

Modern History Sourcebook: Frederick II: Essay on Forms of Government

The King of Prussia, Frederick II (1740-1786), was a model of an Enlightened despot. He took very seriously his duties as king.

A sovereign must possess an exact and detailed knowledge of the strong and of the weak points of his country. He must be thoroughly acquainted with its resources, the character of the people, and the national commerce....

Rulers should always remind themselves that they are men like the least of their subjects. The sovereign is the foremost judge, general, financier, and minister of his country, not merely for the sake of his prestige. Therefore, he should perform with care the duties connected with these offices. He is merely the principal servant of the State. Hence, he must act with honesty, wisdom, and complete disinterestedness in such a way that he can render an account of his stewardship to the citizens at any moment. Consequently, he is guilty if he wastes the money of the people, the taxes which they have paid, in luxury, pomp and debauchery. He who should improve the morals of the people, be the guardian of the law, and improve their education should not pervert them by his bad example.

Princes, sovereigns, and kings have not been given supreme authority in order to live in luxurious self-indulgence and debauchery. They have not been elevated by their fellow-men to enable them to strut about and to insult with their pride the simple-mannered, the poor and the suffering. They have not been placed at the head of the State to keep around themselves a crowd of idle loafers whose uselessness drives them towards vice. The bad administration which may be found in monarchies springs from many different causes, but their principal cause lies in the character of the sovereign. A ruler addicted to women will become a tool of his mistresses and favourites, and these will abuse their power and commit wrongs of every kind, will protect vice, sell offices, and perpetrate every infamy....

The sovereign is the representative of his State. He and his people form a single body. Ruler and ruled can be happy only if they are firmly united. The sovereign stands to his people in the same relation in which the head stands to the body. He must use his eyes and his brain for the whole community, and act on its behalf to the common advantage. If we wish to elevate monarchy above republican government, the duty of sovereigns is clear. They must be active, hard-working, upright and honest, and concentrate all their strength upon filling their office worthily. That is my idea of the duties of sovereigns.

From *The Foundations of Germany*, J. Ellis Barker, trans. (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1916), pp. 22-23.

Questions to Ponder:

1. Based on what you know about absolute monarchs and how they rule, what do you think an enlightened despot is and how do they rule? In a T-chart, make a list of the differences and at the end take a guess at what the meaning of enlightened despot is.
2. Interpret the following statement: a ruler "must use his eyes and his brain for the whole community, and act on its behalf to the common advantage?"
3. Do you agree with Frederick's statement made above? Should a government be allowed to do what it thinks is right even if it might be wrong for society?