

john locke second treatise of civil government

John Locke's Second Treatise of Civil Government stands as a foundational text in Western political philosophy, profoundly influencing ideas about governance, individual rights, and the very structure of society. This seminal work, published in 1689, delves into the origins of legitimate government, asserting that political authority is derived not from divine right or inherited power, but from the consent of the governed. Throughout this exploration, Locke meticulously dissects the concepts of natural law, natural rights, and the social contract, providing a robust framework for understanding the relationship between rulers and the ruled. This comprehensive article will delve into the core tenets of the Second Treatise, examining its key arguments regarding property, freedom, the purpose of government, and the right of revolution, all within the context of its historical significance and enduring legacy.

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The State of Nature and Natural Law

John Locke begins his examination in the Second Treatise by positing a "state of nature" as a hypothetical condition preceding organized society. This state is not, as some might imagine, a lawless free-for-all. Instead, Locke argues that even in the absence of a common sovereign, individuals are bound by the law of nature, which is discoverable by reason. This natural law dictates that all individuals are created equal and possess inherent rights. It obliges every person not to harm another in their life, health, liberty, or possessions.

For Locke, the law of nature serves as a moral compass, guiding individuals toward peaceful coexistence and mutual respect. It is a set of principles that reason apprehends, demonstrating that all mankind is one community, distinct from all other creatures. Even without formal legal systems, individuals in the state of nature are capable of understanding their obligations to one another. The ability to reason allows them to grasp the inherent value and dignity of every human being, thus forming the basis for a just and ordered existence before the advent of civil government.

Natural Rights: Life, Liberty, and Property

Central to Locke's philosophy in the Second Treatise is the concept of natural rights. These

are not granted by governments but are inherent to individuals by virtue of their humanity. Locke famously identifies three primary natural rights: life, liberty, and property. The right to life implies the right to self-preservation, a fundamental drive embedded in all living beings. The right to liberty means the freedom from arbitrary control by others, allowing individuals to act as they see fit, as long as they do not infringe upon the rights of others.

The right to property, perhaps Locke's most distinctive contribution, is derived from the labor an individual expends. By mixing his labor with the common resources provided by nature, a person transforms them and makes them his own. This "labor theory of property" is crucial because it establishes a foundation for individual ownership independent of any governmental decree. Locke believed that the protection of these natural rights, particularly property, is a primary reason why individuals choose to leave the state of nature and form civil societies. Without the secure possession of property, liberty and even life would be precarious.

The Formation of Civil Society: The Social Contract

Locke argues that individuals voluntarily leave the state of nature and enter into a social contract to form civil society. This decision is driven by the inconveniences and uncertainties that exist even within the natural state. While the law of nature guides individuals, there is no impartial judge to resolve disputes, no executive power to enforce the law, and no clear mechanism for collective defense against external threats. These deficiencies, Locke contends, make the enjoyment of natural rights insecure.

Therefore, individuals consent to give up certain natural freedoms—specifically, the power to execute the law of nature themselves—to a political community. This collective transfer of power is not an absolute surrender but a conditional one. The purpose of entering into this social contract is to secure the enjoyment of their life, liberty, and property more effectively. The government established through this contract derives its legitimacy from the consent of the governed, making it a government by agreement rather than by coercion or divine appointment.

The Purpose of Civil Government

The primary purpose of civil government, according to Locke, is the preservation of individuals' natural rights, especially their property. He posits that governments are established to remedy the inconveniences of the state of nature by providing an impartial judiciary, a consistent set of laws, and the power to enforce them. This ensures that justice is administered fairly and that individuals can live securely without fear of arbitrary interference.

Locke distinguishes between political society and other forms of association, such as families or master-servant relationships. Political society is defined by its supreme power, which is established to protect the property of all its members and to act for the public

good. This means that the government's authority is not absolute; it is bounded by the very rights it is established to protect. If a government fails to uphold these fundamental duties, it risks losing its legitimacy.

The Limits of Political Power

A cornerstone of Locke's Second Treatise is his assertion that political power is limited. Unlike absolute monarchs who claimed unchecked authority, Locke advocated for a government that operates within clear boundaries. The supreme power in any commonwealth resides in the legislative power, which is the supreme power of the commonwealth. However, even this legislative power is not arbitrary.

Locke outlines several key limitations on governmental power:

- Governments cannot rule by arbitrary, sporadic decrees. They must govern by promulgated, established laws, not temporary, extemporary ones.
- These laws must be designed for the good of the people.
- The supreme power cannot take from any man any part of his property without his own consent.
- The legislative, or supreme executive power of any commonwealth, cannot assume to itself power to rule by extemporary, unknown laws, but is bound to dispense justice, and decide the rights of the subject by promulgated standing laws, and known authorized judges.

These limitations ensure that the government remains a servant of the people, tasked with protecting their rights and promoting their welfare, rather than an master ruling over them. The concept of consent, both explicit and tacit, plays a vital role in maintaining these boundaries.

The Right of Revolution

Perhaps the most radical and influential aspect of Locke's Second Treatise is his justification for the right of revolution. He argues that when a government acts contrary to its trust and seeks to enslave or destroy its people, it breaks the social contract. In such circumstances, the people are not bound to obey and have the right to resist and overthrow that government. This is not a call for anarchy but a last resort when all other avenues for redress have been exhausted.

Locke distinguishes between the "dissolution of the government" and the "dissolution of the society." The former occurs when the government is overthrown or ceases to function according to its design, while the latter involves the breakdown of the bonds of community

itself. He emphasizes that the people are the ultimate sovereign, and if the government acts as an enemy to them, it forfeits its authority. This right of revolution serves as a crucial check on potential tyranny, ensuring that power ultimately rests with the people.

The Legacy of Locke's Second Treatise

The impact of John Locke's Second Treatise of Civil Government on political thought and practice is undeniable and far-reaching. Its articulation of natural rights, the social contract, and the limits of government provided the intellectual bedrock for revolutions and constitutional governments across the globe. The ideas presented in the treatise directly inspired the American Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution, shaping the principles of individual liberty and limited government that continue to be cherished.

Furthermore, Locke's emphasis on the consent of the governed and the right to resist oppression laid the groundwork for democratic movements and the development of liberal political theory. While some aspects of his philosophy have been debated and refined over centuries, the core tenets of the Second Treatise remain vital for understanding the foundations of modern political systems and the ongoing struggle for freedom and justice. The treatise continues to be a critical text for students of philosophy, political science, and law, offering profound insights into the nature of authority and the rights of individuals.

FAQ

Q: What is the primary focus of John Locke's Second Treatise of Civil Government?

A: The primary focus of John Locke's Second Treatise of Civil Government is to establish the legitimacy of political authority based on the consent of the governed, arguing that governments are formed through a social contract to protect natural rights, and that citizens have the right to resist tyrannical rule.

Q: What are the three natural rights Locke discusses in the Second Treatise?

A: The three natural rights that John Locke discusses in the Second Treatise are life, liberty, and property.

Q: How does Locke define the "state of nature"?

A: Locke defines the "state of nature" as a condition of perfect freedom and equality, governed by the law of nature, where individuals possess inherent rights even before the establishment of civil government.

Q: What is the role of the social contract in Locke's political theory?

A: The social contract, according to Locke, is a voluntary agreement among individuals to leave the state of nature and form a civil society, surrendering certain powers to a government in exchange for the protection of their natural rights.

Q: According to Locke, when do citizens have the right to revolution?

A: Locke argues that citizens have the right to revolution when the government acts contrary to its trust, infringes upon their natural rights, or attempts to enslave or destroy them, effectively breaking the social contract.

Q: What are the main limitations Locke places on political power?

A: Locke places limitations on political power by asserting that governments must rule by established laws, govern for the good of the people, cannot take property without consent, and must act through known judges and promulgated laws.

Q: How did Locke's ideas in the Second Treatise influence later political movements?

A: Locke's ideas in the Second Treatise profoundly influenced later political movements, most notably the American Revolution and the drafting of the Declaration of Independence, by providing a philosophical basis for individual rights, limited government, and the right to self-governance.

Q: What is Locke's view on property rights?

A: Locke's view on property rights is that they are natural rights derived from the labor an individual mixes with natural resources. By applying one's labor, one transforms common goods into private property, which the government is obligated to protect.

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