

Locke, Liberalism, and Disabilities: Towards an Ableist Contract

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As Carole Pateman rightly noted in the preface to *The Sexual Contract* (1988), “there has been a major revival of interest in contract theory since the early 1970s that shows no immediate signs of abating.” In fact, academic concern for the social contract has, far from abated, only heightened since the publication of John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice*. Though not an exclusively ‘liberal’ tradition, the theoretical current loosely described as “contractarianism” does, nonetheless, adhere to a set of ideas redolent of ‘liberal’ discourse. At the very least, fragments of a proto-liberal discourse, or what Jennifer Pitts called “a commitment to human dignity and equality,” abound in the contractarian writings of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Kant. Further, this “liberalism” of social contract theory is mostly pronounced in its universalistic aspirations as a political model for justice and freedom.

In the late 1980s, however, scholarly attention on the social contract focused on its exclusionary and oppressive structure veiled beneath its illusive universal pretensions. The work that launched this critical outlook was Pateman’s *Sexual Contract*. In it, she decried the very idea of a “social contract,” arguing that universal freedom, far from being “universal,” was a masculine exclusivity premised upon the subjection of women. Stemming from Pateman’s critique, Charles Mills argued, in *The Racial Contract*, that white supremacy was for the ‘racial contract’ what patriarchy was for the ‘sexual contract:’ a suppressed political system premised upon the systemic oppression of nonwhite persons. The general goal of my research, then, is to draw on the critical methods developed by Pateman and Mills in order to extend their critiques to the realm of disabilities. My method is to examine where, how, and why ‘ableism,’ or the systematic oppression of disabled persons due to their disabilities, is present in the textual arguments of modern political thinkers, from Hobbes to Rawls. However, my aim in this paper in particular is—in being directly linked to the conference’s theme—to analyze how the exclusion and marginalization of disabled persons is present in the liberal thought of John Locke. Through a close textual analysis of select works by Locke, I argue that both cognitively and physically disabled persons are systematically and particularly excluded from his political constituency on account of their disabilities.

I begin my paper by analyzing how Locke thought of cognitively disabled persons by revisiting his analytical distinctions between “ideots,” “lunaticks,” and “mad Men.” From this I will go on to compare the place cognitively disabled persons occupy in Locke’s political constituency vis-à-vis “rational creatures” and other marginalized subjects, such as non-white persons and women. Next, I will argue that Locke, unlike Descartes, saw mind and body in a state of “continual flux,” as interconnected parts of an organic continuous whole, made up of indiscernible matter. Locke thus conceived the cognitive development of rationality in the mind as being contingent upon the development of physical faculties in the body. This in turn introduces an important physical imperative for rationality in his theory. That is, in order to be rational one must have an able-body, or what I call the ‘able-body-able-mind connection.’ This connection, then, comes to life in Locke’s educational writings where physically disabled pupils, however mentally able, are preemptively excluded from education due to their physical disabilities. The materialist logic here is that a child’s physical deformity, or abnormality, will impede him from achieving full rationality through Locke’s pedagogical project.