

The Absolutism of Louis XIV

It is atheism and blasphemy to dispute what God can do; so it is presumption and contempt to dispute what a king can do, or say that a king cannot do this or that.

—JAMES I

It is in my person alone that ultimate power resides. It is from me alone that my courts derive their authority. It is to me alone that the power to make law belongs, without any dependence and without any division. The whole public order comes from me, and the rights and interests of the nation are necessarily joined with mine and rest only in my hands.

—LOUIS XIV

Resistance on the part of people to the supreme legislative power of the state is never legitimate; it is the duty of the people to bear any abuse of the supreme power.

—IMMANUEL KANT

The Theory of Divine-Right Monarchy

The stable monarchy that Louis XIV inherited was largely the product of two master political craftsmen, cardinals Richelieu and Mazarin. These statesmen actually ran the day-to-day affairs of the French state under Louis XIII and during Louis XIV's minority, respectively. Under their strict control, the French nobility was subdued and made to realize that the king was absolute in his authority and would tolerate no defiance. It was under their direction, from 1610 to 1661, that absolutism was advanced out of the realm of theory and made a part of the political life of France.

The practical rule of any government must be justified through some doctrine, whether it be a devotion to the principles of democracy or to the more blatant dictum "might makes right." Louis XIV justified his absolutism through the belief that God so willed it. Such a "divine-right" monarch ruled with the authority of God and was beholden to no power except that of God. For his part, the king was accountable to God and was expected to rule with the best interests of his people at heart.

The following selections explain the theoretical basis of Louis's absolutism. The first is by Jean Domat (1624–1696), one of the most renowned jurists and legal scholars of his age. He was responsible for a codification of French law that was sponsored by the king himself. The selection presented is from his treatment of French public law and may be regarded as the official statement of divine-right absolutism. The second excerpt is from a treatise by Jacques Bénigne Bossuet (1627–1704), bishop and tutor to Louis XIV's heir. An eloquent political writer, Bossuet justified divine-right monarchy by basing his support on direct evidence from the Bible. The treatise, entitled *Politics Drawn from the Very Words of Scripture*, was directed specifically at Louis's son and successor, the dauphin.

The Ideal Absolute State (1697)

JEAN DOMAT

All men being equal by nature because of the humanity that is their essence, nature does not cause some to be inferior to others. But in this natural equality, they are separated by other principles that render their conditions unequal and give rise to relationships and dependencies that determine their varying duties toward others and render government necessary. . . .

The first distinction that subjects some persons to others is that which birth introduces between parents and children. . . . The second distinction among persons is that which requires different employments in society and unites all in the body of which each is a member. . . . And it is these varying occupations and dependencies that create the ties that form society among men, as those of its members form a body. This renders it necessary that a head coerce and rule the body of society and maintain order among those who should give the public the benefit of the different contributions that their stations require of them. . . .

Since government is necessary for the common good and God himself established it, it follows that those who are its subjects must be submissive and obedient. For otherwise they would resist God, and the government which should be the source of the peace and unity that make possible the public good would suffer from dissension and trouble that would destroy it. . . .

As obedience is necessary to preserve the order and peace that unite the head and members of the body of the state, it is the universal obligation of all subjects in all cases to obey the ruler's orders without assuming the liberty of judging them. For otherwise each man would be master because of his right to examine what might be just or unjust, and this

liberty would favor sedition. Thus every man owes obedience even to unjust laws and orders, provided that he may execute and obey them without injustice. And the only exception that may exempt him from this obligation is limited to cases in which he may not obey without violating divine law. . . .

According to these principles, which are the natural foundations of the authority of those who govern, their power should have two essential attributes: first, to cause justice to rule without exception and, second, to be as absolute as the rule of justice, that is, as absolute as the rule of God Himself who is justice, rules according to its principles, and desires rulers to do likewise. . . .

Since the power of princes comes to them from God and is placed in their hands as an instrument of his providence and his guidance of the states that He commits to their rule, it is clear that princes should use their power in proportion to the objectives that providence and divine guidance seek . . . and that power is confided to them to this end. This is without doubt the foundation and first principle of all the duties of sovereigns that consist of causing God Himself to rule, that is, regulating all things according to His will, which is nothing more than justice. The rule of justice should be the glory of the rule of princes. . . .

The power of sovereigns includes the authority to exercise the functions of government and to use the force that is necessary to their ministry. For authority without force would be despised and almost useless, while force without legitimate authority would be mere tyranny. . . .

There are two uses of sovereign power that are necessary to the public tranquillity. One

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consists of constraining the subjects to obey and repressing violence and injustice, the other of defending the state against the aggressions of its enemies. Power should be accompanied by the force that is required for these two functions.

The use of force for the maintenance of public tranquillity within the state includes all that is required to protect the sovereign himself from rebellions that would be frequent if authority and force were not united, and all that is required to keep order among the subjects, repress violence against individuals and the general public, execute the orders of the sovereign, and effect all that is required for the administration of justice. Since the use of force and the occasions that require it are never-ending, the government of the sovereign must maintain the force that is needed for the rule of justice. This requires officials and ministers in various functions and the use of arms whenever necessary. . . .

One should include among the rights that the law gives the sovereign that of acquiring all the evidences of grandeur and majesty that are needed to bring renown to the authority and dignity of such great power and to instill awe in the minds of the subjects. For although the latter should view royal power as from God and submit to it regardless of tangible indications of grandeur, God accompanies his own power with a visible majesty that extends over land and sea. . . . When He wishes to exercise his August power as lawgiver, He proclaims his laws with prodigies that inspire reverence and unspeakable terror. He is

Politics and Scripture (1679)

JACQUES BÉNIGNE BOSSUET

Monarchy Is the Best Form of Government: Monarchy is the most natural, the most enduring, and therefore the strongest form of government. It is also the best defense against

therefore willing that sovereigns enhance the dignity of their power . . . in such manner as to win the respect of the people. . . .

The general duties . . . of those who have sovereign authority include all that concern the administration of justice, the general polity of the state, public order, tranquillity of the subjects, security of families, attention to all that may contribute to the general good, the choice of skillful ministers who love justice and truth . . . discrimination between justice and clemency whenever justice might suffer from relaxation of its rigor, wise distribution of benefits, rewards, exemptions, privileges and other concessions, wise administration of the public funds, prudence regarding foreigners, and all that may render government agreeable to the good, terrible to the wicked, and entirely worthy of the divine function of ruling men by wielding power that comes only from God and is a participation in his own.

As the final duty of the sovereign, one may add the following which stems from the administration of justice and includes all others. Although his power seems to place him above the law, since no man has the right to call him to account for his conduct, he should observe the laws that concern himself not only because he should be an example to his subjects and render their duty pleasant but because he is not dispensed from his own duty by his sovereign power. On the contrary, his rank obliges him to subordinate his personal interests to the general good of the state, which it is his glory to regard as his own.

political instability, which is the deadliest disease of states, and the most certain cause of their destruction: "Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and

"Politics and Scripture" is from J. B. Bossuet, *Politique tirée des propres paroles de l'Écriture Sainte*, Book I (Paris, 1870).

every city or house divided against itself shall not stand" [Matt. 12:25].

The purpose of the creation of a state is political unity, and there is no greater unity than the rule of a single individual. . . .

Kings Should Respect Their Powers and Use Them Only for the General Good: Since the power of kings is derived from God, they must realize that they are not supreme masters and therefore cannot use it however they please. They should employ their power with restraint, since it has been conferred on them by God, who will judge their actions: "Hear therefore, O ye Kings, and understand; learn, ye that be judges of the ends of the earth. Give ear, ye that rule the people, and glory in the multitude of nations. For power is given you of the Lord, and sovereignty from the Highest, who shall try your works and search out your counsels. Because, being ministers of His kingdom, ye have not judged aright, nor kept the law, nor walked after the counsel of God. Horribly and speedily shall He come upon you: for a sharp judgment shall be to them that are in high places. . . ." [Wis. 6].

Kings should therefore tremble to exercise the power that God has granted to them, and they should remember that it is a terrible sacrilege to abuse this authority derived from God.

We have seen kings occupy the throne of the Lord and hold in their hand the sword that He has entrusted to them. What blasphemy and arrogance for an unjust ruler to occupy the throne of God and issue judgments that are against His law! What presumption it is to oppress and destroy God's children with the very sword that He has placed in the hands of the king!

The Judgment of the King Is Supreme: Kings are gods, and are endowed with at least some of the independence of God: "I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High" [Pss. 82:6].

Therefore, it is evident that whoever refuses to obey the king cannot appeal to some other judge, but will be condemned to death without appeal as an enemy of the public peace and of humanity. The king can always correct himself whenever he realizes that he has made a mistake, but his authority is absolute and there can be no appeal unless it derives from his own will.

Kings Are Not Above the Law: Kings, just like anybody else, are subject to the equity of the laws. Not only are they required by God to act justly, but also because they owe it to their people to set a fair example. But even though they are subject to the law, they are not liable to the penalties of the law. In other words, kings are subject to laws only in their direction, but not in their coercion.

The Definition of Majesty: Nothing is more majestic than pure goodness. And there is nothing that debases majesty than the misery that a king brings down upon his people. God is the quintessence of holiness, goodness, power, reason. These are the components of divine majesty and in their reflection is the majesty of the king.

So great is this majesty that its source could never reside in the king. Rather, it is borrowed from God, who entrusts it to the king for the good of his people. It is proper that God should so restrain this power. . . .

Therefore, kings should be bold in exercising this authority, for it is divine and benefits all people. But kings must wield power with humility, since it is conferred from above. In the end, such awesome power leaves the king weak and mortal, still a sinner and with a greater responsibility to God.

On Arbitrary Government: It is one thing for a government to be absolute, and quite another for it to be arbitrary. It is absolute only in that no human authority can constrain it. But it does not follow that the government should be

arbitrary. Besides the fact that the king is subject to the judgment of God, the king must also act within the boundaries of the law or all action is null and void in a legal sense. Moreover, there is always an opportunity for appeal, so each man remains the legitimate owner of his property. This is in fact the definition of legitimate government, and by its very nature, it is the opposite of arbitrary government.

CONSIDER THIS:

- Louis XIV was a divine-right monarch. What does this mean, and how did Louis use religion to strengthen his political position in the state?

The Sun King and the Practice of Absolute Rule

"Vanity Was His Ruin"

THE DUKE OF SAINT-SIMON

The Duke of Saint-Simon (1675–1755) was a rather indifferent soldier and diplomat, but he was a passionate observer of affairs at Louis's court and has provided us with our most vivid account of the king and his activities. Saint-Simon was typical of the feudal nobility that Louis was trying to control, and thus this account, from his memoirs, was by no means free from prejudice.

Portrait of the King

Louis XIV was made for a brilliant Court. In the midst of other men, his figure, his courage, his grace, his beauty, his grand mien, even the tone of his voice and the majestic and natural charm of all his person, distinguished him till his death as the King Bee, and showed that if he had only been born a simple private gentleman, he would equally have excelled in fêtes, pleasures, and gallantry, and would have had the greatest success in love. . . . Vanity, this unmeasured and unreasonable love of admiration, was his ruin. His ministers, his generals, his mistresses, his courtiers, soon perceived his weakness. They praised him with emulation

- How compelling in support of absolutism are the arguments of Jean Domat on "The Ideal Absolute State" and Jacques Bénigne Bossuet in "Politics and Scripture"? What are the responsibilities of the king and the political advantages of absolute rule?

THE BROADER PERSPECTIVE:

- What is the difference between tyranny and the absolutism of Louis XIV's monarchy? What were the advantages and disadvantages of absolute rule for the different classes of French society? Who profited the most?

and spoiled him. Praises, or to say the truth, flattery, pleased him to such an extent, that the coarsest was well received, the vilest even better relished. It was the sole means by which you could approach him. Those whom he liked owed his affection for them, to their untiring flatteries. This is what gave his ministers so much authority, and the opportunities they had for adulating him, of attributing everything to him, and of pretending to learn everything from him. Suppleness, meanness, an admiring, dependent, cringing manner—above all, an air of nothingness—were the sole means of pleasing him. . . .

Though his intellect, as I have said, was beneath mediocrity, it was capable of being

"Vanity Was His Ruin" is from Bayle St. John, ed., *The Memoirs of the Duke of Saint-Simon*, vol. 2 (New York: James Pott and Co., 1901), pp. 202–203, 214–219, 226–227, 231–232, 273–276.

formed. He loved glory, was fond of order and regularity; was by disposition prudent, moderate, discreet, master of his movements and his tongue. Will it be believed? He was also by disposition good and just! God had sufficiently gifted him to enable him to be a good King; perhaps even a tolerably great King! All the evil came to him from elsewhere. His early education was so neglected that nobody dared approach his apartment. He has often been heard to speak of those times with bitterness, and even to relate that, one evening he was found in the basin of the Palais Royale garden fountain, into which he had fallen! He was scarcely taught how to read or write, and remained so ignorant, that the most familiar historical and other facts were utterly unknown to him! He fell, accordingly, and sometimes even in public, into the grossest absurdities. . . .

Louis XIV took great pains to be well informed of all that passed everywhere; in the public places, in the private homes, in society and familiar intercourse. His spies and tell-tales were infinite. He had them of all species; many who were ignorant that their information reached him; others who knew it; others who wrote to him direct, sending their letters through channels he indicated; and all these letters were seen by him alone, and always before everything else; others who sometimes spoke to him secretly in his cabinet, entering by the back stairs. These unknown means ruined an infinite number of people of all classes, who never could discover the cause; often ruined them very unjustly; for the King, once prejudiced, never altered his opinion, or so rarely, that nothing was more rare. He had, too, another fault, very dangerous for others and often for himself, since it deprived him of good subjects. He had an excellent memory; in this way, that if he saw a man who, twenty years before, perhaps, had in some manner offended him, he did not forget the man, though he might forget the offence. This was enough, however,

to exclude the person from all favour. The representations of a minister, of a general, of his confessor even, could not move the King. He would not yield.

The most cruel means by which the King was informed of what was passing—for many years before anybody knew it—was that of opening letters. The promptitude and dexterity with which they were opened passes understanding. He saw extracts from all the letters in which there were passages that the chiefs of the post-office, and then the minister who governed it, thought ought to go before him; entire letters, too, were sent to him, when their contents seemed to justify the sending. Thus the chiefs of the post, nay, the principal clerks were in a position to suppose what they pleased and against whom they pleased. A word of contempt against the King or the government, a joke, a detached phrase, was enough. It is incredible how many people, justly or unjustly, were more or less ruined, always without resource, without trial, and without knowing why. The secret was impenetrable; for nothing ever cost the King less than profound silence and dissimulation. . . .

The King loved air and exercise very much, as long as he could make use of them. He had excelled in dancing, and at tennis and mall. On horseback he was admirable, even at a late age. He liked to see everything done with grace and address. To acquit yourself well or ill before him was a merit or fault. He said that with things not necessary it was best not to meddle, unless they were done well. He was fond of shooting, and there was not a better or more graceful shot than he. . . .

He liked splendour, magnificence, and profusion in everything: you pleased him if you shone through the brilliancy of your houses, your clothes, your table, your equipages. Thus a taste for extravagance and luxury was disseminated through all classes of society; causing infinite harm, and leading to general confusion of rank and to ruin.