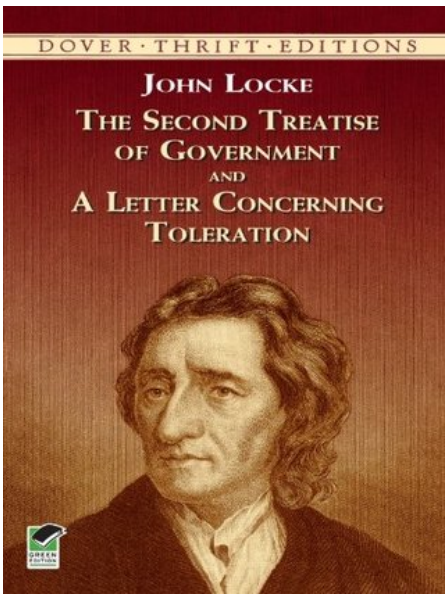

The Second Treatise of Government and a Letter Concerning Toleration

John Locke

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The first of these two highly influential documents refutes the concept of monarchy's divine right. The second argues for a broad acceptance of alternative religious convictions. The basis of social and political philosophy for generations, these books laid the foundation of the modern democratic state in England and abroad.

The Second Treatise of Government and a Letter Concerning Toleration Details

Date	:	Published March 1st 2012 by Dover Publications (first published 1689)
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From Reader Review The Second Treatise of Government and a Letter Concerning Toleration for online ebook

Joshua Nuckols says

I read the Second Treatise, and quickly browsed the Letter.

Observations:

Christians give Locke a pretty bad rap, which I think is unjust. Locke relied heavily upon scripture for making his arguments. From what I've read, his main weakness was in having a less than Calvinist belief as to original sin, but then again, how many...

What is cool, is finding phrases that our Founders used, for instance in documents such as the Declaration: "long train of abuses..."

His contract is not different from the covenant that reformed theologians like Rutherford saw between a ruler and the people. Rulers are hired for a particular purpose: protection of property through enforcement of the law.

Side note: The law has become an instrument of plunder. Think punitive damages in Tort law...

Xander says

This book is a collection of the two most important parts of John Locke's political philosophy: the Second Treatise of Government and a Letter concerning Toleration (both published in 1689, in The Netherlands).

In Second Treatise of Government, Locke argues from the perspective of a social contract, like Hobbes and Spinoza before him (and Rousseau and Montesquieu after him). In the state of nature, mankind is in a perpetual state of war: everyone looks pursues his or her own needs and the fruits of labour can be stolen by anyone at any moment. It is clear that this doesn't create an incentive to accomplish something, apart from the fact that feeling insecure 24/7 isn't mentally healthy. Therefore, there comes a time when humans collectively agree to give up the rights to harm others and steal possessions from eachother, and transfer these rights to an umpire - the state.

The state, in Locke's view, is a minimalist one: it has to protect the life and liberties of its citizens, both at home and from foreign powers, as well as to protect the property rights of individual citizens. Therefore, there's need for laws and the power to execute and - if need be - to coercively enforce these same laws. Locke sees these two components as functions of the sovereign and he doesn't seperate the powers per se (cf. Montesquieu's division of power). (He does make a distintion between executive, legislative and federative power, but this is conceptual/philosophical, not political).

So far, this is exactly Hobbes's view on sovereignty. But Locke takes another road when he gets to the topic of the degree of power. Hobbes promotes absolutism (i.e. dictatorship) as a garantuee for peace; Locke doesn't view absolute power as legitimate power. Situations change and power corrups, therefore there can be situations in which rulers turn into despots and government turns into tiranny. In situations like these, it is

the sovereign power who breaks the social contracts and thereby gives the people back their right of self preservation. It is then legitimate for the people to start a revolution, with only this caveat: it is not the institution of the sovereign that is illegimate, but the person or group of persons that form this sovereign. Revolutions are therefore personal, not political.

It is important to understand that Locke sees the civil society and the state as two different aspects. Citizens form countless associations and compacts, of which the state is only one (be it the highest). In a sense, Locke makes a plea for constitutional democracy, that can be considered as 'the rules of the game' and leaving citizens free to play - in groups or alone - within these boundaries. It is not strange therefore, that the founding fathers of the United States drew inspiration from Locke when writing their Declaration of Independence.

A very important part of Locke's political philosophy regards the rights of property. People have the right to protect their earned property; this individual right is lost in the social contract and thereafter it is the state that should protect individual property in order to keep the peace. This leads inevitably - especially in post-agrarian economies - to the accumulation of wealth in the hands of select individuals. This is a justified critique on Locke's thoughts, since he was active in the Plantation business (therefore slavery). Locke even justifies slavery, under certain conditions (as a post-war consequence and as a - albeit circumscribed - economic necessity).

A second point of critique is that it seems (to me at least) that Locke follows the Greek tradition in democracy, in that he has especially wealthy men in his thoughts when speaking about freedom and property. These two points (slavery and particular rights) are serious moral flaws in his political philosophy. But then again, this was written in 1689; we have to be careful not to moralize historical documents, but when applying these ideas to our own time and place, we should be careful.

The Letter of Toleration is much simpler (at least in its contents): for Locke, there's no place for religious intolerance - or for intolerance as such - in society. The reasons for this are numerous. For one thing, it is impossible to force or threaten people into believing certain ideas. Thought police is impossible, according to Locke (if he's really right in this, is yet to be seen). Therfore, it's unreasonable to try to coerce people into believing your religious creed. Next, it is not only practically impossible, but it is also against Locke's own political philosophy: the church is one of those civil associations that citizens may form, which in the end fall under jurisdiction and power of the state. According to Locke, there's no place for religious authority in a state-run society.

A third reason is philosophical; there are many, mutually exclusive, religious creeds. They cannot all be right, therefore most of them are illusions. There are no valid criteria to determine religious truths, so we cannot be sure that we are right and all of the others are wrong. Therefore, we have to accept that different people believe different things. Locke also mentions a practical benefit of religious tolerance: economic prosperity.

What can we learn from Locke? As mentioned, Locked turned a blind eye to slavery and economic oppression. He also didn't see universal suffrage as important as we do. But apart from these flaws (which have to be seen in the historical context of 17th century England), there is a strong universalism in Locke's philosophy. He was (to my knowledge) the first philosopher who promoted the right of the people to start revolutions against tiranny and despotism. Besides this, he saw property as a way for society to prosper and reach above the level of mere subsistene (granted, a liberal economy has its own flaws, but still). He was also the first thinker to strive openly for religious tolerance - in a time when people had to publish like-minded books posthumously in order to avoid persecution. Constitutions where freedoms of individuals were

garantueed; religious tolerance; these are important lessons for us.

To end this review: it is worth noting that Locke makes various philosophical and conceptual distinctions, which in practice would be quite a different topic. For example, he seems to build his system on a universal human being in the state of nature, without considering practical differences between gender, ethnicity, religion, etc. Political philosophy is idealistic, in the sense that it doesn't deal with the nasty, everyday problems of civil life. It is important to remember this, because we seem to live in an age where masses of people are gradually coerced in a state of universal equality. But as Tocqueville would later on exclaim: freedom and equality are opposite ends - full equality means zero freedom. We should learn to accept differences between human beings, at least in places where they are not relevant.

CJ Bowen says

"Political power, then, I take to be a right of making laws with penalty of death..." 2

"The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one; and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind who will but consult it, that, being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions." 3

"Nothing was made by God for man to spoil or destroy." 14

"For in all the states of created beings capable of laws, where there is no law, there is no freedom." 25

"The reigns of good princes have always been most dangerous to the liberties of their people" 76-77

"Wherever law ends tyranny begins" 92

"No peace and security, no, not even so much as a common friendship, can ever be established or preserved amongst men so long as this opinion prevails, that dominion is founded in grace and that religion is to be propagated by force of arms." 126

"Nay, God himself will not save man against their wills." 129

"No way whatsoever that I shall walk in against the dictates of my conscience will ever bring me to the mansions of the blessed." 131

"Faith only, and inward sincerity, are the things that procure acceptance with God." 131

Brian says

Really well written and expressed, unlike other certain dense thinkers.

However, though he comes to many good conclusions, the premises are definitely wobbly.

Just a sampling:

* Individual possession as basis for rights: oddly enough it is the baptists who should tell us better. Man does not possess himself, but is owned by God, therefore everything else he owns, he owns in stewardship for the common good of man. Although Locke insists that mixing labor with land makes property, he knew that the claims were not absolute: to withhold from those without sustenance was robbery (see his first treatise).

* Natural law: I don't know if Locke is the first, but natural law is a much harder book to read than Scripture and subject to all the same quagmires of interpretation (incidentally his discussion of heresy and schism is hopelessly jejune).

* Social contract: this isn't how men work. I have to look into it more, but I've heard good arguments that this notion of delegating authority isn't really realistic. If Locke was a Calvinist, it was odd that he should hinge everything on choice. (Although I do like his discussion of freedom as something positive; it should put many of his intellectual grandchildren to shame.)

Michael de Percy says

Locke is one of the many philosophers I am familiar with through secondary sources. but this was my first reading of his work. In the Second Treatise of Government, Locke painstakingly covers power in the parental, political, commonwealth, legislative, and tyrannical modes, leading to a conclusion that is equally applicable to social contract theory (explicitly put by Jean-Jacques Rousseau) and the doctrine of the separation of powers. What is taken for granted in liberal democracies today has a clear lineage to Locke. This book also contains Locke's "Letter Concerning Toleration", focusing on freedom of the practice of religion. Freedom of speech and religion are major themes in the letter, with Locke reinforcing what many still regard as proper democratic practice: punish those who break the law, rather than discriminate against individuals with religious characteristics that may, because of unfamiliar or incomprehensible (to conservatives, at least) differences that the dominant group may find confronting. I held the view while reading the Treatise that this might only apply to Christians, but the Letter makes it clear that while "Mahometans" might be "rightly considered" infidels (by Christians), they (and anyone of any religion, even atheists) still had the right to live, work, prosper, and worship as they saw fit so long as they did so with respect for the rule of law. It is interesting that the concepts of liberalism, the social contract, the doctrine of the separation of powers, and the "rule of law" all make an appearance in these works, these are not explicitly mentioned or defined. Yet the definitions and justifications of these concepts used in the present reflect precisely Locke's ideas. That he is known as the "father of liberalism" makes a good deal of sense. Reading Hobbes will be an important endeavour, but so too is the understanding of history, especially of the "Glorious Revolution of 1688", in understanding Locke's work. I also need to read Burke and Kant. While it would probably be smarter to begin at the beginning and work my way through in some sort of chronological order in reading some of the greatest thinkers in political theory, but at the same time, I enjoy the haphazard manner in the same way that one can enjoy a jigsaw puzzle. Not that I pretend that I can ever complete this endeavour, but each completed reading adds a sense of understanding that would otherwise never be gained. Finally, Locke was surprisingly easy to read. Hobbes will be much harder, but there is something about the Enlightenment that changed the nature of written English. Laurence Sterne, too, has a modern form yet it is

of the eighteenth century, but Locke's style is not too far removed. I had never considered before how written English may have changed to attract a larger audience. I have been grappling with whether to drop the essay as a form of assessment for undergraduate students (where possible), but also felt like I may be selling out. But an important lesson from history is that it has happened before, and it will happen again; the world never did fall apart. And so we may well be in that space once more. Not because of Facebook, or short attention spans, but because of an undoing of the intellectual elite. Just a thought.

Dayla says

After reading a book about James Madison (author of the first amendment and father of the constitution), I decided to read all of the books that Madison reflected on prior to the Constitutional Convention in 1789. Locke's toleration letter is almost word for word the justification that Madison uses for the separation of church and state.

Lindsey Doolan says

Read for Senior Traditio, N-term 2010. I don't think that, as a Christian, I should strictly agree with it, although the American in me was "amen"-ing most of the way through. I did like how dense this book was--think I highlighted something on just about every page. That's how foundational this book is to understanding the foundations of the American government.

Pierce says

John Locke is right about more or less everything.

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dr_set says

Tedioso por momentos, explica claramente los derechos que tienen los hombres en cuanto a las sociedades en las que viven y sus gobiernos.

Roslyn says

This was a fascinating read. I came to understand Natural Law much better, and it caused me to re-think my parenting and my current level of involvement with local government.

I was intrigued to read several phrases here that ended up in our Declaration of Independence. So fun to read the works the Founders read as they were deciding how to form our Republic!

JP says

A masterpiece that refined ideas of the early political philosophers (Aristotle, Hobbes, Rousseau) into what became American government. I can understand why the Federalist authors relied on Locke and see directly his influence in those works. All of the key elements are there: libertarianism (trade-off of commonwealth to protect property against the initiation of force), balance of powers, ultimate recourse of the people, state of nature, benefits of commonwealth, justice. He builds with the elements of power -- slavery is not a right but a sustained state of war, paternal power is different than power of the government. Regarding robbery, he contrasts the effect of that done by an individual with that done by government, the former being abhorrent, the latter lauded. Regarding the fall of government, Locke draws distinctions between conquest (external), usurpation (internal), tyranny (internal with the benefit going to the tyrant), and degradation into anarchy. The basis of political society is that people give up their natural right of force available in a state of nature to get the protection of property, which includes threat of punishment and legal recourse. The latter provides for the third branch of government. Regarding monarchy, he shows that almost all forms were at some point elective, originally when a king was designated and accepted; later anytime that decision is validated. The legislative is the first and supreme power, being directly designated by the people.

Jonathan says

Of all the great scientists, philosophers, religious leaders, and political theorists we studied this past semester, John Locke is my favorite.

In my oral final, I was asked to summarize each political philosopher with one sentence. My sentence for John Locke was, "Jefferson, you're welcome!" The more I read of Locke, the more I saw Jefferson and I loved it!

At some point in my reading this book, I scrawled in the cover the following: "Locke stokes the flames of rebellion, fueled by the embers of righteous self-preservation." I thoroughly enjoyed his systematic explanation of the origin of rights and governmental power and authority.

Necessarily, it starts with the individual. God gives life, and with that gift comes great responsibility to honor, preserve, and improve that life. In order to accomplish this sacred duty, one must be free to exercise his will to that end, and he must be able to retain ownership of the fruits of his efforts. The sacred duty to preserve self is not the same as selfishness. It's more akin to the safety instructions given on a plane shortly after boarding that in case of an emergency depressurizing the cabin, one should put the oxygen mask first on oneself before helping others put their masks on.

Because property plays an important role in our stewardship, people tend to want to protect their property. In a state of nature, the effort to protect one's things potentially consumes excessive amounts of time and resources; consequently, people have a natural tendency to aggregate and form governments explicitly to protect their life, liberty, and property. The effort to protect is delegated to representatives, and this frees the people to pursue more productive endeavors.

Locke's analysis of proper government is spot on in so many ways. My book looks like one of my kids' coloring books, because I underlined, circled, hi-lighted, and scribbled so many notes in it. I'll share just a few of the rules he points out.

"...no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions."

All men are born equal. There is no reasonable or rational claim to the divine right of kings.

He who would threaten my life, liberty, or property puts himself in a state of war against me, and as long as I am under threat of force from him, I am justified (if not duty bound) to resist him, even to his destruction.

"Without law there is no liberty." But the law must apply to all equally. If the law or the government demands or prohibits something that violates the inalienable rights of man, it violates its sole purpose for existing.

"...the first and fundamental positive law of all commonwealths is the establishing of the legislative power; as the first and fundamental natural law, which is to govern even the legislative itself, is the preservation of the society, and... of every person in it."

Legislative power: 1) cannot be arbitrary/cannot exceed natural rights. 2) Cannot become a power in itself-it, too, is ruled by the law. 3) Cannot take a man's property without his consent. 4) Cannot delegate law-making to any other power.

The people have a responsibility to defend their life, liberty, and property-even from their own legislators.

The Executive is subordinate to the Legislature. The Executive must always be "in being", whereas the Legislature should only convene from time to time, because laws should not need to be made continuously, but they must be constantly enforced.

I'll do a longer post dedicated on Locke's discussion of prerogative later. For now, know that laws and constitutions set limits, not minimums - especially concerning punishment of crimes. The offender may be punished, but that does not mean he should or must be punished. Locke says, "This power to act according to discretion for the public good, without the prescription of the law, and sometimes even against it, is that which is called prerogative."

I struggled with some of Locke's ideas about education, but I may explore them more in another post.

Finally, I enjoyed Locke's letter on toleration. He was ahead of his time. He also impressed me with some of his comments that I found profoundly in tune with the Spirit of Christ. He basically called for the separation of Church and State, and not in the cheap way that phrase is tossed around today, but with a conviction that worship and faith is essential to a moral people and a sound government; however, using either physical or legal force to obligate or influence another to be faithful is not only ineffective, it is offensive to God.

"Whatsoever is not done with that assurance of faith is neither well in itself, nor can it be acceptable to God. To impose such things, therefore, upon any people, contrary to their own judgment, is in effect to command them to offend God, which, considering that the end of all religion is to please him, and that liberty is essentially necessary to that end, appears to be absurd beyond expression."

I feel I have made this post much too long. Yet, I have barely scratched the surface of the many great things Locke observed and explained. I am excited to reread this and find other writings of Locke. I can see why he was so influential on our Founding Fathers.

C says

Whether or not Hegel was right that history is inevitably moving in a positive direction, he was most assuredly right that History is moving a direction that can limelight past social contradictions. When we look at Locke we see Hegel's claim completely vindicated. His Second Treatise is both revolutionary for its time, and conservative for ours. Moreover, Locke, while challenging mainstream Political Theory of his day (e.g., Men are beasts in a state of war, and Kings have divine rights, and Monarchies are good forms of government), simultaneously leads along a path that would have us owning people, abusing animals, and ignoring the concerns of the commons. How does Locke do this? Knowing the answer to this question is paramount, as Locke more than anyone influenced the American founding fathers, and sons of liberty, in their propaganda and political ideals.

Locke begins his Second Treatise with some interesting claims. Man is born into a state of nature, where all he obeys are the laws of nature. These laws of nature are in fact reason, granted to us by a deity who owns us. Reason, without any deep argumentation, convinces us all that we have a right to life, liberty, and property. Unlike Hobbes, Locke does not believe we are born into a state of war; it's only when someone transgresses against the laws of nature, which we find ourselves in a state of war. Being too irrational to defend ourselves, or at least defend ourselves utilizing a proper punishment and retribution, we desire a common and neutral judge. That judge is the state.

In order to defend the notion of protecting property via the state, Locke has to demonstrate how we come to own property. At first the earth is teaming with sustenance, and provisions. As man begins to labor over the earth, so that which he labors over becomes his. After all man owns his laboring appendages, and therefore, he mixes his ownership with the earth's goods, and comes to own them too (but doesn't God own man, and thus his appendages…). Since we are in a state of nature though, where preservation of life is paramount, we cannot take more than we need, or as Locke calls it, let things spoil or go to waste. Then, without the slightest justification, Locke states that therefore the work of our servant belongs to us. How the hell does someone labor over a man for him to become our servant? This is never justified, but given Locke's private affairs, and personal life, it's no doubt he'd have to sneak this line in to his political treatise. Locke for instance sat on the board of many companies that employed children, and enslaved foreigners. He thought children should be put to work at the age of three. But I digress…. Man also somehow can labor over an animal and thus own it too. Odd. Locke is confident that the earth will reap us a greater harvest, the more we work it, therefore, despite the fact the commons, in the state of nature, provides us with plenty, we can have even more plenty by labor. To a degree this is true, but it's increasingly becoming clear that our industrial labors are having the opposite effect on the planet, destroying what once was plentiful.

Now that we have a super abundance, Locke needs to justify why we can step away from his old rule of the taking of no excess, and hoarding to the point of spoilage. For this Locke augments his shoddy labor theory of value. Man comes to agree that money, be it gold, or paper, which cannot spoil, than represent that which we trade it for. Now instead of hoarding my home with 100 apples, 90 of which will rot, I'll keep 100 apples worth of gold on reserve. Of course Locke never actually explained how money came to share an equivalent value with the goods it is exchanged for. Mere agreement does not allow for universal equivalent of value. For this, we must consult Marx. Moreover, it's completely unclear that people did unanimously come together and 'consent' to using a common currency. Again, consult Marx.

Oddly this prospering and industrious society has all taken place prior to the erecting of a state. The Marxist

truism that bourgeois thinkers read their own society back into history, and implore their own categories of thought – which derive from material circumstances – as timeless tools for analysis, is vindicated when one reads Locke. Man now requires a state to protect his property. No longer does man owe himself to the common lot, but uses the state to augment his own affairs, relying on the state to protect the commons, but the only protection the commons needs is preservation of property, and defense against transgressions. We went from a land of plenty, with our fellow man in mind, to find ourselves in a land of property, where the plenty is sectioned off, people are owned – without justification – and our only duty to our fellow man is to leave him alone. If he cannot make his way in society, it's clearly his own fault. Funny how we all have a right to property, but only extreme minorities actually has it.

Thus Locke is both a revolutionary and a conservative. An enlightener, and a charlatan. A man of liberty and a man who sanctions owning humans. Despite his contradictory nature, he earns a small round of applause for those in favor of democracy. Locke is convinced that legislation can only be consented to when it passed by a majority, and not by a king. A king is literally in the state of war at all times, a man who sets the law, but completely operates outside it.

In regards to the essay on liberation, it's a perfect example of what Zizek refers to as Liberalism's inability to tolerate what it deems extremism. That is, liberals pretend to be for an open society, of tolerance, and religious expression, until you encroach on what they deem to be intolerant, and radical. Locke thinks all religions ought to be tolerated, except Catholics and atheists. The Catholics are beholden to the pope and thus cannot be loyal to the society they live in. And atheists can lie. That's right, the reason you cannot trust atheists, is that they can lie. Stupid. One wonders how Locke didn't instantly realize everyone can lie!

Read Locke, and if you cannot generate a critique, you're long lost to liberal ideology. If you can generate a critique, socialism embraces you.

Jordan says

An excellent summary of the ideas and theories that compromise the society and culture of a capitalist republic. Though there are some details that one might dispute, it is clear that Locke is well-versed in his theories, and has an understanding of some of the truths behind human nature. An excellent place to start for anyone who is interested in beginning a study of Political Philosophy.

Christopher says

I'm reminded of Pastor Wilson's comment: "The only difference between salad and garbage is timing." Locke was a reasonably clever philosopher whose innovative thinking on government and church probably *was* timely, but his work is looking rather brown and limp right about now. He couldn't have predicted Secularism, and it has sucker-punched his philosophy. He assumes Christianity (a safe assumption at the time), but his belief that we can find morality and understand government through natural reason has aged like milk. Likewise, his *Letter Concerning Toleration* was probably a God-send at the time, but it's almost poisonous now. So overall, good in its own way, but time has not been kind.
