



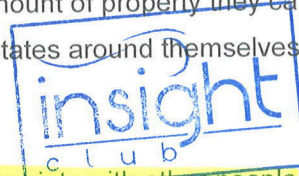
LOCKE'S SECOND TREATISE ON CIVIL GOVERNMENT.



John Locke

Brief Summary

The *Second Treatise of Government* places sovereignty into the hands of the people. Locke's fundamental argument is that people are equal and invested with natural rights in a state of nature in which they live free from outside rule. In the state of nature, natural law governs behavior, and each person has license to execute that law against someone who wrongs them by infringing on their rights. People take what they need from the earth, but hoard just enough to cover their needs. Eventually, people begin to trade their excess goods with each other, until they develop a common currency for barter, or money. Money eliminates limits on the amount of property they can obtain (unlike food, money does not spoil), and they begin to gather estates around themselves and their families.



People then exchange some of their natural rights to enter into society with other people, and be protected by common laws and a common executive power to enforce the laws. People need executive power to protect their property and defend their liberty. The civil state is beholden to the people, and has power over the people only insofar as it exists to protect and preserve their welfare. Locke describes a state with a separate judicial, legislative, and executive branch--the legislative branch being the most important of the three, since it determines the laws that govern civil society.

People have the right to dissolve their government, if that government ceases to work solely in their best interest. The government has no sovereignty of its own--it exists to serve the people.

To sum up, Locke's model consists of a civil state, built upon the natural rights common to a people who need and welcome an executive power to protect their property and liberties; the government exists for the people's benefit and can be replaced or overthrown if it ceases to function toward that primary end.

Context

John Locke (1632-1704) is a predominant figure in the history of political theory and philosophy. His most extensive work, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), formalized empiricism, a branch of inquiry which focuses on the experience of the sense to gather knowledge, rather than speculation or intellectual deduction. Locke's concept of the *tabula rasa* the notion that people are born blank, with no knowledge or faults, remains a hugely influential philosophical concept. Much



Enlightenment philosophy is based on Locke's writings, particularly his adherence to rationality and his refutation of the importance of innate personal traits in favor of experience in shaping personality.

John Locke published his *Two Treatises of Government* anonymously in 1690. Two years earlier, in 1688, the very unpopular King James II had been ousted in favor of King William the III and his wife Queen Mary in the **Glorious Revolution**, with the help of a group of wealthy noblemen known as the Whigs. Locke, though not living in England at the time of the Glorious Revolution (which had some claim to its name, having been almost entirely bloodless and peaceful) had strong associations with the Whigs, and sought to justify the ascension of King William (in fact, the *Second Treatise* was written to justify resistance to king Charles II, but was published as a defense of William's Revolution). The *Treatises* were written with this specific aim--to defend the Glorious Revolution. Locke also sought to refute the pro-Absolutist theories of Sir Robert Filmer, which he and his Whig associates felt were getting far too popular. Although not as immediate a challenge, **Locke's work also serves as a major counter-argument to Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*, in which Hobbes argues in favor of absolutist government to keep people from abusing property and privacy.** Many persistent rifts in political theory today stem from the fundamental disagreements between Locke's *Second Treatise* and Hobbes' *Leviathan*.

The *Second Treatise of Government*, subtitled *An Essay Concerning the True Original Extent and End of Civil Government*, stands today as an extremely influential work that shaped political philosophy and provided a basis for later political doctrines, such as those set forth in the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution.



Overall Analysis

The *Second Treatise of Government* remains a cornerstone of Western political philosophy. **Locke's theory of government based on the sovereignty of the people** has been extraordinarily influential since its publication in 1690--the concept of the modern liberal-democratic state is rooted in Locke's writings.

Locke's *Second Treatise* starts with a liberal premise of a **community of free, equal individuals, all possessed of natural rights.** Since these individuals will want to acquire goods and will come into inevitable conflict, **Locke invokes a natural law of morality to govern them before they enter into society.** Locke presumes people will understand that, **in order to best protect themselves and their property, they must come together into some sort of body politic and agree to adhere to certain standards of behavior.** Thus, **they relinquish some of their natural rights to enter into a social compact.**



In this civil society, the people submit natural freedoms to the common laws of the society; in return, they receive the protection of the government. By coming together, the people create an executive power to enforce the laws and punish offenders. The people entrust these laws and the executive power with authority. When, either through an abuse of power or an impermissible change, these governing bodies cease to represent the people and instead represent either themselves or some foreign power, the people may--and indeed *should*--rebel against their government and replace it with one that will remember its trust. This is perhaps the most pressing concern of Locke's *Second Treatise*, given his motivation in writing the work (justifying opposition to Charles II) and publishing it (justifying the revolution of King William)--to explain the conditions in which a people has the right to replace one government with another.

Locke links his abstract ideals to a deductive theory of unlimited personal property wholly protected from governmental invention; in fact, in some cases Locke places the sanctity of property over the sanctity of life (since one can relinquish one's life by engaging in war, but cannot relinquish one's property, to which others might have ownership rights). This joining of ideas--consensual, limited government based upon natural human rights and dignity, and unlimited personal property, based on those same rights, makes the *Second Treatise* a perfectly-constructed argument against absolutism and unjust governments. It appeals both to abstract moral notions and to a more grounded view of the self-interest that leads people to form societies and governments.

