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Two Treatises Of Civil Government

PUBLISHED
November 25, 2026

REFERENCE
#1795584047026408

Introduction: The Enduring Legacy of a Political Masterpiece

Few works in the history of political thought have shaped the modern world as profoundly as John Locke's **Two Treatises Of Civil Government**. Published anonymously in 1689, this text emerged from the tumultuous political landscape of 17th-century England and went on to become a foundational document for liberal democracy. Its arguments about natural rights, the consent of the governed, and the right to rebellion provided the philosophical scaffolding for the American Declaration of Independence, the French Revolution, and the development of constitutional government worldwide. To understand the political principles that underpin much of the Western world, one must first understand the arguments laid out in the **Two Treatises Of Civil Government**. This article will explore the historical context, the core arguments of each treatise, the key ideas that have proven so influential, and the enduring relevance of Locke's work in the 21st century.

Historical Context: The Birth of a Revolutionary Text

To fully appreciate the **Two Treatises Of Civil Government**, it is essential to understand the political crisis that provided its immediate context. The work was written during the Exclusion Crisis (1679-1681) in England, a fierce political struggle over whether Charles II's Catholic brother, James, should be barred from the throne. Locke, a close associate of the Whig leader Anthony Ashley Cooper (the 1st Earl of Shaftesbury), was deeply involved in the political debates of the time. The **Two Treatises Of Civil Government** was originally intended as a defense of the right of the people to resist a monarch who threatened their liberties. While the work was written during this crisis, it was not published until after the Glorious Revolution of 1688, which saw James II overthrown and William of Orange installed as king. The text thus served as a retrospective justification for the revolution, providing a philosophical framework for limited, constitutional monarchy.

Locke's primary intellectual target in the **Two Treatises Of Civil Government** was Sir Robert Filmer, whose book *Patriarcha* (1680) had become the leading defense of absolute monarchy. Filmer argued that political authority was derived from the patriarchal authority of Adam over his family, and that kings were the direct heirs of this God-given power. This theory of divine right was the dominant ideology of the Stuart monarchy, and it was precisely this theory that Locke set out to dismantle. The **Two Treatises Of Civil Government** can therefore be read as a systematic refutation of absolutism and a compelling alternative grounded in the natural freedom and equality of all human beings.

Overview of the First Treatise: Refuting the Divine Right of Kings

The First Treatise of **Two Treatises Of Civil Government** is a meticulous and often withering critique of Filmer's *Patriarcha*. Locke's goal was to clear the ground for his own positive theory of government in the Second Treatise. He does this by attacking Filmer's scriptural interpretation and logical reasoning. Locke argues that even if one accepts the Bible as a historical record, it does not grant any single person or line of descent

the kind of absolute political authority that Filmer claimed. The grant of dominion to Adam, Locke contends, was not a grant of political power over all humanity, but rather a grant of ownership over the non-human world. Furthermore, even if such a grant had been made, it would be impossible to identify a legitimate heir today. The flaws in Filmer's reasoning are legion, and Locke mercilessly exposes them.

By demolishing the patriarchal argument, the First Treatise achieves a crucial purpose: it removes the intellectual foundation for absolute monarchy. If political authority does not come from divine inheritance or paternal right, then it must come from another source. This sets the stage for the Second Treatise, where Locke presents his own theory of government based on **natural rights**, the state of nature, and the **social contract**. While the First Treatise is less frequently read today than its companion, it was a necessary and powerful piece of polemical writing that paved the way for Locke's more constructive contributions to political philosophy. The argument of **Two Treatises Of Civil Government** is incomplete without understanding the foundational critique laid out in its first part.

Overview of the Second Treatise: A Blueprint for Liberal Government

The Second Treatise of **Two Treatises Of Civil Government** is where Locke presents his original and enduringly influential theory of legitimate political authority. It begins with a description of the **state of nature**, a condition of perfect freedom and equality where all individuals are governed by the law of nature. This natural law, discoverable by reason, teaches that "no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions." In the state of nature, every individual has the **executive power of the law of nature**, meaning they have the right to punish those who violate it.

The Inconveniences of the State of Nature

While the state of nature is not a state of war, it is fraught with "inconveniences." Because individuals are judges in their own cases, partiality, passion, and revenge can lead to bias and conflict. There is no established, known law, no impartial judge, and no executive power to enforce just sentences. These inconveniences make it rational for individuals to leave the state of nature and enter into a **social contract** to form a civil society. The purpose of government, therefore, is to remedy these defects and to protect the **natural rights** of life, liberty, and property.

The Social Contract and Consent

For Locke, the only legitimate source of political authority is the consent of the governed. In the **Two Treatises Of Civil Government**, he argues that individuals voluntarily agree to join together and form a community, and in doing so, they consent to be bound by the decisions of the majority. This original contract creates a political body where the legislative power is the supreme power, but it is not an arbitrary or absolute power. Locke places strict limits on the legislative: it must govern by "promulgated established laws," these laws must be designed for the public good, and the legislature cannot raise taxes without the consent of the people or their representatives. This is a clear and powerful argument for **limited government** and the rule of law.

The Right to Property

One of the most famous and influential sections of the **Two Treatises Of Civil Government** is Locke's theory of property. He argues that in the state of nature, the earth and its fruits are held in common. However, every individual has a property in their own person. When a person "mixes his labor" with something from the common state, he makes it his property. By working on land, cultivating it, or gathering its fruits, a person removes it from the common and establishes a private right. This labor theory of property provides a moral justification for private ownership, but it is initially limited by the "enough and as good" proviso: one can only appropriate as much as one can use before it spoils, leaving enough for others. The invention of money, which does not spoil, allows for the enlargement of property holdings beyond this natural limit, which Locke saw as a

spur to industry and economic development.

The Right to Rebellion

Perhaps the most radical implication of Locke's philosophy is the right of the people to resist and overthrow a government that violates its trust. In **Two Treatises Of Civil Government**, Locke distinguishes between the dissolution of government and the dissolution of society. A government is dissolved when the legislative or executive power acts against the trust placed in it by the people. This can happen if a ruler attempts to gain absolute power, obstructs the legislature, or delivers the people into the subjection of a foreign power. In such a case, the people have the right to "appeal to heaven" and to rebel against the tyrant. This is not a call to anarchy, but a recognition that when government becomes the instrument of oppression, the people have a fundamental right to defend their **natural rights** and to establish a new government that will protect them. This argument provided a powerful justification for the Glorious Revolution and, later, for the American Revolution.

Key Ideas and Their Lasting Impact

The **Two Treatises Of Civil Government** introduced a constellation of ideas that continue to resonate throughout modern political discourse. Several of these concepts deserve particular attention.

Natural Rights and Human Dignity

Locke's assertion that all individuals are born with inalienable **natural rights** to life, liberty, and property was a radical departure from the hierarchical thinking of his time. It placed the individual at the center of the political universe and insisted that government exists to serve the individual, not the other way around. This idea was directly incorporated into the American Declaration of Independence, which famously substituted "the pursuit of happiness" for "property," but the underlying Lockean framework is unmistakable. The modern human rights movement, with its emphasis on universal and inalienable rights, is a direct descendant of the philosophy expressed in **Two Treatises Of Civil Government**.

Consent of the Governed and Democratic Legitimacy

The principle of consent is the bedrock of Lockean government. Locke argued that no one can be subject to the political power of another without their own consent. While Locke's conception of consent was not as fully democratic as later theories (he famously excluded women and the propertyless from full political participation in his own time), the principle itself was revolutionary. It established that legitimate authority flows upward from the people, not downward from a monarch or a god. This idea is now a cornerstone of democratic thought, even if its application has been expanded far beyond what Locke himself envisioned. The notion that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed is a direct echo of the **Two Treatises Of Civil Government**.

Limited Government and the Rule of Law

Locke was a strong advocate for **limited government**. He argued that even the supreme legislative power in a commonwealth is not and cannot be absolutely arbitrary over the lives and fortunes of the people. The legislature must act through established, standing laws that are promulgated and known to the people. It must govern impartially, and it cannot take property without consent (no taxation without representation). This vision of a government constrained by law and by the rights of its citizens is the foundation of constitutionalism. The separation of powers, later developed more fully by Montesquieu and enshrined in the U.S. Constitution, finds its philosophical roots in Locke's warning against concentrating all power in the same hands. The **Two Treatises Of Civil Government** provides one of the earliest and most powerful arguments for why government must be kept within its proper bounds.

Influence on the American Founding

Two Treatises Of Civil Government on the American Founding Fathers cannot be overstated. Thomas Jefferson, in writing the Declaration of Independence, effectively paraphrased Locke: the pursuit of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" is a direct echo of Locke's "life, liberty, and estate." The entire structure of the Declaration—the appeal to natural rights, the list of grievances against the king, and the justification for revolution—is Lockean in spirit and form. James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and the other framers of the Constitution were deeply influenced by Locke's ideas about limited government, the separation of powers, and the need for checks and balances.

The American colonists saw themselves as heirs to the Glorious Revolution, and they read the **Two Treatises Of Civil Government** as a textbook

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