

Frederick II (“the Great”), “Forms of Government and the Duties of Rulers” (1777)

Abstract

Here, Frederick presents a version of social contract theory, in which monarchical power is justified before civil society and stands in opposition to republicanism, by its maintenance of the law, defense of the realm, and other services. These pages contain his famous designation of the king as “the principal servant of the state” [*“der erste Diener des Staates”*]. The essay suggests that the “absolutist” ruler should govern “as if” he were responsible for his actions to “the people.”

Source

Forms of Government and the Duties of Rulers

The citizens have accorded pre-eminence to one of their number only because of the services which he can render them. These services consist in maintaining the laws, in meting out justice, in opposing with all his strength the deterioration of morals, in defending the State against its enemies.

The ruler should carefully watch the cultivation of the soil. He should provide an abundance of food for the people, encourage industry, and further commerce. He ought to be like a sentinel who watches unceasingly the neighbours of the State and the activities of its enemies. It is necessary that the sovereign should act with foresight and prudence and conclude alliances in good time, and he ought to choose his Allies among those who are most likely to promote the interests of his country. Each of the functions named requires a wealth of knowledge from the sovereign. He must study profoundly the physical conditions of his country, and should thoroughly know the spirit and character of the people, for an ignorant sovereign is as guilty as an ill-disposed one. Ignorance in the ruler is due to his laziness, while malice springs from an evil mind. However, the sufferings caused by his mistakes are as great in the one case as in the other.

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.

If a ruler abandons the helm of the ship of State and places it into the hands of paid men, of the Ministers appointed by him, one will steer to the right and another to the left. A general plan is no longer followed. Every Minister disapproves of the actions of his predecessor, and makes changes even if they are quite unnecessary, wishing to originate a new policy which often is harmful. [...]

Men are attached to their own. As the State does not belong to the Ministers in power they have no real interest in its welfare. Hence the government is carried on with careless indifference, and the result is that the administration, the public finances, and the army deteriorate. Thus the monarchy becomes an oligarchy. Ministers and generals direct affairs in accordance with their fancy. Systematic administration disappears. Everyone follows his own notions. No link is left which connects the directing factors.

As all the wheels and springs of the watch serve together the single object of measuring time, all the springs and wheels of a Government should be so arranged and coordinated that all the departments of the national administration work together with the single aim of promoting the greatest good of the State. That aim should not be lost sight of for a single moment. Besides, the individual interests of ministers and generals usually cause them to oppose each other. Thus personal differences often prevent the carrying through of the most necessary measure.

[...]

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 monarchical 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.

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. [...]

Good laws must be clearly expressed. Otherwise trickery can evade them, and cunning take advantage of them, and then the weak will become a prey to the powerful and the cunning. Legal procedure should be as short as possible. Otherwise the people will be ruined by protracted law suits. They should not have to spend vast sums in litigation, for they are entitled to justice. The Law Department of the Government cannot be too watchful in protecting the people against the grasping greed of the lawyers. The whole legal apparatus should be kept in order by periodical inspections, when those who believe that they have been wronged by the law can place their complaints before the visiting Commission. Punishments should never be excessive. Violence should never displace the laws. It is better that a sovereign should be too mild than too severe. [...]

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.

The promotion of morality in the widest sense is one of the most important duties of the sovereign. He can do much by distinguishing and rewarding the worthy and by showing his contempt for the worthless. A ruler should loudly disapprove of every dishonourable act and refuse distinction to those who will not mend their ways.

A sovereign may do irremediable injury to the State by distinguishing people of wealth but without merit, for honours bestowed on the worthless rich strengthen the widely held idea that wealth alone suffices to give distinction. If that belief should gain ground, greed and cupidity will break all bounds. A scramble for wealth will ensue, and the most reprehensible means for acquiring riches will be employed. Corruption will spread apace, become general, and take deep root. Men of talent and of character will be disregarded, and the people will honour only those who by ostentatious expenditure advertise their wealth.

To prevent the corruption of the national character the sovereign must distinguish only men of true merit and treat with contempt men of wealth without virtue.

[...]

Source of English translation: J. Ellis Barker, ed. *The foundations of Germany: A documentary account revealing the causes of her strength, wealth, and efficiency*. London: John Murray, 1918, pp. 21–42.

Source of original French text: *Œuvres de Frédéric le Grand*. Ed. Johann David Erdmann Preuß. Volume 8. Berlin, 1848, pp. 198–201, 208–210.

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