

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-54890-8 - John Locke and the Origins of Private Property: Philosophical Explorations of Individualism, Community, and Equality

Matthew H. Kramer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

John Locke's labor theory of property is one of the seminal ideas of political philosophy, and helped to establish its author's reputation as one of the leading social and political thinkers of all time. Through it Locke addressed many of his most pressing concerns, and earned a reputation as an outstanding spokesman for political individualism – a reputation that lingers widely despite some partial challenges that have been raised in recent years. In this major new study Matthew Kramer offers an extensive critique of the labor theory and investigates the consequences of its downfall. With incisive analyses of the merits and failings of many aspects of Locke's political thought, Kramer advances a powerful challenge to Locke's image as an individualist. Employing a rigorously philosophical methodology, but remaining aware of the insights generated by historical approaches to Locke, Kramer concludes that Locke's political vision was in fact profoundly communitarian.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-54890-8 - John Locke and the Origins of Private Property: Philosophical
Explorations of Individualism, Community, and Equality

Matthew H. Kramer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

John Locke and the origins of private property

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-54890-8 - John Locke and the Origins of Private Property: Philosophical
Explorations of Individualism, Community, and Equality

Matthew H. Kramer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

John Locke and the origins of private property

*Philosophical explorations of individualism,
community, and equality*

Matthew H. Kramer

Churchill College, Cambridge



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-54890-8 - John Locke and the Origins of Private Property: Philosophical Explorations of Individualism, Community, and Equality

Matthew H. Kramer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011-4211, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain

Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

© Matthew Kramer 1997

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1997

First paperback edition 2004

Typeset in 10/12pt Plantin

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

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Kramer, Matthew H., 1959 –

John Locke and the origins of private property: philosophical explorations of individualism, community, and equality / Matthew H. Kramer.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0 521 58412 4 hardback

1. Locke, John, 1632–1704. Communitarianism – History – 17th century. 3. Individualism – History – 17th century. 4. Equality – History – 17th century. 5. Labor – History – 17th century. 6. Right of property – History – 17th century. I. Title.

B1295. K73 1997

330.1'7–dc20 96–44671 CIP

ISBN 0 521 58412 4 hardback

ISBN 0 521 54890 X paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2004

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-54890-8 - John Locke and the Origins of Private Property: Philosophical Explorations of Individualism, Community, and Equality

Matthew H. Kramer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> vii
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xi
Part I Introduction	
1 A philosophical approach to philosophy	3
2 Preliminary matters	15
Part II On equality	
3 Equality unlocked	37
Part III Labor and property	
4 The labors of Locke: a critique	93
5 Once more unto the breach	151
6 The drawing of consequences	213
<i>Citational appendix</i>	319
<i>Index</i>	346

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-54890-8 - John Locke and the Origins of Private Property: Philosophical Explorations of Individualism, Community, and Equality

Matthew H. Kramer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

John Locke and the Origins of Private Property began as a chapter in an unfinished book that was to be entitled *Encounters with Liberalism*. Like the other chapters of that book which I actually wrote, this study of the labor theory of ownership has swelled far beyond its originally foreseen dimensions. Not only does this volume subject the labor theory to minute examination, but it also tackles a number of variously connected issues; and, after sustainedly perusing Locke's theory and a host of surrounding problems, this book presents a large medley of citations that go some way toward revealing the enormousness of the literature on Locke and his labor theory.

Chapter 1 describes the basic approaches and objectives of the analyses in this book. Some further comments are appropriate here. An initial point should be obvious to any careful reader but should now be affirmed expressly: this book does not engage in either an acclamation or a denunciation of the substance of Locke's political views. Though a central aim of this study is to show that the apparent individualism of Locke's labor theory of property is rooted in a thoroughgoing communitarianism, my arguments that arrive at such a verdict will make no effort to applaud or condemn their findings. Censorious remarks that occur herein are strictly analytical – targeted against the invalidness of Locke's reasoning, and not against the putative balefulness of his outlook. The task of reviling or endorsing Locke's politics is left to anyone who feels strongly about such matters.

A second observation should help to clarify the ideal of "communitarianism" that has just been invoked. Though my second chapter and some portions of other chapters will seek to specify with precision the communitarian ideal which this book discerns in Locke's writings, an anticipatory remark is here advisable for the sake of warding off potential confusion straightaway. Collectivism or communitarianism, as understood in the present volume, can be defined roughly as the moral/political prioritization of collective needs over any individual's needs. In a fully communitarian world, the collectivity's superior status *vis-à-vis* individuals is a blanket

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-54890-8 - John Locke and the Origins of Private Property: Philosophical Explorations of Individualism, Community, and Equality

Matthew H. Kramer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x Preface

precedence; individual rights can exist in such a world, but they exist only insofar as they can advance the collective good. That is, the entitlements attached to each person are assigned thereto solely on the basis of communal requirements and objectives. Now, in light of this rudimentary definition and in light also of chapter 2 (and the germane comments in other chapters), we ought to shy away from alternative notions of “communitarianism.”

For example, readers should not surmise that this book perceives communitarian obligations as derivable only from the presence of collectivities that are smaller than the whole human race. Were specific communal structures indispensable for the sway of communitarian duties, the ideal of communitarianism would gain no purchase in the presocietal state of nature; but because communitarianism or collectivism as here defined can reach to all human agents simply by virtue of their membership in the human species, we should have no misgivings about the relevance of communitarianism to life in the state of nature. Throughout this book, my references to the full priority of communal welfare over individual welfare should be taken as references to the full priority of *humankind's* welfare. After all, Locke avouched that the sundry members of “*Mankind are one Community*, make up one Society distinct from . . . other Creatures,” and he posited one “great and natural Community” before civilization (TTG, II, §128, emphasis in original).

Another misconception to be avoided, in regard to communitarianism, is the belief that this study tries to highlight a blend or junction of communitarian elements and individualistic elements in Locke's thought. As my first chapter has emphasized at its outset, this book reveals not a mixing of the two groups of elements but a total absorption of the one by the other. Far from simply *combining* with individualistic strands, Locke's communitarianism *envelops* and *pervades* them. As was mentioned above, the individual rights in a thoroughly communitarian world obtain if and only if they optimally promote collective ends; and since the general theme of this book is that a Lockean state of nature indeed would be communitarian through and through, we know that the individual rights therein would obtain precisely because they furthered collective goals. Instead of merely being coupled with individualism, the communitarianism in a Lockean state of nature would engulf individualism and would employ it for communitarian purposes. Individualism was never absent, but was starkly epiphenomenal.

A final main point to be noted here is the centrality of God and His edicts in many parts of this study. To some degree, the recurring appearances of God in this book have stemmed from my atheistic preoccupation with the Bible (on which I have been writing a commentary for the past

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-54890-8 - John Locke and the Origins of Private Property: Philosophical Explorations of Individualism, Community, and Equality

Matthew H. Kramer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

thirteen years). But the chief reason for the salient presence of the Almighty throughout my critique of Locke is the overwhelming importance of religion for Locke himself. As will be remarked several times, some key principles and arguments which Locke put forward were striking evidence of his faith in a benign Ruler of the world – or, at least, they were striking evidence of his need to take the dominion of such a Ruler for granted. Without explicit or tacit affirmations of God’s benevolent reign, the principles and arguments that have just been noted would crumble under the slightest challenge. And so, unless we presume that Locke deliberately ventured arguments which he almost surely would have assessed as gravely flimsy, we should recoil from the notion that the author of the *Two Treatises of Government* was a furtive atheist. Given the preposterousness of such a notion, it would not warrant any consideration or rebuttal if it had hardly ever surfaced among the exegeses of Locke’s ideas; yet, because disciples of Leo Strauss have busily endeavored to prove that Locke indeed was a crafty nonbeliever, the present point must be highlighted. In defiance of the Straussians’ efforts to “confirm” their dogmatic view that Locke was a secret atheist, we shall time and again discover that his stances and reasoning committed him to the postulation of God’s actuality. Though such logical commitments would not *entail* any personal commitment, they would *suggest* a personal commitment quite strongly. (For additional comments on the wiles of Straussianism, see Matthew Kramer, “Book Review,” *26 Locke Newsletter* 196 [1995] [reviewing Michael Zuckert, *Natural Rights and the New Republicanism*].)

I began *John Locke and the Origins of Private Property* in November 1992, and completed it in February 1995. During most of that period I was living in Madison, Wisconsin, where I enjoyed a Visiting Fellowship at the Institute for Research in the Humanities. I extend my warm thanks to everyone at the Institute, most members of which are listed in the next paragraph. I am equally delighted to thank both Churchill College and the University of Cambridge’s Faculty of Law, where I wrote the first chapter of this book at the outset of 1995. My return to Cambridge has been most pleasant.

In addition to my mother and father, many people have won my gratitude for their constant supportiveness. I thank Richard Fisher and the Cambridge University Press’s readers for their extremely careful and astute attention to my book. I am equally indebted to Hilary Scannell for her invaluable copy-editing, which has greatly improved the book’s style and substance. More generally, at the risk of leaving out someone who should be noted, I must convey my appreciation to the following friends:

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-54890-8 - John Locke and the Origins of Private Property: Philosophical Explorations of Individualism, Community, and Equality

Matthew H. Kramer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii Preface

Klaus Berghahn, Paul Boyer, James Crawford, Neil Duxbury, Loretta Freiling, Jerry Frug, Mark Goldie, Phil Harth, Doug Kelly, David Kennedy, Duncan Kennedy, Isaac Kramnick, Dave Lindberg, David Loewenstein, Martha Minow, Steve Nadler, Richard Parker, Jon Roberts, Nigel Simmonds, Carole Smith, Elisabeth Sponheim, John Tiley, Howard Weinbrot, Kay Zakarian, and Lindy Zakarian. I owe an especially profound debt of thanks to Nigel Simmonds, who perused most of this book in typescript.

A moment ago, I adverted to my parents. I owe far more to them than to everyone else. My father, happily, is alive and well to receive my thanks. My mother, alas, is not; she died in October 1993 while undergoing a course of treatment for the terrible illness of acute leukemia. To the memory of Eunice Kramer, with love, I have dedicated this volume.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-54890-8 - John Locke and the Origins of Private Property: Philosophical Explorations of Individualism, Community, and Equality

Matthew H. Kramer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Abbreviations

- TTG John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967, 2nd edn.) (P. Laslett ed.), cited with treatise and section numbers.
- EHU John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975) (P. Nidditch ed.), cited with book, chapter, and section numbers.
- ELN John Locke, *Essays on the Law of Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954) (W. von Leyden ed.), cited with page numbers.
- LT John Locke, *A Letter on Toleration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968) (R. Klibansky ed., J. Gough trans.), cited with page numbers.
- STE John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) (J. W. Yolton and J. S. Yolton eds.), cited with section numbers.