

## What is Government and Why Have It?

Government broadly conceived involves the authority to make binding decisions and ensure that they are carried out. It can be said, therefore, that some form of government exists in almost every institution. For example, in the family parents make decisions to exercise control over their children. Even in the workplace managers or employers make decisions and enforce rules. Wherever and whenever there is ordered rule, there is government.

Government, however, is usually understood in a more specific sense – as the formal and institutional structure where policies are made in the form of law that is binding on all members of a society. Thus government is the means through which rule is exercised in communities, nations, and at the international level.

The term “government” also is used in some countries with parliamentary systems to denote individuals who have control of the decision-making machinery that Americans consider to be in the executive branch. For example, in Britain and in Japan leaders of the majority party are referred to as the “government” after they are elected to Parliament or the Diet and then appointed by other members of Parliament to serve as the prime minister and his/her cabinet. In the British Parliament and in the Japanese Diet, “the government” (the prime minister and the cabinet) serves only as long as it has the confidence of the legislature. Later you will learn more about this more specific use of the term “government” in parliamentary systems. Here our concern is with understanding government- as a rule exercised in larger political units such as countries.

## What Would Life Be Like Without Government?

Today there are more than 200 sovereign states and their national governments in the world. In addition, there are thousands of local and state governments. Most people take the existence of government for granted, but political philosophers have long raised questions about the need for government, and some have gone about it in an interesting way. They ask: What would the world be like without government? To answer that question they imagine “*a state of nature*,” a situation where no government exists and no one possesses any political power. Then they try to describe what life would be like if one had to live under those conditions.

Thomas Hobbes, who has been called one of the greatest of all political philosophers, lived at the time of the English Civil War. He worried that his country might be falling into “*a state of nature*.” In the hope of persuading his readers how disagreeable this would be and why government was preferable, Hobbes wrote *The Leviathan*. Here, in part, is what Hobbes told his readers to expect in “*a state of nature*”:

In [the state of nature] there is not place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no Culture of the Earth,

. . . no Knowledge of the face of Earth, no account of Time; no Arts, no Letters, no Society; and which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death; and *the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short.*

John Locke, like many political philosophers before and since, also imagined what life would be like in a “state of nature”. He differed from Hobbes, however. Hobbes thought that in a state of nature human beings would be in a permanent state of war against each other, competing for scarce resources. Individuals would be driven by their appetites and desires and they would take pre-emptive, violent action against any competitor.

Locke’s state of nature is more benign. Locke contended that even in a state pre-existing any organized society human beings would be bound by laws of nature that were given not by man but by God, which any individual can discover by reflection. These laws of nature prohibit harming others.

In Locke’s state of nature individuals are both free and equal. There is no natural hierarchy; everyone is equal before God and everyone is free. But when Locke speaks of freedom, he does not mean license or the freedom to do whatever one wants. Even in a state of nature, Locke insists, one’s freedom is limited because the God-given laws of nature prohibit people from harming one another. God created humans as equals, therefore they are not to use or abuse one another.

Locke, however, was a *realist*. he recognized that although the law of nature fully applies to everyone, whether or not the law is obeyed is another matter. He, therefore, comes to agree with Hobbes that some form of government is necessary. As Locke explained it:

Men, being as has been said, by nature all free, equal and independent, no one can put another out of his estate and subjected to the political power of another without his own consent, . . .  
When any number of men have so consented to make one community or government, they are thereby presently incorporated, and make one body politic . . .

On a separate sheet of paper answer the following questions:

1. Create a definition for what a government is.
2. Explain the fundamental concepts that describe a “state of nature”.
3. What are the essential *differences* between Hobbes and Locke in regards to a “state of nature”?
4. Are there any troubled areas in the world that fit a true “state of nature”?

Name (s) \_\_\_\_\_  
Date \_\_\_\_\_ Assignment # 2 Period \_\_\_\_\_

### Is Government Necessary?

Locke, Hobbes and other political philosophers asked the question: What would the world be like without a government? They stimulated the thinking of others who then went on to ask: Is government really necessary? One famous response came from James Madison, the "Father of the United States Constitution." His direct reply in *The Federalist No. 51* was conditioned by what he believed human nature to be in that, "If men were angels, no government would be necessary."

Later Madison revisited his thinking about government and human nature. He clarified his thoughts in *The Federalists No. 55*:

As there is a degree depravity in mankind which requires a certain degree of circumspection and distrust, so there are other qualities in human nature which justify a certain portion of esteem and confidence. Republican government [a government that operates through elected representatives of the people] presupposes the existence of these qualities in a higher degree than any other form.

Two novelists also have explored the connection between human nature and the need for and viability of self-government. Both authors tell of English boys marooned on a desert island. In R. M. Ballantyne's book, *Coral Island*, the boys, through courage, intelligence and cooperation repel pirates and cope with nature to lead an idyllic life in the South Seas. In William Golding's book, *Lord of the Flies*, the boys prove unable to govern themselves and fall into tribal warfare and then into despotism.

One of the great and continuing disagreements about the necessity of government and the form which government ought to take centers on opposing views of human nature. Is man inherently good, inherently evil or a mixture of both to varying degrees? Are conflict, aggression and struggle for dominance "natural" and inevitable among human beings? If this is the case then does human nature then require strong government that restrains human beings and enforces peace among them? On the other hand, many believe that negative behavior is learned and that human beings are capable of reason, compassion and cooperative endeavors. If so, shouldn't a government be an instrument by the people to bring out these positive qualities and shouldn't the people undertake the endeavor for themselves in creating a government? Aren't you glad I ask these questions in a hypothetical arena with me assisting you instead of as homework questions?

**Look on the Back**

On this sheet of paper answer the following questions:

1. How and/or why do basic assumptions of human nature affect the form in which a government takes?

2. In general is there a greater degree of depravity in mankind that merits distrust or that mankind is more deserving of trust and esteem? Why? Are you more like Hobbes or Locke?

Name (s) \_\_\_\_\_  
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### Anarchism and It' s Role in Governing.

Although most people throughout the world believe that government is necessary, anarchists do not. They believe that social organization can be best achieved through voluntary cooperation of individuals.

Today the term "anarchy" is popularly, if inaccurately, synonymous with confusion and lawlessness. Cartoonists depict anarchists as bearded bomb-throwers who have utter disregard for life. Such images are at variance with the political philosophy of anarchism as expressed by its proponents.

The first full exposition of anarchist beliefs came from the British philosopher and novelist, William Godwin. In his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1773), Godwin said, "Man is perfectible, or in other words, susceptible of perpetual improvement." Therefore, as individuals come to recognize that the interests that bind them are stronger than the interests that divide them, they will spontaneously come into social harmony. When disagreements do occur, people will be able to resolve them through rational debate and discussion. Thus, the coercive arm of government will be unnecessary.

Government, Godwin contended, is not a safeguard against disorder and conflict; government is the cause of disorder and conflict. A divider if you will. Because government, in their judgment, is the tool of the powerful and propertied classes, it imposes rule from above which represses freedom, breeds resentment and promotes inequality.

Another influential anarchist writer was the Russian prince, Peter Kropotkin. He argued that were it not for the corruption imposed by governments, humans would develop bonds of instinctive solidarity (unity among men/women without having to think about it) that would make government unnecessary. To prove his assertions, Kropotkin pointed to evidence of uncoerced cooperation within the animal kingdom. All animal species profit through mutual aid he observed. Therefore, if human beings would cooperate they too would reap benefits because they too are members of the animal kingdom.

Anarchists generally recognize that some human beings will engage in anti-social behavior. But they argue that the absence of governments does not mean that there can be no forms of social control over individual behavior. They contend that peer pressure, public opinion, fear of a bad reputation and even gossip can exert their effects on individual behavior.

**Look on the Back**

On a this sheet of paper answer the following questions:

1. Do you believe in Godwin's supposition that Governments are the "cause" of conflict rather than the resolver? Why?
2. If you were involved in a debate death match with Kropotkin (*two men enter, one man leave*) could you find a fault to his logic and survive?