

Maryland Society, Sons of the American Revolution

Third Place Essay Winner (Tie)

The Philosophical Influence of John Locke on the Fundamental Ideas of the United States Constitution.

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The fundamental doctrines of the American government as written in the Constitution of the United States were greatly influenced by the philosophy of the English Enlightenment thinker, John Locke. His philosophy inspired Americans to form a new type of government; a revolutionary design with his ideas cohesively fused into the basis of this new idea: The United States Constitution. Locke's thoughts on government and natural rights to life, liberty and property were radical and revolutionary to the monarchs of Europe, but for America they were the spiritual force; a manifest destiny to lead the American people to revolution and to the unexplored territory of democracy. Starting with the Declaration of Independence and continuing into the United States Constitution, Locke's philosophy inspired many Americans to break away from the common, European institutions and to lay a fresh foundation that in return, inspired other countries to do the same.

There was one basic reason for the establishment for the U.S. Constitution and that was to prevent a tyrannical monarchy such as in the European governments. Americans had just revolted against the English crown to liberate themselves from monarchical oppression, so they were not going to let that happen again. European monarchies were justifiable because of the ancient theory of the "Divine Right of Kings", or that God, not the people, appointed a king to rule. Philosophers like Thomas Hobbes supported this theory, but Locke, in his Two Treatises of Government, rejects this theory by a thorough analysis of the Bible. He concluded that neither Adam, nor his sons had a God given right to rule over their descendents. Therefore, Locke proposes that the people have a right to establish their own government for their own protection of their natural rights. He also stated that people are free and independent, although they must agree to the consent of the majority. These ideas are the fundamentals of American government today. The representatives of the thirteen colonies wrote the Constitution to protect the natural rights and civil liberties that were denied to them under the English monarchy. Still today, Americans are free and have civil rights, but when decisions are made in Congress, majority rules, but minority rights are protected. Locke forms the theory of representative government and the Second Continental Congress puts it to practical use in the United States Constitution.

In its most basic form, the Constitution is a flexible, lawful document of rights and restrictions. The Articles of the Constitution affirm the shape of government, divided into three branches, which are given powers to keep the others in check to balance government. The amendments grant certain civil liberties, but like the articles, also assert specific rules and restrictions on those who are not granted civil rights. Locke's most influential philosophic teachings about natural rights to life, liberty, and property are expanded into the Constitution, specifically the Bill of Rights. The Bill of Rights was added to the Constitution because of the Anti-Federalist views that the Constitution should guarantee a set of civil rights to the people, like the previous English Bill of Rights. Since the American people were oppressed under the English monarchy, the Anti-Federalists wanted to make sure that the people were rewarded for their establishment of sovereignty. The Fifth Amendment is one example of Locke's tremendous influence, which states, "...nor be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor shall private property be taken for public use, without just compensation." In return for the assurance that this new country would be free to establish a government without any foreign intervention, the founders compensate Americans by the liberties in the Bill of Rights. Thomas Jefferson, a major reader of Locke's works also "plagiarized" his idea in the Declaration of Independence; "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." The Declaration and the Fifth Amendment directly address the natural rights theorized by Locke, so the Constitution was, in my point of view, a representation of Locke's social contract. In this mutual agreement, the people establish the government and in return, the government protects the people and their natural rights. Locke strongly believed that the purpose of government was only to protect the people's life, liberty and property. However, if the government does not fulfill their obligations, becomes too powerful and corrupt, the people, Locke radically declares, have the right to destroy that government and create a new institution that will fulfill their obligations.

This was the most inspiring idea from Locke's philosophy, which sparked the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the American Revolution and the creation of the U.S. Constitution. The Declaration overthrew the corrupt English government, the Revolution was fought to ensure independence, and the Constitution was the new form of government that the people created. So Locke just provided the philosophy and the theory, which led the American people to follow and continue where he left off and put his ideas into practical use by creating the Constitution. This document represents the "Lockean utopia," where people are ensured their natural rights and the government is strong and stable enough to maintain order, yet limited enough to bestow upon Americans their well-earned natural rights. By using the model constructed by Locke, the Founding Fathers created a revolutionary design of government, separated into three distinct branches. Locke, but to a greater extent, Montesquieu, envisioned the idea of separation of powers because government would be balanced by the branches keeping the others in check. These concepts of checks and balances and separation of powers are used to describe how our government functions today.

Therefore, Locke's philosophy, as written in *Two Treatises of Government*, shaped the layout of the Constitution of the United States. From his ideas on natural rights, separation of powers and social contracts, Locke presented the American Founders with all the weapons they needed to refute the English monarchy and mold a new reasonable form of government that would ensure themselves their independence, natural rights and security that they had fought

desperately for. In conclusion, Locke's philosophy will always be known as the spiritual, underlying force behind the creation of the Constitution of the United States.

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Biography

Chris Raborg is proud that his full name honors his Revolutionary War ancestor and two great-grandfathers: J.P.H. Christopher Joseph Raborg. He is a sophomore honor student in the Harford Technical High School computer networking and technology program (CNT). Attending and taking a course on Imperial Democracy at the Gilder Lehrman Saturday Academy for American History at the University of Maryland has been a high light of his academic studies. Chris intends to attend college after high school.