

American Philosophy - Essay 1 - Winter 2019

Locke says, “*The state of Nature has a law of Nature to govern it, which obliges every one, and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty or possessions; for men being all the workmanship of one omnipotent and infinitely wise Maker; all the servants of one sovereign Master, sent into the world by His order and about His business; they are His property, whose workmanship they are made to last during His, not one another’s pleasure. And, being furnished with like faculties, sharing all in one community of Nature, there cannot be supposed any such subordination among us that may authorise us to destroy one another, as if we were made for one another’s uses, as the inferior ranks of creatures are for ours. Every one as he is bound to preserve himself, and not to quit his station wilfully, so by the like reason, when his own preservation comes not in competition, ought he as much as he can to preserve the rest of mankind, and not unless it be to do justice on an offender, take away or impair the life, or what tends to the preservation of the life, the liberty, health, limb, or goods of another.*”

(1) Explain Locke’s argument (above) for: (a) the immorality of suicide, (b) the immorality of harming other people except in self-defense or as punishment for their harmful acts, and (c) the immorality of starting wars of conquest. Make sure to explain Locke’s ideas of natural law and natural right and to describe the role they play in this argument.

(2) Does the value of humanity depend on its “natural” (i.e. non-normative) superiority to the other species of animals? Might Locke be wrong in thinking that humans don’t have an obligation to respect the lives, liberties and property (i.e. ecosystems) of other animals? How might one argue for this obligation without invoking the “natural equality” of species?

(3) Do humans even have a “natural obligation” to respect and preserve their own lives and the lives of other humans?

If you answered yes to question (3), explain how you might argue for human rights on less theological grounds than those Locke provides. (Feel free to include research on modern theories of rights, like those offered by Nussbaum and Sen. But cite your sources)

If you answered no to question (3), describe your view of the ways in which humans ought to treat themselves and other humans. (Feel free to include research on modern moral systems that reject talk of rights. But cite your sources.)

(4) Can you argue for your moral (i.e. extra-legal) right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness in a manner that might convince someone who does not already believe in the existence of these rights? Do you need an argument of this kind to convince yourself of the immorality of someone’s taking your life, or land or freedom without provocation? What role has argumentation and the evaluation of arguments played in the development of your thinking about morality?

**5-6 Pages Double-spaced
Due 2/6/19 in class**