

john locke treatise of government

John Locke's *Treatise of Government* represents a foundational text in Western political philosophy, profoundly influencing the development of liberal democracies. This seminal work, specifically his "Two Treatises of Government," dissects the nature of political authority, the rights of individuals, and the legitimate basis for governmental power. By exploring Locke's theories on the state of nature, natural law, and the social contract, we can gain a deeper understanding of the principles that underpin modern governance. This article will delve into the core arguments of the John Locke *Treatise of Government*, examining its historical context, its key philosophical concepts, and its enduring legacy on political thought and practice. We will unpack his arguments against divine right monarchy and his articulation of individual liberties, offering a comprehensive exploration of this pivotal work.

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Historical Context of the *Treatise*

John Locke penned his "Two Treatises of Government" during a period of immense political upheaval in England, specifically in response to the Exclusion Crisis and the Glorious Revolution of 1688. The prevailing political climate was dominated by debates surrounding the succession to the throne and the extent of royal prerogative. Locke's work was a direct refutation of Sir Robert Filmer's "Patriarcha," which defended the divine right of kings and patriarchal absolutism. Understanding this immediate context is crucial to grasping the revolutionary nature of Locke's ideas for his time and how they challenged established notions of sovereignty.

The Glorious Revolution saw the deposition of James II and the ascension of William and Mary, an event that Locke implicitly or explicitly supported through his writings. His *treatise* offered a philosophical justification for this transfer of power, arguing that government legitimacy derives not from divine appointment but from the consent of the governed. This shift in perspective was radical, moving away from the idea of an absolute monarch ruling by God's grace towards a model of government accountable to its people and bound by fundamental laws. The intellectual currents of the English Enlightenment also played a significant role, fostering an environment ripe for questioning traditional authority.

The State of Nature and Natural Law

Central to John Locke's philosophy in the "Treatise of Government" is his conception of the state of nature. Unlike Thomas Hobbes, who viewed the state of nature as a "war of all against all," Locke presents a more optimistic, albeit imperfect, condition. In this pre-political state, individuals are governed by natural law and possess inherent rights. Locke argued that individuals are born free and equal, without subordination or subjection to any other person. This initial premise lays the groundwork for his theory of natural rights and the social contract.

Locke's state of nature is not a lawless void. Instead, it is governed by the "law of nature," which reason, discoverable by all mankind. This law dictates that no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions. It is a moral code inherent in the universe, accessible through human intellect, and serves as the foundation upon which his political philosophy is built. Even without formal government, individuals are bound by moral obligations to respect each other's fundamental rights.

The Law of Nature

The law of nature, as articulated by Locke, is divinely ordained and accessible through reason. It dictates that all individuals are the property of God and thus possess an intrinsic value and a right to self-preservation. This law is not a set of arbitrary rules but a rational framework that guides human conduct, ensuring a degree of order even in the absence of a civil society. Locke believed that this law is binding on everyone, regardless of their social status or political affiliation.

This divine origin of the law of nature imbues it with authority. It means that individuals have a duty to obey it, not just for pragmatic reasons but because it reflects a higher moral order. When individuals violate the law of nature, they forfeit their claim to live by its provisions, and others have the right to punish them, albeit proportionally to the offense. This enforcement mechanism within the state of nature is a critical aspect of Locke's argument, highlighting the inherent limitations of a purely natural condition.

Natural Rights of Man

From the law of nature, Locke derives fundamental natural rights that are inalienable and inherent to every individual. These rights pre-exist any form of government and cannot be legitimately taken away by any earthly power. The most prominent of these rights include life, liberty, and property. Locke argued that these rights are not granted by governments but are possessed by individuals by virtue of their humanity.

The right to liberty means that individuals are free to act as they see fit, provided they do not violate the law of nature. The right to property is particularly significant in Locke's philosophy, as he sees it as a fundamental extension of an individual's labor and effort. These natural rights form the bedrock

of his theory of government, as the primary purpose of establishing a civil society is to protect and preserve them.

The Purpose of Government

According to John Locke, the primary purpose of government is the preservation of natural rights, particularly the right to property. Individuals enter into a social contract and surrender certain freedoms to form a civil society and establish a government to escape the inconveniences and potential injustices of the state of nature. The state of nature, while possessing natural law, lacks an established, known law, an indifferent judge, and the power to enforce judgments, making the enjoyment of rights precarious.

Government is thus created to provide a stable framework for the protection of life, liberty, and property. It acts as an impartial arbiter in disputes and possesses the legitimate authority to enforce laws. This benevolent purpose distinguishes Locke's view from more authoritarian political theories, emphasizing that power is entrusted to the government for the benefit of the people, not for the ruler's personal gain or arbitrary control.

Property Rights

Locke's theory of property is inextricably linked to his concept of natural rights and the social contract. He famously argued that individuals acquire property rights by mixing their labor with natural resources. When a person applies their labor to something that is in common, they transform it, making it their own. This act of labor is what separates it from the common stock and vests ownership in the individual.

This labor theory of property is a cornerstone of Locke's argument for individual autonomy and economic liberty. It suggests that individuals have a natural right to the fruits of their labor and that government's role is to protect this right. The accumulation of property, within the bounds of natural law, is therefore seen as a natural and legitimate outcome of human industry. This emphasis on property rights has had a profound impact on capitalist and liberal economic thought.

The Dissolution of Government

Locke's "Treatise of Government" also addresses the circumstances under which a government can be legitimately dissolved. He argues that government is a trust placed in the hands of rulers by the people, and this trust can be broken. When the government acts contrary to its purpose and violates the natural rights of the people, or if it exceeds the power entrusted to it, the people have the right to resist and overthrow it.

This concept of the dissolution of government is not a call for anarchy but a recognition of the ultimate sovereignty of the people. Locke distinguishes between the dissolution of government and the dissolution of society. While government can be dissolved, the society and its natural rights remain. He outlines various ways in which government can be dissolved, including external force or internal usurpation, but the most critical form of dissolution is when the legislative power is altered without the people's consent.

The Right to Revolution

The "right to revolution" is arguably the most famous and influential aspect of Locke's "Two Treatises of Government." He contended that when a government becomes tyrannical and systematically violates the natural rights of its citizens, the people are not only justified but also obligated to resist and establish a new government. This right is a safeguard against arbitrary rule and ensures that political power remains ultimately accountable to the governed.

This right is not to be exercised lightly but as a last resort when all other means of redress have been exhausted. Locke emphasizes that the people retain the supreme power to remove or alter the legislative, whenever they shall find that it acts contrary to the trust placed in them. This doctrine has been a powerful inspiration for revolutions and movements for self-determination throughout history, most notably influencing the American Declaration of Independence.

Legacy and Influence of Locke's Treatise

The impact of John Locke's "Two Treatises of Government" on Western political thought and practice is immeasurable. It provided the philosophical underpinnings for the Enlightenment, shaping the ideals of liberty, individual rights, and limited government. The treatise directly influenced the American Revolution, with Thomas Jefferson drawing heavily on Locke's ideas when drafting the Declaration of Independence. His concept of natural rights and the social contract became foundational principles for many democratic constitutions around the world.

Furthermore, Locke's emphasis on the separation of powers and the consent of the governed laid the groundwork for modern representative democracy. His ideas continue to be debated and applied in contemporary discussions about governance, individual freedoms, and the balance between state authority and personal liberty. The John Locke Treatise of Government remains a vital text for understanding the philosophical origins of liberal political systems and the enduring struggle for human rights and self-governance.

FAQ: John Locke Treatise of Government

Q: What is the main argument of John Locke's "Two Treatises of Government"?

A: The main argument of John Locke's "Two Treatises of Government" is that legitimate political authority derives from the consent of the governed, not from divine right. He asserts that individuals possess natural rights to life, liberty, and property, and that governments are established to protect these rights. When a government fails to do so or acts tyrannically, the people have the right to resist and alter it.

Q: How did Locke's concept of the state of nature differ from Hobbes'?

A: John Locke viewed the state of nature as a condition governed by natural law, where individuals are free and equal, possessing natural rights. In contrast, Thomas Hobbes described the state of nature as a "war of all against all," a chaotic and brutal existence where life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

Q: What are the "natural rights" that Locke believed individuals possess?

A: John Locke identified the primary natural rights as life, liberty, and property. He argued that these rights are inherent to individuals by virtue of their humanity and pre-exist any form of government.

Q: What is the purpose of government according to Locke?

A: According to Locke, the primary purpose of government is the preservation of individuals' natural rights, particularly the right to property. Governments are formed through a social contract to provide a stable and impartial system for protecting these rights and resolving disputes, thereby escaping the inconveniences of the state of nature.

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

A: Locke argued that the people have a right to revolution when the government becomes tyrannical, systematically violates their natural rights, or acts contrary to the trust placed in it by the governed. This right is a last resort when all other means of redress have been exhausted.

Q: How did Locke justify the right to property?

A: Locke justified the right to property through his labor theory. He contended that individuals acquire property by mixing their labor with natural resources, thereby transforming them and making them their own. This act of labor is what distinguishes private property from common goods.

Q: What was the significance of the Glorious Revolution in relation to Locke's treatise?

A: John Locke's "Two Treatises of Government" was written in the context of the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and served as a philosophical justification for it. The treatise provided a theoretical basis for the deposition of James II and the establishment of a government based on the consent of the governed and the protection of individual rights.

Q: How did Locke's ideas influence the founding of the United States?

A: Locke's ideas profoundly influenced the founding of the United States. Concepts such as natural rights, the social contract, and the right to revolution are evident in the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution, shaping the principles of American democracy and governance.

Q: What does Locke mean by the "dissolution of government"?

A: The "dissolution of government," as described by Locke, refers to the breakdown of legitimate political authority. This can occur when the government oversteps its bounds, acts tyrannically, or is overthrown by external force. Importantly, Locke distinguished this from the dissolution of society, which remains even when government fails.

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