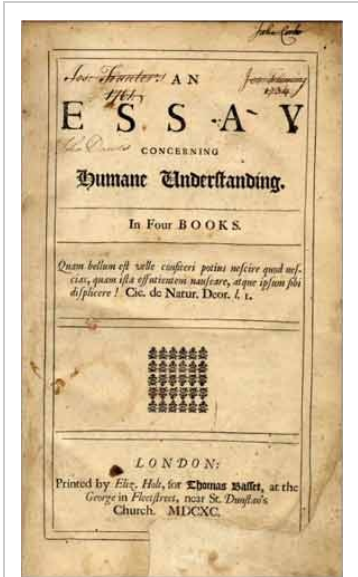




Centuries of Progress

Development of human rights theory began with British philosopher John Locke

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(The following article is taken from the U.S. Department of State publication, *Human Rights in Brief*.)

Traditionally, all groups of humans, from clans of forest dwellers to urban sophisticates, have had notions of justice, fairness, dignity, and respect. However, the notion that all human beings, simply because they are human, have certain inalienable rights they may use to protect themselves against society and its rulers was a minority view in the era before the 1500s.

Many pre-modern societies believed that rulers had an obligation to govern wisely and for everyone's benefit. However, this obligation was believed to come from divine commandment or from tradition. It did not rest on a concept of personal human rights that ordinary people could call on to defend themselves against unjust rulers.

A Theory for Some

The first person credited with developing a comprehensive theory of human rights was British philosopher John Locke (1632-1704). Locke wrote that people form societies, and societies establish governments, in order to assure the enjoyment of "natural" rights. Locke defined government as a "social contract" between rulers and ruled. Citizens, he believed, are obliged to give allegiance only to a government that protects their human rights. Those rights may even have precedence over the claims and interests of the government. Government can only be legitimate when it

Locke's essay asserted the importance of the subjective self. (Special Collections, © 2006 University of Leeds Library)

systematically honors and protects the human rights of its citizens.

However, there were limitations to Locke's theory. He did not consider the claims of all people, even though the language of his writing speaks in universal terms. His actual focus was the protection of the rights of European men who owned property. Women, along with indigenous peoples, servants, and wage laborers, were not recognized as full rights-holders. Nevertheless, the thinking of Locke and others of his time was an important breakthrough.

Expanding Rights

Many of the great political struggles of the past two centuries have revolved around expanding the range of protected rights. This has included extending the right to vote to all citizens, permitting working people to lobby for improved pay and working conditions, and eliminating discrimination based on race and gender.

In all of these situations, dispossessed groups used their limited freedoms to press for legal recognition of the fundamental rights still denied. In each case, the essence of the argument was that "we," no less than "you," are human beings. As such, we are all entitled to the same basic rights as well as to equal concern and respect from the state. The acceptance of such arguments has led to radical social and political changes throughout the world.

Across the globe, regimes that denied basic human rights to their citizens have lacked long-term stability. A significant cause of the collapse of the Soviet Union was the growing unwillingness of citizens in the Communist-bloc countries to accept the systematic denial of internationally recognized human rights. In South America and Central America, repressive military governments fell throughout the 1980s. In Asia and Africa, liberalization and democratization have been more irregular but nevertheless real. South Korea and South Africa, for example, are two outstanding examples of human rights progress.

The lesson of the recent past is that, wherever people are given the chance to choose, they choose internationally recognized human rights. And despite shortcomings, we live in a world in which fewer governments dare to deny their people that free choice.

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