

# **LOCKE'S TWO TREATISES OF GOVERNMENT**

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Richard Ashcraft

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# LOCKE'S TWO TREATISES OF GOVERNMENT

*By*

RICHARD DASHCRAFT

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## GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

Each volume in this series is devoted to a single major text. It is intended for serious students and teachers of literature, and for knowledgeable non-academic readers. It aims to provide a scholarly introduction and a stimulus to critical thought and discussion.

Individual volumes will naturally differ from one another in arrangement and emphasis, but each will normally begin with information on a work's literary and intellectual background, and other guidance designed to help the reader to an informed understanding. This is followed by an extended critical discussion of the work itself, and each contributor in the series has been encouraged to present in these sections his own reading of the work, whether or not this is controversial, rather than to attempt a mere consensus. Some volumes, including those on *Paradise Lost* and *Ulysses*, vary somewhat from the more usual pattern by entering into substantive critical discussion at the outset, and allowing the necessary background material to emerge at the points where it is felt to arise from the argument in the most useful and relevant way. Each volume also contains a historical survey of the work's critical reputation, including an account of the principal lines of approach and areas of controversy, and a selective (but detailed) bibliography.

The hope is that the volumes in this series will be among those which a university teacher would normally recommend for any serious study of a particular text, and that they will also be among the essential secondary texts to be consulted in some scholarly investigations. But the experienced and informed non-academic reader has also been in our minds, and one of our aims has been to provide him with reliable and stimulating works of reference and guidance, embodying the present state of knowledge and opinion in a conveniently accessible form.

C.J.R.  
University of Warwick,  
December 1979

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## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>Works</i>	<i>The Works of John Locke</i> , 12th edn, 9 vols (1824).
<i>ELN</i>	<i>Essays on the Law of Nature</i> , ed. W. Von Leyden (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954)
I:1,1	<i>An Essay Concerning Human Understanding</i> , ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975)
I,1 or II,1	<i>Two Treatises of Government</i> , ed. Peter Laslett, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967)
<i>STCE</i>	<i>Some Thoughts Concerning Education</i> , in James L. Axtell (ed.), <i>The Educational Writings of John Locke</i> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968)
FTG or STG	<i>Two Tracts on Government</i> , ed. Philip Abrams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967)
<i>Early Draft</i>	<i>An Early Draft of Locke's Essay</i> , ed. R. I. Aaron and Jocelyn Gibb (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936)
<i>Correspondence</i>	<i>The Correspondence of John Locke</i> , ed. E. S. De Beer, 8 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976–85)
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**LOCKE'S  
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## INTRODUCTION

Thirty years ago, Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* was viewed as the classic expression of liberal political ideas. It was read as a defence of individualism and of the natural right of individuals to appropriate private property. The *Two Treatises*, it was argued, stated the fundamental principles of the Whigs, and thus served as an intellectual justification for the Glorious Revolution of 1689. The *Two Treatises of Government* provided, in short, a general philosophical defence of the rights of property-owners to institute and defend a political system based upon their consent, and a specific historical defence of the actions of the landed gentry and aristocracy in placing William and Mary on the English throne in 1689. Moreover, Locke's work, and especially the *Second Treatise*, was often characterized as the first secular expression of political theory in the modern era.

In recent years, every aspect of this long-accepted orthodoxy has been challenged by Locke scholars and historians of Restoration England. The communal, religious and traditional features of Locke's political thought which derive from his acceptance of the primary assumptions of Aristotelianism and Christianity have received considerable attention. The general thrust of this interpretative approach has been to see Locke more as a lineal descendant of medieval and Reformation political thought than as the founder of modern political theory.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, greater emphasis has been placed upon Locke's political activity and commitments, and especially upon the radical dimensions of his political ideas in the *Two Treatises of Government*. That work, it is now argued, was not accepted by the Whigs who came to power in the wake of the Glorious Revolution as a commonsensical expression of their political beliefs; on the contrary, they generally dissociated themselves from the anonymously authored *Two Treatises* because it contained radical ideas which were alien to their own conservative perspective.<sup>2</sup> Locke's political thought has simultaneously moved much closer to that of Hooker, Suarez and Aristotle on the one hand, and to the Levellers, Sidney and the Republicans on the other. Indeed, an almost complete reversal of emphasis has occurred. In place of the modern secular Locke, we are offered a traditionally religious thinker, and in place of the conservative spokesman for a landed oligarchy, contemporary interpreters have unearthed a politically revolutionary Locke surrounded

by artisans, tradesmen and old Commonwealth army officers. The *Two Treatises of Government* has become a work which is at once philosophically more conservative and politically more radical.

There are other political theorists about whom more has been written, but with the possible exception of Marx it would be hard to think of an example of one who has undergone a more radical transformation than Locke within the last generation with respect to the characterization of his political thought in the secondary literature. Various aspects of the older orthodoxy still persist, of course, and are defended in books and articles on Locke published during the last decade. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that the tide has shifted in favour of the new orthodoxy – which, however, is not quite so internally homogeneous as I have sketched it above. If the latter has not yet scored a complete triumph, it has seriously undermined the foundations of the older intellectual structure. While this fact says something about the dynamic dimensions of Locke scholarship, it also reveals the perils of interpretation. All that seems solidly grounded to one generation of interpreters may melt into the air for the next.

The tension produced by these co-existing interpretative frameworks will necessarily emerge at almost every crucial point in our discussion of Locke's argument in the *Two Treatises*. Quite apart from the disagreements among various scholars as to the interpretation of a particular passage in the text, therefore, the reader needs to be aware of the broader dimensions of the controversy over the meaning of the work, viewed as a whole. The range of this controversy extends beyond any possible substantive consensus among the participants with respect to the basic precepts of Lockean political theory. For underlying the opposing interpretations of Locke's political thought are fundamental disagreements concerning the definition of political theory, the methodological principles one ought to employ in order to interpret political theory, and the epistemological ground upon which the arguments pertaining to both of these questions must ultimately rest. Our preoccupation with reading one particular text of political theory, in other words, ought not to be allowed to obscure the importance of the fact that embedded in that reading are significant differences in the assessments of the philosophical and historical meaning of Locke's political ideas, of the nature of political theory as viewed by contemporary political theorists, and of the practice of interpretation within the methodology of the social sciences.

Two problems associated with the *Two Treatises* have remained more or less impervious to the recent interpretative developments.

The first concerns the philosophical inconsistencies and logical flaws which, it is alleged, permeate that work. Plamenatz, for example, writes of the many 'ambiguities and false reasonings which spoil the second *Treatise*'. Locke's text, he argues, is so full of 'inconsistencies and confusions' and 'bad arguments' that 'the more carefully we attend to his arguments, the less intelligible they appear'.<sup>3</sup> Sabine is equally harsh in his pronouncements, condemning Locke for his lack of 'formal clarity' or analytical consistency. The consequence, Sabine maintains, is that Locke's political theory in the *Two Treatises* has 'no logical structure' which moves from the first principles of Locke's philosophy to the specific political propositions defended in that work.<sup>4</sup> Gough summarizes the point with the declaration that Locke's political theory 'is full of illogical flaws and inconsistencies'.<sup>5</sup> This criticism was of course formulated in terms of a particular conception of what a good political theory should look like and according to methodological criteria which placed great weight upon logical consistency, clear definitions and an analytically structured argument.

Advocates of a more historically grounded approach to Locke's thought, while they accorded less emphasis to these canons of philosophy as hermeneutic standards, did not so much deny the existence of philosophical inconsistencies in the *Two Treatises* as offer an explanatory account of their presence in terms of the importance Locke attached to certain religious or political beliefs. Even if one accepts this redistribution of emphasis in an interpretative account of Locke's political thought, however, any analysis of the text of the *Two Treatises* must still come to terms with the problem of delineating its internal structure. In this endeavour, the issue of whether there are logical errors in philosophical reasoning in Locke's argument cannot be put aside. Moreover, are these defects present to such a degree as to vitiate the cogency of Locke's argument? Do they, when added up, force one to accept Sabine's conclusion that the *Two Treatises* has no 'logical structure'?

The second intransigent problem concerns the importance of Sir Robert Filmer to Locke's argument in the *Two Treatises*. Although Locke describes his work as a single 'discourse concerning government', it has appeared to many readers to be two very different 'books'. The *First Treatise* is a sustained polemic directed against Filmer's *Patriarcha* and his attempt to demarcate the political rights and duties of seventeenth-century Englishmen through an interpretation of certain passages in the Bible. The *Second Treatise* sets forth 'the true original, extent, and end of civil government', as understood

by Locke. The argument in this half of the discourse is not constrained by the debate concerning the meaning of a particular text – the Bible – which characterizes the *First Treatise*, but is more abstract and wide-ranging in its marshalling of evidence. Some interpreters have gone so far as to claim that the *First Treatise*, as ‘a polemical tract’, is devoid of any ‘permanent importance’, while the *Second Treatise*, as ‘a work of philosophy’ containing ‘principles of universal validity’, deserves its recognition as a classic in the history of political theory.<sup>6</sup> This conclusion owes much to the presupposition that Locke was – or should have been – writing against the only philosophically worthy opponent among his contemporaries: Thomas Hobbes. Whatever his other merits, Filmer is generally regarded as being a very poor philosopher. Hence the conclusion that the *First Treatise* is not really worthy of serious philosophical consideration. The *Second Treatise*, however, was presumed to contain Locke’s reply to – or, in some interpretations, his subtle agreement with – Hobbes, and this fact placed that work among the other great books of political philosophy, such as *Leviathan* or *The Republic*.

Recent interpreters have challenged this linkage of the *Second Treatise* with Hobbes’s political theory, arguing that Filmer was Locke’s intellectual opponent throughout the *Two Treatises*. It is the political importance of Filmer’s ideas in the context of the 1680s, and not the philosophical cogency of his position in *Patriarcha*, which justifies this reassessment of his relationship to Locke’s work. While this viewpoint goes some way towards removing the older bifurcated classification of the *Two Treatises*, it does not dispose of the problem altogether.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, in some respects, the emphasis placed upon the historical significance of Filmer’s argument only increases the difficulty of answering the original question: Why should we suppose that a critical compendium of Filmer’s errors, as compiled by Locke, contains anything of lasting significance so far as contemporary students of political theory are concerned? To put it another way, even if we take Filmer’s ideas more seriously, we are still faced with the distinction Locke draws between ‘the false principles’ of his opponent that occupy his attention in the *First Treatise* and the ‘true’ principles of government laid out in the second half of his discourse. To the degree that truth-claims are a constitutive part of one’s definition of ‘political theory’, this dichotomy poses problems for the interpreter seeking to uncover a unified structure of ‘the text’ of the *Two Treatises*. Moreover, despite the increased attention given to Filmer by recent scholars, there is still no extended discussion of the

*First Treatise* in the secondary literature on Locke.<sup>8</sup> Yet, unless we can demonstrate the importance of Locke's critique of Filmer in the *First Treatise* to the understanding of the *intellectual* framework Locke employs in the *Second Treatise* – that is, for reasons other than the practical influence exercised by Filmer's ideas on Locke's contemporaries – the temptation to disregard the former's errors in order to move expeditiously to a consideration of the 'truth', as presented by Locke, remains a very powerful one.

In addition to these two problems bequeathed to contemporary interpreters of Locke's thought by the traditional orthodoxy, there is a newly uncovered problem which affects in a general way one's view of Locke's political thought and, to a lesser degree, one's reading of the *Two Treatises*. Until recently, virtually all interpreters began their discussion of Locke's political thought with an exegesis of the text of the *Two Treatises*. Leaving aside the fact that, as Laslett has shown, that work was written almost a decade earlier than had previously been assumed, the publication of some of Locke's early writings has provided a much more extended time-frame, from 1660 to 1690, within which to view his political thought. Not only does the *Two Treatises* represent the end product of a long process of political thinking by Locke, but it is also clear from these early manuscripts that his initial approach to politics began from a vantage-point very far removed from the one embodied in the later work. Such important aspects of Locke's political thought as natural rights, toleration, property, limitations on the magistrate's power, and the right to resistance are either absent from these early writings or, more often, are actually rejected by Locke, writing as the opponent of beliefs which later came to be identified as essential ingredients of his thought. To state the point crudely, these early writings show that Locke was not always a 'Lockean' with respect to his political theory. It is clear that a rather dramatic shift in political perspective occurred in Locke's life some time between 1660 and 1680, when he was at work on the *Two Treatises*. While this shift certainly affects one's conception of Locke's political thought, viewed as a whole, the extent to which it bears upon the interpretation of the *Two Treatises* is much less obvious.

If it were the case that *every* significant proposition in these early writings was subsequently rejected by Locke, it might be plausible to assume that one could simply begin an analysis of Locke's political thought with an examination of the *Two Treatises*. In fact, the issue is more complicated than this. For some of the presuppositions held by



Locke in these early writings are important to his later writings, even though the practical political commitments attached to those presuppositions are radically different. In other words, there are both continuities and discontinuities between Locke's early and later writings with respect to the structure of his political thought as a whole. Any attempt to reconstruct that framework, therefore, must adopt a developmental approach; that is, one capable of specifying the areas of stability and change in Locke's political theory. Moreover, unless this is done, any attempt to characterize the structure of Locke's political thought merely from a consideration of his arguments in the *Two Treatises* is, at best, incomplete and, at worst, subject to serious errors of interpretation.

These, then, are the three significant problems which must be addressed in a book which focuses upon the text of Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*. In any effort to explain the relationships that obtain between the various arguments employed by Locke in that work, the interpreter must decide (1) whether and to what extent one assumption or argument is inconsistent with respect to another, (2) whether the treatment of Filmer's ideas in the *First Treatise* is merely an adjunct to or is a necessary part of Locke's argument in the *Second Treatise*, and (3) how to relate the internal structure of the text of the *Two Treatises* to the structure of Locke's political thought as a whole.

Since I propose to say something, briefly, regarding Locke's early life and the historical context within which he undertook to write the *Two Treatises*, I will begin with a consideration of the third problem. The first step is to clarify the nature of the 'break' in Locke's political viewpoint, and to suggest some reasons for it. Then, beginning with Chapter 2, I will move from the more obvious political consequences attached to this shift in Locke's perspective to an attempt to delineate those general assumptions which retained an essential importance to the formulation of Locke's political theory throughout his life. My aim in this chapter is to uncover the basic dimensions of Locke's thought, as expressed in certain ontological presuppositions, religious beliefs and empirical generalizations about the nature of God, man and the conditions of social existence. These beliefs, I shall argue, constitute the foundation for Locke's discussion of politics.

In Chapter 3, I turn to Locke's critique of Filmer in the *First Treatise*. Locke's polemic, I suggest, is guided by certain hermeneutical principles that he employs against Filmer's interpretation of the Bible in order to undermine the claims advanced for absolute