

Evaluating Locke's Theory of Justified Rebellion Against the State

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Dr. Sam Black's PHIL 322 course *History of Ethics*. The assignment asked students to select a question from a list related to the required course material. The paper should analyze a specific claim from the reading, and include proper exposition, a defended thesis, and a response to a potential objection. The paper uses APA citation style.

This paper examines John Locke's theory of justified rebellion as outlined in his *Second Treatise of Government*, supporting his claim that citizens are justified in revolting against a government that fails to protect their natural rights to life, liberty, and property. If a government breaches the social contract and acts against its people, its authority is forfeited, and the people should be released from obedience. A modern example of a revolution in Nepal is used to support this argument. The paper then addresses the anticipated objection that Locke's theory encourages frequent rebellions over trivial issues, concluding that only a "long train of abuses" justifies a legitimate rebellion.

English philosopher John Locke is well-known for his philosophies regarding natural rights, limited government, and the right to rebellion. He put forward many arguments that challenged other famous philosophers of his era, like Thomas Hobbes, on the topics of government and society. This paper will focus on Locke's position regarding the right to rebel. In this paper, I will present and agree with Locke's claim that rebellion against any government that does not secure its citizens' natural rights is justified. I will illustrate why his stance is persuasive and respond to a possible objection that I anticipate those who oppose his view to have, concerning the encouragement of rebellion over trivial matters, as well as my response to said objection.

John Locke's political philosophy is documented in his *Two Treatises of Government*, and his theory of justified rebellion can be found in the *Second Treatise*

of Government. Locke believed that all people are born with natural rights to life, liberty, and property (Locke, 1980, chap. VIII, §95). Individuals being “by nature, all free, equal, and independent” (Locke, 1980, chap. VIII, §95), cannot be deprived of these freedoms and “subjected to the political power of another without [their] own consent” (Locke, 1980, chap. VIII, §95). Locke’s social contract states that if individuals are to join a civil society (also known as a political state), they must consent freely (Locke, 1980, chap. XVI, §192) and agree to relinquish some of their natural rights to the government. The same applies on the other end. A government’s legitimacy is based on its responsibility to preserve the lives and property of its citizens, and a political state is considered legitimate only when individuals consent to join it by surrendering certain rights (Locke, 1980, chap. VIII, §95). Whenever people enter into a society, they expect to be protected, so if the lawmakers and enforcers “endeavour to take away and destroy the property of the people, or to reduce them to slavery under arbitrary power” (Locke, 1980, chap. XIX, §222), they are violating their terms of the social contract. According to Locke, this releases the people from the contract and pardons them from having to obey the government (Locke, 1980, chap. XIX, §222) any further.

This is where his theory of justified rebellion emerges, which I find to be a compelling argument. In the event of the government acting against the people, Locke says that individuals have a natural right to rebel against their government and can also judge when violent rebellion is justified (Locke, 1980, chap. XIX, §227 & §240). This is reinforced by Locke’s view that individuals have the natural right and duty to self-preserve, meaning that if their liberties or properties are jeopardized, they have the right to fight back. He even compares a tyrannical government to a robber or a pirate, and states that if resistance is blamed for disorder or bloodshed, it is like blaming an honest man for fighting back against a robber (Locke, 1980, chap. XIX, §228). He makes it clear that any disorder is the tyrant’s fault, not the people who revolt. Locke additionally notes that the mere threat of rebellion (Locke, 1980, chap. XIX, §224) by those who have been ill-treated can be enough to dissuade governments from becoming tyrannical and keep governments accountable for their actions, so having it as an option for the people is beneficial.

Locke’s argument is convincing to me, as I believe that being able to fight back against the government for one’s rights is essential to having a well-functioning, prosperous civil society where the people are happy and have their interests properly represented. A modern example of a spontaneous revolution is

the recent protests in Nepal, which were started by the young adult population who were fed up with the corruption of the government. This revolt happened in Kathmandu on September 8th and 9th, 2025, and resulted in the Singha Durbar palace being burnt down (Shivji, 2025) and the prime minister resigning. A new interim leader was then chosen by the people through an online vote on the social media platform Discord. On the one hand, the people, whom Locke considers to be the majority, felt as though the government was violating their liberties and properties by doing things like restricting freedom of expression online and allowing the country to live in poverty while the “nepo kids” of political leaders enjoyed luxuries. After the government violated the people’s trust, they rebelled and picked a leader who would act in their best interest. While a revolution like this comes with hardships, it can eventually greatly benefit society more than living under an oppressive regime.

On the other hand, I anticipate that there may be those who object to Locke’s reasoning, saying he is too eager to promote rebellion. This was partially covered when he anticipated in Chapter 19 that his “*hypothesis lays a ferment for frequent rebellion*” (Locke, 1980, chap. XIX, §224). He followed it with his own counter-points about how such revolutions do not happen “upon every little mismanagement in public affairs” (Locke, 1980, chap. XIX, §225) and how it is the government’s fault for violating the contract in the first place, making it the true rebel rather than the people who fight back against it (Locke, 1980, chap. XIX, §226). Yet, I imagine there could be another objection as to how Locke expects revolutions *not* to happen over small, trivial things. If the people are the judge and decide that their natural rights have been violated, and decide to rebel, some may say the standard for what constitutes a breach of the contract or a betrayal of the people’s trust is somewhat vague. It can be difficult to determine, for instance, if the government raises taxes to fund essential public services, the people could perceive this as an infringement on their property and become angry at their money being taken. Furthermore, if revolts do continue happening over smaller mismanagement, what if long-term stable social order becomes unattainable?

In response, I say that clear, consistent issues, even if considered insignificant by some, could provide reasonable grounds for rebellion. In Nepal, for example, corruption had been persistent for a while. The government was spending money on personal luxuries, and their well-connected and wealthy children were living lavish lifestyles while many in the country suffered. Locke was trying to demonstrate that “a long train of abuses” (Locke, 1980, chap. XIX, §225)

can push a country into rightful rebellion, and though it is subjective to the community what is considered an infringement on certain rights, clear and consistent issues create the conditions for his theory. I believe that a stable social order can still be achieved after a rebellion, and that a temporary period of instability may sometimes be necessary to remove an unjust government and instate a better one.

In this paper, I have argued that people who have their natural rights to life, liberty, and property violated by the government should be free of their responsibility to obey the government and have the right to revolt. I illustrated this with a modern-day example of a political revolt, along with Locke's philosophical reasoning to support the view. I also addressed a potential objection that Locke encourages rebellion too extensively, responding by emphasizing the subjectivity involved when discussing certain rights. Although I recognize that there are flaws in some of Locke's beliefs, I agree with his central idea that the people should have the power to rebel against and replace their government, since the main role of the government is to represent the people and their interests.

References

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