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Chapter 12 By What Right



Thomas Hobbes

John Locke

In their struggle for freedom, the colonists raised some age-old questions: By what right does government rule? When may men break the law?

"Obedience to government," a Tory minister told his congregation, "is every man's duty." But the Reverend Jonathan Boucher was forced to preach his sermon with loaded pistols lying across his pulpit, and he fled to England in September 1775.

Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence that when people are governed "under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such a Government."

Both Boucher and Jefferson spoke to the question of whether citizens owe obedience to government.

In an age when kings held near absolute power, people were told that their kings ruled by divine right. Disobedience to the king was therefore disobedience to God. During the seventeenth century, however, the English beheaded one King (King Charles I in 1649) and drove another (King James II in 1688) out of England. Philosophers quickly developed theories of government other than the divine right of kings to justify these actions.

In order to understand the sources of society's authority, philosophers tried to imagine what people were like before they were restrained by government, rules, or law. This theoretical condition was called the state of nature. In his portrait of the natural state, Jonathan Boucher adopted the opinions of a well-known English philosopher, Thomas Hobbes.

Hobbes believed that humankind was basically evil and that the state of nature was therefore one of perpetual war and conflict. Continually faced with the threat of violent death, people formed a government for protection. In the language of the philosophers, they made a social contract in which they pledged themselves to obey the ruler whose laws and authority would control their basic violence and passions. People would then owe obedience to the government that stood between them and the chaos of their natural state, and they did not have the right to overthrow that government.

Thomas Jefferson's view of the human species in their natural state closely paralleled that of another famous British philosopher, John Locke. Locke believed that people were born free and equal. They established a government, formed by a social contract, only to protect the rights that they already had in the state of nature. They had the right to break the contract if the government deprived them of the rights it was established to protect. Thus Locke's and Jefferson's philosophy permitted revolution.



Hobbes's and Locke's ideas have close parallels in modern life and are accepted by those who have never heard of either philosopher, the state of nature, or the social contract. Modern Hobbesians believe that people are basically evil and must be controlled by a strong government. They will favor harsh treatments for those who break society's rules and fear those who take the law into their own hands. The modern followers of Locke believe that people are basically good, and should be ruled by fair and mild governments. They will oppose harsh punishments, stress the need for reform and change in government and society, and permit a wide amount of protest.

The following statements are in the words of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. They are presented in this way to help you understand how the thinking of these two famous philosophers differs on these important ideas.

Thomas Hobbes

John Locke

The State of Nature

In such condition there is no place for industry because the fruit there-of is uncertain, and continual fear of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

We must consider what state all men are naturally in, and that is a state of perfect freedom to order their actions and dispose of their possessions as they think fit. A state also of equality, no one having more than another.

The Social Contract

Without the terror of some kind of power to cause them to be observed, justice, equity, modesty, and mercy are contrary to our natural passions. Covenants without the sword are but words, and of no strength. The only way for men to erect a common power is for men to confer all their strength on one man or one body of men that may reduce their wills to one will.

The great and chief end of man's uniting into commonwealths, and putting themselves under government, is the preservation of their property; to which in the state of nature there are many

The Right to Rebel

That they are subject to a King, cannot, without his leave, cast him off and return to the confusion of disunited multitude, nor transfer to another man or assembly of men.

When the legislative transgresses the rule of society, they forfeit the power the people put in them, and it devolves to the people, who resume their original liberty.²³

²³Quoted in A. Castell, *An Introduction to Modern Philosophy*, The MacMillan Company, New York, 1949), pp. 395-9, and in The Staff, Social Science I, *The People Shall Judge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949) pp. 70, 92, 110-11, 174, 177 (language modified and revised)



Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Define or identify and briefly show the importance to the chapter of each of the following:

a. state of nature e. Thomas Hobbes g. John Locke

b. social contract f. "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish h. "to dispose of possessions"

c. right to rebel & short"

2. With which philosopher, Hobbes or Locke, do you agree on the state of nature, social contract, and the right to rebel. Explain.

3. Make an argument for or against the colonists' rebellion using Hobbes or Locke's thinking to support your position.