

Locke 2nd treatise of government

Locke's 2nd Treatise of Government: A Foundation for Modern Liberty *Unlocking the Principles of Self-Governance in Locke's*

Enduring Masterpiece John Locke's *Second Treatise of

Government*, penned in the late 17th century, isn't just a historical document; it's a cornerstone of modern political philosophy, a whispered promise of liberty echoing through the corridors of democracy. Imagine a world without a clear

framework for individual rights, a world where the whims of a monarch could crush the spirit of an entire nation. Locke's

treatise, a beacon in the tumultuous political landscape of his time, illuminated a path toward a more just and equitable

society. *From the State of Nature to the Social Contract: A*

Journey Through Locke's Vision Locke's work begins by painting

a vivid picture of the "state of nature," a hypothetical pre-

political existence where individuals are free and equal, endowed

with natural rights. He envisioned a world devoid of overarching laws and institutions, where the pursuit of survival often collided

with the pursuit of personal gain, like a forest teeming with both valuable resources and menacing predators. This wasn't a

lawless chaos, but rather a place of inherent rights - the right to life, liberty, and property - which, in Locke's view, are divinely

ordained, not gifts bestowed by a ruler. This state of nature,

though conceptually important, was deemed unsatisfactory. Individuals, realizing the potential for conflict and the inherent limitations of self-governance, voluntarily entered into a "social contract." This contract, not a forced imposition, but a conscious agreement, established a government whose primary purpose was to protect and uphold the very natural rights that existed before its formation. Imagine a town meeting, where the citizens, rather than being subjects, are the sovereign power. They delegate authority to a government, entrusting them with the responsibility of safeguarding their rights. This is, in essence, the social contract in action. A carefully balanced power dynamic where the governed retain ultimate control and the government acts as their loyal servant. **The Indelible Mark on Modern Political Thought** Locke's influence extends far beyond the 17th century. His emphasis on limited government, the protection of individual rights, and the right of revolution against tyranny has resonated deeply in the philosophical and political movements shaping our world today. From the American Declaration of Independence, with its clear echoes of Locke's natural rights, to contemporary debates about civil liberties and the role of government, Locke's ideas remain remarkably relevant. Consider the American Revolution – a clear testament to the enduring impact of Locke's principles. The colonists, invoking the inherent rights to life, liberty, and property, rebelled against perceived tyranny. Locke's arguments provided a philosophical justification for their cause, empowering them with the belief that they had the right to alter or abolish a government that threatened their fundamental rights. This is a

powerful example of how abstract philosophy can translate into concrete action, transforming a nation's destiny. **Actionable**

Takeaways for the Modern Reader 1. *Understanding Individual Rights*: Locke's treatise compels us to reflect on our own inherent rights and responsibilities. 2. **Evaluating Government Legitimacy**: We must critically examine the role of government and its commitment to upholding fundamental rights. 3. *Active Participation in Civic Life*: Understanding Locke's ideas motivates us to actively engage in civic discourse and hold our leaders accountable. *Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)* 1. **Q: How**

does Locke's concept of property differ from modern interpretations? A: Locke's concept of property extends beyond mere possessions, encompassing the right to one's labor and the fruits of one's efforts. Modern interpretations often grapple with the balance between individual property rights and social welfare. 2. **Q: What is the significance of the "right of**

revolution"? A: This concept grants individuals the right to resist and overthrow a government that violates their fundamental rights and fails to uphold the social contract. 3. **Q: How does Locke's work relate to contemporary issues?** A: Locke's ideas continue to inform discussions about freedom of speech, religious tolerance, and the separation of powers. 4. **Q: Was Locke's vision truly revolutionary for his time?** A: Yes.

Locke's ideas challenged the prevailing absolute monarchies and offered a new framework for understanding the relationship between the individual and the state, fostering a shift toward democratic ideals. 5. **Q: How can I delve deeper into Locke's philosophy?** A: Reading secondary sources, exploring related

texts, and attending lectures or seminars on 17th-century political thought will enrich your understanding. Locke's **Second Treatise of Government** stands as a powerful testament to the enduring quest for liberty and justice. Its insightful analysis of the state of nature, the social contract, and individual rights continues to shape our understanding of self-governance, inspiring generations to strive for a more just and equitable world.

John Locke's Second Treatise of Government: A Cornerstone of Modern Political Thought

John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* is more than just a historical text; it's a foundational document that has profoundly shaped the political landscape of the Western world, and indeed, much of the globe. Published in 1689, this relatively short but incredibly dense work lays out a compelling argument for limited government, individual rights, and the right of revolution. It's the kind of book that, once you dive in, you'll find its ideas echoing in everything from democratic constitutions to everyday political debates. Let's unpack why this treatise remains so vital centuries later.

At its heart, Locke's *Second Treatise* is an exploration of the legitimate origins and limits of political authority. He's responding to the prevailing ideas of his time, particularly those

that supported the divine right of kings – the notion that monarchs derive their power directly from God and are thus answerable to no earthly authority. Locke, a staunch advocate for reason and empirical observation, offers a dramatically different, and far more influential, vision.

The State of Nature: A Place of Reason and Natural Law

Locke begins his argument by positing a "state of nature." This isn't a chaotic, war-torn free-for-all as some other philosophers (like Thomas Hobbes) envisioned. Instead, Locke's state of nature is governed by the "law of nature," which is discoverable by reason. This law dictates that all individuals are equal and independent, and no one ought to harm another in their life, health, liberty, or possessions. Think of it as a pre-political condition where individuals are free but not lawless. They possess inherent natural rights that predate any government.

Key to Locke's concept of the state of nature are these fundamental **natural rights**. He famously identifies them as life, liberty, and property. These aren't granted by any ruler; they are inherent to our humanity. The right to property, in particular, is a concept Locke elaborates on extensively. He argues that individuals acquire property by mixing their labor with the resources found in nature. This idea of labor as the source of property rights is a powerful one that has implications for economic and political thought even today.

In this state of nature, individuals have the executive power of the law of nature – meaning they have the right to enforce the law and punish offenders. However, Locke acknowledges that while this state is generally peaceful, it can devolve into disorder. Without a common judge to appeal to, disputes can escalate, and the enforcement of natural law can become inconsistent and biased. This is where the need for government arises.

The Social Contract: Forging Government by Consent

Locke's solution to the potential instability of the state of nature is the **social contract**. Unlike an absolute surrender of rights, Locke's social contract is an agreement among individuals to form a political society and establish a government. The primary purpose of this contract is to protect the natural rights that individuals already possess. They give up their individual right to enforce the law of nature in exchange for the security and impartial justice provided by a government.

Crucially, this contract is based on the **consent of the governed**. Locke is adamant that legitimate government cannot be imposed; it must be created and sustained by the voluntary agreement of the people. This consent isn't necessarily a direct, one-time vote, but rather an ongoing acknowledgment of the government's authority. This principle of consent is a radical departure from the divine right of kings and forms the bedrock of modern democratic theory.

Locke distinguishes between the initial act of entering into society (which is often done by the majority) and the subsequent establishment of government. The people, by agreeing to form a society, also agree to be governed by the decisions of the majority. This majority rule, however, is not absolute. It's constrained by the fundamental purpose of government: the preservation of natural rights.

The Purpose and Limits of Government

For Locke, the purpose of government is not to create new rights or to exert arbitrary power. Its sole legitimate function is to protect the pre-existing natural rights of its citizens – their life, liberty, and property. This is a profoundly important point. Government is a tool, a means to an end, and that end is the well-being and security of the individuals it governs.

This leads directly to the idea of limited government. Locke argues against the concentration of power in one entity, advocating for a separation of powers, particularly between the legislative and executive branches. The legislative power, which makes the laws, should be supreme, but it is still accountable to the people and bound by the law of nature. The executive power enforces these laws, and the federative power deals with foreign affairs. This division of powers, while different from modern tripartite systems, lays the groundwork for checks and balances that prevent tyranny.

Locke's emphasis on property rights is also worth highlighting. He sees the protection of property as a primary duty of

government, as it's through their labor and the fruits of that labor that individuals secure their livelihoods and their independence. This connection between property, liberty, and security is a recurring theme in Western political philosophy.

The Right of Revolution: When Government Fails

Perhaps the most controversial and enduring aspect of Locke's *Second Treatise* is his argument for the **right of revolution**. If government, by breaking the social contract, acts against the trust placed in it by the people, then the people have the right to resist and, if necessary, to dissolve that government. This is not a call for anarchy or constant upheaval, but a last resort when all other avenues of redress have been exhausted.

Locke outlines specific conditions under which revolution is justified. This includes when the legislative or executive power acts contrary to their trust, such as attempting to enslave the people, take away their property arbitrarily, or wage war against them without their consent. In such cases, the government has forfeited its legitimacy, and power reverts back to the people.

This right of revolution is not a license to overthrow a government simply because one disagrees with its policies. It's a recognition that sovereignty ultimately resides with the people, and that government is a conditional authority. This concept has been incredibly influential, inspiring revolutions in America and France, and continuing to inform debates about democratic

legitimacy and citizen resistance around the world.

Legacy and Influence: Locke's Enduring Impact

The impact of Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* is immeasurable. Its ideas on natural rights, consent of the governed, limited government, and the right of revolution became central tenets of Enlightenment thought and heavily influenced the American Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. Thomas Jefferson, a keen admirer of Locke, directly incorporated many of his principles into the foundational documents of the United States.

Beyond America, Locke's philosophy resonated across Europe and beyond, fueling movements for political reform and democratic governance. His emphasis on individual liberty and the rule of law laid the groundwork for liberal political traditions that continue to shape the modern world. Even today, when we discuss concepts like human rights, constitutionalism, or the accountability of leaders, we are often echoing the profound insights of John Locke.

His arguments provided a powerful intellectual justification for challenging oppressive regimes and establishing governments that prioritized the rights and freedoms of their citizens. The *Second Treatise* offers a timeless blueprint for how political authority can be legitimate, limited, and ultimately, accountable to the people it serves. It's a call to vigilance, a reminder that

power must always be exercised with the consent and for the benefit of the governed.

In conclusion, John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* is a monumental work that continues to speak to us across the centuries. Its exploration of the state of nature, the social contract, natural rights, and the right to revolution provides a robust framework for understanding the foundations of legitimate political authority and the rights of individuals. For anyone interested in political philosophy, democracy, or the history of ideas, delving into Locke's *Second Treatise* is not just an academic exercise; it's an essential journey into the very heart of modern governance.

Locke's Second Treatise of Government: A Technical Analysis **
John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*, published in 1689, remains a foundational text in political philosophy. This document, a seminal work on natural rights and the social contract, significantly influenced the development of liberal democratic thought. This technical analysis dissects the key arguments presented in the *Second Treatise*, examining its historical context, core principles, and lasting impact. It will also highlight the treatise's continued relevance in contemporary political discourse.

1. Historical Context and Influences *The English Civil War and the Glorious Revolution: The *Second Treatise* emerged from the tumultuous political climate of 17th-century England. The English Civil War (1642-1651) and the subsequent Glorious Revolution*

(1688) profoundly shaped Locke's thinking. These events witnessed the conflict between the monarchy and Parliament, and the establishment of a constitutional monarchy. Locke's ideas, advocating for limited government and individual rights, were a direct response to these historical upheavals.

2. Core Principles of the *Second Treatise*

The State of Nature: Locke envisioned a state of nature characterized by natural rights, pre-political existence. These rights, inherent and inalienable, include the right to life, liberty, and property. This concept contrasts with Hobbes's more pessimistic portrayal of the state of nature as a "war of all against all."

Natural Rights: A central theme is the inherent and universal right to life, liberty, and property. This natural right to property, however, is contingent on mixing labor with unowned resources.

The Social Contract: Locke argued that individuals, recognizing the limitations of the state of nature, enter into a social contract to form a government. This contract is not a surrender of rights, but rather a delegation of authority to protect existing rights. The government derives its legitimacy from the consent of the governed.

Limited Government: Locke emphasized the concept of limited government. Governments are bound by the laws they create and must respect the rights of citizens. Any government exceeding these limitations forfeits its legitimacy.

3. Examination of Key Concepts

Property Rights and their justification: Locke's theory of property is complex. He argues that individuals

have a natural right to acquire property through their labor. This is justified by the idea that individuals are entitled to the products of their own labor. However, this right is constrained by the proviso that there must be "enough and as good" left in common for others. **The Role of the Legislature:** The legislature, according to Locke, is the supreme power within the government. Its role is to make laws that are consistent with natural law and secure the rights of citizens. **The Right to Revolution:** If the government fails to uphold the social contract or violates the natural rights of its citizens, the people have a right to resist or even overthrow it.

4. Influence and Legacy
Locke's ideas profoundly shaped the development of modern democratic thought. His emphasis on natural rights, limited government, and the consent of the governed influenced the American and French Revolutions, and continue to resonate in contemporary political discourse.

5. Practical Application of Locke's Principles

- Modern Democracies: **Contemporary democratic systems often reflect Locke's principles of limited government, separation of powers, and the protection of individual rights.**
- Constitutionalism: **The concept of a constitution, which limits government power and protects citizen rights, directly stems from Locke's ideas.**
- Human Rights: *The modern human rights movement draws heavily from Locke's emphasis on inherent and inalienable rights.*

6. Criticisms and Limitations *Historical Context and Cultural Bias:* Locke's theories, while influential, are rooted in the specific historical context of 17th-century England. Critics highlight potential biases reflecting the social and economic

realities of his time. *Property Rights and Inequality*: Locke's justification of property rights has been criticized for potentially legitimizing inequalities in wealth and power. *Interpretation of Consent*: The concept of consent remains a contentious issue, particularly concerning how consent is manifested and whether consent can be revoked. Conclusion Locke's **Second Treatise of Government** remains a significant contribution to political philosophy. Its emphasis on natural rights, the social contract, and limited government continues to resonate in contemporary discussions. While subject to criticism regarding its historical context and implications for inequality, the treatise's core tenets continue to serve as a cornerstone of liberal democratic thought.

Advanced FAQs** 1. How does Locke's concept of property differ from modern notions of property rights? 2. What are the specific limitations on property rights outlined by Locke, and how do they relate to contemporary debates on wealth redistribution? 3. How can Locke's concept of the state of nature be applied to issues of international relations? 4. To what extent does Locke's theory of revolution apply to modern forms of political resistance and dissent? 5. How do Locke's ideas on limited government inform contemporary debates about the role of government in the economy? This analysis provides a technical overview of Locke's **Second Treatise of Government**. Further research is encouraged to delve deeper into the nuances and complexities of this influential text.

The Social Contract Revolution: Unpacking John Locke's Second Treatise of Government

John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*, first published in 1689, stands as a foundational text in Western political philosophy. Far from being a mere academic exercise, this seminal work offered a radical re-imagining of the relationship between rulers and the governed, directly challenging the prevailing doctrines of divine right monarchy and absolute power. Its influence is undeniable, resonating through the American Declaration of Independence, the French Revolution, and countless subsequent movements for liberty and self-determination. This article delves into the core tenets of Locke's *Second Treatise*, exploring its key arguments, enduring legacy, and its profound implications for understanding the very essence of legitimate government.

The State of Nature: A Realm of Natural Law and Reason

Locke begins his philosophical journey not with the machinations of kings, but with the hypothetical "state of nature." This is not a Hobbesian war of all against all, but a condition governed by the "law of nature," which Locke argues is discoverable by human reason. This law dictates that all individuals are born free and equal, possessing inherent natural rights that precede any

governmental authority. These fundamental rights, according to Locke, are primarily the rights to life, liberty, and property. The concept of [property](#), in particular, is central to Locke's thought. He posits that individuals acquire ownership of property by mixing their labor with the natural resources available. This assertion of individual ownership, independent of any sovereign's decree, is a revolutionary idea that underpins much of his subsequent political theory.

In this state of nature, individuals possess the executive power of the law of nature, meaning they have the right to enforce its principles. However, Locke recognizes that while this state is not inherently a state of war, it is prone to inconveniences. The absence of a common, established law, an impartial judge, and a power to execute judgments can lead to disputes and an insecure enjoyment of natural rights. This is where the necessity for government arises.

The Social Contract: Consent, Liberty, and Limited Government

Locke's solution to the inconveniences of the state of nature is the formation of a political society through a [social contract](#). This contract is not a surrender of all individual rights to an absolute ruler, but a voluntary agreement by free individuals to enter into a community for the mutual preservation of their lives, liberties, and estates. The cornerstone of this contract is consent. Locke vehemently rejects the notion of subjects being born under any form of government, arguing that true political authority can only

arise from the explicit or tacit consent of the governed.

This concept of consent is crucial. Locke distinguishes between express consent (an overt declaration) and tacit consent (implied by one's actions, such as enjoying the protection of a government or possessing property within its jurisdiction). However, he emphasizes that tacit consent is conditional; if the government fails to uphold its end of the bargain – that is, to protect natural rights – then the obligation of tacit consent is dissolved.

The purpose of this contract is to establish a government that acts as a neutral arbiter, resolving disputes and protecting individuals from both internal and external threats. Critically, Locke argues for a government of laws, not of men. This means that the sovereign power, once established, is not absolute but is limited by the very natural law and the terms of the social contract it was created to uphold.

The Right to Revolution: When Tyranny Dissolves the Contract

Perhaps the most radical and enduring aspect of Locke's *Second Treatise* is his articulation of the right to revolution. He argues that governments are established to serve the people, and if a government acts contrary to its trust, betraying the very principles it was formed to protect, then it dissolves itself and the people are absolved of their obedience. This is not a license for anarchy, but a last resort when all other avenues for redress

have been exhausted.

Locke meticulously outlines the conditions under which the people have a right to resist. This includes when the legislative or executive power acts arbitrarily, violates natural rights, or attempts to enslave the populace. He differentiates between the "supreme power" vested in the people and the "subordinate power" of the government. When the government oversteps its bounds, the supreme power of the people can be invoked to alter or abolish it and institute a new one. This principle, often referred to as the [right to revolution](#), profoundly impacted revolutionary movements and remains a powerful theoretical safeguard against tyranny.

Separation of Powers: The Pillars of a Stable Government

To prevent the concentration of power and the potential for its abuse, Locke advocates for a separation of powers within government. He identifies three distinct branches: the legislative, the executive, and the federative. The legislative power, which Locke considers the "supreme" power in any commonwealth, is responsible for making laws. The executive power is tasked with enforcing these laws. The federative power, closely related to the executive, deals with foreign affairs, war, and peace. Locke's emphasis on the legislative being supreme underscores his belief that the law, reflecting the will of the people, should guide all governmental action.

While Locke's conception of separation of powers differs slightly from the tripartite system of Montesquieu (legislative, executive, judicial), his fundamental insight – that dividing governmental authority is essential for preventing despotism – was groundbreaking and laid the groundwork for modern constitutionalism.

The Enduring Legacy of Locke's Second Treatise

The influence of John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* cannot be overstated. Its ideas on natural rights, consent of the governed, limited government, and the right to revolution provided the philosophical bedrock for the Enlightenment and subsequent democratic revolutions. Thomas Jefferson, in drafting the Declaration of Independence, directly echoed Locke's language, famously asserting the unalienable rights to "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" – a clear descendant of Locke's triad of life, liberty, and property. The French Revolution, with its cry of "liberty, equality, fraternity," also drew inspiration from Locke's theories of popular sovereignty and the right to resist oppression.

Beyond these monumental historical events, Locke's work continues to inform contemporary political discourse. Debates about individual liberties, the scope of governmental power, and the legitimacy of political authority often trace their roots back to the principles articulated in the *Second Treatise*. The emphasis on [individual rights](#) and the idea that governments are

instruments for serving the people, rather than entities possessing inherent authority, remain cornerstones of liberal democratic thought.

Criticisms and Counterarguments

Despite its profound influence, Locke's *Second Treatise* has not been without its critics. Some scholars have questioned the coherence of his state of nature, arguing that it is difficult to conceive of a society without government where natural law is consistently upheld. Others have challenged his account of property acquisition, particularly his labor theory of property, suggesting it could lead to vast inequalities. The concept of tacit consent has also been debated, with some arguing it can be too easily invoked to justify existing power structures.

Furthermore, the practical application of the right to revolution is fraught with peril. Critics argue that it can easily devolve into sedition and instability, and that the determination of when a government has truly become tyrannical is subjective and open to manipulation. Nevertheless, even these criticisms often serve to further illuminate Locke's arguments by forcing a deeper examination of their nuances and limitations.

Conclusion: A Blueprint for Just Governance

John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* remains a vital and compelling work for anyone seeking to understand the

foundations of modern political thought. It provides a powerful and persuasive argument for a government based on the consent of the governed, dedicated to the protection of individual rights, and ultimately accountable to the people it serves. By establishing a clear framework for understanding the legitimate limits of governmental power and the inherent right of citizens to resist tyranny, Locke offered not just a philosophical treatise, but a blueprint for a more just and free society. Its enduring relevance lies in its timeless call for reason, liberty, and the sovereignty of the people.

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Questions & Answers About locke 2nd treatise of government

No	Question	Answer
1	What's the main point of Locke's Second Treatise of Government?	Locke's Second Treatise argues that legitimate government arises from the consent of the governed and exists to protect natural rights: life, liberty, and property. It also outlines the right of the people to resist or overthrow a government that violates these rights.

2	How does Locke define 'natural rights' and where do they come from?	Locke defines natural rights as inherent and inalienable rights that all individuals possess from birth, endowed by God or nature. These are primarily life, liberty, and property, which pre-exist government and are not granted by it.
3	What is the 'state of nature' according to Locke?	Locke's state of nature is a condition of perfect freedom and equality, governed by the law of nature. In this state, individuals have the right to enforce the law of nature themselves, but it can lead to inconvenience and conflict due to partiality and lack of a common judge.
4	Why do people leave the state of nature to form a government, according to Locke?	People leave the state of nature to escape its inconveniences, such as the lack of an established law, an impartial judge, and the power to execute judgments. They form a government to protect their property and ensure a more stable and secure society.
5	What is the concept of the 'social contract' in Locke's philosophy?	The social contract is the agreement by which individuals consent to give up some of their individual freedoms from the state of nature in exchange for the protection and benefits of a civil society governed by established laws and institutions. This consent is the foundation of legitimate government.

6	When does Locke believe it's justified for people to rebel against their government?	Locke argues that rebellion is justified when a government acts contrary to its trust and becomes tyrannical, systematically violating the natural rights of the people it is meant to protect. This includes exceeding its legitimate powers or failing to uphold its end of the social contract.
7	How does Locke's idea of property influence his political theory?	Locke views property (including life and liberty) as a fundamental natural right. He argues that individuals acquire property by mixing their labor with natural resources. The protection of property is a primary purpose of government, and its infringement is a key reason for overthrowing a tyrannical regime.
8	What is the difference between Locke's consent and majority rule?	Locke emphasizes 'tacit' and 'express' consent. While majority rule is often the mechanism for decision-making within a government, the legitimacy of the government itself rests on the initial consent of the governed to enter into the social contract. Consent is the basis, majority rule is a procedural outcome.
9	How did Locke's ideas influence later political movements?	Locke's emphasis on natural rights, consent of the governed, and the right to revolution profoundly influenced the Enlightenment and subsequent revolutions, most notably the American Revolution. His ideas are foundational to modern liberal democracy and constitutionalism.

10	What does Locke mean by 'prerogative' in government?	Locke defines prerogative as the power of the executive to act according to discretion for the public good, without the prescription of law and sometimes even against it. This power is not arbitrary but exercised for the benefit of the people, especially in unforeseen circumstances.
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Locke Second Treatise of Government analysis, Locke's theory of government, Locke Second Treatise summary, Locke political philosophy key concepts, Second Treatise of Government principles, Locke social contract theory, natural rights Locke Second Treatise, Locke government legitimacy, Second Treatise of Government debate, Locke political theory explanation

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Locke 2nd Treatise Of Government eBooks support self-paced learning by allowing readers to control reading speed and progression.

Stability encourages confidence in materials.

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Locke 2nd Treatise Of Government eBooks provide measurable educational value.

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Segmented content helps reduce cognitive overload and improves comprehension.

Accessible knowledge encourages lifelong learning.

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Final thoughts on managing Locke 2nd Treatise Of Government PDFs

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