

## John Locke: *Two Treatises on Government*

English philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) published *Two Treatises on Government* in 1690. In the writings, Locke holds that all people possess natural rights, including property and personal freedom. Locke also states that governments hold their power only with the consent of the people. Locke's ideas heavily influenced revolutions in America and France.

**MAIN IDEA:** In this essay, Locke states that the primary purpose of government is to protect the natural rights of the people.

“But though men, when they enter in society give up the equality, liberty, and executive power they had in the state of Nature into the hands of society . . . the power of the society or legislative constituted by them can never be supposed to extend farther than the common good . . . Whoever has the legislative or supreme power of any commonwealth, is bound to govern by established standing laws, promulgated and known to the people, and not by extemporary decrees, by [unbiased] 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. . .

The reason why men enter into society is the preservation of their property; and the end while they choose and authorize a legislative is that there may be laws made, and rules set, as guards and fences to the properties of all the society,. . .

Whensoever, therefore, the legislative [power] shall transgress this fundamental rule of society, and either by ambition, fear, folly, or corruption, endeavor 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. . . “

## Jean-Jacques Rousseau: *The Social Contract*

In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau (1712-1778) proposes an ideal society formed through a “social contract,” and based on the natural will of the people. Rousseau believed that people in their natural state were basically good but were corrupted by the evils of society. The first lines of *The Social Contract*, “Man is born free, but is everywhere in chains,” reflect this idea.

**MAIN IDEA:** In consenting to form a government, Rousseau says, individuals choose to give up their self-interest in favor of the common good.

“Find a form of association that defends and protects the person and goods of each associate with all the common force, and by means of which each one, uniting with all, nevertheless obeys only himself and remains as free as before. This is the fundamental problem which is solved by the social contract. . .

First of all, since each one gives his entire self, the condition is equal for everyone, and since the condition is equal for everyone, no one has an interest in making it burdensome for the others. . .

If, then, everything that is not the essence of the social compact is set aside, one will find that it can be reduced to the following terms: Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will; and in a body we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole.

Instantly, in place of the private person of each contracting party, this act of association produces a moral and collective body, composed of as many members as there are voices in the assembly, which receives from this same act its unity, its common self, its life, and its will. This public person, formed thus by the union of all the others, formerly took the name City, and now takes that of Republic or body politic, which its members call State when it is passive, Sovereign when active, Power when comparing it to similar bodies. As for the associates, they collectively take the name People; and individually are called Citizens as participants in the sovereign authority, and Subjects and subjects to the laws of the State. . .”

# ***The Spirit of Laws: Baron de Montesquieu***

## **Introduction**

In 1748, the French aristocrat Baron de Montesquieu (1689–1755) wrote *The Spirit of Laws*, in which he concluded that the separation of the executive, legislative, and judicial powers was in the best interests of the people. Both the French revolutionary thinkers and the Framers of the United States Constitution were influenced by Montesquieu's ideas.

## **Primary Source**

The principle of democracy is corrupted not only when the spirit of equality is extinct, but likewise when they fall into a spirit of extreme equality, and when each citizen would fain be [be satisfied] upon a level with those whom he has chosen to command him. Then the people, incapable of bearing the very power they have delegated, want to manage everything themselves, to debate for the senate, to execute for the magistrate [judicial officer of limited authority], and to decide for the judges.

When this is the case, virtue can no longer subsist [survive] in the republic. The people are desirous of exercising the functions of the magistrates, who cease to be revered. . . .

Democracy has, therefore, two excesses to avoid -- the spirit of inequality, which leads to aristocracy or monarchy, and the spirit of extreme equality, which leads to despotic [authoritarian; tyrannical] power, as the latter is completed by conquest. . . .

In the state of nature, indeed, all men are born equal, but they cannot continue in this equality. Society makes them lose it, and they recover it only by the protection of the laws.

Such is the difference between a well-regulated democracy and one that is not so, that in the former men are equal only as citizens, but in the latter they are equal also as magistrates, as senators, as judges, as fathers, as husbands, or as masters.

The natural place of virtue is near to liberty; but it is not nearer to excessive liberty than to servitude. . . . Democratic and aristocratic states are not in their own nature free. Political liberty is to be found only in moderate governments; and even in these it is not always found. It is there only when there is no abuse of power. . . .

To prevent this abuse, it is necessary from the very nature of things that power should be a check to power. A government may be so constituted, as no man shall be compelled to do things to which the law does not oblige him, nor forced to abstain from things which the law permits. . . .

When the legislative and executive powers are united in the same person, or in the same body of magistrates, there can be no liberty; because apprehensions may arise, lest the same monarch or senate should enact tyrannical laws, to execute them in a tyrannical manner. . . .

Again, there is no liberty, if the judiciary power be not separated from the legislative and executive. Were it joined with the legislative, the life and liberty of the subject would be exposed to arbitrary control; for the judge would be then the legislator. Were it joined to the executive power, the judge might behave with violence and oppression.

There would be an end of everything, were the same man or the same body, whether of the nobles or of the people, to exercise those three powers, that of enacting laws, that of executing the public resolutions, and of trying the causes of individuals.

## **Thomas Hobbes, Excerpt from *Leviathan* (1651)**

NATURE has made men equal in body and mind, though there be found one man sometimes stronger in body or of quicker mind than another.... And therefore if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies; and in the process they end up trying to destroy one another. So, when it comes to humanity, we find three principal causes of quarrel (disagreement). First, competition; second, diffidence (lacking confidence in your ability); third, glory.

People need protection from those that wish them harm. The only way to create such a common power (like a government), that is able to defend people from the invasion of foreigners, to protect people from others, and to allow them to live happily, is to transfer all of the people's power and strength upon one man, or upon one assembly of men in a government.

Therefore, society should enter into a **social contract** where they authorize and agree to give up some of their rights to govern themselves to this one man or assembly of men in government. For by this authority, given to this one man by every ordinary person in this nation, he has the use of so much power and strength on him that he is able to form the wills of them all, to keep peace at home, and mutual aid against their enemies abroad.

## Voltaire, Excerpt from *A Treatise on Toleration* (1763)

It does not require great art, or magnificently trained eloquence, to prove that Christians should tolerate each other. I, however, am going further: I say that we should regard all men as our brothers. What? The Turk my brother? The Chinaman my brother? The Jew? The Siam? Yes, without doubt; are we not all children of the same father and creatures of the same God?

**Source:** Voltaire, *Letters Concerning the English Nation*, 1726.

**Note:** Voltaire was born Francois-Marie Arouet in Paris in 1694. He adopted his pen name and became a prolific writer, eventually composing poems, novels, essays, plays, and over 20,000 personal letters. He remains among the leading historical supporters of tolerance. Voltaire died in 1778 at the age of 83, eleven years before the French Revolution.

Take a view of the Royal Exchange (trading center) in London ... where the representatives of all nations meet for the benefit of mankind. There the Jew, the Mahometan (Muslim), and the Christian transact together as tho' they all professed the same religion.... There the Presbyterian confides in the Anabaptist (Baptist), and the Churchman (Anglican) depends on the Quaker's word....

If one religion only were allowed in England, the government would very possibly become arbitrary; if there were but two, the people would cut one another's throats; but as there are such a multitude, they all live happy and in peace.

# Mary Wollstonecraft

**Source:** Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792.

**Note:** British author Mary Wollstonecraft wrote novels, a history of the French Revolution, a travel journal, and a children's book in addition to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. During the 18th century, most people believed that women should be beautiful, emotional and dependent on men. Therefore, women were discouraged from studying history, geography, and rhetoric, which all teach people how to make logical, reasoned arguments.

## **Chapter 2** *The Prevailing Opinion of a Sexual Character Discussed*

The most perfect education, in my opinion, is ... to enable the individual to attain such habits of virtue as will render [her] independent. In fact, it is a farce to call any being virtuous whose [skills] do not result from the exercise of [her] own reason.

## **Chapter 12** *On National Education*

To render mankind more virtuous, and happier of course, both sexes must act from the same principle;... women must be allowed to found their virtue on knowledge, which is scarcely possible unless they be educated by the same pursuits as men. For they are now made so inferior by ignorance and low desires, as not to deserve to be ranked with them....

In short, ... reason and experience convince me that the only method of leading women to fulfill their peculiar duties is to free them from all restraint by allowing them to participate in the inherent rights of mankind. Make them free, and they will quickly become wise and virtuous ....