

john locke two treaties of government

john locke two treaties of government stands as a cornerstone of Western political thought, profoundly shaping ideas about individual rights, legitimate governance, and the very nature of society. This seminal work, published anonymously in 1689, remains a vital resource for understanding the foundations of constitutionalism and the philosophical underpinnings of liberal democracies. The Two Treatises offer a compelling defense of natural rights, challenge the divine right of kings, and articulate a vision of government based on consent. This article will delve into the core arguments of Locke's masterpiece, exploring its historical context, key concepts, and enduring legacy. We will examine the arguments presented in the First Treatise, its critique of Sir Robert Filmer's patriarchalism, and the more influential Second Treatise, which lays out Locke's theory of natural law, the state of nature, and the social contract.

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Understanding John Locke's Two Treatises of Government

John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* is a foundational text in political philosophy, offering a potent critique of absolute monarchy and articulating a powerful defense of individual rights and limited government. Published in the wake of the Glorious Revolution, the work provided a philosophical justification for the overthrow of King James II and the establishment of a constitutional monarchy. Locke meticulously dismantles the arguments for the divine right of kings and constructs a compelling case for a government founded on the consent of the governed, rooted in natural law and the preservation of natural rights. This comprehensive analysis will explore the intricate arguments presented in both treatises, shedding light on Locke's enduring contributions to democratic theory and the concept of individual liberty.

The First Treatise: Refuting Sir Robert Filmer's Patriarchalism

The First Treatise of John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* is primarily dedicated to a detailed refutation of Sir Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha*. Filmer, an ardent supporter of divine right absolutism, argued that all political authority derived from Adam, the first man, who was granted absolute dominion by God. According to Filmer's patriarchal theory, this authority was passed down through generations, establishing a direct, God-given lineage of monarchs who possessed absolute power over their subjects.

The Divine Right of Kings and Patriarchalism

Filmer's core argument was that kings were the direct heirs of Adam and, as such, held a paternal power over their kingdoms. This power was absolute and unquestionable, mirroring the authority of a father over his children. He

contended that there was no recourse against the monarch's will, as their authority was divinely ordained. This perspective legitimized absolute monarchy by grounding it in a seemingly irrefutable theological and genealogical claim.

Locke's Rebuttal of Filmer's Arguments

Locke systematically dismantled Filmer's claims by first challenging the very premise of Adam's absolute dominion. He questioned whether God had indeed granted such absolute power to Adam, and even if he had, whether this power was inheritable. Locke argued that Filmer provided insufficient evidence for the transmission of this supposed paternal authority through primogeniture (the right of the eldest son to inherit). Furthermore, Locke pointed out the practical impossibility of tracing such a lineage through thousands of years and countless generations. Locke contended that the concept of paternal power, while existing within families, did not naturally extend to political sovereignty. He emphasized the distinction between the authority of a father over his child and the authority of a ruler over his subjects, arguing that the latter could not be inherited but must be established through legitimate means.

The Second Treatise: The Foundation of Liberalism

While the First Treatise served as a polemic against Filmer, the Second Treatise is where Locke truly lays the groundwork for his influential political philosophy. This treatise is a much more constructive and enduring work, articulating Locke's theories on the state of nature, natural law, natural rights, and the social contract. It offers a robust justification for limited government and the rights of individuals, becoming a cornerstone of liberal political thought.

The State of Nature and Natural Law

Locke posits that in the "state of nature," before the establishment of civil society, all individuals are fundamentally equal and free. This state is not a lawless free-for-all but is governed by the "law of nature," which Locke identifies with reason. According to this natural law, every person has the duty to preserve themselves and, when possible, to preserve the rest of mankind. This law dictates that no one ought to harm another in their life, health, liberty, or possessions. Locke believed that individuals possess inherent rights that pre-exist any government.

Natural Rights: Life, Liberty, and Property

Central to Locke's philosophy are the natural rights to "life, liberty, and property." These rights are not granted by any government but are inherent to individuals by virtue of their humanity and the law of nature. Locke famously argued that property is acquired when an individual mixes their labor with the natural world, thus removing something from its common state and making it their own. The government's primary purpose, according to Locke, is to protect these fundamental natural rights. Any government that fails to do so, or actively infringes upon them, loses its legitimacy.

The Social Contract and the Purpose of Government

To escape the inconveniences of the state of nature—namely, the lack of an established law, an impartial judge, and the power to enforce judgments—individuals voluntarily enter into a social contract. This contract involves surrendering some of their natural liberties (specifically, the right to personally enforce the law of nature) to a common authority, the government. In return, the government pledges to protect the remaining natural rights of its citizens. The purpose of government, therefore, is not to subjugate individuals but to serve as a trustee of their rights and to promote the public good. Locke emphasizes that this consent is crucial for the legitimacy of any government.

The Right to Revolution

Perhaps one of the most radical and influential aspects of the Second Treatise is Locke's articulation of the right to revolution. He argues that when a government acts contrary to its trust, becoming tyrannical and systematically violating the natural rights of the people, the people have the right to resist and overthrow that government. This is not a call for constant rebellion but a safeguard against oppression, a final resort when all other means of redress have failed. The ultimate authority, for Locke, resides with the people, who delegate power to the government but can reclaim it if it is abused.

Key Concepts and Their Significance

John Locke's Two Treatises of Government introduced several groundbreaking concepts that have profoundly shaped political discourse and the development of modern governance. These ideas, though articulated centuries ago, continue to resonate and inform debates about the role and legitimacy of government.

Consent of the Governed

The principle of "consent of the governed" is perhaps the most enduring legacy of Locke's work. He argued that legitimate political authority arises not from divine right or inheritance but from the voluntary agreement of the people. This means that governments are only just if they rule with the consent of those they govern. This idea formed the bedrock of democratic revolutions and continues to be a fundamental tenet of liberal democracies worldwide.

Limited Government

Locke's philosophy strongly advocates for limited government. He believed that governmental power should be constrained by natural law and the rights of individuals. The government's role is to protect, not to control or dominate. This concept of limited government directly challenged the absolutist regimes of his time and laid the groundwork for constitutionalism, where governmental powers are defined and restricted by a supreme law.

Separation of Powers (Implicit)

While Locke did not explicitly develop a detailed theory of the separation of powers in the way that Montesquieu later would, his Second Treatise contains implicit ideas that foreshadow this concept. He distinguished between different governmental functions, particularly legislative and executive powers, suggesting that concentrating too much power in one entity could lead to tyranny. The idea that governmental authority should be divided and balanced is a key element of his broader argument for preventing the abuse of power.

Influence and Legacy

The impact of John Locke's Two Treatises of Government on Western political thought and the course of history is immeasurable. His ideas provided the intellectual ammunition for revolutionary movements and continue to shape contemporary political discourse.

Impact on American Political Thought

Locke's influence on the American Revolution and the formation of the United States is undeniable. The Declaration of Independence, with its ringing

pronouncements on "unalienable Rights" such as "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness," directly echoes Locke's philosophy. Thomas Jefferson, the primary author of the Declaration, was deeply steeped in Locke's writings. The U.S. Constitution, with its emphasis on natural rights, limited government, and the consent of the governed, stands as a testament to Locke's enduring intellectual legacy.

Enduring Relevance in Contemporary Politics

In the modern era, the principles articulated in John Locke's Two Treatises of Government remain highly relevant. Debates about individual liberties versus state authority, the nature of democratic legitimacy, the protection of property rights, and the right to protest against unjust laws all draw, implicitly or explicitly, from Locke's foundational arguments. His work continues to be studied by political scientists, philosophers, and policymakers, offering enduring insights into the fundamental questions of how societies should be governed and what rights individuals possess.

Frequently Asked Questions

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

The primary purpose is to justify the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and to lay the groundwork for a legitimate government based on the consent of the governed, emphasizing natural rights and the social contract.

What is the concept of the 'state of nature' as described by Locke?

Locke's state of nature is a condition of perfect freedom and equality, governed by the law of nature. In this state, individuals possess natural rights to life, liberty, and property, and can enforce the law of nature themselves.

How does Locke explain the origin and legitimacy of government?

Locke argues that government originates from a social contract where individuals voluntarily surrender certain freedoms from the state of nature to a governing body in exchange for the protection of their natural rights. Legitimacy stems from the consent of the governed.

What are Locke's 'natural rights' and why are they so important?

Locke's natural rights are inalienable rights inherent to all individuals by virtue of their humanity, primarily life, liberty, and property. They are crucial because they pre-exist government and are the foundation upon which government's legitimacy rests.

What is the role of property in Locke's political philosophy?

Property is central. Locke argues that individuals acquire property by mixing their labor with natural resources. The protection of property is a primary reason for entering into society and forming government.

Under what circumstances does Locke argue that citizens have the right to resist or overthrow their government?

Locke argues that citizens have the right to resist or overthrow a government when it acts against their trust, particularly by violating their natural rights or failing to protect them, effectively breaking the social contract.

What is the distinction Locke makes between 'legislative' and 'executive' power?

Locke distinguishes between legislative power, which makes laws, and executive power, which enforces them. He considers legislative power supreme but believes it should be limited and accountable, with the executive power often vested in a monarch.

How did Locke's ideas in the Two Treatises influence later political thought, particularly in the United States?

Locke's ideas profoundly influenced the Enlightenment and the American Revolution. Concepts like natural rights, consent of the governed, and the right to revolution are foundational to the U.S. Declaration of Independence and its Constitution.

What is the 'Second Treatise' primarily concerned with?

The 'Second Treatise' is the more famous and influential of the two. It elaborates on Locke's theories of political authority, the state of nature, the social contract, natural rights, and the right of rebellion.

What was Locke refuting in his 'First Treatise'?

In his 'First Treatise,' Locke directly refutes the patriarchal theory of Sir Robert Filmer, who argued for the divine right of kings based on the hereditary authority of Adam and his descendants.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to John Locke's Two Treatises of Government, with descriptions:

1. In Search of the Common Good: Political Philosophy from Hobbes to Rousseau
This book likely explores the development of political thought in the period following Hobbes and leading up to Rousseau, placing Locke's ideas within a broader intellectual context. It would examine how thinkers grappled with questions of sovereignty, natural rights, and the legitimacy of government. Readers can expect a comparative analysis of different theories on the ideal social contract and the rights of citizens.

2. In Defense of Natural Law: The Foundations of Modern Rights
This title suggests a focus on the philosophical underpinnings of natural law, a key concept in Locke's Second Treatise. The book probably traces the historical roots of natural law theory and its influence on the development of human rights. It would likely argue for the enduring relevance of natural law in contemporary ethical and political discourse.

3. Insurrection and Sovereignty: The Right to Resist Tyranny
This book would undoubtedly delve into Locke's controversial arguments regarding the right of the people to resist a tyrannical government. It likely examines historical instances of rebellion and revolution through a Lockean lens. Readers would find discussions on the limits of governmental power and the conditions under which revolution can be justified.

4. In the State of Nature: Pre-Political Societies and the Social Contract
This title points to an exploration of Locke's concept of the state of nature, the hypothetical condition of humanity before the establishment of political society. The book likely analyzes the implications of this concept for understanding the origins and purpose of government. It would probably consider how pre-political arrangements, or their absence, inform the necessity of a social contract.

5. In Pursuit of Liberty: The Enlightenment Roots of Liberalism
This work would focus on the Enlightenment era and its crucial role in shaping liberal political thought, with Locke as a central figure. It likely traces the intellectual lineage of liberalism, highlighting Locke's contributions to ideas of individual freedom, limited government, and constitutionalism. The book would explore how these ideas have influenced subsequent political movements and ideologies.

6. Inalienable Rights: Property, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness

This title suggests a deep dive into Locke's articulation of natural rights, particularly the right to property, which he viewed as fundamental. The book would likely analyze how these rights are understood as inherent and not granted by the state. It would probably explore the philosophical connections between property rights, individual liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

7. In Trust for the People: The Theory of Government and Consent

This book would likely concentrate on Locke's theory of government as a trust established by the consent of the governed. It probably examines the relationship between the rulers and the ruled, emphasizing the accountability of government to its citizens. Readers can expect a discussion of how consent legitimizes political authority and the consequences of its withdrawal.

8. In Conflict with the Crown: Locke's Challenge to Divine Right

This title indicates a focus on Locke's direct confrontation with the theory of the divine right of kings, a dominant political doctrine of his time. The book likely analyzes Locke's arguments against absolute monarchy and his advocacy for a government based on reason and natural law. It would explore the historical context and impact of Locke's critique on political power structures.

9. In a Society of Laws: The Rule of Law and Constitutionalism

This book would likely explore Locke's influence on the development of the rule of law and constitutional government. It probably examines how Locke's ideas about limited government, separation of powers, and legal frameworks shaped later constitutional documents. The work would likely highlight the importance of predictable and just laws for securing individual liberties.

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