

AN APPROACH TO
POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY:
LOCKE IN CONTEXTS

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Victoria 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1993

First published 1993

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Tully, James, 1946–

An approach to political philosophy. Locke in contexts / James Tully.

p. cm. – (Ideas in context)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 43060 7 – ISBN 0 521 43638 9 (pbk.)

1. Locke, John, 1632–1704 – Contributions in political science.

I. Title. II. Series

JC 153.L87T837 1993

320'.01 – dc20 92-16688 CIP

ISBN 0 521 430607 hardback

ISBN 0 521 43638 9 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2003

Contents

| | |
|---|----------------|
| <i>Acknowledgements</i> | <i>page xi</i> |
| Introduction | i |
| A PHILOSOPHY OF LIMITED GOVERNMENT | |
| 1 An introduction to Locke's political philosophy | 9 |
| PROPERTY DISPUTES | |
| 2 After the Macpherson thesis | 71 |
| 3 The framework of natural rights in Locke's analysis of property | 96 |
| 4 Differences in the interpretation of Locke on property | 118 |
| 5 Rediscovering America: the <i>Two treatises</i> and aboriginal rights | 137 |
| GOVERNING SUBJECTS | |
| 6 Governing conduct: Locke on the reform of thought and behaviour | 179 |
| 7 Rights in abilities | 242 |
| 8 Progress and scepticism | 262 |
| FREEDOM AND REVOLUTION | |
| 9 Liberty and natural law | 281 |
| 10 Political freedom | 315 |
| Index | 324 |

Introduction

The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose.¹

I have sought to develop an approach to political philosophy that throws light on the problems of the present age through contextual studies of the history of modern political thought. I have drawn inspiration from Wittgenstein, Sir Isaiah Berlin, the Cambridge school of John Dunn, John Pocock, Quentin Skinner, and Richard Tuck, Michel Foucault's histories of the present, and the work of Charles Taylor. My approach is thus a contribution to the broad and pluralistic movement to re-examine the relationships between political philosophy and its history that these authors and others set in motion in the post-war era. It is therefore an honour to have these essays published in the *Ideas in context* series, which exemplifies this European and American movement and whose first publication, *Philosophy in history* (1984), is one of the best statements of its main themes.

All the essays are concerned first with understanding the political philosophy of John Locke in a historically sensitive manner by interpreting his writings in light of the discursive and practical contexts in which they were written, published and read. The appropriate contexts are various and overlapping, for authors such as Locke and his adversaries were doing many things in writing a text, and so it is necessary to approach the same text from many different contexts to understand it. They range from specific debates and events in England to European political movements and intellectual traditions. By this somewhat meticulous underlabouring I hope to

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical investigations*, tr. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), section 127.

furnish a better understanding of the complexity of both Locke's political thought and its place in early modern political thought. Second, I seek to bring out the critical significance or interest of the interpretation for a late twentieth century reader. Critical significance too is various: questioning a conventional interpretation or offering an interpretation of a disputed stretch of text, comparing Locke's arguments to his contemporaries to show his conventionality or originality, tracing the roles of his arguments in the formation of the labyrinth of modern political thought, drawing either a contrast or a comparison to a conventional assumption of later or current political philosophy in order to call it into question, and so on – a variety of exercises in placing specific aspects of the present in a different, less familiar and more critical light. I have tried to meet the criteria of historians of political thought and political philosophers, and to show by example that both disciplines can be enriched by an approach that combines the two.²

Locke's political philosophy is particularly suitable for this type of study, as John Dunn's pioneering work demonstrates, because it addresses many of the central themes of seventeenth century political reflection and it plays a multiplicity of roles in later political thought in Europe and North America, especially in twentieth century varieties of liberalism. A reinterpretation of Locke is thus not only a reinterpretation of one strand of liberalism but also of the ways many liberals and their critics understand the formation of modernity and postmodernity, both of which are standardly defined in relation to interpretations of Locke's philosophy. John Dunn, Michel Foucault, John Pocock, Quentin Skinner, and Charles Taylor, for example, have challenged the conventional understanding of Locke and liberalism and, in so doing, altered our views of modernity. Thus, to take up these penetrating challenges and investigate Locke's philosophy critically in the context of the current debates, often as a way of testing the interpretations that set the terms of the debates, is to contribute to a better understanding of Locke and the varieties of liberalism, and, in so doing, of one aspect of our tangled identities as moderns.

² See James Tully, 'Wittgenstein and political philosophy', *Political theory* 17, 2 (May 1989), 172–204, and the methodological writings of Quentin Skinner, to which I am greatly indebted, in *Meaning and context: Quentin Skinner and his critics*, ed. James Tully (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988).

The essays, written over the last decade, have been rewritten and arranged thematically. Chapter 1 provides an overview of Locke's political philosophy, aspects of which are then taken up in more detail in the following chapters. At the centre of the *Two treatises of government* is – not surprisingly but often overlooked – a philosophy of *government*. The relation of governance between governors and free citizens is conceptualized, not as sovereign and subjects, as in the absolutist traditions, but rather as a game of conditional and mutual subjection in which each governs the other by subjecting the other to the rule of law. In the final chapter I suggest that this agonistic picture of government is his most distinctive and enduring contribution to modern political thought. Elsewhere I have argued that Locke and republican writers are closer, but not identical, in their views in this regard, and in their common opposition to the passive subjection characteristic of absolutism, than the conventional distinction between juristic and civic humanist traditions leads one to believe.³ Written, rewritten and published in the context of the struggles in England in the 1680s, the *Two treatises* is also seen by Locke to address a European-wide set of problems and to draw upon European political theories.

The development of Locke's defence of religious toleration and pluralism in *A letter concerning toleration* is the subject of the second section of chapter 1. It is an integral part of his political philosophy and light can be thrown on contentious aspects of the *Two treatises* by reading the two together. For instance, the specific groups of people in England (and France) who Locke believed had their rights and property violated, and so had the right to resist, were not capitalist landowners but oppressed religious minorities. A survey of Locke's historically important views on the arts of government, or applied political economy, rounds off the chapter.

The following four chapters deal with various features of Locke's theory of property. Chapter 2 surveys scholarship on property in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries since the publication of C. B. Macpherson's *The political theory of possessive individualism* (1962) and reassesses this classic study in light of recent scholarship and the

³ James Tully, 'Placing the *Two treatises*', in *Political discourse in early modern Britain: Essays in honour of John Pocock*, ed. Nicholas Philipson and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

political problems of the late twentieth century that have given rise to it. This scholarship suggests that the theoretical development of concepts of rights-bearing individuals and the uses to which these concepts were put in political struggles from Grotius to Wollstonecraft were more multifaceted, and more widely challenged by alternative conceptions of agency, than Macpherson assumed. Chapter 3, the oldest in the collection, lays out the natural rights to the means of preservation that provide the frequently ignored framework of Locke's theory of property, thereby summarizing one of the themes of my book *A discourse on property: John Locke and his adversaries* (1980). I discuss a number of constructive criticisms of *A discourse on property* in chapter 4 and point out where I have corrected my original arguments and where they can be defended. Two recent studies, while disagreeing in some details, have independently substantiated the main lines of my interpretation, especially the importance of the right to the means of preservation and the role of the workmanship model: Richard Ashcraft, *Locke's Two treatises of government* (1987), and Gopal Sreenivasan, *The Lockean limits to private property* (forthcoming).

Chapter 5 illustrates the methodological point of how a change in context can alter and enhance one's understanding of the layers of meaning and significance of a text. I discuss the roles Locke's theory of property played in the justification of English settlement in America and the dispossession of the Amerindian First Nations of their property and sovereignty. This context not only clarifies a number of contentious passages in chapter 5 of the *Two treatises*; it also shows how some of the premises of Locke's argument functioned, and continue to function uncritically in theories and legal arguments that follow from Locke, to legitimate this monumental injustice.

Chapters 6 to 8 investigate aspects of Locke's influential views on the malleability of human thought and behaviour, the extent to which they are shaped by custom, education and practice, and the implications of these views for moral and political reform. Chapter 6, written in response to Michel Foucault's *Discipline and punish* (1977), is an attempt to place Locke's philosophical views on and practical proposals for the reform of human thought and behaviour in a broad European context. In his response to this essay John Dunn points out that there is an unresolved tension between the malleable conception of human agency in Locke's works that I discuss in this chapter and the conception of the human agent as having rights over his or her

body, action and beliefs in the *Two treatises* and *A letter concerning toleration*, somewhat akin to Foucault's distinction between disciplinary and juridical systems of power, knowledge and subjectivity.⁴ For it does not follow from the premise that humans are tractable that governments have a right to mould them as they please or that they will not rightfully resist. Indeed, Locke's philosophy of government is based on the two opposite assumptions. Furthermore, in the Introduction to John Locke, *A letter concerning toleration* (1983), I argue that the theory and practice of rights deriving from Locke has functioned as one of the most powerful bulwarks against the manipulation of humans by governments and other institutions in the modern world.

Chapter 7 takes up this tension in the course of a survey of ways in which a right in one's ability to labour has been conceptualized over the last 300 years. My main concern is to broaden the horizons of the current debate over self-ownership (of one's abilities) by recollecting the diversity of ways in which rights in abilities have been conceptualized and of the conceptions of agency and work relations that are implied by each. The survey shows that the conception of a rights-bearing subject in the *Two treatises* places limits on the way in which a government or, later, a capitalist, ought to treat citizens or workers. This tension, then, seems to be a permanent feature of liberalism and capitalism, held in counterpoise by the continual exercise of rights against abuses of power. Chapter 8, written to mark the two-hundredth anniversary of the French Revolution, places Locke's conception of reform, and the cognate concept of progress, in the broader perspective of views of progress, reform and scepticism from the seventeenth century to the present.

Locke's writings on liberty are analysed in the last two chapters. Section I of chapter 9 presents my first interpretation of Locke on political liberty, which I wrote from the perspective of the *Two treatises*. The main objective is to explicate his natural law based concept of political liberty relative to other early modern political traditions and to current conceptions of freedom. As I worked on chapter 6 I came to see that Locke altered his views on natural law and moral liberty throughout his moral, psychological, and theological writings. The second section is an attempt to present a synopsis of these views. Chapter 10 was written for the three-hundredth

⁴ John Dunn, 'Bright enough for all our purposes: John Locke's conception of a civilised society', *Notes and records of the Royal Society of London* 43 (1989), 133–53.

anniversary of the publication of the *Two treatises* and in the wake of the revolutions in Eastern Europe. Here I argue that Locke's vision of the political freedom of citizens in relation to their government, introduced in chapter 1, is superior in a number of respects to many of its seventeenth century and current rivals.

One theme that runs through the collection is a critical attitude to Locke and liberalism. Liberals tend not to take history or their critics seriously enough and critics tend to reject the whole liberal tradition, or a historically unrecognizable caricature of it, on the basis of one criticism. There is, however, a third way. It is possible to use historical studies of the formation of modern political thought to gain a deeper understanding of, and critical perspectives on, the problems raised by both liberals and their critics. These essays are a tribute to this critical attitude and the many scholars who contribute to it, including Sir Isaiah Berlin, who opened up and demonstrated the potential of this way of reflecting on the present, and especially John Dunn, John Pocock, Quentin Skinner, and Charles Taylor, whose works are exemplars.