



Biographical Briefing on John Locke

Directions: The following information will help your group prepare for the press conference in which one of you has been assigned to play John Locke and the rest of you have other roles to play. To prepare for the press conference, each group member reads a section of the handout and leads a discussion of the questions following that section.

John Locke was born into a Puritan family in Bristol, England in 1632. Locke's father, an attorney, was part of the parliamentary army fighting against the monarchy during the English Civil War. He wanted his son to become a minister, but Locke decided against this and instead studied medicine. As a student at Oxford University, Locke was influenced by John Owen, Dean of Christ Church College. It was Owen who first introduced Locke to the idea of religious freedom and the idea that people should not be punished for having different views on religion. However, Locke, a Protestant, continued to oppose Catholic and atheist (the belief that there is no God) influence in England. He remained entirely tolerant only of different forms of Protestantism. He was deeply influenced by the writing of the French philosopher and mathematician René Descartes, who proclaimed that all men possess the ability to reason. Locke also believed that people develop reason and can therefore rationally settle their differences by seeking a middle ground and compromising.



- **Describe Locke's family background.**
- **In what ways did John Owen and René Descartes influence Locke?**
- **Why did Locke believe people could rationally settle their differences?**

After college, Locke continued to study and read with a passion. He expressed his views about freedom of religion and the rights of citizens. When in 1682 his ideas were seen by the English government as a challenge to the king's authority, he fled to Holland. Locke returned to England in 1689 after the Glorious Revolution had forced the new British monarch to respect the authority of Parliament and accept a Bill of Rights limiting the king's power. Locke defended this revolution and the limitation of the monarch's power. 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."



- **Why did Locke go to Holland?**
- **What ability did Locke believe people had?**
- **Did Locke believe people were capable of governing themselves? Why or why not?**

Locke did not believe that God had chosen a group or family of people to rule countries. He rejected this idea of “Divine Right,” which many kings and queens used to justify their right to rule. In his own society, Locke supported a monarchy (rule by king or queen) whose power is limited to ensure that the rights of the people are respected. He argued that governments—including the limited monarchy under which he lived—should only operate with the consent, or approval, of the people being governed. 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.



- **What did Locke think about Divine Right?**
- **According to Locke, what is the purpose of government?**
- **What did Locke think people should do if governments abused people’s rights?**

John Locke believed that the control of any person against her or his will was unacceptable, whether in the form of an unfair government or in slavery. Locke wrote, “The natural liberty of man is to be free from any superior power on earth, and not to be under the will or legislative authority of man, but only have the law of nature for his rule.” He extended his ideas about freedom to a belief in civil liberties. Locke felt that women had the ability to reason, which entitled them to an equal voice, at least in the home—an unpopular idea during this time in history. Despite fearing that he might be censored, he wrote, “It may not be [wrong] to offer new...[ideas] when the old [traditions] are apt to lead men into mistakes, as this [idea] of [fatherly] power probably had done, which seems so [eager] to place the power of parents over their children wholly in the father, as if the mother had no share in it; whereas if we consult reason or [the Bible], we shall find she has an *equal* title.”



- **What did Locke think of men being controlled against their will?**
- **What did Locke write about the abilities of women?**
- **How do you think Locke’s views were received?**