

john locke the second treatise of government

john locke the second treatise of government stands as a monumental work in political philosophy, profoundly shaping Western thought and influencing revolutions across the globe. This seminal text, part of his larger "Two Treatises of Government," meticulously outlines Locke's theories on natural law, individual rights, and the legitimate basis of political authority. It delves into the concept of the state of nature, the social contract, and the fundamental principles that justify civil society and government. By examining Locke's arguments, we gain insight into the enduring ideas of liberty, property, and the consent of the governed that continue to resonate in contemporary political discourse. This comprehensive article will explore the core tenets of John Locke's "Second Treatise," its historical context, and its lasting impact on political theory.

Table of Contents

The State of Nature and Natural Law

The Law of Nature

Property Rights in the State of Nature

The Social Contract and the Formation of Government

The Purpose of Government

The Right to Revolution

Locke's Influence and Legacy

The State of Nature and Natural Law

Central to John Locke's "Second Treatise of Government" is the concept of the state of nature, a hypothetical condition preceding the establishment of civil society. Unlike the grim, war-like state envisioned by Thomas Hobbes, Locke's state of nature is governed by natural law, a rational and moral order inherent in humanity. This natural law dictates that all individuals are born free and equal, possessing inherent rights that predate any government. Locke argues that in this state, individuals are subject to the dictates of their own reason, which teaches that, being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions. This fundamental equality and freedom are the bedrock upon which his entire political philosophy is built.

The Law of Nature

The law of nature, according to Locke, is discoverable by reason and serves as a moral compass guiding human conduct even in the absence of a sovereign power. This law dictates that individuals have a duty to

preserve themselves and the rest of mankind, as long as it does not conflict with the preservation of their own life. It is God-given and universally binding, accessible to all rational beings. This inherent moral framework means that the state of nature is not a lawless free-for-all, but rather a condition where individuals are responsible for upholding justice and punishing transgressors against natural law.

Property Rights in the State of Nature

One of Locke's most significant contributions in the "Second Treatise" is his theory of property. He posits that individuals acquire property rights by mixing their labor with the natural resources available. For instance, when a person picks an apple from a tree or cultivates a piece of land, they are transforming a common resource into their own through their exertion. This labor imbues the object with value and establishes a claim of ownership. Locke argues that these property rights are natural and precede government; indeed, a primary function of government is to protect these pre-existing rights. However, he also introduces limitations, suggesting that one should only take what they can use and leave enough for others, a principle that becomes more complex with the introduction of money.

The Social Contract and the Formation of Government

While the state of nature possesses a natural law, it also presents inconveniences, primarily the lack of an established, known law, an indifferent judge, and the power to execute the law. These deficiencies make the enjoyment of natural rights insecure. To remedy this, individuals voluntarily enter into a social contract, surrendering certain rights to a common authority in exchange for the protection of their remaining rights. This consent is the fundamental basis of legitimate government. Locke emphasizes that this is a voluntary act; individuals do not surrender all their freedoms but rather delegate specific powers to the government.

The Purpose of Government

The ultimate purpose of government, for Locke, is the preservation of property, which he broadly defines to include life, liberty, and estate. Government is established to create a stable and predictable environment where individuals can live without fear of arbitrary interference. It is not meant to serve the interests of a ruler or a select few, but rather to act as a trustee for the people, safeguarding their natural rights. When government fails in this fundamental duty, it forfeits its legitimacy.

The Right to Revolution

Perhaps the most radical and influential aspect of the "Second Treatise" is Locke's articulation of the right to revolution. He argues that if a government acts contrary to the trust placed in it, becoming tyrannical and infringing upon the natural rights it was created to protect, the people have the right to resist and overthrow it. This is not a call for anarchy but a last resort when all other avenues for redress have been exhausted. The people retain supreme power, and if the government acts against their fundamental interests, the authority reverts back to them. This principle profoundly influenced revolutionary movements, most notably the American Revolution.

Locke's Influence and Legacy

The impact of John Locke's "Second Treatise of Government" on political thought and practice is immeasurable. His ideas on natural rights, the social contract, consent of the governed, and the right to revolution formed the intellectual scaffolding for Enlightenment political philosophy. Thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Montesquieu, as well as the American Founding Fathers, were deeply indebted to Locke's work. The Declaration of Independence, with its emphasis on unalienable rights and the right of the people to alter or abolish a destructive government, directly echoes Locke's arguments. Even today, debates about limited government, individual liberties, and the legitimacy of political authority often draw upon the foundational principles laid out in this enduring text. The continuous examination of Locke's "Second Treatise" remains crucial for understanding the development of liberal democracy and the ongoing struggle for human freedom.

FAQ

Q: What is the primary difference between Locke's state of nature and Hobbes' state of nature?

A: The primary difference lies in their characterization of human nature and the presence of natural law. Hobbes viewed the state of nature as a "war of all against all," driven by self-interest and fear, where life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." In contrast, Locke believed the state of nature is governed by natural law, which dictates reason and morality, leading to a condition of natural freedom and equality where individuals possess inherent rights and are capable of cooperation.

Q: How does Locke justify the acquisition of private property in the state of nature?

A: Locke justifies private property acquisition through the concept of labor. He argues that when an individual mixes their labor with a natural resource that was previously unowned (like land or fruit), they transform it and make it their own. This act of labor establishes a natural right to that property, provided there is "enough, and as good left in common for others."

Q: According to Locke, what is the main reason individuals leave the state of nature to form a civil society?

A: Individuals leave the state of nature to form a civil society primarily to remedy the inconveniences that make the enjoyment of their natural rights insecure. These inconveniences include the lack of a settled, known law, the absence of an indifferent judge to settle disputes, and the lack of a power to enforce the law.

Q: What is the role of consent in Locke's theory of government?

A: Consent is the absolute foundation of legitimate government in Locke's philosophy. He argues that individuals voluntarily agree to enter into a social contract, thereby giving their consent to be governed. This consent can be explicit or tacit, but it is essential for establishing the authority of the government and binding individuals to its laws.

Q: Under what circumstances does Locke argue that the people have a right to revolution?

A: Locke argues that the people have a right to revolution when the government acts contrary to the trust placed in it, becoming tyrannical and systematically infringing upon the natural rights of its citizens. This occurs when the legislature or the executive power exceeds its authority, dissolves the government, or fails to protect the lives, liberties, and properties of the people.

Q: How does Locke define "liberty" in the context of his political philosophy?

A: Locke defines liberty not as a freedom to do whatever one pleases, but as freedom from arbitrary power and the license to do whatever is not prohibited by the law. In the state of nature, liberty is governed by the law of nature, and in civil society, it is governed by laws established by consent, ensuring that individuals are free from the will of another person.

Q: What does Locke mean by "tyranny" and how does it relate to the right of revolution?

A: Locke defines tyranny as the exercise of power beyond right, which no one can have a right to. It occurs when a ruler, having authority, uses it not for the good of the people but for his own private advantage. Tyranny is the perversion of government, and when it becomes a systematic and overt abuse of power, it justifies the people's right to resist and overthrow the tyrannical ruler.

Q: How has John Locke's "Second Treatise of Government" influenced modern democratic thought and institutions?

A: Locke's "Second Treatise" has profoundly influenced modern democratic thought by establishing core principles such as natural rights, the social contract, popular sovereignty, and the right to revolution. These ideas provided the intellectual framework for the Enlightenment, the American and French Revolutions, and the development of constitutionalism and representative democracy worldwide. His emphasis on limited government and the protection of individual liberties remains a cornerstone of contemporary liberal political systems.

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