

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.

Suggested Student Exercises:

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

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| a. state of nature | e. Thomas Hobbes | g. John Locke |
| b. social contract | f. "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish & short" | h. "to dispose of possessions" |
| c. right to rebel | | |

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.