4042056

Thursday 3:00 – 3:50 PM

**Introduction**

I believe that Locke’s assessment of class inequality in Section II.50 of *The Second Treatise* is plausible*.* I will argue that Locke’s justification of class inequality is not sound by examining the real-world example of the tobacco industry in the context of his argument. I will then assess my own objection and show how Locke may successfully respond to it.

**Section 1: Locke’s Argument**

Locke begins his argument by asserting that consent, both explicit and tacit, is sufficient in providing legitimacy to whatever is consented to. He then states that money has no intrinsic value because it does not directly contribute to an individual’s survival in the same manner that food or shelter do; rather, its value comes entirely from the tacit consent of people. Locke concludes here that the use of money is legitimate, having been incorporated into the norms of a society by this consent. His next premise states that the effects of any legitimate practice must also be legitimate. He then observes that the use of money has led to the emergence of widespread inequality. Locke reasons that since money is a nonperishable good, individuals can trade their perishable goods, such as land and food, for it. This process has allowed those individuals to accumulate a wealth of capital that is impossible to attain when operating solely with perishable goods. Since this entire procedure has been guided by express or tacit consent from all members of a society, Locke ultimately concludes from these premises that the existence of inequality is legitimate.

A significant piece of evidence that Locke uses to support his argument is the formation of governments. Nearly every developed society has a government formed specifically to protect its citizens’ private property rights. Locke believes that such an institution again requires the consent, whether explicit or tacit, of all members of society. This means that a government is considered a legitimate practice and lends credence to his assertion that money, and inequality by extension, must also be legitimate.

**Section 2: Objection to Locke’s Argument**

What I believe to be the strongest objection to Locke’s argument concerns his premise that the effects of a legitimate practice are also legitimate, in that they are accepted by society as just and fair. I do not consider this premise to be true, as there are many examples of legitimate practices with effects that people have deemed unacceptable. For example, we see this phenomenon occur with the public’s gradual response to the effects of cigarettes sold by the tobacco industry.

No one would argue that legally selling a product to consumers is an illegitimate practice, so the tobacco industry is doing nothing unjust in this respect. Despite this, we can observe a generally negative opinion of cigarettes and of the tobacco industry in American society. This disconnect between a legitimate practice and its effects is due to an overwhelming consensus, backed by research, that the effects of smoking and of cigarettes are harmful to society and therefore should not be acceptable. For context, a report gathered by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows that cigarette smoking is the leading cause of preventable death in the United States, causing more than 480,000 deaths each year (“Smoking & Tobacco Use”). In more general terms, “cigarette smoking harms nearly every organ of the body, causes many diseases, and reduces the health of smokers in general” (“Smoking & Tobacco Use”).

To say that the gruesome effects of this practice are justified is to say that there are certain practices that take precedence over human life. The public’s negative attitude towards the tobacco industry shows an implicit consensus that a functional society cannot coexist with these parasitic effects of otherwise legitimate practices. We see that a tangible effort has been taken to reduce the effects of this practice on society as the public has gathered information about the negative effects of smoking. In 2009, President Obama passed the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act, a legislative measure that granted the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) the power to regulate the industry (“Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act – An Overview”). We allow those who wish to buy cigarettes to do so, as that is within their rights as citizens. However, the effects of widespread tobacco use would be so detrimental to society that they have been deemed illegitimate, demanding legislative regulation of the industry as a result. That society has not accepted the effects of the tobacco industry’s participation in capitalism is in direct contradiction with Locke’s premise that the effects of legitimate practices must necessarily be legitimate themselves.

**Section 3: Assessment of the Objection**

Locke might respond to the objection from Section 2 with a more nuanced phrasing of the premise in question. Instead of saying that all effects of a legitimate practice must necessarily be legitimate, he may say that these effects must first meet a certain set of criteria. More specifically, Locke may state that if an effect of a legitimate practice is negative to an individual, the practice must be essential for ensuring the current welfare of society to also be considered legitimate. This could be explained using the modern-day example of vaccinations. Receiving vaccinations is a painful and overall negative experience to the individual, but the practice is extremely important in present American society for preventing the transmission of deadly diseases. Because we generally possess an understanding of the importance of vaccines, we willingly accept the negative effects associated with them.

Locke would still be able to argue that inequality is justified under this more nuanced definition of a legitimate effect. Because using money is an essential aspect of modern society, the inequality it causes can be considered legitimate despite it being a negative experience for a select group of individuals. Again, we understand that money is too important to the structure of our society to do without, meaning that we must accept its negative effects. Since my objection to Locke’s argument in II.50 has been accounted for with this alteration of one of his premises, there is good reason to accept Locke’s claim that inequality is justified.

**Works Cited**

Products, Center for Tobacco. “Compliance, Enforcement & Training - Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act - An Overview.” *U S Food and Drug Administration Home Page*, Center for Drug Evaluation and Research, [www.fda.gov/tobaccoproducts/guidancecomplianceregulatoryinformation/ucm246129.htm](http://www.fda.gov/tobaccoproducts/guidancecomplianceregulatoryinformation/ucm246129.htm).

“Smoking & Tobacco Use.” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 15 May 2017, [www.cdc.gov/tobacco/data\_statistics/fact\_sheets/health\_effects/effects\_cig\_smoking/index.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/data_statistics/fact_sheets/health_effects/effects_cig_smoking/index.htm).