

Enlightenment Background

In the 1600s and 1700s, most European countries were ruled by kings and queens who had complete control of the government and who claimed that God gave them the right to rule. These absolute monarchs inherited their power from their royal families.

Inspired by the Scientific Revolution when people used observation and reason to challenge the Catholic Church, philosophers started to question whether monarchy was the best form of government. This movement is now known as The Enlightenment.

Enlightenment writers asked questions like:

- *What is the purpose of government?*
- *What is the best way for a government to rule its people?*
- *Are people born with rights? If so, should these rights be protected by a government?"*

Enlightenment writers believed that government should be democratic, in other words, elected by the people. They wrote books that spread their ideas throughout Europe and beyond.

Enlightenment philosophers thought about **natural law**, which are rules discoverable by logic and reason, just like scientific laws and theories. Enlightenment thinkers extended this concept to social interactions and human behavior, thinking that, in a natural state (in the absence of society), people naturally follow a system of ethics that govern how they act.

One of the earliest Enlightenment writers was **John Locke** who thought that people's consciences were naturally predisposed to helping others, and that society (especially monarchies) were what gave rise to all of the evils in the world. Locke wrote that people are born with **natural rights** like those to life, liberty, and property, and that the purpose of a government should be to protect those rights.

Jean Jacques Rousseau, another Enlightenment writer, went one step further saying that people naturally had certain rights and that government should protect those rights (unlike what government had been doing at that time). Rousseau argued that a ruler and the people they rule should enter into a **social contract** that clearly states the laws that the government and the citizens have to follow.

Mary Wollstonecraft was an Enlightenment writer who recognized that most philosophers did not include women in their writing. Wollstonecraft argued that **women** should also be equal in society and under the law.

The Enlightenment inspired many changes in global history. For example, starting in the 1700s and continuing to today, governments write constitutions that list the powers of the government and the rights of the people in sets of laws that are designed to prevent tyranny and corruption. Some monarchs in the 1700s read Enlightenment ideas and changed the way they ruled as a result. In addition, the women's rights movement traces its beginning to the Enlightenment and continues to push for equality for all today.