

Two Views of the Social Contract

In the 1600s, two English thinkers, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, set forth ideas that were to become key to the Enlightenment. Both men lived through the upheavals that shook England early in the century. Yet they came to very different conclusions about human nature and the purpose and nature of government.

“Nasty, brutish, and short.” Thomas Hobbes set out his ideas in a work titled *Leviathan*. Hobbes argued that people were naturally cruel, greedy, and selfish. If not strictly controlled, they would fight, rob, and oppress one another. Life in the “state of nature” without laws or other control - would be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

To escape that “brutish” life, said Hobbes, people entered into a social contract, an agreement by which they gave up the state of nature for an organized society. Hobbes believed that only a powerful government could ensure an orderly society. Such a government was an absolute monarchy, which could impose order and compel obedience. Not surprisingly, Hobbes had supported the Stuart kings in their struggle against Parliament.

Natural rights. John Locke had a more optimistic view of human nature. People were basically reasonable and moral, he said. Further, they had **natural rights**, or rights that belonged to all humans from birth. These included the right to life, liberty, and property.

In *Two Treatises of Government*, Locke argued that people formed governments to protect their natural rights. The best kind of government, he said, had limited power and was accepted by all citizens. Thus, unlike Hobbes, Locke rejected absolute monarchy and sided with Parliament in its struggle against the Stuarts.

Locke then set out a radical idea. A government, he said, has an obligation to those it governs. If a government fails its obligations or violates people's natural rights, the people have the right to overthrow the government. This right to revolution would echo through Europe, in Britain's North American colonies, and around the world in the centuries that followed.

HOW DID ENLIGHTENMENT THINKERS DIFFER ON THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

"Two View of the Social Contract". Answer the questions below. If statement is false, rewrite it correctly in the space provided.

1. Thomas Hobbes and John Locke were both French scientists. T / F _____

2. Hobbes argued in his book, Leviathan, that people were born cruel ,greedy and evil. T/F _____

3. "Social contract" means that people give up some of their freedom in exchange for an orderly society to live in. T / F _____

4. Hobbes believed that without a strong government, such as an absolute monarch, people would simply live together peacefully. T / F _____

5. Do you agree with statement #2? Explain why. _____

6. "Most people riot and loot stores during any type of emergency situation (blackouts, natural disasters)." Would Locke agree with this statement? _____ because _____

7. According to John Locke, the government gives citizens their rights to life, property and liberty. T / F _____

8. According to the Two Treatises on Government, the government has no obligation to protect the rights of its citizens. T / F _____

9. The rule of Louis XIV would have been supported by John Locke. T / F _____

10. "When a government fails to protect the rights of its citizens, the people must revolt against that government." T / F _____
