NOTES FOR READING THE BIBLE
WITH JOHN LOCKE

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The preference for republican government over monarchy in the Hebrew Bible appears to be revisited in the writings of the modern political philosophers, especially John Locke. The revival of this preference in the teaching of the moderns occurs in the mode of ideology, and rests upon a new epistemology that skirts the classic contention about the relationship of knowledge and virtue. Even so, the modern teaching is at once an interpretation and a qualified revival of the Scriptural teaching that man is to "be fruitful and multiply, abound in the earth, conquer it and rule" (Genesis 1:28).

Introduction

The preference in the Hebrew Bible for republican government over monarchy appears to be revisited in the preference for republican government over monarchy in the writings of the modern political philosophers. The Bible's teaching on covenant as the principle of republican government likewise receives a new lease on life, albeit significantly transformed, in the argument for consent in the writings of the early modern thinkers.

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The early moderns do not defer to the Bible, but it does appear to guide them, and even in some important way to persuade them. The dominant mode in their address of Scripture is neither the intention to subordinate reason to revelation nor the aim of "replacing Scripture with reason." One finds rather a recognition that Scripture and reason are so far in agreement that one may call on Scripture to correct the more manifest misuses of reason. The early modern thinkers did not seek to expel the Bible from the city that they built, as Plato sought to expel the poets; but they did not make its admission unconditional. Their dependence on it makes the role of the Scriptures in their city an interesting and complicated one.

The basis for classic republicanism is the rule of the wise, but in the modern interpretation the foundation of republican government is consent. This difference is the reason for the famous divide between classic and modern republicanism. Classic republicanism, as in Plato's Republic, supplies an image of republican government as monarchy. Modern republicanism, as in Hobbes's Leviathan, supplies an image of monarchy founded on consent, and hence as republican. The modern teaching that monarchy founded on consent is a form of republic is conservative in motivation because it serves to moderate and to guide the revolutionary republican criticism of monarchy unleashed by Machiavelli's writings.

The modern thinkers characteristically advert to the moderation that guides the classic thinkers as intellectualist, pusillanimous and puerile. These ascriptions are leitmotifs in the founding documents of modern science as well as of modern politics.

The writings of Galileo and Bacon are cases in point. In his pamphlet, "The Starry Messenger," Galileo declares that the telescope enables every man to acquire knowledge of the heavens "with all the certainty of sense evidence." In this pamphlet, in which he announces his discovery that "the surface of the moon is not smooth, uniform, and precisely spherical as a great number of philosophers believe it (and the other heavenly bodies) to be," Galileo proposes a new epistemology. The invention of the telescope signifies for Galileo the inauguration of an era in which the public may participate in the increase of knowledge. The approach to knowledge that Galileo proposes is through body, which is more universal, or more common, than mind.

Like Machiavelli before him, Galileo exaggerates the priority that modern science assigns to observation over theory, in contradistinction to ancient and medieval science, which he caricatures. Galileo's essay is a clarion call to Enlightenment. His epistemology is an ideological one because it skirts the classic contention that excellence is the property of the few, while resting the claim that
knowledge can be universal on a kind of knowledge that ranks low in the classic teaching. This approach to knowledge suggests the influence of Machiavelli, in whose teaching the notion of popular science first ceases to be an oxymoron.

Another *locus classicus* for these ascriptions is Bacon’s *New Organon*. Bacon approvingly mentions the Egyptian apothegm, that the Greeks “were always boys, without antiquity of knowledge or knowledge of antiquity,” adding in his own name that:

Assuredly they have that which is characteristic of boys; they are prompt to prattle, but cannot generate; for their wisdom abounds in words but is barren of works. And therefore the signs which are taken from the origin and birth-place of the received philosophy are not good.

Bacon agrees with Galileo that the Greek thinkers were, as Bacon calls them, “intellectualists.” Bacon’s potent criticism alludes to the shared conception of the moderns that the divine blessing to be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth (Genesis 1:28) is in agreement with reason. Bacon seems to go farther than Galileo in suggesting that Greek intellectualism thwart the divine blessing and is both irrational and fruitless.

These criticisms of the classic authors reach a fruition in the *Discourse on Method*, which Descartes writes to inspire men to exchange speculative for practical philosophy, “and thus render ourselves the lords and possessors of nature.” Descartes follows Galileo in aiming to enlist public support for a science based on experiments. His summons entails, and is at least indirect inspiration for, the liberal experiment in self-government. In the political science of the Enlightenment, philosophers can be statesmen because politics is a contribution to knowledge.

In its original version, the teaching that man is to subdue the earth and rule in it is not an ideological one. Its purpose is not to subordinate reason to the passions of one portion of humanity. Its original purpose appears to be to inspire and to elevate all of humanity. The Bible aims to accomplish this purpose through the complementary and subsequently-disclosed teaching that covenant is the basis of law and that republican government in the context of covenant is preferable to monarchy.
Genesis and Exodus are similar to one another in this respect: each begins with an element which one must reinterpret in the light of the new teaching on the covenant, which each text only subsequently discloses. In Genesis, the divine blessing to be fruitful and multiply and to rule reads differently in the new context outside the Garden, where human beings become partners in the covenant through Noah. Man will interpret the divine blessing differently after he leaves the Garden than while he was living in it. In Exodus, the promise of liberty that the Israelites receive while they are still slaves and are not yet in a position to know what liberty is takes on new meaning in the light of their subsequent consent to law under the covenant at Mount Sinai.

In breathing new life into the teaching that man is to conquer the earth and rule in it, the moderns call on human beings to recognize that they have done little to fulfill either part of the divine blessing at Genesis 1:28, either the part that calls on them to be fruitful and multiply and to abound in the earth, or the part that calls on them to subdue and to rule. The moderns as a rule tend to connect humanity’s failure to live up to either part of the divine blessing with the failure to establish republican government as distinct from monarchy.

**Locke’s Exegesis of the Divine Blessing**

In detecting and overthrowing Sir Robert Filmer’s readings of Genesis 1:28 and 3:16 as foundations for patriarchy, John Locke shows the way back to the republican reading of the Bible. Locke’s exegesis in his *Two Treatises on Government* intends, among other things, to explore the inner logic of the divine blessing, where multiplication precedes rule because rule is not by one man but by all men. According to Locke, monarchy is a great hindrance to carrying out the divine blessing. Locke maintains that “how much Absolute Monarchy helps to fulfil this great and primary Blessing of God Almighty, *Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the Earth*, which contains in it the improvement too of Arts and Sciences, and the conveniences of Life,” may be seen in the fact that lands under the suzerainty of the Turkish monarchy contain less than 1/100 of the population that they held in former times.5

Locke argues not just from the empirical example of the Turkish monarchy, but from the nature of reason itself. The development of technology in fulfillment of the divine blessing depends not on one man’s discovery of his ability to reason, but on the capacity of virtually all men to do so:
It is more reasonable to think, that God who bid mankind increase and multiply, should rather himself give them all a Right, to make use of the Food and Rayment, and other Conveniences of Life, the Materials whereof he had so plentifully provided for them; than to make them depend on the Will of a Man for their Subsistence....

Locke sees in the Bible’s account of the Garden of Eden the origin of the universal right to reason. Locke’s principal objection to monarchy is that it violates this right. The problem with monarchy is not just that it monopolizes the conveniences of life but that it hamstringsthe inventors of new conveniences because it “is likelier by want and the dependence of a scanty Fortune, to tye them to hard Service.” Locke for a moment considers the elements of the divine blessing in reverse order and proposes that “liberal Allowance of the Conveniences of Life” would serve “to promote the great Design of God, Increase and Multiply.” Here Locke construes the second part of the divine blessing as the condition or the means to the fulfillment of the first part. Locke comments, “He that doubts this, let him look into the Absolute Monarchies of the World, and see what becomes of the Conveniences of Life, and the Multitudes of People.” Monarchy is a hindrance to carrying out each part of the divine blessing.

Thus, according to Locke, the divine blessing is not neutral with respect to the choice between republic and monarchy. Technology and science do not advance under monarchy. Locke’s remark that the divine blessing encompasses “Rayment, and other Conveniences of Life,” indicates that the divine blessing points to the birth of technology, or to the beginning of man’s transformation of nature. The principle of Locke’s interpretation is that it is necessary for man to leave the Garden in order to adequately interpret the divine blessing. Fulfilling the divine blessing requires disobeying the divine command not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Furthermore, the divine blessing encompasses self-preservation, at least, for a creature with reason, to a career as a maker.

Locke’s interest in showing the concord of reason and revelation or of natural and divine law appears to draw some motivation from the discovery that the elements of the divine blessing are in full accord with reason. Locke argues in his Two Treatises on Government that the divine blessing is significant, but not just because the first man hears it. Locke suggests that it was unnecessary for Adam to hear the divine benison aloud, and indeed he doubts “not, but before these words were pronounced (if they must be understood Literally to have been spoken) and without any such Verbal Donation, Man had a right to a use of the Creatures, by the Will and Grant of God.”
George M. Gross

Locke hints that the statement of the divine blessing at Genesis 1:28 is an allegory to express, in very condensed form, a set of closely-connected propositions which form the first substantive teaching of reason. Adam did not need to hear the divine blessing because

reason, which was the voice of God in him, could not but teach him and assure him, that pursuing that natural Inclination he had to preserve his Being, he followed the will of his Maker, and therefore had a right to make use of those Creatures, which by his Reason or Senses he could discover would be serviceable thereunto.7

Locke’s particular insight is that each term of the divine blessing entails the one that succeeds it.

According to Locke, reason, revelation and the law of nature agree in the standing that they assign to the command to self-preservation, but they also agree in teaching that this command is not simply selfish. The blessing to be fruitful is itself so fundamental in nature that it curbs or guides the instinct to self-preservation. Here Locke argues from the universality of nature. "The Dens of Lions and the Nurseries of Wolves know no such Cruelty" as the catalogue of crimes that Robert Filmer’s patriarchal reading of the Scriptures authorizes men to commit. Locke asks, “And is it the Privileged of Man alone to act more contrary to Nature than the Wild and most Untamed parts of the Creation?”8

Locke frames his argument from nature against Filmer’s defense of practice or custom as a reason for monarchy. Locke quotes Psalm 106:38 on the Canaanite practice of child sacrifice to show that the Bible does not accede to “the authoritie of practise.” The principle of Biblical legislation consists in the intention to interpret and fulfill the string of elements which compose the divine blessing. Thus the Scriptural text does not “justifie Adultery, Incest and Sodomy...; Sins, which I suppose, have their Principal Aggravation in this, that they cross the main intention of Nature, which willeth the increase of Mankind.” According to Locke, the Bible teaches that “the continuation of the Species in the highest perfection, and the distinction of Families, with the Security of the Marriage Bed,” are necessary for the fulfillment of the divine blessing.9 Reason, nature and revelation aspire to preservation “in the highest perfection.”

The Bible signifies its invention of the family and of the covenantal institution of marriage in the novel figure of the patriarch as the man who loves his wife, as against the prevailing, pre-patriarchal models and institutions of Biblical times. Locke follows the Bible in articulating the reason for the family and for the consensual institu-
tion of marriage against the prevailing conception of patriarchy in his own time, which is more or less the conception of Filmer. Locke contends that Genesis 3:16 “only fortels what should be the Womans lot,” but does not amount to a grant of authority as such. In elaborating the Bible’s argument against custom or practice, Locke revives but also reinterprets the meaning of Biblical patriarchy. The loose use of the idea of “patriarchy” and its application to the Bible in some recent scholarship really amounts to a reassertion of Filmerism. Indeed, feminism in an extreme form may be a kind of Filmerism.

Locke’s argument that the Bible opposes unguided customs or practices of man is an exemplary instance of his use of the Bible to correct Filmer’s misuse of his reason. The thrust of Locke’s criticism is that Filmer fails to distinguish between reason and convention. A related instance in the Two Treatises is Locke’s correction of Filmer’s misreading and misinterpretation of the fifth commandment, to “honor your father and mother.” Filmer, as Locke says, seems to regard “and Mother, as Apocriphal Words.”

Filmer’s misreading of the fifth commandment recalls the old argument of Apollo, in the Eumenides of Aeschylus, that the mother is not really a parent, since the woman is only “a nurse to the seed.” In adopting that argument at the trial of Orestes, Athena provokes the Furies in order to put them in a frame of mind where they will be grateful for the proposal that she finally places before them. Athena’s argument is facetious; it is a ruse. Filmer’s argument is no ruse, however. Locke maintains, speaking of the monarchist followers of Filmer, “That Fundamental Authority from whence they would derive their Government of a single Person only, was not plac’d in one, but two Persons joyntly.” Locke proposes, not entirely facetiously, that the fifth commandment indicates the Bible’s preference for republic over monarchy.

Filmer provides a monarchist reading, not just of the episode in I Samuel 8 which grants the Israelites’ request for a king, but of the entire Bible. Locke frames his Two Treatises of Government around the refutation of Filmer’s monarchist interpretations of Genesis 1:28 and 3:16. Some of Locke’s exegesis may seem a little far-fetched, such as his republican reading of the fifth commandment. Locke even turns to the New Testament to make a republican reading of Peter’s injunction to “submit yourselves to every ordinance of man” (I Peter 2:13). There is a significant constitutional document from the early colony of Connecticut that anticipates Locke’s unusual reading. The American colonists who wrote the revised preface to the General Laws and Liberties of Connecticut Colony, perhaps influencing (or rather persuading) Locke himself, also interpreted this verse in a
Republican way. In reading Locke's Biblical exegesis, it is important to see the forest behind the trees. Even where Locke's interpretations of particular verses seem facetious and forced, his interpretations tend to indicate the direction and the intention of the Scriptural teaching as such, which is republican and not monarchist.

Locke's alignment of the natural law teaching and the Scriptural teaching would have to seem mischievous when one considers the radical mistrust of unguided human conduct that the Scriptural teaching fosters. It is easy to find confirmations for Locke's reading of Psalm 106:38 that the Bible tends to oppose the untutored practices or conventions of man.

Moreover, the Scriptural tradition and the classic natural tradition have different teachings on law. In the teaching of the Hebrew Bible, the idea of law comprises consent. Slaves, such as the Israelites in Pharaoh's Egypt, do not live under law because they do not give their consent to the regime that they live under. By definition, slaves cannot be said to live under law. The classic natural right teaching, in contrast, inquires into the law which is suitable for those who are "slaves by nature." The medieval natural law teaching interprets the covenant law teaching in terms of the classic natural law teaching, as one can see in Thomas Aquinas' discussion of "the natural order of rule and subjection," that is, the question as to whether there are "slaves by nature." Locke, on the other hand, appropriates the natural law tradition for use by the covenant law tradition, as one can see in his use of reason as the standard for evaluating custom while criticizing Filmer's failure to distinguish between nature and custom.

Locke and the other moderns reason that the Bible's statement on the duties of man in the pristine state of the Garden of Eden is highly unsatisfactory. In the pristine state, man's assignment is not the glorious task of dominion but the humbler task of "tilling and keeping" the Garden (Genesis 2:15). This is a state in which man has not yet become man. He has not yet acquired the knowledge of good and evil, he has yet to display any one of the human emotions (which, because of their intricate connection with reason, require a developed ability to compare and contrast) and he is as yet incapable of living under the covenant (nor is he given the opportunity to do so).

Locke implies that the assignment that man receives in the Garden pertains specifically to the epoch of the Garden. Man's acquisition of the human qualities through his disobedience has caused him to leave the Garden. One needs an interpretation of the divine blessing that enables man to live up to it in his new state. The intention to find a workable interpretation of the divine blessing to be fruitful and multiply, subdue and rule, appears to be a primary
goal of modern political philosophy, after it has interpreted this blessing to be the teaching of reason.

There is a community of purpose in the modern teaching and in the Biblical teaching of which it is at once a revival and an interpretation. The community of purpose is not obvious because the modern interpretation of the Bible’s teaching is in the mode of ideology. As such, it is not, strictly speaking, covenantal. In the Bible’s teaching, a covenantal interpretation of the divine blessing is the only one that is suitable to human beings who no longer live in the Garden of Eden. A covenantal interpretation of the divine blessing at Genesis 1:28, indicating the responsibilities and the appropriate actions of human beings who aim to carry out the divine blessing, entails risk (as covenants do) since it must depend on the human willingness to live according to law. Risk is necessary since man is now a being who has discovered the knowledge of good and evil. The moderns see risk-taking as anathema to the classic teaching. Uncovering the Biblical motivation in the modern criticism of the classic teaching helps to illuminate the basis for the non-ideological interpretation of modernity.

Readers of Locke often are abashed to credit the Biblical motivation in his argument. Underlying their diffidence appears to be the misguided notion that the Bible does not ally itself with reason, or even that the Bible does not often seek to persuade. Their diffidence leaves openings for reassertions of Filmerism in its various manifestations. These theologico-political issues receive sharp definition in Locke’s writings, where the exegetical and the epistemological motivations are mutually sustaining. Examining Locke’s work helps to clarify the nature of Biblical argument.

**Locke’s Statement on the Bible’s Ambition**

In *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, Locke’s contrasting of the great ambition of Hebrew Bible and the narrow ambition of the Greek philosophers reflects Locke’s conception of the ambition of the modern thinkers, including his own ambition. In characterizing the Greek philosophic thinkers as pusillanimous, Locke charges them with ignobly acquiescing in lower standards for humanity than the Scriptural teachings would have allowed.

According to Locke, the reasonableness of the Scriptures turns on their fulfillment of an end which is proper to reason. Since “human reason unassisted, failed men in its great and proper business of morality,” it has fallen to the Scriptural teachings to supply
the defect.16 This is the task of framing "a body of Ethics, proved to be the law of nature, from principles of reason, and reaching all the duties of life." Locke devotes The Reasonableness of Christianity to an apology for revelation, and to an apology for Christianity as the most reasonable, that is, the most "effectual," mode of revelation.

In The Reasonableness, Locke thus establishes the respective spheres of reason and revelation. He seems in this way to subordinate Scripture to reason. His argument is a truncated version of an old argument with a distinguished history. In the old argument, reading the Bible adequately requires training in natural science, not because the Bible provides further training in natural science, but because without preliminary training one can hardly know a miracle when one sees one. Galileo makes a version of this old argument in his "Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina." Without adequate knowledge of natural science one can hardly discern which propositions in the Bible are accommodations to the prejudices of the many.17 One may take Galileo’s argument a step further and propose that in the episode of the burning bush, Moses would not have turned aside "to investigate this great sight" (Exodus 3:3) if he had been too superstitious to recognize the anomaly.

In Locke's truncated argument, the purpose of miracles is to establish revelation. Nature supplies ample evidence for the existence of God, "yet the world made so little use of their reason, that they saw him not." Miracles supplement the proofs that are available in nature. Miracles are necessary because the proofs that nature supplies are for all practical purposes inaccessible to the majority of the people. Locke does not maintain, like Maimonides for example, that miracles require a proper foundation in belief, without which they would be indistinguishable from feats of magic. Locke rather insists that the evidence of Jesus’ miracles is incontestable.18

According to Locke, there is a host of reasons why the evidence of nature did not suffice to make God popularly known in antiquity. In Locke’s enumeration of these reasons, “sense and lust” blinded some, while “a careless inadvertency” in others, and “fearful apprehensions” in most, betrayed multitudes over to the hands of their priests. These introduced “false notions,” and implemented “foolish rites,” “which devotion soon made sacred, and religion immutable.” Thus superstition became firmly established.19

The existence of God was known to “the rational and thinking part of mankind,” but they kept it “locked up in their own breasts as a secret.” If they acknowledged and worshipped Him, they “durst” not let the people, not to mention the priests, “those wary guardians of their own creeds and profitable inventions,” know of it.20 This
passage in the *Reasonableness* is the locus for the charge of pusillanimity that Locke levels against the ancient philosophers.

Israelite antiquity was quite different from antiquity everywhere else and reflected the boldness and the greater ambition of "the rational and thinking part" of that people. Israel's uniqueness and exemplariness consist in the fact that "the belief and worship of one God, was the national religion of the Israelites alone." Locke does not say that the prophets were philosophers, or lovers of wisdom, just that the existence of the deity "was introduced and supported amongst that people by revelation."21

Though the Athenians went "farther in all sorts of speculations" than other peoples, "yet there was but one Socrates amongst them." To spare themselves the fate of Socrates, Plato and those like him "were fain, in their outward worship, to go with the herd, and keep to the religion established by law." But they conceded too much to the herd. Locke regards their teaching as unreasonable. Superstition was no less established among them than in "the rest of the world."22

Locke's comparative sociology of the Greeks and the Israelites is the reason for his recalling Paul's address to the Athenians: "Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious" (Acts 17:22).23 Paul's address supplies the standard for Locke's judgment of the Greek philosophic tradition in its relation to popular morality. In his judgment as in Paul's, the tradition falls egregiously short.

As the *Two Treatises of Government* makes clear, however, Locke differs from Paul because Locke maintains that just as superstition, which hampers knowledge of causes, is the chief obstacle to science, so popular enlightenment is the prerequisite to progress in the arts and in the sciences. Again, as the episode of the burning bush illustrates, revealed religion establishes the basis for science through the doctrine of miracles, which opposes superstition, or the belief in multiple principles of causality. Locke grafts the ideological program of the Enlightenment on to the goal of science that revealed religion establishes. Under the new dispensation, everyone is a pursuer of knowledge.

The main given and the chief subject for investigation in Locke's terse comparative sociology of Greek and Israelite antiquities is the wide gap between the learned and the multitude in Greece, and the blurring or the obscuring of, without extinguishing, this gap in ancient Israel. Locke agrees with Plato's judgment of the religion that the poets in the tradition of Homer handed down. In Greece and almost everywhere else, religion ran amok on account of the priests' power. In Israel, however, the poets and the priests were firmly under the hand of the civil power, at least in the time of Moses.
In *The Reasonableness*, Locke also presents a terse sociology of the revealed religions. The chief incentive to virtue among the Israelites was the political greatness of their kingdom (and, one should add, by extension, the prosperity of their children, by way of their covenantal duty to future generations). Moses used miracles to establish revelation among the Israelites. Jesus used many more miracles than Moses, and in doing so established, for the first time, "the doctrine of a future state." This doctrine was "an imperfect view of reason; or perhaps the decayed remains of an ancient tradition." It was for the most part unknown to man. Yet it was "effectual" for the completion of reason's task of establishing virtue because it rendered virtue "visibly the most enriching purchase, and by much the best bargain." Locke points out in his short essay, "A Discourse of Miracles," that Muhammad did not use miracles at all (though he affirmed Jesus' teachings on the day of judgment and the afterlife). Locke thus distinguishes the revealed religions according to two sets of qualities: the incentive to virtue, which may be noble or selfish; and, to supplement the use of reason, the use of miracles, which may be promiscuous, moderate, or abstentious.

**Concluding Comments**

The Hebrew Bible and the modern political philosophers share a preference for republican government over monarchy, as distinct from the preference for the rule of the wise in the classic tradition. Though the modern teaching regarding knowledge and the mastery of nature is in an ideological mode, it stands nonetheless as an interpretation of the divine blessing at Genesis 1:28. The modern teaching appears to be motivated at least in part by the failure of the classic teaching to do justice to the republican implications of the divine blessing. The modern teaching construes the elements of the divine blessing as being in agreement with reason.

While Genesis 1:28 presents man with the divine blessing, the Hebrew Bible leaves it to man to arrive at the proper interpretation or fulfillment of this blessing (though through the teaching on covenant it intends to guide him). The duties of man as Genesis 2 describes them stand as an inadequate interpretation of the divine blessing for man as we know him, since man is no longer in a condition even resembling that of the Garden. It is probably the case that some of the contemporary criticisms of the modern "project" rest in part on an inadequate understanding of the respective functions of Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 in the Biblical narrative.
Notes for Reading the Bible with John Locke

Notes


5. John Locke, Two Treatises of Government, ed. Peter Laslett (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 164-165 (I 33). This work is cited below as Two Treatises. Emphases are Locke's unless otherwise noted.

6. Two Treatises, pp. 169-170 (I 41).

7. Two Treatises, p. 205 (I 86).

8. Two Treatises, p. 181 (I 56).


10. Two Treatises, p. 174 (I 47). For the interpretation of marriage as consensual, see esp. Two Treatises, p. 321 (II 81-82).

11. Two Treatises, p. 184 (I 60).


13. Two Treatises, p. 304 (II 53).


