

Biographical Briefing on John Locke

John Locke was born into a Puritan family in Bristol, England in 1632. Locke's father, an attorney, was part of the parliamentary army fighting against the monarchy during the English Civil War. He wanted his son to become a minister, but Locke decided against this and instead studied medicine. As a student at Oxford University, Locke was influenced by John Owen, Dean of Christ Church College. It was Owen who first introduced Locke to the idea of religious freedom and the idea that people should not be punished for having different views on religion. However, Locke, a Protestant, continued to oppose Catholic and atheist (the belief that there is no God) influence in England. He remained entirely tolerant only of different forms of Protestantism. He was deeply influenced by the writing of the French philosopher and mathematician Rene Descartes, who proclaimed that all men possess the ability to reason. Locke also believed that people develop reason and can therefore rationally settle their differences by seeking a middle ground and compromising.

- **Describe Locke's family background**
- **In what ways did John Owen and Rene Descartes influence Locke?**
- **Why did Locke believe people could rationally settle their differences?**

After college, Locke continued to study and read with a passion. He expressed his views about freedom of religion and the rights of citizens. When in 1682 his ideas were seen by the English government as a challenge to the king's authority, he fled to Holland. Locke returned to England in 1689 after the Glorious Revolution had forced the new British monarch to respect the authority of Parliament and accept a Bill of Rights limiting the king's power. Locke defended this revolution and the limitation of the monarch's power. Throughout his writings, Locke argued that people have the gift of reason, or the ability to think. Locke thought people have the natural ability to govern themselves and to look after the well-being of society. He wrote, "The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which [treats] everyone [equally.] Reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind...that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, or possession."

- Why did Locke go to Holland?**
- **What ability did Locke believe people had?**
- **Did Locke believe people were capable of governing themselves? Why or why not?**

Locke did not believe that God had chosen a group or family of people to rule countries. He rejected this idea of "Divine Right," which many kings and queens used to justify their right to rule. In his own society, Locke supported a monarchy (rule by king or queen) whose power is limited by the consent of the people being governed. Locke wrote, "[We have learned from] history we have reason to conclude that all peaceful beginnings of government have been laid in the consent of the people." Governments are formed, according to Locke, to protect the right to life, the right to freedom, and the right to property. These rights are absolute, belonging to all people. Locke believed that ideally government power should be divided equally into three branches of government so that politicians do not face the "temptation" to grasp [absolute] power." If any government abuses the right of the people instead of protecting them, the people have the right to rebel and form a new government. He wrote. "Whenever [the preservation of life, liberty, and property for which power is given to rulers by a commonwealth] is manifestly neglected or opposed, the trust must necessarily be forfeited and then [returned] into the hands of those that gave it, who may place it anew where they think best for their safety and security." Locke's idea that only the consent of the governed gives validity to a government inspired the founders of new democracy, such as the writers of the United States Constitution.

- **What did Locke think about Divine Right?**
- **According to Locke, what is the purpose of government?**
- **What did Locke think people should do if government abused people's rights?**

John Locke believed that the control of any person against her or his will was unacceptable, whether in the form of an unfair government or in slavery. Locke wrote. "The natural liberty of man is to be free from any superior power on earth, and not to be under the will or legislative authority of man, but only have the law of nature for his rule." He extended his ideas about freedom to a belief in civil liberties. Locke felt that women had the ability to reason, which entitled them to an equal voice, at least in the home- an unpopular idea during this time in history. Despite fearing that he might be censored, he wrote, "It may not be [wrong] to offer new...[ideas] when the old [traditions] are apt to lead men into mistakes, as this [idea] of [fatherly] power probably had done' which seems so [eager] to place the power of parents over their children wholly in the father, as if the mother had no share in it; whereas if we consult reason or [the Bible], we shall find she has an equal title."

- **What did Locke think of men being controlled against their will?**
- **What did Locke write about the abilities of women?**
- **How do you think Locke's views were received?**

Biographical Briefing on Thomas Hobbes

Thomas Hobbes was born in England in 1588. This was a time of much social unrest in England, and Hobbes later wrote that “fear and I were born twins.” Hobbes’ father was a clergyman, and Hobbes was educated in the classics at Oxford University. He traveled many times to meet writers, philosophers, and scientists of other European countries and to study different forms of government. The English Civil War prompted Hobbes to flee to Paris and to become a political philosopher. In 1651 Hobbes wrote his most famous work *Leviathan*. In it, he argued that people are naturally wicked and cannot be trusted to govern. Therefore, Hobbes believed that an absolute monarchy- a government that gives all power to a king or queen- is best.

- **What was happening in England when Hobbes was born?**
- **Where did Hobbes go to study government?**
- **What was the topic of Hobbes’ book *Leviathan*?**

Hobbes’ political philosophy is based on his idea that humans are essentially selfish creatures. He believed that all people are equal, and that this equality leads to competition and violence. In *Leviathan* Hobbes wrote that humans are driven by a “perpetual and restless desire [for] power...that ceases only in death,” and that the natural condition of humankind is a situation of “a war of every man against every man.” Because he thought that people act in their own selfish interests if they are left alone, Hobbes did not believe that people should be trusted to make their own decisions. He also felt that nations, like people, are selfishly motivated and in a constant battle for power and wealth. To further prove his point, Hobbes wrote, “If men are not naturally in a state of war, why do they always carry arms and why do they have keys to lock their doors?”

- **What did Hobbes believe to be humankind’s main characteristics?**
- **According to Hobbes, why should people not be trusted to make decisions?**
- **What evidence did Hobbes use to prove his point that countries are in a battle for wealth and power?**

Governments were created, according to Hobbes, to protect people from their own selfishness and evil. He believed that it is not possible for people to have both freedom and peace, since the state of freedom is a state of unlimited greed and war. Joining together to form societies is thus humankind’s only possibility for peace. The best government is one that has the great power of a *leviathan*, or sea monster. Hobbes believed in the rule of a king or queen because he felt a country needs an authority figure to provide direction and leadership. Because the people are only interested in promoting their own interests, Hobbes believed that democracy- allowing citizens to vote for government leaders- would never work. Hobbes believed that without a strong government, people experience “continual fear and danger of violent death” and lives that are “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

- **For what purpose did Hobbes think governments were created?**
- **Why did Hobbes believe in the rule of a king or queen?**
- **Why would democracy not work, according to Hobbes?**

Hobbes reasoned that all people should voluntarily choose to relinquish (give up) their rights to the leviathan, who then would protect people from one another and ensure peace. This idea was not the same as divine right—the belief that monarchs are chosen by God and thus people do not have the right to question their rule. Instead, Hobbes believed that a ruler’s absolute power comes not from God, but from people rationally deciding that this is in their best interests. Hobbes considered that the ruler could abuse his or her absolute power and become cruel and unfair. However, this problem could be lessened, Hobbes believed, by appointing a diverse group of representatives to present the problems of the common people to the leviathan. These representatives would only have the power to present opinions, since all final decisions would be made by the leviathan.

- **For Hobbes, what was the proper role in government for the people?**
- **Where does the leviathan get his or her power?**
- **How did Hobbes propose to lessen the possibility that the leviathan might abuse his or her power?**

Biographical Briefing on Baron de Montesquieu

Charles Louis de Secondat was born in Bordeaux, France in 1689. Despite his family's wealth, de Secondat was placed in the care of a poor family during his childhood. He later went to college and studied science and history, eventually becoming a lawyer in the local government. De Secondat's father died in 1713, and de Secondat was placed under the care of his uncle, Baron de Montesquieu. The Baron died in 1716 and left de Secondat his fortune, his office as president of the Bordeaux Parliament, and his title of Baron de Montesquieu. Later, the new Baron de Montesquieu became a member of the Bordeaux and French Academies of Science and studied the customs and governments of the countries of Europe. He gained fame in 1721 with his *Persian Letter*, which criticized the life-style and liberties of the wealthy French, as well as the church. However, Montesquieu's *On the Spirit of the Laws*, published in 1748, was his most famous book. It outlined his ideas on how government would best work.

- **Where was Montesquieu born?**
- **How did he acquire the title Baron de Montesquieu?**
- **What was the subject of *On the Spirit of the Laws*?**

Montesquieu was very concerned about the relationship between religion and violence. He writes in the *Persian Letters*, "I can assure you that no kingdom has ever had as many evil wars as the kingdom of Christ." A character in the *Persian Letters* states strongly, "in order to love and conform to one's religion it is not necessary to hate and persecute those who do not conform to it." Montesquieu argued not for atheism (belief that there is no God), but rather a secular (worldly) mortality that is tolerant of many different religions. Despite Montesquieu's belief in religious tolerance, he did not feel that all people were equal. Montesquieu approved of slavery. He also thought that women were weaker than men and that they had to obey the commands of their husbands. At the same time, he felt that the gentler nature of women could make them valuable decision makers and participants in government. "It is against reason and against nature for women to be mistresses in the house...but not for them to govern an empire. In the first case, their weak state does not permit them to be preeminent (above others); in the second, their very weakness gives them more gentleness and moderation, which, rather than the harsh and ferocious virtues, can make for good government."

- **How did Montesquieu feel about religious intolerance?**
- **What did he think about slavery?**
- **Why did Montesquieu believe that women would be valuable members of government?**

According to Montesquieu, there are three forms of government: monarchy (rule by a king or queen), aristocracy (rule by the noble or wealthy class), and republicanism (rule by elected leaders.) Montesquieu was opposed to absolute monarchy (where no other persons or institutions have any control over the monarch) and believed that a monarchy with limited powers makes countries the most stable and secure. People's role in government, Montesquieu believed, should be based on political virtue (moral goodness) and equality. Political virtue means that citizens voluntarily put their public interests above their individual interests. States should be kept small to make it easier for people to play a role in government. Montesquieu believed that the success of a government depends upon maintaining the right balance of power between different branches.

- **How did Montesquieu define the three types of government?**
- **Which type did Montesquieu favor?**
- **Upon what did Montesquieu believe the success of a government depends?**

Montesquieu argued that the best government is one in which power is balanced among three separate branches of government with equal but different powers. He thought that England in the eighteenth century provided the best model of government, because it divided power among three parts: the king, who enforced laws; the Parliament, which created laws; and a court system, which interpreted laws. Montesquieu called this idea of divided government rule the “separation of powers.” He believed in the separation of powers because he felt that if all political power is handed over to one branch, greed and corruption inevitably result. He wrote, “When the [lawmaking] and law-enforcing powers are united in the same person...there can be no liberty.” According to Montesquieu, each branch of government checks (limits) the power of the other two. This way, no branch of government can threaten the freedom of the people, and tyranny can be avoided. His ideas about the separation of powers became the basis for the United States Constitution.

- **What kind of government did Montesquieu believe was best?**
- **What country provided a good model of government?**
- **Why did Montesquieu favor a separation of powers?**

Biographical Briefing on Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was born in Geneva in 1712. By the time he was 13 his mother had died and his father, a failed watchmaker, had been forced to leave Geneva to avoid being imprisoned for fighting a duel. Virtually abandoned, Rousseau was forced to serve as an apprentice to an engraver who brutally mistreated him. Partly to free himself from bitter servitude and partly to embark on an adventure, Rousseau fled to the Swiss capital at the age of 16, and wandered about Europe. In his travels, Rousseau befriended several wealthy people who took him into their homes and provided the time and money for him to receive an excellent education in music and philosophy. At the age of 30, he moved to Paris and quickly established himself as one of the most outstanding philosophers of the eighteenth century. He died in 1778.

- **-What was Rousseau's early family life like?**
- **-Why did he leave Geneva?**
- **-How was Rousseau educated?**

Unlike most other philosophers of his time, Rousseau believed that people are born good, independent, and compassionate. If left to their own devices in a state of nature (a society with no government or laws, like on a deserted island) people would naturally live happily and inequalities brought by modern society. Influenced by the peace and stability he saw in simple, traditional Swiss villages, Rousseau believed the luxury, corruption, and greed of modern nations harm the individual, giving too few people too much power over many others. In modern countries, for example, political control ends up in huge capital cities far away from most of the people. Further, he believed that society's institutions, like government, schools, the arts, and the media, corrupt naturally good individuals. Rousseau thought that modern civilization, for all its progress, has made humans neither happier nor more virtuous (morally good).

- **-How did Rousseau believe people would act in a state of nature?**
- **-According to Rousseau, what corrupts the natural goodness of human beings?
Why?**
- **-Based on Rousseau's views of human nature, do you think he thought people can be trusted to govern themselves?**

Rousseau's Swiss background had an enormous influence on the type of government he advocated (supported). Unlike its surrounding autocratic (government with unlimited power by one person over others) neighbors, Switzerland for centuries had been divided into small districts. Decisions were made locally, not far away in a royal palace in the capital city. The manner in which people in these traditional villages gathered regularly to make decisions was an example of democracy (government by the people), whereby a simple majority vote by the adult male citizens enacted a law. Each adult male voted on laws himself, without anybody representing him. This form of direct democracy also flourished briefly in ancient Athens and Rome. Although direct democracy was extremely rare outside of Switzerland at that time, Rousseau believed it was the ideal way for people to make decisions. He referred to how non-democratic governments in Europe had corrupted modern people when he wrote in his book *The Social Contract*, "Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains." He believed that even representative democracy (where people vote for other people to represent them) - as in England and the United States- is corrupt. "Any law which the people has not ratified in person is void; it is not law at all. The English people believes itself to be free; it is gravely mistaken; it is free only during the election of Members of Parliament; as soon as the Members are elected, the people are enslaved."

- **How were decisions made in the Swiss villages where Rousseau grew up?**
- **What did Rousseau believe is the ideal way of making laws for government?**
- **Give examples from your life where you have participated in decisions making like that of a direct democracy.**

Many philosophers during Rousseau's time believed that people must choose to enter into a "contract" (agreement) with society and be ruled by a monarch, or stay outside of society and to be free. They believed that only the rule of a monarch would ensure that society is stable and secure. Freedom, for many philosophers, meant chaos or anarchy (no government). In contrast, Rousseau believed that people can be both ruled and free if they rule themselves. He thought that governments should exist on the basis of a democratic "social contract," where people have direct say in the way their society is governed. Only through direct democracy, Rousseau believed that all adult males should help make laws in assemblies, those who administer or carry out the laws (like presidents and prime ministers) can be elected as representatives of the people.

- **In Rousseau's time, what did most philosophers think about freedom?**
- **How did Rousseau's idea differ from theirs?**
- **What two parts did Rousseau's ideal government consist of?**



Biographical Briefing on Mary Wollstonecraft

Directions: The following information will help your group prepare for the press conference in which one of you has been assigned to play Mary Wollstonecraft and the rest of you have other roles to play. To prepare for the press conference, each group member reads a section of the handout and leads a discussion of the questions following that section.

Mary Wollstonecraft, born in London in 1759, was one of the first women during the late eighteenth century to actively call for the rights of women. Wollstonecraft, the daughter of a silk weaver, left home at the age of 19, angry that all her family's small resources went to the oldest son (she was the oldest daughter). At that time, laws supported men's control of the family's money. For instance, even if a woman entered a marriage with money inherited from her family, it was immediately turned over to her husband. If she worked, all her wages were given to her husband. Wollstonecraft did not want to get married and be controlled by her husband like many other women she knew. Instead she established her own small school. Later, she left to work as a servant to a wealthy widow, then as a seamstress, schoolteacher, and finally governess to the Viscount and Lady Kingsborough in Ireland. During the French Revolution in 1789, she lived in France, where she worked and wrote about the rights of women and the French Revolution. She was not married when her first daughter, Fanny, was born in 1794. The next year, Wollstonecraft tried to commit suicide. Eventually she married the famous writer William Godwin after she became pregnant with his child. Godwin, like Wollstonecraft, did not believe in the institution of marriage. He wrote that only his love for her and nothing else "could have induced me to submit to an institution which I wish to see abolished." Wollstonecraft died soon after giving birth to their daughter, Mary Shelley. Even after her marriage, society still condemned her for her unconventional behavior, and after her death she was renounced (spoken badly of) as a prostitute and a monster.



- **Why did Wollstonecraft leave home?**
- **What kind of work did she do after she left home?**
- **How did Wollstonecraft view marriage?**

Women led a restricted life during Wollstonecraft's time. Men generally thought that women had an inferior intellect and considered them weak by nature. Wollstonecraft attributed human nature and behavior to environment, as opposed to heredity. She believed that all people are equal and that every person possesses the natural right to determine his or her own destiny. Human nature can be perfected if education is improved and oppression ended. Oppressive systems—which include the rule of masters over slaves as well as the rule of husbands over wives—corrupt both the oppressed and the oppressor. Thus, all of society would benefit from equality and the end of male domination over women.

Stop Here
& Discuss



- **What was the general attitude of men toward women in the late 1700s?**
- **What did Wollstonecraft believe determined human behavior?**
- **How did she believe human nature could be improved?**

“I am about to display ‘the mind of a woman, who has thinking powers.’”

Wollstonecraft wrote in the introduction of her book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. During this period in England, women had virtually no rights of political participation. They could not receive an education, vote, or run for public office. In addition, women were not allowed access to the court system—they could not file a complaint, appear in court, or hire a lawyer. Women were not allowed to hold jobs in government, medicine, or a number of other occupations. Inequality between men and women is not the result of natural differences, Wollstonecraft believed, but rather the result of the powerful tyranny (cruel and unjust rule) of men. Women do not have the opportunity to prove their equality because men have keep them in inferior positions. “Let men prove [that women are weaker],” she wrote. If men truly want to confirm women’s inferiority, they must first treat women as equals, she believed.

Stop Here
& Discuss



- **Describe the status of women in eighteenth-century England.**
- **To what did Wollstonecraft attribute inequality?**
- **What did she argue that men must do if they want to prove women are inferior?**

While most of her writing centered on issues of equality between women and men in the home as a way to improve society, Wollstonecraft was also concerned with women’s role in civic life. She believed that humanity’s progress is held back by the fact that women are not allowed to fully contribute to society. She demanded that women, whether married or single, must participate in civic and political life, and that they be able to study professions such as medicine, politics, and business. Wollstonecraft compared the unjust rule of kings over their subjects to the unjust rule of husbands over their wives. She was opposed to monarchy (rule by a king or queen), as well as to all patriarchal (dominated by men) systems. Power corrupts, Wollstonecraft believed, and therefore is the enemy of society. She referred to the reign of monarchs and the color symbolizing royalty as the “pestiferous (harmful) purple,” and wanted to return to a state where every person was her or his own master. “Society will not be whole,” Wollstonecraft wrote in *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, “until the last king is strangled with the guts of the last priest.”

Stop Here
& Discuss



- **To what does Wollstonecraft compare the dominance of husbands over their wives?**
- **What role did she believe women should have in civic and political life?**
- **How did she feel about monarchs?**



Biographical Briefing on Voltaire

Directions: The following information will help your group prepare for the press conference in which one of you has been assigned to play Voltaire and the rest of you have other roles to play. To prepare for the press conference, each group member reads a section of the handout and leads a discussion of the questions following that section.

The son of a notary, François Marie Arouet, known as Voltaire, was born at Paris and was educated at the Jesuit Collège Louis-le-Grand. Because of insults to the regent, Philippe II d'Orléans, wrongly ascribed to him, Voltaire was sent to the Bastille (1717) for 11 months. There he rewrote his first tragedy, *Cædipe* (1718), and began an epic poem on Henry IV, the *Henriade*. It was at this time that he began to call himself Voltaire. *Cædipe* won him fame and a pension from the regent. Voltaire acquired an independent fortune through speculation; he was often noted for his generosity but also displayed a shrewd business acumen throughout his life and became a millionaire.

In 1726 a young nobleman, the chevalier de Rohan, resenting a witticism made at his expense by Voltaire, had Voltaire beaten. Far from obtaining justice, Voltaire was imprisoned in the Bastille through the influence of the powerful Rohan family, and he was released only upon his promise to go to England. The episode left an indelible impression on Voltaire: for the rest of his life he exerted himself to his utmost in struggling against judicial arbitrariness. During his more than two years (1726–28) in England, Voltaire met, through his friend Lord Bolingbroke, the literary men of the period. He was impressed by the greater freedom of thought in England and deeply influenced by Newton and Locke. Voltaire's *Letters concerning the English Nation* (1733, in English), which appeared (1734) in French as *Lettres philosophiques*, may be said to have initiated the vogue of English philosophy and science that characterized the literature of the Enlightenment. The book was formally banned in France.

**Stop Here
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Discuss**



- What kind of injustice did Voltaire suffer?
- How did English philosophers influence Voltaire?
- Why do you think Voltaire's book was banned in France?

Voltaire purchased (1758) an estate, Ferney, just over the French border, where he lived until shortly before his death. He conducted an extensive correspondence with most of the outstanding men and women of his time; received hosts of visitors who came to do homage to the "patriarch of Ferney"; employed himself in seeking justice for victims of religious or political persecution and in campaigning against the practice of torture; contributed to the *Encyclopédie*; and managed his estate, taking an active interest in improving the condition of his tenants.

Voltaire also edited the works of Corneille, wrote commentaries on Racine, a writer of tragedies, and turned out a stream of anonymous novels and pamphlets in which he attacked the established institutions of his time with unremitting virulence. Ironically, it is one of these disavowed works, *Candide* (1759), that is most widely read today. It is the masterpiece among his "philosophical romances," which also include the inimitable short tale *Jeannot et Colin* (1764), perhaps the quintessence of Voltaire's style. In *Candide*

Voltaire attacked the philosophical optimism made fashionable by Leibniz. Its conclusion, "Let us cultivate our garden" (instead of speculating on unanswerable problems), expresses succinctly Voltaire's practical philosophy of common sense.

**Stop Here
&
Discuss**



- What rights did Voltaire fight for?
- Why did Voltaire have to keep his criticisms anonymous?
- Why was common sense so important to Enlightenment thinkers?

In 1778, his 84th year, Voltaire attended the first performance of his tragedy *Irène*, in Paris. His journey and his reception were a triumph and apotheosis, but the emotion was too much for him and he died in Paris soon afterward. In order to obtain Christian burial he had signed a partial retraction of his writings. This was considered insufficient by the church, but he refused to sign a more general retraction. To a friend he gave the following written declaration: "I die adoring God, loving my friends, not hating my enemies, and detesting persecution." An abbot secretly conveyed Voltaire's corpse to an abbey in Champagne, where he was buried. His remains were brought back to Paris in 1791 and buried in the Panthéon.

Voltaire attained the most subtly comical effects through an imperceptible turn of a phrase; his sentences flow with facility; his expressions are always felicitous and unlabored; his irony is as devastating as its touch is light. Brevity and lucidity characterize all his writings. The *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764) is a compendium of Voltaire's thought on the most varied subjects. In his serious poetic works, the perfection of his style is usually combined with a coldness that has robbed them of lasting appeal, although they tower above those of other 18th-century imitators of Racine. Voltaire was significant in helping to introduce to the theater authentic costumes, and he labored successfully for the improvement of the social status of actors.

**Stop Here
&
Discuss**



- How did Voltaire feel about the Catholic Church?
- Before Voltaire's call for social reform, how were actors treated?
- Why is being a gifted writer a useful tool to criticize things?

In his philosophy, based on skepticism and rationalism, he was indebted to Locke as well as to Montaigne and Bayle. Despite Voltaire's passion for clarity and reason, he frequently contradicted himself. Thus he would maintain in one place that man's nature was as unchangeable as that of animals and would express elsewhere his belief in progress and the gradual humanization of society through the action of the arts, sciences, and commerce. In politics he advocated reform but had a horror of the ignorance and potential fanaticism of people and the violence of revolution.

In religion Voltaire felt that Christianity was a good thing for chambermaids and tailors to believe in, but for the use of the elite he advocated a simple deism. He opposed the atheism and materialism of Helvétius and Holbach. His line, "If God did not exist, he would have to be invented," has become proverbial. His celebrated slogan, *Écrasez l'infâme!* [crush the infamous thing!], has been interpreted as addressed either against the church or against the ancien régime of France in general.

**Stop Here
&
Discuss**



- What is skepticism and rationalism?
- How was Voltaire a man of contradictions?
- What principles and beliefs of Voltaire have influenced the United States, even to this day?