

# John Locke:

## Reading and Discussion Guide

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In his works “A Letter Concerning Toleration” (1689) and “The Second Treatise On Civil Government” (1690), philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) created what would become the philosophical source for many of the founding principles and founding documents of the United States. Locke believed, among other things, that political leaders are not in a better position to grasp the truth than other men are, and thus have no right to attempt to force their opinions on others. Locke has been called the intellectual founding father of the United States.

### KEY PASSAGES FOR CLOSE READING AND DISCUSSION:

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

“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.”

“Wherever, therefore, any number of men so unite into one society, as to quit everyone his executive power of the law of Nature, and to resign it to the public, there, and there only, is a political or civil society. [...] Hence it is evident that absolute monarchy, which by some men [e.g., Hobbes] is counted the only government in the world, is indeed inconsistent with civil society, and so can be no form of civil government at all.”

“No man in civil society can be exempted from the laws of it: for if any man may do what he thinks fit, and there be no appeal on earth, for redress or security against any harm he shall do; I ask, whether he be not perfectly still in the state of nature, and so can be no part or member of that civil society; unless any one will say, the state of nature and civil society are one and the same thing, which I have never yet found any one so great a patron of anarchy as to affirm.”

“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. And this is making use of the power any one has in his hands, not for the good of those who are under it, but for his own private separate advantage. When the governor, however intitled, makes not the law, but his will, the rule; and his commands and actions are not directed to the preservation of the properties of his people, but the satisfaction of his own ambition, revenge, covetousness, or any other irregular passion.”

“A liberty to follow my own will in all things where that rule prescribes not, not to be subject to the inconstant, uncertain, unknown, arbitrary will of another man, as freedom of nature is to be under no other restraint but the law of Nature.”

“But what if he neglect the care of his soul? I answer: What if he neglect the care of his health or of his estate, which things are nearer related to the government of the magistrate than the other? Will the magistrate provide by an express law that such a one shall not become poor or sick? Laws provide, as much as is possible, that the goods and health of subjects be not injured by the fraud and violence of others; they do not guard them from the negligence or ill-husbandry of the possessors themselves. No man can be forced to be rich or healthful whether he will or no. Nay, God Himself will not save men against their wills.”

“No peace and security among mankind—let alone common friendship—can ever exist as long as people think that governments get their authority from God and that religion is to be propagated by force of arms.”

“Nay, if we may openly speak the truth, and as becomes one man to another, neither Pagan nor Mahometan, nor Jew, ought to be excluded from the civil rights of the commonwealth because of his religion.”

“New opinions are always suspected, and usually opposed, without any other reason but because they are not already common.”

“To prejudge other men’s notions before we have looked into them is not to show their darkness but to put out our own eyes.”

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Consider this statement: “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.” What does John Locke mean by the phrase “by nature?”
2. Look up the terms “usurpation” and “tyranny” and then decide whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: “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. And this is making use of the power any one has in his hands, not for the good of those who are under it, but for his own private separate advantage.”
3. Why did John Locke make the following assertion? “No peace and security among mankind—let alone common friendship—can ever exist as long as people think that governments get their authority from God and that religion is to be propagated by force of arms.” What would be the alternative to “force of arms” in giving authority to religion or government?
4. Discuss the following quotation and give a current example of this error: “To prejudge other men’s notions before we have looked into them is not to show their darkness but to put out our own eyes.”
5. Do you agree with the following statement: “New opinions are always suspected, and usually opposed, without any other reason but because they are not already common.” If so, how can new opinions ever become commonly accepted?
6. Why would the writers of America’s founding documents have liked John Locke’s ideas so much?