

9-16-11

Review Plato, Hobbes, Locke

## I. Locke & Jefferson: Liberal Democracy

A. In 1640's England rejected the divine right of kings with the beheading of James II; since then, nothing has been the same (-:)).

### B. Features of a Liberal Democracy:

- a) public good more important than the good of the elite (aristocracy, etc.)  
cf. Locke's reply to Hobbes at ¶13.
- b) consent of the governed is emphasized as the basis of civil society (repeated over and over in Locke)
- c) legislative powers introduced (see Locke ¶149...says it ALL!). Executive subordinated to the legislative (see Locke ¶152)
- d) people are the best and ultimate judge on which a government rests (see ¶223 for contrast with Hobbes, who doesn't trust people to be such judges [see pg. 149 last paragraph]). For Hobbes, people are merely a source of disunity (whereas kings are a source of stability) most of the time, whereas for Locke, the reverse is true: kings tend to create disorder, the majority of people tend to a kind of conservative inclination to return to tried-and-true ways of doing things (the people are usefully resistant to change).

### C. Jefferson: philosophy student influenced by Locke and Rousseau.

--literally put their ideas to work in motivating the American Revolution; the decl. of independent is the best example of their influence, but the letters and constitution outrank anything before its time--with a preamble to introduce the purpose of the legislation.

--what Jefferson adds that goes beyond Locke:

- a) common defense
- b) tranquillity as an objective of state formation
- c) promotion of general order (something beyond public good & private property)

--What Liberal Democracy is not: not *liberal* in our contemporary sense.

--What Liberal Democracy *is* (as contrasted with the appropriate meaning of *conservative* in this context):

conservative	liberal
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--preserve and guard property	--preserve & promote public good
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--more limited role of protection	--maximal type of state
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--minimal government	--government in comprehensive role
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## II. Jefferson's Writings on Civil Society and the Liberal Democratic State.

A. Faith in the people--"the good sense of the people will always be found to be the best army." [p.256] (compared to Hobbes' view that the people need a 'common power' over them)

B. Reduced faith in government: "I am convinced that those societies (as the Indians) which live without government enjoy in their general mass an infinitely greater degree of happiness than those who live under the European governments." [p256] (Hobbes turned on his head!). Public opinion replaces law "and restrains morals as powerfully as laws ever did anywhere." [p256] The errors of the people are less serious than the errors of government: "To

punish these errors [i.e., of the people] too severely would be to suppress the only safeguard of the public liberty.”[p256]

C. Emphasis on an informed public: “If once they become inattentive to the public affairs, you and I, and Congress and Assemblies, judges and governors shall all become wolves.”[p257] Need for newspapers: “The basis of our governments being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I shold not hesitate for a moment to prefer the latter.”[p256]!!!!

D. Jefferson denies Hobbes’ premise that force is the only true source of government (once a social contract is agreed upon): “that nature has formed man insusceptible of ay other government but that of force [is] a conclusion not founded in truth, nor experience.”[pp257-258].

E. Hobbes is nonetheless lurking: if the people become lazy and inattentive, the ‘rational wolves’ reappear (see above quotation at C).

F. Society does not require government (see p. 258 top: Jefferson on three types of societies).

G. Fundamental Jeffersonian emphasis: *the problem is government, specifically of the European, monarchic kind* (excluding England, which has a kind of government by consent of the governed). Note: the revolution against monarchy that began in England in 1640 is now in full flower.

H. Why government, then? For Jefferson, because lack of government is “inconsistent with any great degree of population.”[p.258] Aha! Population explosion creates need for government to preserve happiness!

I. Rebellion from time to time is “a medicine necessary for the sound health of government.”[p258] “The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time, with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure. . . .”[p260]

J. No generation has the right to ‘bind another’ ...the earth and its bounty belongs to the living... “the dead have neither powers nor rights over it.”[p261] Note: Is Jefferson denying the chief principle of most wills and testaments, even in our time (to give property to our descendants), or is he after a different target? [hint: “no man can bey *natural right* oblige the lands he occupied, or the persons who succeed him in that occupation, to the paiement of debts contracted by him.] Jefferson’s point is that one generation should not be able to impose *burdens* on the next. Every generation pays its own debts. (“no generation can contract debts greater than may be paid during the course of it’s own existence.”[p262] He is quite comfortable that one make *gifts* to the next. (Question: how should we understand the national debt in this context? Is it moral to maintain it indefinitely [see pg. 264 marked]? Does Jefferson offer a formula for figuring out how long a society can legitimately acquire and carry such a debt? [hint: see page 263 top half—Jefferson’s answer is: the # of years that slightly over half the population is normally alive.]

K. Society=the sum of its parts (the sum of the individuals that make it up). Consequence: the rights of the society as a whole must be derivative of the rights of the individuals that constitute it. Cf. pg. 262 marked.

L. The constitution is no longer valid, according to Jefferson, since it has not been reconstituted by generations at the end of every 19 years (he uses the same principle he used to determine how long a national debt can be carried that is incurred in a previous generation). THIS IS CONSISTENT WITH THE PRINCIPLE OF MAJORITY RULE (and imposing the laws erected by dead people is an unjustifiable extension of the conditions under which they, by

their natural rights, consented to those laws during their own time). Upshot: all natural rights are *rights of the living* (makes sense: if rights arise through the natural conditions that produce human beings, then they stand and fall with life itself). Question: would Jefferson countenance our 20th century decision to treat corporations as legal persons in our commonwealth?

Note: this is an attack on an important aspect of monarchical societies: hereditary principles that governed the transfer of wealth, property various rights and which were common in European societies before the Enlightenment.

M. Jefferson's 'natural aristocracy' based on "virtue and talents" vs. what he calls 'artificial aristocracy', "founded on wealth and birth, without either virtue or talents". This natural aristocracy is a "give of nature"

Plato revisited!!!!: "that form of government is best, which provides the most effectually for a pure selection of these natural aristoi into the offices of government..."[p267]

Question #1: is Jefferson, the founder of egalitarian government, an elitist? (after all, he thinks the natural aristocracy will be chosen freely by the people, who "will elect the really good and wise."...Is Jefferson naive? If he is, then is democracy a good form of government after all? If the people will not elect the good and wise, why trust them to form governments? Was Plato right after all, and the best society arises when only the demonstrably knowledgeable are given power? If not, why not?)

Question #2: if the wealthy control our elections, have we placed ourselves in the hands of the 'artificial aristocracy' or not?

N. Notice Locke's influence on Jefferson: he bases everything on "using the free exercise of our own reason".[p267]

O. The role of free public education in Jefferson's conception of the conditions under which a society could best promote the natural aristoi to positions of influence.[p.268-269 marked] "An insurrection has ... begun, of science, talents, and courage, against rank and birth, which have fallen into contempt."[p270]

### III. Jefferson on Morality

A. Morality does not have its foundation in *truth* (as Socrates thought), nor in love of *God*, as Augustine thought ("...whence arises the morality of the Atheist?"), nor in the faculty of taste (*kalon* in Greek), nor self-interest or *egoism* ("I consider our relations with others as constituting the boundaries of morality" [Plato agrees!], which means that self-interest or self-love cannot be intrinsically moral for Jefferson, but rather, is the enemy of morality "Self-love, therefore, is no part of morality. Indeed it is exactly its counterpart. It is the sole antagonist of virtue, leading us constantly by our propensities to self-gratification in violation of our moral duties to others."[p272]).

B. Jefferson's ground of morality: "nature hath implanted in our breasts a love of others, a sense of duty to them, a moral instinct, in short, which prompts us irresistibly to feel and to succor their distresses, and protests against [... self-interest]"[p272].

C. Morality = "social dispositions" implanted in man by our creator. We have a moral sense to go along with our senses of touch, sight, taste, smell, and sound, with which to detect what is moral in the world of action.

D. But then Jefferson says that "the standard and test of virtue" is "*utility*". He says that the useful=the virtuous.

E. Combining (C) and (D), can we conclude that Jefferson thinks that our moral sense is the power to reason out what is useful in the social domain, and then to pursue that as the morally correct end of action? Is Jefferson inconsistent in claiming both that utility=virtue, and that what makes us moral is that we have a 'moral instinct'?[p273bottom, for example]