

The Enlightenment

A Unit of Study for Grades 7–10

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National Center for History in the Schools
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

Approach and Rationale	1
Content and Organization	1

Teacher Background Materials

I. Unit Overview	3
II. Unit Context	3
III. Correlation to the National Standards for World History	3
IV. Unit Objectives	4
V. Lesson Plans	4
VI. Introduction to the Age of Enlightenment	5

Dramatic Moment	9
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Lessons

Lesson I: The English and French Philosophers	
Part One: Thomas Hobbes and John Locke	10
Part Two: The Philosophes (Montesquieu and Rousseau)	13
Lesson II: Voltaire and Frederick the Great of Prussia	20
Lesson III: Denis Diderot's <i>Encyclopédie</i>	30
Lesson IV: Benjamin Franklin's <i>Poor Richard's Almanack</i> and Thomas Jefferson's <i>Declaration of Independence</i>	39

Annotated Bibliography	44
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TEACHER BACKGROUND MATERIALS

I. UNIT OVERVIEW

The purpose of this unit is to explore the ideas and ideals of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers called the Philosophes, and to understand how they continue to influence our basic notions about the nature of man and his world. The unit introduces key members of the Philosophes through short excerpts from their works. The selections illustrate the social concerns of Enlightenment thinkers in society, politics, and education. Through a study of primary sources, the works of Baron de Montesquieu, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Marquis de Condorcet will be discussed. François Marie Arouet de Voltaire and the “enlightened despot” Frederick the Great, will also be introduced, as will the revolutionary *Encyclopédie* of Denis Diderot. The unit ends with the influence of the Enlightenment on the New World through a lesson on Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, author of *The Declaration of Independence*.

The ideals of the eighteenth century Enlightenment acquaint students with the vision of the perfectibility of man through the power of reason, which laid the basis for the notion of egalitarianism at the heart of the French and American Revolutions. Fundamental issues such as the basic nature and rights of man will be discussed, as will the value of reason over tyrannical authority. This unit also shows the relationship between ideals and their practical application in society. Through the use of primary sources both written and visual, the student will be able to experience the age of reason. By learning about the Philosophes, the student will develop critical thinking and inductive reasoning. This unit is an essential link in understanding the development of European thought because the writings of the Philosophes influenced not only the French and American Revolutions, but paved the way for the Industrial Revolution and modern culture.

II. UNIT CONTEXT

This unit should come after covering the development of the absolutist state in France and Eastern Europe. The students also should have previously studied the advances and discoveries of the Scientific Revolution, which would have included a discussion of the Scientific Method. This unit on the Enlightenment would then be followed by lessons on the French and American revolutions.

III. CORRELATION TO THE NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR WORLD HISTORY

The Enlightenment provides teaching materials that address *National Standards for History, Basic Edition* (National Center for History in the Schools, 1996), Era 6, "The Emergence of the First Global Age." Lessons within this unit help students appraise

Standard 2E, the significance of the Enlightenment in European and world history. This unit likewise integrates a number of Historical Thinking Standards including: draw upon visual and literary sources (**Standard 2**, Historical Comprehension); examine the influence of ideas (**Standard 3**, Historical Analysis and Interpretation); and interrogate historical data by uncovering the social, political, and economic context in which it was created (Historical Research).

IV. UNIT OBJECTIVES

1. By studying the relationship between Voltaire and Frederick the Great, the students will see the relationship between the ideals of the Enlightenment and the practical application of these ideas in the real world.
2. The student will be able to place the Enlightenment in its historical context, and be able to identify its basic ideas.
3. Through the study of primary sources, students will become familiar with the ideas of eight key Philosophes of the Enlightenment.
4. By engaging in a class debate, students will understand three major areas of concern to the Philosophes, namely, the discovery of the underlying laws which govern society, the proper structure of government, and the dissemination of knowledge about the material world.
5. The study of illustrations from Diderot's *Encyclopédie* will graphically demonstrate to students the new availability of information, both technical and philosophical, to the literate public, and the impact that it made in society.
6. The student will discover the role of ideas in affecting the course of history, and in precipitating major events; in this case, the French and American Revolutions.

V. LESSON PLANS

1. The English and French Philosophers
2. Voltaire and Frederick the Great of Prussia
3. Denis Diderot's *Encyclopédie*
4. Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanack* and Thomas Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence*.

VI. INTRODUCTION TO THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT

The diverse and contradictory nature of eighteenth-century Enlightenment thought, commonly known as the Age of Reason, pays homage to the tremendous intellectual ferment of the previous century. In the seventeenth century, the Scientific Revolution had provided a new model for how problems could be solved through rational thought and experimentation, rather than on the authority of religion or the ancients. In fact, the French philosopher, mathematician and scientist René Descartes had seen man's ability to reason as the very proof of his existence, declaring "*Cogito, ergo sum*" (I think, therefore I am), in his *Discourse on Method* in 1637. Descartes rejected all forms of intellectual authority except the conclusions of his own thought, which he then used to prove the existence of God.

The Scientific Revolution had actually begun in the mid-16th century with Copernicus' new theory of the sun as the center of the universe, replacing Ptolemy's earth-centered model, accepted since antiquity. This revolution culminated in the seventeenth century with the publication of Sir Isaac Newton's *Principia* in 1687, in which a thoroughly mechanical universe was explained through universal laws of motion. Newton, like Descartes, presented a vision of the universe whose most basic workings could be calculated and understood rationally, but which was also the work of a Creator.

The triumph of Newtonian science coincided with and helped to produce a fundamental intellectual change. By the early eighteenth century, the focus of speculation was shifting from theological to secular concerns. This change is at once evident when we compare two rulers who exemplify the old and new outlooks. Louis XIV of France (1643–1715*) was a typical seventeenth-century sovereign, in that he had seen his primary duty to the State as a religious leader. His revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, which forced tens of thousands of Protestants to flee France, was an example of his concern with the religious unity of his country. In contrast, the eighteenth-century ruler Frederick the Great of Prussia (1740–86*) was basically a secular leader. He described his own role as that of "first servant of the state." To Frederick, his subjects' religions were their own affair, a matter of private conscience, and not a public matter of state. Frederick's overriding concern instead was with building an army and a stable bureaucracy, and putting in place a tax structure to fund them. His rationally-organized state machine would assure the security and prosperity of his subjects. The old religious hostilities that had divided Europe since the Reformation no longer preoccupied him. Science and rational inquiry now came to be seen as the common ground which reunited men, previously polarized into Catholic or Protestant, in what the *Declaration of Independence* would call "the pursuit of happiness"—happiness to be achieved in *this* world, not the next. Reason provided a unifying doctrine, and the key to increasing human happiness taking over the position once held by religion. With the right use of reason, all society's problems could be solved and all mankind could live prosperously and contentedly.

* The years of a monarch's reign are given in parentheses.

This optimism reflected a sense of growing economic opportunity. Europe in the eighteenth century was richer and more populous than ever before. Steady economic growth seemed to bear out the notion that the new key of scientific method could unlock the answers not only to the physical world (as Newton had done), but to theology, history, politics and social problems as well. Using the advances made possible through rational scientific inquiry, farmers pioneered improvements in agriculture and entrepreneurs experimented with new technologies and products.

In England, the seminal political theories of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke were in the spirit of the same rational approach to problem solving, but had also been influenced by the dramatic conflicts that unfolded in Britain between the 1640s and the 1680s. Hobbes wrote in his masterwork, the *Leviathan* (1651), that men were motivated primarily by the desire for power and by fear of other men, and so needed an all-powerful sovereign to rule over them. He characterized their lives without a strong ruler as "solitary, nasty, poor, brutish, and short." For Hobbes, the English Civil War, which began in 1642, and ended with the execution of King Charles I in 1649, was convincing evidence that men were ultimately selfish and competitive. In addition, Galileo's ideas concerning the nature of the physical world, led him to reason that only matter exists, and that human behavior could be predicted by exact, scientific laws. In the *Leviathan*, he attempted to turn politics into a science, in which the clash of competing material bodies (men), could be predicted with mathematical accuracy, and thus regulated.

John Locke, a generation later, developed an entirely different notion of the basic nature of humankind, which he saw as innately good. While attending Oxford in 1666, he became friends with the first Earl of Shaftesbury, and in 1679, when the Earl was implicated in plots against King Charles II, Locke was also suspected. He fled to the Netherlands, where he met Prince William and Princess Mary (Mary Stuart) of Orange. Locke ultimately enjoyed a favored position at court after William and Mary were invited to invade England and assume the throne in 1688. They came and conquered, but real power was now in the hands of Parliament, representing the propertied classes, which granted them the throne in 1689.

Locke then, witnessed this almost bloodless, so-called "Glorious Revolution," and became convinced that people could live amicably together, after discovering God's law through the application of reason. In Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (1690), he outlined a theory of politics based on people's natural rights: life, liberty, and the ownership of property. To Locke, the task of the state was to protect these rights. Government was a contract between ruler and subjects, as the events of 1688-1689 had demonstrated: rulers were granted power in order to assure their subjects' welfare. His writings were seminal for the American revolutionary leader Thomas Jefferson, who closely followed Locke's ideas in the *Declaration of Independence*.

In the early eighteenth century, this early critical inquiry into the nature of man and society, spurred by events in England, influenced a group of French thinkers who came to be known as the *Philosophes*. Many French thinkers came to admire the economically advanced country across the channel with its unique form of representative government.

In the first generation of French *Philosophes*, one of the most important contributions to Enlightenment political thought was made by Charles de Secondat, the Baron de Montesquieu (1689–1755). This French nobleman came to respect the British political system after a stay in England from 1729–1731. In his masterwork *The Spirit of the Laws*, published in 1748, he developed the notion that human, natural and divine laws guide all things, including forms of government, and can best be discovered by empirical investigation.

Another of the early *Philosophes* who wrote on the nature of government was the author and poet Francois Marie Arouet, better known by his pen name of Voltaire (1694–1778). He was famous in his younger days for his acerbic and witty poetry and plays, but after personal troubles forced him into exile in England in 1726, he came into contact with the ideas of Locke and Newton, and took up weightier concerns. England became for him a model of religious and philosophical freedom, and greatly affected the course of his work, culminating with the publication of his *Philosophical Letters Concerning the English Nation* in 1733, in which he praised the customs and institutions of English life. In his native France, Voltaire's work was seen as a direct rebuke to French mores and government, and after being condemned by local authorities, Voltaire was once again forced to flee abroad.

In 1749, Frederick the Great of Prussia, who admired Voltaire's political views, invited him to come to his court in Potsdam as his royal writing teacher. After three years of what Voltaire saw as "intellectual tyranny" by the monarch, however, he fled to freer circumstances, settling for some time in Switzerland and eventually returning to Paris, to a hero's welcome, at the end of his life in 1778.

Rousseau (1712–1778) and Diderot (1713–1784), born a generation later, continued the *Philosophe* tradition. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) was an outspoken critic of the French social and political order. In his landmark work, *The Social Contract*, written in 1762, Rousseau rejected existing forms of government in favor of a community based on the choice of all its citizens, and their democratic participation in every major decision. These ideas were to be of central importance after the outbreak of the French Revolution. Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, to which Rousseau contributed, was a wide-ranging attack on the irrationality of contemporary society and political institutions. Despite being banned, it continued to be published; its last volume was issued in 1772.

The Enlightenment was a cosmopolitan movement, not restricted to England and France. In Germany, Italy and Spain, thinkers similar to the French *Philosophes* pursued their campaign against outmoded ideas and political and religious obscurantism. In colonial America, men like Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790), corresponded with European thinkers on political and scientific topics. Through Franklin and Jefferson—to name only the most prominent—the critical, rationalist thought of eighteenth-century Europe exercised a decisive influence on American political and social theories. The *Declaration of Independence* (1776) is one of the clearest and most succinct articulations of the Enlightenment program to be penned in the entire eighteenth century.

The development of the scientific method begun in the seventeenth century was continued in the eighteenth, and extended into fields of inquiry largely untouched by the Scientific Revolution, such as biology, botany and chemistry. The work of the Swedish scientist Linnaeus (Carl Linné, 1707–1778), provides an excellent example of the growing refinement in science, which was summarized for the general reader in Diderot's *Encyclopédie*.

For the men of the Enlightenment the basic question of the age was: how does one make mankind happy and rational and free? Their basic answer was: by discovering the underlying laws which would organize all knowledge into a clear, rational system, enabling individuals to become enlightened, and the societies in which they live to progress. It was a goal seen as obtainable to the people of the eighteenth century. Science and reason seemed to offer the key to the future, to a kind of paradise which would be realized not in the next world, as the theologians asserted, but in this world, here and now.

LESSON ONE

THE ENGLISH AND FRENCH PHILOSOPHERS

Part One: Thomas Hobbes and John Locke

A. OBJECTIVES

- ◆ Students will learn how the ideas of Hobbes and Locke distilled the concepts that developed in the political ferment of seventeenth-century England, and set the terms of debate for the eighteenth-century Philosophes.
- ◆ Students will discern a rational approach to thinking about the nature of man based on reason, not on folk beliefs, authority, or religion.
- ◆ Students will understand the role that a basic view of human nature plays in forming theories of government.

B. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Two English intellectuals, mathematician Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and philosopher John Locke (1632–1704), were among the first to use a scientific approach to study man and his society. As a mathematician, Hobbes' political theory was an effort to make politics into an exact science like geometry. Hobbes was an admirer of Galileo's studies of motion, and attempted to apply Galileo's scientific principles to social theory.

The philosopher John Locke was himself a friend of Sir Isaac Newton, and was influenced by Newton's description of the universe as a vast machine operating by precise, unvarying scientific laws. Locke thought deeply about the nature of economics, psychology and religion, as well as politics.

Both men lived through upheavals of seventeenth-century English politics, and witnessed the establishment of limited monarchy and Parliamentary rule. Hobbes had witnessed the bloody execution of King Charles I in 1649, as the culmination of England's bitter Civil War (1642–1649). As tutor to the young heir-apparent Charles II, he fled with the royal household to France after the King's execution. Locke, on the other hand, although aligned with the political opposition to the Stuarts and exiled in 1683, was successful in government circles upon his return to England after 1688. He witnessed the so-called "Glorious Revolution" of 1689, in which William and Mary came to the throne of England, replacing the monarch James II almost without bloodshed.

Hobbes's and Locke's divergent views of human nature reflect their different personal experiences. While Hobbes concluded that the nature of humans was competitive, that fear was their most powerful motive for action, and that their natural state was one of war, Locke saw men living in a state of nature which was basically reasonable and cooperative.

Hobbes's pessimistic view of human nature did not appeal to most Enlightenment thinkers: Locke's view of humankind as essentially reasonable and benevolent accorded much better with the optimism of the age, and seemed to justify it. But the two English political theorists had pointed the way to a new, rationalist approach to the problems of government and society. They showed that the laws of science might have their counterpart in other laws that governed social and political behavior. The scientific method could be applied even to intractable questions of politics.

C. LESSON ACTIVITIES

1. Share **Documents 1-A** and **1-B**, selections from Hobbes' *Leviathan* and Locke's *Of Civil Government*.
2. Allow 15 minutes for the class to read the documents.
3. Based on the readings, have students engage in a debate defending these essentially different views of human nature.

4. **Homework Assignment:**

Write a one-page essay on which point of view you really believe in, giving your reasons.

D. QUESTIONS TO GUIDE DEBATE

1. Why would the basic nature of humans be a topic of discussion? (As an attempt to understand the basic laws which govern human interaction in society.)
2. Why would this be important for developing a concept for an ideal form of government? (The idea would be successful or not, depending upon whether it fitted the basic nature of human beings.)
3. How would these writers have come up with their point of view? (Through the scientific method of observation of particulars, generalization, prediction for future.)

Lesson One

4. How could Locke and Hobbes have come to such different conclusions? (One idea: they had experienced extremely different political situations in their lives; for Hobbes—the English Civil War, the beheading of a monarch; for Locke—the Glorious Revolution, with no bloodshed.)
5. Relate discussion to students' personal experience with people; the role environment plays in forming ideas.



Frontispiece of the *Leviathan*.

Public domain. From Thomas Macaulay, *The History of England* (London: Macmillan, 1913).

Part Two: The Philosophes (Montesquieu and Rousseau)

A. OBJECTIVES

1. From a reading of Montesquieu, the nature of law will be understood, as well as the value of a system of checks and balances between the three branches of government.
2. Through reading Rousseau, students will see a reasoned attempt to define the proper relationship between the individual and the group in society.

B. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Many writers and thinkers of the eighteenth century, especially in France, built upon the ideas and analytical method employed by Locke, and attempted to develop theories of government based on a rational approach to man's relationship with the society in which he lived. Two of the key thinkers on the nature of government were Montesquieu (1689–1755) and Rousseau (1712–1778). Montesquieu admired the English system of limited constitutional monarchy, which was a product of the “Glorious Revolution” of 1689 and was a victory for the political opposition, of which Locke formed part. He also was influenced by Locke's *Two Treatises of Civil Government* (1690), in which Locke articulated his support for the government which was created by the revolution. Rousseau, on the other hand, found this form of government inadequate, for it did not grant sovereignty equally to all of the people within the society.

C. LESSON ACTIVITIES (Oral Group Reports)

1. Write the following three basic tenets of the *Philosophes* on the board:
 - a. Human society is governed by Natural Laws.
 - b. These Natural Laws can be discovered by rational men.
 - c. Human society can turn from traditional, authoritarian forms, and progress toward a more perfect government through rational thought.
2. Divide the class into three groups.
3. Give each group a different reading. **Document 1-C** is the section on law from Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws*. **Document 1-D** is the section on government checks and balances, also from the same document by Montesquieu. **Document 1-E** is from Rousseau's *The Social Contract*.

Lesson One

4. In their three groups, have students find as many of the three basic tenets as they can in each of these documents on government, and come up with a list.
5. Each group then makes an oral report on their findings to the class, using quotes from the documents to back up their points.
6. Draw up a complete list on the board.

EVALUATING THE LESSON

Part One

- Informal observation of debate.
- Evaluation of essay assigned as homework.

Part Two

- Observe the work in groups.
- Evaluate lists.

SELECTIONS FROM *THE LEVIATHAN*
Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679)
(Primary Source)

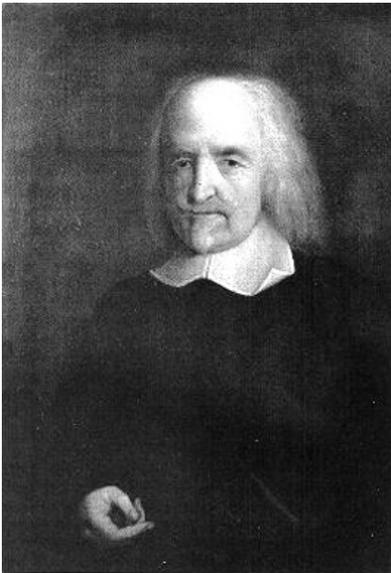
Human Equality:

Nature has made men so equal, in the faculties of the body and mind; as that though there be found one man sometimes manifestly stronger in body, or of quicker mind than another, yet when all is reckoned together, the difference between man and man, is not so considerable. . .

For such is the nature of men, that howsoever they may acknowledge many others to be more witty, or more eloquent, or more learned; yet they will hardly believe there be many so wise as themselves. . . .

The State of Nature:

From this equality of ability, arises equality of hope in the attaining of our ends. And therefore if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies. . . .



Thomas Hobbes

Hereby it is manifest, that during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war, as is of every man, against every man. For 'war' consists not in battle only, or the act of fighting, but in a tract of time, wherein the will to contend by battle is sufficiently known.

In such condition there is no place for industry [meaning productive labor, not "industry" in modern sense of factories], because the fruit thereof is uncertain, and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building. . . no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and, which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

SELECTIONS FROM *OF CIVIL GOVERNMENT*
John Locke (1632–1704)
(Primary Source)

The State of Nature

To understand political power aright, we must consider what state all men are naturally in, and that is, a state of perfect freedom to order their actions and dispose of their possessions and persons, as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of nature; without asking leave, or depending upon the will of any other man. . . .

The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one: and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions: for men [are] all the workmanship of one omnipotent and infinitely wise Maker; all the servants of one sovereign master, sent into the world by his order, and about his business. . . .

Reason

Men living together according to reason, without a common superior on earth, with authority to judge between them, is properly the state of nature.



John Locke

God, who hath given the world to men in common, hath also given them reason to make use of it to the best advantage of life, and convenience. The earth, and all that is therein, is given to men for the support and comfort of their being.

Nothing was made by God for man to spoil or destroy. And thus, considering the plenty of natural provision there was a long time in the world, and the few spenders . . . there could be then little room for quarrels or contentions about property so established.

SELECTIONS FROM *THE SPIRIT OF THE LAWS* (1749)
Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu (1689-1755)
(Primary Source)

Of the Laws in General

Laws, in their most general meaning, are the necessary relations arising from the nature of things. In this sense, all beings have their laws, the Deity his laws, the material world its laws, the intelligences superior to man their laws, the beasts their laws, man his laws. . . .

Since we observe that the world, though formed by the motion of matter, and void of understanding, subsists through so long a succession of ages, its motions must certainly be directed by invariable laws. . . .

Law in general is human reason, inasmuch as it governs all the inhabitants of the earth; the political and civil laws of each nation ought to be only the particular cases in which human reason is applied.

They should be adapted in this manner to the people for whom they are framed, because it is most unlikely that the laws of one nation will suit another.

They should be relative to the nature and principle of each government. . . . They should be relative to the climate of each country, to the quality of its soil, to its situation and extent, to the principal occupation of the inhabitants, whether farmers, huntsmen, or shepherds: they should have a relation to the degree of liberty which the constitution will bear, to the religion of the inhabitants, to their manners, and customs. . . . in all which different respects they ought to be considered.

SELECTIONS FROM *THE SPIRIT OF THE LAWS* (1749)
Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu (1689–1755)
 (Primary Source)

Of Political Liberty and the Constitution of England

Political liberty is to be found only in moderate governments; and even in these it is not always found. It is there only when there is no abuse of power: but constant experience shows us that every man invested with power is apt to abuse it, and to carry his authority as far as it will go.

To prevent this abuse, it is necessary, from the very nature of things, that power should be a check to power.

The political liberty of the subject is a tranquility of mind arising from the opinion each person has of his safety. In order to have this liberty, it is requisite the government be so constituted as one man need not be afraid of another.

When the legislative and executive powers are united in the same person, or in the same body of magistrates, there can be no liberty. . . .

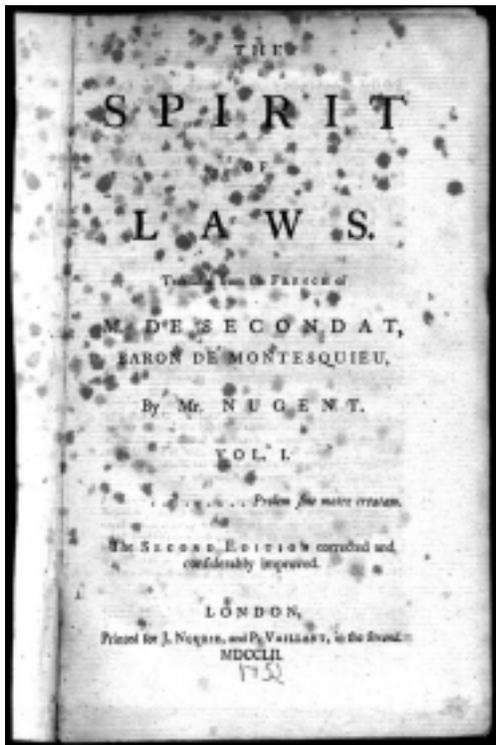


Image of the 1752 edition title page.

Reprinted online:

http://www.constitution.org/cm/sol_front.jpg
 (February 1999)

Again, there is no liberty if the judiciary power be not separated from the legislative and executive.

In perusing the admirable treatise of Tacitus on the manners of the ancient German tribes, we find it is from that nation the English have borrowed the idea of their political government. This beautiful system was invented first in the woods. . . .

Neither do I pretend by this to undervalue other governments, nor to say that this extreme political liberty ought to give uneasiness to those who have only a moderate share of it. How should I have any such design; I who think that even the highest refinement of reason is not always desirable, and that mankind generally find their account better in mediums than in extremes?

Source: Montesquieu, Charles de Secondat, baron de *The Complete Works of M. de Montesquieu* (London: T. Evans and W. Davis, 1777).

SELECTIONS FROM *THE SOCIAL CONTRACT* (1762)
Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)
(Primary Source)

Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains. Many a one believes himself the master of others, and yet he is a greater slave than they.

... [T]he social order is a sacred right which serves as a foundation for all others... now, as men cannot create any new forces, but only combine and direct those that exist, they have no other means of self-preservation than to form... a sum of forces which may overcome the resistance, to put them in action... and to make them work in concert.

This sum of forces can be produced only by the combination of man; but the strength and freedom of each man being the chief instruments of his preservation, how can he pledge them without injuring himself, and without neglecting the cares which he owes to himself? This difficulty, applied to my subject, may be expressed in these terms:

‘To find a form of association which may defend and protect with the whole force of the community the person and property of all its members and by means of which each, coalescing with all, may nevertheless obey only himself, and remain as free as before. Such is the fundamental problem of which the social contract furnishes the solution.’



Jean Jacques Rousseau

In short, each giving himself to all, gives himself to nobody. . .

We see from this formula that the act of association contains a reciprocal engagement between the public and individuals, and that every individual . . . is engaged in a double relation. . . .

... the social pact . . . includes this engagement . . . that whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be constrained to do so by the whole body; which means nothing else than that he shall be forced to be free. . . .

Source: Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, Henry J. Tozer, trans. (London, 1895).