

John Locke: Natural Rights

John Locke was born in England in 1632. His thinking about government and people's rights had a major impact on the Enlightenment.

Thomas Hobbes had argued that kings should have absolute power. In contrast, Locke favored constitutional monarchy. In this type of government, a basic set of laws limits the ruler's power.

Locke's ideas reflected a long tradition in England. Recall how English barons forced King John to accept the Magna Carta in 1215. The Magna Carta favored nobles rather than common people, but it established the idea of rights and liberties that the king had to respect.

Over time, Parliament became the main check on the king's power. During the civil war of the 1640s, Locke's father fought on the side of Parliament. The young Locke was greatly influenced by his father's beliefs.

In the 1680s, another crisis developed. The new king, James II, was Catholic. His enemies in Protestant England feared that he wanted to put Catholics in power. In 1688, they forced James to flee the country.

The next year, Parliament gave the crown to a Protestant, King William III. Parliament also passed a bill of rights. The English Bill of Rights strengthened the power of Parliament as the representative of the people. For example, it forbade the king to keep a standing army in peacetime or to levy taxes without Parliament's consent. It also listed individual rights. Among them were protection in court cases from excessive fines and "cruel and unusual punishment."

Locke approved of these changes in England. In 1690, he published *Two Treatises of Government*. In this book, he offered a theory of government that justified Parliament's actions.

Locke denied the divine right of kings to rule. The true basis of government, he wrote, was a social contract, or agreement, among free people. The purpose of government was to protect people's natural rights. These included the right to life, liberty, and property. In exchange for this protection, people gave government the power to make and enforce laws.

In Locke's theory, a government's authority was based on the consent of the governed. If the government failed to respect people's rights, it could be overthrown.

Locke's view of government had a wide influence. In 1776, his ideas would be echoed in the American Declaration of Independence.

Questions

1. According to Locke, what was the purpose of government? What rights did he think government should protect?
2. In his book *Two Treatises of Government*, Locke argued that governments should only exist with the consent or approval of whom? What did he say should happen if the government does not do its job?