

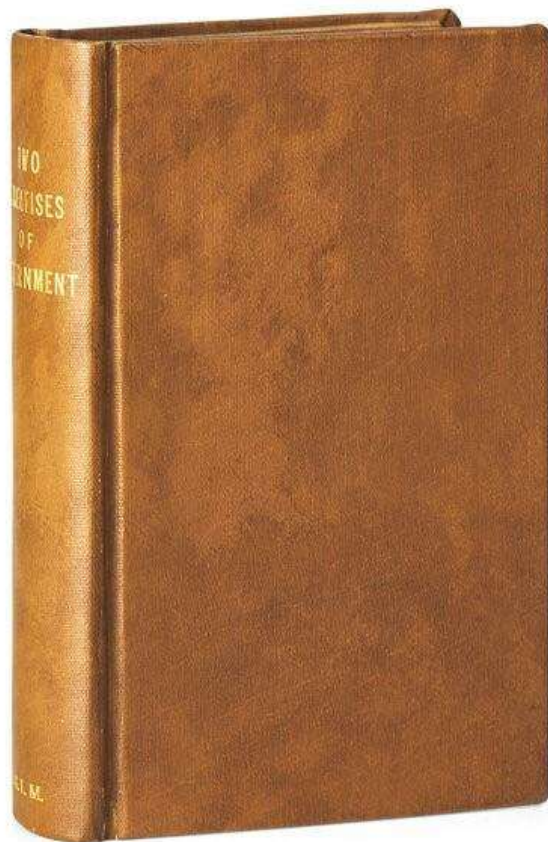
# **"Two Treatises on Government (written 1660, published 1689) by John Locke": A Canonical Book:**

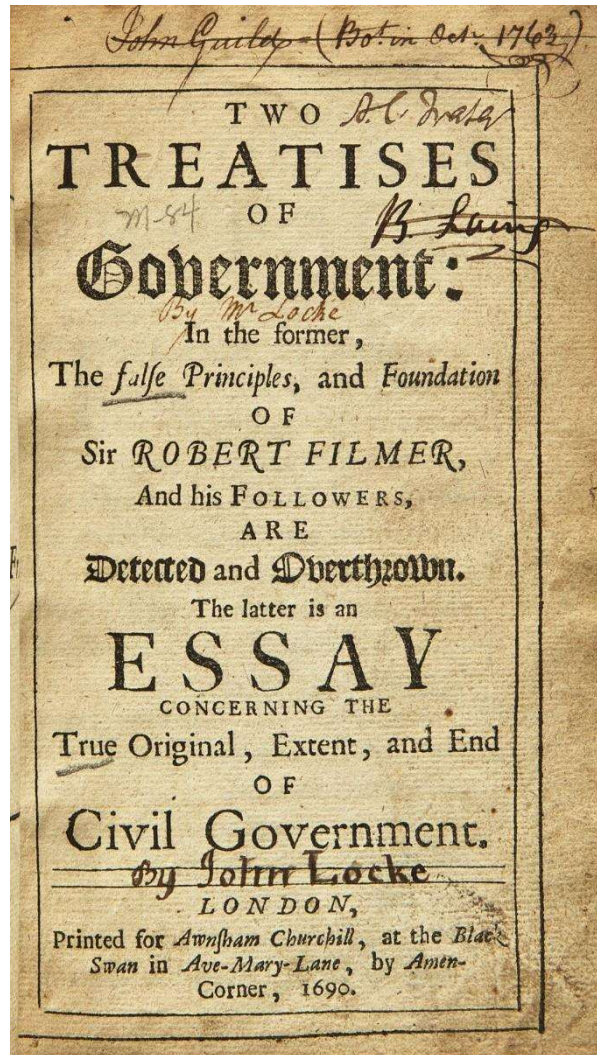
Curated by Stephen A Batman

Essay created Wednesday, April 16, 2025.

## **Summary of this Particular Rare First Edition**

**John Locke, Two Treatises on Government, 1660**





## **“MEN ARE BY NATURE FREE AND EQUAL, AND THAT PEOPLE HAVE THE RIGHT TO PURSUE LIFE, LIBERTY, AND PROPERTY.”**

London: Printed for Awnsham Churchill, 1690 (but 1689). First edition (with quire Q in second, of two, settings, per Yolton/Laslett). 8vo. (xii), 464, 269-271 pp.; without final errata leaf ("usually" found, per Yolton). Title-page within double rule; License leaf, dated August 23, 1689; sectional title-page for Book II.

Modern tan cloth, titled in gilt on upper spine, "G.L.M." in gilt on lower spine; all edges trimmed; License leaf repaired in gutter; three ownership signatures on title-page (near-contemporary and later): "John Guild (Bot. in Octr. 1763)", "A.C. Fraser", "B. Laing"; Locke's name supplied twice in manuscript on title-page; scattered but extensive modern pencil underlining, and some pencil marginalia; some contemporary underlining in ink; "IB" added in contemporary manuscript at bottom of II; repair bottom edge Cc3; scattered light spotting to text.

From the library of German-American cultural and social historian George L. Mosse (1918-99), and with his initials in gilt at foot of spine. Yolton 29; Laslett 1; ESTC R2930; Wing L-2766; *Printing and the Mind of Man* 163

Very rare first edition of John Locke's foundational text on civil society and the nature of government. Published at the end of 1689 in an edition of likely only 1,000 copies. The first part of Locke's work is a refutation of Robert Filmer's 1680 work *Patriarcha*, defending the divine right of kings, while the second part delineates Locke's influential ideas regarding the origin and purposes of civil government. Locke's argument that men are by nature free and equal, and that people have the right to life, liberty, and property, would provide the intellectual bedrock for the American and French Revolutions.

Philosophy] (Locke, John). *Two Treatises of Government: In the former, The false Principles, and Foundation of Sir Robert Filmer; And his Followers, Are Detected and Overthrown. The latter is an Essay Concerning the True Original, Extent, and End of Civil Government*

## **Introduction**

John Locke's "Two Treatises of Government" stands as one of the most influential political texts in Western philosophy, fundamentally reshaping how we conceptualize government, individual rights, and political legitimacy. Though published anonymously in 1689, scholars believe Locke composed much of the work between 1679 and 1683, during a period of intense political turmoil in England. The publication of the treatises coincided with the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution of 1688-89, which saw the overthrow of King James II and the establishment of a constitutional monarchy under William III and Mary II. This timing was not coincidental; Locke's work served as a philosophical justification for the revolution, articulating why the people had the right to remove a monarch who violated their trust.

The political climate surrounding the publication was defined by the Exclusion Crisis (1679-1681), during which Locke's patron, Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Earl of Shaftesbury, led the

Whig effort to exclude James II, a Catholic, from succession to the throne. Locke's close association with Shaftesbury placed him at the center of radical politics, and his political writings emerged from this context of religious and political conflict. The Two Treatises were written as a response to Sir Robert Filmer's "Patriarcha," which defended the divine right of kings and absolute monarchy. Locke's motivation was to dismantle Filmer's arguments and establish a new foundation for political authority based on consent rather than divine right or patriarchal power.

Economically, England was experiencing significant changes with the rise of commercial interests and the expansion of property ownership. Locke's emphasis on property rights reflected these developments, as he sought to provide a philosophical framework that would protect individual property from arbitrary governmental interference. Culturally, the work emerged during the early Enlightenment, a period characterized by growing emphasis on reason, natural law, and individual rights. Locke's treatises embodied these Enlightenment values, challenging traditional authority and advocating for a more rational approach to political organization based on natural rights and the consent of the governed.

## **The Author**

John Locke was born on August 29, 1632, in Wrington, Somerset, England, to Puritan parents. His father worked as a clerk to the local Justice of the Peace and later served as a cavalry captain during the English Civil War. This early exposure to both legal matters and political conflict likely influenced Locke's later philosophical interests. His education began at the prestigious Westminster School in London, followed by Christ Church at the University of Oxford in 1652, where he earned both bachelor's and master's degrees by 1658. Though the classical curriculum frustrated him, Locke developed interests in medicine, natural philosophy, and the modern works of thinkers like René Descartes.

Locke's life took a decisive turn when he met Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Earl of Shaftesbury, who became his patron and employed him as a personal physician. This relationship placed Locke at the center of Whig politics, as Shaftesbury was a founder of the Whig movement that opposed absolute monarchy. Through Shaftesbury, Locke gained access to political circles and developed his revolutionary political ideas. His association with Shaftesbury, however, eventually forced him into exile in the Netherlands in 1683, following accusations of involvement in the Rye House Plot, a conspiracy to assassinate King Charles II. Though his involvement was never proven, Locke remained in exile until after the Glorious Revolution.

Upon his return to England after William and Mary ascended to the throne, Locke published his major works, including the "Two Treatises of Government," "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding," and "A Letter Concerning Toleration." These works established him as a leading intellectual of his time and a key figure in the Enlightenment. Beyond his political philosophy, Locke made significant contributions to epistemology, religious tolerance, and educational theory. He never married and died on October 28, 1704, at the age of 72 in Essex, England, leaving behind a philosophical legacy that would profoundly influence political thought for centuries to come.

## Why this is a Canonical Book

"Two Treatises of Government" must be included in the canon of essential books for American political thought for several compelling reasons. First and foremost, Locke's work provided the philosophical foundation for the American Revolution and the establishment of the United States. His ideas about natural rights, consent of the governed, and the right to revolution directly inspired the Declaration of Independence, with Thomas Jefferson drawing heavily from Locke's concepts. The famous phrase "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" is a clear adaptation of Locke's emphasis on "life, liberty, and property" as fundamental natural rights that governments must protect. Indeed, Jefferson himself acknowledged Locke as part of his "trinity of immortals" alongside Newton and Bacon, and considered Locke's Second Treatise one of the best books ever written on politics.

Secondly, Locke's conception of limited government and separation of powers profoundly influenced the structure of American government as outlined in the Constitution. His insistence that governmental power should be constrained by law and that no one, not even rulers, should be above the law became central to American constitutionalism. The American system of checks and balances reflects Locke's concern about the concentration of power, as he warned that those who make laws should not also be responsible for executing them, lest they exempt themselves from the laws they create.

Thirdly, Locke's theory of property rights has been fundamental to American economic thinking. His labor theory of property—that individuals acquire property rights by mixing their labor with natural resources—provided a moral justification for private ownership that has been central to American capitalism. The protection of property rights remains a cornerstone of American jurisprudence, with Locke's ideas continuing to influence debates about economic liberty and the proper scope of government regulation.

Fourthly, Locke's advocacy for religious toleration, articulated in his "Letter Concerning Toleration," laid groundwork for the First Amendment's protection of religious freedom. His argument that church and state should be separate institutions with different purposes helped shape American conceptions of religious liberty and the proper relationship between government and religion.

Finally, Locke's social contract theory—that legitimate government derives from the consent of the governed—remains the bedrock principle of American democracy. The idea that government exists to serve the people, not the other way around, and that citizens have the right to alter or abolish governments that fail to protect their rights, is perhaps Locke's most enduring contribution to American political culture. This principle continues to inform American understandings of political legitimacy and the relationship between citizens and their government.

In sum, Locke's "Two Treatises" is canonical because it articulates the philosophical principles that underpin American governance, from individual rights and limited government to consent of the governed and the right to revolution. Its ideas have been woven into the fabric of American

political identity and continue to shape debates about the proper scope and purpose of government in a free society.

## Five Timeless Quotes

1. "Being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions."

This foundational statement from Locke's Second Treatise encapsulates his conception of natural law and natural rights. Its relevance today is profound as it establishes the moral basis for both individual liberty and the limits of that liberty. In contemporary debates about everything from healthcare access to gun control, this principle reminds us that freedom must be balanced with responsibility toward others. The quote establishes the philosophical groundwork for modern human rights frameworks, suggesting that all people possess inherent dignity that must be respected. In an age of increasing polarization, Locke's emphasis on equality and the obligation not to harm others provides a common ethical foundation that transcends partisan divides, offering a standard by which to evaluate both individual actions and public policies.

2. "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."

This quote articulates Locke's essential principle that legitimate political authority derives from consent. Its contemporary relevance is evident in ongoing global struggles for democracy and self-determination. In established democracies like the United States, it serves as a reminder that government authority is not self-justifying but must continually earn the consent of the governed through fair representation and respect for rights. This principle challenges modern forms of authoritarianism and underscores the importance of meaningful political participation. In an era of declining trust in institutions, Locke's emphasis on consent reminds us that political legitimacy ultimately rests on the will of the people, not merely on tradition or force. This principle also informs debates about international relations, suggesting that external powers cannot legitimately impose governance systems without the consent of affected populations.

3. "Whensoever therefore the legislative shall transgress this fundamental rule of society; and either by ambition, fear, folly or corruption, endeavour to grasp themselves, or put into the hands of any other, an absolute power over the lives, liberties, and estates of the people; by this breach of trust they forfeit the power the people had put into their hands for quite contrary ends, and it devolves to the people, who have a right to resume their original liberty, and, by the establishment of a new legislative, (such as they shall think fit) provide for their own safety and security, which is the end for which they are in society."

This powerful assertion of the right to revolution remains profoundly relevant in today's world. It establishes that government power is a trust that can be revoked when betrayed, providing a moral framework for resistance to tyranny. In contemporary contexts, this principle informs movements against authoritarian regimes worldwide and reminds established democracies that

governmental legitimacy depends on respecting fundamental rights. The quote's emphasis on government as a means to secure safety and liberty, not as an end in itself, provides a standard for evaluating political systems. In an age of expanding executive power in many democracies, Locke's warning about the dangers of concentrated authority offers a timely caution. This principle also underscores the importance of constitutional safeguards and independent institutions that can check governmental overreach.

4. "As usurpation is the exercise of power, which another hath a right to; so tyranny is the exercise of power beyond right, which no body can have a right to."

This distinction between usurpation and tyranny remains essential for understanding political legitimacy. Today, it helps us distinguish between different forms of governmental abuse—illegitimate seizure of power versus legitimate authority exercised unjustly. This framework is valuable for analyzing contemporary challenges to democracy, from military coups to elected leaders who expand their powers beyond constitutional limits. The quote reminds us that even democratically elected governments can become tyrannical if they exceed the proper bounds of their authority. In an era of democratic backsliding in many parts of the world, Locke's clear-eyed analysis of how power can be abused provides a valuable analytical tool. This principle also underscores the importance of constitutional constraints and the rule of law in preventing the slide from legitimate governance to tyranny.

5. "Wherever Law ends, Tyranny begins."

This succinct statement captures Locke's commitment to the rule of law as the essential bulwark against tyranny. Its contemporary relevance is evident in ongoing struggles worldwide to establish and maintain legal systems that constrain arbitrary power. In established democracies, it reminds us that respect for legal constraints is not merely a procedural matter but essential to freedom itself. The quote challenges claims that emergency circumstances justify setting aside legal protections, suggesting instead that such moments are precisely when legal safeguards are most needed. In an age of security threats and technological change, Locke's principle warns against sacrificing legal protections for expediency. This fundamental insight also informs international efforts to establish rule of law in developing democracies, recognizing that legal constraints on power are not Western impositions but essential protections for universal human rights.

## **Five Major Ideas**

### **1. Natural Rights and Natural Law**

Central to Locke's political philosophy is the concept of natural rights—inherent, inalienable rights that all humans possess by virtue of their humanity. Locke identifies these primary natural rights as life, liberty, and property. These rights exist prior to government and are not granted by any political authority but derive from natural law, which Locke understands as a moral code discernible through reason. Natural law mandates that individuals not only preserve themselves but also, when possible, preserve the rest of humanity. This creates both rights and



responsibilities: individuals have the right to defend their life, liberty, and property, but also the responsibility not to infringe upon others' rights.

This concept fundamentally transformed political thinking by establishing that governmental legitimacy depends on protecting these pre-political rights. Government does not create rights but exists to secure them. When government fails in this essential purpose, it loses its legitimacy. This idea provided a revolutionary standard for evaluating political systems, suggesting that governments should be judged not by their pedigree or tradition but by how well they protect natural rights. Locke's natural rights theory thus established a moral framework for limiting governmental power and justifying resistance to tyranny, ideas that would profoundly influence revolutionary movements from the 18th century onward.

## **2. Consent as the Basis of Political Legitimacy**

Locke's social contract theory posits that legitimate political authority derives solely from the consent of the governed. In the state of nature, individuals are free and equal, subject to no one's political authority. They enter civil society by voluntarily giving up certain rights—specifically, the right to enforce the law of nature—in exchange for the protections that organized society provides. This consent is the only legitimate foundation for political power; no one can rightfully be subjected to political authority without their agreement.

This principle fundamentally challenged prevailing notions of political legitimacy based on divine right or patriarchal authority. For Locke, political power is not natural or divinely ordained but artificial—created by human agreement for specific, limited purposes. This idea revolutionized thinking about political authority by making it contingent on popular consent rather than tradition, force, or divine sanction. It established that government exists to serve the people, not the reverse, and that political leaders are trustees of the people's rights, not their masters. This conception of political legitimacy as resting on consent has become the foundation of modern democratic theory, establishing popular sovereignty as the essential basis of legitimate governance.

## **3. Limited Government and Separation of Powers**

Locke articulates a vision of government that is inherently limited in its scope and powers. Since government exists to protect natural rights, its authority extends only to what is necessary for that purpose. Government that exceeds these bounds becomes tyrannical. Locke specifically warns against concentrating power in the same hands, arguing that those who make laws should not also execute them, as this creates incentives for self-dealing and corruption. This insight laid the groundwork for the separation of powers doctrine later developed by Montesquieu and incorporated into the American constitutional system.

Locke's limited government principle establishes that governmental power is not absolute but constrained by its purpose—protecting rights—and by the consent that legitimizes it. This creates both procedural and substantive limits on government: procedurally, government must operate according to established laws that apply equally to all; substantively, it cannot violate the natural rights it exists to protect. This conception of limited government has been essential to



constitutional democracy, establishing that even majority rule must respect certain boundaries. Locke's emphasis on limited government continues to inform debates about the proper scope of governmental authority in areas from economic regulation to national security.

#### **4. Property Rights and Labor Theory of Value**

Locke's theory of property is one of his most distinctive and influential contributions. He argues that individuals acquire property rights by mixing their labor with natural resources. In the state of nature, God gave the world to humanity in common, but individuals can appropriate parts of it by adding their labor, thereby creating value. This appropriation is legitimate as long as "enough and as good" is left for others and the appropriated resources are not wasted. With the introduction of money, however, individuals can accumulate more than they can personally use without violating natural law, as money does not spoil and its accumulation is based on tacit consent.

This theory provided a moral justification for private property that did not depend on governmental grant or social convention but on natural right. It suggested that property rights exist prior to government and thus limit governmental authority over economic matters. Locke's labor theory of property also implied a moral dimension to economic activity, suggesting that labor creates legitimate entitlement. This conception of property rights has profoundly influenced economic thinking, particularly in market-oriented societies, providing philosophical grounding for economic liberty. At the same time, Locke's provisos about waste and leaving "enough and as good" for others have informed critiques of unlimited accumulation and arguments for distributive justice.

#### **5. Right of Revolution**

Perhaps Locke's most radical idea is his defense of the right of revolution. He argues that when government betrays the trust placed in it by violating natural rights or acting contrary to the public good, it places itself in a state of war with the people. In such circumstances, the people have not only the right but the duty to resist and, if necessary, replace the government with one that will better secure their rights. This right is not triggered by minor governmental missteps but by a "long train of abuses" that demonstrates a design to reduce the people to despotism.

This principle established a moral framework for resistance to tyranny that has inspired revolutionary movements worldwide. It suggests that political obligation is conditional on governmental performance—citizens owe allegiance to government only insofar as it protects their rights and serves the common good. This idea fundamentally challenged notions of absolute sovereignty and passive obedience, establishing instead that ultimate political authority resides with the people. Locke's right of revolution has provided moral justification for numerous liberation movements while also serving as a check on governmental power in established democracies, where the possibility of legitimate resistance reminds those in power of the conditional nature of their authority.

# Three Major Controversies

## 1. Locke's Views on Religious Toleration and Their Limits

While Locke is celebrated for his advocacy of religious toleration, his views have generated significant controversy due to their limitations. In "A Letter Concerning Toleration," Locke argues for the separation of church and state and tolerance for different Christian denominations. However, he explicitly excludes atheists from toleration, stating that atheism is "inimical" to society. This exclusion stems from his belief that without belief in God, there is no higher authority to which individuals answer, potentially undermining moral and social order.

This limitation has provoked criticism from both religious and secular perspectives. Religious critics have questioned whether Locke's toleration, rooted more in pragmatic concerns about social stability than in recognition of conscience rights, provides adequate protection for religious freedom. Secular critics have pointed to the exclusion of atheists as revealing the limits of Enlightenment liberalism and its failure to fully embrace pluralism. This controversy highlights tensions within liberal thought between universal principles and particular cultural assumptions.

The controversy continues in contemporary debates about religious freedom and its limits. Questions about whether religious beliefs can justify exemptions from generally applicable laws, whether secular states can accommodate religious diversity without privileging particular traditions, and how to balance religious liberty with other rights all have roots in the tensions within Locke's approach to toleration. His simultaneous defense of religious freedom and exclusion of atheists exemplifies the ongoing challenge of defining the proper scope of toleration in diverse societies.

## 2. Locke's Theory of Property and Its Implications for Colonialism

Locke's theory of property has generated intense controversy due to its potential justification for colonial appropriation. His argument that individuals acquire property rights by mixing their labor with natural resources, and that uncultivated land is essentially "waste," has been interpreted as providing moral cover for European colonization of indigenous lands. Critics argue that by defining property primarily through European-style agriculture, Locke delegitimized indigenous relationships to land that did not involve such cultivation, effectively declaring their territories "unowned" and available for appropriation.

This controversy has been amplified by Locke's personal involvement in colonial enterprises, including his role in drafting the Constitution of Carolina and his investments in the slave-trading Royal African Company. These connections have led some scholars to interpret his political theory not as a universal defense of natural rights but as a particular justification for British imperial interests. This reading sees Locke's emphasis on property rights not as an emancipatory doctrine but as an ideological tool for dispossession.

The controversy continues in contemporary debates about indigenous land rights, reparations for historical injustices, and the moral foundations of property systems. Questions about whether and

how to recognize non-Western conceptions of land relationship, how to address historical appropriations justified by Lockean principles, and whether liberal property regimes can accommodate communal ownership all reflect ongoing engagement with the problematic aspects of Locke's property theory. This controversy highlights tensions between Locke's universal natural rights claims and the particular historical contexts in which those claims have been deployed.

### **3. Locke's Conception of Equality and Its Limitations**

While Locke's assertion that all humans are "by nature free, equal and independent" has been foundational for democratic theory, his conception of equality has generated controversy due to its apparent limitations in practice. Critics note that despite his theoretical commitment to equality, Locke did not extend full political rights to women, the property-less, or enslaved people. His emphasis on property ownership as central to political participation has been interpreted as restricting full citizenship to property-owning men, effectively creating a hierarchical society despite theoretical equality.

This controversy has been particularly acute regarding Locke's views on slavery. While he argues against slavery in principle in the Second Treatise, declaring that no one can consent to absolute power over themselves, he also drafted the Constitution of Carolina, which permitted slavery, and invested in slave-trading enterprises. This apparent contradiction has led some scholars to argue that Locke's conception of natural rights was never truly universal but implicitly limited to Europeans or to particular social classes.

The controversy continues in contemporary debates about the inclusivity of liberal democracy and the relationship between formal equality and substantive inequality. Questions about whether political equality requires economic equality, how to address historical exclusions from citizenship, and whether liberal rights frameworks can adequately address structural inequalities all reflect ongoing engagement with the limitations of Locke's equality concept. This controversy highlights tensions between Locke's universal theoretical claims and the particular exclusions that have characterized liberal societies in practice.

## **In Closing**

Civic-minded Americans should read "Two Treatises of Government" because it provides the philosophical foundation for understanding the American political experiment. Locke's ideas about natural rights, consent of the governed, limited government, and the right to revolution directly informed the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, making his work essential for comprehending the principles upon which American democracy was built. By engaging with Locke's arguments, citizens gain insight into not just what American government is, but why it is structured as it is and what purposes it is meant to serve.

In an age of increasing polarization and declining civic knowledge, Locke's work offers a common reference point for understanding shared political values that transcend partisan divides. His emphasis on government as a trust created to protect rights provides a standard for evaluating political leadership that citizens across the ideological spectrum can appreciate. His

insistence that legitimate authority derives from consent reminds us of the fundamental importance of democratic participation and the responsibility of citizens to hold their representatives accountable.

Locke's nuanced analysis of the relationship between liberty and authority remains profoundly relevant to contemporary political challenges. His recognition that freedom requires both protection from others' interference and constraints on governmental power offers wisdom for navigating tensions between security and liberty, individual rights and common good, that continue to define American politics. His defense of property rights alongside his concern for the public welfare provides perspective on ongoing debates about economic policy and the proper scope of regulation.

Moreover, by engaging with Locke's work directly rather than through secondary interpretations, citizens can develop their own informed understanding of foundational political principles rather than relying on partisan characterizations. This intellectual independence is essential for thoughtful civic participation. The controversies and limitations in Locke's thought also provide valuable opportunities for critical reflection on the unfinished work of realizing America's founding ideals, particularly regarding inclusion and equality.

Finally, at a time when democratic institutions face significant challenges both domestically and globally, Locke's passionate defense of liberty against arbitrary power and his insistence that government exists to serve the people rather than the reverse offer a powerful reminder of what is at stake in the preservation of constitutional democracy. His work inspires renewed commitment to the principles that have sustained American democracy while also providing intellectual tools for its ongoing improvement. For all these reasons, "Two Treatises of Government" remains essential reading for citizens committed to thoughtful participation in America's continuing democratic experiment

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