



The BIG Thinkers

Leaving Certificate Politics and Society



Key Concepts: Power and decision making; The role of the State; Rights and freedoms of individuals

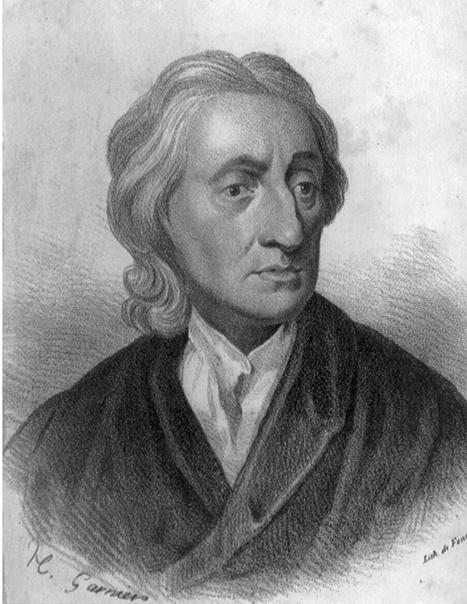


Influential Work: *Two Treatises of Government* (1680-1690)

Locke, John

John LOCKE

(1632 to 1704)



Locke in Context

Like Hobbes, John Locke is most certainly a product of his time. When studying his political philosophy, it's important to bear in mind the circumstances of his life. He was greatly influenced by Lord Shaftesbury, a prominent constitutional and liberal politician, whom he first worked for as a physician. When constitutionalism found itself challenged by arguments for the absolute power of monarchy in the late 17th century, Locke became more actively involved in politics.

Lord Shaftesbury, along with other leading constitutionalists, believed that Catholics (supported by their peers abroad) would attempt to take the throne of England following the childless King's death. To them, it was becoming increasingly apparent that the King had a power to raise taxes at his whim, thus interfering with their property. Locke believed that if a Catholic took the throne of England, then all the achievements of the English Civil War - placing limitation on the absolute power of the monarch - would be in vain. The threat was particularly potent as theorists like Sir Robert Filmer were setting about building a manifesto that justified absolutism. This, and the idea of an England once again under the absolute power of monarch, terrified Locke.

Locke was actively working on his seminal work *Two Treatises of Government* when he was suspected of involvement in a plot to assassinate King Charles II. Fearing for his life, he fled to the Netherlands. He did not return to England until The Glorious Revolution of 1688.

In short, when you read the work of Locke, be cognisant of a man in exile, in fear, and in terror of the absolute power of a monarch.

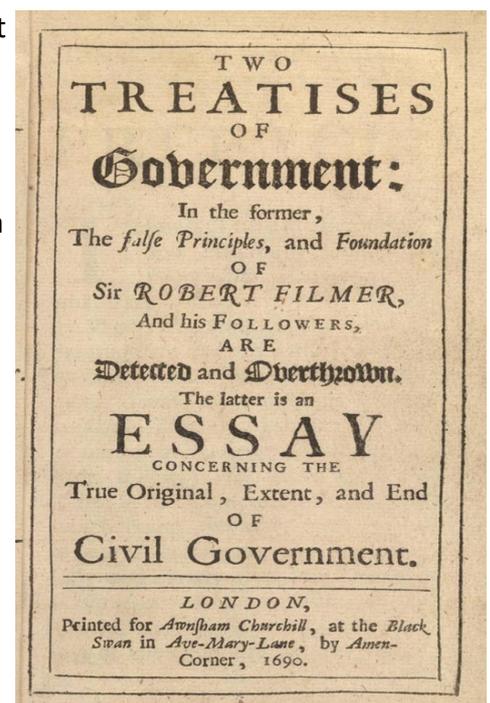
His View of the Human Person and the State of Nature

Locke's perception of the State of Nature and the human condition is not as bleak as that of Hobbes. For Locke, the human person is not a selfish individualist who will do anything to survive and prosper, but is a person bound by a **moral code** to do what is right, and natural.

Locke *does* concede to the idea of a state of nature, but for him, it isn't a problem to be overcome (Hobbes' view), but is created by God, and so should be embraced and made to function.

Locke's state of nature it is one of **perfect equality**, **perfect liberty**, and ruled by the **Law of Nature**.

The first of Locke's three tenets regarding the state of nature is **perfect equality**. Here, he attests that no one individual has the right to subordinate another, thus we are all truly equal. His second tenet is **perfect freedom**. Locke calls this the freedom to live through the laws of nature, thus only what was morally acceptable. Finally, his third tenet of the state of nature is called the **Law of Nature**.



Law of Nature

Hobbes believed that people will naturally seek peace in the state of nature, even by means of war. Locke, however, believes that the state of nature is created by God, and that no one has the right to harm another. Doing so, he argued, would amount to an affront to God.

Other than a duty to preserve mankind, Locke believed that it was a **law of nature not to harm another individual**. He also believed that a person had a **duty to help others, so long as they did not harm themselves in the process**, for doing so would be to damage God's creation.

However, Locke also believed that because we are **all equal in the state of nature**, then no one person can assume control over the others. Thus, if power is going to exist, then it needs to be a power that belongs to everyone.

In summary, Locke believed the state of nature was created by God, and that, accordingly, humans have an obligation to make it work. This differed greatly from Hobbes' belief that we must appoint a sovereign in order to attain peace. The next major difference is that Hobbes thought people should hand over their power to one individual in return for peace and prosperity. Challenging this, Locke felt that because God created all humans equally in the state of nature, then power must be divided equally.

Legitimate Commonwealth/Power

Locke believed that it was only when people renounced their rights under the law of nature, and banded together accordingly, that a true civil society manifested. He argued that when people do not have a public arbiter - a legislative - to appeal against the possible injustices of an absolute sovereign, then there exists an injustice. For him, the legislative, that someone or something that can hold the sovereign accountable for its actions, is a practical and moral necessity.

For political authority to manifest in Locke's interpretation, then it must go through two stages: Collective consent; and that a government is established **through trust**, not right. The body making the decision to form the government, the society, have the right to do so. In Locke's philosophy, the government is bereft of a right to power, serving only on its received trust of the society. Locke also espouses the imperative of **continuous consent**. If a person wishes to participate in a society, then consent of birth is not enough, they must continuously consent to being a subject of the commonwealth. If the government does not have the continuous support of the people, then it is illegitimate.

Ultimately, for Locke, legitimate power is '*Power plus right*'. Because an individual's power is limited by their own natural rights, then so too must the power of the government. **Locke's legitimate government can not be arbitrary, it must be formed of general laws and not individual**



'The liberty of man in society is to be under no other legislative power but that established by consent in the commonwealth, nor under the dominion of any will, or restraint of any law, but what the legislative shall enact, according to the trust put in it'.

John Locke

will, it can not appropriate the property of its citizens; and that it can not delegate powers to a proxy.

Property Rights

Property is a central tenet of Locke's political philosophy. A modern reader would be forgiven for immediately connoting goods and possessions with the term, but Locke's property is much more metaphysical. He argues that property is born out of the divine, and ultimately comes to mean one's own person, not goods and possessions. It's important to note that in the seventeenth century, the word property was more associated with philosophy than possessions.

When a person gathers and consumes material, they do so as it is their right. Thus, when we *'mix our labour'* with the products of nature, we establish **justified ownership** of the material. It is inexorably mixed with our person, so, in turn, it is fundamentally right to do so under the laws of nature. Just like governance, however, the **right to property is limited**. Locke argues that one's own appropriation of property can only be just as **long as it does not deprive others** who hold equal rights to property.

Civil Disobedience and Resistance

As noted above, legitimate governance was an ethical imperative for Locke. His *'political power'* was at odds with a number of other theorists at the time, most of whom, like himself, were rigorously and fervently engaged in a PR war not unlike the pamphlet battles preceding the Civil War. In order to counter *'paternal power'* the theory of Filmer, Locke set about justifying resistance and disobedience to unjust power.

He considered illegitimate power as follows: unlimited, despotic, autocratic power (i.e. the monarchy before the Civil War). He argued that any body claiming unlimited power denies the right and responsibility of power, and reneges upon the trust of the society. Thus, it was not just reasonable, but a philosophical imperative, to forcibly remove the body of unlimited power: *'liable to be destroyed by the injur'd person and the rest of mankind'*.

This didn't just apply to the *'domestic'* citizens of the autocrat's rule, but also to conquered peoples under their control. Here, he also underlined concepts of **the right to revolt** and a **just war**.

Revolution

Although he argued for the right to dissent, Locke once again enters the field of limitations. For him, limitations must be set to the practice of revolution. They are outlined as:

- A King is often sacred. So, whilst one may attack his officers, one may not physically attack the King.



'Whenever the legislators endeavour to take away or destroy the property of the people, or to reduce them to slavery under arbitrary power they put themselves into a state of war with the people, who are thereupon absolved from any further obedience, and are left to the common refuge, which God hath provided for all men against force and violence: resistance'.

John Locke

- One must always seek legal recourse before succumbing to armed resistance.
- No one act of illegality or arbitrary power may justify revolution. It must manifest from a *'long Train of Actings'* - a proven track record of injustice.

Revolution then is justified under three criteria:

- When the government's action are not legal, and no legal recourse is available to the aggrieved
- When the government's action are not in harmony with the general will/general good
- When the government no longer enjoys the consent of the people

In Summary

- Locke's writings cannot be separated from his own personal context
- He believed people were bound by a moral code to do what was right
- Power and rights were ultimately divine, so people had a duty to make them work in the most moral manner
- Power is 'Power plus Right' and must come from the people
- He argued an inalienable right to property, limited only by the rights of others
- Locke believes in a right to revolt when power is abused by the government
- Revolution is limited by the pursuit of legal recourse

Material Consulted

Hampsher-Monk, Iain. (2012) *A History of Modern Political Thought: Major Thinkers from Hobbes to Marx*. Victoria. Blackwell Publishing.

Wolff, Jonathan. (1996) *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*. New York. Oxford University Press.



'For having quitted Reason, which God hath given to be the Rule betwixt Man and Man, and the common bond whereby humane kind is united into one fellowship and societie; and having renounced the way of peace, which that teaches, and made use of the Force of War to compass his unjust ends upon an other, where he has no right, and so revolting from his own kind to that of Beasts by making Force which is theirs, to be his rule of right, he renders himself liable to be destroyed by the injur'd person and the rest of mankind, that will joyn with him in the execution of Justice, as any other wild beast, or noxious brute with whom Mankind can have neither Society nor Security'.

John Locke