



Revisiting the Lockean Proviso on Ownership of Property in the Light of Contemporary Demand for Resource Control

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Abstract

This article examined the moral foundations of resource ownership in light of increasing global scarcity and inequality. Drawing on the natural rights tradition, particularly the work of John Locke, it analysed the relevance and limitations of the Lockean proviso, which holds that appropriation is just only if there is “enough and as good” left for others. Using the methods of critical analysis and normative evaluation, the study argued that the classical formulation of this proviso is inadequate for addressing the complexities of a finite and interconnected world. The paper first traced the development of natural rights theory and explained how Locke’s account of property introduced moral limits on acquisition. It then critically examined the classical proviso, showing how its assumptions of abundance and localised interaction failed under conditions of global inequality, environmental degradation, and resource scarcity. The discussion highlights how contemporary patterns of consumption and distribution undermined the possibility of leaving “enough and as good” for all. The article proposed a rethinking of the proviso as a global moral principle. It argued that resource rights must be conditioned by considerations of fairness, sustainability, and shared responsibility. By engaging contemporary scholarship on environmental justice and global inequality, the study advanced a framework that reconceives property not as absolute ownership but as a socially embedded and morally constrained possession. The paper concluded that

achieving resource equity in a finite world requires both conceptual revision and practical reform, aimed at ensuring that all individuals have access to the basic means of survival.

Keywords: Natural Rights; Lockean Proviso; Global Proviso; Resource Scarcity; Global Inequality; Property Rights; Resource Equity

Introduction

In a world where some nations struggle to access clean water while others have far beyond their needs, a simple but troubling question arises: who truly owns the Earth's resources? This question is not merely economic or political; it is deeply moral. It concerns whether individuals and nations have unlimited rights to acquire and use natural resources, or whether there are limits grounded in fairness and justice. As the global population grows and environmental pressures increase, this issue becomes more urgent and harder to ignore. The idea of natural rights offers an important starting point for addressing this problem. Natural rights theory holds that individuals possess certain rights simply by being human, including the right to own property. John Locke famously argued that individuals can acquire property by mixing their labour with nature. However, he introduced a condition which is often called the Lockean proviso, which posits that appropriation is only just if there is "enough, and as good" left for others (Locke 27). This proviso suggests that property rights are not absolute; they are limited by the need to ensure that others are not made worse off.

While Locke's idea was developed in a very different historical context, its relevance today is clear. The modern world is marked by finite resources, environmental degradation, and deep global inequalities. The assumption that there will always be "enough and as good" left is no longer convincing. Wealthy nations and corporations often control a large share of the world's resources, leaving poorer populations with limited access to basic necessities. This raises a critical question: can the Lockean proviso still justify current patterns of ownership, or does it need a rethinking on a global scale? This article argues that the traditional understanding of the Lockean proviso is no longer sufficient in a finite and interconnected world. Instead, it proposes the idea of a "global proviso," which extends the moral limits of resource appropriation beyond national boundaries. This study aims to demonstrate that justice necessitates a more inclusive and internationally responsive framework by looking at the fundamentals of natural rights and assessing the difficulties of resource scarcity and inequality. The method adopted is critical analysis and normative evaluation, which is aimed at questioning existing assumptions and proposing a more equitable approach to resource distribution.

Natural Rights and the Lockean Proviso

The idea of natural rights begins with a simple claim: that human beings possess certain rights by virtue of their humanity, not because they are granted by governments or societies. Scholars have defined this idea in different but related ways. John Locke describes natural rights as rights to “life, liberty, and estate,” which individuals hold in a state of nature prior to political authority (Locke 87). Hugo Grotius sees natural rights as moral principles rooted in human nature and discoverable by reason, independent of divine command (Grotius 89). Similarly, Thomas Hobbes defines natural right as the “liberty each man hath to use his own power... for the preservation of his own nature” (Hobbes 91). In more contemporary terms, John Finnis understands natural rights as claims grounded in basic human goods such as life, knowledge, and sociability (Finnis 198–200). Despite their differences, these accounts share a common idea: natural rights are universal, inherent, and morally binding.

The roots of natural rights thinking can be traced back to ancient philosophy, even though the term itself was not always used. In ancient Greek thought, philosophers were more concerned with natural law than with individual rights. Aristotle, for instance, argued that justice exists partly by nature and partly by convention, suggesting that there are universal moral standards that transcend human laws (*Nicomachean Ethics* V.7). However, Aristotle did not speak of rights in the modern sense; his focus was on duties and the proper order of the polis. Stoicism later developed this idea further by emphasising that all human beings share in reason and are therefore equal under a universal moral law. This laid an important foundation for later theories of natural rights. During the medieval period, natural law theory was refined within a theological framework. Thomas Aquinas argued that natural law is part of the eternal law of God and is accessible to human reason (Aquinas I-II, Q.94, Art. 2). For Aquinas, moral principles such as the preservation of life and the pursuit of good are grounded in human nature. Although he did not fully develop a theory of subjective rights, his work helped to establish the idea that moral claims can be universal and rationally justified. Over time, later thinkers began to shift the focus from law to rights, especially as Europe experienced political and religious upheavals.

The early modern period marked a turning point in the development of natural rights. Thinkers such as Hugo Grotius began to argue that natural law and rights would remain valid “even if we should concede... that there is no God” (89). This move made natural rights more secular and accessible. Thomas Hobbes further transformed the idea by grounding it in self-preservation. In his view, the state of nature is a condition of insecurity where each person has a right to everything, leading to conflict. To escape this, individuals transfer their rights to a sovereign authority (117). However, Hobbes’s account has a limitation: it reduces natural rights

largely to survival and justifies strong political control. It is in the work of John Locke that the modern and more balanced theory of natural rights is clearly articulated. Locke agrees that individuals possess natural rights in a pre-political state, but he presents this state as generally peaceful and governed by reason. According to Locke, all persons are equal and independent, and no one ought to harm another in their “life, health, liberty, or possessions” (271). Property becomes central in his theory. He argues that individuals acquire ownership by mixing their labour with natural resources. For example, when a person cultivates land or gathers fruit, they make it their own.

However, Locke does not defend unlimited acquisition. He introduces an important moral condition known as the Lockean proviso: appropriation is only just if there is “enough, and as good” left for others (288). This proviso serves as a restraint on excessive accumulation. For instance, if one person takes more land than they can use while others have none, such appropriation would violate the proviso. Locke also adds another limit: one should not take more than one can use before it spoils. These conditions show that property rights, for Locke, are not absolute but morally regulated (John 268). The Lockean proviso reveals a tension within natural rights theory. On one hand, it supports individual freedom and ownership; on the other, it recognises the need for fairness and shared access. In Locke’s time, this balance may have seemed reasonable because land and resources appeared abundant. In today’s world, however, where resources are clearly finite and unevenly distributed, the assumption that there will always be “enough and as good” is difficult to sustain. This raises a deeper question: can Locke’s framework still guide our understanding of justice in view of our contemporary reality or must it be revised to address global inequalities?

From Classical to Global: Rethinking the Proviso

The Lockean proviso, as earlier discussed, sets a moral condition on the appropriation of natural resources. What may be called the *classical proviso* refers to John Locke original formulation, which assumes a relatively simple social setting where individuals acquire property from nature without harming others. In this classical sense, the proviso operates within a limited framework—one in which resources appear abundant and human interactions are largely direct and localised. Its aim is to ensure fairness at the point of acquisition, not to regulate complex global systems of distribution. Locke (287–288) expresses this position in the *Two Treatises of Government*, thus:

Though the earth, and all inferior creatures, be common to all men, yet every man has a property in his own person... Whatsoever then he removes out of the state that nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his labour with, and joined to it something that is his

own, and thereby makes it his property... For this labour being the unquestionable property of the labourer, no man but he can have a right to what that is once joined to... at least where there is enough, and as good left in common for others.

This captures the moral structure of the classical proviso. Property is justified through labour, but it is not unlimited. The condition that there must be “enough and as good” left for others ensures that appropriation does not result in deprivation. In principle, this creates a balance between individual freedom and collective fairness. In practice, the classical proviso can support productive use of resources. For example, when an individual cultivates unused land, builds on it, or transforms raw materials into useful goods, such actions increase value and benefit society. As Robert Nozick argues, appropriation is just if it does not worsen the position of others, even if it leads to inequality (178). In this way, the proviso can justify economic growth and innovation while maintaining a moral check on excessive accumulation. However, this same flexibility allows the proviso to be interpreted in ways that favour the powerful. The idea of leaving “enough and as good” is not clearly defined, and this creates room for abuse. Historically, this ambiguity was used to justify large-scale land acquisition, especially during colonial expansion. According to C. B. Macpherson (221), Locke’s theory was shaped by a context in which land was treated as abundant, allowing appropriation to proceed with little regard for those who were displaced. In such cases, the proviso becomes less a limit and more a justification for inequality. The limitations of the classical proviso become even clearer in the modern world. First, the assumption of abundance no longer holds. Natural resources are finite, and their distribution is highly unequal. This is because global economic structures enable wealthy societies to consume far more than their fair share, while others lack access to basic needs (Pogge 13). Under such conditions, it is difficult to maintain that appropriation leaves “enough and as good” for all.

Second, the classical proviso does not address the global effects of resource use. It focuses on immediate acquisition without considering how actions in one part of the world impact others. For instance, industrial activities in developed countries contribute significantly to climate change, which disproportionately affects poorer regions. Henry Shue highlights that this imbalance raises serious questions about fairness and responsibility (531). The classical proviso lacks the scope to deal with such interconnected harms. Third, the proviso does not adequately consider future generations. It is mainly concerned with present access to resources, yet current patterns of consumption can limit the opportunities available to those who come later. What is worth noting is that justice must include obligations to future persons,

especially in matters of environmental sustainability (Barry, 99). The classical proviso, in its original form, does not clearly extend to this temporal dimension.

These challenges make it necessary to rethink the proviso beyond its classical formulation. A 'global proviso' would extend Locke's principle to the entire human community. It would require that the appropriation and use of resources anywhere in the world must not undermine the ability of others, regardless of location, to meet their basic needs. This approach reflects a shift from a narrow view of justice to a more inclusive and universal one. The case for a global proviso is supported by contemporary philosophical thought. For Pogge (15), global justice demands reforms that ensure fair access to resources for all, not just those within wealthy nations. Likewise, Peter Singer maintains that moral responsibility extends beyond borders, especially when we have the capacity to prevent harm (231). These perspectives reinforce the idea that fairness in resource distribution must be global in scope. From our analysis of the standpoint above, the move from a classical to a global proviso should be seen as a natural development rather than a radical break. If it is unjust for individuals to appropriate resources in a way that harms others within a community, then it is equally unjust for nations or corporations to do so on a global scale, and thus fairness should be prioritized as a canon in the proviso. As noted by Francis Esikot, "the possibility of prioritization requires universal rules of engagement and cooperation for the stability and progress required in a global world order" ("Globalization" 134). Therefore, the principle remains the same, but its application must expand to reflect the realities of a finite and interconnected world. In this way, the global proviso preserves the moral insight of Locke while making it relevant to contemporary challenges.

Resource Scarcity and Global Inequality

To understand the ethical challenge of resource distribution, it is important to first clarify what is meant by 'resource scarcity'. In simple terms, resource scarcity refers to a condition in which available resources are insufficient to meet human needs and demands. Scholars define it more precisely as a situation where resources are limited relative to the demands placed upon them, making allocation necessary (Bridge and Wyeth, 249-258). In another sense, scarcity can arise not only from physical limits but also from social and economic conditions that restrict access to resources. This means that scarcity is not always about absolute shortage; it can also be about unequal availability. Recent scholarship shows that scarcity is increasingly a global reality rather than a local one. Natural resources such as land, water, and energy are finite, and their depletion is accelerated by population growth and patterns of consumption. As Jeffrey D. Sachs (34) notes, the pressure on finite ecological systems is intensified by unsustainable economic practices, which place strain on both present and future resource availability. This suggests that scarcity is

not merely a technical issue but a moral one. If resources are limited, then decisions about who gets what become questions of justice.

Importantly, scarcity does not always mean that there is simply “not enough.” Scholars have pointed to what may be called “scarcity amidst abundance,” where resources exist in sufficient quantity but are distributed in ways that leave many without access. Modern economic systems often produce conditions in which wealth and resources are concentrated in the hands of a few, while many remain excluded (Arewa 300). For example, global food production is sufficient to feed the world’s population, yet millions still face hunger due to poverty and unequal distribution. This reveals that scarcity is often shaped by human systems rather than natural limits alone. Scarcity imposes moral constraints on how resources can be used. If resources are finite, then unlimited acquisition by some inevitably reduces access for others. This aligns with the concern raised above regarding the Lockean proviso: appropriation must not leave others worse off. In contemporary terms, this means that individuals, corporations, and states have a responsibility to use resources in ways that are fair and sustainable. Jason Hickel reinforces this point by arguing that continuous growth-driven consumption in wealthy societies deepens ecological strain and reinforces global inequalities (Hickel, 52). This highlights the need to rethink how resources are governed.

Closely connected to resource scarcity is the concept of global inequality. Global inequality refers to the uneven distribution of income, wealth, and access to resources among individuals and across nations. It captures both differences between countries and disparities within them. Thomas Piketty defines inequality as the concentration of wealth and power in ways that systematically advantage some groups over others (7). This definition shows that inequality is not random; it is structured and often reinforced by institutions. At its core, global inequality is not just an economic issue but a moral one. When some populations consume far more than they need while others lack basic necessities, questions of fairness arise. For instance, resource-rich countries often enjoy higher standards of living, while resource-poor regions face structural challenges that limit development. Okereke (112) argues that global environmental governance often reflects unequal power relations, where the interests of stronger nations dominate decision-making processes. This creates a situation where inequality is not only maintained but also legitimised.

Furthermore, the relationship between inequality and sustainability is particularly important. Unsustainable consumption patterns in wealthier societies place pressure on global resources, contributing to environmental problems such as climate change. At the same time, poorer communities are often the most affected by these problems. Ikeme (198) highlights that climate justice debates reveal deep tensions between responsibility and vulnerability, as those who contribute least to

environmental harm suffer the most from its effects. This imbalance raises serious ethical concerns about fairness and accountability. For example, economies that rely heavily on natural resources often experience uneven development, where wealth is concentrated in certain sectors or regions. At the same time, efforts to reduce dependence and promote sustainable development can help narrow these gaps. The 'Human Development Report' by the United Nations Development Programme shows that inequalities in access to education, health, and environmental resources continue to shape life chances across the world (UNDP 45). This suggests that inequality is not only about income but also about access to opportunities and well-being.

From a broader perspective, the link between scarcity and inequality raises important questions about justice. If scarcity is partly socially produced, then inequality is not inevitable; it is shaped by policies, institutions, and power relations. This means that addressing global inequality requires more than temporary solutions; it requires structural change that must ensure that all individuals have access to the basic means of survival while also respecting environmental limits.

Towards Resource Equity in a Finite World

It is indeed true that the "history of philosophy and indeed humanity has been characterized by the emergence of trends, movements, ideas or ideologies which have held sway at one time or the other" (Esikot, "Multiculturalism" 91). If earlier discussions have shown that scarcity and inequality are not accidental but structured, then any meaningful solution must go beyond adjusting outcomes and instead rethink the very architecture of ownership. Rather than focusing only on limiting excess, a more forward-looking approach is to redesign property relations in ways that reflect interdependence, ecological limits, and shared vulnerability. One emerging perspective is the idea of relational property. This view moves away from seeing property as a fixed individual entitlement and instead understands it as a set of relationships between people, communities, and the environment. According to Okereke (121), environmental governance must recognise that natural resources are embedded within social and ecological systems, and therefore cannot be treated as isolated commodities. For instance, a forest is not merely timber for private gain; it is also a source of livelihood, biodiversity, and climate regulation. Treating such resources as purely private property ignores these wider connections.

A second perspective involves recognising certain resources as 'global commons'. This includes elements such as the atmosphere, oceans, and even critical minerals that are essential for modern technology. Instead of allowing unrestricted private or national control, these resources can be governed through shared frameworks that ensure equitable access. Elinor Ostrom demonstrates that common resources can be sustainably managed through collective rules and local

participation, rather than through either pure privatisation or centralised control (88). This challenges the assumption that only private ownership can ensure efficiency. In addition, there is a growing argument for 'use-based' rather than 'ownership-based' rights. Under this model, what matters is not who owns a resource, but how it is used and whether that use contributes to human well-being. Arewa (308), points out that systems that prioritise accumulation often disconnect ownership from productive or beneficial use, leading to waste and exclusion. For example, land that is held for speculation rather than cultivation may be legally owned but socially unproductive. A use-based approach would prioritise access for those who can utilise resources in ways that meet real needs. This shift in thinking is captured in the following reflection by Ostrom (90-91):

The presumption that common-pool resources must either be privatised or centrally regulated has led to policy prescriptions that are often ineffective. What we have found instead is that users of these resources frequently develop sophisticated systems of governance, including rules, monitoring, and sanctions, that allow them to manage resources sustainably. These systems are not perfect, but they show that collective action, when properly structured, can avoid both overuse and exclusion. The challenge is not to eliminate shared ownership, but to design institutions that make it work.

This insight opens up a new way of thinking: rather than asking how much individuals can own, we begin to ask how resources can be governed in ways that are inclusive, adaptive, and sustainable. Translating these ideas into practice requires a shift from abstract principles to concrete institutional design. One key implication is the need for multi-level governance, where decisions about resources are made not only by national governments but also by local communities and international bodies. This layered approach recognises that resource challenges operate at different scales and cannot be solved by a single authority. For example, local communities can be empowered to manage land and water resources through participatory systems, while global institutions can regulate issues such as climate change and transboundary pollution. Accordingly, inclusive governance is essential for achieving environmental justice, as it allows those most affected by resource decisions to have a voice in shaping them (Ikeme 200). This not only improves fairness but also enhances the effectiveness of policies.

Another practical implication is the need to align economic incentives with ethical goals. At present, many systems reward over-extraction and short-term profit. To change this, policies can be designed to encourage sustainable behaviour. This may include carbon pricing, resource taxes, and incentives for renewable energy.

Jeffrey D. Sachs emphasises that sustainable development requires integrating economic, social, and environmental goals, rather than treating them as separate concerns (45). For instance, investing in clean energy not only reduces environmental harm but also creates jobs and improves long-term stability. A further step involves redefining what counts as progress. If success continues to be measured primarily in terms of economic growth, then pressures on resources will persist. Hickel (74) argues that societies must move towards models that prioritise human well-being, equity, and ecological balance over endless expansion. This could involve adopting alternative indicators such as well-being indices or sustainability metrics, which provide a more accurate picture of social progress. The deeper ethical challenge, however, lies in reshaping global responsibility. As Thomas Pogge (18–19) observes:

We are not merely passive observers of global inequality; we are participants in a system that produces it. The structures that govern trade, investment, and resource use are not neutral—they are shaped by human decisions and can therefore be changed. If these structures foreseeably and avoidably impose severe disadvantages on some, then those who uphold them share responsibility for the resulting harms. Justice, in this sense, requires not only assistance to the poor but reform of the rules that perpetuate their condition.

This argument shifts the focus from charity to accountability. It suggests that achieving resource equity is not simply about helping those in need, but about transforming the systems that create need in the first place. In other words, this could mean strengthening international agreements on resource use, enforcing corporate accountability across borders, and ensuring that technological advancements benefit a wider range of people. It also involves promoting transparency and fairness in the allocation of resources, particularly in sectors such as mining, agriculture, and energy.

Conclusion

The question of who has a right to the world's resources becomes more urgent in a finite and deeply unequal world. This study has shown that while the classical formulation of natural rights, particularly in John Locke, provides a useful foundation, it is no longer sufficient for addressing contemporary realities. The Lockean proviso, though morally insightful, assumes conditions of abundance and limited interaction that no longer exist. In today's interconnected global system, resource use in one region often affects the well-being of others, making a purely individual or local approach inadequate. The study has urged for a change to a more inclusive framework, one that extends moral concern beyond borders and generations, by looking at the reality of resource scarcity and global inequity. Such a framework is provided by the concept of a global proviso, which mandates that

resource exploitation cannot jeopardise the fundamental requirements of people anywhere in the globe. Additionally, redefining property rights and encouraging shared accountability offer workable strategies to achieve greater justice. In the end, justice in a finite world requires more than ownership; it demands responsibility, restraint, and cooperation. It is only when we rethink both our moral assumptions and institutional practices that we can have a more balanced and sustainable global order be realised.

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