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*I pledge my honor I’ve abided by the Stevens Honor System.*

A Lockean System of Government

John Locke’s Second Treatise on Civil Government was one of Locke’s most influential works. It introduced his theories on how people act in their natural state, and introduced his concept of the liberal political society. He talked about how families form even while people are struggling for survival all on their own, how they eventually consent to a social contract and enter a political society, and how that political society functions. Locke’s Treatise could be seen as a rebuttal to Thomas Hobbes’s Leviathan, as the two works present vastly different answers to the same set of questions: how do people act in a state of total anarchy, what basis are governments formed, and for what purpose are those governments formed? While no theory is completely accurate, I find myself agreeing with most of Locke’s answers to these questions, though I have a few issues with them, particularly regarding his belief in a universal set of morals that apply to everyone in their natural state, his advocacy for the power of the majority, and his apathy towards the lower class. Even with the issues I have with Locke’s theories, he still presents a compelling case for what could be, with a couple of tweaks, one of the best systems of government the world has ever seen.

Locke begins his Treatise by discussing how he believes people lived in a way of life with no governing force of any kind. He calls this state the “state of nature.” In this state, he argues, people live in familial units, comprised of a father and a mother, the leaders of the family, and a number of children. He then goes to say that these families would still be subject to what he calls “natural law:” a set of ethical rules imposed upon each and every person by virtue of having been created by a higher being. He justifies these laws by comparing them to someone being prosecuted in a foreign country; the laws of that country would apply to them even though they weren’t the laws of the society they consented to participating in. These rules, Locke says, would dictate that all punishments fit their associated crimes. All of these ideas are in great contrast to Hobbes’s theories on the state of nature: Hobbes believes that all people in the state of nature are in a state of total war against each other in competition for the resources they need to survive. As such, there are no laws to break in the state of nature, and the strong will dominate the weak. I am of the opinion that both of these theories hold some element of truth to them, but neither is completely accurate in practice. I believe all humans operate in a manner that best serves their interests; in this, both Locke and Hobbes would probably agree. It’s pretty evident that the first and most important priority for each and every human is day to day survival. Finding food to eat, water to drink, and a place to sleep that protects them from the elements is vital to their continued survival. Past those priorities, one of the biggest long term goals for any person is to mate with someone of the opposite gender and create offspring, who will live on even after they have passed away. This long term goal makes the creation of a family a pursuit that is in the best interest of both a man and a woman. These families, I believe, would operate essentially as Locke describes them; the parents would care for the children and would operate for the small group’s best interest, while the kids would stay with the parents until they were mature enough to go out into the world on their own. However, I believe Hobbes’s ideas start to become relevant when we look at the family’s place in the rest of their environment. Families could potentially become very protective of their own, and would use any means necessary to secure resources for themselves. In this way, families could act as Hobbes predicted individuals would act in their state of nature. Locke believes this would be counteracted by his “natural law,” but I don’t find that idea very convincing. In a state of nature where people are constantly looking out for their own best interests, I don’t believe a universal set of morals could be imposed upon everyone without a governing power enforcing them. I’m inclined to believe Locke’s vision of a familial structure, as it benefits everyone involved, but less inclined to believe his vision of interactions between other families in the state of nature. That, I believe, would take a more Hobbesian turn.

Locke’s theory states that people leave the state of nature and enter a social contract by relinquishing some of their freedoms and liberties to a sovereign power, and do so because it is beneficial to them and to the people around them. By placing power in the hands of an executive authority, their property is protected, and they can feel safer because the entire society is subject to the same set of rules. I agree with Locke on this subject; excluding conquest and tyranny, the primary reason people enter a political society is to assure their safety and their property. Locke also brings up a good definition of property, using an apple as an example. He starts by reasonably claiming that people own their own bodies, and, by extension, they own the labor done by their bodies on other things. In the apple example, once a person plucks an apple, it becomes theirs by the labor of them plucking it from its tree. There wouldn’t be much of a way to protect your claims to your property without some sort of higher power stepping in, and political society provides exactly that. Overall, Locke talks about three major things a political society has that are absent in the state of nature. First, he discusses the laws of that society, which he describes as “established”, and “well-known.” Having established laws lets everyone know what they can and cannot do, and helps people understand the kinds of things they are protected from. Next, Locke describes one part of society as an impartial judge, which would be responsible for deeming accused lawbreakers innocent or guilty, and for prescribing a punishment according to the crime. Finally, political society has the power to carry out the punishments it prescribes. These things comprise the judicial portion of the society, which is crucial to its founding and continued operation.

Locke continues and talks about what it means for a person to relinquish their rights for the privilege of entering liberal society. For practicality, a person submitting to the will of a society is submitting to the will of the majority; liberal society operates for their benefit. This point in particular is open to abuse, and could be a potential flaw in his theory; catering to no one but the majority can lead to what is known as “the tyranny of the majority,” where the greatest percentage of people has absolute power over the smaller groups. Moving past that, another point for concern is brought up in people who aren’t property owners. Having little motivation to protect property, it would seem that by joining society they would be sacrificing their freedoms for little in return. Locke’s theory doesn’t cover much of this, simply insisting that, to protect people’s property, all people within a society must be subject to the same laws and restrictions. This applies to everyone, even people who lack property to protect. This imbalance has the potential to widen the gap between the wealthy and the less wealthy, and has in certain Lockean societies, like the United States. Locke’s theory of government paints a pretty picture of a functional government that benefits the majority of the people in it, but, like any good theory, has its fair share of flaws.

Locke’s structure for government has proven itself to be stable enough to support a country, as seen in the United States, but even the US didn’t take a pure Lockean system without making alterations and amendments. The first thing the founding fathers did upon ratification of the Constitution was amend it to prevent the possibility of a totally dominant majority wielding absolute power over the minority. Their first ten amendments are now known as the Bill of Rights, and are in place to restrict what the majority can do to the minority, in all cases. Certain actions in the highest parts of the government need a two-thirds majority to be put through, instead of a one-half majority. These kinds of amendments are in place to prevent a tyranny of the majority, but they alone don’t completely alleviate the problem. The US did little to address the growing gap in property between the upper and lower class, and it’s obvious, seeing the top one percent of people own the majority of the wealth, that that specific problem is still prevalent to this day. While I agree with many of Locke’s points, I do believe a few tweaks are needed to address some of its most glaring flaws. Firstly, a society should have a set of unalienable rights that cannot be violated by anyone in it, even if the majority wants to; the US did an amicable job seeing this flaw and implementing a fix for it early on. Secondly, to stifle the growth of the gap between classes, I believe taxes should be implemented on a scale that has poorer people paying less, and richer people paying more. A stricter tax code that would prevent richer people from avoiding taxes would bring more money into the government, which would then be used to help out people in the lower classes. This kind of system would benefit the majority, while not dramatically hurting the one percent minority that has plenty of wealth. These tweaks, I believe, would help make Locke’s system of government even more inclusive and effective in many situations.

Locke’s theories on the state of nature and on the liberal political society have left a mark that can still be seen in governments to this day. His concept of families sticking together and eventually consenting to a social contract and entering a mutually beneficial political society is a very convincing theory, though it does have its flaws. Many of his points are in contrast to another philosopher’s, Thomas Hobbes’s, theories about the same concepts. Hobbes takes a much more pessimistic view on human nature, theorizing that people seek nothing but conflict while in their state of nature, and need an absolute ruler to keep them in line. While no theory is completely accurate, I find myself mostly siding with Locke, except for a few instances, especially regarding his belief in a universal set of morals that exists while in the state of nature, his advocacy for the power of the majority that could lead to their eventual absolute rule in society, and his apathy towards the lower class that only serves to widen the gap between the more privileged and the less privileged. With a few small tweaks, I believe Locke’s system of government has the potential to be one of the strongest systems of government the world has ever seen.