**John Locke: Ownership from Labor**

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*Introduction*

John Locke’s views on labor and its relation to property are well-traversed terrain.[[1]](#endnote-1) His arguments are by now familiar enough to most scholars that there seems little warrant for reconsidering what he says. The conventional account of him is as a natural law theorist who justifies the right to property through an act of labor that satisfies a moral duty of self-preservation. From there interpretations usually diverge along three paths: one that situates Locke among the founders of classical liberalism and extols him as a libertarian; another that criticizes him as someone who rationalizes the exploitative and inegalitarian tendencies of market economies; and a final one that regards his arguments as dated and of little contemporary relevance. Which of the three paths is taken usually reflects the predilections of a given scholar as much as it does anything concerning Locke, and often involves arguments that exhibit notable partiality. Yet, while there may be no way to adjudicate definitively the various takes on Locke’s views – nor enforce strictures that his arguments be recounted impartially – it does remain possible to survey what he says and why it has proven provocative. For despite the apparent familiarity of his work, it nevertheless remains the case that there are nuances to Locke’s position that are worth reexamination.

Born in 1632, Locke came of age in England at a time when there were sharp political cleavages that fell along religious, economic, and social lines.[[2]](#endnote-2) As he himself characterized it, “I no sooner perceived myself in the world but I found myself in a storm.”[[3]](#endnote-3) The storm Locke refers to is the period after the English Civil War, when tensions were inflamed following the restoration of the monarchy in 1660.[[4]](#endnote-4) Locke experienced these tensions himself in a variety of ways, through personal and professional relationships, as well as the reception of his writings. As an author Locke’s reputation initially turned upon his efforts in philosophy, particularly his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, an innovative and provocative work in epistemology. Yet Locke did not neglect more practical matters, penning texts that took up issues of education, religious toleration, and the nature of political authority. It is the latter writings that evince his personal and professional commitments, as his service as the Earl of Shaftesbury’s personal physician facilitated Locke’s initiation into the world of high politics.[[5]](#endnote-5) Well situated to witness the major events of his day, Locke’s position also allowed him no small degree of participation in them. This participation took various forms both officially and unofficially, and unquestionably includes his most famous political writing, *Two Treatises of Government*.[[6]](#endnote-6) It is upon this work that Locke’s reputation as a political philosopher stands, as well as the provision of his views about labor and its significance. It is, accordingly, the subject of this chapter given my concern to review Locke’s views of labor.

My discussion shall proceed as follows: I will begin with a review of Locke’s position that situates his discussion in its historical context and clarifies how the debates of his day led Locke to make the argument he does. Along these lines, I shall lay out that argument and draw out what I take to be the major elements of his discussion. Locke himself regarded his views as novel and important, recommending them as part of a reading program for someone interested in being well-educated about the affairs of government.[[7]](#endnote-7) Locke’s appraisal of his own work is warranted, for his argument does shift the parameters of the debate about labor and property as conceptualized at that time. Recognizing this then allows for a review of the reception of Locke’s views that provides insight into the reaction of later scholars, who either attempt to extend or repudiate his arguments. Locke’s views have essentially proven to be a lightning rod that attracts quite electrifying comments about the relation of economics and politics, and considering a few of the critical claims made for and against him in this regard will serve to underscore the importance of what he says. I will then conclude with a few observations of my own that draw together the themes of my discussion. While I do believe Locke’s position continues to be pertinent today, I think this pertinence is more limited than sometimes allowed. I will therefore now begin with a review of his views that contextualizes them historically.

*Labor, Property, and the Issue of Legitimate Ownership*

Debates about labor and property during Locke’s time were characterized by references to the Bible and to Natural Law, and had antecedents traceable to the medieval era.[[8]](#endnote-8) The significance of this is that while scholars during Locke’s day may have differed in their interpretations of Scripture or accounts of Natural Law, when it came to notions of labor and property their disagreements fell within a particular set of boundaries. This is no surprise, for while the Reformation had undermined the hegemony of the Catholic Church the basic worldview within Europe remained one given by Christianity. Despite the effects of the scientific revolution, which increasingly called into question the metaphysical presuppositions of both Catholics and Protestants alike, there was a continuity of thought and disquisition inherited from the middle ages that continued to shape scholarly discourse. Thus during the medieval period the debate was over whether humanity’s natural state (as evinced with the Garden of Eden) allowed for a natural right of property or whether personal property was a social convention set up after Adam and Eve’s expulsion from Eden. The echoes of these arguments reverberated during the seventeenth century in the form of disputes about property that invoked the idea of a natural commons that preceded the allotment of specific property holdings to individuals. The questions that Locke and his contemporaries asked were markedly similar to those asked earlier: how can one justify a right to personal possessions, and what are the political implications of this? Obviously there were different answers to these questions, and to the extent that this is the case the various answers can be explained by the particular concerns of the given writer. As has long been noted for Locke, *his* concern was to respond to the writing of Sir Robert Filmer (1588-1652), whose works were being used by Roylists to vindicate the ideal of absolute monarchy.

Filmer’s position expresses the view that there is a natural hierarchy based upon paternal power, and that the political order reflects this insofar as a king rules a nation the way a father rules his family. The argument is at once grounded upon revelation and reason, for the evidence Filmer uses is that given by the stories in the Bible as confirmed by reflection upon the implications of these stories. Filmer’s target is the set of arguments made by men such as Grotius, who held that humanity’s original condition was a state of nature characterized by freedom and equality, and that political authority was established by a social covenant.[[9]](#endnote-9) Such views would clearly threaten proponents of monarchism, as they would base the legitimacy of a monarch’s right to rule upon the consent of the governed, as well as potentially allow the people the right to depose a king. Filmer’s response to this is to argue that there is a natural social order grounded in the family, and that as seen in Scripture this order is ordained by God.[[10]](#endnote-10) More particularly, Filmer argues that Adam, initially, is the sole authoritative figure, being both the first man and first father.[[11]](#endnote-11) Paternal power and political power are identical for Filmer, as the earliest forms of political association were monarchies that were essentially extended families. As regards the possession of property, Adam was the only person with any proprietary rights, as God originally granted him complete dominion over the earth and all it contains. It is here that Filmer distinguishes himself from his contemporaries, as he denies that things were initially held in common and instead attributes to Adam an individual right to property that originates in a dispensation from God. From this perspective, there is no commons, because Adam alone enjoyed dominion over everything.[[12]](#endnote-12)

It is easy to comprehend why Locke and his peers would take issue with Filmer. Filmer’s position is assertive in its claim of an original right to private property, but more so in its restriction of this right to a single individual whose proprietary right is allegedly given by God. That Filmer also grounded political governance upon paternal power simply underscored the perceived boldness of his view, since it justified a form of authority that knew no boundaries between the political and the familial, and ostensibly subjugated all to the rule of one. While perhaps not fully original, as Laslett notes it was a position stated in such a forthright manner as to “combine the subtleties of the doctrine of sovereignty with the crude assumptions of patriarchalism” in a “devastating attack on the assumptions of the contractual school about the nature of society and the justification of political obligation.”[[13]](#endnote-13) Thus Filmer became the standard bearer of the Royalist cause and was someone who could not be ignored. Almost of necessity his arguments demanded a response, and so Locke took Filmer’s writings as the subject of his *Two Treatises of Government*, *the First Treatise* addressing Filmer’s explicit arguments for absolute monarchy, *the Second Treatise* providing Locke’s own vision of government.[[14]](#endnote-14)

The framework for Locke’s position is an account of the state of nature, wherein all individuals are portrayed as free and equal. As he characterizes it, freedom refers to the individual’s ability to “order their Actions, and dispose of their Possessions, and Persons as they think fit,” while equality refers to the fact that each individual “is born to all the same advantages of Nature,” there being no natural hierarchy that would subordinate one person to another.[[15]](#endnote-15) It is a moral state, established by God, who has provided a means of determining one’s obligations. As Locke famously puts it, “The State of Nature has a Law of Nature to govern it, which obliges everyone: And Reason, which is that Law, teaches all Mankind … that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his Life, Health, Liberty, or Possessions.”[[16]](#endnote-16) Several things come from this “Law of Nature,” the first being a moral duty of self-preservation, the second being an obligation to preserve the life of others as far as one can. Relatedly, liberty is not to be confused with “license” or the ability to do whatever one wishes, but is instead to be regarded as bounded by the rationally determined rights of others, while equality is to be understood as a power everyone has of enforcing the Law of Nature rather than a form of socio-economic standing.[[17]](#endnote-17) Individuals are free to order their affairs as they see fit, but are obliged to do so in a way that recognizes the freedom of others to do the same. If anyone transgresses this, then others have a right to punish the transgressor.[[18]](#endnote-18)

It is the need for self-preservation that provides the impetus for labor. Yet, while nature provides the resources that allow individuals to preserve themselves, it does so spontaneously, without anyone having an original title to “private Dominion, exclusive of the rest of Mankind.”[[19]](#endnote-19) Locke’s claim reasserts the idea that the state of nature is understood as a commons, and his discussion counters Filmer’s argument about the proprietary rights of Adam by referencing the Book of Psalm wherein it is said that God has “*given the Earth to the Children of Man*, given it to Mankind in common.”[[20]](#endnote-20) Thus the question arises as to how anyone can claim legitimate ownership of anything, without it being based upon the consent of others. For if everyone has a possible right to the goods of nature it would seemingly follow that the division of goods would require the approval of all.[[21]](#endnote-21) Locke’s argument here not only distinguishes his position from Filmer’s, but from many of his contemporaries as well, as he claims, first, that individuals have proprietary rights of their own bodies, and second, that they therefore have proprietary rights over their own labor.[[22]](#endnote-22) As he explains it: “Though the Earth, all inferior Creatures be common to all Men, yet every Man has a *Property* in his own *Person* … The *Labour* of his Body, and the *Work* of his Hands, we may say, are properly his.”[[23]](#endnote-23) Locke’s basic point is that because individuals have a right to their own bodies, they have a right over their own actions. It is a straightforward account of the origins of labor, whose strength and appeal is its very simplicity: one’s labor is something one has a claim to, because one’s labor is something one physically does.

Locke develops and clarifies his position by focusing upon acts of appropriation. In response to the question ‘When does ownership begin?’ he says it is “the taking any part of what is common, and removing it out of the state Nature leaves it in, which *begins the Property* …”[[24]](#endnote-24) Acts of appropriation can take various forms, from picking an apple to cultivating land.[[25]](#endnote-25) Regardless of the form of appropriation, it remains the case that it is human effort that characterizes the act and becomes the basis for rightful possession. That noted, Locke indicates that acts of appropriation are bounded in the state of nature, partially because of the limits of individual consumption, and partially because of the moral strictures imposed by the Laws of Nature. As he explains it, “No Mans Labour could subdue, or appropriate all: nor could his Enjoyment consume more than a small part …” something that confines “every Man’s *Possession*, to a very moderate Proportion …”[[26]](#endnote-26) No one’s needs are excessive in the state of nature, therefore no one has reason to appropriate more than a modest amount. More importantly, however, are the Laws of Nature, which place prohibitions upon individuals as regards their labor. While individuals have a right to what is necessary to preserve their own life – thereby meeting the obligation of the first Law of Nature – more than this contravenes the ability of others to do the same. Locke articulates this in terms of two prohibitions: one that prohibits individuals from taking more than they can use before it spoils (the so-called “spoilage proviso”), the other that requires individuals leave “enough and as good as” for others to use themselves (what can be termed the “sufficiency proviso”).[[27]](#endnote-27) Essentially the argument is that God has placed moral boundaries upon acts of appropriation, insofar as the Laws of Nature stipulate how much one should rightfully acquire through one’s labor. To appropriate more than needed for self-preservation – to waste or hoard things – is to act immorally.[[28]](#endnote-28)

The significance of labor goes beyond simply meeting the duty of self-preservation. For labor also determines the allocation of property, or in other words, serves as the distributive mechanism for material goods. Locke seemingly allows for the possibility of potential disparities of possessions to arise despite the limits imposed by the Laws of Nature and personal consumption, as he intimates some individuals will be inclined to labor harder than others. As he asserts, while God gave the world to “Men in Common” it was for the “Industrious and Rational … not to the Fancy or Covetousness” that this was done.[[29]](#endnote-29) Such suggestions have led to claims that Locke ultimately rationalizes a “possessive individualism” that is the hallmark of capitalism, and I will return to this in the next section. What needs noting for now is how Locke conceives labor not only as the source of legitimate possession, but as the source of economic value. According to Locke, labor transforms the objects of appropriation and in the process renders them more suitable to human need. Here there is a notable shift of emphasis away from issues of legitimate possession to economic considerations that again have a straightforward appeal, insofar as labor has been traditionally regarded as a source of value by economists in terms of the “labor theory of value.” As with the issue of ownership, there is a striking plausibility to the idea that objects take on economic significance to the extent that they embody human labor, and Locke’s consideration of such things pushes his discussion beyond the parameters set by a concern to refute Filmer, whose arguments pay little heed to these matters.[[30]](#endnote-30) In this respect Locke’s discussion proves to be a deeper reflection upon the nexus between labor, economics, and, ultimately, politics, one that proves deeply influential upon the course of political thought.[[31]](#endnote-31) For where others such as James Tyrrell wrote similarly, it is Locke whose works intellectual historians point to as marking a decisive moment.[[32]](#endnote-32) And as should be clear, much of his influence has to do with the idea that we have a right to the fruits of our labor, partially because they are the result of *our* labor, and partially because our labor serves as the basis of those “conveniences” of life that we value.[[33]](#endnote-33)

Locke’s portrayal of labor in the state of nature is of an act laden with moral significance. Yet it also proves to be the case that the pursuit of property introduces problems that eventually necessitate the abandonment of the state of nature and establishment of government. Among these problems is the fact that individuals desire more than their share. As he notes, “before the desire of having more than Men needed” arose, the modest possessions that were accrued sufficed to satisfy individuals.[[34]](#endnote-34) Basically men are not fully governed by reason, and thus fall prey to the desires associated with acquisitiveness. Another problem concerns the advent of money, which is used to facilitate exchange without contravening the provisos that limit the accumulation of property. As Locke characterizes it, money can be used to trade for the surplus of production that occurs from those who, by their labor, produce more than they themselves can use. Moreover, “Gold and Silver … may be hoarded up without injury to any one, these metals not spoileing or decaying in the hands of the possessors.”[[35]](#endnote-35) Basically, money does not spoil and so does not transgress the moral limits on property, something that allows disparities of wealth to arise.[[36]](#endnote-36) Thus while property allows individuals to provide for themselves and ensure their own preservation, the advent of money provides an opportunity for the avaricious to give free rein to their desires.[[37]](#endnote-37) Ultimately, the need to deal with the problems just outlined requires an authority that can serve as an impartial adjudicator of disputes, as well as possess the power to enforce its decisions. Here lies the origin of government, whose foundation is the consent of the governed, and whose purpose is to regulate and preserve property through standing laws.[[38]](#endnote-38) This, in the broadest terms, is Locke’s account of labor, its ties to property, and its moral and political importance.

*Criticisms of Locke’s Position*

Locke’s views about labor have proven to be a source of controversy, understandably so given the implications of what he says. For the stress he places upon individual appropriation has been seen as a precursor to modern economic theories of the free market whose basic unit of analysis is the individual worker, consumer, or producer, and which often involve an especially abstract perspective that critics claim wrongly ignores reality. Similarly, the argument that money is a store of value that allows for the accumulation of wealth without breaking any strictures against hoarding seemingly sanctifies greed and disparities of wealth that are morally indefensible. And finally there is an alleged valorization of labor that is thought to demean humanity by focusing too much upon the material ends individuals pursue at the expense of more spiritual ones. For present purposes, I wish to focus upon two criticisms that have been levelled against Locke, one addressing the historical situation of his position, the other providing a more analytical critique. The first sees him as a prophet of capitalism and its attendant ills, the second as subscribing to a mistaken economic theory of value. Both lines of thought wind up rejecting Locke’s views on labor, even while they vary on what comes from this. Does the refutation of his arguments about labor necessitate a complete rejection of his position? Or does the refutation of his arguments about labor simply require a revision of his position? Part of the continuing debates about Locke today boil down to the answers one gives to these two questions.

Regarding the first criticism, the issue here concerns how Locke’s arguments embody assumptions that reflect his socio-economic standing, and how this is embedded in a historical process that eventually leads to modern market systems. The thrust of the charge is that Locke is a part of the economic elite, and his discussion of labor and property is meant to rationalize their interests. Macpherson provides the clearest statement of this interpretation, which he characterizes as “possessive individualism.” As Macpherson explains it, Locke’s claim that individuals have a proprietary right in their own person (and therefore in their own labor) is a precondition to the development of capitalism.[[39]](#endnote-39) Noting that Locke allows for economic exchange in the state of nature (such as with bartering over goods), Macpherson holds that this extends to labor itself. Basically, individuals are able to sell their labor as a commodity – alienate it from themselves – which allows those who are purchasing their labor to accumulate capital. This eventually becomes the basis of a political order that seeks to protect the interests of the wealthy. The order sustains itself through a process of exploitation, as those who possess nothing but their labor sell themselves into “drudgery.”[[40]](#endnote-40) For Macpherson, the result is objectionable, both because of the end result, which degrades individuals, as well as the fact that Locke smuggles into the state of nature his own prejudices. As Macpherson puts it, Locke “was reading back into the state of nature the market relations of a developed commercial economy,” something that leads to a “confusion in his mind between the remnant of traditional values and the new bourgeois values.”[[41]](#endnote-41) The tension between these “traditional” and “bourgeois” values supposedly entails an unsustainable contradiction that will inevitably require the repudiation of market economies and the possessive individualism they are built upon.[[42]](#endnote-42)

The second criticism focuses upon Locke’s argument that labor is the source of value. The idea is that labor transforms objects into goods that satisfy the needs or desires of individuals, and therefore labor is the ultimate source of economic value. A commonplace among political economists of the 18th and 19th centuries, the labor theory of value was regarded as true by those as divergent in their views as Adam Smith and Karl Marx. However, toward the end of the 19th century a trend away from the labor theory of value begins, partially because it was held that the theory involves a circularity about just what is “useful labor”—which winds up being labor that creates value! —that undermines its explanatory power, and partially because it was recognized that things can be valuable even if no labor to speak of went into their production. (For instance, if one simply stumbles upon a large gemstone, it has value even if the only work one puts in is picking it up.) Whatever the merits of the criticisms, economists begin to shift attention to other factors, something which eventually has significance for the reception of Locke’s views within political theory.[[43]](#endnote-43) Perhaps the best example of this is with the work of Nozick, who, in his attempt to articulate a vision of libertarianism, has recourse to Locke’s arguments.

Observing that Locke depends upon the labor theory of value, Nozick questions Locke’s specific account about how labor transforms objects. As Nozick points out, Locke’s discussion involves claims that labor is “mixed” with objects, thus providing a proprietary claim to them. Yet, as Nozick observes, these claims proves untenable, as there is no way to specify the extent of the “mixing” in a way that does not fall into absurdity (or at the very least involve a principle that is not tied to labor, which then conceptually dilutes the importance of labor).[[44]](#endnote-44) Nozick also points out that some forms of labor do not generate value at all, an outcome that calls into question the very basis for arguing about labor’s importance for property rights.[[45]](#endnote-45) Nozick eventually indicates that if labor involves ambiguities that generate absurdities– and is not a reliable source of value – then the attempt to justify institutions using such arguments is destined to fail. Nozick does not take this to mean that all of Locke’s claims are erroneous, for he does believe the moral prohibitions Locke stipulates carry weight.[[46]](#endnote-46) However, Locke’s attempt to justify limited government and guarantee the rights of the individual through arguments utilizing the labor theory of value misfires. Unlike Macpherson, Nozick believes it remains worthwhile to pursue Locke’s goals concerning limited government, but without replicating what are taken to be flawed arguments.

While there are other critiques of Locke that raise important points (such as whether or not Locke’s epistemology is compatible with his commitment to natural law), the two I have mentioned provide the most direct challenges to his views about labor.[[47]](#endnote-47) Macpherson’s criticisms render Locke little more than apologist for a particular socio-economic class, someone whose arguments are rationalizations limited by historical context. As times change – as capitalism gives way to socialism – then Locke’s discussion will lose its relevance, except, perhaps, as a historical artifact indicative of an outdated view that has been superseded. Nozick’s criticisms, on the other hand, foreground theoretical issues that pose significant problems for anyone concerned by the rights of the individual and limited government. For Nozick, Locke’s goals – to provide institutions that protect life, liberty, and property – remain valid, but different arguments need to be employed to achieve them. Though it is beyond my discussion here, Nozick tries to repair the breaches in Locke’s position by honing in on the issue of consent and its ties to autonomy, and reinterpreting them. How successful Nozick ends up being is open to debate, but for present purposes this is less important than the accuracy of his appraisal of Locke’s views on labor. So by way of conclusion let me now turn to my own appraisal of Locke, and address the criticisms I have just reviewed.

*Appraisal and Conclusion*

As mentioned earlier, Locke’s discussion of labor has an intuitive appeal. The presumption that we have a proprietary claim on our own bodies is plausible, as is the extension of this to our actions as expressed in labor. There is undoubtedly a sense in which individuals are responsible for – claim ownership of – the things they do and the things they make. That such actions take on a moral dimension insofar as they help us preserve our lives (and even the lives of others) seems sound, and ostensibly a reason to take property rights seriously. That money amplifies exchange by providing a store of value that does not spoil is also insightful, particularly when money can serve as a form of capital, as Macpherson rightly notes. And yet, despite the intuitive appeal of Locke’s views, there are points where his arguments are less than convincing, sometimes because the arguments themselves are weak. This is not terribly surprising – no one fully sees every shortcoming of their own ideas – but it is enough to invite a reconsideration of what is otherwise a credible position.

Take, for example, Macpherson’s point that Locke’s discussion rationalizes the socio-economic order of his day. There is undoubtedly truth to the suggestion that Locke’s arguments reflect the concerns of his day and that they favor a particular political viewpoint. As seen, Locke opposed Filmer’s attempts to vindicate absolute monarchism – so it stands to reason Locke’s arguments would align with the Whigs. Like Macpherson, Ashcraft also notes the ideological dimensions to the *Two Treatises*, but, in my opinion, correctly argues that Locke was more critical of the economic elites of his day than Macpherson allows. As Aschcraft points out, some of Locke’s strongest criticisms are reserved for “idle landowners … and those of inherited wealth who do nothing to advance the common good …”[[48]](#endnote-48) Macpherson, ironically, imputes to Locke ideas that reflect the moral commitments of Macpherson himself, and is rightly taken to task for it by others. Dunn in particular notes that Locke’s views evolve over time – to the point that it creates interpretive problems for Macpherson – while Berlin lays bare the distortions that Macpherson uses to fit Locke into a Marxist schema.[[49]](#endnote-49) So while it may be true that Locke’s arguments exhibit a certain ideological partiality, this does not warrant the insinuation that his writings are primarily pieces of propaganda whose aim is to justify the ascendency of the bourgeoisie. If this is all there was to it, then the content of Locke’s writings would hardly deserve our attention.

That Locke’s writings *do* deserve our attention can be seen from the way in which scholars such as Nozick continue to turn to them for inspiration, not as intellectual historians but as political philosophers. Nozick’s critique of Locke differs from Macpherson’s by treating Locke’s writings as transcending their day and having contemporary relevance. This relevance is to be understood not in terms of influence or legacy, but primarily as the source of arguments that can be seen as valid or invalid regardless of context. Consequently, Nozick’s criticisms, which address difficulties arising from conceptual ambiguities, leave open the possibility that Locke’s position can be repaired if the conceptual issues are sorted. For someone such as Nozick, the arguments may be weak, but they are not primarily rhetorical devices that serve an ideological function. I tend to agree with this, although I think the difficulties that attend the shortcomings of Locke’s position may be more difficult to repair than Nozick allows. The labor theory of value *is* ambiguous in the ways Nozick mentions, but where he would claim that the moral prohibitions on the acquisition of property nevertheless remain meaningful I think the opposite may actually be the case: if “labor” cannot be conceptualized clearly enough to justify property rights, then moral prohibitions limiting the accumulation of property as a result of labor seem irrelevant. Granted, the moral prohibitions may be explained in other ways, as Nozick attempts with his arguments from consent, but this seems to me to replace one contentious concept (“consent”) with another (“labor”). We may be better served by articulating different constraints on property (as Kant does), or introducing property into the discussion in an altogether different manner (as Rawls does). Regardless, the idea is that while Locke’s arguments may have been prompted by debates that no longer capture our attention, they nevertheless express something that deserves serious consideration. In the end, I believe the fairest judgement is that while Locke’s particular arguments may have notable limitations, they still warrant being taken seriously whether one opposes him or not.

1. The secondary literature on John Locke at this point in time is immense, which comes as no surprise given that his works were written over 300 years ago. One cannot hope to cover everything that has been written, thus I have opted to focus on those works that directly pertain to my subject here that can be regarded as making a notable contribution to the topic. For those with a further interest in Locke who want to explore the full range of his thought the following are a sample of works to consider (some of which I will refer to in my study): Peter Anstey, *John Locke and Natural Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Barbara Arneil, *John Locke and America* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Richard Aschcraft, *Revolutionary Politics and Locke’s Two Treatises of Government* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986); Vere Chappell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Locke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Richard H. Cox, *Locke on War and Peace* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960); John Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke: An Historical Account of the Argument of the ‘Two Treatises of Governmen*t’ (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); John W. Gough, *John Locke’s Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974); Ruth W. Grant, *John Locke’s Liberalism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987); Iain Hampsher-Monk, “John Locke,” in *A History of Modern Political Thought: Major Political Thinkers fro Hobbes to Marx* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1992); Nicholas Jolley, *Locke: His Philosophical Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); David A. Lloyd Thomas, *Locke on Government* (London: Routledge, 1995); John Marshall, *John Locke: Resistance, Religion and Responsibility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994);Susan Mendus, *Locke on Toleration in Focus* (London: Routledge, 1991); Geraint Parry, *John Locke* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1978); Martin Seliger, *The Liberal Politics of John Locke* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.); Gopal Sreenivasan, *The Limits of Lockean Rights in Property* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Nathan Tarcov, *Locke’s Education for Liberty* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984); James Tully, *An Approach to Political Philosophy: Locke in Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Jeremy Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality: Christian Foundations in Locke’s Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and John Yolton, *John Locke and the Way of Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956). Also for consideration is the annual journal *Locke Studies* (whose sole focus is upon Locke) and the *John Locke Bibliography*, both of which can be found online. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Probably the most accessible biography of Locke remains Maurice Cranston’s, although Roger Woolhouse provides an excellent one as well. See: Maurice Cranston, *John Locke, A Biography* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1957); and Roger Woolhouse, *Locke: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. John Locke, *Two Tracts on Government*, ed. Philip Abrams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 119. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For more on the background of this period a good recent work is: Jonathan Healey, *The Blazing World: A New History of Revolutionary England, 1603-1689* (New York: Vintage Books, 2023). Another good review of the period with a slightly more analytical (rather than narrative) approach to the material is: Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution, 1603-1714* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd.. 1961). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Anthony Ashley Cooper (1621- 1683), the first Earl of Shaftesbury, was one of the leading figures within Parliament and served in a variety of offices. His political proclivities have been characterized as opportunist as much as principled, but by the time Locke had met him Shaftesbury was a champion of the Whigs (who were proponents of constitutional monarchy and a strong parliament) and eventually became Prime Minister. His influence upon Locke has been the source of some commentary, for there is a clear shift in Locke’s views dating to the time of his service with Shaftesbury. For more on this see: Ashcraft, *Revolutionary Politics and Locke’s Two Treatises of Government*; Cranston, *John Locke*; Peter Laslett, “Introduction,” *Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 25-37; and John R. Milton, “The Unscholastic Statesman: Locke and the Earl of Shaftesbury,” in *Anthony Ashley Cooper, First Earl of Shaftesbury 1621-1683*, ed. John Spurr (London: Routledge, 2016), 153-182. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Locke’s professional life consisted of much more than serving as Shaftesbury’s personal physician. Locke also received appointments to various political positions, among them: the Secretary of Presentations, the Secretary of the Council of Trade and Plantations, and an appointment as a commissioner on the Board of Trade. See Cranston, *John Locke*, 143-159, 399-448. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. John Locke, “A Letter to the Reverend Richard King, 25 August 1703,” in *The works of John Locke: a new edition, corrected, in ten volumes, vol. 10* (London: Printed for Thomas Tegg, 1823), 305-309. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. For more on this see: Stephen Buckle, *Natural Law and the Theory of Property* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); Janet Coleman, “Property and poverty,” in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought c. 350-1450*, ed. J. H. Burns (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 607-648; Thomas A. Horne, *Property Rights and Poverty: Political Argument in Britain, 1605-1834* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Richard McKeon, “The Development of the Concept of Private Property in Political Philosophy: A Study of the Background of the Constitutions,” *Ethics* 48, no. 3 (1937): 297- 366; Richard Tuck, *Natural rights theories: their origin and development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); and James Tully, *A Discourse on Property: John Locke and his adversaries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) . [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Robert Filmer, *Patriarcha and Other Works of Sir Robert Filmer*, ed. Peter Laslett (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1949), 63f. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Filmer, *Patriarcha*, 57-63, 188. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Filmer, *Patriarcha*, 57-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Filmer, *Patriarcha*, 71. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Peter Laslett, “Introduction,” *Patriarcha and Other Works of Sir Robert Filmer* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1949), 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Compare with Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke*, 66-67. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 269. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Locke, *Two Treatises*, 271. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Locke, *Two Treatises*, 270-72. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Locke, *Two Treatises*, 279-80. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Locke, *Two Treatises*, 286. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Locke, *Two Treatises*, 286. The emphasis is in the original. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Locke, *Two Treatises*, 288. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. The best discussion of how Locke resembles his contemporaries while nevertheless departing from them is James Tully’s. See: James Tully, *A Discourse on Property: John Locke and his adversaries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). For a slightly different take on the issue see: Ashcraft, *Revolutionary Politics & Locke’s Two Treatises of Government*, 228-285; and Horne, *Property Rights and Poverty*, 41-72. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Locke, *Two Treatises*, 287-88. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Locke, *Two Treatises*, 289. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Locke, *Two Treatises*, 288-92. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Locke, *Two Treatises*, 292. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. The “spoilage proviso” arises when Locke claims “As much as any one can make use of to any advantage of life before it spoils; so much he may by his labour fix a Property in.” The “sufficiency proviso” arises when Locke says “For this Labour being the unquestionable Property of the Labourer, no Man but he can have a right to what htat is once joined to, at least where there is enough, and as good left in common for others.” See: Locke, *Two Treatises*, 288, 290. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. For more on the two provisos and their relations see Seliger *The Liberal Politics of John Locke*, 141-149. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Locke, *Two Treatises*, 291. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Filmer did not completely ignore economic issues, as he wrote a work concerning usury entitled *Quaestio Quodlibetica, or a Discourse Whether it may be lawful to take Use for Mone*y that was printed in 1653 before being reprinted a few times later. However, this writing is not among those that concerned Locke, and it would be difficult to hold that it influenced Locke’s views about labor. See: Cesare Cuttica, *Sir Robert Filmer (1588-1653) and the patriotic monarch: Patriarchalism in seventeenth-century thought* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. While there are a number of studies that highlight the importance of Locke for Western thought – many of which I mention in note one – a recent treatment of the issue that is highly insightful is Duncan Bell’s “What is Liberalism?” which delves into the question of how Locke in particular came to be associated by scholars with the liberal tradition. See: Duncan Bell, “What is Liberalism?” *Political Theory* 42, no. 6 (2014): 682-715. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Laslett details the similarities between Locke, Tyrrell, and Baxter very carefully in his note to paragraph 27 of *the Second Treatise*. See: Locke, *Two Treatises*, 287. Horne compares Locke and Tyrrell to Algernon Sydney, while Tully relates him to Pufendorf, Grotius, Selden, and Suarez (among others). See: Horne, *Property Rights and Poverty*, 41-72 and Tully, *A Discourse on Property*, 64-94. Cranston provides an interesting reference to the work of Jon Pollexfen, a now forgotten economist who had served on the Board of Trade and Plantations. He notes that Pollexfen articulated a version of the labor theory of value in his *Discourse of Trade Coin and Paper Credit*, although it is unclear if Locke was familiar with it. See Craston, *John Locke*, 404, n. 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. As Locke puts it: “The measure of Property, Nature has well set, by the Extent of Mens *Labour, and the Conveniency of Life* …” (Locke, *Two Treatises*, p. 192) Statements such as this one, which recur throughout the text, indicate that property is for more than mere self-preservation. Such an open-ended understanding of property has been noted by others, but I think it is enough to note here that the implication is that labor remains the basis for the comforts of life as well as the means to them. For more on the extended sense of “property” for Locke see: Gough, *John Locke’s Political Philosophy*, 93-96, Sreenivasan, *The Limits of Lockean Rights in Property*, 32-34; Thomas, *Locke on Government*, 23, 89-90; and Tully, *A Discourse on Property*, 60-61. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Locke, *Two Treatises*, 294. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Locke, *Two Treatises*, 302. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. How money addresses the spoilage proviso seems clear – but how it addresses the sufficiency proviso is less so. It seems Locke assumes that the exchange of goods that money allows for means that individuals can appropriate more than they otherwise would, because they can then trade the excess for gold or silver. This would presumably mean that there remains a sufficient amount of goods for others, so long as they can purchase the excess. However Locke does not really address this issue and it may remain a blind spot in his discussion. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Locke, *Two Treatises*, 301-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Locke, *Two Treatises*, 268, 330f. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, 3, 200-201. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, 222-32. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, 217, 220. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, 271f. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. The shift in economic thought that I have mentioned was gradual and occurred over a long period of time as the result of the work of a variety of scholars. For good historical reviews of this see: Agnar Sando, *Economics Evolving: A History of Economic Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011) and Joseph Schumpeter, *History of Economic Analysis* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1954). Sando focuses provides a concise summary that focuses primarily on economists, while Schumpeter provides a more expansive discussion that relates the economic arguments to broader intellectual trends. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 174-75. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 175. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 178f. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. See, for example: A. John Simmons, *The Lockean Theory of Rights* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953); and John W. Yolton, *Locke and the Compass of Human Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970). [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Aschcraft, *Revolutonary Politics & Locke’s Two Treatises of Government*, 270. . [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Dunn, The Political Thought of John Locke, 11-18, and Isaiah Berlin, “Review of C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism, Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford, 1962: Clarendon Press),” *Political Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (1964): 444-68. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)