#4

“For where is the man that has incontestable evidence of the truth of all he holds, or of the falsehood of all he condemns; or can say that he has examined to the bottom all his own, or other men’s opinions? The necessity of believing without knowledge, nay often upon very slight grounds, in this fleeting state of action and blindness we are in, should make us more busy and careful to inform ourselves than constrain others.”

* John Locke

In this citation, Locke suggests that there is no man who is, essentially, all-knowing. The implication of this is claim is that everyone is flawed when it comes to the truths that they hold, and it is thus their duty to inform themselves to better justify what they claim. It is preferable to be humble than to condemn what others hold as truth, for others may well be more justified in their claims. In this essay, I will support Locke’s assertion that one should be more concerned with finding deeper justification for the truths that we hold, but also that we should still be allowed to “constrain” others in certain situations without incontestable evidence of our claims. I shall argue further that it is impossible to hold an incontestable claim because such a thing does not exist. I will instead argue for justifying one’s claims to a *reasonable* extent, relative to the scale and importance of one’s claims.

It is important to inform ourselves about the truths that we hold because they influence the decisions that we make, both the ones that are arrived at through reason and even those that are arrived at emotionally. Essentially, any decision that one makes is a reaction to an occurrence based on what one holds as a set of truths. To provide an example, a man is told that he has to choose a field to study in university. This is the occurrence that prompts a reaction. Let us assume that narrows down his choices to music and biology. He chooses biology, and this is the reaction to the occurrence. He justifies his choice by arguing that even though he enjoys music more, studying biology would open up more job opportunities than music would, and that having a stable career path is more important than enjoying himself. These are all truths that he holds. Given the long-term consequences of his decision, it is thus important that the decision he arrived at be based on truthful claims. Let us assume, then, that this man makes a claim that is not truthful. Let us assume that he holds that music would open to just as many career opportunities as biology would, and that since he enjoys music better, he should pursue it. He has again made a decision that is based on what he holds as truths, but given the invalidity of this truth, it affects him negatively in the long term. It is also easy to imagine instances where the decisions one has to make would negatively influence other people, and in such situations, having a lack of informed claims could have a negative societal impact where one would be morally accountable.

It is also important, however, to realize that one cannot be expected to hold incontestable truths before judging others for the truths that they hold. This is not necessarily what Locke meant to argue, all he says is that it is *preferable* to inform oneself than to constrict others, but doesn’t suggest at one point one is allowed to do the latter. It is unreasonable to be expected to hold incontestable truths because they do not exist. Any claim can be argued against. The reason that I argue this is because every possible claim, no matter how deeply examined and justified, always rests upon a set of assumptions, and assumptions are intuitive, not logical. One can throw a ball against a wall one thousand times and watch it bounce back in the same way every single time. One can reasonably argue that if one were to throw the ball again, that it would bounce back in the same way, because it did one thousand times before, and because the laws of physics work in such a way that require the ball to bounce in that way. However likely it may be that the ball will bounce back in the same way the next time, this argument still rests on the assumption that the laws of physics are always consistent and will continue to be consistent in the future when one throws the ball against the wall again. The point here is that if one were required to hold incontestable truths before judging others, one would never be fit to denounce what someone else considers a truth, as one could always be expected to more deeply justify the truths that they hold. A man who disagrees that the ball would bounce back the same way in the next iteration could expect the one making the claim to further justify his position before judging him. For this reason, I believe it to be a waste of time to seek out *incontestable* truths, and instead propose that one holds truths that are *reasonable*. A reasonable truth would be one that can be justified to an extent where one can argue that a truth is very likely. This is, of course, context dependent, and subjective. The individual has to define for himself what is reasonable justification given the circumstances, and be honest to himself while doing so. One can, for example, be reasonably expected to more deeply justify a decision with large consequences (like choosing to study biology instead of music) than a decision that is essentially insignificant and has no far-reaching consequences (like deciding that a ball will bounce a certain way when thrown at a wall). While there is a lot to be desired in terms of the objectivity of such a judgement, it is the best we can hope for as creatures who are inherently only able to observe things subjectively.

So what if one is informed, then? What if one holds a truth that can be reasonably justified? In that situation, it would be perfectly acceptable to, as Locke puts it, *constrain* someone else for the truth that they hold. One might argue that it is immoral or irresponsible to silence an opposing view, especially so because truth is subjective, and because a huge number of ideas that were in the past considered incontestable truths have been in later years shown to be false. In the past it was an incontestable truth that the sun revolved around the earth, but today we know that it is the earth which revolves around the sun. Therefore, a controversial view may not necessarily be a false one. To that, I would argue that yes, there are dangers associated with constraining the truths that others hold, but also that to constrain a view does not necessarily mean to silence it. What would perhaps be the most responsible thing to do is to honestly consider the opposing view, regardless of how sure one is in their own, and if one finds that it is not logically sound, one can then discard it as false. These claims would only be silenced to the extent that they would not be given the same credence as claims that are considered logical in the society where they are found. A good example of this is the debate of evolution vs. creationism. Evolution is considered a nearly incontestable truth in our society today, but there still exists creationists who argue against it. They are free to argue for creationism all they want. They are only silenced to the extent that not having a serious presence in the scientific community is considered being silenced. The danger with letting people hold views that are not reasonably justified is that it can also lead to negative long-term consequences. It can mean that ideas that are not grounded in logic at all can have a foothold in society, and in effect be counter-productive to the intellectual development of society.

In the course of this essay, I have supported Locke’s claim that being secure in what one holds as a truth is a vital duty for the individual, and not doing so can lead to negative long-term consequences. I have even argued that it is one’s moral duty to make sure one’s views are reasonably justified. I have also argued that one should be allowed to constrain opposing claims if they are not reasonably justified, as failing to do so might be detrimental to society.