

An Investigation to John Dunn's Locke Interpretation and Its Influence to Contemporary Society

Liangxuan Xu

Philosophy Department, Boston College, 140 Commonwealth Ave., Boston, United States
liangxuanharryxu@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper intends to discuss John Dunn and Macpherson's investigations to John Locke and provide an evaluation of whether or not John Dunn and Macpherson's investigations misjudged Locke's original texts. The paper will first focus on John Dunn's argument of Locke's work being outdated due to Locke's historical background and the reason behind Locke's writings, especially behind the *Second Treatise of Government*. Then the paper will focus on Macpherson, who argued against John Dunn but as well denied the importance of Locke's work in today's society. By investigating on these two scholars, this paper intends to argue against both two authors and argue that Locke's works could still provide precious insights to today's society and is not as what these two authors argued, "outdated" and "historical". Due to the limits of the length of this paper, I shall only focus in this paper on the section of Property in Locke's *Second Treatise*.

Keywords: John Locke, John Dunn, political philosophy

1. Introduction

As many Locke Scholars such as John Dunn, James Tully, and many others all have given their own interpretations of Locke's theories or have pointed out what is not fitting with modern society in Locke's insights. Some of the problems are indeed within Locke's theories, yet some other problems are just due to some misinterpretations of Locke's way of writing, or some misunderstandings to Locke's arguments. In this paper, I will focus on how John Dunn interpreted Locke's overall theory in his *An Historical Account of the Argument of the Two Treatise of Government*. I will then give some opposing arguments from other Locke Scholars such as Macpherson. Afterwards, and as my thesis, I will argue that both John Dunn and Macpherson misinterpreted part of Locke's theory of property and by clarifying their misreading we can understand Locke's theory of property and its significance in today's society better.

2. John Dunn's Investigation to Locke:

2.1. John Dunn's investigation to Locke based on Locke's personal historical background:

John Dunn's investigation to Locke focused on Locke's historical context and how that context influenced Locke. To Dunn, Locke's overall theory was intended to justify the revolution in England at that time and argued for the correctness of King Charles II's Reign. As John Dunn writes in his *Locke, A Very Short Introduction*,

“The first is that the main stimulus which led him in chapter V of the Second Treatise to discuss property in our sense, entitlement to material possessions, was the wish to deny a right on the part of a reigning monarch to do as he chose with the material possessions of his subjects, without their express consent.” [1].

In Dunn’s point of view, Locke’s chapter on property is to provide a support to Locke’s overall theory of monarch. As Dunn argued, Locke would like to set up limitations to the power of kings [2]. However, as mentioned above, Dunn’s investigation to Locke was based on the historical context at that time. During that time period, England just experienced a civil war which was grounded on a dispute between the king and Parliament in the notion of property [3]. Locke needed a standpoint first: What is the foundation of political right of kings, especially the right of property? If a king would like to exercise any of his rights, what would be the base? At that time, most people would argue from the point of “God’s command” or “King’s rights were born with”. However, such explanation could not provide any satisfying proof and both of these explanations could not stop any revolution or anyone from rising unjust wars to claim these rights. Thus, there should be another explanation to king’s power source [4]. To Locke, property, as the primary reason for that revolution, needed to be evaluated and provided with a way of explaining that could explain radius of a king’s control to his kingdom’s property rights. To Dunn, Locke’s core argument of property lies within a master’s control to his servant’s labor [5]. Though Locke argued that only what a person gained from his rational labor could be called as his property, in Dunn’s interpretation, Locke also wrote that a master could rightfully gain what his servants gained from their labor. Then if a king is considered master to all the people within his kingdom, he could rightfully use whatever his people gained from their labor and that gives the king property rights over all his people.

However, though Dunn provided a fair explanation to Locke’s political theory based on the historical context and personal characteristics of Locke, he could not give up on the standpoint he made for Locke in the first place, that “I simply cannot conceive of constructing an analysis of any issue in contemporary political theory around the affirmation or negation of anything which Locke says about political matters [2].” Locke’s theories to Dunn were outdated because in Dunn’s explanation everything Locke said was to convince people about the correctness or wrongness of that past civil war but nothing more. In other words, instead of viewing Locke’s theory as a starting point of modern political philosophy or a piece of work intended to guide future political systems, Dunn viewed Locke’s Two Treatise as a sort of conclusion to a past event and nothing more. It indeed is undeniable that Locke’s piece of work reflected his thoughts on the revolution at that time. However, it is also inappropriate to conclude Locke’s Two Treatise as a mere reflection on past even but nothing more. As Dunn himself admitted in his later work,

“Or, more freely translated, everything in the political theory of Locke is well and truly dead. The sentence was intended, plainly enough, as a challenge - perhaps even almost as a boast. It was certainly not intended, as it now dispiritingly reads, as a ludicrous confession of intellectual myopia. But its importance lies not in its only too sincere expression of stupidity but in the error which led me to make it at all” [5].

Dunn later also explained that his point of view when writing *An Historical Account of the Argument* was too focused on the historical background of that time period and Locke’s personal background as a devout Christian believer. Such a focus limited his perspective to Locke’s overall interpretation at that time and missed some parts that could be useful not only to people at that time but also to today’s discussion as well.

2.2. John Dunn’s investigation to Locke on Property:

Dunn’s investigation to Locke’s overall theory started from the chapter of Property. In this chapter, as Dunn argued, “In so far as the first type of restraint was concerned, all that Locke needed to assert

was the dependence of legitimate taxation upon representative legislative consent – no taxation without parliaments” [5]. Combined with the social situation, or the background of the revolution, such interpretation is reasonable. However, in the text of Locke’s Two Treatise, main focus of the chapter of property concerns almost only how to define personal property. As James Tully pointed out, the focus of Property of Locke was to claim that people could own property only when they mix their rational labor with something that is still unowned to anyone else [6]. Dunn’s interpretation on Property focused not on the meaning of that chapter and its connection to the later ones but rather as a mere tool to assert the ownership of property of parliament. Such wrong interpretation lost an important aspect of Locke’s work, which would connect to the final chapters where Locke argued that king’s power came not from the parliament or the lords but from the consent of people. It is because of the individual citizens agreeing to let the king execute on their behalf could the king use his power over the lands. The source of personal property is rational labor and king’s power comes from personal consent. Dunn’s interpretation simply missed this part and focused on the tension between parliament and king at that time.

2.3. John Dunn’s investigation to Locke based on religious belief:

Another aspect of Dunn’s interpretation on Locke was based on Locke’s identity as a devout Christian believer. As Dunn writes in Short Introduction, These were freedoms which rested straightforwardly upon God’s endowment of the world to men in like manner; and the possibility that ensuing human shows (like financial trade) may be qualified for dig in on them is on a very basic level at chances with Locke’s origination of property [1]. Not only did he argue that Locke’s chapter on Property focused not on personal labor but rather a sort of natural ownership human beings adopted from God, at the same time, Dunn rejected the interpretation Macpherson made, which argued in favor of moral legitimacy of Capitalist production. Though Capitalist production is not the same as James Tully’s interpretation, Macpherson’s interpretation is still closer to the assertion of personal labor transferred to property rather than natural rights. Dunn argued in the same book that

The boldest response to this inquiry, progressed most strikingly by C. B. Macpherson, is that Locke planned his hypothesis as a clarification of the ethical authenticity of industrialist creation. There is little case for treating this in a serious way as an evaluation of Locke’s goals in building his hypothesis. In any case, it is a really intriguing inquiry how far this idea might catch, if in somewhat chronologically erroneous terms, Locke’s feeling of his own accomplishment in having developed his hypothesis. In its most grounded structure the idea remains completely unconvincing. Locke, similar to Thomas Aquinas, accepted that all men reserved an option to actual resource which abrogated the property privileges of different people [5].

To Dunn, somehow Locke’s Christian belief conflicts with labor in terms of claiming property. This point of view is another proof of Dunn misinterpreted Locke’s overall theory and Locke’s Two Treatise.

2.4. John Dunn’s misinterpretations to Locke due to his limits:

Indeed, Locke’s identity as a Christian believer has a great impact on his works and how he arranged his theories. However, to most philosophers, such as Macpherson and James Tully, Locke’s identity as a Christian believer is not in conflict with his overall theory or the logic behind Two Treatise. In Dunn’s theory, Locke’s Christian belief conflicts with labor because Locke adopted his Christian belief from Thomas Aquinas and would believe human has a certain right to physical world that would easily turn property right around. However, from prior chapters and latter ones one could easily see that Locke, at least in his Two Treatise, never argued in favor of this “rights that human beings are born with” [4]. Though Locke’s Two Treatise started with State of Nature and Natural Law, by

reading through those chapters one could know that Locke was arguing actually against this natural right theory. To Locke, God provided human beings not with a natural right to property but a right to property with conditions. The first several chapters of *Two Treatise* focus on defining the natural rights of human being, and Locke clearly states that the most precious thing human beings adopted from God is nothing but rationality. As Locke writes in *Two Treatise*, “God, who hath given the World to Men in common, hath also given them reason to make use of it to the best advantage of Life, and convenience [4].” And later, Locke argues that “yet 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.” Locke here clearly meant something totally different from Dunn’s interpretation, that Locke would argue human being a natural right to physical subsistence that could override property rights. Quite the opposite, in Locke’s theory, though God provided the physical world to human beings to nourish themselves and make the best use of it, human beings do not have any natural right to private property. As Locke wrote in chapter IV, “And though all the fruits it naturally produces, and Bests 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, 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” [4]. Locke here distinguished human right of private property from mankind’s natural right to the physical world according to Bible. How then, could such a right of private property be defined? To Locke, the answer is by rational labor. As Locke then stated, “yet every Man has a Property in his own Person. This no Body has any Right to but himself. The Labour of his Body, and the Work of his Hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever them 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 [4].” By mixing one’s private force into natural work, a man announces his ownership to that natural work. Only when human beings are rationally use their strength or other power to work on naturally existing things could they claim their rights to them. For instance, human beings could not claim to own a land unless a human being could rationally work on this land to support his own life. When a man could do so and prove that this land is necessary for his living, he would earn his right to own this land.

3. Macpherson’s Interpretations on Locke’s Chapter of Property:

Macpherson also seems to support this way of interpretation. As he states in *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*, (1) one may just use however much one can use before it ruins (*Two Treatises* 2.31), (2) one should leave "enough and as great" for other people (the adequacy limitation) (2.27), and (3) one may (probably) just suitable property through one's own work (2.27) [7]. My prior interpretation focused on the third part of Macpherson’s interpretation. To agree with Locke’s three limitations on private property, one must realize that these three limitations all come from rational thinking, which Locke believed that human beings adopted directly from God. Because this characteristic of human being is received from God, rational thinking could be used as the base of his property theory without raising any further questions [8]. Macpherson also realized such a connection between Locke’s religious belief and his political theory as he argued according to Locke’s limitations strongly. If one read closely to the Holy Bible and Locke’s *Two Treatise*, one could see that Locke’s interpretation on human beings and his requirements to human morality are in accordance with what the Holy Bible intended to educate human beings to be. Locke’s Christian belief never stopped him from forming his own theory of political philosophy but rather helped him to see human nature and human requirements in a different way.

4. John Dunn and Macpherson's Pros and Cons in Their Arguments:

Yet, Dunn's interpretation to Locke's theory has its own advantage that other interpretations do not have. Dunn's focus on Locke's personal history and social historical context provides a precious explanation on Locke's Two Treatise. Macpherson's argument, on the other hand, is not without its own limits. Unlike Dunn, who focused too much on Locke's personal identity, Macpherson's interpretation to Locke's piece of work focuses too much on the influence of Locke's work when trying to interpret capitalism. Macpherson, when arguing around Locke's theory of property, talks mostly about how Locke's restrictions on property lose their meanings when society forms and currency system is established. As Macpherson argues, the spoilage restriction would not be available since currency is invented because currency cannot decay, and the second restriction is also meaningless since the making of private property so expands efficiency that even the people who presently don't have the chance to get land will have greater freedom to procure what is essential forever. In Macpherson's perspective, such a restriction is a mere prior requirement that could guaranteeing the chance to gain the necessity of staying alive through labor. The last limit, as Macpherson later argued, cannot be Locke's own opinion as Locke himself agreed on property earned by one's slave's labor should also be that person's property [7]. However, here Macpherson misunderstood how Locke defines labor. Though Locke defined in the prior chapter that only one's own work out of his or her hands are properly one's work, such restriction is made because to Locke, human beings are born with nothing but their body, thus when a person is born, he only has right to his own body. However, this is during the state that human being has no other natural rules or social rules which bounds him. In Locke's theory, especially in Locke's Two Treatise, there are a lot more ways, even in a state of nature, that one person could interfere with power that comes out of one's own body. For instance, as Locke argued in the part of State of War and Slavery, when one person starts a war with others, he puts himself in the danger of being punished by others and becoming slave. In other words, in Locke's early chapters of Second Treatise, the only way one person would become a servant or slave is due to the punish of natural law. Natural Law increases the range of human right and thus provides more possibilities to the capacity of human labor. When a person justly punishes another person according to natural law and makes the one punished become his servant, he justly earns that other person's labor [4]. There are several places in Locke's Second Treatise which Locke tries to establish a certain social rules or principle while could also explain how society works at that time. It is common for people to own slaves at that time and Locke would like to give both slavery and property system a reason to exist. Yet, as Locke interprets slavery as a system of punishment, it is safe to interpret that Locke is not supportive to slavery system but consider it to be a way of providing amend when one could not kill oneself as answer to crimes or entering state of war [9]. Macpherson's interpretation on Locke's theory of property focuses too much on attacking Locke's influence on later capitalism and individualism property system. This I believe, is because Macpherson's interpretation lacks understanding to Locke's historical and personal background. Just as other philosophers, such as James Tully and Alan Ryan argued, Macpherson's understanding lacks understanding to Locke's definition to several different key words in the part of property and those mistakes led to a wrong conclusion as well.

5. Own Opinion and Conclusion

5.1. Own Opinion

In my opinion, just as Dunn's interpretation to Locke has its own flaws, so does the ones which are opposed to Dunn's theory. To interpret Locke correctly, one should not only investigate on Locke's written works but also his historical background. Just as Dunn pointed out, Locke's arguments were

highly based on the historical context at that time and it is important for us to understand the historical context before we get to Locke's overall theory. However, Locke's theories, as he wrote, influenced not only his period of time but can also provide precious knowledge to political theories to our time period as well. For instance, Locke's understanding of private property, though closely connected to Christian belief, just as Locke frequently quoted the Bible and God's will in that chapter, could still provide insight to what forms our private property and especially under today's social background as we trade personal labor with commercial goods all the time. If we check today's property system, we could see that labor is still one of the most important bases of private property. Thus, by checking Locke's second Treatise and Locke scholar's interpretations, it would be easier for us to understand contemporary property system better.

5.2. Conclusion:

In all, Dunn's interpretation of Locke, though has some mistake, could be valuable if combined with other philosophers' theories which could make up to the points Dunn overlooked. Yet, Dunn's interpretation on Locke, especially the ones based on Locke's personal identity as a Christian believer and historical background at that time, are still meaningful to today's understanding of Locke's theories. Locke's theory is meaningful to us not only because of its historical value but also how it could help us understand the struggles and problems that we have today. To be able to do so, one must first understand Locke's original text and that will be John Dunn's most valuable influence on today's understanding of Locke. However, if not combined with other philosophers' theories, such as the ones of James Tully, or Macpherson one could fall into the same mistake as Dunn once made, which is to consider Locke only as a historical figure and forget about his influence and importance even to today's interpretation of political theories as a whole.

References

- [1] John Dunn, (2003) *Locke: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 71.
- [2] John Dunn, (1969) *The Political Thought of John Locke: An Historical Account of the Argument of the Two Treatises of Government*, Cambridge U.P, 60.
- [3] John Locke, (2006) "An Essay Concerning Toleration," *The Clarendon Edition of the Works of John Locke: An Essay Concerning Toleration: And Other Writings on Law and Politics, 1667–1683*, pp. 267–267,
- [4] John Locke and A. John Simmons, (2021) *Second Treatise of Government*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, II, 1, 3.
- [5] John Dunn, (2016), *Interpreting Political Responsibility: Essays 1981-1989*, Princeton Univ Press, 2-4.
- [6] James Tully, (2006) *A Discourse on Property: John Locke and His Adversaries*, Cambridge University Press, chapter 4.
- [7] C. B. Macpherson, (1962) *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*, Oxford University Press
- [8] Karl Olivecrona, (1974) "Appropriation in the State of Nature: Locke on the Origin of Property," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 35, no. 2 (1974): p. 211
- [9] Stephen Buckle, (2002) *Natural Law and the Theory of Property: Grotius to Hume*, Clarendon Press,.