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‘Born to command and not to obey’: Milton and the Political Force of Liberal Humanism

Asserting the legitimacy of executing Charles I, Milton declared, with typical force:

No man who knows ought, can be so stupid to deny that all men naturally were borne free, being the image and resemblance of God himself, and were by privilege above all the creatures, born to command and not to obey.

(Tenure, CPW 3.198–9)

The texts in which Milton elaborated the implications of this premise have caused him to stand for many as ‘the major intellectual spokesman’ of the English Revolution. In William Haller’s judgement, ‘His pamphlets, their influence enhanced and sustained by the poems which grew out of his revolutionary experience, would become one of the main channels by which Puritan revolutionary ideas in their most dynamic form would reach the age of John Locke.’

Certainly Locke, whose Two Treatises of Government have earned him general recognition as a founding father of liberal political thought, is in accord with Milton in his fundamental assumption of the natural freedom of man. Near the opening of the Second Treatise Locke declares that ‘To understand political power aright, and derive it from its original, we must consider what estate all men are naturally in, and that is, a state of perfect freedom to order their actions, and dispose of their possessions and persons as they think fit’ (2T §4). Part of this freedom was the right of each man to execute on his own behalf the law of nature, an objective guide to right conduct recognizable by rational reflection on the design of the universe, ‘the material element of the divine will, as revealed in the created order’. For Locke, ‘that all men
may be restrained from invading others’ rights, and from doing hurt to one another, and the law of Nature be observed, which willeth the peace and preservation of all mankind, the execution of the law of Nature is in that state put into every man’s hands’. Likewise Milton, rendering his account of the origins of government in the form of an historical narrative, refers to ‘This autoritie and power of self-defence and preservation’ against ‘what was violated against peace and common right . . . being originally and naturally in every one of them.’ However, there are, as Locke puts it, ‘inconveniences’ in this ‘state of nature’. Not only is there the possibility that some men will be guilty of ‘invading’ the rights of others, but there is the further danger that in judging what action to take in response men will be ‘partial to themselves and their friends’ and too harsh towards others. Milton, too, recognizes the problems that would arise if ‘each man should be his own partial judge’. Thus, as Locke puts it, ‘civil government is the proper remedy’. An end is put to the state of nature, states Milton, when men agree ‘to ordain som authoritie, that might restrain by force and punishment what was violated against peace and common right’ (2T §7 and 13; CPW 3.199).

However, giving up the power personally to execute the law of nature is not the end of the freedom which is the essence of man as God has made him, because it is not the end of the power to judge whether those charged with the responsibility of ruling, or executing the law of nature, are acting in accord with this law. For Locke, ‘government has no other end but the preservation of property’, defined a little later as the people’s ‘lives, liberties and estates, which I call by the general name – property’, and ‘The people shall be judge’ of whether this trust has been kept (2T §94, 123, 240). ‘Common right’ predates and exists independently of the sovereign. Thus, even once magistrates were established they remained accountable. The need for accountability underlies Milton’s account, in Tenure, of how, since the power to execute justice ‘left absolute in thir hands’ (that is to say, unrestricted by specific laws) proved a ‘temptation’ to the first magistrates and ‘perverted them at length to injustice and partialitie’, the people found they had to frame laws so that ‘man, of whose failing they had proof, might no more rule over them, but law and reason abstracted as much as might be from personal errors and frailties’ (CPW 3.199–200). According to Locke, any power which is not limited along these lines is ‘no form of civil government at all’ and is indeed worse than the state of nature, since a man subject to such power is denied a right of redress: