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Locke: Two Treatises Of Government (Cambridge Texts In The History Of Political Thought)



Synopsis

This is a new revised version of Dr. Laslett's standard edition of Two Treatises. First published in 1960, and based on an analysis of the whole body of Locke's publications, writings, and papers. The Introduction and text have been revised to incorporate references to recent scholarship since the second edition and the bibliography has been updated.

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Customer Reviews

This is one of the most important works ever written. In the Second Treatise, Locke lays down the theory of natural law and how it relates to the individual as well as to government. Although he was not the first or the only writer to elaborate such a theory, his interpretation is clear and eloquent, as can be seen in its use in the Declaration of Independence. The First Treatise was basically a refutation of the now obscure authoritarian work "Patriarcha" by Sir Robert Filmer. Although it is an interesting piece, it has long been rightfully overshadowed by its partner. If for some reason you are actually seeking a refutation of Filmer, I would refer you to Algernon Sidney's more lengthy "Discourses Concerning Government." By far the finest edition of this work is Peter Laslett's, and I consider the purchase of any other edition a sorry waste of money. In his lengthy introductory essays, he traces the historical, political, and philosophical background of John Locke's life and ideas as well as the actual writing of the work itself. His greatest contribution however, is proving that the work was written well before the Glorious Revolution of 1688.

I'm no genius. A pedant, perhaps, and an arrogant jerk, but not a guy with the kind of education it seems other reviewers have. I can't tell you who Locke's friends were or what his political connections were, either. I have some vague notion that Locke's and Mill's ideas influenced the philosophical basis of the American founding documents, but I'm just a soldier who sometimes likes to bite off more than he can chew--I want to know the stuff them smart people do, and don't see any reason I shouldn't! So if you're like me, let me encourage you to get this book. Your friends will almost certainly call you a nerd (after all, who reads 17th century political philosophy for FUN?), and it'll take a few pages to cut your teeth on the language, but after you get going, this book is a breeze. I can't tell you the philosophical doctrines nor their framework in several distinct points, but I can tell you this: the language, to one of average education, was a little hard to wrap my brain around, but what worked for me was just to set a pace and trudge through it without getting hung up on the one sentence that twisted my mind into a pretzel. After a few pages (maybe 10 or 15) I found that my brain was correcting for the nature of the wording, and for the rest of the book, I swear, I understood what was going on through the second treatise and the Letter, too. After I got going, I was all highlighters and folded corners, but it had too many profound and simple statements to save them all in my head. If you're even vaguely political, this book will make points as absolutely applicable to today's world politics as it did to those of the bygone time. It applies from everything from the crazy long haired hippie communist democrats to the crazy power-mad Neocons, but it'll make you wish with all your heart that both ruling parties of American Government would give it a quick read over the recess. Anyhow, I rate this work as 4 stars out of 5. Mostly that's because I have absolutely nothing to compare it against, and am therefore hesitant to give it 5 stars, because it's the first political philosophy I've ever read. But dammit, it seems like a pretty good one to me. Just don't let it scare you off, you don't need to be a genius to understand this. Let's even the playing field between us regular people and the academic jerks (love you guys, really, just making a point) that like to write reviews even Locke wouldn't understand :) This stuff is great, and it's great for even those who, like me, are only moderately intelligent readers.

In his book, *Second Treatise of Government*, John Locke (1632 - 1704) writes that all humans are born equal with the same ability to reason for themselves, and because of this, government should have limitations to ensure that people are free from the arbitrary will of another person, according to the laws of nature. Government, in Locke's view, is a social contract between the people in control, and the people who submit to it. The editor of this edition, C. B. Macpherson, gives a little background and overview in his introduction to this book. He writes that the book "was directed

against the principles of Sir Robert Filmer, whose books, asserting the divine authority of kings and denying any right of resistance, were thought by Locke and his fellow Whigs to be too influential among the gentry to be left unchallenged by those who held that resistance to an arbitrary monarch might be justified." (p. viii) Locke's book served as a philosophical justification for revolting against tyrannical monarchies in the Glorious Revolution and the American Revolution. His book was practically quoted in the Declaration of Independence. Locke lays out his basis for government on the foundation that people are able to reason. Because of this, people have inherent freedoms or natural rights. Though he believed in reason, Locke was an empiricist, meaning he believed that all knowledge of the world comes from what our senses tell us. The mind starts as a "tabula rasa", latin for an empty slate. As soon as we are born, we immediately begin learning ideas. Thus, all the material for our knowledge of the world comes to us through sensations. Nevertheless, Locke had an unshakable faith in human reason. He believed that people do learn what is right and wrong, regardless of what they choose to do. Locke believed that faith in God, certain moral norms and understanding consequences were inherent in human reason. So, even though people acquire everything they know about the world through the senses, they are able to think for themselves and reason at a higher level about what they learn. Locke presumed that there are universally recognized principles and that the consequences are practically scientific. He was greatly influenced by Isaac Newton (1647-1727) who wrote *The Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*. Locke took the ideas that there were "natural laws" in science and tried to extend that to society. Natural laws, or rights, in Locke's view, are obvious and learned through human reasoning, and apply to everyone. They are also called "self-evident," which appears in *The Declaration of Independence*. All humans are created equal, and Locke bases this idea on the golden rule, that people are to do to others as they would have others do to them. Natural equality is the basis of the first and most important "natural law" which is to care for one another. (p. 9) Locke believes that with or without government, there were universal natural rights. Without government, people are unprotected from harm by other people. Where there is no government, people are free to do as they please, even to harm others. In this state, natural laws still apply, such as the right of people to protect themselves and seek reparation for injuries done to them. However, people are naturally inconsistent in executing punishments, because they have a propensity to act out of hate or revenge. Therefore, laws are necessary in a civil society to fairly arbitrate justice. The purpose of creating a civil society is to avoid major conflicts and keep peace. Thus, civil government is a "contract" between people to regulate their affairs fairly. According to Locke's theories, people enter into a social contract by forming governments that will preserve order. Locke describes a civil government as being

democratic with some checks to ensure that it does not overstep its boundaries, and having both legislative and executive powers. A civil government is democratic or representative, meaning laws are created by the consent of the people through the voice of a majority vote. The legislature should represent the people equally based on population. (Salus populi suprema lex) All people are subject to the law, including the rulers-no one is above the law. Even the legislature needs "standing rules" to keep it from over-stepping its boundaries. Locke advocated the principle of division of powers. Because the legislature only meets at appointed times to create or revise laws, there needs to be an executive power that is constantly enforcing the laws. So Locke describes a division of the legislative and executive powers. In contrast to what was being claimed by the rulers of the time, Locke taught that the purpose of government is to serve and benefit the people and that it should be controlled by the people for which the government was made. His claim that people have the right to rebel against government was controversial. Second Treatise of Government served as a foundation for future political philosophies.

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