

# The Incompleteness of Free and Equal

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John Locke, who wrote the classic piece of *Two Treatises of Government*, and Toni Morrison, who lived in the country that applied Locke's idea as the backbone of law, are having a serious debate with their own ideas. Through a close analysis of Locke's idea in Morrison's perspective, the theories around "free and equal" are incomplete by limitation in inclusiveness of different races and genders and the divine lord.

In the chapter of *Of the State of Nature*, Locke wrote that it is essential to understand the status of all men first in order to understand political power, and one critical problem arises from his word choice of "men." In a modern dictionary, the word "human" may be more accurate when referring to the kind of biological species that we are. However, because Locke lived in the eighteenth century, he could intentionally employ this word to exclude women and other minority races. Morrison would definitely refute this point and claim the importance of everyone's effort across genders and races. And in fact, everyone has their own special roles to play in this gradually globalizing world. Then Locke came up with the cardinal idea of "perfect freedom"<sup>1</sup>, which according to his explanation is that men can do anything without others' interference as long as the thing is inside the definition of the "law of Nature"<sup>1</sup>. The argument is strange because Locke had not even explained the idea of freedom to the readers before he defined "perfect freedom." A possible explanation could be that Locke assumed that anybody who reads his passage is familiar with the concept of freedom, which he only needs to elaborate to create his definition of freedom. Nevertheless, everyone's definition of freedom is different. Morrison may agree with Locke on the idea of "what is freedom," but she definitely will

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1. John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government: in the Former, the False Principles and Foundation of Sir Robert Filmer, and His Followers Are Detected and Overthrown ; the Latter Is an Essay Concerning the True Original, Extent, and End of Civil-Government* (Ann Arbour, M.I.: Hardpress), 2012, 106

disagree with Locke's answer on "who shall embrace freedom." In Morrison's definition, nobody exploits anyone's freedom or right, but rather "humans relating to one another in mutually constructive ways."<sup>2</sup> Men and women from different races work at their own will towards the goals that they share. This modern definition of freedom indicates the aspect of inclusiveness in Locke's idea is not enough because he ignores how important females and different races can be in the construction of "perfect freedom."

Locke began to explain equality in the second paragraph. In his words, everybody in the state of nature is equal to each other. Also, the point he made that "wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal"<sup>3</sup> accords with Morrison's notion of human beings should help each other to a mutual goal. Although in my opinion, reciprocity has a different meaning from equality over a short period of time, in the long term, these two concepts could mean the same thing. In the standpoint of economy, every different entity has its own most effective product, like group A is good at making water and group B is good at making food. Both organizations could make their living on their own, but it is not as effective as they trade with each other at a reasonable rate. However, the reciprocal trade may be unequal at first because water is relatively more necessary than food, so the exchange rate may favor entity A than B. Nonetheless, in a long period of time both groups are indispensable for each other, because human beings cannot live without both resources, and the exchange rate will gradually flow to equality. However, this point is also theoretical, because in reality most enterprises are still unequally reciprocal, and Locke does not clarify the meaning of reciprocal here.

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2. Toni Morrison, "Moral Inhabitants," in *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 62

3. John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 106

Here it comes to, in my understanding, the most challenging part of this passage. “(men are equal) unless the lord and master of them all should, by any manifest declaration of his will, set one above another, and confer on him, by an evident and clear appointment, an undoubted right do dominion and sovereignty”<sup>4</sup>. This sentence seemingly contradicts with Locke’s argument of equality, but it actually serves supplement of that argument. It is the omnipotent “lord” that sets differences between men, which everyone should agree with, and therefore it is not a conflict of the definition but a part of it. However, people are in different religion in the modern world. For example, how will atheist view this rule set by the “lord?” In Morrison’s opinion, the concept of the “lord” here is only an excuse for justifying the existence of slavery and discrimination. One’s success that builds on somebody else’s failure is not really success, it is only inhumane exploitation.

The United States of America is the most successful country accords to Locke’s political theories, but the country’s freedom and equality also includes the dehumanization of turning people into slaves. Here arise some questions that are worth considering: is the equality of having “approved” inferiorities in Locke’s idea really equality? Is the “lord” who set this really an effective authority? Or are concepts like “free”, “equal” and “reciprocal” applicable in reality? No matter what the answers are, what Toni Morrison will say, which is also a point that will make Locke’s theories more complete, is that humans should be related “to one another in mutually constructive ways”.

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4. John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 106

## Bibliography

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