

John Locke (1632-1704)

John Locke was a famous English Enlightenment philosopher that lived from 1632-1704. The following is an excerpt from his Second Treatise on Government. In it, Locke expresses his views on politics and government.

All men are naturally born in a state of perfect freedom, equal and independent to act how they want to. The state of nature has a law that governs it. This law of nature obliges that no one should harm another in his natural rights to life, liberty, and property.

To maintain this natural state of freedom, equality, and independence, men consent to join and unite into a community for comfortable, peaceful living, and a greater security against any others that might desire to take away or harm their natural rights. When every individual in a community has consented to join together, they have made that community a government.

Because men consent to enter into society to preserve their natural rights to life, liberty, and property, whenever the government endeavors to take away or destroy the life, liberty, or property of the people, the government puts itself in a state of war with the people and the people are released from any further obedience to the government.

Source: John Locke, "The Second Treatise of Government" published 1689

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679)

Thomas Hobbes was one of the first English Enlightenment philosophers. He believed in a strong government based on reason. The following is an excerpt from his most famous work The Leviathan.

Nature has made men so equal in with regards to the body and mind that the difference from man to another man is not so considerable.

From this equality of ability comes an equality of hope in attaining of our goals and desires. If any two men desire the same thing which they cannot both enjoy, they compete and become enemies. When this happens, and if there is no common power to keep them all in awe, they will engage in a condition which is called war.

In such condition there is no place for business or prosperity because war makes all things uncertain. As a result of this, culture goes away and knowledge is lost. There are no arts, no letters, and no society in times of war. Worst of all, there is continual fear and danger of violent death. The life of man is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

In order to live a more contented life and escape that miserable condition of war, men must give up their freedom to the State. The power of the State must be absolute in order to keep men in awe, and tie them by fear of punishment to the performance of their covenants (moral agreements) with one another.

Source: Thomas Hobbes, "The Leviathan," published in 1651

Charles de Montesquieu (1689-1755)

Charles de Montesquieu was an important French philosopher during the Enlightenment. The following is an excerpt from "The Spirit of Laws," his best known work. In it, he explains his theory of separation of powers and checks and balances.

In every government there are three kinds of power. These are the legislative, the executive, and the judicial powers.

The power of the first (legislative) is to create laws and to amend those that have been already created. The power of the second (executive) is to maintain the public security by enforcing the laws. The power of the third (judicial) is to punish criminals and settle the disputes that arise between individuals.

There would be no freedom if the same man or the same group of men controlled those three powers at once. This man or group of men would have complete control over all parts of the law. They could create tyrannical laws or enforce them like a tyrant. They could plunder the country by their general determinations; and could ruin any private citizen by their particular decisions.

This is why many of the kings and princes of Europe, whose goal has been to attain absolute power, have tried to unite in themselves all the branches of government.

Source: Charles de Montesquieu, "The Spirit of Laws," published in 1748

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)

Rousseau was a French philosopher and author during the Enlightenment. He saw current governments as corrupt. The following is an excerpt from his most famous work, The Social Contract, where he talks about his idea for government.

Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains. This is because Man has given up his freedom to many masters (kings) in order to preserve his life. This primitive condition can subsist (continue) no longer. The problem now is to find a form of government which will defend and protect the life and goods of each member while still allowing each member to obey himself alone and thus remain as free as before.

The Social Contract provides the solution to this fundamental problem. The masses must unite together. This union of all people together is called the general will. Each person must put himself and all his power under the common control of the general will and must obey whatever the general will decides. Each member has the same power and is thus an equally important part of the whole.

Through this Social Contract, man maintains as many of the freedoms he received from nature as possible. Each man, in giving his freedom to all, gives his freedom to no one. This is because there is no one over whom he does not acquire the same power as he has given (each person gives their freedom to the general will, but they also become part of the general will and have the same power as everyone else).

Source: Jean-Jacque Rousseau, "The Social Contract," written in 1762

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797)

Mary Wollstonecraft was a self-educated Enlightenment philosopher from England. Her focus on women's rights and education helped to start 19th century Feminism, a movement for women's equality.

All educated men who have written on the subject of female education and behavior have depicted women as artificial, weak characters and useless members of society. Even Rousseau declares that a woman should never even for a moment think of herself as independent. She should be nothing but an attractive object of desire, a sweet companion to man. This is the purpose of a woman. What nonsense!

I have observed more girls than Rousseau and will dare to say that a girl whose spirit has not been dampened by society will always be a romp (full of energy). I am fully persuaded that if girls were allowed to take sufficient exercise, and not be confined (kept) in closed rooms till their muscles are weak, and their powers of thought destroyed, women could do anything. They might even study politics. Educate women like men and the more power women will have. This is the very thing I aim for. But I do not wish women to have power over men, but over themselves.

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