

JOHN LOCKE AND JOHN PAUL II ON THE NATURE OF WORK

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My aim in this paper is to describe how John Paul II explains the nature of human work. To that end, I will focus on his 1981 Encyclical, *Laborem Exercens*.¹ Before that discussion, I will briefly outline how John Locke addresses the same issue in his 1690 *Second Treatise on Civil Government*.² I choose Locke because of his importance to the American Founding Generation and because his understanding of work reveals the sophistication of John Paul II's explanation. Indeed, John Paul II identifies a dimension of work, the subjective, which Locke fails completely to appreciate.

Near the beginning of the *Second Treatise*, Locke claims that all humans are equal.³ By "equal," he does not mean "all sorts of equality"⁴ Rather, all persons are in "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"⁵ He reaches this conclusion since there is "nothing more evident, than 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"⁶

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1. Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens* [Encyclical on Human Work on the Ninetieth Anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*] (1981).

2. JOHN LOCKE, *TWO TREATISES OF CIVIL GOVERNMENT* (Project Gutenberg 2010) (1690) (ebook).

3. *TWO TREATISES OF CIVIL GOVERNMENT*, *supra* note 2, bk. II, ch. II, sec. 4.

4. *Id.* ch. VI, sec. 54.

5. *Id.* ch. II, sec. 4.

6. *Id.* In contrast, Hobbes claims in his 1651 *Leviathan* that humans are equally free from domination since they are roughly equal in the ability to dominate. *Cf.*, THOMAS HOBBS, *LEVIATHAN* 96 (Project Gutenberg 2002) (1651) (ebook).

Locke is claiming that humans are equal since they all share in reason and that they are equally free since they all have free will.⁷ The freedom Locke identifies is from domination by others in the state of nature, the original position of humans before the creation of civil government. That said, humans are not free from all restraint since, as creatures, they must follow the law of their Creator:

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; . . . they are his property, whose workmanship they are, made to last during his, not one another's pleasure . . .⁸

Though quoting Richard Hooker, who implies that the law of nature imposes some affirmative duties on humans to assist each other,⁹ Locke's focus appears more on negative precepts:

Everyone, . . . when his own preservation comes not in competition, ought he, . . . to preserve the rest of mankind, and may 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.¹⁰

To repeat, humans are naturally free from each other's domination since they share in the capacities of reason and free will. Nevertheless, they are bound as creatures not to destroy themselves nor the lives and property of others (without sufficient justification).¹¹ With this background, I proceed to Locke's description of property and human work.

7. Though Locke does not draw this out, perhaps the argument is, if humans have reason, they can perceive contraries; but, if the will is inclined to what reason presents, it must be able to choose between the contraries else we would have the power to will in vain.

8. TWO TREATISES OF CIVIL GOVERNMENT, *supra* note 2, bk. II, ch. II, sec. 7.

9. *Id.* sec. 5. (quoting RICHARD HOOKER, OF THE LAWS OF ECCLESIASTICAL POLITY 121-122 (A.S. McGrade & Brian Vickers eds., St. Martin's Press 1975) (1594)).

10. *Id.* sec. 6.

11. *Id.* ch. III, sec. 16.

Locke takes no notice of the pragmatic reasons for private property that Aristotle¹² and St. Thomas¹³ consider.¹⁴ His interest is how to justify private property when resources initially are in common. Nevertheless, a distinctive understanding of human work emerges from his justification for such property.

Locke begins his discussion of property by acknowledging that resources were first held in common,¹⁵ resting the claim both on Revelation¹⁶ and natural reason: “[Such] reason . . . tells us, that men being once born, have a right to their preservation, and consequently to meat and drink, and such other things as nature affords for their subsistence”¹⁷ I take it that Locke means the term “right” here as an expectation that others will not interfere with one’s preservation and the procurement of what is necessary for it. Assuming further that all humans are equally entitled to such expectations, Locke can reasonably conclude that resources in some way began in common. Resources that remain in common, however, are useless for preserving human life;¹⁸ and, thus, Locke must “endeavor to shew, how men might come to have a property in several parts of that which God gave to mankind in common, and that without any express compact of all the commoners.”¹⁹

The right each person has against such interference Locke calls a property in one’s body, which includes the labor expended for the person’s preservation. When such labor is mixed with common resources, it makes those resources one’s own—that is, the expectation of noninterference is extended to include what is acquired:

12. ARISTOTLE, *POLITICS* bk. II, ch. V, at 33-34 (Benjamin Jowett trans., Random House 1943) (350 B.C.E.).

13. ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *SUMMA THEOLOGICA* Pt. II-II, Q. 66, Art. 2 (Fathers of the English Dominican Province trans., Benziger Bros. ed. 1947) [hereinafter *SUMMA THEOLOGICA*] (For example, “a more peaceful state is ensured to man if each one is contented with his own. . . . [Q]uarrels arise more frequently where there is no division of the things possessed.”).

14. I will pass over Locke’s revision of the limit on private property in Chapter V from household use to the avoidance of waste. By thus permitting the unrestricted acquisition of nonperishables, like money, and of cultivated land, with produce exchangeable for money, he arguably provides justifications for both capitalism and colonialism.

15. *TWO TREATISES OF CIVIL GOVERNMENT*, *supra* note 2, bk. II, ch. V, sec. 25.

16. *Id.*

17. *Id.*

18. *Id.*

19. *Id.* “[Natural resources,] being given for the use of men, there must of necessity be a means to appropriate them some way or other, before they can be of any use, or at all beneficial to any particular man.” *Id.* sec. 26.

[E]very 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 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 hath 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 to²⁰

Other creatures besides humans appropriate common resources. Why should they not have a claim as well to what they acquire? For Locke, it is reason and free will that give all humans equal dominion over their bodies and their labor. Thus, reason and free will give human appropriation of common resources a special claim.

Locke adds to this claim that the Divine Command to “subdue the earth” is not only to appropriate natural resources, but improve them as well:

God and his reason commanded . . . [Man] to subdue the earth, i.e. improve it for the benefit of life, and therein lay out something upon it that was his own, his labour. He that in obedience to this command of God, subdued, tilled and sowed any part of it, thereby annexed to it something that was his property, which another had no title to, nor could without injury take from him.²¹

Locke adds that the improvement of natural resources by human labor greatly increases its value:

[I]t is labour indeed that puts the difference of value on everything [I]f we will rightly estimate things as they come to our use and cast up the several expenses about them, what in them is purely owing to nature and what to labour, we shall find, that in most of them ninety-nine hundredths are wholly to be put on the account of labour.²²

20. *Id.* sec. 27 (Locke’s proviso) (“[A]t least where there is enough, and as good, left in common for others.”).

21. *Id.* sec. 32.

22. *Id.* sec. 40, 43. “It is labour then which puts the greatest part of value upon land, without which it would scarcely be worth anything” *Id.* sec. 43.

Thus, for Locke, the objective quality of work is enhanced by the rational freedom of human beings that is mixed with it. John Paul II adds to this critique a dimension Locke did not consider, the subjective quality of work.

John Paul II begins *Laborem Exercens* by defining “work” as “any activity by man, whether manual or intellectual, whatever its nature or circumstances”²³ As stated, the definition is broad enough to include what is commonly not considered work itself—for example, strolling, playing, even eating. He likely means instead to provide a comprehensive description of activities capable of serving as means to achieve the identifiable ends of work: “Through work man must earn his daily bread and contribute to the continual advance of science and technology and, above all, to elevating unceasingly the cultural and moral level of the society within which he lives”²⁴

From the outset, John Paul II rests human work on the Biblical command to “subdue the earth.”²⁵ Since he addresses the encyclical not only to the faithful but also to all persons of goodwill and since, early in the Encyclical, he recognizes that “human work is a *key*, probably *the essential key*, to the whole social question,”²⁶ it appears that he views the Biblical text as also embodying a precept accessible to natural reason.²⁷ That said, just as faith aids reason to understand the precepts of the Natural Law,²⁸ it is the Biblical text that illuminates what natural reason is able to gradually perceive about work:

Man is the image of God partly through the mandate received from his Creator to subdue, to dominate, the earth. In carrying out this mandate, man, every human being, reflects the very action of the Creator of the universe.²⁹

23. *Laborem Exercens*, *supra* note 1, at *Blessing*.

24. *Id.* (footnote omitted).

25. *Id.* (referring to *Genesis* 1:28).

26. *Id.* at ¶ 3 (“[W]hat is a conviction of the intellect[, that work is a fundamental dimension of man’s existence on earth,] is also a conviction of faith.”). *Id.* at ¶ 4.

27. *SUMMA THEOLOGICA*, *supra* note 13, Pt. I, Q. 1, Art. 1.

28. *Id.* Pt. I-II, Q. 100, Art. 3 (recognizing the Two Great Commandments as the general principles of the Natural Law, “self-evident to human reason, either through nature or through faith”).

29. *Laborem Exercens*, *supra* note 1, ¶ 13.

In analyzing the nature of work, John Paul II begins with its objective dimension. He follows Locke by recognizing that humans first used what was ready at hand—domesticating animals, gathering natural resources, and the like—then cultivating land, as a more evident application of reason to human work.³⁰ He extends the analysis to industrialization and technology, advances not anticipated by Locke, but nonetheless means developed by humans to facilitate their rational dominion over nature,³¹ “[u]nderstood in this case not as a capacity or aptitude for work, but rather as a *whole set of instruments* which man uses in his work, . . . undoubtedly man’s ally”³² and “the fruit of the work of the human intellect and a historical confirmation of man’s dominion over nature.”³³

Admittedly, many activities of other animals are similar to human work. Yet, John Paul II concludes that “[o]nly man is capable of work, and only man works”³⁴ He not only extends here the implications of Locke’s recognition that humans infuse reason into their labor but also goes further than Locke and identifies a subjective quality of work.

The first step in this analysis is John Paul II’s recognition that human beings are persons:

As the “image of God” . . . [Man] is a person, that is to say, a subjective being capable of acting in a planned and rational way, capable of deciding about himself, and with a tendency to self-realization.³⁵

From this, what John Paul II means by the subjective dimension of work is clear: just as persons are called to “subdue the earth,” by completing God’s design through their labor, so they are called to subdue themselves as well. As they apply their rationality to work, they choose to make themselves more rational, and thus better realize what they are as rational beings. In other words, as persons are, persons work; and, as persons work, they become fully persons. Since, through work, persons image God, it is fair to say that, in working, they “dominate,” that is, infuse the Lord, into the earth and themselves.

30. *Id.* ¶ 5.

31. *Id.*

32. *Id.*

33. *Id.*

34. *Id.* at *Blessing*.

35. *Id.* ¶ 6.

Thus, if by work, humans realize themselves, then work must have a personal dimension since, in every respect, it involves rational decision-making on how humans become fully themselves: “[T]here is no doubt that human work has an ethical value of its own, which clearly and directly remain[s] linked to the fact that the one who carries it out is a person, a conscious and free subject, that is to say, a subject that decides about himself.”³⁶

John Paul II concludes that “[t]he sources of the dignity of work are to be sought primarily in the subjective dimension, not in the objective one.”³⁷ Christ’s life as a manual worker provides “the most eloquent ‘Gospel of work,’ showing that the basis for determining the value of human work is not primarily the kind of work being done but the fact that the one who is doing it is a person.”³⁸ Such concept, John Paul II concludes, “practically does away with the very basis of the ancient differentiation of people into classes according to the kind of work done.”³⁹

Though in one sense, work is rated according to its objective value, the subjective dimension predominates:

[T]he *primary basis of [the] value of work is man himself*, who is its subject. . . . [H]owever true it may be that man is destined for work and called to it, in the first place work is “for man” and not man “for work.”⁴⁰

36. *Id.*

37. *Id.*

38. *Id.*

39. *Id.*

40. *Id.*