

# On the Virtues of Private Property in Locke and Rousseau

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## On the Virtues of Private Property in Locke and Rousseau

John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau, following their predecessor Thomas Hobbes, both attempt to explain the development and dissolution of society and government. They begin, as Hobbes did, by defining the “state of nature”—a time before man found rational thought. In the *Second Treatise*[1] and the *Discourse on Inequality*[2], [Locke](#) and [Rousseau](#), respectively, put forward very interesting and different accounts of the [state of nature](#) and the evolution of man, but the most astonishing difference between the two is their conceptions of property. Both correctly recognize the origin of property to be grounded in man’s natural desire to improve his life, but they differ in their description of the result of such a desire. Locke sees the need and purpose of society to protect property as something sacred to mankind, while Rousseau sees property as the cause of the corruption and eventual downfall of society. Although Rousseau raises interesting and applicable observations, Locke’s argument triumphs because he successfully shows the positive and essential effect of property on man.

In order to examine either philosopher's views on property and its origins, it is necessary to go back to the beginning of human development, as it were, and discuss their different conceptions of the state of nature. As opposed to Hobbes whose vision of the state of nature was a state of war, Locke's state of nature is a time of peace and stability. "We must consider what State all Men are naturally in, and that is, a State of perfect Freedom...A State also of Equality, wherein all the Power and Jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another." (Locke, Second Tre...

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... we have can never be a negative. However, Rousseau's vision of ambition being the downfall of society is flawed. Individuals may be corrupted and may fall, but innovation improves greater society more than it hurts it. Locke successfully argued this, and is further shown to be on the mark by how much his vision resembles our present day society in comparison to Rousseau's predictions.

[1] Locke, John. The Second Treatise. Ed. Peter Laslett. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1988.

[2] Rousseau, Jean Jacque. Discourse on Inequality. Ed. Victor Gourevitch. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1997.

[3] All text citations for Second Treatise will be given in the format of "chapter.paragraph".

[4] All text citations for Discourse on Inequality (also called the Second Discourse) will be given in the format of "part.paragraph".

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