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THE UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG
DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS

JOHN LOCKE
AND THE
SOCIAL POSITION OF WOMEN

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Working Paper 90-6

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the contribution made by Locke to the economic analysis of the status of women. Locke's contribution, it is argued, is fundamental to the development of the economic discipline's analysis of women's role in society. His work both undermined the theological determinism that had previously dominated intellectual debate and also laid open the path down which subsequent economic analysis was to progress.

In the history of economic thought John Locke is acknowledged as one of the more important of those contributors to pre-Smithian economics who helped to lay the philosophical foundations upon which the general principles of political economy were to be subsequently constructed. He is also perceived as having made a number of direct contributions to the development of political economy particularly in the area of monetary economics and property theory (Vaughn 1980; Mitchell 1986). The purpose of this paper is to show that Locke should also be given credit for pioneering research into both the economics of the social position of women and of the study of the economic relationship between husband and wife.

Locke developed his analysis of relations between the sexes and between spouses as a consequence of his involvement in the seventeenth century debate over the innate rights of human beings versus the divine rights of the monarchy. This contextual point is critical for both explaining why Locke took up the issue of women's relationship to men and why his argument took the form that it did. Ashcraft (1986) has shown that to comprehend Locke's work it is critical that the context in which he wrote be understood, for this context greatly shaped not only what he wrote about but also his manner of dealing with particular topics. His writings on gardening, for example, written while in exile in Holland if taken at face value are not significant historically. When they are read as Ashcraft suggests they should be, i.e. as coded communications between conspirators hatching plans for regicide, however, they take on an entirely different meaning and significance. Because of the importance of context in Locke's work it is necessary to specify in some detail the environment in which he made his contribution to the economic analysis of women's social position.

The Dissenters, Whigs and radicals who populated the movement challenging the regent's right to monopolise political power in seventeenth century Britain, argued that state power was not founded on birth and divine will as claimed by the Royalists. Rather, they insisted that there existed a 'social contract' between the head of state and the people which gave regents the right to govern the nation so long as they used their power to protect and advance the interests of the people. The consent theorists argued further, that the original contract of government which specified the nature of the relationship between the people and the state had been forged while the population remained in a state of nature, this being a stage

in the development of human society in which there existed no government. In such a society people existed in a state of equality initially owning the world in common with all who were rational, being free of any natural domination by any other. A rational human being was an individual who had the capacity to comprehend natural law. This was the highest form of law and was that which prevailed irrespective of the existence of government being law which must exist if the world was to be compatible with the will of God (Grotius 1925:38-39).

The Royalists replied to the arguments of the consent theorists by insisting that no matter how regents behaved the people did not have the right to question their wishes because the powers of a regent were divine in origin. In support of this claim they advanced an argument which was a mixture of biology and scripture. It was argued that biologically, God's commitment to regal absolutism was proven by the fact that God had created humans in a biological form which meant that they necessarily came into the world as beings who were dependent on and hence subject to their parents. As the Royalists' reading of the relationship between Adam and Eve, as revealed in the book of Genesis, convinced them that God had decreed that husbands had the right to expect unquestioning obedience from their wives it followed that the father was the senior parent within the family. This meant that children, while bound to honour both their parents, owed their primary allegiance to the will of their fathers. Paternal authority was therefore natural and divine in origin in that subordination of wife to husband was decreed by God and subordination of child to father was grounded in a nature which God had created.

As all individuals were born as natural subjects of their fathers, the Royalists argued, there could never have been a time when individuals were sufficiently independent of the will of another to have made possible the forging of a freely entered covenant of government. The true foundation of states, therefore, could not be any voluntary agreement between people and regent. Rather, it was the God-given paternal power that existed within the family, the people of a nation being no more than the members of an extended family the head of which was entitled to all the rights due to husband and father within the home.

Of the absolutist authors whose publications influenced the debate on relations between state and people through the second half of the seventeenth century, Robert Filmer was the most significant historically. Filmer's most important contribution to the debate was the observation that consent theory was seriously flawed because it could not provide an adequate explanation for how mankind could have ever have held the supposed meeting which forged the original covenant of government. He observed that if all people in the state of nature were equal in status because God had given mankind the world to be owned in common, then it was necessary that all should have partaken in the original decision to divide the world into separate states. No individual or group of individuals has the right to take or give away another's God-given natural rights and clearly dividing the world into separate states and privately owned lots infringed the individual's natural law right to share in the common ownership of the earth. The only acceptable way this could have been done was if every one had met together and agreed to take these steps. Such a meeting being physically impossible Filmer concluded that in fact it had never been held and that consequently the claim that there existed an original contract of government to which all mankind had freely consented was farcical. He also concluded that if this was the case then the consent theorists' refusal to acknowledge the divine nature of regal power left them with no other explanation for the origin of government, authority and private property than the fact that some individuals had in the past forcibly usurped the natural rights of others. Consent theory, therefore was a licence for the free use of force and for anarchy (Filmer 1969:267).

Filmer's work was published in the midst and as part of a political struggle, in which both Royalists and consent theorists were striving to win support from a property enfranchised, male electorate. This fact is important for understanding why Filmer's critics went to great effort both to deny that they had no defence for private property and to discuss the status of women in relation to men. The first was necessary to disabuse those who feared that to break the link between regent and God would undermine the sanctity of property and the second to placate the fears of those who suspected that breaking this link would undermine the power of husbands. The reason this second issue was a difficulty was because the consent theorists' method for undermining belief in the divine nature of the King's powers was to deny that Adam

had enjoyed supreme regency of the world. They argued that a rational reading of the Bible made it clear that even in the Garden of Eden, Adam had not enjoyed the powers of an absolute ruler because his powers had been shared by Eve. This point was critical because if it could be sustained then the very foundations of absolutism would be seriously undermined. The problem, however, lay in the fact that it followed that if Eve had not been subject to Adam's absolute authority then husbands could not have inherited the divine right to rule their wives that they claimed God had given Adam. Such a suggestion had the potential to be electorally disastrous in a society in which virtually all men accepted that they had the right to be treated as absolute regents within the confines of their own homes. Certainly, telling men that there was no moral or theological foundation to this claim was hardly likely to be a positive factor attracting these individuals to the political alliance the consent theorists were attempting to build.

Filmer's work then, was a challenge to the consent theorists in that it both undermined their claim that the foundation of state power lay in the people's will and it laid them open to the charge that they had no defence for property rights. It also made clear that regents in theory drew their power from the same source as did husbands and that if one denied that the King had inherited absolute power to rule the nation from Adam it was also necessary to deny that husbands had inherited an identical power within the household. To attack the rights of regents, therefore, was to attack the rights of husbands. A reply to this multifaceted challenge which would be an effective propaganda instrument aiding the creation of a strong electoral, indeed revolutionary alliance, therefore needed not only to refute Filmer's scriptural evidence but needed to do so in a manner which was consistent with natural equality, a disproportionate distribution of the world's wealth amongst mankind and which preserved men's authority within the home. All this, moreover, had to be done in a manner which was consistent with consent theory but without the requirement that all humanity had once held a meeting and freely decided these arrangements. It was the challenge of constructing an argument that could simultaneously deal with all these numerous interlocked issues that Locke chose to take up in the early 1680s. Because these issues were so integrally interwoven, comprehending the nature of Locke's explanation of women's social position requires an understanding of his contribution as a whole. Only when one has this overall picture does it become possible to

comprehend both where women fit into the argument and the manner by which Locke was led to advance certain conclusions as regards their relations with men.

Locke and the Divine Origin of Regal Power

In his reply to Filmer, published as *Two Treatises on Government*, Locke sought first, to deny the divine origin of regal power and state absolutism. Second, he sought to disabuse those who feared that to accept that political power was founded in the will of the people would leave no substantive justification for private property or for political and household authority. Locke began by attacking the claims that the regent's powers were divine in origin and absolute in extent. To achieve this objective he engaged in a painstaking scriptural analysis of Filmer's work. By undertaking this exegetic endeavour he was able to argue convincingly that the claim that God had given sole regency of the world to Adam, when he initially created the universe, was based on a selective and literal rather than a comprehensive and rational reading and use of scripture. Locke observed that the *Bible* utilises the plural word 'them' when stating to whom dominion of the earth was initially given by God. As utilised, he suggested, this word could either refer to Adam and Eve together or it could be a reference to all members of the human race. Locke (1969:25-26) acknowledged there was ambiguity here but he insisted what was not ambiguous was the plurality of the term 'them'. To whomever ownership of the world was given, the use of the word 'them' made clear, it was not given to Adam alone. Adam therefore could not have been given absolute power by God when the world was first created for he had to share his power with at least one other. Locke added, moreover, that the significance of the plurality of the original grant of dominion could not be dismissed merely by observing that Eve was Adam's subject. Even were she to some extent subservient to Adam this would not mean that Adam's powers were absolute because the *Bible* explained that Eve 'was not so subjected to him as to hinder her dominion over the creatures, or property in them' (Locke 1969:26). For Locke this meant that even if one were to acknowledge that Eve was Adam's subject, a claim he did not accept, then at the very minimum it would be necessary to also acknowledge that she was a subject with a great deal of power in her own right and thus Adam's powers were not absolute.

Locke made explicit his acceptance of the fact that Adam had no God-given right to dominate Eve when dealing with the claim that at the time of the Fall, God decreed that henceforth Eve must be subject to Adam's rule. In response to this assertion Locke observed that when Adam and Eve were being driven from Paradise both were being punished and therefore it was unlikely that God would have chosen this moment to elevate Adam to absolute ruler of the world. It was true that Eve was subjected to a greater punishment than was Adam because she had aided in his temptation as well as sinning herself and that this greater punishment accidentally give Adam a 'superiority' over Eve. Locke denied however, that what Adam was accidentally receiving, by being subjected to a lesser punishment than Eve, was a divine right to rule over her. Rationality, he insisted, made it clear that when God said to Eve '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 (cited by Locke 1969:37)' he was not granting Adam any authority over Eve. Rather, what God was doing was merely foretelling what was going to be the fate of Eve and of women in general outside of Paradise. Locke was most insistent on this point, making it clear that when he acknowledged that Adam attained a superiority over Eve, at the time of the Fall, by superiority he did not mean that God made Adam Eve's superior and thus she his subordinate but rather that Adam attained some form of material advantage as a consequence of the greater disadvantages that were imposed on Eve. Adam, in other words, gained a greater capacity to undertake certain activities than that enjoyed by Eve, as a consequence of her receiving a greater punishment. He did not, however, thereby gain the right to rule over her.

God, in 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 this providence he would order it so that she should be subject to her husband, as we see that generally the laws of mankind and customs of nations have ordered it so (Locke 1969:37).

Having made the point that Adam had not been given a divine right to rule Eve, Locke immediately moved to reassure his readers that husbands would normally be the senior partner within marriage. Male seniority within this institution, even if not justified by right of inheritance from Adam, was to be expected because there existed 'a foundation in nature for it.'

For Locke this natural foundation was the fact that the advantage men accidentally attained over women at the time of the banishment from Paradise rendered women the 'weaker sex'. It was this critical fact, he observed, that tended to ensure that in the vast majority of cases men were able to attain a superior position in their relations with women. That he believed men's superior social position was founded on this natural base Locke reaffirmed when discussing how disputes between husband and wife, over common family problems would normally tend to be resolved. He argued that in most cases decision-making power in the family would accrue to the husband in the last instance because of his greater natural abilities and strengths.

But the husband and wife, though they have but one common concern, yet having different understandings, will unavoidably sometimes have different wills too; it therefore being necessary that the last determination - i.e., the rule - should be placed somewhere, it naturally falls to the man's share, as the abler and stronger (Locke 1969:161).

Fundamental to Locke's explanation and justification for women's subordination to men then, was the claim that males have greater innate abilities and strengths than do women. Men's superior social position was based, in the final instance, not on any social arrangement such as the theoretical and ideological separation of home and civil society, as has been argued by Fox-Genovese (1977) and Nicholson (1986), but rather it was established on this 'foundation in nature'. Locke (1969:37) concedes that 'the laws of mankind and customs of nations have ordered it so' that wives should be subject to their husbands but he does not locate the fundamental cause of women's subordination in these social constructs. These laws and customs merely reinforce the underlying factor upon which men's superior social position is based and this factor, he insists, is women's relative weakness and the source of this lesser strength is located in nature not in society.

Locke failed in the *Two Treatises* to specify in what ways he regarded women as being weaker than men. Most observers have interpreted his meaning, however, as referring to physical capacities rather than mental strengths (Clark 1979). This interpretation would appear to be justified given the evidence that can be gathered from Locke's other writings where he indicates that he considered women to be men's spiritual and intellectual equals. Michel (1978:39) has observed that, in the late seventeenth century this would have been a most

radical hypothesis to adopt, for the claim 'that women were weaker than men, in both mind and body' was generally accepted as a given by the population of England. Though in the process of being challenged, the ideas of Hippocrates, Aristotle and Galen regarding women's physiological and mental capacities continued to remain influential. These classical scholars had argued that the male constitution was dry and warm while the female's was humid and cold. These innate differences between men and women were considered of critical importance in the formation of the relative abilities of the two sexes. This was because it was believed that while 'men's heat melted their fat and 'concocted the Humours' into good and proper aliment, women were left fat and sluggish — in mind as well as in body' by their greater humidity and lower temperature (Michel 1978:40).

The fact that the population in general accepted women's intellectual and physical weakness is not evidence that a radical thinker such as Locke shared these views. Through the seventeenth century the empiricism associated with the scientific revolution then gathering momentum throughout Europe undermined the acceptance of many of the claims of the classical theorists. At the same time, however, the empiricists continued to accept many of the ideas of these individuals. Indeed, in certain instances, by the use of empiricism, they confirmed particular claims made in the classical writings. Not the least of the ideas that were either undermined or confirmed by the empiricists related to the intellectual and physical capacities of males and females. The idea that women were naturally the intellectual inferiors of men, for example, began to be challenged by an increasing number of empiricists in the second half of the seventeenth century, this development being best exemplified in Mary Astell's proposals for the reform of the education system to make it more accessible for girls (Smith 1916; Nadelhaft 1982).

Locke was a committed advocate and a leading theorist of the new empiricism in science. His contribution to the development of modern empiricism, however, was not limited to philosophical theorising. In his role as a medical practitioner he worked with many of the leading medical empiricists of his day. He was consequently well versed in the debates regarding women's physiological and mental capacities (Dewhurst 1984). His knowledge of these topics, moreover, was strengthened by the intellectual and personal relationships he

maintained with a number of the leading feminist scholars of his day. From 1691 until his death in 1704, for example, he lived in the home of Damaris, a woman whom Laslett (1953:536) has suggested could justifiably be described as 'the first bluestocking of them all'. In her *Thoughts on Education* published in 1675 Masham had 'castigated those English gentlemen, who, destitute of knowledge themselves, derived a sense of superiority from depriving women of knowledge' (Butler 1978:149). Smith (1916:110) has argued that these two scholars had a marked influence upon each other. As a result of the relationship, Locke appears to have gained an enhanced appreciation of the progress of theological debate that had occurred in England during his period of exile in Holland. She, in turn, moved somewhat towards utilitarianism and became more radical in her liberalism as a consequence of his influence. There is also some evidence to suggest that Locke assisted Masham in a pamphlet debate she undertook with her fellow feminist educational theorist Mary Astell, over the question of the love of God. While having difficulty embracing some aspects of his political radicalism and religious ideas, Smith reports that both Astell and Masham were deeply influenced by Locke in their subsequent writings. The former in 1700 published a pamphlet, *Occasional Thoughts in Reference to a Virtuous Christian Life* in which she feminized Locke's ideas on education. Likewise, Masham utilised both Locke's argument that God had not condemned Eve to perpetual subservience and his claim that absolutism was unacceptable in both the domestic and the civil sphere to advance the cause of women in her *Reflections Upon Marriage*. Both of these women moreover, were particularly influenced by Locke's discussion in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* of the connection between experience and self knowledge and his arguments concerning innate ideas. Consequently, both must be considered as being amongst the first of those Restoration and eighteenth century women who, O'Donnell (1979:151) has argued, drew inspiration from Locke's ideas and were thereby helped to 'recognize themselves as rational beings whose minds should be exercised and developed.'

Locke appears then to have accepted the validity of the claim that women were rational and had a high level of intellectual capacity. Indeed, unlike the majority of his Whig peers he believed that females had sufficient intelligence to justify an all but identical educational programmes for both sexes. In his writings on the education of children Locke argued that only

minimal changes needed to be made to the curriculum he advocated for boys in order to make it equally suitable for girls. These latter changes primarily related to the physical side of the curriculum and essentially involved the need to take into consideration the greater desire of girls to protect their complexions. As far as mental development was concerned Locke suggested that an identical curriculum be utilised for the education of both girls and boys (Locke 1927:102-103).

While his empiricism and his belief in the rationality of human beings may have led Locke to question the claims of the classical theorists as regards the natural intelligence and rationality of women, these factors did not lead him to reject certain of the other beliefs regarding sexual dimorphism handed down from antiquity. Most importantly, empiricism did not lead him to question the classicists' belief that women were physically weaker than men. In his medical writings he advised women that the lifting of heavy weights was an activity which 'belongs not to their sex' it being a danger to their physical wellbeing to undertake such activities (Locke 1954:95-98). That empiricism would not have induced Locke to question women's claimed relative physical weakness is understandable because the evidence produced by this method even today shows that it is the case that women on average are decidedly weaker than men. Where the physical strength of equally trained men and women has been compared it has been found that on average women have only some 65% of the muscular capacity available to adult males (Snook and Ciriello 1974).

It would appear then, that when Locke stated that women were the weaker sex he was not referring to their innate intelligence but to their physical capacities. That he chose to emphasise physical strength as a factor both explaining and justifying men's senior position within the home has caused Locke to be the subject of some criticism by feminist writers. It has been argued that to suggest that husbands should have a precedence in the making of decisions within the family, because they have greater muscular strength, is to condone the rule of 'beasts', i.e. it is to imply that husbands have the right to dominate their wives simply because they have sufficient physical power to compel obedience (Clark 1979:19; Shanley 1982:94). The laying of such a charge, however, indicates a failure to understand Locke's argument. Unlike many of his contemporaries Locke never suggested that a husband has the right to

compel obedience from his wife by the use of terror or violence. It is true that he argued that men do have the right to insist that their marriage partners pay due heed to their greater strength and give this attribute due consideration in the shaping of the marriage relationship. This is not, however, because the man has the right to use his greater physical power to compel his wife to consent to his will by threatening her with violence. No one, Locke (1969:121,124) insisted, has the right to use force to compel another human being to do their bidding. Rather, for Locke, why men's greater strength is important is because it is a property of some significant utility. Consequently, as with any other attribute or resource that either partner brings to the marriage relationship, men have the right to require that to the extent that their greater strength is of value this fact be taken into consideration in the determination of the provisions of the marriage contract. A man's strength is a property which belongs to the man and the benefits of which belong to him. If wives wish to share in the material rewards that Locke believed men's muscular capacity enabled them to generate he considered it reasonable that men ask a price for this concession. Equally, he insisted a woman would have the right to require that a prospective husband take note of those attributes she brought to the relationship.

Locke's Theory of Property

To comprehend Locke's argument regarding the respective status of husband and wife it is necessary to understand his theory of the origin of private property, his justification for the uneven distribution of property within society and his understanding of the relationship that would normally exist between property owners who choose to forge a partnership. As suggested earlier, to reply adequately to the challenge thrown down by Filmer it was necessary for Locke not only to advance a defence for male superiority it was also necessary for him to show concomitantly how private property could be compatible with natural law given that God had granted the world to mankind in common. This had to be done without resorting to some mythical mass meeting which had been attended by the whole human race. Locke needed, moreover, to make his argument attractive to as wide a proportion of the electorate as possible. This meant his defence of property had to appeal both to the owners of wealth and to those voters with relatively modest economic resources. Locke's means of achieving these various

objectives was to argue that by the term property he meant not only goods but all use-values which may be possessed by an individual, be they corporeal or spiritual. He is explicit on this point insisting; 'By property I must be understood here, as in other places, to mean that property which men have in their persons as well as goods (Locke 1969:210).' The use-values within an individual's person to which he refers in particular, are their life, liberty and their capacity to labour. For Locke the common feature of both these non-physical use-values and of goods is that their existence is critical to the preservation of human life none being necessarily more so than another. As the taking of human life is prohibited by natural law, except where individuals have placed themselves in a state of war with society, the arbitrary expropriation of any of these forms of property is a threat to human life and hence an infringement of natural law. Indeed, some types of property are so critical to the preservation of human life the individual cannot contract to give them away even if they freely wish to do so. Thus individuals cannot sell themselves into slavery for to be a slave would be to lose one's personal freedom from absolute, arbitrary power, a freedom 'so necessary to and closely joined with a man's preservation that he cannot part with it but by what forfeits his preservation and life together' (Locke 1969:132). The existence of this natural law restriction on the nature of contracts was a critical point for Locke for it meant that the people, when forging the original covenant which created the state and granted a particular individual the right to be regent, could not have thereby granted this person the absolute powers claimed by the Royalists. The natural law command that people preserve human life and hence their liberty meant that individuals had never had total power over their own lives and as they did not possess this capacity it followed that they could never have given this power to another.

[F]or a man not having the power of his own life cannot by compact or his own consent enslave himself to any one, nor put himself under the absolute arbitrary power of another to take away his life when he pleases. Nobody can give more power than he has himself; and he that cannot take away his own life cannot give another power over it (Locke 1969:132).

Locke's insistence that an individual's liberty is a form of property that is inalienable is the essential element at the core of his explanation of how a world which had been given to mankind to be possessed in common could have come to be owned in parts by private

individuals. He notes that the common resources initially granted to humanity by God had little innate value or ability to ease the convenience of human life. For the world's natural wealth to be appropriated to the use of human beings, it was necessary for individuals to interact with nature in a constructive manner, i.e. they must engage in labour. To make clear this point he utilised the example of acorns observing that while it was true that nature alone could produce this fruit its capacity to sustain human life cannot be realised unless some person picks the acorns from the ground and transforms them, by the use of labour, into a form suitable for human consumption. So significant is the contribution of labour to the creation of wealth, in Locke's estimation, he suggests that the value of undeveloped natural resources is only one-hundredth, possibly only one-thousandth, of the value these same resources can attain when they are mixed with human labour.

The capacity to labour, Locke argued, is a property inherent in the body of all human beings, i.e. it is part of one's self. Because this ability is contained within an individual's person and natural law prohibits an individual contracting to give or sell themselves into the unrestrained control of another, i.e. into slavery, Locke asserted that it followed that the capacity to labour must also be a natural form of private property. Having laid down the principle that the inalienable nature of an individual's liberty necessarily renders their capacity to labour a form of private property, Locke proceeded to argue that if individuals combine their labour with any part of the world's commonly owned wealth they, by this act, transform what was common property into private property. That natural wealth which was common, should become private when mixed with human labour, Locke suggests, is necessarily the case because individuals infuse something of themselves into natural resources when they mix them with their own labour. These resources consequently become part of the individual, and as such goods that can only be owned by the individual, i.e. they become private property. To reinforce this argument, Locke added that it was only reasonable that it should be the case that individuals should be allowed to privately possess resources to which they had applied their labour or labour-power that they had purchased from others given the extent to which the value of such resources is enhanced by being mixed with labour. In terms of value, the worth of resources so transformed, Locke (1969:142-143) suggests, is barely more than the congealed labour they

subsequently contain and this no matter how many levels of transformation they may pass through. Given this situation it is only fair that the individual to whom the labour belonged should own the resource.

Though the earth and all inferior creatures be common to all men, yet every man has a property in his own person; this nobody has any right to but himself. The labour of his body and the work of his hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever then he removes out of the state that nature hath provided and left it in, he hath mixed his labour with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property (Locke 1947:134).

Locke argued, moreover, that reason decreed that natural law did not demand that people gain the consent of all mankind before utilising their labour to appropriate, for private use, part of the common natural wealth. One does not ask mankind's permission before first beginning to breathe the common air and thus convert what is a common resource to one's private use. Indeed to choose to do so would contravene the natural law decree that individuals preserve human life because it would allow people to die when the wherewithal for their survival was at hand. In other words natural law not only concedes people the right to appropriate what was common to their personal ownership, but to the extent that private appropriation enables people to physically survive, natural law actually demands that this be done.

Having shown the existence of private property, in a world that had been given to humanity in common, to be consistent with natural law and consent theory, Locke proceeded to explain and justify the uneven distribution of private property amongst the population. Again, it is possible to see here his need to appeal both to the property owning gentry as well as to that section of the population who found attractive the belief that there existed within the human race a natural equality. Locke resolved both these needs by arguing that while he believed that all rational members of the human race were equal by nature he did not mean by this that people are equal in all respects. He is explicit as regards this point, taking care to ensure he is not misinterpreted.

Though I have said ... 'that all men by nature are equal,' I cannot be supposed to understand all sorts of equality. Age or virtue may give men a just precedency; excellency of parts and merit may place others above the common level; birth may subject some, and alliance or benefits others, to pay an observance to those whom nature, gratitude, or other respects may have made it due; and yet all this consists with the equality which all men are in, in respect of jurisdiction or domination one over another, which was the equality I there spoke of as proper to the business in hand, being that equal right that every man hath to his natural freedom, without being subjected to the will or authority of any other man (Locke 1969:147).

The equality to which Locke refers, in other words, is not an equality of goods or attributes but rather it is the equal right of all rational individuals to be free of the arbitrary domination of another. People have the unquestioned equal right to this freedom but at the same time they have the right to enjoy greater status and precedence in decision making if their biological capacities, endeavour or social position has provided them with some material advantage that makes it possible for them to lawfully gain these rewards. In other words, there can be equality between individuals in certain areas of social life without there necessarily being equality in others. All may have equal right to sleep under bridges or the right to life itself but be unequal in any other number of respects.

The fact that human capacities and levels of initiative are not distributed evenly through the population, Locke argued, meant that some individuals could labour more productively than could others. While the world remained the common property of all humanity with all entitled to an equal share of the world's wealth, individuals who had above average abilities were prohibited from utilising these capacities to increase their share of the world's wealth by the natural law provision that they only appropriate, to their private ownership, an equal share of these resources. Given mankind collectively owned the earth, however, it was not necessary that they retain this equality of ownership if the people decided unanimously that they no longer wished to do so. If they so desired, the people could collectively choose to abandon equality of ownership and adopt some other pattern of resource distribution. As noted above, however, to sustain this position in the face of Filmer's challenge it was necessary for Locke to explain how such a decision could have ever been reached. Locke's method of dealing with this fundamental problem was to lay aside the claim that the uneven division of the world's economic resources

was a consequence of a unanimous decision taken at a mass meeting attended by the whole of humanity. In the place of this mythical meeting and the voicing of overt consent by its participants he substituted the market and tacit consent by all people. Humanity, he argued, had chosen to divide the world disproportionately but its method of taking this decision was not to meet together and vote directly on the issue. Rather, the people had adopted the use of an instrument which would enable them to vote on this topic without ever having to meet. This marvellous instrument was money and the system of economic distribution the people had chosen was not equal wealth for all but the allocation of resources on the basis of individual capacities and levels of industriousness. The evidence that the decision to abandon equality of economic ownership had been taken freely, tacit though the choice may have been, was the fact that rare durable metals, notably gold and silver had been chosen as the primary instrument of exchange. Money in this form, Locke observed, had little intrinsic capacity to sustain human life compared to such things as food and clothing. It had, however, the important characteristic that there was no limit to the extent to which it could be accumulated and stored. This was because there was no danger that it would lose its value through physical deterioration. Apart from this capacity to act as a limitless, non-perishable store of wealth, Locke observed, gold and silver had little utility. Even so, the people had chosen to elevate these particular elements to the status of money. Locke suggested that this indicated that the people had decided that the one characteristic of money they valued above all others was its ability to be amassed without limit. The fact that they had chosen durable metals as the primary money form, then, was a clear indication that the people had elected to support the right of the individual to pursue the unlimited accumulation of wealth. Moreover, it clearly indicated that the people had also chosen to support the uneven distribution of the world's resources for, Locke argued, this was an inevitable result of allowing people with differing abilities and capacities to accumulate wealth without limit.

And thus came in the use of money - some lasting thing that men might keep without spoiling, and that by mutual consent men would take in exchange for the truly useful but perishable supports of life... And as different degrees of industry were apt to give men possessions in different proportions, so this invention of money gave them the opportunity to continue and enlarge them; (Locke 1969:144).

That the people had chosen as money, commodities that had little intrinsic utility apart from their capacity to act as a store of value was also important, Locke argued, in that it showed that the decision to adopt these commodities as the primary form of exchange must have been taken freely. This followed from the fact that despite gold and silver having little direct capacity to sustain human life people were willing to accept these metals as payment for goods which had a more direct capacity to aid survival. Their acceptability as a means of exchange rested, in other words, not on any life sustaining capacity but on the fact that people chose to give value to these otherwise relatively useless commodities. This was an exercise in free choice for people were free to refuse to accept this form of payment if they wished. If they chose not to accept money as a form of payment their survival was not endangered and so the fact that they did indicated they did so freely. Finally, there remains the question of why Locke believed people would have chosen to give up the security provided by the limitation on accumulation, with its assurance of equality for all, in exchange for the right to accumulate unlimited wealth. The latter freedom, he made clear, could only be had at the cost of forgoing the security associated with economic equality. There was, in other words, a decided opportunity cost in choosing to abandon equality of goods for equality of opportunity. Locke's explanation for why the human race would have opted for the second of these options even if this was at the cost of the other was founded on his belief that nature 'has put into man a desire of happiness and an aversion to misery (Locke 1961:27)'. Consequently, individuals faced with a choice between two goods would always take that which gave the greatest utility - 'for no rational creature can be supposed to change his condition with an intention to be worse' (Locke 1969:186; Brogan 1959). Locke's explanation for why humanity had chosen opportunity over security then, was that the people had decided that by so doing their overall utility would be maximised.

Relations Between Property Owners

By developing his theory of the origin of property Locke successfully countered Filmer's accusation that the consent theories had no logical explanation for how the world could have come to be divided into private lots. Having achieved this objective without the need of a mythical meeting of all humanity, it was a relatively small step for Locke to then invent the property-defending state. All that was now required for a government to be created was for the property owners of a region to get together and decide that they could pass certain of their powers over to a collective body. Such an act did not contravene natural law. This was because it was only the property of the individuals involved that was being placed under the protection of a government and what was done with the individual's property only its owners had a natural law right to determine.

Having justified property rights and the existence of the state Locke proceeded to discuss the nature of relations between property owners. A useful aspect of this part of the Two Treatises was his explanation of why employers normally enjoyed a precedence in decision-making over employees. There are three reasons why it is useful to examine this issue in a paper on Locke's contribution to the women's question. First, doing so helps to make clear his understanding of relations between the sexes. Second, it highlights the fact that Locke was consistent in his understanding of relations between individuals who form a partnership. Third, it enables one to see that apart from allowing for the need to protect any children that were a consequence of a marriage partnership, Locke did not apply different standards to his analysis of the social position of men and women.

Given his belief that all individuals are property owners even if the property they possess is no more than their life, liberty and their capacity to labour, all relationships formed to promote a common endeavour are, for Locke, partnerships between property owners. The relationship between the buyer and seller of labour-time normally involves the creation of such a partnership because the successful exchange of commodities belonging to employer and employee normally requires a sustained period to be achieved. As with any other partnership, Locke accepted that the employment relationship should be founded on a freely negotiated contract. What provisions the partners chose to include in this contract was entirely up to the

individuals involved save only that they ensure that these provisions comply with the law. Where no civil law exists this means only that they comply with natural law. Locke suggested that in the case of the employment contract natural law demanded first, that the contract not exist in perpetuity, (for a person would be thereby selling away their freedom); second, that the provisions of the contract be not subject to arbitrary modification during its lifetime. (Locke 1969:162).

Master and servant are names as old as history, but given to those of far different condition; for a freeman makes himself a servant to another by selling him, for a certain time, the service he undertakes to do in exchange for wages he is to receive; and though this commonly puts him into the family of his master and under the ordinary discipline thereof, yet it gives the master but a temporary power over him and no greater than what is contained in the contract between them (Locke 1969:162).

Locke accepted that when human beings negotiate an employment contract, employer and employee meet as free agents who are equals in terms of their respective freedom from arbitrary domination by any other. From this particular perspective these individuals are equals irrespective of what level of inequality may exist in other areas. Consequently, any contract forged between them to facilitate the exchange of their respective commodities is a contract between equals. If viewed broadly, it is of course ludicrous to suggest that employers and employees normally bargain as equals. Employers generally have access to greater resources than do employees. They also tend to have a lesser degree of immediate need for the employee's services than the latter tend to have for that offered by the employer. That Locke was well aware that this was the normal situation is shown by his recognition of the fact that within the employment relationship the common arrangement was one of superior and subordinate. He accepted, in other words, that normally the employer was conceded authority over the relationship by the employee. Given they were equals in terms of their natural freedoms, according to Locke, the only way the employer could justifiably gain such a position was if the employee consented voluntarily to this arrangement. For Locke a voluntary agreement was one in which consent was not extracted by the use of coercion. It did not, however, preclude the possibility that only one of the contractors might have a strong motive for entering the arrangement. If a prospective partner's level of need for the commodity offered

by the other was unequal this did not negate the fact that the choice of each to enter the partnership was a voluntary act. As Dunn (1967:157) has put it, for Locke: 'Voluntary action does not, of course, imply the absence of motive, even of overwhelmingly powerful motive.'

Where bargainers who are negotiating a trade of commodities have differing levels of need for the goods or services being offered in exchange there is a likelihood that this fact will be manifested in the final terms of the agreement. If, for example, all the land of a region is in private hands and there is an overabundance of available landless labour motivated to enter an employment relationship by the need to eat, it can be expected that these facts will be reflected in the wage paid to the employee for his or her labour-power. It is also reasonable to assume that where the exchange process requires the creation of a partnership the bargainer with the lesser degree of need is likely to come out of the bargaining process with the more advantageous or senior position. Locke accepted that both these probable consequences of unequal need amongst bargainers would characterise the employment relationship. Unequal distribution of land, he accepted, commonly enabled landowners who entered into partnerships with those without sufficient resources to enable them to survive independently, to extract a surplus from the employee or tenant. Thus, Locke argued, uneven distribution of land or money facilitates the transfer of what 'was the reward of one man's labour into another man's pocket (Locke 1740:19).' Locke also accepted that the employee would normally be under the 'ordinary discipline' of the employer, i.e. the employer would be the boss. In other words, because of their greater bargaining power employers would normally receive more from the employee than they paid and be accorded a 'just precedence' over those 'things of their common interest and property'. Given the bargainers were free agents hypothetically this was not how things had to be. These individuals were free to establish alternative arrangements if they wished, but for Locke it was to be expected that the common arrangement would be that the employer's advantageous position would enable the extraction of a surplus and the employer would be the senior partner.

Locke applied the principles utilised in his analysis of the employment contract to his discussion of a number of other social covenants. Not the least of these was the marriage partnership. Here, once again, we are presented with two free individuals who are equals in

terms of their natural freedoms. By a process of negotiation these individuals forge a contract, the provisions of which are constrained only by natural law and if in civil society by those laws of the state which are consistent with natural law. That there should be an equality between prospective marriage partners was normally accepted as a given by consent theorists. Their conception of what this equality necessarily involved, however, was very limited in nature. Grotius (1925:234) and Pufendorf (1927:95), for example, limited women's natural conjugal freedom merely to the right to choose whom to marry. These men presumed that the husband's absolute authority in the marriage was a necessary condition of the relationship. Locke, on the other hand, argued that 'the ends of matrimony requiring no such power in the husband, the condition of conjugal society put it not in him, it being not at all necessary to that state (Locke 1969:161)'.

To argue that women retained their natural freedoms after marriage and that men had no God-given right to dominate the marriage relationship was a very radical hypothesis for seventeenth century England. It was an implicit criticism of those civil laws which constrained women's freedoms and it held up a model of what should be, which was not to become legal fact for another two centuries. Why Locke adopted this radical posture is a matter of conjecture. It should be noted, though, that to accept the alternative, i.e. the claim that husbands had a natural right to a dominant position within marriage, would have undermined his argument that Eve was not Adam's natural subordinate. This, in turn, would have destroyed his thesis that regents could not base their absolutist claims on the supposed absolute powers that had been given by God to Adam. To sustain his position, as regards the King's claims, Locke needed to argue that wives and husbands were free to arrange their relationships as they wished.

Acknowledging that Locke was in a situation where the denial of women's natural equality was difficult to render compatible with his political needs, however, is not to suggest that he adopted this position merely because he had no choice. To do so would be to unjustly deny him the moral credit he deserves for challenging the received wisdom. His friend James Tyrrell (1681:14,110) when faced with this same difficulty could not bring himself to accept women's equality as could very few of Locke's other Whig contemporaries. For Tyrrell the physical and mental weakness that he believed characterised the female sex meant that women

would necessarily have to accept that they would be 'as a slave' to their husbands once they were married. It is therefore to Locke's credit that when faced with this situation he maintained consistency and insisted that women's natural rights were no less than those that belonged to men and that marriage could not constitute a forfeiture of these rights. Locke accepted that wives would normally be the lesser partner in the marriage relationship and he accepted this situation as reasonable, it is true, but his reasons for doing so were not inherently sexist. By this is meant he did not utilise differing criteria for explaining the nature and assessing the justice of relations between men and women than he applied to those between men.

Locke's explanation and justification for why men were normally the senior partner in marriage was the same as his explanation for why the employer was normally the boss. In short, men's greater strength and consequent abilities enabled them to negotiate a superior position with their prospective brides. As did employees, women consented to this lesser position because they accepted that this was a cost that they had to pay for economic security. Again, as with the employment relationship, Locke insisted that there was nothing inherent in marriage that demanded that one or other of the partners had to have the senior position. Marriage partners were free to negotiate different terms to their contract if they wished. The only concessions to the uniqueness of the marriage contract that Locke was willing to concede was that it had to be compatible with the attainment of the primary purpose of marriage, i.e. 'the continuation of the species.' This meant first, that the marriage partners had to agree that both would have right of access to the body of the other for purposes of procreation. Second, both had to agree to remain with the other for at least as long as was required to enable their common offspring to reach an age where they could fend for themselves. Third, both had to agree to provide the degree of support and assistance required to ensure the children gained adequate nurturing. Beyond these necessary provisions there were no natural restrictions which the partners had to agree to include in their covenant.

Conjugal society could subsist and attain its ends without it [i.e. husbands having the right to dominate the marriage relationship]; nay, community of goods and the power over them, mutual assistance, and other things belonging to conjugal society, might be varied and regulated by that contract which unites man and wife in that society as far as may consist with procreation and the bringing up of children till they could shift for themselves, nothing being necessary to any society that is not necessary to the ends for which it is made (Locke 1969:161-162).

Or as Shanley (1982:93) has put it:

Beginning from the premises that the end of marriage is the procreation and nurture of children and that marriage is a contractual relationship, Locke concluded that husband and wife might set whatever terms they wished to their relationship as long as these were conducive to the care of the young.

For Locke then, the same restrictions and freedoms applied to the marriage contract as applied to any other covenant. Most importantly, the property rights of both partners, both corporeal and spiritual, could not be arbitrarily infringed. Consequently, just as a people could not grant the state absolute power over their property, a wife could not grant her husband the right to absolute authority over her life even if she so wished. To do so would alienate a property she has not the power to give away. Nor may a man confiscate for his own use the goods a woman brings to the marriage merely because the couple have chosen to marry. This was her property and hence part of her being and as such could not be expropriated against her will. For Locke the marriage relationship created no theoretical difficulties with these forms of property. There was, however, a theoretical problem with property which a husband and wife, by common endeavour, might accumulate during the period of the marriage. As this wealth was the product of their common labours the husband could have no right to arbitrarily utilise it as he wished. 'For as to the wife's share, whether her own labour or compact gave her a title to it, it is plain her husband could not forfeit what was hers (Locke 1969:216).' This left unresolved, however, how the day to day decision making as to the use of this common property was to be determined. It was here that Locke observed that as the male was the 'abler and stronger' of the two sexes, familial decision making power, in the last instance, tended 'naturally' to fall to the husband. This development, it needs to be stressed, Locke believed was

a tendency not a universal phenomenon. He was quite explicit that it was not the case that husbands must inevitably have final decision making power in the family. Indeed, he scoffed at those who suggested that marriage conveyed this right on husbands. When doing so he pointed out that within England no one accepted that a queen who married one of her subjects consequently became the subordinate of this individual (Locke 1969:37). Locke observed, moreover, that even while it was true that the power of ultimate decision over common goods normally fell to the husband this was not the way things had to be. 'Community of goods and the power over them' within marriage, he insisted, could be varied and regulated as the marriage partners wished, the only proviso being that the interests of any offspring be protected (Locke 1969:162). Finally, Locke observed that even the tendency for men to be the senior partner in marriage was limited in nature. The rights men's supposed greater abilities and strengths might convey were strictly limited, for the husband could not make any claim on that which was the wife's personal property. Nor could these capacities enable the man to claim any more right over her life than she had over his. Indeed, if the husband attempted to infringe these basic rights, Locke insisted, the wife was perfectly at liberty to appeal to the state to protect her interests, separate or even divorce.

Pateman (1987:106) has denied that Locke accepted that both men and women had an equal right to be free of subjugation by any other. He could not have done so, she insists, because he accepts that women are natural subordinates and a 'natural subordinate cannot at the same time be free and equal'. Pateman, however, misses Locke's point that there can be equality between individuals in certain areas of social life without there necessarily being equality in all others. It was, moreover, not the case that Locke depicted women as men's 'natural subordinates' in the *Two Treatises*. Indeed, as has been shown it was critical for his refutation of absolutism that any claim that husbands had a natural right to dominate their wives be denied. Even if he believed that this was the case, therefore, Locke could not have conceded that women were the natural subordinates of men. As has been shown this is not to suggest that Locke did not accept that men would normally be the dominant partner in the marriage relationship. His explanation for this, however, lay not in any concession to women's supposed natural subordination. Rather, it lay in his theory of property and his understanding

of the relationship that would normally exist between property owners who have differing levels of need for each others services but who choose, nonetheless, to forge a partnership.

What Locke argued, in short, was that men commonly enjoyed a natural advantage when bargaining over the provisions of the marriage partnership as a consequence of the fact that women were physically the weaker sex. Men's greater strength was an advantage because it enabled them to undertake certain significant manual tasks much more effectively than could women. Consequently, because most men had this overall advantage Locke accepted that, just as the employer commonly had the ability to negotiate the senior position within the employment relationship, because of their greater attributes, prospective husbands normally had the capacity to negotiate a superior position within marriage.

What made the strength advantage important, in the shaping of relations between the sexes then, was for Locke not that it gave men the capacity to terrorise women but that it gave them a greater ability to undertake those specific activities which required high levels of physical capacity. In seventeenth century England two fundamental activities which would have fallen within this category were soldiering and certain types of productive labour. Traditionally, the first had been of great importance amongst the ruling strata. The significance of this factor had, however, declined greatly since the period of high feudalism when the rulers had in effect been a military class. Even so, despite its diminished significance the respective military capacities of the sexes remained a significant factor influencing the ideological perspective of those who were members of the dominant sector. Much more significant for the overwhelming bulk of this agrarian population, however, would have been the extent to which the differing muscular capacities of the sexes would have influenced their respective ability to undertake heavy manual labour. That Locke might have believed that this factor could enable the majority of husbands to gain a negotiated precedence in their relations with their wives has been denied by Clark (1979:31) on the grounds that women are 'as able to labour as men.' The point is, however, that where certain types of work were concerned, this being work where physical strength was a highly significant factor influencing the individual worker's productivity, Locke did not accept that the sexes had an equal ability to labour. He believed that

heavy physical work was an activity, a 'stress of labour', which women were less capable of undertaking than were men (Locke 1954:490).

Whether or not Locke was correct in his belief as regards the respective labouring abilities of the sexes is a debatable point. It should be noted, though, that those historians who have studied this specific issue have reported that the hypothesis was widely held in seventeenth century England and that there tends to be substantive evidence to suggest there was some truth in the claim (Roberts 1979; Snell 1981; Middleton 1988). Irrespective of the validity of Locke's hypothesis, however, what is clear is that he believed it to be the case that women's lesser physical strength rendered them less capable than were men of undertaking heavy physical labour. That this was so is important, for it enables us to comprehend how Locke could come to believe that men would tend normally to come out of the negotiations over the conditions of the marriage partnership as the senior partner. Locke lived in a society where the economic security of the overwhelming majority of families was greatly dependent on the capacity of its members to periodically undertake heavy physical labour. Indeed, even the livelihood of the gentry and the aristocracy, classes which did not actually engage in manual labour, was partially dependent on this ability. That this was so was because the mass of surplus value these classes could extract from employees or tenants, was influenced by the level of labour productivity of the direct producers. Believing that men's greater muscular capacity gave them an enhanced ability to undertake manual labour would, in such a situation, amount to accepting that the majority of men entered the negotiations over the provisions of the marriage contract with a decided economic advantage. Locke does not appear to have believed that women had any natural economic attribute which might be as effective a bargaining tool as that which he accepted was enjoyed by men. Consequently, he could rationally conclude males entered these negotiations with a lesser need for that which women had to offer than the need women had for that which could be offered by men. Both prospective marriage partners could offer the other sex, companionship, children and productive labour, but the man, because of his greater physical prowess, could also offer a level of economic security which very few women could match. This last being necessarily so unless the woman was amongst that small minority

of the population who owned a significant mass of economic property, other than their ability to labour, or had a level of physical strength that would be unusual for a female.

In advancing the above hypothesis it needs to be added that given Locke's understanding of the role played by relative need in the bargaining process, the viability of his argument did not require men to be more productive than women in all types of work. Indeed, even if it was the case that wives were more productive than were husbands overall and consequently contributed more to the home than did their spouses Locke theoretically might still have been able to accept that most men could be able to negotiate a superior position in the marriage relationship. Whether this could be done would depend on how critical to survival were the tasks requiring high levels of physical strength. In other words men might be able to extract a reward in the form of a rent from the fact that strength was unevenly distributed between the sexes. If survival of the wife required access to the physical strength that was largely a natural monopoly of men but there was nothing that she possessed that was equally needed for his survival, then the man has a decided advantage in the determination of the provisions of any partnership which they may form to promote their joint interests. In short, given his understanding of the bargaining process Locke could accept that common sense would decree that in such a situation the woman was likely to come out of the bargaining process promising to honour and obey while he merely promised to keep her in sickness and in health.

Conclusion

In his reply to Filmer, Locke sought to contribute to the undermining of political absolutism by disabusing those who feared that to deny the King's claim that his power was derived from God was to undermine political stability, property rights and men's authority within the home. In seeking to achieve this objective Locke advanced an explanation for male superiority, which, while conceding that husbands normally enjoyed a position of seniority in their relations with their wives, rejected the claim that men's superior position was divinely sanctioned or was part of their birthright. By so doing Locke aided women to free themselves from the binds of a theological determinism which decreed that they were forever fated to a

condition of subservience to men. Given the extent to which religion and the story of Adam and Eve had traditionally shaped peoples' view as to the 'correct' relationship between men and women, this was no mean feat. As O'Donnell has observed, to undermine this perspective as did Locke was a contribution of great significance to the efforts of those who insisted that in terms of spirituality, rationality and intelligence women were the equals of men and thus entitled to the same rights as men.

The Christian patriarchal political and cultural system - whereby every avenue of power within society is in male hands - is ideologically rooted in the story of Adam and Eve. The birthright whereby males rule females, the innate distinctions presumed to fit males for domination and females for submission, is contained within the story. In the deepest sense, Adam's mastery of Eve precludes her claims to autonomous identity, while Adam's God-given power to name the creatures of the earth insures his right to define Eve with his own words. Locke's empiricism undercuts the story ... because it insists that the human mind become aware of itself and its own powers.

In the place of the theological argument advanced by the absolutist theorists Locke substituted an economic argument which, while it retained links to theology, took debate far down the secular path which the economics discipline was eventually to follow. In the process Locke helped to lay down the foundations upon which subsequent debate on the social position of women was to be based. Contract, bargaining, relative productivity, utility and opportunity cost, these were the critical elements in Locke's explanation for men's superior social position. In the bargaining process women, acting as free agents, conceded men a precedence in the marriage contract because women recognised that their ability to produce the material wherewithal needed for life was less than what could be had by forming a marriage partnership with a man, a partnership which had a cost but the price of which was less than the utility forgone. Advocates of the new household economics, with their overarching interest in the nature of intra-family economic relations and the concept of intra-family contracts, might well recognise a similarity between this argument and some of their own work. Indeed, if they were to claim Locke as an early advocate of their approach to the study of the family they would be justified in doing so. Likewise, feminist economists, with their critical approach to the issue of discrimination might well claim Locke as an early supporter of the right of women to be treated as equals with men. If they were to do so they would be joining feminist philosophers, such as

Squadrito (1979:10), who even though she fails to comprehend his economics can perceive Locke's underlying commitment to sexual equality and thus argue:

Relative to his contemporaries Locke took an extremely liberal position on sexual equality. These views, like most of his work, were considered radical and dangerous: indeed, some of his ideas about women did not become respectable until the twentieth century. We cannot rank Locke among the great fore-mothers of the feminist movement, but we should accord him his place among those whose insight and courage contributed to its development.

To some modern readers Locke's thesis has appeared merely as a new justification for patriarchy. It has been perceived as little more than a construct advanced to enable a traditional justification for the enslavement of women to be jettisoned while ensuring that women remained men's subordinates. The traditional argument, it is suggested, was abandoned only because it had become an obstacle to men's political emancipation. Such a verdict, however, is unjustified for in the context in which he wrote, i.e. a society which granted the husband total control of his wife's property and conceded him the right to beat her all but to death, Locke's work was undoubtedly sexually progressive and emancipatory. It depicted women as beings who were rational and who were entitled consequently to the natural law rights that automatically accrued to all rational beings. This meant they had the right freely to possess their lives, liberties, goods and the product of their labour. It is true that his economic argument gave justification to women's subordinate status within marriage. At the same time, however, it provided important theoretical arguments which could and did aid women in their struggle to free themselves from a theological determinism which condemned them to perpetual subservience. Moreover, his argument placed an onus on men to justify their demand that they be given a superior ranking within marriage, rather than merely assuming they should enjoy this position simply because they were men. It denied husbands and fathers the right to use violence against females and accorded women the right to strive to find ways to overcome men's natural advantages. All in all, therefore, Locke's work was a valuable theoretical contribution to the process of women's emancipation. Certainly, his contribution was a great advance on a traditional argument which simply stated that God had decreed that women were subservient to men and this is the way it must always remain.

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