

A CRITIQUE OF MACPHERSON'S POLITICS AND HOW THEY
INFLUENCE HIS VIEW OF LOCKE'S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

"... (B)ut merely that if you clasp the telescope firmly to your eye and gaze fixedly at the flagstaff, you stand an excellent chance of seeing the signal. But the causal explanation of this may not be that a communication has been despatched but rather that you already know what they message must be."¹ Here John Dunn points out one of the principal problems with C.B. MacPherson's² description and critique of John Locke's political philosophy: Being a staunch Marxist, he's going to evaluate and try to fit Locke into history solely as an apologist for the bourgeoisie. Certainly, this is the temptation. Although MacPherson makes valid points about Locke's philosophy, his Marxism causes him to see Locke too narrowly. So as to examine why MacPherson analyzes Locke as he does, let's evaluate what MacPherson believes politically, and how this influences his evaluation of Locke.

Two key premises exist that nearly always will distinguish a modern liberal/socialist/Marxist from a modern conservative³ or most libertarians. One of these premises concerns whether human nature is fundamentally changeable (malleable) or not, and whether it is necessarily evil, uncaring, and selfish, or good, loving, and cooperative. The obvious implications of this premise concerns how utopian a conception of what kind of society is possible, and how much potential humanity has for moral improvement, collectively and individually. For you won't strive to achieve a certain kind of society if you believe a priori it is im-

possible for it to exist. The second premise concerns whether or not inequality

¹John Dunn, The Political Thought of John Locke (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 209.

²C.B. MacPherson, The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism Hobbes to Locke (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962). This book shall be called "MI" for now on in the footnotes.

³I say "modern" in order to distinguish the twentieth century definition of these terms from the nineteenth century definition. I shall use these terms in this paper in the twentieth century sense. For classical liberalism was devoted to laissez-faire, while modern liberalism attacks it.

of opportunity and condition are justifiable or not, and if so, why. This premise has obvious implications for your view of property rights, and whether or not the government or some other collective entity should hold all substantial, non-personal property in common. If you should accept that human nature is innately good and infinitely improvable, and that inequality of condition and opportunity is evil and morally unjustifiable, this leads to the standard left wing view of society. On the other hand, if you should accept that human nature is innately or necessarily evil and selfish, that it can't be changed much by society, and that inequality of condition/opportunity is morally justifiable, this leads you to the standard right wing view of society. Thus, if you know these two fundamentals of a person's political philosophy, you can easily predict their overall political philosophy and stances on various ^{public} issues or controversies with with a high degree of accuracy.

Now MacPherson very clearly believes that human nature is both good and easily improvable, especially through societal action:

"Can we just play about with these postulates of the essence of man, rejecting one because it does not suit our moral values and setting up another because it does? Do we not have to demonstrate the truth or falsity of the postulates, and have we done so? I think we do not have to, and certainly we have not done so. . . . But the truth or falsity of the postulate is not in question. For it is not entirely a factual postulate, however much it may be presented as such. It is an ontological postulate, and as such, a value postulate. (This statement betrays the influence of the logical positivists' assault on the possibility, let alone objectivity, of metaphysics). . . . Since postulates about essence are value postulates, they may properly be discarded when they are seen to be at odds with new value judgements about newly possible human goals. The discarding, now, of the postulate of man's essence as infinite consumer, infinite appropriator,

infinite antagonist of scarcity, comes within the category of allowable discards."⁴

And MacPherson clearly believes in the malleability of human nature, although the prior citation contains plenty of proof for that proposition as well:

"If you start from the assumption that there is a permanent unchanging nature of man, then you are forced to subsume all changes, such as increase of desires, under his innate nature. If you drop that assumption, and assume instead that man changes his nature by changing his relation to other men and the material environment, the difficulty disappears. It can then be seen that man can in principle choose and impose what moral rules he wishes, and can change them as circumstances seem to call for."⁵

And MacPherson doesn't criticize the following view: "It is true that the full development of human capacities, as envisioned in the liberal-democratic concept of man--at least in its most optimistic version--is infinitely great. No inherent limit is seen to the extent to which men's human capacities may be enlarged."⁶ He goes on to say such view of human development need not require the continual rising of the material standard of living to accomplish, however.

The breathtaking audacity of this viewpoint is well worth some comment.

MacPherson is saying that if we devise a new moral code, human nature will automatically mold itself to fit that new code. There's nothing about the nature of man that's beyond the power of positive thinking to fix. Indeed, the essence of man, which surely includes genetic, biological, and physical components, the brain's physical functions included, can be changed merely by changing the ideas of man's nature in our minds. I've heard of mind over matter, but this is ridiculous.

⁴C.B. MacPherson, Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 37-38. For now on, this book will be known as "M2."

⁵M2, p. 34.

⁶M2, p. 62.

Admittedly, the question of whether human nature is innately good or evil, and whether it is easily or infinitely improvable is not likely to be resolved in this age. But this issue is empirical as well as metaphysical, and won't be simply solved by saying man's nature corresponds to whatever conception about it we may wish to devise. For while Rousseau's Emile proclaimed the positive view of human nature, and that society is what corrupts it, at least as plausible is William Golding's alternative vision as proclaimed in The Lord of the Flies, which maintains society's rules that keep people from destroying each other and from acting out their selfishness. The history of the twentieth century--WWI, WWII, Nazi concentration camps, Soviet gulags, etc.--has served to fit Golding's schema more than Rousseau's. While such evidence isn't decisive, for Rousseau could merely blame such atrocities upon civilization, they did serve to end the nineteenth century's optimistic vision of automatic progress. We in the West tend to think optimism about the improvability of man died on the battlefields of the Somme and Verdun, but that's not the case. Certainly, the twentieth century's history hasn't been favorable to MacPherson's optimism. Perhaps the failure of social engineering in the USSR and eastern Europe under communism will be more effective in curing such hopes.

In support of the idea that human nature is good, a believer in the improvability of human nature will mention those primitive societies whose members are highly loving and altruistic, such as the Tasadai of the Philippines. Of course, this omits those other groups which are highly hostile, at least to outsiders, such as the Plains Indians and many past South Pacific Islanders. As one critic of Marxism put it:

"It is sometimes contended, in support of (belief in the malleableness of human nature), that members of so-called 'primitive societies' display towards each other the kind of empathy and altruism that communism both requires and would call forth. Such societies, however, do

not prove that human beings could be a communism requires them to be in order to have a chance of success. Granted that members of such societies display an endearing propensity towards altruism and mutual aid vis-à-vis other members. But such altruism is confined to a very small number of other people all of whom are very well known to everyone. Moreover, such altruism is typically conjoined with extreme hostility or else indifference towards those who are not members of the society. Communism to be effective, requires that individual members be disposed to regard anonymous, unknown others with as much regard as close relations and kin. How is it possible to identify closely with people whom one does not even know? It is true saints manage to do something like this. But can we and should we pin our truest upon the possibility that all could become as saints?"⁷

Nor are children as innocent as we like to think they are. While they will be faithful and easily follow their parents' lead many times, and haven't known the kind of deliberate kind of evil adults do, on the other hand they are totally self-centered and are oblivious to the needs of others when conflict with others. To watch a group of toddlers play with each other, with the kind of punching, grabbing of others' toys from each other, etc. taken in this light could be quite disillusioning. they engage in as a routine - matter of course, A One psychologist said (say) that if he was given the choice of either being put in a land of 40 foot tall giants who were adults, and 40 foot tall toddlers, and being *FAWD* by these inhabitants, he'd take the adults anyday. As another psychologist said: "The toddler is the world's most hard-nosed opponent of law and order, and he can make life miserable for his harassed mom. In his own innocent way, he is vicious and selfish and demanding and cunning and destructive."⁸ So we should be careful about assuming the problem of

human nature can be as easily disposed of as MacPherson thought it could be.

⁷his emphasis, David Conway, A Farewell to Marx An Outline and Appraisal of His Theories (Harmonsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 208-209.

But now, what about the other premise mentioned above concerning egalitarianism? MacPherson clearly believes equality of opportunity and of basic condition are necessary ingredients of any truly democratic society:

"The rejection of the market concept of man's essence (which to MacPherson is man as an infinite consumer and infinite appropriator) is increasingly needed now because, as I have argued, that concept, as it is entrenched in our present society, is incompatible with the equality of individual right to make the most of oneself which is now being demanded by the increasingly democratic temper of the world as a whole. . . . (I)t is probably that the continuance of Western societies combining individual liberties and democratic rights depends on those societies providing their members with an equal right to realize their essence as exponents, enjoyers, and developers of their individual human capabilities, for this is the concept of man's essence avowed in the theory and ideology of both the communist and third worlds."⁹ "In the first place we should notice that the difficulty arises at all only in the transition from an unequal to a more nearly equal society (or indeed from an unequal to an even more unequal **society**). (MacPherson is speaking of the trade-off involved in causing the richer parts of society not to be able to develop their potentials as human beings as much in return for the poorer parts of society being able to develop more). It would not arise in a society which had already established equal access to the means of life and the means of labour."¹⁰

Clearly, MacPherson is a good egalitarian.

⁸ James Dobson, Dare to Discipline (New York: Bantam books, 1970), p. 20.

⁹M2, p. 36.

¹⁰M2, p. 73-74.

The problem of defending inequality of condition (and more so of opportunity) appears to be formidable, but may not be upon further reflection. "Social justice" could be said to consist in allowing people to have different incomes based upon talent, hard work, education, skills, intelligence, luck, etc., as opposed to forcing everyone by government fiat to be equal (which is the more usual definition). John Locke himself recognized this when he wrote: "He gave it to the use of the Industrious and Rational, (and Labour was to be his Title to it;) not to the Fancy or Covetousness of the Quarrelsome and Contentious."¹¹ As it has been pointed out, unequal causes are going to yield unequal effects. The old time Marxist motto, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need" also runs into the problem of providing an incentive for people to work.¹² For if people see no self-interest in working hard, it's easy to lay back and let others do it all, and so take a free ride on the more productive's backs. For if you do no or little work while someone else does much more of it, but both get the same income, clearly an involuntary transfer from the more productive to the less productive has occurred, since the more productive can't ever be paid more. The elimination or lessening of incentive causes all to work less, causing everyone's standard of living to fall, which is one of the prime problems behind eastern Europe's economic collapse. While some would prefer a society in which all get \$100 a year as opposed to one in which 90% get \$1000 a year and the rest \$50,000, I'll prefer to just take my \$1000 and go, letting others get worried about those getting \$50,000 a year. The alleviation of envy and covetousness by confiscating by force the wealth of those making \$50,000 will backfire inevitably.

Of course, the obvious reply here would be that wealth gained by inheritance or (in many cases) speculation wasn't based on mental or

physical labor, but luck. Also there is the problem MacPherson repeatedly mentions:

¹¹ his emphasis, John Locke, The Second Treatise of Government, section 34. Special note: unless otherwise noted, all emphasis for now on in quotes from this book is John Locke's own.

¹² To MacPherson's credit, it seems he wouldn't object to some differentials in income based on such factors. Nonetheless, those who are the most capable and creative in business--people like Sam Walton and H. Ross Perot--by being denied the opportunity to own the means of production wouldn't be able to help others

"The fact is that those who do not own or have free access to, the resources which are their necessary means to labour, have to pay for the access with a transfer of part of their powers. . . . The transfer of powers is a continuous transfer between non-owners and owners of the means of labour, which starts as soon as and lasts as long as there are separate classes of owners and non-owners; not a momentary transfer occurring at the time of that separation."¹³

The view being propounded here^{implicitly} is that the ownership of capital itself is inert and involves no particular talent or hard work. Therefore, the owner of capital deserves nothing for the capital itself, as opposed to any labor as a manager he may bring to his business.

Two basic defenses for payment to capital as a factor of production exist, even if the owner(s), of it don't participate in its direct management.¹⁴ One is to say the risk the owner of capital takes upon himself or herself justifies a special payment just for doing this. For the laborer is guaranteed his wage regardless of whether his product was sold or not, or whether his services (such as at a retail store) were used enough by customers to pay all the costs of business, or even just the wage alone.¹⁵ The risk of owning capital, and possible bankruptcy would deserve special compensation, since all the money put into capital could be lost completely or partially. The other reason for rewarding capital is that it involved the voluntary abstention from consumption by someone along the line, whether by the present or past owner of the capital in question. For even today, most of the money the wealthy have is invested, and not spent on fancy living. As for the problem of inheritance, it is the right of the owner to dispose of his capital as he wishes, for while it may be said the heir didn't earn it himself, neither did anyone else in society who doesn't have wealth earn it either. And, on a pragmatic level, the desire to leave wealth for children, spouses, or others (including even charities) is a useful incentive to get people to

¹³M2, p. 64-65.

¹⁴Conway, Farwell to Marx, p. 106-108.

work harder to provide for more than just what they need for their own use in their lifetimes, but strive to (inadvertently) enrich (future) society as a whole by building up an excess. Speculation's value to the community consists in ^{helping to} push the market towards its equilibrium condition when taken together as a whole: "Speculation in the capitalist system performs a function which must be performed in any economic system however organized: it provides for the adjustment of supply and demand over time and space."¹⁶ It helps to even out prices and supplies, by buying things at a low price at one place and time (thus driving their price up some), and selling them at a high price at another place and time (thus driving their price down some) where they were more needed (or more demanded). Of course, ^{while} much more could be said both for and against payment for "inert" capital, the above will serve to cast some doubt on MacPherson's views on this subject.

But now, how do either of these two premises of MacPherson's affect his view of Locke? For by exploring Locke's view of the state of nature, we can see to some degree Locke's view of humanity's essence and nature was, and how MacPherson reacts to it. And by exploring Locke's view of property, we can find out how MacPherson's desire for (rough) equality of condition and opportunity affected his view of Locke.

Now it would seem Locke has a fairly positive view of human nature when it is left alone to regulate itself in the state of nature, at least compared to Thomas Hobbes' view of it in this situation: "continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short."¹⁷ For instance, Locke specifically states the difference between a state of war and the state of nature, which means he doesn't see them as synonymous: "And here we have the plain difference between the State of Nature, and the State of War, which however some Men have confounded, are as far distant, as a State of Peace, Good Will, Mutual Assistance, and Preser-

¹⁵This ignores how workers, much like capitalists themselves, could be the victim of unpaid for contracts due to force or fraud. Thus, they could get cheated out of their wages due to bankruptcy, etc., though lawsuits are a solution to this problem.

¹⁶Ludwig Von Mises, Socialism: An Economic and Sociological Analysis (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1981), p. 125;

vation, and a State of Enmity, Malice, Violence, and Mutual Destruction are one from another. Men living together according to reason, without a common Superior on Earth, with Authority to judge between them, is properly the State of Nature."¹⁸ The state of nature is better than living under an absolute, arbitrary government: "It cannot be supposed that they should intend, had they a power so to do, to give to any one, or more, an absolute Arbitrary Power over their Persons and Estates, and put a force into the Magistrates hand to execute his unlimited Will arbitrarily upon them: This were to put themselves into a worse condition than the state of Nature. . . . Whereas by supposing they have given up themselves to the absolute Arbitrary Power and will of a legislator, they have disarmed themselves, and armed him, to make a prey of them when he pleases."¹⁹ Thus, Locke clearly sees human nature as being good and rational in the state of nature to a great degree, which isn't a notion MacPherson is apt to deny.

However, it could be Locke is inconsistent on the state of nature, and implicitly on how good human nature is, since Locke says the state of nature is easily apt to degenerate into the state of war.²⁰ Locke says in the very next section, after saying the state of nature is very different from the state of war, in the Second Treatise: ". . . but where no such appeal (to a common superior power) is, as in the State of Nature, for want of positive Laws, and Judges with Authority to appeal to, the State of War once begun, continues, with a right to the innocent Party, to destroy the other whenever he can, until the aggressor offers Peace . . ."²¹ Man gives up the state of nature because: ". . . he hath such a right (to freedom), yet the Enjoyment of it is very uncertain and constantly exposed to the Invasion of others. For all being Kings as much as he, every Man his Equal and the great part no strict Observers of Equity and Justice, the enjoyment of the property he has in this state is very unsafe, very unsecure."²²

Since people are biased towards their own interests, they aren't apt to apply

¹⁸Second Treatise, section 19.

¹⁹Second Treatise, section 137.

²⁰Note M1, p. 240-242.

²¹Second Treatise, section 20.

the law of nature impartially to their own circumstances. They will engage in revenge and ^{emotionally} react often if they think they've been wronged in the state of nature, which could well lead to violence. So it seems Locke is contradicting himself on the state of nature, saying people have a good rational nature sometimes, or a prejudiced, emotional nature other times.

Now MacPherson argues the reason for Locke's apparent contradictions here is that Locke sometimes thought of the state of nature consisted of undifferentiated persons, and other times of people being in two classes with differential rationality: the rich and propertied, who are rational, and the poor wage earners, who are irrational (and so try to take from the rich).²³ But I'll suggest an alternative view: namely that Locke believed men were basically rational and good individually, but as they conflict over limited resources, it is easy for them to end up fighting and stealing because it's hard to be unprejudiced when their interests conflict. So while human nature starts off good and so men may cooperate with one another in the state of nature even to the extent (as Locke saw it) of trade and to agree to use money as a medium of exchange,²⁴ they won't always agree on what is "fair." And thus even if rational and normally moral, violence can result when people disagree, and wish to press their rights against the other without a common superior power to arbitrate between them. And without a court system to judge between such disputes, and a police force to enforce them, endemic violence will result in parts of society, make all feel unsafe, even if most people in the state of nature aren't engaged in such violence themselves.²⁵ Hence, as Ayn Rand pointed out: "But the possibility of human immorality is not the only objection to anarchy (i.e. a state of nature): even a society whose every member were fully rational and faultlessly moral, could not function in a state of anarchy; it is the need of objective laws and of an arbiter for honest disagreements among men that necessitates the establishment of a government."²⁶ Hence, even if human nature was perfectly moral and

²²Second Treatise, section 123. ²³ML, p. 243, 245-246. ²⁴Second Treatise, sections 36, 45, 50. ²⁵In the infamous Dodge City of the American Wild West, the appalling violence in the absence of the law didn't develop even more.

and rational, errors in knowledge would still necessitate a government.

Thus, MacPherson's view that Locke was being contradictory may not be the case, nor that Locke was reading back the differential rationality between the classes back to the state of nature of his own day and society. It could be Locke saw people in the state of nature as being basically good and rational, but due to the natural prejudice that exists in us towards our own interests (as well as due to "honest disagreements" perhaps), violence and conflict were apt to result among at least some of those in the state of nature. And, very much opposed to Hobbes, he saw the state of nature as being safer than being under an arbitrary absolute government, which implies the state of war only involves some of the people living in it, and so isn't a war of all versus all, with everyone perpetrating or suffering violence. Although only some are involved in this violence, such activity would put fear into the majority that it could happen to them next, which is why all are put into fear even if they themselves aren't violent or a victim of ^{violence}. Since I can't examine Locke's own mental states that occurred as he wrote on the state of nature, I can't know for certain that he was or wasn't confused and contradictory here, but it could be that he was consistent so long as we keep in mind basically moral and rational individuals can still come to blows, even if this wouldn't occur as often compared to what would be the case if they were irrational and immoral. The fence straddling position MacPherson rejects--that men and women are irrational and immoral to some degree, but not completely--could well be the correct view of how Locke conceived the state of nature.²⁷ Thus, we need not accept MacPherson's view that Locke's conception of the irrational poor lower class is what Locke is projecting back on the state of nature at times, which is the ^(mainly?) group responsible for the state of nature degenerating into the state of war.

²⁶her emphasis, Ayn Rand, Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal (New York: The New American Library, 1967), p. 334.

²⁷M1, p. 241.

However, despite MacPherson sees Locke as confused and class distinction-ridden on the state of nature, he saves his main salvos for Locke's arguments that allow unlimited appropriation. MacPherson's analysis of how Locke gets from mankind owning the earth in common to private property an individual could potentially own in unlimited amounts is quite insightful.²⁸ However, Locke's views are inevitably going to antagonize MacPherson's egalitarianism, which has been documented above already. And, one of the main reasons why MacPherson has a very negative attitude towards capitalism is that it allows property to be owned to any extent by a single individual, which bodes ill for how well MacPherson will receive Locke's views on the subject. As MacPherson put it: "If we do not now resolve the contradiction that has been built into our Western theory (of democracy), the contradiction between equal freedom to realize one's human powers (which is how MacPherson summarizes his egalitarianism and which he sees as the main purpose and justification for democracy) and freedom of unlimited appropriation of others' powers, or between the maximization of powers in the ethical sense and the maximization of powers in the descriptive market sense, we are unlikely to be able to compete (against the communist countries ideologically)."²⁹ Thus, MacPherson has a strong motive for condemning Locke on this score.

And the stick which MacPherson beats Locke with are the conclusions Marx drew from the labor theory of value as applied to capitalism. "Had Locke not been taking the wage relationship entirely for granted, his inclusion of 'my servant's' labour in 'the labour that was mine,' (MacPherson is quoting from Locke in the Second Treatise, section 28) the labour whose expenditure gave me by natural right a title to the product, would have been a direct contradiction of the case he was making."³⁰ Thus, the employer is seen as owning someone else's life to the extent the latter sells his labor. "Supporters of capitalist production, of whom Locke was one, were not yet troubled

²⁸M1, p. 199-208, 220-221.

²⁹M2, p. 23. Of course, ^{this statement,} like many statements written by both left- and right-wingers prior to the collapse of communism in eastern Europe, has been rendered obsolete by recent events.

³⁰M2, p. 23.

in their consciences about any dehumanizing effects of labour being made into a commodity; in the absence of such moral qualms there was no reason for them not to think of the wage relation as natural."³¹ Here Locke is identified as a capitalist--the apotheosis of all evil apparently--and the employer employee relationship is identified as dehumanizing. Why is it dehumanizing? MacPherson denies this relationship is voluntary.³² MacPherson goes on to condemn Locke this way: "Locke did not care to recognize that the continual alienation of labour for a bare subsistence wage, which he asserts to be the necessary condition of wage-labourers through their lives, is in effect an alienation of life and liberty."³³

This analysis leads MacPherson to say Locke: "transform(ed) the natural right of every individual to such property as he needed for subsistence, and as he applied his labour to, into a natural right of unlimited appropriation, by which the more industrious could rightfully acquire all the land, leaving others with no way to life except by selling the disposal of their labour."³⁴ And he draws upon Marx's moral analysis of the employer-employee relationship using the labor theory of value clearly in this quote: ". . . labouring no longer implied appropriating, though appropriating implied (someone's) labouring. At this point it became morally and expediently rational to appropriate land in amounts greater than could be used to produce a plentiful supply of consumption goods for oneself and one's family (which is what MacPherson would limit ownership to, it seems); that is, it became rational to appropriate land to use as capital, which involves appropriating the surplus produce of other men's labour, i.e. of the labour of those who have no land of their own."³⁵ Because of this view, MacPherson blasts Locke harshly: ". . . the contradiction in his (Locke's) individuals, in

which fully individuality for some was produced by consuming the individuality

³¹M1, p. 217. ³²M1, p. 218, noting his comment on (b) near the top of the page. ³³M1, p. 220. Interestingly, Locke says the American Indians lived much worse than day laborers in England: ". . . have not one hundredth part of the Conveniences we enjoy: And a King of a large fruitful Territory there feeds, lodges, and is clad worse than a day Labourer in England" (Second Treatise, section 41). ³⁴M1, p. 231. ³⁵M1, p. 234.

of others."³⁶ MacPherson passes final judgment on Locke by saying

"Locke's concept of natural rights" is of no use in forming "a twentieth-century concept of human rights" except in telling us what to avoid.³⁷ With such an unsympathetic view of Locke, MacPherson has every possible political motivation to evaluate Locke's political philosophy as negatively as possible.

Unfortunately for MacPherson, this negative evaluation of Locke on property rights is built on conceptual quicksand, for the labor theory of value has about as much respect in mainstream economics (which includes the various Keynesians, etc.) as the Flat Earth Society has in the eyes of mainstream astronomers. MacPherson mentions how Locke believed "that almost the whole value of any commodity was created by labour"³⁸ because, one might suspect, he couldn't refer^{to} a contemporary, non-Marxist economist or philosopher as believing in it. For, rather stunningly, MacPherson never deals with the blows rendered to the labor theory of value, which was a core concept of classical economics, in the late nineteenth century by Eugene von Bohm-Bawerk and other economists since. As Ludwig Von Mises put it: "One can easily see the cause of (John Stuart) Mill's mistake. The last representative of the classical school of economists, he did not survive to see the transformation of economics by the subjective theory of value, and he did not know the conception between wage rates and the marginal productivity of labour."³⁹ MacPherson's position of blithely ignoring the arguments against the labor theory of value resembles that of a fundamentalist scholar who wishes to argue in favor of God's existence without dealing with the arguments Hume advances in Dialogs on Natural Religion, or Kant in The Critique of Pure Reason.

For what determines the value of labor isn't how much time is spent on a task as the product resulting from the use of that time. And in turn the value of that product is based on the collective subjective judgment of the

³⁶M1, p. 261.

³⁷M2, p. 233. ³⁸M2, p. 65.

³⁹Ludwig Von Mises, Socialism, p. 155.

individuals composing the market. If the market says chairs that took 20 labor hours to make are less valuable than desks that took 40 labor hours to make, then the prices will adjust accordingly regardless of the "labor content" of the objects in question. For final retail prices are set by the law of supply and demand, not by how much labor went into this or that product. The costs of production and prices "mutually determine each other; there is no one-way causation" in modern marginal theory.⁴⁰

Likewise, if some dresses designed on highly avante garde and currently fashionable lines had 10 hours of labour put into them reached the market at the right moment⁴¹ are worth \$300 each, but if they arrive a month or two later, they are eventually worth only \$75 each when sold (finally!) after being marked down repeatedly. Needless to say, the wages received by the employees--lets say \$8/hour--aren't affected by how much the retailer finally sold the dresses for, although their future wages or even continued employment will be determined by future sales ~~successes~~ ^{or failures}. Or, if I put 200 hours into a garden, and grew potatoes, my labor is worth far more than if I worked 200 hours, and grew some exotic weeds nobody would buy instead. Thus, the value of labor (economically, not intrinsically or morally) is determined by what others will pay for the product it produces, not by some sort of intrinsic value for the time involved.

Conway⁴² advances some other telling arguments against the labor theory of value. The value of paintings by now dead artists, rare stamps and coins, etc. isn't based on how much time was invested by the artist or making, but by how much (wealthy) collectors or museums will pay for them. Also, the value of labor is affected by developmental processes that occur after the labor was performed in many cases. Hence, the amount of labor involved in planting a tree sapling today is the same as that which planted what is now an oak tree that's a hundred years old, but the value of the latter labor is far greater

in economic value due to the passage of time solely. Mises and Conway both point
⁴⁰Henry Hazlitt, The Failure of the "New Economics" An Analysis of the Keynesian Fallacies (New York: University Press of America, 1983), p. 297.
⁴¹...

out how Marx commits circular reasoning when he says skilled labor is only unskilled labor intensified: "What is ultimately decisive for the solution of the problem of the calculation is the question whether one can assimilate different kinds of work to a common denominator without a valuation of the products."⁴³ Without the market to determine how much the product of skilled labor is worth as compared to that of unskilled labor, any translations of one to the other are totally arbitrary, for the number of kilocalories expended in muscular effort and however you would value the mental effort and calculations ^{involved in} labor may not have much to do with how much a skilled engine lathe operative's labor is worth compared to an unskilled laborer who sweeps the floor. Hence, we shouldn't accept MacPherson's arguments about the employer exploiting employees through taking "surplus value" as profit when it is based upon a fallacious economic theory.

But, a much more serious assault is launched by MacPherson against substantive ^{of} private property (i.e., "the means of production") by saying the only way a wage earner can earn a living is by working for a capitalist since the capitalist class owns all the property upon which he could support himself.⁴⁴ As he put it when attacking the famous monetarist Nobel-laureate economist Milton Friedman: "The proviso that is required to make every transaction strictly voluntary is not freedom not to enter into any particular exchange, but freedom not to enter into any exchange at all. This, and only this, was the proviso that proved the simple model (of a capitalist economy) to be voluntary and non-coercive, and nothing less than this would prove the complex model to be voluntary and non-coercive. . . . What distinguishes the capitalist economy from the simple exchange economy is the separation of labor and capital, that is, the existence of a labour force without its own sufficient capital and therefore without a choice as to whether to put its labour in the market or not. . . . (Friedman's) attempted demonstration

⁴² Conway, Farewell to Marx, p. 88-92.

⁴³ Mises, Socialism, p. 115-116.

⁴⁴ This analysis ignores how those with highly specialized, professional skills/like doctors and lawyers need little physical capital to set up business for

that capitalism co-ordinates without coercion therefore fails."⁴⁵ Hence, when Locke allows individuals to own as much property as they can acquire by money and their own labor,⁴⁶ MacPherson will see this^(i.e. "unlimited individual appropriation")⁴⁷ as the virtual embodiment of evil, and so evaluate Locke accordingly.

The problem with MacPherson's view is that socialism is unlikely to solve the problem when all the means of production are put under the control of government, and controlled by a central planning commission with an army of bureaucrats to implement its decrees. Why? For the state now takes the place of the capitalists, and controls the means of production, and can punish its opponents by denying them employment.⁴⁸ For the individual capitalists still have to compete for workers, which is what puts a floor on wage rates, for disgruntled, badly-paid workers will go elsewhere. Henry Ford offered \$5 a day when most other employers were paying \$3.50 a day for skilled labor because he knew he could get the best workers by paying an above average wage, and that his application of assemblyline techniques to automobile production insured raised productivity enough that he could easily afford to do this. In contrast, the socialist state is a huge one company town with one big difference: You can't seek a better deal by escaping from it!⁴⁹

Also, it seems MacPherson is assuming an effortless existence is possible to men, for people have to work in order to survive. Whether the auto plant is owned by GM or Uncle Sam, you still have to go to work, or else (via taxes and government aid) force someone else to work for you in order to live.

"Socialists usually attempt to refute the argument for freedom by contending that under capitalism only the possessor is free. The proletarian is unfree

because he must work for his livelihood. It is impossible to imagine a cruder
⁴⁵M2, p. 146. ⁴⁶Second Treatise, section 46. ⁴⁷M2, p. 18. ⁴⁸This tactic was occasionally used in the USSR to punish dissidents. One prominent Soviet defector told this story for instance: "Stalin did not send Morozov to a concentration camp, but he devised a cruel punishment for him: he decreed that Morozov was not to be given employment anywhere. The poor man earned his living through articles he wrote under assumed names, his former classmates secretly helping him get them published" (Arkady N. Shevchenko, Breaking With Moscow (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985), p. 98-99.

⁴⁹This assumes the socialists dream of a single worldwide government is accomplished as well, which eliminates emigration as an option.

conception of freedom. That man must work, because his desire to consume is greater than that of the beasts of the field, is part of the nature of things. That the possessor is able to live without conforming to this rule is a gain derived from the existence of society which injures no one--not even the possessionless. And the possessionless themselves benefit from the existence of society, in that co-operation makes labour more productive."⁵⁰ For what MacPherson really is attacking isn't capitalism per se, but the division of labor, which massively raises the productivity of people. And since socialist societies like the USSR have the division of labor, including "meaningless factory jobs," socialism isn't apt to solve problems caused by the division of labor, such as any alienation resulting from it.

And, on a purely practical basis, let's consider the fact that corporate profits as a percentage of GNP are under 10%, and after taxes are roughly 6%.⁵¹ The Fortune 500 find 5% net income to be a general ballpark range for ^{an}adequate return on investment, for it's hard for a large company to make extra-normal profits year after year without competition muscling its way into its market(s). Let's consider this 5% to be the evil transfer MacPherson discusses the capitalists extract out of our hides for their merely "inertly" owning capital. As MacPherson puts it: " . . . (A) capitalist market society, and that the latter by its very nature compels a continual net transfer of part of the power of some men to others, thus diminishing rather than maximizing the equal individual freedom to use and develop one's natural capacities which is claimed."⁵² Since the payment of this 5% of "my" income allows me to avoid waiting in line 10-20 hours a week to buy groceries and other necessities, allows me to avoid most rationing, including waiting lists of 20+ years to get a new apartment,⁵³ I consider this money well spent. I'd much rather be "exploited" like this, than enjoy the conditions that prevailed behind the (former) Iron Curtain in communist "worker's paradises." Certainly my

overall standard of living is higher due to being in a capitalist country,
⁵⁰Mises, Socialism, p. 172. ⁵¹Conway, Farewell to Marx, p. 49. ⁵²M2, p. 10-11.

⁵³Such were the conditions in Poland under communism. When babies were born, parents would quickly put their names down on waiting lists so by the time their

capita GNP
as per comparisons of similar capitalist and socialist countries show
(such as North and South Korea, the former West Germany with the former
East Germany, the former West and East Berlin's differences, the USA
with the USSR, 19th century Japan with 20th century India, Mainland
China with Hong Kong and Taiwan, etc.), so I can easily afford to pay
this 5% as a sort of "tax." Since the U.S. Federal government demands
25% of the GNP, and the states a further 10% or so, the burden of the
capitalist class is quite light by comparison. The capitalist businesses
also have the virtue of being, on average, much more efficient than
non-profit driven government administration. and so waste less of the money I give them for necessary
products and services.
I simply don't see how this
"transfer"
5% ruins my potential to become a fully worthwhile human being, which Mac-
Pherson seems to be convinced is the case.⁵⁴

Now MacPherson attacks Locke as favoring differential rights since
the less rational will end up working for the more rational owners of the
means of production.⁵⁵ Now, as even MacPherson himself points out, Locke
said natural rights were equal:

". . . (W)e must consider what State all Men are naturally in, and
that is, a State of perfect Freedom to order their Actions, and dispose
of their Possessions, and Persons as they think fit within the bounds
of the Law of Nature, without asking leave, or depending upon the
Will of any other Man. (This sentence is interesting for shedding
light on Locke's view of property rights, including those in the
state of nature). A State also of Equality, where in all the Power
and Jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another:
there being nothing more evident, than that Creatures of the same
species and rank promiscuously born to all the same advantages of
Nature, and the use of the same faculties, should also be equal one
amongst without Subordination, or Subjection . . ."⁵⁶

So, with such a basic premise of equality, how does Locke end up favoring

⁵⁴See M2, p. 35-36, 41-45, 138, etc. MacPherson seems to assume sometimes such
transfer is wrong because it requires material goods to develop these worthwhile
attributes, which to a great degree is highly questionable, and that jobs under
socialism are less alienating, which is also highly questionable. Also, the above

differential rights in MacPherson's view?

Here Sir Isaiah Berlin's division of liberty into positive and negative types is useful for analyzing MacPherson's views on Locke's seeming inconsistency on the natural equality of rights. For what has to be realized is that Locke believed only in negative rights, and not positive ones. You won't find a right to food, healthcare, a minimal standard of living, etc. in Locke's Second Treatise, which are all examples of positive rights. But Locke did believe in negative rights, such as the right to property,⁵⁷ which includes the right to sell your labor,⁵⁸ and "Lives, Liberties, and Estates."⁵⁹ The last section in particular shows Locke's concern with physical coercion and protection from "invasion" from others, which is what negative liberty is all about: It gives you the right not to be attacked or interfered with by

Indeed, the whole reason for giving up the state of nature's freedoms is to gain protection another. ^{for yourself and your property, which concerns negative rights.} The problem with positive rights is that they contradict and interfere with negative rights, especially if those emphasizing positive rights.

rights are in the thrall of coercive utopianism, and wish to impose their ideals of the good society upon others. For a right to food presupposes the right to take it from another who has it when you don't. A right to healthcare maintains if you need an operation, you can force a doctor into performing it, and someone else (via taxes) to pay for it. For though Isaiah Berlin didn't push his ideas to their logical conclusion concerning the problems with positive freedom,⁶⁰ they definitely tend towards the position MacPherson describes in the following words: "To omit lack of access (to the means of labor) from the category of coercive impediments to liberty, and so to remove such class-imposed denials from the department of liberty into the department of justice or equality, seems to me an unfortunate reversion towards the extreme liberalism of Herbert Spencer."⁶¹

⁵⁵M1, p. 230-231. ⁵⁶Second Treatise, section 4.

⁵⁷Second Treatise, section 135. ⁵⁸Second Treatise, section 27.

⁵⁹Ibid., 123. ⁶⁰M2, p. 103.

⁶¹M2, p. 102.

What has to be realized is that Locke is consistent concerning having equal negative rights for all.⁶² However, since he allows people to have highly different amounts of property, he doesn't believe in equal positive rights for all. Hence, MacPherson will write something like this: "Once the land is all taken up, the fundamental right not to be subject to the jurisdiction of another is so unequal as between owners and non-owners that it is different in kind, not in degree . . . The initial equality of natural rights, which consisted in no man having jurisdiction over another cannot last after the differentiation of property (or, as I might add, the division of labor)."⁶³ But Locke would see this "jurisdiction" of one over another as voluntary-- the freedom of contract between employer and employee. Such consenting capitalist acts he would allow, and would say interfering with them violates individuals' negative rights. For Locke will allow people the right to become very unequal in property, a right which MacPherson would annihilate if given his druthers. Since Locke denies positive rights, he will seem inconsistent on the equality of rights to anyone who believes in both negative and positive rights, such as MacPherson, who thinks a positive right includes the right to have access to the means of production and a guaranteed minimal standard of living. Thus, granted Locke's premises of equal negative rights, he is consistent and doesn't deny such rights to wage earners.

Now MacPherson goes too far in saying Locke was a collectivist.⁶⁴ It seems almost MacPherson is "Hobbesianizing" Locke, by saying Locke has people give up all their rights to the trustworthy majority of bourgeois (and aristocratic) propertyholders.⁶⁵ It also seems MacPherson isn't recognizing the difference between placing something under jurisdiction, which means you will still have rights ^{to do something} so long as it doesn't conflict with the law, and totally giving up the ownership of something completely. Allowing something to be regulated is not the same as losing it completely. Now MacPherson could

quote something like this to prove Locke was a collectivist: "'Whosoever

⁶²Presumably voting would be an exception since Locke would limit it to the propertied class. ⁶³MacPherson, p. 231. ⁶⁴MacPherson, p. 255. ⁶⁵MacPherson, p. 257.

therefore out of a state of Nature unit into a Community, must be understood to give up all the power, necessary to the ends for which they unite into Society, to the majority of the Community . . . "66 However, such a quote has to be understood in the light of sections 129 and 130, which describe much more carefully what is being given up: "The first Power, viz. of doing whatsoever he thought fit for the Preservation of himself (in the state of nature), and the rest of Mankind, he gives up to be regulated by Laws (Notice!-- the power isn't given up completely. Instead, it becomes regulated, not eliminated--EVS) made by the Society, so far forth as the preservation of himself, and the rest of that Society shall require; which Laws of the Society in many things confine the liberty he had by the Law of Nature. Secondly, the Power of punishing he wholly gives up, and engages his natural force (which he might before imploy in the Execution of the Law of Nature, by his own single Authority, as he thought fit) to assist the Executive Power of the Society, as the Law thereof shall require."67 While the power to punish in retaliation is totally given up, the other power, of the right of trying to preserve yourself, is placed under the regulations of the state but a right here still remains. And such a section as the following undermines the view of Locke believing all rights were given up: "For no Body, can transfer to another more power than he has in himself; and no Body has an absolute Arbitrary Power over himself, or over any other, to destroy his own Life, or take away the Life or Property of another."68

Furthermore, MacPherson's view that collectivism is compatible with individualism is ridiculous, even Orwellian. Notice: "The notion that individualism and 'collectivism' are the opposite ends of a scale along which states and theories of the state can be arranged, regardless of

the stage of social development in which they appear, is superficial and

⁶⁵It should be noted Hobbes, although a good, . . . zealous absolutist, still maintained certain basic rights weren't given up. For instance, the sovereign couldn't order you to kill yourself. See Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 93, 151.

⁶⁶Second Treatise, section 99. ⁶⁷Second Treatise, sections 129-130.

⁶⁸Second Treatise, section 402.

and misleading. . . . It is not a question of the more individualism, the less collectivism; rather, the more thorough-going the individualism, the more complete the collectivism."⁶⁹ Of course, if this is really true, then why does MacPherson complain about Locke's view of property rights accomplishing the following?:

"For to insist that a man's labour is his own, is not only to say that it is his to alienate in a wage contract; it is also to say that his labour, and its productivity, is something for which he owes no debt to civil society. If it is labour, a man's absolute property, which justifies appropriation and creates value, the individual right of appropriation overrides any moral claims of the society. The traditional view that property and labour were social function, and that ownership of property involved social obligations, is thereby undermined."⁷⁰

For again, while Locke wants people in civil society to realize they gave up their absolute freedoms to gain the protection of the state, nonetheless to be under the jurisdiction of society doesn't mean you gave up all your rights. MacPherson is intent on caricaturing Locke as creating a type of collectivism which exists only among the property holders, and which allows them to lord it over the propertyless but which gives no rights to the propertied ^{individual} against a majority of the propertied opposing him or her. He assumes, in his Marxist prejudice, that the ruling class is perfectly united and won't ever commit evil acts against one another, but only against wage earners.

A standard definition of individualism is: "a doctrine that the interests of the individual are or ought to be ethically paramount; . . . a theory maintaining the political and economic independence of the individual and stressing individual initiative, action, and interests." A standard definition

for collectivism is: "a political or economic theory advocating collective

⁶⁹M1, p. 256.

⁷⁰M1, p. 221.

control esp. over production and distribution or a system marked by such control." To maintain these two concepts go together easily is worthy of comparison to Ingsoc in 1984 saying freedom is slavery, war is peace, and ignorance is strength. For the whole moral reason for why collectivism is advanced as against individualism is that the latter is ^{attacked as} a selfish and immoral doctrine, and that society should control its members in order to promote the common good. If it's true these two concepts go together, then laissez-faire capitalism is a perfectly collectivist system, and Naziism and Pol Pot's communism are perfect embodiments of individualism. Unbridled capitalism will reduce the number of laws and rules restricting the individual to the barest minimum, which certainly doesn't fit MacPherson saying, "Locke's individualism, that of an emerging capitalist society, does not exclude but on the contrary demands the supremacy of the state over the individual."⁷¹ The state under a full-blooded capitalist system demands a theoretical supreme allegiance, but it seldom interferes in day-to-day life through laws and regulations, nor does such a state promote the view its citizens exist only to live for the good of society as a whole (i.e. the embodiment of ^{which} is the state). By contrast, nobody will say, I hope, that communism, Naziism, or any type of socialism don't demand "the supremacy of the state over the individual." This analysis of MacPherson's clearly deserves to be completely trashed.

While MacPherson's analysis of Locke's philosophy clearly contains errors, and that his political agenda does distort his view of Locke, it's important to realize much of his analysis contains truth in it, such as his analysis of how Locke starts with an assumption of common ownership, but turns it into permission for "unlimited individual appropriation." For while he overdraws his case many times, and adds a very negative value judgment on Locke's theories which I don't agree with, many times there is something to be said for his analysis. For if you look at Dunn's reply to MacPherson,⁷² his corrections

⁷¹ML, p. 256.

⁷²John Dunn, The Political Thought of John Locke. see pages 203-241 especially

often are ones of degree, not of kind. When J.C.D. Clark says, "the liberal and the later Marxist picture of Locke as the herald of bourgeois society failed to survive Mr. Dunn's analysis, despite the eloquent expression given to it in C. B. Macpherson's The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism,"⁷³ he is overstating what Dunn did. So while I totally disagree with MacPherson's politics, and this paper has dwelled excessively upon them, and how he so negatively evaluates Locke's doctrines morally, I'm not one to say MacPherson's analysis is totally wrong, as Clark seems to be saying. For while English society may not have been made bourgeois after the Glorious Revolution due to the beliefs of Locke and those like him, it's clear Locke himself definitely is bourgeois, and to say he isn't (which could be what Clark is saying above) is in error. So while I'm sure there have been better interpretations of Locke than MacPherson's, I doubt ^{his} is the worst. If his work on Locke is approached knowing his ideological agenda, and ^{gets} suitably discounted for it, you will learn something useful.

⁷³ J.C.D. Clark, English Society 1688-1832 Ideology, Social Structure and Political Practice During the Ancien Regime (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 46.