

# Second Treatise of Government Locke

Richard Cox  
Editor





*Second Treatise  
of Government*

# Crofts Classics

GENERAL EDITOR

Samuel H. Beer, *Harvard University*



JOHN LOCKE

*An Essay Concerning the True Original,  
Extent and End of Civil Government*

*Second Treatise  
of Government*

EDITED BY

*Richard H. Cox*

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT BUFFALO

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## *introduction*<sup>1</sup>

John Locke's precursor, Francis Bacon, once said, "Some books are to be read only in parts; others to be read, but not curiously; and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention."<sup>2</sup> Locke's *An Essay Concerning the True Original, Extent and End of Civil Government*—the second of his *Two Treatises of Government*—is the third kind of book, for it is a work of political philosophy. Such works contain the concentrated thought of philosophic minds, focussed on basic questions concerning the nature of political things: What is justice? What is property? What is the best form of government? What is law? What is the purpose of political society? The serious reader of a work of political philosophy seeks, in effect, to ascend to the summit of thought concerning these questions by

<sup>1</sup>To "introduce" a work of political philosophy is, to some extent, to "interpret" it. *Introduce* comes from a Latin root, *intro-ducere*, which means "to lead into" or "to lead within." Similarly, *interpret* comes from a Latin root, *interpretari*, which means "to explain" or "to expound," with a more remote root in older words that mean "to spread abroad between others." Drawing on these etymological senses, I conceive of my Introduction as seeking to lead the reader "within" Locke's *Second Treatise* by "explaining" certain of its most important features.

On the problem of interpreting, see Michael Platt, "Interpretation," *Interpretation*, 5, no. 1 (Summer 1975): 109–130.

<sup>2</sup>Francis Bacon, "Of Studies," in *Essays or Counsels, Civil and Moral* (1625).

rethinking the thoughts of the philosopher. The following remarks on Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* offer guidelines for that ascent.

Part I is a sketch of Locke's life and times. It is meant to set Locke's writings within their historical and intellectual framework in order to help the present-day reader grasp his purpose and meaning. Part II is an overview of Locke's five main writings. It argues that Locke's *Second Treatise* is best understood as part of a grand intellectual design for the fundamental restructuring of society and thus of human life. Part III is a compressed analysis of the structure and content of the *Two Treatises*. This analysis permits the reader from the outset to see the main lines of Locke's argument and thus prepares the way for an intensive reading of the *Second Treatise*. Part IV discusses the interpretation and the significance of Locke's political teaching.

## I. Locke's Life and Times

John Locke was born in 1632 and died in 1704.<sup>3</sup> He thus lived through some of the most tumultuous events in English history: the Civil War between Royalists and Roundheads (1642–1649), the establishment and collapse of Oliver Cromwell's "Commonwealth" (1649–1660), the Restoration of the Monarchy (1660), and the continuing religious-political controversies that were largely resolved in the Glorious Revolution (1688–1689) and the Act of Settlement of the Crown (1701).

Locke was born to Puritan parents of modest means. He was educated at Westminster School (London) and Christ Church College (Oxford), largely supported by scholarships. At Oxford he followed the traditional curriculum in natural and moral philosophy. He also became interested in the new experimental study of nature and in medicine, but he pursued both interests informally.

<sup>3</sup>A concise biography of Locke may be found in the *English Dictionary of National Biography*. In what follows I am much indebted to Maurice Cranston's *John Locke* (London: Longmans, 1957).

In the summer of 1666 Locke met Lord Ashley, later to become the first earl of Shaftesbury and one of the principal Whig opponents of the restored monarchy. It was a fateful meeting: Locke soon became not only personal physician to Ashley but also a political advisor. Late in 1666, by order of the Court and perhaps with the help of Ashley, Locke was appointed as a physician at Christ Church over the objection of the Oxford medical faculty.

As the conflict between the Whigs and Charles II intensified, so did the danger for Ashley and his physician-advisor. Thus, in 1677 Ashley was sent to prison in the Tower for a year. In 1679 the college librarian at Christ Church became a secret, unofficial spy for the Court, keeping it informed of Locke's doings and whereabouts. Again in 1681 Ashley was thrown into the Tower and released only because the grand jury, loaded with Whigs, refused to indict him. Upon his release, Ashley actively sought to raise a Whig rebellion. But when that failed, he fled to the political refuge of Holland late in 1682, where he died early in 1683.

Locke now became ever more fearful for his own safety. He too sought asylum in Holland, arriving there in September 1683. But he was not forgotten by his enemies in England: In 1684 the King ordered him expelled from his position at Christ Church and placed his name on a list of alleged "conspirators," which was presented to the Dutch States General with the demand that the named persons be extradited to England for trial. Locke then went into hiding. He used aliases and concealed his whereabouts from all but close friends. And even when he came out of hiding in 1686, after James II had come to the throne, he took pains to conceal the location of his residence and was very cautious in his correspondence. Finally, early in 1689 he returned to England, but only when it appeared reasonably safe to do so because of the imminent transfer of the crown to Protestant William and Mary of Holland.

From 1689 to 1700, when failing health greatly restricted his activities, Locke divided his time between writing and public service. He took an active part in weighty controversies over public policies, particularly those having to do with various aspects of trade. He published two works (one in 1691 and one in 1695) that discuss the prob-

lems of the legal regulation of interest rates and the state of the coinage in England.<sup>4</sup> He sought to show that the workings of natural laws of productivity and exchange cannot be overcome by unwise civil laws and that to seek to do so is to ensure serious harm to the economy, hence to the common interest in a thriving, powerful political society. One important consequence of his arguments was the recoinage that eventually had a beneficial effect on English trade. As for public service, in 1696 William III appointed Locke a commissioner of the newly founded Board of Trade. Locke served in that post until 1700, much occupied with very practical matters such as the linen trade in Ireland, the choice of administrators in the colonies, and policy toward paupers. His abilities and influence were recognized again by William III in 1698, for he was personally offered a position by the King—apparently the important post of embassy secretary in Paris. Locke declined because of his poor health and because he wished to devote more time to his studies and writings. But he remained a notable public figure until very near the end of his life.

Thus Locke was no mere reclusive philosopher. And yet in retrospect his role in the great political controversies of his time proves to have been far less important than was his role in the great intellectual controversy that also was going on. That controversy—the most fundamental in the intellectual history of the West—is sometimes known as “the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns.” In 1704, the year Locke died, Jonathan Swift (1667–1745) published a remarkably acute satire on the quarrel in *The Battle of the Books*. And in 1726 he published a much more intricate satire, his most famous work, *Gulliver’s Travels*. A brief survey of one aspect of the opposition between ancients and moderns that Swift satirized will help to set Locke’s writings in their proper philosophical framework.

The basic opposition was between the ancients’ essentially “contemplative” and the moderns’ essentially “manipulative” understanding of the ultimate nature and purpose of

<sup>4</sup>*Some Considerations of the Consequences of the Lowering of Interest; Further Considerations Concerning Raising the Value of Money.*



human knowledge. The ancients spoke of the vehicle of human knowledge as the *psyche* or soul; they conceived of the highest activity of the soul as *theoria*—active wondering and gazing at the cosmos and its various parts; and they concluded that the true object of *theoria* is simply knowledge for the sake of knowledge. In more concrete terms, the *theoria* of classical physics, for example, consists of observation and reflection concerning the nature of motion and rest. Knowledge of that nature is an end in itself, complete and perfect. In contrast, the moderns increasingly spoke of the vehicle of human knowledge as the mind; they conceived of the highest activity of the mind as the discovery of methods by which the mind may penetrate nature's secrets by developing a dialectic between theory and experiment; and they concluded that the true object of that dialectic is the acquisition of human power over natural processes. Knowledge is for the sake of human power. Again in more concrete terms, the theory of modern physics is a progressive interchange between hypotheses concerning the laws of physical processes and experiments, which themselves often require the very extensive and intensive manipulation of physical things. Thus, the moderns thought, the knowledge of things in nature is contingent upon and revealed by human power *over* nature and the object of knowledge is the making of new things that serve human desires. Francis Bacon, whom Swift perceived as one of the most formidable of the moderns, summarized this aspect of the modern conception of human knowledge in a remarkable phrase: He argued that the object of knowledge is "the conquest of nature for the relief of man's estate."

Today it is difficult to grasp, let alone give much credence to, the teaching of the ancients, so thorough has been the acceptance of the teaching of the moderns. But for the purpose of studying Locke's works, it must constantly be kept in mind that when he lived and wrote the issue between ancients and moderns was still very much undecided. As a matter of fact, when Locke wrote his five most important works—*A Letter Concerning Toleration*, *Two Treatises of Government*, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, and *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*—political, religious, and uni-

versity authorities joined forces to restrain and even to prevent the articulation of unorthodox doctrines, including the “modern” principles. First of all, the government licensed and censored written works. Locke’s *Two Treatises*, for example, was licensed by the government in the fall of 1689; without that license, it could not have been published. Second, a vigorous polemic was waged against the works of the most obvious advocates of the modern principles, as well as against those who were suspected of harboring sympathies for that camp. For example, a raging invective bespattered the main political works of Thomas Hobbes (*Of the Citizen*, 1642, and *Leviathan*, 1651) when they were published. Hobbes, an open advocate of the modern principles, was variously described as “The Monster of Malmesbury,” a defamer of human nature in his account of man in the state of nature, and even an outright atheist, in spite of the elaborate exegeses of biblical passages Hobbes presented as proofs that his teachings were consonant with the biblical ones. And toward the end of the century Locke’s own *Reasonableness of Christianity*—published anonymously like most of his works—was subjected to the harsh charge that its teaching was merely a thinly disguised form of Hobbism.

A third kind of repression of unorthodox doctrines occurred when public authorities sometimes subjected alleged miscreants to the full force of criminal law, such as to statutes which forbade blasphemy or sedition. A young man of eighteen was publicly hanged at Edinburgh in 1696. His crime: public denial of the doctrine of the trinity, a blasphemy he was alleged to have learned in part from reading Hobbes’ writings. Earlier Algernon Sidney, a Whig leader, was beheaded in the Tower of London in 1683. His crime: the “treasonous” assertion of the superiority of republican over monarchical government, an assertion he was alleged to have made in his unpublished work, *Discourses on Government*, a writing clearly influenced by Machiavelli’s *Discourses on Livy*.

In sum, when Locke wrote and published, harassment, calumny, and even outright persecution were serious possibilities and sometimes painful realities for those who dared to teach unorthodox principles of morals, religion,

or government too openly. With this in mind, let us look at Locke's personal circumstances and his conduct with respect to the publication of his first three major works.

Locke completed the *Letter*, *Treatises*, and *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* while a hunted exile in Holland. In 1689 he published the *Letter* anonymously in a Latin version in Holland, and the *Treatises*, also anonymously but in London. In 1690 he published the *Essay* in London; it alone of all three works carried his name on the title page. Thus, within a year's time, as we *now* know, but hardly anyone in the world *then* knew except Locke himself, Locke published two works on religion and politics and one on the abstruse question of the workings of the human mind. He never publicly acknowledged either the *Letter* or the *Treatises* during the remaining fourteen years of his life. He did so in fact only when he suspected death was near and then only in a codicil to his will. On the other hand, he acknowledged the *Essay* from the outset and publicly defended it against all critics. Apparently Locke felt free to publish openly and to defend in his own name a work on human understanding but not those on religion and politics.

To see more exactly why, let us look closely at the *Letter*. On the title page of the original Latin edition are some mysterious letters. Maurice Cranston has shown that they are the first letters of a Latin phrase that means, in part: written by one who is a "friend" of peace and a "hater" of persecution.<sup>5</sup> Above all, Locke must have had religious persecution by political authority in mind, for the *Letter* itself contains the essence of the doctrine of separation of church and state. We now take that doctrine nearly for granted as true or proper, especially in the United States, but when Locke published his *Letter*, it was bold and unorthodox. That is shown not only by Locke's great reluctance to acknowledge the *Letter* as his own but even more so by the stream of scathing criticism directed against it in the pamphlet literature of the times. Locke published three rebuttals to that criticism, always anonymously, and in these he admitted the unorthodox character of the

<sup>5</sup>Cranston, *op. cit.*, p. 320.

*Letter's* doctrine. Given the circumstances his policy of anonymity was not paranoia but merely prudent reserve.

This would suggest in turn that his equally tenacious policy of anonymity concerning his *Treatises* was rooted in a recognition that they, too, contained strange doctrine. What is puzzling, however, is that the *Treatises* were not subjected to the criticism directed against the *Letter* or the *Reasonableness*. Is this because the *Treatises* are not in fact nearly so heterodox as the other two works? But if that is the case, then why Locke's persistent anonymity? Alternatively, is there a heterodoxy in the *Treatises* but one that is more carefully concealed than that in the other two works? It is not easy to demonstrate that the latter possibility is the true one: By its very nature, a partially concealed heterodoxy appears, on the surface, mostly as orthodoxy. Thus, one has to scrutinize such a text with more than ordinary care.<sup>6</sup>

Given Locke's circumstances and conduct, I suggest that his great reticence concerning his *Treatises* may have reflected an awareness, first, that the book contains a strange doctrine on government hidden beneath a surface of orthodoxy; second, that it was therefore not desirable for the book to be connected to other books by him, some of them much more openly unorthodox in content, as the *Letter* surely is; third, that the *Treatises* are part of a large, overall design, a design meant to be translated into practice by the cumulative effect of his major published works but one which, too openly stated, might have brought him at least the calumny heaped on Hobbes if not the axe inflicted on Sidney.

## II. The Design and Strategy of Persuasion of Locke's Main Works

I believe that Locke conceived of his major works as part of just such a coherent design. His object was to bring about a

<sup>6</sup>For a general discussion of such writing, see Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, (Glencoe, Ill.: 1952).

new human condition, one in which mankind would become much more at home in this world than ever before by becoming the conqueror of a penurious and largely hostile natural condition. Locke sought to achieve that object by a strategy of persuasion directed largely at the leaders of society. The strategy combined fairly open challenges to orthodoxy, as in the doctrine on toleration in the *Letter*, and more restrained, ambiguous challenges, as in the doctrines on the law of nature, on property, and on the object of government in the *Treatises*. I will now show more exactly what I mean both by the overall design and the strategy of persuasion, for it is in that framework that the *Treatises* may be most profitably understood.

The purpose of the *Letter* was to establish the "just bounds" between a "commonwealth" (or "the state," as we now say) and a "church." The commonwealth, Locke argued, is constituted solely for the "procuring, preserving, and advancing" of men's "civil interests." Civil interests, in turn, fall into two basic categories: first, the things that naturally pertain to the individual, his "life, liberty, health, and indolency [ease and rest of the] body"; second, things external to the body, such as "money, land, houses, furniture, and the like." On the other hand, the church, he argued, is a purely voluntary "society" that men may join in order publicly to worship God as "they judge acceptable to Him." Its ultimate purpose is to effect "the salvation of their souls."

The intended short-range effect of this distinction is, first, to reserve to the government the exclusive power to inflict punishment, civil or criminal, and absolutely to restrict punishment to acts committed against other men's civil interests; and second, to reserve to the church the exclusive power to discipline its members and absolutely to restrict discipline to "exhortations, admonitions, and advices," or in an extreme case, separation from the church. But the intended long-range effect is also twofold and complementary: first, wholly to secularize government and to depoliticize religion, and second, to reorient men primarily in the direction of their civil interests, which is to say in the direction of concern for their life, liberty, and possessions, the interests to be protected by government.

Locke was profoundly aware that to bring about so radi-

cal a change in the human condition would require a commensurately radical change in men's understanding of what constitutes the good life, and that this in turn would require a change in understanding principally among the leading members of society. According to Locke, they point the way for and shape the opinions of the great majority. In short, Locke's design required him to persuade the leading members of society that such a change would be beneficial to all mankind.

Locke's most theoretical book, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, contributes to this aspect of his design in a fundamental way. When Locke wrote the *Essay*, in the middle and latter part of the seventeenth century, the universities still strongly emphasized the teaching of ancient and Scholastic philosophy (the latter a fusion of Christian doctrine and Aristotelian philosophy). But that traditional approach to understanding the world was increasingly under a vigorous, double assault. On one side it was besieged by the philosophical arguments of works such as Francis Bacon's *Novum Organum* (1620), which Bacon conceived of as a replacement for the *organon*, or "logic," of Aristotle. Bacon projects a new *method* and a new *end* for all the sciences. The method is to develop highly rigorous modes of reasoning concerning 1) observations made on natural bodies in their natural state and 2) observations made on experimentally induced changes in natural bodies. The end is to develop power over nature's processes by discovering their inner character and then to use that power to produce "works"—what we now know as the products of scientific technology. On the other side the traditional understanding was besieged by the actual results of the new physics, such as Isaac Newton's *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* (1687).

Locke's *Essay* unobtrusively but decisively joins forces with Bacon and Newton. Thus, in a telling image in his "Epistle to the Reader," Locke refers to himself as removing some of the "rubbish" that "lies in the way to knowledge"—that is to say, as one who helps clear away the ancient philosophies and opens the way to the new investigation of nature that was already developing in what he calls the "commonwealth of learning," whose chief citizens are men such as "the incomparable Mr. Newton." Now

Locke's own contribution to the enterprise is this: first, to determine the exact nature and limits of human understanding and, second, to direct the purged and enlightened understanding to a concern with all those things that "may be of use to us" and in particular, the things that may contribute to "a comfortable provision for this life." (Introduction, 5) In so doing Locke seeks both to divert men of great intellect from the sterile province of Scholastic philosophic disputation and from the dangerous province of religious polemics, and to redirect them to investigations that give promise of producing those works that Bacon held out as the hope of mankind. In sum, the *Essay* seeks to make all men increasingly at home in this world by teaching their intellectual leaders the theoretical principles that should guide the new commonwealth of learning, a commonwealth dedicated to securing things of "use" to men in "this life."

It is true that Locke also speaks in the *Essay* of the life beyond this one—of a "better" life, as he at one place calls it (Introduction, 5)—thus echoing traditional Christian doctrine, which teaches that man's true life is the one after death, that comes to those who truly accept Jesus as their Saviour. But since the *Essay* is primarily concerned with natural reason, and since revelation goes beyond natural reason, the *Essay* says little about what is required to enter into that better life. For that we must turn to Locke's *Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695). Now when Locke's *Reasonableness* is set beside other great works on Christian doctrine, most notably St. Augustine's *City of God* and John Calvin's *Institutes of Christian Religion*, it becomes apparent that Locke seeks to narrow the Christian teaching in a remarkable way. The Christian teaching, Locke argues, may be reduced to one and only one article of faith: "Jesus is the Messiah." Whereas St. Augustine and Calvin might conceivably have accepted Locke's formulation as a beginning for unfolding Christian doctrine, it is inconceivable that either could have accepted his reduction of the doctrine to that single, uncomplicated principle. Nor could they have accepted his argument, already articulated in the *Letter*, that the civil magistrates could not in any way require belief even in this one article. And still less could they have accepted the central sense of Locke's *Essay*, which, as

I have indicated above, seeks to direct men's intellects above all to the production of things for use in this life. But the *Reasonableness* was an integral part of Locke's own design, for it directly addressed the question of what must be conceded—at least in the circumstances he faced—to the claims of revealed religion, while at the same time circumscribing those claims as narrowly as possible.

We come then to the *Two Treatises of Government*. In the *First Treatise* Locke demolishes Sir Robert Filmer's version of the "Divine Right of Kings" to political rule. In particular he singles out for assault the arguments and the biblical citations of Filmer's *Patriarcha* (1680), in which Sir Robert sought to derive all legitimate political rule from fatherly rule and ultimately from the rule of the first father of humankind, Adam himself. In this part of the *Treatises* Locke relies mainly on refutations of Filmer's interpretation of biblical teachings and secondarily on arguments and evidence obtained from natural reason. In the *Second Treatise* Locke moves from demolition to reconstruction: He now presents his own positive teaching on the "true original, extent, and end of civil government." In this part of the *Treatises* Locke relies mainly on arguments and evidence obtained from natural reason and secondarily on what appears to be the true—as contrasted to Filmer's false—interpretations of biblical teachings. It remains to be seen whether this second element is in the final analysis compatible with the first. But it suffices for now to make two observations: First, the marked shift in emphasis from the *First Treatise* to the *Second Treatise*—the shift that brings natural reason's discoveries concerning the nature of government into the foreground—reinforces the secular sense of the commonwealth that was articulated in the *Letter Concerning Toleration*. Second, the *Second Treatise* constitutes the political cornerstone of the new edifice that Locke seeks to raise. And embedded in that cornerstone is the definitive treatment of "civil interests": It is Locke's analysis of the nature of "property," on which everything else in the work at last comes to rest.

Finally, there is the work entitled *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693). Its purpose is to set forth principles for the physical, moral, and academic instruction of young men, or to be more exact, of young gentlemen. As such,



the work focusses on the proper training of those individuals most likely to be among the leading part of a well-ordered political society—men of good families, of fairly extensive real property, and of good educational backgrounds, hence men having extensive “civil interests” in Locke’s sense of that phrase, and therefore bound to have a considerable stake in the right ordering of government. The *Thoughts* is thus a supplement to both the *Reasonableness* and the *Second Treatise*. It is a supplement to the former in that it supplies a secular moral counterpart to the religious moral doctrine conveyed in the *Reasonableness*. It is a supplement to the latter in that it supplies guidelines for the education of those most likely to have the greatest interest in and capability of maintaining a civil government dedicated to the protection of men’s life and liberty, as well as possessions such as land, houses, and money.

As we turn now to look more closely at the *Two Treatises of Government*, the reader may profitably be reminded that the work is best perceived as part of a larger design, whereby Locke seeks to give practical form to the root distinction between this-worldly and other-worldly things. Stated even more pointedly, the *Second Treatise* seeks to make men much more at home in *this* world by teaching them how to construct a civil government that will be essentially the protector of men’s property, and that will, in particular, provide encouragement and protection to those “industrious” and “rational” men (*Second Treatise*, para. 34, hereafter II.34) who will most efficaciously extract a plentitude of useful goods from the penurious hand of nature.

### III. An Analytical Outline of the *Two Treatises of Government*.

#### A. THE FIRST TREATISE.

The *First Treatise* is, as was noted above, a polemic against Sir Robert Filmer’s patriarchal version of the “Divine Right of Kings.” Locke singles out Filmer’s contention that men