

John Locke Part I – *Second Treatise on Government*

Faith and Law Intern Reading Group

BACKGROUND

Are faith and politics separate spheres or connected in some way? What attitude should a Christian have toward secular politics?

These are the questions of political theology – the study and understanding of how one’s deeply held religious beliefs influence one’s views about politics. Throughout Christian history, the tension between politics and religion has led to serious conflict. This conflict continues today in the United States and around the world.

Following a discussion on Augustine’s two spheres concept from *City of God* and Thomas Aquinas’ understanding of the law as explained in the *Summa Theologica*, we turn to John Locke to gain perspective on the role of religion in the formation of natural right theory and liberalism.

John Locke (1632-1704) was an English philosopher during the Enlightenment known for his monumental influence in the development of liberalism and social contract theory, among other things. That is to say, he argued that government is legitimate only if its sovereignty comes from the people, and that all men are free, equal and have a natural right to things like life, liberty and property.

A dedicated member of the Anglican church, religion played a role in influencing Locke’s beliefs. During his lifetime there were significant struggles between the Church of England, nonconformists (various other protestant denominations), and Catholics. This led Locke to write about the idea of separation of church and state as a means for peace. (We’ll read *A Letter Concerning Toleration* next time!) Alongside these religious struggles, the political structure changed in 1689 with the development of a Bill of Rights that limited the power of the king.

Locke’s philosophy had a monumental impact on the Founders of America. The *Second Treatise of Government* recounts Locke’s understanding of legitimate government and the worth of the individual.

Excerpts from [*Second Treatise of Government*](#)

The beginning of society

GOD having made man such a creature, that in his own judgment, it was not good for him to be alone, put him under strong obligations of necessity, convenience, and inclination to drive him into society, as well as fitted him with understanding and language to continue and enjoy it...

What state men are naturally in

To understand political power right, and derive it from its original, we must consider, what state all men are naturally in, and that is, a state of perfect **freedom** to order their actions, and dispose of their possessions and persons, as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of nature, without asking leave, or depending upon the will of any other man.

A state also of **equality**, wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another; there being nothing more evident, than that creatures of the same species and rank, promiscuously born to all the same advantages of nature, and the use of the same faculties, should also be equal one amongst another without subordination or subjection, unless the lord and master of them all should, by any manifest declaration of his will, set one above another, and confer on him, by an evident and clear appointment, an undoubted right to dominion and sovereignty.

Reason, the Law of Nature

But though this be a state of liberty, yet it is not a state of license: though man in that state have an uncontrollable liberty to dispose of his person or possessions, yet he has not liberty to destroy himself, or so much as any creature in his possession, but where some nobler use than its bare preservation calls for it. 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: for men being all the workmanship of one omnipotent, and infinitely wise maker; all the servants of one sovereign master, sent into the world by his order, and about his business; they are his property, whose workmanship they are, made to last during his, not one another's pleasure: and being furnished with like faculties, sharing all in one community of nature, there cannot be supposed any such subordination among us, that may authorize us to destroy one another, as if we were made for one another's uses, as the inferior ranks of creatures are for our's.

Everyone, as he is bound to preserve himself, and not to quit his station willfully, so by the like reason, when his own preservation comes not in competition, ought he, as much as he can, to preserve the rest of mankind, and may not, unless it be to do justice on an offender, take away, or impair the life, or what tends to the preservation of the life, the liberty, health, limb, or goods of another.

Justice in the State of Nature

And that all men may be restrained from invading others rights, and from doing hurt to one another, and the law of nature be observed, which wills the peace and preservation of all mankind, the execution of the law of nature is, in that state, put into every man's hands, whereby everyone has a right to punish the transgressors of that law to such a degree... if *anyone* in the state of nature may punish another for any evil he has done, *everyone* may do so. For in that state of perfect equality, where naturally there is no superiority or jurisdiction of one over another, what any may do in prosecution of that law, everyone must needs have a right to do.

And thus, in the state of nature, one man comes by a power over another; but yet no absolute or arbitrary power, to use a criminal, when he has got him in his hands, according to the passionate heats, or boundless extravagancy of his own will; but only to retribute to him, so far as calm reason and conscience dictate, what is proportionate to his transgression, which is so much as may serve for **reparation and restraint**; for these two are the only reasons, why one man may lawfully do harm to another, which is that we call punishment.

In transgressing the law of nature, the offender declares himself to live by another rule than that of reason and common equity, which is that measure God has set to the actions of men, for their mutual security. So, he becomes dangerous to mankind, the tie, which is to secure them from injury and violence, being slighted and broken by him. Which being a trespass against the whole species, and the peace and safety of it, provided for by the law of nature, every man upon this score, **by the right he has to preserve mankind in general**, may restrain, or where it is necessary, destroy things noxious to them, and so may bring such evil on anyone who has transgressed that law... And in the case, and upon this ground, **every man has a right to punish the offender and be executioner of the law of nature.**

The role of government...and Locke roasts monarchs

To this strange doctrine, viz. That in the state of nature everyone has the executive power of the law of nature, I doubt not but it will be objected, that it is unreasonable for men to be judges in their own cases, that self-love will make men partial to themselves and their friends: and on the other side, that ill nature, passion and revenge will carry them too far in punishing others; and hence nothing but confusion and disorder will follow, and that therefore **God has certainly appointed government to restrain the partiality and violence of men.**

I easily grant, that civil government is the proper remedy for the inconveniencies of the state of nature, which must certainly be great, where men may be judges in their own case, since it is easy to be imagined, that he who was so unjust as to do his brother an injury, will scarce be so just as to condemn himself for it. I shall desire those who make this objection, to remember, that **absolute monarchs** are but men. If government is to be the remedy of those evils, which necessarily follow from men's being judges in their own cases, and the state of nature is therefore not to be endured, I desire to know what kind of government that is, and how much better it is

than the state of nature, where one man, commanding a multitude, has the liberty to be judge in his own case, and may do to all his subjects whatever he pleases, without the least liberty to anyone to question or control those who execute his pleasure? and in whatsoever he doth, whether led by reason, mistake or passion, must be submitted to? much better it is in the state of nature, wherein men are not bound to submit to the unjust will of another: and if he that judges, judges amiss in his own, or any other case, he is answerable for it to the rest of mankind.

Entering political society

Men being, as has been said, by nature, all free, equal, and independent, no one can be put out of this estate, and subjected to the political power of another, without his own consent. **The only way whereby anyone divests himself of his natural liberty, and puts on the bonds of civil society, is by agreeing with other men to join and unite into a community** for their comfortable, safe, and peaceable living one amongst another, in a secure enjoyment of their properties, and a greater security against any, that are not of it.

The chief end of government

If man in the state of nature be so free, as has been said; if he be absolute lord of his own person and possessions, equal to the greatest, and subject to no body, why will he part with his freedom? why will he give up this empire, and subject himself to the dominion and control of any other power? To which it is obvious to answer, that though in the state of nature he has such a right, yet the enjoyment of it is very uncertain, and constantly exposed to the invasion of others... This makes him willing to quit a condition, which, however free, is full of fears and continual dangers, and it is not without reason, that he seeks out, and is willing to join in society with others, who are already united, or have a mind to unite, for the mutual preservation of their lives, liberties and estates, which I call by the general name, property.

The great and chief end, therefore, of men's uniting into commonwealths, and putting themselves under government, is the preservation of their property.