locke suggested that our passions often pro-

mote self-interest, he was quite optimistic regarding our ability to cooperate and collaborate rather than confront and compete. As reason enlightens our passions, he argued, it leads us to conclude that it is in our best self-interest to do so.

Locke had earlier established the principle of self-preservation in his *First Treatise on Civil Government* as he explained that reason is the voice of God revealing to us the laws of nature:

God having made man, and planted in him, as in all other animals, a strong desire of self-preservation, and furnished the world with things fit for food and raiment and other necessities of life, subservient to His design that man should live and abide for some time upon the face of the earth, . . . for the desire, strong desire, of preserving his life and being having been planted in him as a principle of action by God Himself, reason, 'which was the voice of God in him,' could not but teach him and assure him that, pursuing that natural inclination he had to preserve his being, he followed the will of his Maker.²

Similarly, Locke argued that within this natural state, no person has power over another. Man's freedom to order his actions is directly linked to the laws of nature as ordained by the will of God. He explains in *The Second Treatise on Civil Government*,

To understand political power aright, and derive it from its original, we must consider, what state all men are naturally in, and that is, a state of perfect freedom to order their actions, and dispose of their possessions and persons, as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of Nature, without asking leave, or depending upon the will of any other man.

A state also of equality, wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one have more than another; there being nothing more evident, than that creatures of the same species and rank, promiscuously born to all the same advantages of Nature, and the use of the same faculties, should also be equal one amongst another without subordination or subjection, unless the lord and master of them all should, by any manifest declaration of his will, set one above another, and confer on him, by an evident and clear appointment, an undoubted right to dominion and sovereignty.³

Similarly, Locke's thought regarding one's right to personal property is rooted in natural law. Accordingly, it is based upon the will of God. Unlike Hobbes who had proposed that there is *no thine and mine* unless it be acquired by fear and force and fraud, Locke insisted that labor establishes one's right to property. Since it is the result of one's personal labor, it is, therefore, a part of the person himself:

Though the earth and all inferior creatures be common to all men, yet every man has a 'property' in his own 'person.' This nobody has any right to but himself. The 'labour' of his body and the 'work' of his hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever,

then, he removes out of the state that Nature hath provided and left it in, he hath mixed his labour with it, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property. It being by him removed from the common state Nature placed it in, it hath by this labour something annexed to it that excludes the common right of other men. For this 'labour' being the unquestionable property of the labourer, no man but he can have a right to what that is once joined to, at least where there is enough, and as good left in common for others.⁴

Nevertheless, having delineated these laws of nature regarding man's right to life, liberty, and personal property, Locke recognized that humans often violate the dictates of reason. Men, for example, kill one another; they steal; the strong often go unpunished. And whereas Hobbes had proposed that such behavior was a result of fear, Locke held it to be the result of three basic deficiencies within nature itself.

First, he noted, there are no established laws within the primitive state, laws agreed upon by common consent, laws that could serve as a standard as to what is right and wrong. Even though natural law is plain and intelligible to all rational creatures, he suggests, there are those who are either biased in their interests or who are unwilling to study its directives. Second, Locke noted that nature lacks indifferent and unbiased judges, and the result is disorder and confusion: "self-love will make men partial to themselves and their friends; and on the other side, ill nature, passion, and revenge will carry them too far in punishing others, and hence nothing but confusion and disorder will follow."⁵ Finally, he suggested, in the primitive state of nature, there is a lack of power for the administration of justice. Those with force often abuse the rights of others; yet, one whose life, liberty, or possessions have been violated has the natural right to punish his transgressor. Thus, Locke argued that it is reasonable for men to enter into a social contract to eliminate these deficiencies, and it is this covenant that serves as the foundation of civil society. It is this covenant that lies at the core of his leadership dyad.

The social contract of Locke, however, bears little resemblance to that proposed by Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes had suggested that humans enter into a contract among themselves, transferring their rights to the king in order to gain protection, not only from each other, but from other sovereignties as well. Yet, the king is not a party to the contract. He is the sovereign. Since he makes the laws, he is above the laws, and he maintains complete authority until such time that he can no longer protect the commonwealth.

Locke, however, considered such an arrangement to be inconsistent with the purposes of civil society, for it did not address the deficiencies of nature. Its laws were arbitrary. It did not provide for unbiased judges to settle disputes, for if the king were considered to be above the law, he could not administer the law in a just manner. Consequently, Locke believed it to be inevitable that the monarch would be in a constant state of war with his subjects, and even though a contract might have been drawn, people would remain in their primitive state. Hence, for Locke, a monarchy could be no form of government at all.

Consequently, at the heart of Locke's social contract lie remedies to these deficiencies. Accordingly, he addressed the first principle necessary for justice among men: clearly stated laws providing a standard for proper behavior enacted only through the consent of the governed. These laws cannot be arbitrary. They must apply to all. The lives, liberties, and possessions of all men must be protected:

The great end of men's entering into society being the enjoyment of their properties in peace and safety, and the great instrument and means of that being the laws established in that society, the first and fundamental positive law of all commonwealths is the establishing of the legislative power, as the first and fundamental natural law which is to govern even the legislative. Itself is the preservation of the society and (as far as will consist with the public good) of every person in it. This legislative is not only the supreme power of the commonwealth, but sacred and unalterable in the hands where the community have once placed it.⁶

Locke's civil society also addressed the second deficiency of nature: impartiality regarding the settlement of differences among citizens. In his social contract, penalties were not arbitrarily determined; they were established by law. The community was the common judge of disputes, and those united through this agreement escaped this deficiency of nature:

But because no political society can be, nor subsist, without having in itself the power to preserve the property, and in order thereunto punish the offences of all those of that society, there, and there only, is political society where every one of the members hath quitted this natural power, resigned it up into the hands of the community in all cases that exclude him not from appealing for protection to the law established by it. And thus all private judgment of every particular member being excluded, the community comes to be umpire, and by understanding indifferent rules and men authorised by the community for their execution, decides all the differences that may happen between any members of that society concerning any matter of right, and punishes those offences which any member hath committed against the society with such penalties as the law has established; whereby it is easy to discern who are, and are not, in political society together. Those who are united into one body, and have a common established law and

judicature to appeal to, with authority to decide controversies between them and punish offenders, are in civil society one with another; but those who have no such common appeal, I mean on earth, are still in the state of Nature, each being where there is no other, judge for himself and executioner; which is, as I have before showed it, the perfect state of Nature.⁷

Consequently, with leadership based upon the consent of the governed, Locke believed that society would have sufficient power and authority to enact its laws. No individual would have the force necessary to overrule the will of the people. Justice could be administered fairly. By each making himself subject to laws agreed upon by the people, order would be maintained. Thus, man would escape the deficiencies of his natural state and be free to enjoy the liberties given him by his creator.

Having reviewed Locke's framework for a civil society, we can address his understanding of leadership. Who among those who have willingly agreed to a covenant based upon consensual law should lead? Locke's answer to the question is far more complex than it might appear, for within his society all authority ultimately resides in the people.

Even when we select those who will represent us in matters of law, we do not transfer our right to lead ourselves. We merely entrust our representatives to carry out our wishes. Representatives become servants of the people. Should this trust be broken, the people maintain the right and authority to remove them. And although a legislature might appear to have supreme power, those who hold such power are always subject to the will of the people. Locke explains,

For all power given with trust for the attaining an end being limited by that end, whenever that end is manifestly neglected or opposed, the trust must necessarily be forfeited, and the power devolve into the hands of those that gave it, who may place it anew where they shall think best for their safety and security. And thus the community perpetually retains a supreme power of saving themselves from the attempts and designs of anybody, even of their legislators, whenever they shall be so foolish or so wicked as to lay and carry on designs against the liberties and properties of the subject.⁸

Similarly, Locke recognized the need for a separation of the power among those who are entrusted to serve through the consent of the followers. Those who make the laws, he believed, should not execute the laws. The temptation for injustice would be too great for those empowered by their positions.

From a purely theoretical perspective, then, there are no leaders within Locke's civil society. There are only trustees. There are only

servants. Their function is not to lead but to enact the will of the people. Consequently, the rights of leaders are no different from the rights of followers. No more. No less. Leaders have no privilege. All have the right to life, liberty, and personal property. No person is subject to the will of another, and the laws of society guarantee that these rights will be protected.

Nevertheless, Locke acknowledged the obvious inequalities among humans. Age and virtue and rational ability often give some a natural advantage over others. Parents, for example, have the natural right of rule over their children until such time that age and reason deliver them from their subjugation. Locke explains,

Thus we are born free as we are born rational; not that we have actually the exercise of either: age that brings one, brings with it the other too. And thus we see how natural freedom and subjection to parents may consist together, and are both founded on the same principle. A child is free by his father's title, by his father's understanding, which is to govern him till he hath it of his own.

The freedom then of man, and liberty of acting according to his own will, is grounded on his having reason, which is able to instruct him in that law he is to govern himself by, and make him know how far he is left to the freedom of his own will. To turn him loose to an unrestrained liberty, before he has reason to guide him, is not the allowing him the privilege of his nature to be free, but to thrust him out amongst brutes, and abandon him to a state as wretched and as much beneath that of a man as theirs.⁹

As for differences among men and women, Locke was quite egalitarian in his teachings. Although he acknowledged that because of their different aptitudes and abilities a sort of inequality appears to exist between husbands and wives, he held that these differences in themselves do not warrant subjection by either. For Locke, any inequality that might exist between them would be those willingly agreed to within the marital contract. Since either may choose to enter into or break the contract, the husband has no more power over his wife than she has over him:

But the husband and wife, though they have but one common concern, yet having different understandings, will unavoidably sometimes have different wills too. It therefore being necessary that the last determination (*i.e.*, the rule) should be placed somewhere, it naturally falls to the man's share as the abler and the stronger. But this, reaching but to the things of their common interest and property, leaves the wife in the full and true possession of what by contract is her peculiar right, and at least gives the husband no more power over her than she has over his life; the power of the husband being so far from that of an absolute monarch that the wife has, in many cases, a liberty

to separate from him where natural right or their contract allows it, whether that contract be made by themselves in the state of Nature or by the customs or laws of the country they live in, and the children, upon such separation, fall to the father or mother's lot as such contract does determine.¹⁰

Men, then, are not superior to women. Husbands and wives merely alter their freedoms in terms of a marriage contract to which they both voluntarily agree.

In a similar manner, Locke taught that one might willingly exchange his freedom for benefits another might provide. We might, for example, agree to exchange our labor for money. During the time we are in such employment, we agree to subject our will to that of another; we *consent* to be a servant within the leadership dyad. Even though we might exchange services for salary, however, our God given rights regarding life, liberty, and possessions remain intact:

For a free man makes himself a servant to another by selling him for a certain time the service he undertakes to do in exchange for wages he is to receive; and though this commonly puts him into the family of his master, and under the ordinary discipline thereof, yet it gives the master but a temporary power over him, and no greater than what is contained in the contract between them.¹¹

Locke also understood the inequalities related to the possession of private property. In brief, Locke held that God gave the world to humans in common in order that they might improve on it. He also believed that those who develop these common gifts of God are justly entitled to the fruits of their labors. Yet, he was an optimist regarding the distribution of wealth, arguing that man would take no more of God's common gifts than he might need. Why would one hoard while others are without? Reason would dictate the foolishness of gathering more perishables than one could eat, for the food would only rot, depriving others of its nourishment. Yet, no matter how much man took from nature, humankind would always expand its yield through labor and invention. As a result, Locke believed that through man's effort, wasted and barren lands would be continuously developed into prosperous fields. Through man's creativity, the fruits of nature would always blossom.

Such are a few of the contributions of John Locke regarding our understanding of leadership in Western culture. First, Locke forced us to reconsider our understanding of the nature of humankind. In accordance with the dignity of reason, he taught that we have within us the ability to lead ourselves. People need not be dependent upon others to bring peace and unity to their lives. Equally significant, he

taught that all humans, regardless of wealth or status, have liberties afforded them by their creator, and that no person has the power to infringe upon those rights. Indeed, with John Locke, the leadership dyad had been laid on its side.

In his essay on Locke, Robert Goldwin summarizes Locke's contributions to Western thought as follows:

Locke sought to free mankind from every form of absolute arbitrary power. He sought to present the true and complete account of man's making of civilization out of the almost worthless materials furnished to him. In this account, the chief force that spurs man on to his own liberation is a passion, the desire for preservation. As the reader of this volume well knows, the ancient political philosophers considered the passions arbitrary and tyrannical; they thought that the tendency of the passions is, above all, to enslave men. They taught, therefore, that a man is free only to the extent that the reason in him is able, one way or another, to subdue and rule his passions. But Locke recognized passion as the supreme power in human nature and argued that reason can do no more than serve the most powerful and universal desire and guide it to its fulfillment. Only when this ordering of things is understood and accepted as the true and natural ordering is there any prospect of success in mankind's struggle for freedom, peace, and plenty. That, above all else, is Locke's political teaching.¹²

For Americans the implications of these teachings regarding their understanding of leadership are all too obvious, for Locke's writings served as the philosophical foundation of our independence as a nation. When Thomas Jefferson wrote, *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness*, he was citing the teachings of John Locke. When the founding fathers of the United States drafted a constitution calling for separate and limited powers, they were acknowledging their understanding of John Locke. When capitalists defend their right to private property based on their initiatives, they are voicing their agreement with the writings of John Locke. So, too, are workers when they insist that the added value of their labors be acknowledged within a context of economic justice. Perhaps no other philosopher has had a greater influence regarding our understanding of political relationship in the United States than has John Locke, for his spirit permeates every crevice of this democracy.

And his influence is not limited to politics. It has impacted our understanding of leadership in the corporate world as well. Throughout the last fifty years there has been a growing movement toward participation and empowerment throughout all levels of our organizations. This is not to suggest that our companies and businesses

have become democracies. They have not. It is, however, to note that increasing numbers of leaders are abandoning authoritative management styles in favor of those that respect the intelligence of their employees. They cooperate and collaborate with their people rather than confront and compete. They recognize a relationship between management and its employees that is structured by a social contract based upon inalienable rights afforded to all men by their creator. Such practices may be traced directly to a philosophy of man that acknowledges the dignity of humankind. They can be traced directly to the teachings John Locke.

The same is true in terms of *equality*. Even though many Western democracies were founded upon Locke's principles of life, liberty, and property, it has only been within recent years that many of these rights have been recognized in the work place. Demands for privacy. Demands for safety. Demands for education. Demands for just wages. Demands for opportunity. Demands for sharing in profits related to the value added dimension of labor. All have caused us to re-examine the meaning of the term *inalienable rights*. What do we mean by the right to life? To liberty? To the pursuit of happiness? All are examples of the rebellious spirit of individualism advanced by John Locke.

Accordingly, it is this spirit of individualism that altered the Western mind. Abolishing elitism and privilege, it brought a new perspective to the leadership dyad. No one, by nature, is superior to another. There is no divine right of kings. All of us are free to follow our passions, our desires, and our dreams. We can only be ruled by our own consent, and the social contract is the vehicle of that consent. Scoffing at the teachings of those who taught that man is a victim of fear and self-interest, Locke believed that egotism can be tempered by reason, that self-interest can be tempered by enlightenment, that cooperation can best serve the interests of all parties to an agreement. Thus, his contract for a civil society both allows for and limits the extent of mutual exploitation among people.

These ideas are Locke's gifts to Western culture. More specifically, these ideas are Locke's gift to America. Again, Robert Goldwin explains,

John Locke has been called America's philosopher, our king in the only way a philosopher has ever been a king of a great nation. We, therefore, more than many other peoples in the world, have the duty and the experience to judge the rightness of his teaching.¹³

Indeed, it is our duty to judge the rightness of his teaching.

Notes

1. John Locke, *Two Treatises of Civil Government* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1943), 119.
2. Ibid., 61.
3. Ibid., 118.
4. Ibid., 130.
5. Ibid., 123.
6. Ibid., 183-184.
7. Ibid., 159.
8. Ibid., 192.
9. Ibid., 145-147.
10. Ibid., 156-157.
11. Ibid., 157-158.
12. Robert A. Goldwin, "John Locke," in Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, eds., *History of Political Philosophy* 3rd. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 510.
13. Ibid.