

PHILOSOPHER READING

Biographical Briefing on **Jean-Jacques Rousseau**

Unlike most other philosophers of his time, Rousseau believed that people are born good, independent, and compassionate. If left to their own devices in a state of nature (a society with no government or laws, like on a deserted island) people would naturally live happily and peacefully. In fact, such a society would be free and ideal, much more satisfying than the inequalities brought by modern society. Influenced by the peace and stability he saw in simple, traditional Swiss villages, Rousseau believed the luxury, corruption, and greed of modern nations harm the individual, giving too few people too much power over many others. In modern countries, for example, political control ends up in huge capital cities far away from most people. Further, he believed that society's institutions, like government, schools, the arts, and the media, corrupt naturally good individuals. Rousseau thought that modern civilization, for all its progress, has made humans neither happier nor more virtuous (morally good).

Stop here and discuss:

- How did Rousseau believe people would act in a state of nature?
- According to Rousseau, what corrupts the natural goodness of human beings? Why?
- Based on Rousseau's views of human nature, do you think he thought people can be trusted to govern themselves?

Biographical Briefing on **Thomas Hobbes**

Hobbes' political philosophy is based on his idea that humans are essentially selfish creatures. He believed that all people are equal, and that this equality leads to competition and violence. In *Leviathan* Hobbes wrote that humans are driven by a "perpetual and restless desire [for] power...that ceases only in death," and that the natural condition of humankind is a situation of "a war of every man against every man." Because he thought that people act in their own selfish interests if they are left alone, Hobbes did not believe that people should be trusted to make their own decisions. He also felt that nations, like people, are selfishly motivated and in a constant battle for power and wealth. To further prove his point, Hobbes wrote, "If men are not naturally in a state of war, why do they always carry arms and why do they have keys to lock their doors?"

Stop here and discuss:

- What did Hobbes believe to be humankind's main characteristics?
- According to Hobbes, why should people not be trusted to make decisions?
- What evidence did Hobbes use to prove his point that countries are in a battle for wealth and power?

Biographical Briefing on **John Locke**

Throughout his writings, Locke argued that people have the gift of reason, or the ability to think. Locke thought people have the natural ability to govern themselves and to look after the well-being of society. He wrote, "The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which [treats] everyone [equally]. Reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind...that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, or possessions."

Locke wrote, "[We have learned from] history we have reason to conclude that all peaceful beginnings of government have been laid in the consent of the people." Governments are formed, according to Locke, to protect the right to life, the right to freedom, and the right to property. These rights are absolute, belonging to all people. Locke believed that ideally government power should be divided equally into three branches of government so that politicians do not face the "temptation...to grasp at [absolute] power." If any government abuses the rights of the people instead of protecting them, the people have the right to rebel and form a new government. He wrote, "Whenever [the preservation of life, liberty, and property for which power is given to rulers by a commonwealth] is manifestly neglected or opposed, the trust must necessarily be forfeited and then [returned] into the hands of those that gave it, who may place it anew where they think best for their safety and security." Locke's idea that only the consent of the governed gives validity to a government inspired the founders of new democracy, such as the writers of the United States Constitution.

Stop here and discuss:

- What ability did Locke believe people had?
- Did Locke believe people were capable of governing themselves? Why or why not?
- According to Locke, what is the purpose of government?
- What did Locke think people should do if governments abused people's rights?

Excerpt from **Karl Marx**

Bourgeois and Proletarians

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.

Freeman and slave, patrician and plebian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.

In short, the Communists everywhere support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things.

The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win.

Stop here and discuss:

- What does Marx say about history?
- What does he think about human nature?
- What does he say Communists should do?
- Who are the Communists? Why should they rule?

Located in: Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. *The Communist Manifesto*. Signet Classics, 1998. pp 49-50