

# Essay on the relationship between the state and individual: aristotle and locke

[Law](#), [Justice](#)



The relationship between the state and individuals is a complex one; political philosophers have explored this dynamic for centuries, if not millennia, to figure out the best way in which the people can interact with their government. According to right-libertarian philosopher John Locke, the state has no say in the rights of individuals to determine their own destiny; however, famed Greek philosopher Aristotle believes the state to be the highest form of political community (polis), where individuals serve the state and public service is preferable to private life. These two philosophies are diametrically opposed, falling under two conflicting extremes about the influence of the state into a person's life. While the truth lies somewhere in the middle, it is Aristotle's words that are more convincing; Aristotle successfully manages to break down the principles of the inclusiveness and duty individuals have to the state that protects them.

John Locke's philosophy is strongly associated with right-libertarianism: In classic liberalism/libertarianism, limited government is the key to a successful society; individual liberty and choice is placed above everything else, and people should be allowed to pursue their self-interest. Free market capitalism is heavily linked to this principle, as it is thought that the concept of a free market would allow people to realize their destinies according to their will and resources. John Locke was known as the Father of Classical Liberalism, and believed that people earn their property through the labor expended to create their goods and properties.

Locke believed that the people, not the state, should have ultimate sovereignty over their lives. In essence, he argues that people are imbued with equal rights handed to them by the state of nature; this is " a state of

perfect freedom of acting and disposing of their own possessions and persons as they think fit within the bounds of the law of nature" (Locke 70). Locke believes in a concept known as the state of nature, wherein people do not have the right to tell other people what to do. At the same time, Locke does not think this gives men license to behave as they will: "" 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" (Locke, Ch. 6). This interaction between the state and law of nature helps to chiefly define Locke's perspective; the state is an empire formed by a confluence of these two elements of nature, creating a society where no one is oppressed or taken advantage of, but people are not controlled by any outside force. Much of Locke's perspectives on the world around him come from his influences, namely the philosopher Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes elucidates the concept of regulated thoughts - a pattern of behavior and action that stems from causes and is a means to achieve a desired effect. Our thoughts are self-regulated when we use them to decide how we interact or communicate with others: we might say one thing to achieve a desired effect in another. This discourse is performed through words and reasoning in concert; we reason causes and effects in relation to our wants and desires, and then communicate them through words in order to convey them to someone else (Melchert 368). As this relates to his thoughts on communication within society, there is a struggle between the laws and rights of nature of all human beings. People have the right, or the liberty, to do whatever they can to stave off death and see to their interests; however, in order to interact with a group of other human beings, they must voluntarily give up those

rights of nature to an extent to allow other people to have a communal sense of civilization. This is known as a social contract theory, wherein a group of people understand that they cannot just follow their urges, as that would disrupt the society in which they live (Melchert 373). The social contract theory provides a decent middle ground between Marxism and libertarianism; while people are free to pursue their interests, they cannot do so at the expense of the people, or while defying the social contract.

Aristotle's perspectives on the state and the individual differ greatly from Locke's. For one, his concept of the state is related to the concept of the human good, wherein authority by the state is used to create a common good that works toward the happiness of its citizens: " Even if the end is the same for an individual and for a city-state, that of the city-state seems at any rate greater and more complete to attain and preserve. For although it is worthy to attain it for only an individual, it is nobler and more divine to do so for a nation or city-state" (EN I. 1. 1094b7-10). Basically, it is of the highest good to serve the state, as the individual is dedicating their life to a higher ideal - that of serving the absolute good. A citizen is defined as anyone who is able to participate in the governmental process, and Aristotle believes that the vast majority of people in the polis have the power to be citizens. " He who has the power to take part in the deliberative or judicial administration of any state is said by us to be a citizen of that state; and speaking generally, a state is a body of citizens sufficing for the purpose of life." (Aristotle Politics, Book 3).

Aristotle's followers understood the importance of the polis; In Book II of Plato's Republic, Glaucon asks Socrates and the others to find a way to prove

that justice is something that should be sought after to the point where it is desired in and of itself and for whatever consequences may arise. Socrates retorts with a vision of justice that splits it into two types, the kind for man and the kind for the state, or polis. Cities are more important and larger in scale than a man, with many different facets of justice, including political. He forms a perfectly ideal and just city for his hypothesis, and looks at how justice enters into this city. Through this city, he builds on his thesis in order to determine the best way for justice to thrive for its own sake.

These two philosophies are diametrically opposed to each other; however, in the end, Aristotle's wins out. One of the strengths of Locke's arguments is its reasonable concepts on the surface; everyone gets to do what they want, provided they do not abuse that power. However, without a manmade state, instead of the state of nature, there is no way to enforce the law of nature. Often, it will be violated, and this often happens with the libertarian worldview. Aristotle's view is much more idealistic and practical, as it provides the ability to serve the whole as a manner of highest ideal. It places restrictions on its citizens to work toward the human good, but he frames this in a way that benefits everyone, instead of the individual. Because of Aristotle's focus on creating a world that makes everyone's lives better, and pools resources to create a strong state with vested interests in mutual success, his philosophy wins out over Locke's somewhat presumptuous assertion that people do not need regulation because of vague promises they will not do harm to the other person. The social contract only goes so far, and makes incredible presumptions about the ability for people to not

take advantage of others; regulation of some kind must be put in place to prevent these abuses (while also enforcing the social contract).

## **Works Cited**

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