

AP US Government: Philosophical Foundations

Philosophers Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and Montesquieu all served as influences for the founding fathers of the US Constitution. Remembering their philosophies puts today's issues in perspective with a greater political philosophy.

Thomas Hobbes (author, *Leviathan*)

Hobbes believed that the state of nature is chaotic, and in it life is "nasty, brutish, and short." In a state of nature, everyone is afraid of everyone else and people are very uncooperative in communal efforts. He believed that the state of nature is so crazy because human nature is to be greedy, selfish, and vain. Hobbes thought men are motivated toward war out of competition and mistrust of other people, but at the same time, desire peace and hope for safety.

Hobbes and a Sovereign Ruler

The reason we want to leave this state of nature, Hobbes would say, is out of a fear of a violent death and a desire for security. Once we leave the state of nature, the only way to ensure security is to give lots of power to a sovereign. This sovereign keeps things peaceful by making people too afraid of repercussions of disrupting the peace to start any conflicts.

John Locke (author, *Second Treatise*)

In contrast, philosopher John Locke is much more optimistic about people than Thomas Hobbes. Locke saw the state of nature as cooperative, and saw people as interested in their own needs, but were not necessarily as war-driven as Hobbes thought. People banded together to get rid of "degenerates" and were able to mostly keep their own peace. Thus, Locke's reasoning of why we leave the state of nature is based more around the lack of politics rather than a lack of security. Like Hobbes, Locke assumed that the sole right to defend in the state of nature was not enough, so people established a civil society to resolve conflicts in a civil way with help from government in a state of society. Locke advocated governmental separation of powers and believed that revolution is not only a right but an obligation in some circumstances. He also clearly advocated for a separation of church and state.

Checks and Balances

Locke thought everyone needed to form a society together where there is a system of checks and balances. The main problem in the state of nature, Locke would say, is that there aren't any impartial judges and there's no clear interpretation of law. Creating a society solves these problems. He also felt that the people should elect a series of representatives to keep things in order, not place all the power in the hands of one.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (author, *Social Contract*)

According to Rousseau, a society is legitimate if it is freer than it was in a "state of nature." Morality proper, i.e., self restraint, can only develop through careful education in a civil state. Humans "in a state of Nature" may act with all of the ferocity of an animal. He believed that everyone is enslaved to each other under the original contracts and everyone is also a slave to acquisition and protection of private property. Since labor as a commodity and the right to private property don't really exist in a state of nature, people are freer

without it. Rousseau believed we'd all be freer if we didn't own property and if we decided what rules we wanted to follow based on a consensus.

Rousseau on Locke and the Social Contract

Rousseau felt Locke's idea of a representative democracy doesn't work because the representatives only represent their own experiences and interests, not the common good of all society. He felt the best social contract is one in which everyone participates in politics.

Summary, Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau

Rousseau's ideas for a legitimate society are liberty and the common good. Locke's test for legitimacy is to make sure that individual interests are protected with a heavy emphasis on property. And Hobbes felt that a good society is ruled by one person who instills enough fear in citizens to keep them from breaking rules.

Baron de Montesquieu, Charles-Louis de Secondat (author, *The Spirit of the Laws*)

He saw despotism, in particular, as a standing danger for any government not already despotic, and argued that it could best be prevented by a system in which different bodies exercised legislative, executive, and judicial power, and in which all those bodies were bound by the rule of law. This theory of the separation of powers had an enormous impact on liberal political theory, and on the framers of the constitution of the United States of America.