

LOCKE'S COMMODIFICATION OF HUMANITY

Emily McDill  
Humanities 103  
October 4, 2019

## Passages:

### Difficulty Passage:

“This freedom from absolute, arbitrary power is so necessary to, and closely joined with, a man’s preservation, that he cannot part with it but by what forfeits his preservation and life together. For a man, not having the power of his own life, cannot by compact or his own consent enslave himself to any one, nor put himself under the absolute, arbitrary power of another to take away his life when he pleases. Nobody can give more power than he has himself, and he that cannot take away his own life cannot give another power over it.”

“This is the perfect condition of slavery, which is nothing else, but the state of war continued between a lawful conqueror and captive...”

“I confess, we find among the Jews, as well as other nations, that man did sell themselves; but it is plain this was only to drudgery, not to slavery; for it is evident the person sold was not under an absolute, arbitrary, despotical power...”<sup>1</sup>

### Engagement Passage:

“But the fact is that the **Historical Statistics of the United States** is pretty much like what the contours of academic scholarship are now and have always been: the equating of human beings with commodity, lumping them together in alphabetical order...”

“...Reflects the flaw that obstructs the imagination and humane scholarship and realization of a humane society. Such scholarship would be one in which the thrust is toward the creation of members of society who can make humane decisions. And who do. It is a scholarship that refuses to continue to produce generation after generation of students who are trained to make distinctions between the deserving poor and undeserving poor but not between rice and human beings”

“History is percentiles, the thoughts of great men, and the description of eras. Does the girl know that the reason that she died in the sea or in a twenty-foot slop pit on a ship named **Jesus** is because that was her era? Or that some great man thought up her destiny for her as part of a percentage of national growth, or expansion, or manifest destiny, or colonialization of a new world?”<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> John Locke, *Two Treatises of Civil Government* (1689), 114-115.

<sup>2</sup> Toni Morrison. “Moral Inhabitants,” in *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 59-61.

In Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*, he sets out to explain how government arose with the example of a hypothetical "state of nature," where men have equal rights and natural liberty. However, in Chapter IV, Locke describes the "perfect condition of slavery," in which a "lawful conqueror and captive... make an agreement for limited power on one side, and obedience on the other."<sup>3</sup> The description of the conqueror as "lawful" implies that slavery is justified, which clashes with my original impression that Locke's writing advocated for universal equality. Additionally, I was unsure what constituted the "perfect condition of slavery," and whether Locke's writing further propagated and justified the practice of slavery. I wondered, how can the dichotomy between every man having natural rights and slavery exist within one cohesive theory? Toni Morrison's essay "Moral Inhabitants," which details the devastating effects of dehumanization in the context of slavery, illuminates Locke's passage by emphasizing the need for "humane scholarship."<sup>4</sup> Morrison's assertion that slavery can be attributed to the "thoughts of great men" who determine the destiny of others based on larger theoretical concepts especially resonates with Locke's theories.<sup>5</sup> Morrison's "Moral Inhabitants" reveals how the dispassionate language in Locke's second treatise tolerates the commodification of humanity and asserts the need for writers to project a more humanistic and empathetic view of the world.

The first sentence of Locke's Chapter IV asserts that all men possess a natural liberty "to be free from any superior power on earth" in the state of nature.<sup>6</sup> When man enters society, he must forfeit some of these liberties, but the laws established under the new government must be

---

<sup>3</sup> John Locke, *Two Treatises of Civil Government* (1689), 115.

<sup>4</sup> Toni Morrison. "Moral Inhabitants," in *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 60.

<sup>5</sup> Morrison, 60-61.

<sup>6</sup> Locke, *Two Treatises of Civil Government*, 114.

mutually agreed upon and apply to every man equally. Additionally, Locke claims man does not have enough power over his own life to consent to give it to someone else. Therefore, man could not enter into slavery even if he wanted to, because Locke defines true slavery as when a master has complete control over his slave's life, including the ability to take their life away. In Locke's theory, slavery is defined as the control of one man by the "inconstant, uncertain, unknown, arbitrary will of another man."<sup>7</sup> This led me to wonder—if Locke only categorizes true, unjust slavery as when someone has complete control over the continuation of another's life—how would he categorize the grey area between involuntary servitude and his definition of the "perfect condition of slavery?" Is it justified if the master does not have complete control over the slave's life?

To strengthen his position on slavery, Locke employs a Biblical anecdote, explaining that when the Jewish people sold themselves into slavery it was simply "drudgery." He reasons that they were not under complete control because if they were to be harmed by their masters, they would gain their freedom. I think that Locke's flippant statement, "this was only to drudgery, not to slavery," reveals a lot about his privileged stance from which he makes sweeping and generalized statements about a deeply sensitive topic.<sup>8</sup> Locke's claim minimizes the struggle and suffering that the slaves undoubtedly endured and exemplifies his removal from his subject matter. Locke's casual reference to the "perfect condition of slavery" makes me wonder how the detached language of Locke's second treatise enabled the historical propagation of slavery. This question is especially pertinent to the United States where his influence is seen in many founding documents, like the Declaration of Independence.

---

<sup>7</sup> Locke, 114.

<sup>8</sup> Locke, 115.

When viewed in relation to Locke's chapter on slavery, Morrison's criticism of, "The Historical Statistics of the United States Colonial Times to 1957" and discussion of "humane scholarship" in "Moral Inhabitants" illuminates the meaning and repercussions of Locke's dispassionate language.<sup>9</sup> "Historical Statistics" was an index of shipping logs that documented the trafficking of goods to and from the United States between 1619 and 1773. The records nonchalantly grouped together slaves, measured by headcount, amongst goods like rice, tar, and turpentine. Morrison conveys disgust with how carelessly human beings were quantified and dehumanized, reminding the reader how easy it is to lose track of an individual's humanity when people are reduced to statistics or a single title like "slave."

In particular, Morrison disputes a footnote in "Historical Statistics," which clarifies: "Number of Negroes shipped, not those who actually arrived" when she challenges its indifferent language.<sup>10</sup> She poses the question—"Who died? Was there a seventeen-year-old girl there with a tree shaped scar on her knee?"<sup>11</sup> By posing this question, Morrison immediately reassigns humanity to the victim; a girl who could remind the reader of a sister or friend. When I viewed Locke's second treatise through the lens of Morrison's criticism of "Historical Statistics," I recognized the similarities between the blanket statements employed by both documents. Indiscriminately viewing a population as a whole enables Locke to make broad generalizations about mankind that justify slavery. By simply referring to "conqueror and a captive" he produces a binary view of the world—of the state of nature versus state of war—and of right versus wrong.<sup>12</sup> Locke's writings on slavery demonstrate the "intellectual flaw" Morrison describes as

---

<sup>9</sup> Morrison, "Moral Inhabitants," 59.

<sup>10</sup> Morrison, 59.

<sup>11</sup> Morrison, 59.

<sup>12</sup> Locke, *Two Treatises of Civil Government* (1689), 115.

the “deplorable inability to project, to become ‘other.’”<sup>13</sup> In some sense, the index embodies Locke’s attitude toward slavery; from his stance as an erudite philosopher he is too far removed from the reality of slavery to comment. For Locke, the concept of slavery is a theme to be manipulated to fit into his schema of society. It is questionable whether he considered the larger implications of his rhetoric as framework for asserting that certain people have fewer rights than others.

Morrison’s “Moral Inhabitants” not only addresses the issue of problematic language as presented in Chapter IV of Locke’s Second Treatise but provides a solution in the form of “humane scholarship.” Humane scholarship disrupts the traditional historical narrative, which is dictated by “percentiles, the thoughts of great men, and the descriptions of eras.”<sup>14</sup> Humane scholarship encourages intellectuals to consider the world from an intrapersonal level and emphasizes the value of the individual. Morrison’s criticism of classifying ethnic groups with a single title is also applicable to Locke’s overarching descriptions of “mankind” as a whole. When viewing humanity as one group, Locke loses sight of the critical distinctions between individuals and their uniquely human traits. Locke could hide behind the protective barrier of ambiguous language and lofty theories to justify jarring claims, such as the legitimacy of slavery. Perhaps if Locke had considered the subject from a more personal and individualized perspective, regarding the “lawful conqueror” and “captive” as individuals, rather than faceless members of mankind, he would have recognized the callous incongruities of his theory. Morrison’s essay “Moral Inhabitants” reveals the necessity for more empathetic scholarship, particularly when one’s position of authority warrants great reverence from their audience.

---

<sup>13</sup> Morrison, “Moral Inhabitants,” 61.

<sup>14</sup> Morrison, “Moral Inhabitants,” 60.



## Bibliography

John Locke, *Two Treatises of Civil Government* (1689), 114-115.

Toni Morrison. "Moral Inhabitants," in *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 59-61.