John Locke's intellectual curiosity and social activism also led him to consider issues of general public concern in the lively political climate of seventeenth-century England. In a series of *Letters on Toleration*, he argued against the exercise of any governmental effort to promote or to restrict particular religious beliefs and practices. His epistemology is directly relevant to this issue: since we cannot know perfectly the truth about all differences of religious opinion, Locke held, there can be no justification for imposing our own beliefs on others. Thus, although he shared his generation's prejudice against "enthusiastic" expressions of religious fervor, Locke officially defended a broad toleration of divergent views.

Locke's political philosophy found its greatest expression in the *Two Treatises of Civil Government*, published anonymously during the same year that the *Essay* appeared under his own name. In the *First Treatise* Locke offered a point-by-point critique of Robert Filmer's *Patriarchia*, a quasi-religious attempt to show that absolute monarchy is the natural system of human social organization. The *Second Treatise on Government* develops Locke's own detailed account of the origin, aims, and structure of any civil government. Adopting a general method similar to that of Hobbes, Locke imagined an original state of nature in which individuals rely upon their own strength, then described our escape from this primitive state by entering into a social contract under which the state provides protective services to its citizens. Unlike Hobbes, Locke regarded this contract as revokable. Any civil government depends on the consent of those who are governed, which may be withdrawn at any time.

**Property**

From the outset, Locke openly declared the remarkable theme of his political theory: in order to preserve the public good, the central function of government must be the protection of private property. (2nd Treatise §3) Consider how human social life begins, in a hypothetical state of nature: Each individual is perfectly equal with every other, and all have the absolute liberty to act as they will, without interference from any other. (2nd Treatise §4) What prevents this natural state from being a violent Hobbesian free-for-all, according to Locke, is that each individual shares in the use of the faculty of reason, so that the actions of every human agent—even in the unreconstructed state of nature—are bound by the self-evident laws of nature.

Understood in this way, the state of nature vests each reasonable individual with an independent right and responsibility to enforce the natural law by punishing those few who irrationally choose to violate it. (2nd Treatise §§7-8) Because all are equal in the state of nature, the proportional punishment of criminals is a task anyone may undertake. Only in cases when the precipitate action of the offender permits no time for appeal to the common sense, reason, and will of others, Locke held, does this natural state degenerate into the state of war of each against all. (2nd Treatise §19)

Everything changes with the gradual introduction of private property. Originally, Locke supposed, the earth and everything on it belongs to all of us in common; among perfectly equal inhabitants, all have the same right to make use of whatever they find and can use. The only exception to this rule is that each of us has an exclusive right to her/his own body and its actions. But applying these actions to natural objects by mixing our labor with them, Locke argued, provides a clear means for appropriating them as an extension of our own personal property.
Since our bodies and their movements are our own, whenever we use our own effort to improve the natural world—the resulting products belong to us as well.

The same principle of appropriation by the investment of labor can be extended to control over the surface of the earth as well, on Locke's view. Individuals who pour themselves into the land—improving its productivity by spending their own time and effort on its cultivation—acquire a property interest in the result. (2nd Treatise §32) The plowed field is worth more than the virgin prairie precisely because I have invested my labor in plowing it; so even if the prairie was held in common by all, the plowed field is mine. This personal appropriation of natural resources can continue indefinitely, Locke held, so long as there is "enough, and as good" left for others with the gumption to do the same. (2nd Treatise §33)

Within reasonable limits, then, individuals are free to pursue their own "life, health, liberty, and possessions." Of course the story gets more complicated with the introduction of a monetary system that makes it possible to store up value in excess of what the individual can responsibly enjoy. (2nd Treatise §37) The fundamental principle still applies: labor is the ultimate source of all economic value. (2nd Treatise §42) But the creation of a monetary system requires an agreement among distinct individuals on the artificial "value" frozen in what is, in itself, nothing more than a bit of "colored metal." This need for agreement, in turn, gives rise to the social order.

Civil Society

The first instance of social organization, on Locke's view, is the development of the family, a voluntary association designed to secure the propagation of the human species through successive generations. (2nd Treatise §78) Although each individual in the state of nature has the right to enforce the natural law in defence of property interests, the formation of a civil society requires that all individuals voluntarily surrender this right to the community at large. By declaring and enforcing fixed rules for conduct—human laws—the commonwealth thus serves as "umpire" in the adjudication of property disputes among those who choose to be governed in this way. (2nd Treatise §87-89) An absolute monarch, by contrast, can only remain in a state of nature with respect to the subjects under its rule.

Securing social order through the formation of any government invariably requires the direct consent of those who are to be governed. (2nd Treatise §95) Each and every individual must concur in the the original agreement to form such a government, but it would be enormously difficult to achieve unanimous consent with respect to the particular laws it promulgates. So, in practice, Locke supposed that the will expressed by the majority must be accepted as determinative over the conduct of each individual citizen who consents to be governed at all. (2nd Treatise §97-98) Although he offered several historical examples of just such initial agreements to form a society, Locke reasonably maintained that this is beside the point. All people who voluntarily chooses to live within a society have implicitly or tacitly entered into its formative agreement, and thereby consented to submit themselves and their property to its governance. (2nd Treatise §119)

The structure or form of the government so established is a matter of relatively less importance, on Locke's view. (2nd Treatise §132) What matters is that legislative power—the ability to provide for social order and the common good by setting standing laws over the acquisition, preservation, and transfer of property—is provided for in ways to which everyone
consents. (2nd Treatise §134-8) Because the laws are established and applied equally to all, Locke argued, this is not merely an exercise in the arbitrary use of power, but an effort to secure the rights of all more securely than would be possible under the independence and equality of the state of nature.

Since standing laws continue in force long after they have been established, Locke pointed out that the legislative body responsible for deciding what the laws should be need only meet occasionally, but the executive branch of government, responsible for ensuring that the laws are actually obeyed, must be continuous in its operation within the society. (2nd Treatise §144) In similar fashion, he supposed that the federative power responsible for representing this particular commonwealth in the world at large, needs a lengthy tenure. Locke's presumption is that the legislative function of government will be vested in a representative assembly, which naturally retains the supreme power over the commonwealth as a whole: whenever it assembles, the majority of its members speak jointly for everyone in the society. The executive and federative functions, then, are performed by other persons (magistrates and ministers) whose power to enforce and negotiate is wholly derived from the legislative. (2nd Treatise §153) But since the legislature is not perpetually in session, occasions will sometimes arise for which the standing laws have made no direct provision, and then the executive will have to exercise its prerogative to deal with the situation immediately, relying upon its own counsel in the absence of legislative direction. (2nd Treatise §160) It is the potential abuse of this prerogative, Locke supposed, that most often threatens the stability and order of a commonwealth.

**Revolution**

Whether any specific use of executive prerogative amounts to an abuse of power, is a question that transcends the social contract itself, and can only be judged by a higher appeal, to the divinely ordained law of nature. (2nd Treatise §168) Remember that according to Locke all legitimate political power derives solely from the consent of the governed to entrust their "lives, liberties, and possessions" to the oversight of the community as a whole, as expressed in the majority of its legislative body. (2nd Treatise §171) The commonwealth as a whole, then, is dissolved (and a new one formed) whenever there is a fundamental change in the membership of the legislature. (2nd Treatise §220)

The most likely cause of such a revolution, Locke supposed, would be abuse of power by the government itself: when the society unduly interferes with the property interests of the citizens, they are bound to protect themselves by withdrawing their consent. (2nd Treatise §222) When great mistakes are made in the governance of a commonwealth, only rebellion holds any promise of the restoration of fundamental rights. (2nd Treatise §225) Who is to be the judge of whether or not this has actually occurred? Only the people can decide, Locke maintained, since the very existence of the civil order depends upon their consent. (2nd Treatise §240) On Locke's view, then, the possibility of revolution is a permanent feature of any properly-formed civil society. This provided a post facto defense of the Glorious Revolution in England and was a significant element in attempts to justify later popular revolts in America and France.