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Educational materials for John Locke

INTRODUCTION TO JOHN LOCKE

In this article, Steven Forde illuminates the central debates surrounding John Locke, one of the founders of the liberal political philosophy upon which the [American Constitution](#) is based. The greatest controversy in Locke interpretation today is whether natural rights or natural law take precedence in his philosophy. Locke argues that even in the state of nature man is bound by natural laws and has a duty to respect the rights of others. However, he qualifies this notion by arguing that the individual has a duty to respect others' rights only when his own preservation is not threatened—and Locke can be read as suggesting that self-preservation is continually threatened. Because of this, some scholars have argued that Locke is not a natural law thinker at all. Instead, he is placed in a tradition with [Thomas Hobbes](#) where morality is based, not on duty, but on each individual's right to preserve himself. By prioritizing individual right, Locke places man in isolation, lacking any moral ties to others in society. Other interpretations of Locke, to the contrary, argue that Lockean rights imply mutual respect among individuals in a way unseen and unformulated by Locke's predecessor Hobbes. Those who do see Locke as a natural law thinker recognize that his theory of natural law is far more atomistic (or individualistic)—and therefore closer to that of Hobbes—than any previous theory of natural law. The debates surrounding Locke are central to understanding the character of liberalism, and a close study of Locke raises the question: can a rights-based society also incorporate an adequate and compelling account of responsibility?



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JOHN LOCKE

John Locke was born in the small Somerset village of Wrington on August 29, 1632. His mother died while he was an infant and his father, a country lawyer, died a few years thereafter. He was educated at the famous Westminster school from 1646 and at the University of Oxford from 1652 where his early training was in the classics (Greek, rhetoric, moral philosophy, etc.). In 1659 he was elected to a senior studentship at Christ Church, Oxford. In 1668, Locke was elected a fellow of the recently established Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge.

Through his friendship with Lord Ashley, who was to become the First Earl of Shaftesbury, Locke attained various governmental appointments. Political turmoil forced Locke to live abroad at various times, and it was during these exiles that he was able to write some of his most important works. However, when the political climate changed again in England after the Glorious Revolution, Locke returned and found favor with the new government. John Locke died at Oates, the country house of Lady and Lord Masham in Essex, on October 28th, 1704.

To read more about John Locke's life and works, see [this](#) encyclopedia article or visit TheGreatThinkers.org/Locke.



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GLOSSARY OF TERMS FOR LOCKE

acrimonious:

bitter and sharp in language or tone.

Cicero:

(106-43 B.C.) Roman statesman and consul. Marcus Tullius Cicero was a preeminent orator, lawyer, and moral and political philosopher. His extensive written legacy gives particular attention to the natural basis of justice and right. For more information on Cicero and his relationship to the natural law tradition, please see the section of this website on "[Cicero and the Natural Law](#)."

esoteric:

designed for or understood by the specially initiated alone; difficult to understand.

dichotomy:

a division into two mutually exclusive or contradictory groups or entities.

liberalism:

the political philosophy of individual rights and limited government on which the [American constitution](#) and all Western political systems today are based. Not to be confused with the notion of "liberalism" as understood in contemporary American politics.

Hugo Grotius:

(1583-1645) Dutch jurist and scholar who has been called the founder of international law, which he

grounded in natural law. For more information on Hugo Grotius and his relationship to the natural law

tradition, please see the section of this website on "[Natural Law and the Law of Nations](#)."

natural law:

the law that exists in nature, which man knows through reason. The kind of natural-law thinking prevalent in the pre-modern age was most particularly exemplified by Aquinas. It was characterized by an emphasis on laws rather than rights (see also [NATURAL RIGHT](#)) and by the idea that divine authority was the source of natural law.

natural right:

a power or privilege that people deserve by reason of their human nature, and which therefore is owed to them regardless of customs or positive laws to the contrary.

social contract:

an implicit or explicit agreement in which each individual must consent to give authority to the government. The purpose of the contract is to safeguard the rights of each citizen.

state of nature:

a hypothetical condition in which all human beings lived separately from one another before the creation of society or government through the voluntary consent of each individual. According to Locke,

men in the state of nature are free and equal.

Thomas Hobbes:

(1588-1679) An English philosopher particularly known for his political philosophy as published in his most famous work, *Leviathan*. The political theory that emerges in *Leviathan* provides the foundations for much of Western political philosophy with such concepts as “social contract theory,” “natural rights,” and an understanding of the human person as having “a perpetual desire for power after power that

ceaseth only in death.” For more information on Thomas Hobbes and his relationship to the natural law

tradition, please see the section of this website on "[Thomas Hobbes: From Classical Natural Law to](#)

[Modern Natural Rights](#).”



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OUTLINE OF THE ESSAY ON LOCKE

I. Introduction—John Locke.

A. A founder of liberal political philosophy.

1. He proposes individual rights and limited government.
2. His thought formed the basis of the [American constitution](#) and Western political systems.

B. His most important political work is the [Second Treatise of Government](#).

1. Therein he grounds his political philosophy in natural law.

II. Natural law and natural rights.

A. Natural law theories say that morality is fundamentally about man’s duty to follow the natural law.

B. [Thomas Hobbes](#) bases morality not on duty but on each individual’s right to preserve himself and to pursue his own good.

1. Man is by nature a solitary and independent creature in Hobbes’s “state of nature.”
2. Nature has made individuals independent and left man to fend for himself; nature has thus granted each person a right to fend for himself.
3. State of nature is a “war of all against all” without moral ties between persons.
4. Society is not natural, but the product of a social contract to which individuals must consent for their own safety

C. John Locke also speaks of a state of nature where men are free, equal, and independent. Men consent to give authority to the government in the social contract, and government must respect the rights of individuals.

III. Locke and Natural Law

A. In the *Second Treatise*, Locke says that men in the state of nature are free “within the bounds of the law of nature.” They have a duty to respect the rights of others, including the right of property, even within the state of nature.

B. Hobbes does not acknowledge this limitation on man’s liberty. Property is useless in the Hobbesian state of nature because individuals do not have the duty to respect others’ property.

IV. Locke and Natural Law/Natural Rights

A. If man’s individual right to fend for himself is primary, can individuals also have a duty to respect the rights of others?

B. Locke argues that man’s duty to respect the rights of others depends upon natural law, not individual right, as the basis of morality.

1. Potentially serious loophole in Locke’s natural law argument: Locke says that the individual only has the duty to respect others’ rights when his own preservation is not threatened. If his state of nature is as violent as Hobbes’s, man’s right to look out for himself threatens the rights of everyone else.

C. Another possibility: Locke’s argument is based on rights rather than law, but rights imply reciprocity, or mutual respect among individuals, in a way that Hobbes failed to see.

D. If Locke is a natural law thinker, what is the source of that law? In the [First Treatise](#), he says that God is the source of natural law. In the *Second Treatise*, this is not so clear.

E. If Locke is a natural law thinker, his theory is much more individualistic and closer to that of Hobbes than to those of previous thinkers such as Aquinas.

V. Conclusion

A. One reason why contemporary Americans would profit from studying Locke (and Hobbes) is in order to understand the character of liberalism.

1. Such study is important for considering the interplay and relationship of rights and responsibilities (or duties).

B. Must a rights-based society degenerate into selfishness, or could it emphasize man’s responsibility to respect the rights of others? If so, would it have to place natural law above natural right? Must natural law have a religious dimension?



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STUDY GUIDE FOR LOCKE

Part I. Basic Interpretation of Locke

If you are interested in the thought of John Locke after reading Forde’s essay, please go to the [Primary Source Documents](#) to read some of the essential passages of the *First Treatise on Government* and the *Second Treatise on Government* that relate to the article. A biography of John Locke is also available. As you go back to the primary sources, keep in mind the following questions:

1. Describe Locke's state of nature. Is it always a state of war? Even before the advent of civil societies, are there any communities?
2. In your own words, what does Locke mean by natural law? How do men know it? List precepts of the natural law that Locke explicitly mentions. Does natural law exist in the state of nature? If so, why do men come together in the social contract? Does the social contract establish new laws as well?
3. What are natural rights, according to Locke? Which natural rights does Locke explicitly mention? Where do they come from? What does he mean when he says that all men are equal?
4. Why does Locke think that absolute monarchy does not remove man from the state of nature?
5. According to Locke, what is property? Where does the original land come from? Why is labor so important?

Part II. Connections to Other Thinkers

In order to understand Locke's writings more completely, it is important to place him in his proper context. Locke's contribution to political theory is widely recognized as foundational within the tradition of liberal political philosophy along with thinkers such as [Thomas Hobbes](#) and [Montesquieu](#). As you look deeper into Locke's works and thought, consider these questions in order to see how he fits into the broader history of ideas:

1. The essay begins by hailing Locke as one of the founders of liberal political philosophy. Thomas Hobbes is also part of this tradition that ties man's freedom to his independence from governmental authority. Contrast Locke's and Hobbes's view of man's original independence with [Aristotle](#)'s definition of man as a political animal.
2. Locke is often grouped with Hobbes in his individualistic understanding of man. Is his view of man in the state of nature individualistic? Does his picture differ from Hobbes's in any important respects?
3. Do you think that Locke is closer to Hobbes or to Aristotle in his view of human nature and man's relationship to others?
4. Locke and Hobbes both locate the origin of government in the social contract. The political forms that they advocate, however, are very different. Compare the governments that they propose. What reasons do they give for their respective models? Compare what actually happens in their respective versions of the social contract that might explain their different models of government. Do they differ in their views on the purpose and role of government? Why?
5. According to Forde, the greatest controversy in Locke interpretation today is whether his philosophy is based on natural law or on a natural-rights philosophy like that of Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes bases morality not on duty, but on each individual's right to preserve himself and essentially to do as he wishes. Is this what Locke means when he talks about man's natural

rights? In Locke's analysis, are natural rights the result of man's ability to do whatever he wants for his own preservation, as Hobbes argues, or do they come from somewhere else? Compare Locke's and Hobbes's views on whether a man can ever give up certain rights.

6. Compare Locke's theory of natural rights with the [New Natural Law](#) theory of basic goods. Does this help to shed light on Forde's suggestion that, in Locke's theory, rights imply reciprocity, or mutual respect among individuals, in a way unseen by Hobbes?
7. Unlike Hobbes, Locke does talk about a natural law that is known by reason and involves duties. While Locke speaks only of reason, however, [Cicero](#) says that the natural law is known by right reason. While Locke mentions duties, [Aquinas](#) speaks of virtue. Draw out these distinctions more in your own words. Do you think they are great enough to separate Locke completely from the natural law tradition?
8. The [Framers](#) of the [American Constitution](#) were clearly influenced by Locke. In establishing the United States as a democratic republic, however, they instituted what to Locke would have been a radical version of his idea of limited government. In doing so, do they remain within Locke's theory of natural rights and the role of government, or do they significantly develop his ideas? Given the concern that a state based on Locke's idea of natural rights does not emphasize responsibility sufficiently, might a democratic republic serve better? Why or why not?
9. Compare Locke's theory of natural rights with Montesquieu's theory. Does Montesquieu acknowledge certain rights that Locke never mentions? Would you group the two thinkers together in their theories of natural rights, natural law, and limited government, or are there significant differences between the two?

Part III. Critical Interpretation of Locke

With a basic understanding of Locke's thought, let us examine his work more critically. Are his arguments persuasive? Can we expand on Locke's thought to determine what he would say about issues that he did not directly address? Use the questions below as your guide:

1. Forde poses a serious problem for those who wish to defend Locke as part of the natural law tradition. In the *Second Treatise*, Locke [says](#) that the individual has a duty to respect others' rights only when "his own preservation comes not in competition." Do you think that this clause threatens the primacy of natural law in Locke's thought? What do you think that Locke means by both preservation and competition? Do you think that Locke would argue that a starving man could take someone else's property in order to live? Do you think that Locke would allow the starving man to kill someone else in order to ensure his own self-preservation?
2. Locke [defines law as](#) "the direction of a free and intelligent agent to his proper interest." What do you think Locke means by interest? Do you think that it is limited to individual material security? In formulating your answer, pay particular attention to Locke's strong defense of both property and freedom. Does Locke value freedom for its own sake, or only insofar as it enables man to preserve his life and material well-being?
3. Locke explains how man's right to make use of creatures springs from his desire for self-preservation: "Reason, 'which was the voice of God in him,' could not but teach him, and assure him, that pursuing that natural inclination he had to preserve his being, he followed the

will of his Maker, and therefore had a right to make use of those creatures” (86).

- a. The classical teleology of Aristotle and Aquinas says that God has endowed man with spontaneous natural inclinations to move toward his own perfection. These inclinations lead to moral obligations because by observing the natural law that these inclinations reveal, man discovers and participates in the divine design-plan for his nature. Locke seems to echo classical teleology in his analysis of man’s natural inclination to preserve his own life. Man possesses creation as both a gift and a task. God has given man the use of creatures, but man must mix his labor with creation in order to obtain property and security. Do you think that this natural inclination that Locke speaks of leads to a moral obligation? What are the differences that you see between Locke’s analysis of natural inclinations and the teleology of Aristotle and Aquinas?
 - b. Locke explains how man’s natural inclination leads to his right to make use of creatures. Aquinas would say that man’s natural inclinations reveal the natural law. Even if Locke’s analysis of natural inclinations could lead to moral principles, do you think that “rights” language adequately captures these obligations? For example, do you think that saying man has a right to property and a right to life means also that he ought to make use of creation for his preservation and that he ought to defend his own life and the lives of others?
4. Aquinas assigns much more responsibility to government and laws to make man virtuous and give him a sense of responsibility. Do you think that Locke agrees with Aquinas that man should be virtuous and responsible but disagrees about government’s role in making him so? If so, is he too optimistic, or does he allow more room for man’s freedom? Or does he simply not care about virtue and think that property, life, and liberty are all that are necessary for man’s happiness? Point to specific passages to argue your case.
 5. The central question that Forde poses is whether or not Locke’s theory of natural rights also includes a full enough understanding of duties and the common good. Locke explicitly speaks about duties and the common good in discussing the family. According to Locke, why should children honor and obey their parents? Why should parents provide for their children? Within the context of the family, do you think that Locke has an adequate notion of the common good? Does the common good here mean anything beyond material goods and the preservation of comfort in living?
 6. According to Forde, “if Locke is a natural law thinker, his version of natural law is much more individualistic, much closer to Hobbes, than were previous versions.” Do you see Locke’s theory as individualistic even within his analysis of the family? Does Locke’s emphasis on the duties and obligations within the society of the family provide an insight into his understanding of natural law as prior to right? How might this emphasis on our moral ties to others affect the Lockean implication of reciprocity in rights that Hobbes failed to see?
 7. In both the *First* and *Second Treatise of Government*, the rights that Locke speaks of derive from God’s donation (or free gift) to man. Do you think that the language of rights retains this idea of gift? Forde ends by asking whether natural law must have a religious dimension. What do you think? According to Locke, the natural law is one of the things given by God. Is the idea of donation necessarily religious? Does the language of rights instead of gifts help make Locke’s ideas more acceptable to those who are not religious? Does his theory of rights make sense without a God who has given man these rights?

Part IV. Contemporary Connections

Locke has left an important mark on political philosophy and theory in Western society. Therefore, let us now turn to some contemporary issues and see how Locke's thought might be applied to them.

1. Locke, and the Founding Fathers with him, asserted that men are naturally free and equal. Today, however, we often see the principles of freedom and equality coming into conflict. To give an extreme example, Princeton philosopher Peter Singer notoriously endorses elective infanticide in cases where a child's disability sentences him to a life of extraordinary suffering. Singer seems to be in line with Hobbes's approach. As Forde puts it, he upholds each man's freedom "to pursue his own good--essentially to do as he wishes," even when this right conflicts with the disabled child's right to equality. Would Locke agree with this approach to freedom and equality? How might Locke respond to Singer?
2. Man's right to equality also seems to conflict with his right to freedom in matters of money and property. Does equality mean an equal distribution of goods, according to Locke? What does freedom mean for Locke in this context?
3. Locke, as a founder of liberalism, is one of the first defenders of man's right to liberty. As the previous questions revealed, however, this right can be interpreted in different ways. To be "liberal" today often means to believe that freedom is the ability to do whatever one wants (as long as such actions do not cause harm to others). Any moral claims about what is right or wrong, therefore, limit freedom. Is this how Locke thinks about freedom? Consider the section of the *Second Treatise* where Locke talks about slavery. Does he think that the law is always a limitation of freedom?
4. According to Locke, each man can acquire as much property for himself as he is able because there should be enough property for all. Do you agree? [Locke does recognize](#) that the creation of money makes things more complicated because money "altered the intrinsic value of things, which depends only on their usefulness to the life of man." Do you think that our current economic problems have anything to do with a Lockean emphasis on the individual's right to acquire as much property as he is able and the definition of intrinsic value according to usefulness? Or do you think that the active involvement of the government in distributing society's wealth (something that Locke would not have approved of) is the more likely culprit?
5. [According to Locke](#), "the first society was between man and wife, which gave beginning to that between parents and children." Today, the value of marriage as an institution is being questioned. When the importance and relevance of the traditional family becomes a subject of dispute, is the political society that Locke envisioned possible? Why is the family important for society, in his view? What potential problems might the decline of the traditional family cause for the wider society?
6. As Forde mentions, many Americans today are eager to claim their rights, while unwilling to shoulder their corresponding responsibilities. Do you think that rights, as Locke understands them, imply responsibilities as well? For example, the [Bill of Rights](#) upholds a right to the free exercise of religion. Is there a corresponding duty for all citizens to make laws and take measures to support religious practice, even if they are not personally religious? Or consider the even more basic right to life. Does your enjoyment of a right to life mean that you ought never to intentionally take the life of someone else? Does your enjoyment of a right to life also mean that you have a duty to actively defend and preserve the lives of others in society when they are threatened? If rights do logically bring duties, why aren't people willing to shoulder these

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responsibilities? What does this say about the power of the natural law to influence action? If the natural law does exist, how do you think men should be motivated to follow it without limiting the freedom that Locke so staunchly defends?

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