

Two Treatises of Government

work by Locke

⋮ Actions

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Two Treatises of Government, major statement of the [political philosophy](#) of the English philosopher [John Locke](#), published in 1689 but substantially composed some years before then.



John Locke

The work may be considered a response to the political situation as it existed in England at the time of the exclusion controversy—the debate over whether a law could be passed to forbid (exclude) the [succession](#) of James, the Roman Catholic brother of

King [Charles II](#) (reigned 1660–85), to the English throne—though its message was of much more lasting significance. Locke strongly supported exclusion. In the preface to the work, composed at a later date, he makes clear that the arguments of the two [treatises](#) are continuous and that the whole [constitutes](#) a justification of the [Glorious Revolution](#), which deposed James (who reigned, as [James II](#), from 1685 to 1688) and brought the [Protestant William III](#) and [Mary II](#) to the throne.

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It should be noted that Locke's political philosophy was guided by his deeply held religious commitments. Throughout his life he accepted the existence of a creating God and the notion that all humans are God's servants in virtue of that relationship. God created humans for a certain purpose, namely to live a life according to his laws and thus to inherit eternal [salvation](#); most importantly for Locke's philosophy, God gave humans just those [intellectual](#) and other abilities necessary to achieve this end. Thus, humans, using the capacity of [reason](#), are able to discover that God exists, to identify God's laws and the duties they entail, and to acquire sufficient knowledge to perform their duties and thereby to lead happy and successful lives. They can come to recognize that some actions, such as failing to care for one's offspring or to keep one's contracts, are morally reprehensible and contrary to [natural law](#), which is identical to the law of God. Other specific [moral](#) laws can be discovered or known only through [revelation](#).

The essentially Protestant Christian framework of Locke's philosophy meant that his attitude toward [Roman Catholicism](#) would always be hostile. He rejected the claim of [papal infallibility](#) (how could it ever be proved?), and he feared the political dimensions of Catholicism as a threat to English [autonomy](#), especially after [King Louis XIV](#) of France in 1685 revoked the [Edict of Nantes](#), which had granted religious liberty to the Protestant [Huguenots](#).

The first treatise

The first [treatise](#) was aimed squarely at the work of another 17th-century political theorist, [Sir Robert Filmer](#), whose *Patriarcha* (1680, though probably written in the 1630s) defended the theory of the [divine right of kings](#): the authority of [monarchs](#) is

divinely sanctioned by their descent from [Adam](#)—according to the [Bible](#), the first king

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historical record or any other evidence, and any contract that God and Adam entered into would not be binding on remote descendants thousands of years later, even if a line of descent could be identified. His refutation was widely accepted as decisive, and in any event the theory of the divine right of kings ceased to be taken seriously in England after 1688.

The second treatise

Locke's importance as a political philosopher lies in the argument of the second treatise. He begins by defining political power as a

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right of making Laws with Penalties of Death, and consequently all less Penalties, for the Regulating and Preserving of Property, and of employing the force of the [Community](#), in the Execution of such Laws and in defence of the Common-wealth from Foreign Injury, and all this only for the Publick Good.

Much of the remainder of the second treatise is a commentary on this paragraph.

The state of nature and the social contract

Locke's definition of political power has an immediate moral dimension. It is a "right" of making laws and enforcing them for "the public good." Power for Locke never simply means "capacity" but always "morally sanctioned capacity." [Morality](#) pervades the whole arrangement of society, and it is this fact, tautologically, that makes society [legitimate](#). Locke's account of political society is based on a [hypothetical](#) consideration of the human condition before the beginning of communal life. In this "[state of nature](#)," humans are entirely free. But this freedom is not a state of complete license, because it is set within the bounds of the [law of nature](#). It is a state of equality, which is itself a central element of Locke's account. In marked contrast to Filmer's world, there is no natural [hierarchy](#) among humans. Each person is naturally free and equal under the law

of nature, subject only to the will of “the infinitely wise Maker.” Each person, moreover, is required to enforce as well as to obey this law. It is this duty that gives to humans the right to punish offenders. But in such a state of nature, it is obvious that placing the right to punish in each person’s hands may lead to injustice and [violence](#). This can be remedied if humans enter into a contract with each other to recognize by common consent a civil government with the power to enforce the law of nature among the citizens of that state. Although any contract is legitimate as long as it does not infringe upon the law of nature, it often happens that a contract can be enforced only if there is some higher human authority to require [compliance](#) with it. It is a primary function of society to set up the framework in which legitimate contracts, freely entered into, may be enforced, a state of affairs much more difficult to guarantee in the state of nature and outside [civil society](#).

Property

Before discussing the creation of political society in greater detail, Locke provides a lengthy account of his notion of [property](#), which is of central importance to his political theory. Each person, according to Locke, has property in his or her own person—that is, each person literally owns his or her own body. Other people may not use a person’s body for any purpose without that person’s permission. But one can [acquire](#) property beyond one’s own body through labour. By mixing one’s labour with objects in the world, one acquires a right to the fruits of that work. If one’s labour turns a barren field into crops or a pile of wood into a house, then the valuable product of that labour, the crops or the house, becomes one’s property. Locke’s view was a forerunner of the labour [theory of value](#), which was expounded in different forms by the 19th-century economists [David Ricardo](#) and [Karl Marx](#) (*see also* [classical economics](#)).

Clearly, all persons are entitled to as much of the product of their labour as they need to survive. But, according to Locke, in the state of nature one is not entitled to hoard surplus produce—one must share it with those less fortunate. God has “given the World to Men in common...to make use of to the best advantage of Life, and convenience.” The introduction of [money](#), while radically changing the economic base of society, was itself a [contingent](#) development, for money has no [intrinsic](#) value but depends for its utility only on convention. Locke’s account of property and how it comes to be owned faces

difficult problems. For example, it is far from clear how much labour is required to turn any given unowned object into a piece of private property. In the case of a piece of land, for example, is it sufficient merely to put a fence around it? Or must it be plowed as well? There is, nevertheless, something intuitively powerful in the notion that it is activity, or work, that grants one a property right in something.

Organization of government

Locke returns to political society in Chapter VIII of the second [treatise](#). In the community created by the [social contract](#), the will of the majority should prevail, subject to the law of nature. The legislative body is central, but it cannot create laws that violate the law of nature, because the enforcement of natural law regarding life, liberty, and property is the rationale of the whole system. Laws must apply equitably to all citizens and not favour particular sectional interests, and there should be a division of legislative, executive, and judicial powers (see [separation of powers](#)). The legislature may, with the agreement of the majority, [impose](#) such taxes as are required to fulfill the ends of the [state](#)—including, of course, its defense. If the executive power fails to provide the conditions under which the people can enjoy their rights under natural law, then the people are entitled to remove it, by force if necessary. Thus, [revolution](#), in extremis, is permissible—as Locke obviously thought it was in 1688.

The significance of Locke’s vision of political society can scarcely be exaggerated. His [integration](#) of [individualism](#) within the framework of the law of nature and his account of the origins and limits of legitimate government authority inspired the [U.S.](#)

[Declaration of Independence](#) (1776) and the broad outlines of the system of government adopted in the [U.S. Constitution](#). [George Washington](#), the first president of the [United States](#), once described Locke as “the **greatest man** who had ever lived.” In France too, Lockean principles found clear expression in the [Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen](#) and other justifications of the [French Revolution of 1789](#).

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