

Study Guide on John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government (I–XI, XIX)*

The title page (3¹) reads: “Two treatises of government. . . . The latter is an essay concerning the true original extent and end of civil government.” What is the origin of civil government, according to Locke? How does civil society come to be?

- What does Locke mean by *political power* (I.3. p.8)?
- What powers or rights must individuals give up in order to enter into a government? (See IX.129–30 p.67–8.)
- What do individuals agree to, positively speaking, in joining a government (IX.30 p.67)?
- Do prior communities, such as the family, clan, town, *etc.*, grow into the political society, or are they accidental to the political order? Do these societies have the same or different aims, fundamentally?

Is Locke's starting point in political analysis, namely, a state of nature in which the natural law alone binds, the right beginning to political science? Is there an alternative “first natural state” from which one could begin political analysis? Depending on your answer, how might Locke's departure point compare with the alternative?

How does Locke believe private property comes to be (Ch. V, p.18 ff.)? What initially restricts the amount of property which can be owned? How does the invention of money affect those limits (V.36, p.22)? Is this right to property prior to civil authority?

What is the chief end of civil government (IX.124 p.66)? What is lacking in the state of nature for achieving this end (IX.124–6)? Does this division make sense? How are these three problems alleviated by the establishment of government?

¹ John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, ed. C. B. Macpherson. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980. (All chapter, heading and page numbers refer to this edition.)



What is the “state of nature,” and what does Locke believe to be its nature and qualities?

- What does it entail in terms of freedom and equality? What does Locke say about subordination or subjection, naturally speaking? See II.4 p.8.
- What is characteristic of the state of nature, in Locke’s view? Consider III.19 p.15.
- Who, if anyone, has ever been in such a state of nature (II.14 p.13)? Do the examples cited supply a convincing illustration?
- Why is this state of liberty different from a state of *license*? What restricts a man’s liberty, if there is no government?
 - What is the “law of nature” and what does this law state (p.9)? What kind of law is it? (VI.57, p.32)
 - Whence does it arise? Is the existence of an “infinitely wise maker” (p.9) necessary for this argument? Could this law be justified without reference to the “maker”?
 - In what sense is the law of nature binding? Is it binding in the conscience, or through the enforcement of other men, or in reason itself, like a mathematical demonstration?
- Consider how Thomas Hobbes views the state of nature, as expressed in *Leviathan*:
 - Does Hobbes identify any rational or moral limits to the freedom experienced in the state of nature? Is this vision of freedom the same as, or different from, what Locke explicitly opposes as “license” (II.6 p.9)?
 - What is the quality of life in Hobbes’ state of nature? What is the normal mode of human interactions? Is this the only possible mode? When is there war between men; and in it, who opposes whom?
 - In what sense does Hobbes see all men as being equal? Is this also Locke’s view?
- Compare Hobbes’ doctrine with that of Locke: “Whosoever uses *force without right*, as every one does in society, who does it without law, puts himself into a *state of war* with those against whom he so uses it; and in that state all former ties are cancelled, all other rights cease, and every one has a right to defend himself, and *to resist the aggressor*” (XIX.232 p.116–7; see also III.19 p.15, XIII.155 p.80–1).
 - How do these views differ, essentially?
 - Following from this, why is absolute monarchy inconsistent with civil society, according to Locke (VII.90–4 p.48–51)?



Does Locke see government as necessary only because men are corrupt? (See, for example, p. 67.) Is there a positive good, a common good, which the government directly promotes, or does it only prevent evils from occurring? If it does not promote, does it make possible any common good? Is the government formally or only instrumentally part of the good life for man, in Locke's analysis?

Under what conditions can a government be justly dissolved? What form may this dissolution take, and how might the reformation of a new government take place? (Ch. XIX p.107 ff.)

Does Locke see man as a political animal? As a social animal? How does he support or prove his claims? If both are asserted, is there a priority between these two—that is, does one exist prior to, and give rise to, the other? If so, what does this show about the relation of society to government?

For what audience is Locke addressing this treatise, primarily, and what does he aim to convince them of? (See Preface, 5–6.) Drawing from the text, what circumstances seem to have given rise to this work?

Does Locke's system of law and government derive fundamentally from God's ownership of man and purpose for the material goods of the earth, or from man's ownership of himself, his work, and his property? Does one allow the other? Does one demand the other? Can either one stand without the other?

Does Locke believe that an individual's *consent* to be governed is the only justification of political rule? If so, from what principles does he draw this conclusion? If not, how does it relate to political rule? Is consent required for all kinds of subordination, or all kinds of obligation?

Suggested use: This study guide includes a few questions and observations about John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*. Among possible uses, one could consider these comments while reading the work; or one could use them as starting points for a classroom discussion.

