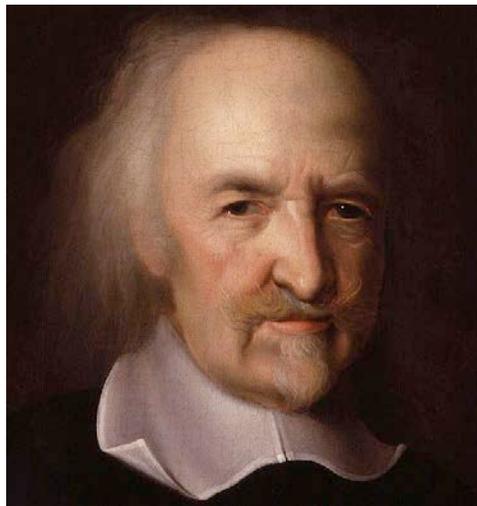


## The Political Philosophies of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke

Matt Logan  
LaFayette High School  
LaFayette, Georgia

This module was developed and utilized for a ninth-grade advanced placement U.S. government class to teach the AP syllabus topic "Constitutional Foundations: English Enlightenment Influences." However, the module may be utilized in standard or honors U.S. government or history classes.

Estimated module length: Two hours and fifteen to twenty minutes



Thomas Hobbes. Source: *Wikipedia* at <https://tinyurl.com/leocdbx>.



John Locke. Source: *Wikipedia* at <https://tinyurl.com/kpmmpb2>.

## Overview

Thomas Hobbes (April 5, 1588–December 4, 1679) and John Locke (August 29, 1632–October 28, 1704), although in agreement in some of their assertions about human nature and the need for government, held radically different perspectives about the ability of people to govern themselves. A number of American founders, familiar with both political philosophers, favored the ideas of Locke, particularly the assertions that men had natural rights, rulers should derive their authority from the consent of the governed, and the governed had the right to overthrow governments that abused their rights.

This module is designed to introduce students to the political thought of both men and serves as a bridge to future lessons concerning the Declaration of Independence, the U.S Constitution, and other foundational documents.

## Objectives

Students will:

Identify Thomas Hobbes’s and John Locke’s contributions to the English Enlightenment.

Compare and contrast their beliefs about the state of nature, the best type of government, and the nature of the social contract.

Explain the concepts of popular sovereignty, consent of the governed, and the social contract, and how these concepts influenced the American Revolution and founding documents like the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution.

## Prerequisite knowledge

The module was written to enable students to have contextual knowledge for understanding the creation of the American political system. The assumption is that students will have no prior knowledge of Hobbes and Locke. Basic understanding of terms and concepts such as sovereignty, consent, order, and liberty is assumed.

## Module introduction: Human nature, good or bad?

This introduction to the module is intended for students to understand that political thought and often action are predicated in part on the individual’s perspective about human nature. Generally, Hobbes had a somewhat negative view of human nature, while Locke’s perspective on human nature was more positive.

Upon entering the classroom, students are asked to complete the task below, posted on the whiteboard (estimated time, ten to fifteen minutes):

Write a short paragraph answering the following question: “Are people naturally good or naturally bad?” Base your rationale on history, current events, or your own life. This is an opinion question, and your response will not be categorized as correct or incorrect.

Students then are randomly asked to share their answers.

Follow-up questions may be utilized to help students think more deeply about the initial question. Examples include:

“If people are naturally bad, how does one justify demonstrable improvements in human life that have occurred throughout history?”

“If people are naturally bad, why are there so many charities and taxpayer-funded government programs for the needy?”

“If people are naturally good, why do we need so many rules and laws?”

“If people are naturally good, why do you lock your car, house, and cellphone?”

### **Student primary source work: The political philosophies of Hobbes and Locke**

Introduce students to the political thought of Hobbes and Locke through succinctly describing basic biographical information about each man and the major event(s) that influenced their respective perspectives on government (estimated time, five to eight minutes).

Hobbes:

For Hobbes, the English Civil War significantly shaped his worldview. In response, he developed a political philosophy that emphasized three key concepts:

The natural state of mankind (the “state of nature”) is a state of war of one man against another, as man is selfish and brutish.

The way out of the “state of nature” is a “social contract,” to be agreed upon by the people to be governed and the government.

The ideal form that government should take is an absolute monarchy that has maximum authority, subverting mankind’s natural state and creating societal order in the process.

Locke:

For Locke, the overthrow of King James II in the Glorious Revolution of 1688 showed how governments and people should behave. He developed a philosophy that emphasized three points:

According to Locke, the natural condition of mankind is a “state of nature” characterized by human freedom and equality. Locke’s “law of nature”—the obligation that created beings have to obey their creator—constitutes the foundation of the “state of nature.” However, because some people violate this law, governments are needed.

People voluntarily give government some of their power through a “social contract” in order to protect their “natural rights” of life, liberty, and property.

If a government fails to protect the natural rights of its citizens or if it breaks the social contract, the people are entitled to rebel against the government and create a new one.

**References:** <http://tinyurl.com/y8n7abkw> and <http://tinyurl.com/y9avro28>.

Primary source excerpts: Hobbes's *Leviathan* and Locke's *Second Treatise on Government*

Before distribution of the primary source documents, the following additional contextual comment (or something similar) might be needed:

Hobbes and Locke also each posed questions about the nature of humanity, or the “state of nature,” as they called it. These questions about the state of nature concerned whether men were naturally inclined to cooperate and get along with each other in society—or, in other words, “good”—or if man was naturally greedy, self-centered, and prone to violence and isolation from his fellow man—or, in other words, “bad.”

Distribute the excerpts of *Leviathan* and *Second Treatise on Government* with eleven text-based questions and have students work through each excerpt, answering the questions as they read. Circulate throughout the room checking student progress and clarifying questions and explaining vocabulary if needed (estimated time, forty-five minutes to one hour).

Note: All primary source materials and accompanying questions are included in Appendix 1 and available at this link (<https://www.utc.edu/center-reflective-citizenship/pdfs/crcloganm1materials.pdf>)

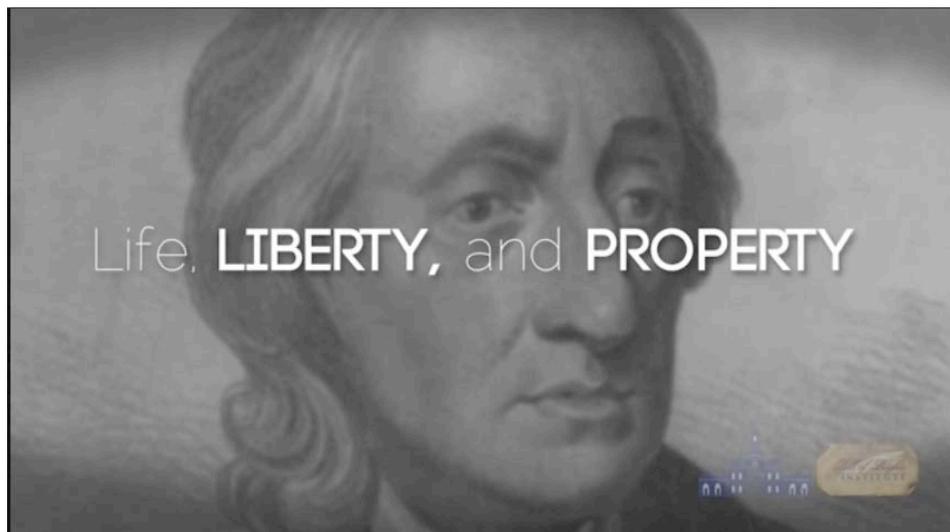
After students finish reading and answering the Hobbes document, solicit student responses to the Hobbes portion of the question sheet first, correcting or expanding/simplifying answers as needed (estimated time, five to eight minutes).

Augment and expand upon student answers by stressing that although the statement is not present in the primary source readings, Hobbes believed a government headed by an absolute monarch could ensure enforcement of the social contract, and therefore suggested hereditary monarchs be allowed to rule with absolute authority. He argued that anarchy would follow from the lack of powerful central authority and man would revert back to the nasty, brutish, and short state of nature (AKA the “state of war”). The founders rejected this assertion.

After students finish reading and answering the Locke document, solicit student responses to the Locke portion of the question sheet, correcting or expanding/simplifying answers as needed (estimated time, five to eight minutes).

The teacher will emphasize during this section that Locke believed a constitutional government that ruled through the consent of the governed and popular sovereignty was needed. This government should protect the citizens' natural rights of life, liberty, and property, and could be dissolved if the government abused the people and didn't recognize their authority. The founders found this claim accurate, and they adopted many of Locke's ideas as their own.

As a homework assignment, students watch a brief online Bill of Rights Institute video titled *Consent of the Governed* and download and complete an accompanying video guide/worksheet available at the same site (estimated time, forty-five minutes):



Source: Screen capture from *Consent of the Governed* from the Bill of Rights Institute.

Links: <https://www.billofrightsinstitute.org/engage/student-resources/constitutional-principles-videos/>  
<http://billofrightsinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Consent-of-the-Governed-Video-Viewing-Guide-Final.pdf>

Cumulative activity questions/formative assessment (estimated time, thirty-five minutes)

Use the following questions that reinforce particularly Locke's ideas and their relationship to the concept of "consent of the governed":

Why does Locke's portrait appear in the short documentary?

Define "consent of the governed" in your own words and give a contemporary example.

Go back to the Locke primary source document. Find passages in Locke that defend the idea of "consent of the governed."

Consider the differences and similarities you see in the philosophies of Hobbes and Locke. What do you identify as the key difference between the two? Recall what you know about the Declaration of Independence. Which philosophers' writing aligns more with the primary message of that document?

Instructors collect copies of the video guide/worksheet for formative evaluation.

### **Summative evaluation**

Instructors can include summative evaluation questions on graded tests or examinations.

## Enrichment/alternative activity

The Center for Civic Education's *We the People* program features two very lucid and basic lectures, each just a bit over eleven minutes long, by Peter Woodcock on Hobbes and Locke. The lecture on Hobbes indicates his quite modern and novel—for the day—arguments about why people should support the state. In Woodcock's Locke lecture, he explains Locke's arguments for human rights—perhaps the first in political history—his defense of freedoms of property and (though qualified) religion, and his argument that in certain situations people have a right to overthrow their government. The lectures may be accessed at <http://www.civiced.org/constitution-course-unit-i>.

## References and Resources

<http://tinyurl.com/y8n7abkw>: This site from Yale's National Initiative to Strengthen Teaching in Public Schools provides an excellent unit plan that uses Hobbes and Locke to teach students about civil rights and civil liberties. The unit plan here is too long for an AP course, but it provides great background content on Hobbes and Locke, and it gives some potentially useful ideas about how to approach this topic. I used it primarily for content background in preparing the lesson.

<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/creating-the-united-states/interactives/declaration-of-independence/index.html>: This Library of Congress site is a digital exhibition called "Creating the United States." This particular page concerns the creation of the Declaration of Independence and provides interactive buttons that reveal the intellectual background of key passages in the document, many relating to Locke. It could be used to enrich a lesson with more digital content.

<https://www.billofrightsintstitute.org/engage/student-resources/constitutional-principles-videos/>: This site features videos that provide background on core American ideals such as separation of powers, consent of the governed (used in this lesson), rule of law, and representative government. The other videos would also prove useful during or after this module if a teacher wanted to add more video resources.

<https://www.billofrightsintstitute.org/founding-documents/declaration-of-independence/>: This is a link to the video guide/worksheet that accompanies the *Consent of the Governed* video from the Bill of Rights Institute's website.

<http://youtu.be/ZfWZE8N2snw>: This video from "Educatina" on YouTube gives an overview of the similarities and differences between Hobbes and Locke. It is in Spanish and could be used for students who need extra help in English-language classrooms.

<http://tinyurl.com/y7kh9tvu> and <http://tinyurl.com/ycyps8zj>: Hobbes's *Leviathan* and Locke's *Second Treatise on Government* were accessed at Project Gutenberg, which offers over 53,000 free e-books.

## Appendix 1

<http://tinyurl.com/y7kh9tvu> and <http://tinyurl.com/ycyps8zj>

### From Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651)

#### OF THE NATURAL CONDITION OF MANKIND AS CONCERNING THEIR FELICITY AND MISERY

NATURE has made men so equal in the talents of body and mind that, though one man is sometimes manifestly stronger in body or of quicker mind than another, yet when all is reckoned together the difference between men is not so considerable as that one man can thereupon claim to himself any benefit to which another may not also claim. For as to the strength of body, the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination or by confederacy with others that are in the same danger with himself....

From this equality of ability arise the quality of hope in the attaining of our ends. And therefore if any two men desire the same thing, which they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies; and in the way to their goal, they endeavor to destroy or subdue one another. And from this, it comes to pass that where an invader has no more to fear than another man's single power, if one plant, sow, build, or possess a convenient seat, others may probably be expected to come prepared with forces united to dispossess and deprive him, not only of the fruit of his labor, but also of his life or liberty. And the invader again is in the like danger of another....

Hereby it is manifest that during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war as is of every man against every man... the nature of war consists not in actual fighting, but in the known disposition thereto during all the time there is no assurance to the contrary. All other time is peace.

Whatsoever therefore is consequent to a time of war, where every man is enemy to every man, the same is consequent to the time wherein men live without other security than what their own strength and their own invention shall furnish them withal. In such condition there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth... no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

It may seem strange to some man that has not well weighed these things that Nature should thus dissociate and render men apt to invade and destroy one another: and he may therefore, not trusting to this inference, made from the passions, desire perhaps to have the same confirmed by experience. Let him therefore consider with himself: when taking a journey, he arms himself and seeks to go well accompanied; when going to sleep, he locks his doors; when even in his house he locks his chests; and this when he knows there be laws and public officers, armed, to revenge all injuries shall be done him; what opinion he has of his fellow subjects, when he rides armed; of his fellow citizens, when he locks his doors; and of his children, and servants, when he locks his chests. Does he not there as much accuse mankind by his actions as I do by my words?

To this war of every man against every man, this also is consequent; that nothing can be unjust. The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, have there no place. Where there is no common power, there is no law; where no law, no injustice. Force and fraud are in war the two cardinal virtues. Justice and injustice are none of the faculties neither of the body nor mind. If they were, they might be

in a man that were alone in the world, as well as his senses and passions. They are qualities that relate to men in society, not in solitude. It is consequent also to the same condition that there be no propriety, no dominion, no mine and thine distinct; but only that to be every man's that he can get, and for so long as he can keep it. And thus much for the ill condition which man by mere nature is actually placed in; though with a possibility to come out of it, consisting partly in the passions, partly in his reason.

The passions that incline men to peace are: fear of death, desire for a comfortable life, and the hope of attaining a comfortable life by hard work. And reason suggests convenient articles of peace upon which men may be drawn to agreement.

**From John Locke, *Second Treatise on Government* (1690)**

#### **CHAP. II.: Of the State of Nature.**

Sec. 6. . . . The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one: and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions: for men being all the workmanship of one omnipotent, and infinitely wise maker; all the servants of one sovereign master, sent into the world by his order, and about his business; they are his property, whose workmanship they are, made to last during his, not one another's pleasure: and being furnished with like faculties, sharing all in one community of nature, there cannot be supposed any such subordination among us, that may authorize us to destroy one another, as if we were made for one another's uses, as the inferior ranks of creatures are for our's. Every one, as he is bound to preserve himself, and not to quit his station wilfully, so by the like reason, when his own preservation comes not in competition, ought he, as much as he can, to preserve the rest of mankind, and may not, unless it be to do justice on an offender, take away, or impair the life, or what tends to the preservation of the life, the liberty, health, limb, or goods of another.

Sec. 8. . . . In transgressing the law of nature, the offender declares himself to live by another rule than that of reason and common equity, which is that measure God has set to the actions of men, for their mutual security; and so he becomes dangerous to mankind, which is to secure them from injury and violence, being slighted and broken by him. Which being a trespass against the whole species, and the peace and safety of it, provided for by the law of nature, every man upon this score, by the right he hath to preserve mankind in general, may restrain, or where it is necessary, destroy things noxious to them, and so may bring such evil on any one, who hath transgressed that law, as may make him repent the doing of it, and thereby deter him, and by his example others, from doing the like mischief. And in the case, and upon this ground, every man hath a right to punish the offender, and be executioner of the law of nature.

#### **CHAP. IX. : Of the Ends of Political Society and Government.**

Sec. 123. IF man in the state of nature be so free, as has been said; if he be absolute lord of his own person and possessions, equal to the greatest, and subject to no body, why will he part with his freedom? Why will he give up this empire, and subject himself to the dominion and control of any other power? To which it is obvious to answer, that though in the state of nature he hath such a right, yet the enjoyment of it is very uncertain, and constantly exposed to the invasion of others: for all being kings as much as he, every man his equal, and the greater part no strict observers of equity and justice, the enjoyment of the property he has in this state is very unsafe, very unsecure. This makes him willing to quit a condition, which, however free, is full of fears and continual dangers: and it is not without reason, that he seeks out, and is willing to join in society with others, who are already united, or have a

mind to unite, for the mutual preservation of their lives, liberties and estates, which I call by the general name, property.

Sec. 124. The great and chief end, therefore, of men's uniting into commonwealths, and putting themselves under government, is the preservation of their property. To which in the state of nature there are many things wanting. First, There wants an established, settled, known law, received and allowed by common consent to be the standard of right and wrong, and the common measure to decide all controversies between them: for though the law of nature be plain and intelligible to all rational creatures; yet men being biased by their interest, as well as ignorant for want of study of it, are not apt to allow of it as a law binding to them in the application of it to their particular cases.

Sec. 125. Secondly, In the state of nature there wants a known and indifferent judge, with authority to determine all differences according to the established law: for every one in that state being both judge and executioner of the law of nature, men being partial to themselves, passion and revenge is very apt to carry them too far, and with too much heat, in their own cases; as well as negligence, and unconcernedness, to make them too remiss in other men's.

Sec. 126. Thirdly, In the state of nature there often wants power to back and support the sentence when right, and to give it due execution, They who by any injustice offended, will seldom fail, where they are able, by force to make good their injustice; such resistance many times makes the punishment dangerous, and frequently destructive, to those who attempt it.

Sec. 131. But though men, when they enter into society, give up the equality, liberty, and executive power they had in the state of nature, into the hands of the society, to be so far disposed of by the legislative, as the good of the society shall require; yet it being only with an intention in every one the better to preserve himself, his liberty and property; (for no rational creature can be supposed to change his condition with an intention to be worse) the power of the society, or legislative constituted by them, can never be supposed to extend farther, than the common good; but is obliged to secure every one's property, by providing against those three defects above mentioned, that made the state of nature so unsafe and uneasy. And so whoever has the legislative or supreme power of any common-wealth, is bound to govern by established standing laws, promulgated and known to the people, and not by extemporary decrees; by indifferent and upright judges, who are to decide controversies by those laws; and to employ the force of the community at home, only in the execution of such laws, or abroad to prevent or redress foreign injuries, and secure the community from inroads and invasion. And all this to be directed to no other end, but the peace, safety, and public good of the people.

#### **CHAP. XI. : Of the Extent of the Legislative Power.**

Sec. 134. THE great end of men's entering into society, being the enjoyment of their properties in peace and safety, and the great instrument and means of that being the laws established in that society; the first and fundamental positive law of all commonwealths is the establishing of the legislative power; as the first and fundamental natural law, which is to govern even the legislative itself, is the preservation of the society, and (as far as will consist with the public good) of every person in it. This legislative is not only the supreme power of the common-wealth, but sacred and unalterable in the hands where the community have once placed it; nor can any edict of any body else, in what form soever conceived, or by what power soever backed, have the force and obligation of a law, which has not its sanction from that legislative which the public has chosen and appointed: for without this the law could not have that, which is absolutely necessary to its being a law, the consent of the society, over whom no body can have a power to make laws, but by their own consent, and by authority received from them; and therefore all the obedience, which by the most solemn ties any one can be obliged to pay, ultimately terminates in this supreme power, and is directed by those laws which it enacts: nor can any oaths to any foreign

power whatsoever, or any domestic subordinate power, discharge any member of the society from his obedience to the legislative, acting pursuant to their trust; nor oblige him to any obedience contrary to the laws so enacted, or farther than they do allow; it being ridiculous to imagine one can be tied ultimately to obey any power in the society, which is not the supreme.

#### **CHAP. XVIII.: Of Tyranny.**

Sec. 202. Where-ever law ends, tyranny begins, if the law be transgressed to another's harm; and whosoever in authority exceeds the power given him by the law, and makes use of the force he has under his command, to compass that upon the subject, which the law allows not, ceases in that to be a magistrate; and, acting without authority, may be opposed, as any other man, who by force invades the right of another.

#### **CHAP. XIX.: Of the Dissolution of Government.**

Sec. 222. . . . Whensoever therefore the legislative shall transgress this fundamental rule of society; and either by ambition, fear, folly or corruption, endeavour to grasp themselves, or put into the hands of any other, an absolute power over the lives, liberties, and estates of the people; by this breach of trust they forfeit the power the people had put into their hands for quite contrary ends, and it devolves to the people, who have a right to resume their original liberty, and, by the establishment of a new legislative, (such as they shall think fit) provide for their own safety and security, which is the end for which they are in society.

Sec. 225. Secondly, I answer, such revolutions happen not upon every little mismanagement in public affairs. . . . But if a long train of abuses, prevarications and artifices, all tending the same way, make the design visible to the people, and they cannot but feel what they lie under, and see whither they are going; it is not to be wondered, that they should then rouse themselves, and endeavor to put the rule into such hands which may secure to them the ends for which government was at first erected; and without which, ancient names, and specious forms, are so far from being better, that they are much worse, than the state of nature, or pure anarchy; the inconveniencies being all as great and as near, but the remedy farther off and more difficult.

#### **Hobbes vs. Locke: Compare and contrast**

Answer the following questions as you read the excerpts from Hobbes's *Leviathan*. Stop when you are finished with Section I. We will discuss your responses and then move to Locke's *Second Treatise*.

#### **I. Hobbes, *Leviathan***

1. Why do people harm each other?
2. According to Hobbes, what "condition" do men live in when they live without a common power to keep them all in awe?
3. How does Hobbes describe life without common security?
4. What evidence does Hobbes give for his claims?
5. What "inclines men to peace"?

## **II. Locke, *Second Treatise on Government***

### **From Ch. II**

1. What is the law of nature that should govern mankind? Who created this law of nature?
2. What should happen when a person breaks the law of nature?

### **From Ch. IX**

3. Why would a person voluntarily give up some of his freedom to join society and submit to laws and rules of the society?
4. What role should judges play in a commonwealth of men?

### **From Ch. XI**

5. What is the “great end” of men entering into society with each other?

### **Ch. XIX**

6. What can people in a society do if their legislature breaks the fundamental rules of society?