

The Second Treatise of Government

John Locke

A biography of John Locke appears on p. 155.

This reading is from Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*, the treatise following the one in which he criticizes Robert Filmer's defense of the divine right of kings. Locke begins the *Second Treatise* by describing the "state of nature"—the condition that human beings are in before there is any government. People are free to do whatever they wish, provided their actions do not violate the "law of nature." The law of nature forbids harming others or taking their property, except as a way of punishing those who have broken the law of nature. (According to Locke, any transgressor of the law of nature may be punished by anyone.) Positively, the law of nature requires that a person preserve his or her own life and (except when doing so conflicts with self-preservation) the lives of others. People remain in this state of nature "till by their own consents they make themselves members of some politic society."

Political society arises when, through a "social contract," individuals transfer to the community their power to punish transgressors of the law of nature. Members of the community agree to abide by the decisions of the majority. The primary motive for people forming a political society, Locke explains, is to establish a fairer and more reliable way of preserving their property. Anticipating the objection that most people are born into a political society and do not formally enter into a social contract, Locke explains that consent can be tacit as well as explicit. In the final section, he shows how a social contract can be dissolved from without, by foreign conquest, or from within, when the rulers alter the legislature or abuse "the lives, liberties, or fortunes of the people."

CHAPTER II. OF THE STATE OF NATURE

To understand political power aright and derive it from its original,¹ 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, promiscuously² born to all the same advantages of nature and the use of the same faculties, should also be equal one among 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. . . .

¹original: origin. [D. C. ABEL]

²promiscuously: diversely. [D. C. ABEL]