John Locke and Natural Rights

For much of history, governments have used force to control their populations. These governments have all of the power and the average citizens have none of the power. In these situations, the government rulers have total control and no one questions their authority. However, this is not always the case. Sometimes tyranny has led to new thinking about liberty and the rights of humans.

In England in the 1600s, this was certainly true. It was a time of repression, rebellion, and civil war. This situation led to a large number of authors writing about politics and government. The most important and influential of these writers was John Locke.

The Man

Locke was born in 1692. He was born to a wealthy family in England. As a young man, Locke considered becoming a minister but later, Locke became a doctor. However, he was unsuccessful and had only one patient. After watching the English Civil War, Locke decided to become a philosopher and political scientist. He wrote several papers and essays about the purpose of government.

His Ideas

Locke is most famous for his book called Second Treatise Concerning Civil Government. He had some radical ideas about government and his ideas were very dangerous to have. In fact, he had to hide his identity as its author. No one knew he had written the book until after he had died. If the King of England knew that he had written the book, he could have been killed.

Locke’s most important ideas are about the rights of people and the purpose of government. Locke believed that governments exist to serve their people. Locke believed that governments must protect the life, liberty, and property of its citizens. He called these natural rights and argued that governments and other people cannot take them away from a person. He called them natural rights because he believed that all people are born with these rights. He said it

NATURAL RIGHTS QUOTES

“All mankind... being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty or possessions.”
- John Locke

“The care of human life and happiness, and not their destruction, is the first and only object of good government.” – Thomas Jefferson

“Every man has a property in his own person. This nobody has a right to, but himself.” – John Locke

“We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” – Thomas Jefferson

“Where there is no law, there is no freedom.” – John Locke
is in our nature to have these rights and that these rights were given to people by God.

Locke also believed in **limited government**. He believed that limiting the power of government was the best way to protect peoples’ rights. According to Locke, governments without limits can do whatever they want, including abuse people’s rights. Locke thought that governments must be based on the **rule of law**. He argued that all people must be equal under the law. For Locke, no one was above the law; not the king, not the wealthy, no one.

His most radical idea was the right to rebel. Locke insisted that when a government violates individual rights, people may **legitimately** rebel. He argued this because for him, governments exist to serve the people, not the other way around. As soon as a government stopped serving its people, it was no longer legitimate.

**His Influence**

Locke’s ideas did not become popular until after his death. His writings inspired the **ideals** of the American Revolution. The American colonies argued that the King of England was not protecting their rights. Therefore, this gave them the right to rebel. In the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson clearly referenced Locke in his reasons of why America was declaring its independence. Furthermore, the U.S. **Constitution** is based on the idea of limited government. The constitution is full of limits and restrictions on government power.

Later, Locke’s ideas spread throughout Europe, Latin America, and Asia. His ideas are the foundations of governments all over the world. The United Nation’s **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** is based upon ideas started by Locke. Without these ideas, the world would be very different today.

**Adapted from:**