

A research paper regarding why John Locke is Sometimes Called the Father of Liberalism

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Abstract. Locke's contributions as the father of liberalism went beyond epistemology and political theory to include concepts of social equality and justice. Although he was primarily concerned with political philosophy, his ideas about the natural rights of individuals laid the foundation for the concept of equality. This paper aims to explore in depth the relationship between Locke's theories and gender equality, providing a more comprehensive and impartial perspective on John Locke's liberal contributions. The rest of this article aims to introduce a feminist perspective to convey why John Locke is sometimes called the father of liberalism - two sides of the same coin - as an example of critically assessing the meaning of John Locke, one of the most influential theorists.

Keywords: Locke; liberalism; feminism; contributions.

1. Introduction

Liberalism is commonly defined as a political and social philosophy that values the freedom of individuals, equality, and protection of individual rights (Freeman, 2017). Tracing its roots back to the 17th century, this political ideology spawned during the Enlightenment. During the flourishing time when new ideologies, political structures, and social expectations were proposed, John Locke theorized diverse thoughts and composed his influential work, "Two Treatises of Government", which later on has been regarded as the authoritative guide for principles and foundations of liberalism. Thus, John Locke, born in 1632 and emerged as a highly prominent philosopher in the field of politics, was then recognized by the mass as the father of liberalism.

John Locke's contributions extended beyond epistemology and political theory to encompass notions of social equality and justice. Despite his leading focus being political philosophy, his ideas on natural rights of individuals laid the groundwork for the concept of equality. Moreover, he widely incorporated ideas on gender into his work, such as his attack on patriarchy and propositions in the marriage contract. Although his ideas contributed to the gradual progression toward more inclusive understandings of gender equality, his views should be carefully interrogated, which are believed limited by the context of the era in which he lived. Thus, in the rest of the essay, I aim to convey why John Locke is sometimes-with two sides of a coin-referred to as the Father of Liberalism through a feminist lens, as an example of critically evaluating the implications of one of the most influential theorists, John Locke.

Gender equality should be included concerning the framework of liberalism for the following reasons. Firstly, liberalism's core values align with gender inequality's standpoints of advocating for equal opportunities, rights, and treatment for all individuals regardless of their gender (Arneson, 2013). Secondly, gender equality is vital for the realization of true justice and fairness. Excluding or marginalizing a particular gender group clashes with the liberal ideals of equal treatment and equal worth of all individuals (Schwarzenbach, 2007). Hence, this essay aims to thoroughly explore the relationship between Locke's theory and gender equality in the following four domains of his propositions, to develop a more comprehensive and unbiased perspective on John Locke's contributory efforts to liberalism.

2. Social Contract Theory & Marriage Contract Theory

According to Locke, the social contract is an agreement between the people and their government; in order to secure and protect the natural rights of individuals (Duignan, 2023). The contract involves the transfer of some individual freedoms and powers to the government, which then assumes the

responsibility of the responsibility to preserve the rights and welfare of the citizens (Friend, n.d). Locke argued that governments should only have authority if they are consented to by the people, challenging the prevailing belief in the divine right monarchy. This notion of the social contract laid the foundation for democratic principles and played a significant role in historical revolutions, such as the American and French Revolutions, which sought to establish governments based on the will of the people (Friend, n.d).

Locke's social contract theory not only challenged the monarch's claim to divine authority but also traditional patriarchal notions associated with marriage. John Locke's perspective on marriage, which emphasized voluntary consent among adults as well, posed a challenge to traditional patriarchal beliefs. By emphasizing the consent of both parties and equal decision-making power in family matters, he improved equality in conjugal relationships within marriage. He believed that both partners should have a say in terms of establishing and terminating the marriage contract, and the decisions regarding family issues and household properties should be made jointly. This perspective challenges traditional notions of marriage as a patriarchal institution where the male partner holds greater power and authority. His progressive views on marriage laid the foundation of women's more equal power to divorce when they wish, instead of merely 'being divorced by their partners', or being restricted or oppressed in the institution of marriage. By applying the concept of a social contract to the social structure of marriage, John Locke, de facto, empowered women in conjugal relationships and granted them a voice and agency in marriage. Nevertheless, John Locke's concept of gender equality had certain restrictions, underscoring the strengths and weaknesses of his theories in relation to gender dynamics, which will be illustrated more in the next sections.

3. Patriarchy & Family Relationships

Patriarchy, a social system where men dominate, manifests within father-son and husband-wife relationships (Guy-Evans, 2023). However, John Locke challenged the prevailing understanding of patriarchy and took the initial step toward breaking down the structure. According to the patriarchists, as exemplified by Sir Robert Filmer (1680) in his work "Patriarcha", the king held absolute power and was seen as the divinely appointed father figure. They argued that no individual was born free, but rather born under the authority of a patriarchal superior. Every individual in the patriarchal society was solely defined by their relations to the patriarchs of the family or the nation, with positions inflexibly determined by hierarchical orders (Butler, 1978). In his writings, Locke advocated for equal rights of educating children between couples, ensuring that both husbands and wives have the power and authority to participate equally in the upbringing of their children (Butler, 1978). This empowerment of women within family relationships was a significant advancement in challenging patriarchal norms and promoting gender equality.

Apart from Locke's recognition of the importance of the family unit and the role of parents in educating children, he also showed initial awareness of the equal rights between couples in regard to marriage and conjugal relationships. His emphasis on consent and voluntary associations in marriage, according to social contract theory, has provided a framework for empowering women within conjugal relationships. However, John Locke often made assumptions about the natural and societal roles of men and women, which reflected the gender biases of his time (Hunt, 2016). For example, he supported the notion of the husband's authority both within the family and in the public sphere, considering it natural and justifiable (Pfeffer, 2001). Therefore, while Locke's ideas offer some insights into the dynamics of patriarchy and family relationships, they require further analyses and evaluations to fully address the complexities and inequalities within these realms.

4. Natural Rights

Natural rights are the core of citizenship, encompassing fundamental entitlements inherent to individuals, including life, liberty and property; and citizenship pertains to the rights and

responsibilities associated with belonging to a particular political community (Mohapatra, 2021). Locke's concept of natural rights and citizenship had a profound influence on liberal and democratic thought. His ideas shaped the foundations of modern democracy, emphasizing the importance of individual rights, consent, and the rule of law in the governance of societies, serving as a cornerstone of democratic principles and human rights. The right to vote, as the key component of citizenship, signifies John Locke's perspectives on gender including both limits and advances.

By considering women as humans with natural rights, albeit partially, Locke indirectly acknowledged their entitlement to property ownership and some individual freedoms (Vaughn, 1980). However, his writings often did not explicitly address the rights and liberties of women in the same comprehensive manner as those of men (Jenkins, 2011). Politically, his writings did not adequately articulate women's roles and status within the political and civic systems. As a result, the absence hindered the recognition and inclusion of women as meaningful and active participants in the political realm. Thus, even though John Locke recognized women's status in private spheres at home as a mother and wife, women were historically completely excluded in the public sphere in his view. This exclusion was explicitly articulated in his work, with women being denied certain political rights, including voting. To sum up, while John Locke's political philosophy emphasizes the social contract and women's natural rights, his views on gender and women's rights revealed limitations and exclusions.

5. Education & Rationality

John Locke's insights into the importance of education and rationality, particularly regarding political participation, are still relevant today. Locke believed that individuals possess natural rights and freedoms, which they surrender to society in exchange for protection and security (Baldwin, 1993). Locke believed that education was essential for individuals to develop their rational faculties and critical thinking abilities. He argued that through education, individuals can better understand their natural rights, and the duties and responsibilities of individuals and government towards each other. His views on political participation as a right and responsibility of citizens encourage inclusivity and promote a more equal distribution of power and representation.

Though he recognized the significance of education and its association with citizen political participation, Locke's views on education excluded women from equal access to education and participation in public affairs. Women were often denied the opportunity to pursue formal education during Locke's time and were relegated to domestic and caregiving roles. Also, Locke accepted the empirical notion of women's inferiority to men, particularly in terms of rationality and capability. He believes that women are not 'suitable' for political discussions due to their natural inferiority. The inferiority Locke attributed to women depended on their being less rational than men; and women's mind, as well as their body, was less able to endure the "hardships" of life (Giuliana Di Biase, 2007). He further agreed that this female inferiority contributed to the limitation of women's participation in political society as capable actors. His views on the equality of education for women paradoxically contradicted his belief in natural rights and equal opportunities. This paradox is significant highlighting that John Locke was unable to break through the traditional ideas regarding social justice between genders which conflicts with his claim of natural rights for all.

6. Conclusion

In summary, John Locke has established key principles that continue to shape modern democratic societies. His emphasis on individual freedom and limited government has informed debates around civil liberties, economic policy, and social welfare for centuries. Throughout the whole essay, four realms regarding his contributions to the world of liberalism and particularly, to gender justice, have been discussed, including social and marriage contract, patriarchy and family relationships, natural rights, and education and rationality.

Locke's concept of natural rights, including life, liberty, and property, provides a foundation for recognizing women's autonomy and agency. By extending these rights to women, Locke's theories have partially challenged traditional gender roles and oppressive structures that limit women's freedoms. He has profoundly empowered women in family and conjugal relationships by resisting patriarchy. However, despite stretching the boundaries to a more progressive view on women's rights, John Locke failed to recognize that men and women should be treated fairly equally and given the same rights. He viewed women as inferior to men, and women were suited for domestic roles other than rational thinking. While advocating for education and rationality, Locke excluded women from these opportunities, resulting in their limited access to political participation and social recognition equally as citizens or humans. These proved that Locke's perspectives still fell short of fully recognizing and promoting gender equality despite some incomplete proposals.

Without doubt, Locke is one of the greatest philosophers who achieved success in opening the door to liberalism, however as for cultivating gender-equal ideologies as part of liberalism, they are neither perfect nor complete. The exemplified evaluation from a feminist lens has formed our overall argument that John Locke is sometimes recognized as the founding father of liberalism, considering both his influential insights in all walks of society and some of his ideas limited by the context of the era that he was living in. The evolution of liberalism is interminable since this concept is never static. In John Locke's era, liberalism was largely based on the political system itself. Monumental development has occurred in the past few decades leading to a more inclusive concept where connections are formed with other social aspects. For instance, liberalism could now be incorporated with gender equality, poverty, education and much more. Therefore, an open mind is crucial when evaluating and understanding liberalism in the future.

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