

john locke two treatises on government

John Locke's Two Treatises of Government stands as a foundational text in Western political philosophy, offering a profound exploration of the origins and legitimacy of government. This seminal work, deeply influential on democratic thought and revolutionary movements, lays out Locke's theories on natural rights, the social contract, and the limits of political authority. Understanding the core arguments within these two treatises is crucial for grasping the evolution of ideas about individual liberty and the role of the state. This article delves into the historical context, key concepts, and enduring legacy of John Locke's Two Treatises on Government, examining its profound impact on constitutionalism and the very notion of governance in the modern world.

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The Historical Context of Two Treatises on Government

Published anonymously in 1689, John Locke's Two Treatises of Government emerged during a period of immense political upheaval in England. The Glorious Revolution of 1688, which saw the deposition of King James II and the accession of William and Mary, provided the immediate backdrop and justification for Locke's arguments. Locke was deeply involved with prominent Whig figures, and the treatises were widely understood as a defense of the revolution and a refutation of the absolutist principles that had led to it. The prevailing political climate was marked by intense debate between proponents of divine right monarchy, who asserted that kings ruled by God's mandate and were accountable only to Him, and those who favored a more limited, constitutional form of government.

The earlier part of the 17th century had seen the reign of Charles I, his conflict with Parliament, and the English Civil War, followed by the Commonwealth and Protectorate under Oliver Cromwell, and then the Restoration of the monarchy. These events created a deep-seated skepticism about unchecked royal power. Locke's work can be seen as a philosophical culmination of these historical struggles, attempting to provide a rational and principled foundation for a government that was both stable and protective of individual liberties. The anonymity of the publication highlights the dangerous political climate and the potential repercussions for challenging established doctrines of royal authority.

First Treatise: Refuting Divine Right Monarchy

The First Treatise of Government is almost entirely dedicated to a systematic dismantling of Sir

Robert Filmer's Patriarcha. Filmer, in his work, argued that legitimate political authority derived from Adam's patriarchal power, granted by God, and passed down through a continuous line of male succession. Locke meticulously dissects Filmer's genealogical arguments, demonstrating their historical inaccuracies and logical inconsistencies. He challenges the very premise of hereditary, absolute dominion, arguing that there is no scriptural or rational basis for such a claim to power.

Locke contends that Filmer's theory of patriarchalism leads to an untenable position where no one can definitively establish their right to rule, thus rendering political authority inherently unstable. Furthermore, Locke rejects the idea that power can be legitimately inherited in the same way that property can be. He emphasizes that political power is distinct from paternal power or the ownership of land and that its justification must rest on different grounds. The First Treatise serves as a crucial, albeit less widely read, precursor to the more impactful Second Treatise, by clearing the ground of the primary philosophical obstacle to Locke's own theory of government.

Second Treatise: The Foundation of Civil Government

The Second Treatise of Government is where Locke lays out his positive theory of political authority, outlining the principles of natural law, the state of nature, the social contract, and the rights and responsibilities of both government and the governed. Locke posits that all individuals are born into a state of nature, governed by the law of nature, which dictates that no one ought to harm another in their life, health, liberty, or possessions. In this state, individuals possess inherent natural rights.

Locke argues that the state of nature is not necessarily a state of war, as Thomas Hobbes famously posited, but rather a state of perfect freedom and equality. However, due to the inconveniences of individuals being judges in their own cases and the lack of a common authority to enforce the law of nature, people voluntarily enter into a social contract to form civil society and establish a government. This government's primary purpose is to protect the natural rights of its citizens, particularly the right to life, liberty, and property. The consent of the governed is paramount, forming the legitimate basis for any government's authority.

Key Concepts in John Locke's Political Philosophy

Locke's political philosophy, as expounded in the Two Treatises, is built upon several interconnected and revolutionary concepts. These ideas have profoundly shaped modern conceptions of governance, individual freedom, and the structure of democratic states. The emphasis on reason and natural law as the foundation for political order marked a significant departure from earlier theories.

Natural Rights and the State of Nature

Central to Locke's thesis is the concept of natural rights, which are inherent and inalienable, existing prior to any government. These rights include the right to life, liberty, and property. Locke's understanding of the state of nature is a condition of perfect freedom and equality, where individuals are governed by the law of nature, which is discoverable by reason. This law dictates that all individuals, being equal and independent, ought not to harm another in their life, health, liberty, or possessions. While not a state of license, the state of nature lacks the established laws, impartial judges, and executive power necessary for the secure enjoyment of rights.

The Social Contract and Consent of the Governed

Locke argues that individuals leave the state of nature and enter into civil society through a social contract. This contract is a voluntary agreement among individuals to give up certain freedoms and the power to enforce the law of nature themselves, in exchange for the protection of their remaining rights by a common authority. Crucially, this authority is established through the consent of the governed. Locke distinguishes between the initial consent to enter society and the ongoing consent required for the government to remain legitimate. Without the consent of the people, government loses its moral and legal standing.

Property Rights and Economic Liberty

Locke's theory of property is intricately woven into his broader political philosophy. He argues that individuals acquire property rights by mixing their labor with natural resources. For instance, when someone cultivates land or gathers fruit, they are transforming it with their labor and thus making it their own. This right to property is seen as a natural right, protected by the law of nature and subsequently by civil government. Locke believed that the preservation of property was one of the principal ends for which men enter into society. This emphasis on private property and economic freedom became a cornerstone of liberal economic thought.

The Right to Revolution and Limited Government

A pivotal aspect of Locke's Second Treatise is his justification for the right to revolution. When a government becomes tyrannical, systematically violating the natural rights of its citizens and acting contrary to the trust placed in it, the people have the right to resist and overthrow that government. This right is not a call for constant rebellion but a last resort against oppressive rule. Locke argues that political power is a trust, and if that trust is broken, the people are absolved of their obedience. This principle underscores Locke's commitment to limited government, where power is not absolute but is constrained by the rights and liberties of the populace.

The Enduring Legacy of Two Treatises on Government

The influence of John Locke's Two Treatises of Government extends far beyond the political landscape of 17th-century England. Its profound insights into natural rights, the social contract, and the principles of limited government have resonated through centuries, shaping the trajectory of political thought and practice across the globe. The work provided a powerful intellectual framework for challenging arbitrary power and advocating for governance based on popular consent and the protection of individual freedoms.

Impact on American Revolution and Constitutionalism

Perhaps the most significant practical impact of Locke's Two Treatises can be seen in its direct influence on the American Revolution and the subsequent formation of the United States. The Declaration of Independence, with its eloquent articulation of unalienable rights—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—is a clear testament to Lockean philosophy. The Founding Fathers of the United States drew heavily upon Locke's ideas when drafting the Constitution and the Bill of Rights,

embedding principles of limited government, separation of powers, and the protection of individual liberties into the fabric of American governance. Locke's theories provided the philosophical bedrock for the idea of a government derived from the consent of the governed.

Influence on Modern Political Thought

Beyond the American context, Locke's ideas have been instrumental in the development of liberal democracy worldwide. His emphasis on natural rights, the rule of law, and the right to revolution has inspired movements for freedom and self-determination. The concept of a government accountable to its people, rather than ruling by divine right or brute force, is a direct legacy of Locke's work. Modern constitutional frameworks, human rights declarations, and debates about individual liberty and governmental authority continue to grapple with and build upon the foundational principles laid out in John Locke's Two Treatises on Government.

FAQ

Q: What is the primary purpose of John Locke's Two Treatises on Government?

A: The primary purpose of John Locke's Two Treatises on Government is to justify the Glorious Revolution of 1688 by refuting the divine right of kings and establishing a foundation for legitimate government based on natural rights, the social contract, and the consent of the governed.

Q: Who was Sir Robert Filmer and why did Locke dedicate the First Treatise to refuting him?

A: Sir Robert Filmer was an English political theorist who argued for the divine right of kings in his work "Patriarcha," asserting that all political authority originated from Adam's patriarchal power passed down through hereditary succession. Locke dedicated the First Treatise to refuting Filmer to dismantle the primary philosophical justification for absolute monarchy before presenting his own theory of government.

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

A: In the Second Treatise, John Locke identifies three fundamental natural rights: the right to life, the right to liberty, and the right to property. These rights are considered inherent and inalienable, existing prior to the establishment of any government.

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, which dictates that no one ought to harm another in their life, health, liberty, or

possessions. It is a state where individuals possess natural rights but lack established laws and an impartial authority to enforce them.

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 by individuals to leave the state of nature and form civil society and government. They consent to give up certain powers, such as the right to personally enforce the law of nature, in exchange for the protection of their remaining natural rights by a common authority.

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 a government becomes tyrannical, consistently violates the natural rights of its citizens, and acts against the trust placed in it. This right is a last resort against oppressive rule, where the government has broken the social contract.

Q: How did John Locke's Two Treatises on Government influence the American Revolution?

A: John Locke's Two Treatises on Government profoundly influenced the American Revolution by providing the philosophical justification for independence. Concepts like natural rights, the consent of the governed, and the right to alter or abolish oppressive governments were central to the rhetoric and ideology of the revolution, as seen in the Declaration of Independence.

Q: What is Locke's view on the right to property?

A: Locke views the right to property as a natural right that individuals acquire by mixing their labor with natural resources. He believed that the preservation of property was one of the primary reasons individuals form civil societies and establish governments.

Q: Is Locke's concept of government one of absolute power?

A: No, Locke's concept of government is one of limited power. He argues that government authority is derived from the consent of the governed and is constrained by the natural rights of individuals. The government's primary duty is to protect these rights, and its power is not absolute.

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