

“Have we not an equal interest with the men of this nation?”
Gender, Equality, and *Genesis* in John Locke's Political Thought

John Locke (1632-1704) is a seminal figure in modern political thought, of this fact, most, if not all readers of this article would agree. Beyond this observation, however, there is an almost dizzying array of diverse interpretations and disagreement as to the meaning, intent, and significance of his work. As Paul Sigmund, the editor of a recent critical edition of Locke's works notes, in looking at Locke “there is something for everyone,” to either condemn or to praise in often contradictory readings of his classic texts.¹ A reader can find proof of a “covert Hobbesian or an apologist for unrestrained accumulation of property,” although there is plenty in his corpus to contradict any narrow view of Locke as “hedonist, materialist, atomistic individualist, collectivist, deist, secularist, advocate of majority tyranny, and naïve believer in human perfectibility.”² Controversial interpretations of John Locke's views that Sigmund's critical edition describes as “refuted” still have their defenders.³

The authors of this study hope to make a contribution to Locke scholarship that emphasizes above all the importance of understanding and evaluating Locke within his historical context. To that end, the methodological commitment of this study is both textual and contextual. In other words, the primary text needs to be read closely and within the context of seventeenth-century social and political assumptions. Specifically, with regard to the issues discussed here, it is crucial that Locke first describes the pre-political State of Nature as a situation within which “all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal.”⁴ Locke's working assumption was that in all instances human societies are formed by social interaction, not à la Hobbes by isolated survivalists, but rather by people who even without a sovereign state would already, and “by nature,” be engaged in a set of relationships including economic, familial, and even religious ties. None of these are

at any point in Locke's corpus described as dependent upon the order created by the will of the sovereign. Indeed, the "inconveniences" that Locke continues on to describe as typical of the state of nature presume that not only does human society exist in nature but so to do the norms, the laws that govern us at all times and in all places.⁵

By approaching Locke's understanding of politics as fundamentally "reciprocal" patterns of "power and jurisdiction" one can better appreciate the crucial role that gender relations play in his outlook and gain critical insight into his concept of natural equality. Locke, as Nancy Hirschmann describes "in some ways ... provides the foundation for liberal feminism. But his gender politics are somewhat inconsistent, suggesting that women have at best an uncertain and incomplete relationship to liberty."⁶ These ambiguities are described in further detail below, however the point here is not only that Locke provides an ambiguous legacy with regard to the natural rights and equality of women, but that one cannot fully grasp the whole pattern of his political philosophy without attending to the natural in/equality he describes between women and men.

The main contribution of this study is to describe the ambiguities and interplay of equality and inequality in Locke's discussions of gender. He is at once proto-feminist, an engaged revolutionary whose politics at base rested on a critique of patriarchal absolutism, yet also a man who at times, it seems, accepted naively (and at other times seems to fundamentally question) conventional patterns of male dominance. To the extent Locke's theoretical descriptions of gender in/equality inform his theoretical work as whole, they would then by this account also help us to understand his views on such issues as class, education, and representative government. While it is beyond the scope of this present work to analyze all of these connections, one illustration is attempted specifically Locke's reading of the biblical book of

Genesis in two key texts; the *First Treatise on Government* and the *Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695).⁷ While the later text makes little mention of women as such, it notably repeats patterns of thought from his studies on government and thereby provides further illustration of the discernible ambiguities in Locke's concept of equality. This article focuses on the parallels between Locke's political and religious texts, showing that despite some ambiguities, a liberal egalitarian pattern of thought recurs in his critique of patriarchal absolutism, property, and theology.

Locke's Critique of Patriarchy

Locke is best remembered in the history of political thought for his *Second Treatise of Civil Government*, commonly considered a foundational text of classical liberalism and modern conceptions of individual rights and limited sovereignty.⁸ Locke's *First Treatise of Civil Government* is a less-studied critique of Robert Filmer (1588-1653), an early seventeenth-century theoretical defender of monarchical absolutism. The object of Locke's criticism in the *First Treatise* is Filmer's absolute monarchist text *Patriarcha*,⁹ written six decades prior to the publication date (1689) of Locke's two treatises, although for still obscure reasons left unpublished until Locke's day. Thus it was the case that more than three decades after his death in 1653, Filmer was regarded as a defender of the absolute monarchy and Stuart interests with whom a thinker of Locke's political sensibility would need to come to terms.

Filmer's defense of absolute monarchy is predicated on a reading of scripture, which the Anglican Filmer presents as a counter to Roman Catholic theories of sovereignty. In Filmer's exposition, the doctrine that temporal government is based on consent is grounded in neither reason nor revelation, but is merely a product of medieval Scholastic sophistry. Filmer depicts the Catholic theorists Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621) and Francisco Suarez (1548-1617) as false

teachers, who would subvert the divinely ordained truths of the bible and the order and sovereignty of the English monarch as head of the church, state, and patriarch of a Christian people. It is of interest in this context that Filmer published a review of Thomas Hobbes's great work of social contract consent theory, *Leviathan*, in which he praises the absolutist conclusion that Hobbes reached. Nonetheless, Filmer critiques Hobbes's method for relying upon the doctrine of consent, "I consent with him [Hobbes] about the rights of exercising government, but I cannot agree to his means of acquiring it" (i.e., by consent of the governed).¹⁰

In Filmer's view, the biblical text of Genesis establishes the basis for absolute monarchy through a divine grant of authority to Adam to dominion over the earth. This divinely ordained right of the first man to have dominion over the earth is, on Filmer's account, extended to the dominion of the patriarch over all other persons such that if "Adam himself were still living, and now ready to die, it is certain that there is one man, and but one in the world, who is next heir."¹¹ Since Adam's true heir by primogeniture is unknown, "the kingly power escheats in such cases to the prime and independent heads of families."¹² By contrast the first woman, Eve is regarded as the origin of sin and a curse is placed on her that extends to all women in their subordination not only to Adam and his heirs, but to all husbands and fathers. Indeed, even as to the parentage of a child, Filmer argues that mothers may not be permitted to undermine patriarchal authority, "it is not the will of the mother to make whom she pleases the father, for if the mother be not in possession of a husband, the child is not reckoned to have any father at all."¹³ Filmer recognizes no parental authority for mothers and puts forth a selective reading of the Ten Commandments to support his position that all authority is patriarchal; "we find in the Decalogue that the law which enjoins obedience to kings is delivered in terms of 'honor thy father' as if all power were originally to the father."¹⁴

Filmer recognizes no distinction between the public and the private realms as he regards each household as a monarchy in miniature and the whole kingdom as the household of the king-patriarch. “There is no differentiation between political authority, paternal authority, and Divine authority,” notes Zillah Eisenstein in her summary of Filmer. Furthermore, “hierarchical relations of the family structure the relations of society as well” in the interchangeable roles of patriarch and ruler.¹⁵ Effectively then, one might argue that there is a kind of negative equalitarianism in Filmer’s thought insofar as no subject has any natural right that may be upheld against the father-figure king. To the contrary, Filmer like Hobbes, argues that rights are conventions, that is to say, privileges granted by sovereigns just as they see fit.

Filmer’s patriarchal politics served as apologetic for the Stuart dynasty. Yet, James Stuart’s immediate predecessor goes unmentioned. The Stuart ascendancy was, after all, the product of Elizabeth Tudor’s childlessness, and Stuart absolutism owed much to her effective rule. Indeed, it is on this point that Locke makes a striking criticism of Filmer, noting that a queen as well as a king may hold legitimate sovereignty. Locke’s response to Filmer relies on the rightful authority of women as mothers as well as occasional rulers. Citing both Elizabeth I and Mary Tudor, Locke argues that even in the case of a sovereign queen who marries, she may retain her position of sovereignty under the terms of the marriage. Here Locke remarkably anticipates the modern role of a prince consort.¹⁶ Further, Locke argues that within a family, mothers as well as fathers hold authority over children and that a mother’s labor and substance are primary responsible for the very life of the child, “the Woman hath an equal share, if not the greater, as she nourish the Child a long time in her own Body out of her own Substance.”¹⁷

Perhaps Locke’s medical training and practice provided him with an enhanced understanding, even sympathy, for the painful contribution that mothers make to the process of

human reproduction. Locke went so far as to claim that it “is so hard to imagine the rational Soul should presently Inhabit the yet unformed Embrio, as soon as the Father has done his part in the Act of Generation, that if it must be supposed to derive anything from the Parents it must certainly owe most to the Mother.”¹⁸

Locke’s title page to the *First Treatise* announces that the divine right absolute monarchist theory of Robert Filmer “overthrown.”¹⁹ Filmer argued that the absolute rule of seventeenth-century kings was based on the divine grant made to Adam of dominion over the earth and all it contains in Genesis 1:28.²⁰ Filmer claims that this authority passes by primogeniture through the male line to Adam’s heirs, providing them with a birthright of unlimited political power. As Filmer states the point in *Patriarcha*, the “lordship which Adam by command had over the whole world, and by right descending from him the patriarchs did enjoy, was as large and ample as the absolutist dominion of any monarch hath been since the creation.”²¹ This dominion in Filmer’s account is paternal in origin and nature, “Adam was lord of his children, so his children under him had a command and power over their own children, but still with subordination to the first parent, who is lord-paramount over his children’s children to all generations.”²²

Filmer himself acknowledges an obvious weakness in his claim, to the effect that “it may seem absurd to maintain that kings now are the father of their people.”²³ Nevertheless, his arguments served absolutist purposes and significantly reflected his contemporaries received understandings of the origins of paternal dominion over wives and children. In effect, Filmer sought to reduce all of political society to patriarchal familial relations.²⁴ Filmer’s purpose was to expose the “vulgar opinion” and “desperate assertion” that humanity is “born with freedom from all subjection, and to choose what form of government it please”²⁵ as a novel, scholastic,

and papist position antithetical to scripture. By shifting the entire realm of the political into the sacrosanct sphere of the patriarchal family, he renders any and all forms of political resistance as wicked as a son's rebellion against paternal authority, which Filmer's readers would recognize as a capital offense per the biblical sanction of Deuteronomy 21:18-22.

To counter Filmer, Locke's critique entails much more than a counter to absolute monarchy, but a root and branch rejection of the notion that God had actually somehow re-enforced Adam's dominion over Eve as a consequence of her sin and the couple's resultant expulsion from Eden. As Locke puts it, God was "disclaiming his wrath against them both, for their disobedience, we cannot suppose that this was the time wherein God was granting Adam prerogatives and privileges."²⁶ Locke is here glossing Genesis 3:16 where Eve is cursed for her sin, as rendered in the King James translation, "Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee."²⁷ Notably however, Filmer's arguments in *Patriarcha* do not rely upon this passage to establish patriarchy, instead in that text Filmer depicts Adam's dominion as pre-lapsarian and based upon Genesis 1:28 as noted above. This discrepancy between Filmer's assertion as to the foundation of patriarchal right and Locke's line of counter-argument leads one recent commentator to note that "Eve was subject to Adam before he sinned. Political authority, in Filmer's view, is not at all post-lapsarian remedy for sin."²⁸ This points out incisively the extent to which Filmer himself appears to have made a novel departure from a traditional Augustinian Christian conception of the origins of political authority, yet there is a textual basis for Locke's focus on Genesis 3:16. Locke appears to be responding to a claim made by Filmer in another text, namely *The Anarchy of a Limited or Mixed Monarchy* (1648) where in polemics against parliamentary authority, Filmer references

Genesis 3:16 “where God ordained Adam to rule over his wife, and her desires were to be subject to his” and asserts of this scriptural text that it is “the original grant of government.”²⁹ Filmer is apparently contradictory on this point, for in the very same text he also asserts that “Adam was a king from his creation ... Eve was subject to Adam before he sinned.”³⁰

Having a choice, it is certainly easier for Locke to argue against the “guilty” Adam rather than the “innocent” one. It could be claimed, however, that there is no contradiction in Filmer’s position, that he read Genesis as granting Adam dominion over all things, including Eve and their descendants at 1:28, but that government does not arise until after the Fall and is established by Genesis 3:16. If so, then Locke has correctly identified precisely the proper point at which to contest Filmer, for Locke’s concern is with the “true original, extent, and end of Civil-Government” as the *Two Treatises* title page indicates. Locke nowhere denies Adam’s natural, God-given dominion rather his target is the Filmerian claim that “the original grant of government” is a gain, perversely acquired by Adams’ heirs as a result of Adam’s sin. Correctly identifying the point of Locke’s attack on Filmerian biblical interpretation helps to clarify Locke’s position, for Locke does not deny the idea of a natural masculine supremacy, but he does reject the view that there is a basis in the Genesis account for the patriarchal absolutism in either the state or the family.

Locke describes Eve as “representative” of womankind but claims of her subordination to Adam at Genesis 3:16 that “there is here no more law to oblige a woman to subjection.” In other words, she is subject to no subject beyond what, in Locke’s view, was the natural balance of the relationship of men and women. “This text gives not, that I see, any authority to Adam over Eve, or to men over their wives, but only foretells what should be the woman’s lot; how by his providence he would order it so, that she should be subject to her husband ... there is, I grant a

foundation in nature for it.”³¹ In this oft-quoted passage, Locke effectively affirms the Genesis 1 assertion of Adam’s dominion and if this section is to be understood as internally coherent, then by “he [God] would order it” should be understood to mean that God “foretells” arrange rather than commands woman’s subjection, or as the phrase “no more law” would suggest that her prelapsarian status as helpmate to man is unaltered by the Fall. Indeed, Locke notes that with regard to the punishment laid upon Eve that her female descendants are under no duty but rather should be expected “to endeavour to avoid” the pains of childbirth and may also be “exempt” from subjection to a man depending upon “her condition or contract with her husband.” In other words, no woman after Eve need unnecessarily acquiesce nor consent to the fates of suffering and subjugation as a result of the curses Eve received for her sin. Most significant for Locke in this is that a female ruler who might wed does not thereby become automatically subject to her spouse and that even if wives are understood as by the “laws of mankind and customs of nations” subordinate to husbands, this “can only be a conjugal power, not political.”³² This is to say that Locke’s purpose in these arguments is to undo Filmer’s reduction of politics to patriarchal familialism.³³ Yet it must be noted that Locke suggests something more than this. His voluntaristic foundation for the social contract not only applies to politics but also to rendering both the state and the family conventional institutions.

In response to Filmer’s approach then, Locke denies the natural, divinely ordained quality of male authority. By way of contrast to Filmer’s account, Locke argues that the first sin was the mutual responsibility of Adam and Eve. “God did not intend to reward Adam . . . but to punish both.”³⁴ As such, the divine punishment levied on Eve to suffer pain in childbirth should not be construed to advantage Adam. “Eve’s subjection was meant as a punishment for Eve not a victory for Adam.”³⁵ Indeed, again perhaps again reflecting his training as a physician, Locke

notes that the pains of childbirth may be and should be mitigated by human arts. Nonetheless, while denying that patriarchal authority is by God ordained, Locke does indicate his belief that men do play a superior role in families and that this is “foretold” by divine providence in the biblical account of the Fall.³⁶

Locke’s primary interest as a political theorist was, it should be noted, not to defend the rights of women but to undermine the patriarchal argument Filmer used to support absolutism. In opposition to patriarchal absolutism, Locke was defending natural rights, especially the right of property. The practical application of his philosophy was to advocate for the rights of fathers and sons, of the nobility and the gentry, to maintain their family estates and freeholds from nonconsensual expropriation or taxation by the monarchical sovereign. Locke’s philosophical base of operations in his polemic against Filmer is the natural law tradition and the classical conception of the state as grounded in reasoned consent. Locke is theoretically innovative within this tradition to the extent that he develops a novel conception of natural rights, regarding these as the property of each person in themselves.³⁷ Conceptually, this reverses Filmer’s antimony of rights and authority by depicting rights as grounded in nature, while political authority is considered as a human artifice.

Nature, Authority, and Property

Locke’s conception of the natural and artificial can be summarized in the following three propositions:

1. Humanity, through God-given reason is capable of becoming cognizant of the natural law, including the rights of life, liberty, and self-ownership that each person possesses.³⁸
2. As regulated by the natural law and necessity humanity must associate in order to

preserve the species and take from nature possessions for use.³⁹

3. Through human art is created a sovereign of limited authority that is designed to uphold and protect the natural rights of all persons consenting to the social contract.⁴⁰

While he denied divine ordination of patriarchal kingship, Locke did not deny the natural (and therefore in his view, divinely created) quality of human association. To the contrary, the institutions of family and property individually held are depicted as natural necessities.

Contracts and covenants must be consistent with the natural law otherwise they are null and void.

The natural law in turn is based upon reason's understanding of the divine will. Within the bounds of the family and household there is claimed to be a "Foundation in Nature" for "Rule [that] . . . naturally falls to the Man's share, as the abler and the stronger."⁴¹ In the *Second*

Treatise, Locke states that there is a natural, as opposed to a consensual or conventional foundation for male supremacy.⁴² As Susan Moller Okin points out, when Locke approaches issues related to men's roles within households in families, he begins to sound

uncharacteristically Hobbesian, relying on physical strength rather than reason to establish their authority.⁴³ Thus, with reference to "their common Interest and Property," the man rules. As Gordon Schochet notes, Locke "does not seem to have questioned this aspect of the traditional patriarchal family."⁴⁴

The husband, father, and/or master as head of household derives benefit from the labor of women who may provide progeny and other useful forms of productivity. Much in the same manner as the efforts of servants, which lead to greater accumulation of property for the estate's lord, "thus the Grass my Horse has bit; the Turfs my Servant has cut . . . become my property."⁴⁵ Insofar as Locke regards family as a naturally male-dominated institution, the man's position seemingly upholds the rights of property owner and male head of household in a way that does

not require the same standard of limited power as is placed upon the political sovereign.⁴⁶

The Lockean political sovereign is a human artifice, limited in authority by the rational consent of the citizens. The family, on the other hand, is founded in the state of nature. Locke's assumption was that in families men take a "natural" position of rational decision-maker for the family as a whole and direct the disposition of any property holdings. Similarly, to the extent that property is founded in the state of nature as well, it is a right that distinctly favors and benefits the head of household who is presumably male, except in the rare Elizabethan instance. Woman's labor in childbirth and the domestic sphere creates no proprietary status for her, no more than does the laborer receive the full fruit of toil that is done on behalf and under the charge of another. As we have seen, while Locke credits the "substance" of children more to the mother than to the father, this work provides women with no control over their own bodies where reproduction is concerned. Despite his belief that a human fetus lacks soulful consciousness, Locke argued in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that abortion, as well as infanticide, violate "one's duty to God-given laws of nature."⁴⁷

Formally speaking then, women may hold property and even on occasion exercise political power, but it is quite unlikely that this will occur with frequency in a society in which those estates that provide access to status and public position are a male preserve. Locke, by reconstituting the classical public-private dichotomy reproduced what Pateman has termed the "fraternal social contract" which protects the property of fathers and sons, but implicitly denies the claims of women and other subordinate household members.⁴⁸ Locke's conventional assumptions about the fundamental nature of the relationships between women and men work to negate his theoretical assertion of natural equality against Filmer's patriarchy, with respect to those outside the propertied fraternity.

Locke's "Liberalism" Reconsidered

Political theory has traditionally treated issues of family and domesticity as secondary to and distinct from "public" concepts such as the state, sovereignty, nation, property, and law. However, there is more than a little irony in this, as both classical and early modern writers have treated the family as a primary form of community that either logically or historically preceded the polity. In Locke, the family is portrayed as existing in the pre-political state of nature; "the first Society was between Man and Wife."⁴⁹ This is not unlike the Aristotelian conception of the family and household are treated as the first form of society and are quite literally the economy (*oikos*) in the Greek. Even so, the ancients like the moderns, distinguished the family-household realm from a more rational and male political realm, despite the analogies and parallels between the two spheres. For Locke as for Aristotle, the "first Society" is distinct from and inferior to the political realm, "the Master or Mistress of it had some sort of Rule proper to a Family; each of these, or all together came short of Political Society, as we shall see if we consider the Ends, Tyes, and Bounds of each of these."⁵⁰ Hence, the fundamental shortcoming of Filmer, whose patriarchal theory collapses the public/private distinction and also the boundary of Locke's relatively egalitarian view of marriage, is set by Locke's distinction between the conjugal and the political. Consequently, and notwithstanding "a few gestures toward Elizabeth I," he nowhere suggests that women should be participants in politics."⁵¹ As contemporary feminist theorists have pointed out, the theoretical divide between the private and the public is gendered in the sense that it reflects a division of labor and conceptual distinction between the places of women and men. This dichotomy in turn reinforces the social subordination of women and provides ideological support for male domination by associating rationality with the public world. By contrast, private life is depicted as self-interested and characteristically emotive.⁵²

While there is a formal equality of persons asserted in Locke's social contract theory there is a practical expectation, as we have seen, that women in the domestic world are subject to men.⁵³ In effect then, men as heads of households and families are masters of those who inhabit the private sphere; women, servants, children, and as noted above, livestock. As such, to the extent that they are masters of estates, men are in position to act out the potentiality of their reason and participate in the political world, at least so far as Locke is concerned, exercising the right of liberty. What might puzzle today's reader of these texts is the apparent inability of a seventeenth-century "liberal," as Locke is typically held to be, to recognize the logical implications of his own thought. How it could be plausible that women would consent to any form of social contract or marital covenant that would not protect their natural rights is left unexplained. Yet, if women are to be assumed to make such self-abnegating consent, à la the Hobbesian subject, then Locke's own argument against Filmer and absolutism is undermined. Perhaps, it is the case with Locke, as with most people, that he simply failed to live up to (or indeed, think up to) the logical and moral imperatives of his own beliefs as to do so would threaten his own secular interests. Maybe so, but if we are to continue to treat Locke as the source text of modern liberalism then we need must take seriously his inattention to the incipient rights claims of women and men without property. The extent to which he truly is a seminal figure in the history of political thought perhaps depends effectively, albeit not solely, on this point.

Our historical horizon is in so many ways radically different from Locke's. It could be argued that we should consider gender equality to be so far removed from Locke's practical considerations that it is anachronistic to read into his work a fundamental contradiction between his critique of patriarchy and his assumption of natural male supremacy. Locke wrote of natural

rights and reason as universal components of human nature, yet he presumed that in the main a class of men would exercise political power, hold and acquire estates. After all, in the England of Locke's life and times, children and nearly all women, as well as the majority of men, were members of strata that fell below the property line. As such, they were consigned to a legal status little better than domestic beasts, within the household sphere of production and reproduction.

There is advocacy of neither democracy nor "leveling" to be found in Locke's work. As such it would be errant to consider him as anything more "modern" than an advocate of a republic of limited sovereign power, the citizens of which would be male heads of household. The philosophical distance from Locke to the Aristotelian mixed polity is then less than it is from Locke to the contemporary advocate of liberal democracy and gender equality. Locke would then be best regarded as a republican critic of absolutism whose thought anticipates, in some respects, modern liberalism. His thought, however, reinforces the privileges of male property holders and this point is worth emphasis insofar as he would have been aware of the challenge to patriarchal authority that had been presented by more thorough going egalitarian critics of the established order.

In Locke's historical context there were indeed significant challenges to sexual and other forms of social inequality. As historians such as C. P. Hill have documented, radical-popular religious groups of the seventeenth century, such as the so-called Quakers and Ranters,⁵⁴ understood the scriptural concept of the equality of all souls before God to include women as well as men. For these groups, divine inspiration could speak through either sex. The quote that entitles this article is taken from another radical Christian group of the period, the Diggers or "True Levellers," practitioners of a religiously-based communism.⁵⁵ In this instance, the Digger

women were in 1649 petitioning the Parliament on behalf of the men of their faction who had been subject to political persecution and arrest. “Have we not an equal interest with the men of this nation in those liberties and securities contained in the ‘Petition of Right,’ and other good laws of the land?”⁵⁶ We might note as well that in the case of the Diggers, the prerogative experienced by their men was a primacy in imprisonment by the sovereign authority while the Digger women attempted to exercise a citizenly right of petition that had been previously asserted by the Puritan leadership against the monarchy. Cromwell’s parliament was, of course, unwilling to extend the same right to their critics “from below.” Similarly inattentive was the Locke of the *Two Treatises* to the interests of the subaltern members of that society.

Our contemporary assessment of Locke should nonetheless acknowledge Locke’s philosophical importance within the civic republican tradition and his historically important role as a “revolutionary” supporter of Parliamentary ascendancy.⁵⁷ Locke deployed a universalistic language of natural right and law to articulate his position, the far-reaching implications of which are still being explored by advocates of human rights, liberal reformers, and democratic radicals in our own time. Nonetheless, this should not preclude modern readers from recognizing the ways in which his particularistic concerns limited the practical radicalism (in the sense of going to the roots) of his political thought as it was understood and likely intended at the time. The vocabulary of natural rights that Locke developed has shaped modern politics and the state in ways that Locke himself never intended nor imagined.⁵⁸

That we now consider it a norm that the state ought to treat women and men as equal under the law in status and rights is a Lockean conceptual legacy. Yet the liberal state did not place men and women on an equal footing under law for centuries after Locke. The concern of this essay has so far, been to understand how Locke’s thought both reflects and contributes to

these contradictions. Rather than seek to render Locke's thought as a coherent whole, it would seem more plausible to treat the divergent strands of his thought as products of his complex polemical position as critic of absolutism and defender of property rights. Ultimately, contemporary perspectives on Locke should pay due respect to the contribution he made to laying the groundwork of formal equality in the liberal state, but note that within the limits of Locke's thought lies a "missed opportunity" for a less particularistic, more coherent and broad understanding of the natural rights of women and men.⁵⁹ A more balanced and perhaps nuanced perspective on this may be pursued through an approach to a later, "non-political" text of Locke's.

The Reasonableness of Equality

A better understanding of Locke's political theory might be gained by study of his later religious texts, most specifically, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*. This text contains both notable parallels and contrasts to his *Two Treatises of Civil Government*, most specifically with the *First Treatise*, Locke's critique of Robert Filmer's patriarchalist theory of absolute monarchy, in that both address the implications of the biblical Fall from an original state of human kind in the biblical account of the Garden of Eden. In the key fifth chapter of the *First Treatise* Locke attacks the notion that the subjection of Eve described in Genesis 3 provides a basis for the permanent subjection of women to men and the absolute sovereignty of Adam's heirs over all humanity. In *Reasonableness*, Locke challenges received Christian accounts of the moral depravity of human will as a result of original sin and its consequent domination of sin over human nature. Locke's account of natural human freedom as developed in his *Second Treatise* then relies upon his prior demolition of the claim that the Fall led to the establishment of

a legitimate form of political domination and this account is consistent with and effectively reinforced by the emphasis on free will in his later religious writings.

In contrast to the *First Treatise*, Locke's 1695 book, *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (hereafter *RoC*,) has little, indeed almost nothing to say about woman in general and contains sparse references to specific women. This absence is noteworthy in that *RoC* is well known for its explicit rejection of the doctrine of original sin. How and to what extent it does so will be described in further detail below, what is of note here is the absence of the biblical Eve in Locke's in-depth discussions of "Adam's sin" as the fall from Edenic Paradise is consistently described in the text.

Noted biblical scholar Elaine Pagels remarks of Eve that "woman, although created to be man's helper, became his temptress and led him into disaster."⁶⁰ In this notable study, Pagels provides an account of Christian interpretations of the Genesis narrative from classical to modern sources that have been used for patriarchal and misogynist purposes. As Pagels herself "describes the results" of the serpent seduced Eve's temptation of Adam, who partakes of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, offered by his wife, "God himself reinforced the husband's authority over his wife, placing divine sanction upon the social, legal, and economic machinery of male domination."⁶¹

Locke indicates in his discussion of Genesis 3:16 that while Eve is "representative" of women, her sin does not deprive women of the freedom and natural rights to resist pain and the tyranny of men. In other words, woman's nature was not permanently affected by Eve's sin and punishments as orthodox Christian understandings of original sin would have it. Turning now to *RoC*, there are found striking parallels in the form and language of the arguments, despite Eve's absence from this later text. Locke in effect prefigured his rejection of original sin in the *First*

Treatise's discussion of the (non)-subjection of Eve. In *RoC* there are three parallel arguments that will be discussed here. These three are notable for their affinity as well as some intriguing discrepancies between the texts. These three are:

1. The term "representative" recurs with respect to the commission of the first sin, but Adam is said to be *not* representative of all mankind.
2. Adam's descendants are not punished for his sin. Nor is their moral freedom of choice and action thereby affected.
3. In both texts, Locke relies upon what he terms "unbiased" reading of biblical text to criticize established doctrine and theological systems.

In the first part of *RoC*, Locke states his purpose is to "understand ... what we are restored to by Jesus Christ, we must consider what the scripture shews us we lost by Adam. This I thought worthy of a diligent and unbiased search."⁶² Here Locke asserts against those "who would have all Adam's posterity doomed, to eternal punishment, for the transgression of Adam" that "no one had authorized [Adam] to transact for him, or be his representative."⁶³ Locke takes the view that what humanity "lost by Adam" is immortality. Locke cites St. Paul twice to the effect that death is the consequence of Adam's sin for Adam and all his descendants.⁶⁴ However, Locke also notes that "for some" death is taken to mean a "state of guilt, wherein not only he [Adam] but all his posterity was so involved, that every one descended of him deserved endless torment, in hell-fire."⁶⁵ In a rhetorical move quite reminiscent of his critique of Filmer, Locke notes that "it seems a strange way of understanding a law, which requires the plainest and directest words, that by death should be meant eternal life in misery." Just as it is unreasonable to think that Adam's status would be aggrandized in relation to Eve by their mutual sin, so too is it "strange" in Locke's judgment to make Adam's death mean an afterlife of damnation for his

descendants. Similarly, against the Calvinist notion of original sin as moral depravity, Locke notes the irrationality of regarding Adam's sin as leading to "a state of necessary sinning" by his descendants. To counter this, Locke again employs his plain reading of scripture method against this "yet harder sense of the word death" which he again describes as "this strange interpretation" that "the Righteous God be supposed as a punishment for one sin wherewith he is displeased to put a man under a necessity of sinning continually."⁶⁶

As described above, the assertion that Locke rejects the doctrine of original sin means that he rejects notions that humanity bears any moral guilt or that human nature was altered with regard to our normative freedom in consequence of the first sin as described in the Genesis narrative. Failing and falling from "the state of perfect obedience, which is called justice" as Locke describes the condition of Edenic humanity, Locke concludes the first part of his discussion with the claim that "every one's sin is charged upon himself only."⁶⁷ It should be noted however, that Adam's descendants do on Locke's account suffer a devastating loss for Adam's sin, namely access to the Tree of Life and thereby immortality. Yet this, Locke claims is no punishment. To the contrary, he asserts that mortality is not punishment for the reason that mortal life is still better than "not to have been born" although "a state of extreme irremediable torment is worse than no being at all."⁶⁸ In other words, by having mortal life without original sin we have receive a divine gift, but to have been given a life in which we bear the inherent guilt of original sin and lack moral free will would place in jeopardy of a fate worse than non-existence.

Locke envisions Adam's death as permanent non-existence, what might be described as soul-death, but this he claims is just "what we are restored to by Jesus Christ," namely eternal life, which we may regain by the justification of faith in Jesus Christ and by repentance for our

individual sins. The text of *RoC* is largely taken up with working out the implications of the rejection of original sin that is made in the opening sections. He is largely concerned with determining what it is necessary in Christianity to believe in order to receive salvation. Without the doctrine of original sin, the expiation of sin by the crucifixion no longer plays a central theological role. The moral teachings of Jesus and his apostles are emphasized instead and described as complete and superior to all schools of philosophy as means to human happiness. This shift in emphasis led in Locke's day (and continues to do so in ours) to speculation and debate about Locke's actual theological position.

Claims were and are made that Locke rejected not only original sin but also the doctrine of the Trinity (which he does not treat as a necessary belief, but neither does he reject it), and if he was a non-Trinitarian then he may be taken for a "Socinian" or Unitarian who did not accept the divinity of Christ.⁶⁹ That the text was admired and used by Unitarians and other eighteenth-century religious rationalists is historical fact. However, to elide Locke's position with sixteenth and seventeenth-century Socinianism, Unitarianism, or even atheism, is to ignore not only the text's opening statement of seeking to understand what we have regained through Christ, but also its concluding claim of the central significance of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. At that penultimate point in the text, the figure of woman makes one of her infrequent appearances. She is the personification of virtue whose beauty was "unendowed" until "a perfect complete life of eternal duration" was "given us" as "unquestionable assurance and pledge" for those who believe that Jesus was the Messiah and Son of God, repent their sins, and follow the moral teachings of gospel.⁷⁰ Locke's theological position seems much more clearly to shift Christian focus from a theology of the crucifixion to a theology of the resurrection, a focus that on some accounts is distinctly more compatible with a practice of religious toleration.⁷¹

The Resurrection reveals for Locke that path by which we might attain the eternal happiness of everlasting life. In other words, we can rise from the second level to the highest place on Locke's scale: eternal happiness, mortal life, non-existence, eternal misery. Again, a notable parallel can be seen between *RoC* and the *Two Treatises* in which Locke describes a similar hierarchy within the realm of mortal life: civil society, state of nature, tyranny. In this parallelism, the Lockean social contract is analogous to faith; the consensual contract provides a means to earthly preservation of natural rights while faith facilitates the way to eternal life. Both Christian salvation and political society must be non-coercive and just as the state of nature is not a state of war, mortal earthly life is a far better state than eternal torment. Similarly, life under a tyrant is worse than the state of nature, as it is a state of war in which the individual's freedom and self-preservation are denied and rendered almost impossible. Robert Goldwin provides an apt metaphor in his explication of Locke, that humanity's political quest, from a Lockean point of view, is to "avoid falling back into the state of nature."⁷² Tyranny, then is earthly hell, while the state of nature is akin to the sleep of death from which we can be resurrected by faith and the covenant of grace/depart from via consent to a social contract and enter into the advantages of political society. The rational ends of Christianity are homologous to those of Civil Government, the fundamental difference of course being that earthly advance takes place within a mortal realm and as such is reversible through tyranny and renewable through revolution, while the salvation which Locke sees offered by Jesus is eternal.

Following Locke's own suggestion about scripture, we could parallel *RoC* and the *Two Treatises* and "observe the coherence and connexion of the parts"⁷³ of the larger structure of Locke's political theology. For Locke, the sum of all goods is eternal life in God's grace.⁷⁴ Politics has a vital "part" within this larger "coherence" of facilitating happiness, but Locke's

ultimate goal is not secular unless we would describe him as a “Christian hedonist” who would make all mankind happy by appealing to what he claims is reasonable faith in Jesus the messiah and the morality of the gospel. In Locke’s view, Christianity brings salvation through the resurrection but those who lived before the time of Christ and those who have never heard the gospel, are not consigned to eternal outer darkness because all have a “spark of the divine nature” and an ability to understand our natural moral “duty” that leads away from perdition.⁷⁵ In response, to his own question, “What advantage have we by Jesus Christ?”⁷⁶ Locke claims that the morality taught by Jesus and his apostles “tends entirely to the good of mankind and that all would be happy, if all would practice it.”⁷⁷ The text does not end with this but continues a progression from earthly happiness to the promise of eternal resurrection in what has been already described above as its penultimate claim.

Locke falls within the tradition of those who have sought to reconcile reason and revelation but with the crucial difference that he rejects the use of systematic theology. For Locke, there is no need to be a philosopher to enter into the Kingdom, rather he associates such an approach with priestcraft and treats both as obstacles moral understanding. Such understanding, as already noted, is available through natural reason, just a natural law is available as reason in the state of nature to those who will but consult it. Turning to the Bible as his sole source for illumination of the necessities of faith, Locke notes that it may reveal many other truths, some even very obscure,⁷⁸ but his concern is to identify the requisites of justificatory Christian faith in a plain manner that is comprehensible to the ploughman and the digger (and he adds parenthetically, “the other sex”).⁷⁹

At the conclusion of *RoC* we find another of the text’s scant references to woman. In the penultimate discussion of the resurrection she appeared “endowed” with virtue, now her

appearance is parenthetical, a seeming afterthought but again in the abstract not as a concrete woman or women, she is like the “hand [that] is used to the plough and the spade” the other of those who are exercised in “mysterious reasonings.” She is now unendowed by education, but the way to eternal happiness is as available to her as to any man.

As suggested above, Locke’s political theology is conducive of a tolerationist viewpoint. The claim made here is that a better understanding of Locke’s political thought may be arrived at through a study of *RoC* and Locke’s other late religious texts. As Locke’s recent biographer notes, in his last year Locke was working on his commentaries on Paul’s epistles as well as *A Fourth Letter for Toleration*.⁸⁰ Beyond the parallels between *RoC* and the *Two Treatises*, it should be noted also that there is an affinity between the argument of *RoC* and *A Letter Concerning Toleration*. Here again, Locke is seeking the minimum necessary to salvation from civil strife and religious warfare.⁸¹ Central to Locke’s argument for toleration is his insistence that “toleration is the mark of a true Church.”⁸² Here again, the pattern of Locke’s thought is “liberal” Christian yet minimalist in its dogmatic demands, reserving its restrictions for what he regarded as the irrationality of priestcraft and atheism, imprecise perhaps in its Christological viewpoint and ambiguous already to his contemporaries with regard to just how much liberty Locke had taken in his challenge to patriarchal “authority and jurisdiction.”

ENDNOTES

References to primary sources such as Locke's Treatise I or II, refer to specific text sections and paragraphs by number where appropriate.

¹ Paul Sigmund, *The Selected Political Writings of John Locke* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), xxxiv-xxxviii.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ John Locke, "Second Treatise of Civil Government" as in Ian Shapiro, ed. *Two Treatises of Civil Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), sec. 4.

⁵ Locke, *Second Treatise*, sec. 13.

⁶ Nancy J. Hirschmann, *Gender, Class, and Freedom in Modern Political Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 116.

⁷ John Locke, "First Treatise of Civil Government" as in Ian Shapiro, ed. *Two Treatises of Civil Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003); John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*. I. Ramsey, ed. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 1958).

⁸ Richard Ashcraft, *Locke's Two Treatises of Government* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1987) emphasizes Locke's radical legacy; for discussion of Locke on individual rights, see also Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953).

⁹ Robert Filmer, *Patriarcha and Other Writings* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

¹⁰ Ibid., 184.

¹¹ Ibid., 10.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 192.

¹⁴ Ibid., 11.

¹⁵ Zillah Eisenstein, *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism*. 2nd ed. (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1993), 38.

¹⁶ Locke quoted in Ingrid Makus, *Women, Politics, and Reproduction: The Liberal Legacy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 63.

¹⁷ Locke, *First Treatise*, sec. 51.

¹⁸ Ibid., sec. 55.

¹⁹ John Locke, *Locke's Two Treatises of Government*. P. Laslett, ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 169.

²⁰ Filmer, *Patriarcha*, chapter I, section 4.

²¹ Ibid., chapter I, section 4.

²² Ibid., chapter I, sec. 3.

²³ Ibid., chapter I, sec. 7.

²⁴ Schochet, Gordon J. (1975) *Patriarchalism in Political Thought*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

²⁵ Filmer, *Patriarcha*, chapter I, sec. 1.

²⁶ Locke, *First Treatise*, sec. 44.

²⁷ Ibid.

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- ²⁸ Jeremy Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality: Christian Foundations of John Locke's Political Thought* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 27.
- ²⁹ Filmer, *Op. Cit.*, 138.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 145.
- ³¹ Locke, *First Treatise*, sec. 47.
- ³² *Ibid.* sec. 48.
- ³³ Melissa Butler, "Early Liberal Roots of Feminism: John Locke and the Attack on Patriarchy," *American Political Science Review* 72, (1978): 135-50.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, sec. 49.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, sec. 44.
- ³⁶ Locke quoted in Makus, *op. cit.*, 53.
- ³⁷ G.A. Cohen, *Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), chapter nine.
- ³⁸ Locke, *Second Treatise*, sec. 6.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, sec. 7.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, sec. 95.
- ⁴¹ Locke, *First Treatise*, sec. 47.
- ⁴² Locke, *Second Treatise*, sec. 82.
- ⁴³ Susan Moller Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 199-200.
- ⁴⁴ Schochet, *Op. Cit.*, 250.
- ⁴⁵ Locke, *Second Treatise*, sec. 28.
- ⁴⁶ C.B. McPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, (NY: Oxford University Press, 1962) for the case against Locke as egalitarian.
- ⁴⁷ Quoted in Makus, *op. cit.*, 86.
- ⁴⁸ Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988).
- ⁴⁹ Locke, *Second Treatise*, sec. 77.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁵¹ Nancy Hirschmann & Kirstie McClure, *Feminist Interpretations of John Locke*. (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2002), 4.
- ⁵² Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman*, 2nd ed., (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).
- ⁵³ Mary B. Walsh, "Locke and Feminism on Private and Public Realms of Activities," *The Review of Politics* 57, (1995): 254.
- ⁵⁴ As their names suggest, non-conformist religious groups of the period were often tagged with pejorative names reflective of contemporary stereotyping of their supposed frenzied religious behaviors and street preaching. Christopher P. Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*. (NY: Penguin, 1975).
- ⁵⁵ "Diggers" so-called due to their efforts to establish a collective farm on common land.
- ⁵⁶ Diane Coole, *Women in Political Theory*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1993), 77. See also Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*. *Op. Cit.*
- ⁵⁷ Ashcraft, *Op.Cit.*
- ⁵⁸ Butler, *Op.Cit.*
- ⁵⁹ Melissa Butler, "Afterword: Roots and Shoots - Revisiting the Attack on Patriarchy," in Hirschmann and McClure, *Op. Cit.*, 192.

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- ⁶⁰ Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*. (New York, NY: Random House, 1988), 114.
- ⁶¹ Ibid.
- ⁶² Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, section 1.
- ⁶³ Ibid. sec. 1.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid. sec. 2.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid. sec. 3.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid. sec. 4.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid. sec. 5.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid. sec. 6.
- ⁶⁹ John Marshall, *John Locke: Resistance, Religion and Responsibility*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
- ⁷⁰ Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, section 245.
- ⁷¹ James Carroll, *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews*. (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin, 2001).
- ⁷² Robert A. Goldwin, "John Locke," in Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, eds. *History of Political Philosophy*. 3rd edition. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 507.
- ⁷³ Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, section 248.
- ⁷⁴ For a contrary view emphasizing Locke's modernity and discontinuity between his outlook and the tradition of political theology leading back through Hooker to Aquinas, see Michael P. Zuckert, *Launching Liberalism: On Lockean Political Philosophy*. (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002).
- ⁷⁵ Locke, John, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, section 231.
- ⁷⁶ Ibid. sec. 234.
- ⁷⁷ Ibid. sec. 243.
- ⁷⁸ Ibid. sec. 235.
- ⁷⁹ Ibid. sec. 252.
- ⁸⁰ Roger Woolhouse, *Locke: A Biography*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 452-4.
- ⁸¹ John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*. J. Tully, ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1983).
- ⁸² D. Wootton, "An Evaluation of Locke's Argument against Persecution," as in Paul Sigmund, ed., *The Selected Political Writings of John Locke*. (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2005), 369. How ironic then that some of the present day heirs to seventeenth-century English non-conformism seem to fail to uphold the tradition of tolerance!