

# Compare aristotle and locke on private property



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John Locke and Aristotle agree that the issue of private property is one of numerous intricacies. However, the philosophers draw dissimilar conclusions on how the earth's land should be divided amongst people. While John Locke believed in a more individualistic approach to property ownership, Aristotle believed more firmly in a communal approach. Moreover, the two philosophers disagree on many other issues regarding property ownership, including acquirement, maintenance, and divine intervention. However there are indeed some issues regarding property rights where the two thinkers converge, particularly the issue of equity.

To understand the dichotomy between John Locke and Aristotle it is best to first comprehend their respective views on property rights individually and thusly compare and contrast their thoughts. Aristotle's view on the issue of private property can be best understood in relation to the overall characterization of his thoughts. Aristotle believed that the individual was most important when discussing society as a whole. More specifically, Aristotle believed that the individual is dependant on society and vice-versa.

Aristotle believed that happiness in life was achieved through public participation in society, mainly politics. Aristotle fervently believed that practical reasoning guides moral virtues by humans. Aristotle claims that humans need to find a middle ground in any situation regarding virtuousness. The Aristotelian justification for the ownership of private property is explained as, " virtuous citizen should be an owner of property" in order to best serve the larger community. In this respect, Aristotle says man needs to find the mean between extravagance and stinginess in land ownership as in any other human practice. Aristotle speculates on how much

land or possessions a man should truly have; he believes man needs to find the mean between extravagance and stinginess for all situations in life.

Property should not simply be something that is endlessly pursued, and a medium needs to be developed in society to ensure that this happens.

Aristotle speculates on how much land or possessions a man should truly have in stating that even the most politically powerful in society should find the “ mean” he speaks of. In this respect he justifies that finding the mean in property ownership is similar to finding virtuousness. This is deduced in understanding that those who are politically powerful are also virtuous. However this should not be viewed as a mandate, merely Aristotle believes this is the best course of living. Aristotle states that in order to “ live the good life” one must have a certain amount of wealth and possessions.

Therefore Aristotle finds a certain, yet ambiguous mean that citizens should abide by in order to be virtuous. Aristotle claims that land ownership should indeed be private but available for “ common-use. More specifically, Aristotle claims that no one person’s property should be closed off to other people in society. Everyone’s private land is thus open to public tilling and leisure.

However, Aristotle does claim that there are some fundamental flaws with this plan. Specifically, he says that many people will have the tendency to take advantage of the benevolent communal style of property ownership. This “ free-rider” tendency does indeed undermine Aristotle’s argument that his community is most virtuous. A “ tragedy of the commons” situation could develop in this situation as no one person has a stake in the land.

While Aristotle admits the flaws of this system I do not feel he gives these enough merit, as private property has proven to be a main reason in the preservation of the environment. Aristotle speculates on the effects wealth, and more specifically money has on possessions. He believes that wealth has an adverse effect on the general nature of mankind. Specifically, Aristotle claims that “ For self sufficiency in possessions of this sort (wealth) with a view to the good life is not limitless. ” (Aristotle’s Politics Book 1, Chapter 8, pg. 6) In this respect Aristotle asserts that wealth should be monitored and not accrued beyond what is useful to one person.

Furthermore, Aristotle asserts that when there is an overabundance of wealth, mankind tends to sink into a state of inequality. Aristotle believes that the invention of money was highly detrimental to the natural state of governing mankind in the best manner. In more general terms Aristotle does believe it is necessary for every person to have land of some sort. Moreover, his claim that a virtuous community shares its property is inherently flawed in its unintelligent assumption about common humanistic tendencies.

Aristotle’s theories regarding property ownership are ambiguous at best. Indeed in a utopian society his plans might work in harmony with typical human nature.

Conversely to Aristotelian ideas, John Locke’s theories regarding property ownership are more rational and grounded in typical human nature. John Locke’s philosophies on what is the best manner for people to live on Earth are quite different from those of Aristotle’s while also being quite similar in their overall obtainable goals. In respect to the former, John Locke believes much in the same as Aristotle that a strong centralized government in

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necessary for sustaining society. However Locke believes that government is only necessary as long as it provides for the common good.

Specifically, Locke believed that government was secondary to the importance of the individual and his link with nature. Indeed Locke believed that humans were bestowed the Earth by God to tend to and subsist off of, “ And tho’ all the fruits it naturally produces, and beasts it feeds, belong to mankind in common, as they are produced by the spontaneous hand of nature; and no body has originally a private dominion, exclusive of the rest of mankind, in any of them, as they are thus in their natural state: yet being given for the use of men. This relationship between man and the Earth allows private property theories to protect from environmental degradation. Locke believes that humans need to conquer nature in order to best serve mankind as a whole.

Indeed he believes God intended for man to use nature to their benefit. However, Locke does decree that humans should also take great care of the Earth, as it is a divine gift. Additionally, he believes that humans should utilize Earth in an individualistic manner. This ideal also can be interpreted as supporting a more privatized, liberal approach to organized society. In this respect Locke believes that an ideal society tolerates all religious practices and an ideal government preserves its citizen’s souls. Locke articulates this precisely when he states that “ if there is a conflict between religion and government, one should obey the should and accept the punishment.

” Thus a clear distinction can be drawn between Locke and Aristotle in respect to their views on politics; Aristotle puts great emphasis on the

importance of politics in sustaining mankind while Locke believes politics is merely a tool used to organize nature. Locke's 2nd Treatise of Government, Chapter V) Locke's ideas regarding private property coincide with his theories of conquering nature. Locke believes that a man owns the land for which he conquers. More specifically, he believes that wherever a man decides to tend his land for subsistence is the land he owns, " As much land as a man tills, plants, improves, cultivates, and can use the product of, so much is his property. He by his labour does, as it were, enclose it from the common. (Locke's 2nd Treatise of Government, Chapter V) The latter portion of Locke's statement shows a clear distinction between his thoughts on property and Aristotle's.

Locke clearly believes more in the rights of the individual rather than the common good. Furthermore, Locke believes that if any person or even the government infringes upon a man's property in an aggressive manner, that man has the right to defend the property by killing others. Locke further substantiates that property ownership is a right given by God, not a privilege as Aristotle speaks of it. Locke discusses how people do not need popular consent in order to acquire property. This idea is important because it shows how unlike Aristotle's property ownership qualifications Locke's stance is, as he believes that people do not require communal acceptance in order to subsist.

Locke does, however, outline restrictions to property ownership for mankind. Indeed if a man conquers a land but doesn't tend to the land in order to gain subsistence, they are not deserving of the land and can be thusly have their right to that piece of land revoked, " every man should have as much as he

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could make use of, would hold still in the world, without straitening any body" (Locke's 2nd Treatise of Government, Chapter V). Locke parallels Aristotle on finding a mean between extravagance and meagerness when it comes to property ownership. Locke and Aristotle both desire finding this mean so that every man can own fairly equal shares of property.

Locke also discusses other limitations on property rights that are similar to Aristotle's. Locke believes that every person on God's Earth has the right to land. Moreover he believes that there is more than enough land for every man to subsist off of. Finally, Locke believes that mankind must leave enough land so that every person has the ability to subsist; " what portion a man carved to himself, was easily seen; and it was useless, as well as dishonest, to carve himself too much, or take more than he needed" (Locke's 2nd Treatise of Government, Chapter V pg. 6), describing this ideal as the " Sufficiency Proviso.

" Locke also believes that humans should not accumulate so much land as will their subsistence shall spoil. Prevention of this greedy and irrational practice is outlined in his " Spoilage Proviso. " He extrapolates on this idea by claiming the Earth was given to mankind to tend to and enjoy, not to waste and harm. Locke also parallels Aristotle in his ideas regarding the commons. Albeit he doesn't believe in the same rights as Aristotle proposes, however, he does mention that by laboring on the Earth a person increases the common stock of humanity.

Specifically, Locke states that in laboring on the Earth, a man leaves other land to be cultivated by other men and thus increasing the total value of the

Earth, “ It is labour then which puts the greatest part of value upon land, without which it would scarcely be worth any thing: it is to that we owe the greatest part of all its useful products. ” (Locke’s 2nd Treatise of Government, Chapter V pg. 14) In addition, Locke states that every man must “ share” their land with other men seeking subsistence if the need should arise. In this respect Locke directly parallels Aristotle’s thoughts on sharing of personal property. Another area of parallelism between the two philosophers is on the issue of money.

Indeed Locke believes that the creation of currency was highly detrimental to the equating of the proper state of life for mankind. Alike to Aristotle he believes that money brings out the malevolence within humans, and that the social creation of money has hurt mankind. Specifically, Locke believes that many conflicts arise due to money, as man develops the ability to purchase another man’s labor aided in the vast expansion of property ownership for the individual. This is because in purchasing labor, one man can now tend to more land that he alone could. Thusly some men are forced to work for other men rather than subsisting off of their own land, and in this respect Locke believes the “ Sufficiency Proviso” is violated.

Locke and Aristotle find a consensus in that money accumulation and property ownership should not be limitless. However, Locke also tries to justify the ability for all of mankind to subsist despite vast inequities of wealth. This is because private property ownership is highly productive – both in terms of production and environmental protection as people have an investment to protect. Therefore Locke appears to change his philosophy



from an idealistic liberal prospective to that of a utilitarian. In doing so Locke first approaches a more Aristotelian view, but then digresses.