

One of the earliest people to think about our role in society was the Greek philosopher Plato, who lived in the 4th century BCE. Plato believed that the community is best served by each citizen doing whatever it is that he or she does best. The best builders should build; the best farmers should farm; and the best ruler should rule. Plato based his arguments on the belief that humans are not created equal in gifts and talents. Some people are good at making decisions and others are not. Some people are good at guarding, and others are better at making bread. To Plato, your role is determined by your natural abilities.

Your role in society is more than just choosing a career, though. Our roles in society have to do with purpose: What is the purpose we serve in this world? The Dalai Lama has said that "Our prime purpose in this life is to help others." What is your reaction to his position? If helping others is our prime purpose, then there must also be a secondary purpose (and maybe even a third and fourth purpose). The Mi'kmaq people believe that the individual has responsibilities to the collective; that is, the individual's purpose is to better serve the community.

In this collective, each person has both rights and advantages from being part of the whole but also has obligations and responsibilities that define membership and citizenship...As one understands oneself—spiritually, mentally, physically and emotionally—one becomes centered and focussed, and thus becomes a vital force in enabling others to do the same.

—Source: Marie Battiste and James Youngblood Henderson, *Protecting Indigenous Knowledge and Heritage*, p. 56.

Both Plato and the Mi'kmaq bring the idea of citizenship into their ideologies. Your role in society, especially a democratic society such as Canada's, is determined in part by what kind of citizen you choose to become. Whatever ideology you subscribe to, you cannot avoid being a citizen of society; that is, having a role in society. Your actions and beliefs shape your purpose, and they have an effect on your society and the people around you.

Ideology in History

⇒ start reading here

Over the centuries, there have been many people who have thought, talked, and written about these three questions, and, in so doing, they created ideologies. Some of these people have had a more profound impact on future generations than others. Plato, for instance, is still one of the most influential philosophers of Western thought—even more than 2000 years after his death! In this section we will look at three other philosophers who have had profound impacts on shaping Western ideologies: Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques

PAUSE AND REFLECT

Do you see any flaws in Plato's theory? Can you think of instances where his theory would not hold true?

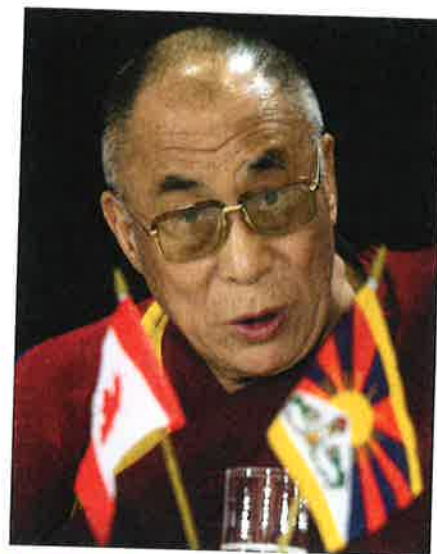


Figure I-8

The Dalai Lama is the spiritual leader of the world's Tibetan Buddhists. He has been a vocal supporter of Tibetan independence from China and is the head of the Tibetan Government in Exile. The Dalai Lama won the 1989 Nobel Prize for Peace.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

What similarities can you see between Plato's and the Mi'kmaq ideologies? How is the well-being of the community served under both views of a person's role in society? How is the individual served?

Rousseau. These men were writers during the Enlightenment, which was a period from the late 17th through the 18th centuries in Europe when the recognition of human reason made human authorship of solutions to human problems seem possible. Western democratic ideas about equality, freedom, and participatory government came out of this time period.

File Facts)

Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679)

- studied at Oxford University
- later lived in Paris for several years
- tutored the Prince of Wales (later King Charles II)
- wrote *Leviathan* (1651), a key text in Western political philosophy
- wrote extensively about social contract theory and the state of nature
- returned to England during the Civil War (1642–1651), fearing persecution from the English royalists in exile
- was banned from publishing any book related to human conduct following the Restoration of the monarchy (1660)

Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679)

Thomas Hobbes was an English philosopher living during the English Civil War. The war was a bitter struggle between the king and Parliament that ended when King Charles I was beheaded. After that, a republic was formed under Oliver Cromwell, a strict Puritan, whose government tyrannized the people and brutally punished anyone who disagreed with its policies.

These events profoundly influenced Hobbes. He believed that human nature is characterized by fear, violence, and dangerous self-interest—in other words, extreme individualism—where people are looking out only for themselves and hurting anyone who gets in their way.

[During the state of nature, people] are in that condition which is called war...In such condition there is no place for industry...no culture of the earth...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.

—Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapter XV,
“Of Other Laws of Nature.” Great Voyages:
The History of Western Philosophy.

<http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/hobbes/leviathan-c.html#CHAPTERXV>



PAUSE AND REFLECT

Do you agree with Hobbes's assessment of human nature? What are the implications of the ideal society Hobbes envisioned? What flaws do you see in his theory?

Hobbes believed that if everyone is free, then everyone is in danger, and that we all need security more than we need freedom. Hobbes's solution was a society where everyone gave up his or her freedom to one person (a monarch or a dictator) who was responsible for everyone's security. Quite simply, Hobbes did not think it was possible to have both freedom and security.

John Locke (1632–1704)

John Locke, another English philosopher, had a very different view of human nature. Unlike Hobbes, he believed that people are rational, intelligent, and reasonable. Most people living at the time believed that power rested with God and the king (who was chosen by God to rule and therefore had absolute power, a doctrine known as the divine right of kings). Locke, on the contrary, believed that the source of power

was people themselves, which was a revolutionary idea in the 17th century. He believed that individuals possess the ability to be reasonable and make rational decisions.

Locke further believed that the only reason governments exist is to protect life, liberty, and property, which is why people give up their natural state of freedom to enter into a civil society. However, Locke believed that any government action had to be justified by popular consent. Take, for example, what Locke said about taxation:

[The government is allowed to tax the people, but] it must be with his own consent—i.e., the consent of the majority, giving it either by themselves or their representatives chosen by them; for if any one shall claim a power to lay and levy taxes on the people by his own authority, and without such consent of the people, he thereby invades the fundamental law of property, and subverts the end of government.

—John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Civil Government*, Chapter 11, "Of the Extent of the Legislative Power," 1690.

File Facts)

John Locke (1632–1704)

- studied philosophy and medicine at Oxford University
- wrote about *social contract* theory, like Hobbes, as well as consciousness, identity, liberty, and government
- prepared writings on individual rights that later became key ideas in the ideology of liberalism



Figure I-9

Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau all talk about humans in a *state of nature* (that is, prior to the existence of an organized society), but their ideas about this position were very different. Whom do you agree with? Why? Take a look at the photos shown here—people walking to raise money for AIDS awareness and others clashing on the ice rink. What have your experiences taught you about human nature? How does that affect the way you see yourself and others?



The notion of popular consent is what sets Locke apart from most thinkers of his time. In essence, Locke believed in democracy, which is why his theories were used by American revolutionaries almost 100 years later as the basis for their new government.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was a Swiss philosopher who spent much of his adult life in France. He was very interested in the common good. He believed that people are inherently good and have been corrupted by civilization and society. Another important Enlightenment thinker, Rousseau's friend Denis Diderot, expressed a similar view: "It is not human nature we should accuse but the despicable conventions that pervert it."

File Facts)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778)

- grew up an orphan in Geneva, Switzerland
- worked in the French Embassy in Venice
- contributed several articles to Denis Diderot's *Encyclopedia* in Paris
- wrote operas and novels, as well as celebrated essays on music, the arts and sciences, and education
- wrote a work on *social contract* theory and had a positive view of human nature (this is what he is best known for)
- had critical views on religion, which caused his books to be banned in France and Switzerland

Most importantly, Rousseau believed that humans are naturally free and are equal in principle: "Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains." He believed that private property and ownership of land had led to jealousy and corruption. People had lost their compassion for one another, become selfish, and based their happiness on the opinions of others. Rousseau was writing at a time when France had an oppressively rigid class structure, great extremes of wealth and poverty, and an autocratic government led by a king who allegedly proclaimed "L'État, c'est moi" ("I am the state").

Rousseau wanted to strip humans of all those aspects that he took to be the results of the influence of society. He wanted humans to go back to the characteristics that were universal and unchanging: the characteristics that made humans good and equal. He thought that if this could be done, the most effective and legitimate forms of government could be determined. Rousseau's ideal state was one where the general will of the people was the absolute authority. Unlike Locke, however, Rousseau was opposed to the idea of a **representative democracy** (a system where a small group of politicians are elected by a larger group of citizens). Instead, Rousseau felt that citizens themselves should make the laws directly. Rousseau believed that if this were achieved, people could enjoy a level of freedom close to what they enjoyed in the state of nature.

Each of these philosophers had very strong views on human nature and came up with an ideal form of government based on his beliefs. Make a list of the key points each philosopher makes about

- the nature of human beings
- the nature of society
- people's role in society

Are there any similarities among the philosophers' ideas? Think about how some of the ideas put forward by these philosophers have been integrated into our modern society. Do you think any of them would approve of the way we live our lives today?