

## Background on absolutism

### The status of an absolute sovereign

1. Pure or perfect
  - a. Meaning: one of Aristotle's three types of government: monarchy, aristocracy, or democracy.
  - b. Contrast: "mixed" government, a monarch that shares power with an aristocratic or democratic body like Parliament (Daly, 236) (Sommerville, 351-52).
2. Not morally or legally accountable to any other human power, having no superior (Sommerville, 350-51). What various absolutist theories have in common is attempts to "free rulers from accountability to their subjects" (Sommerville, 348).
  - a. Contrasts: subordination to Papacy or some class within the state. In early usage, having an "absolute" sovereign was a way of boasting of the nation's independence from the Pope (Daly, 231).
  - b. Compatible with: accountability to God. "The idea that sovereigns are subject only to God was central to absolutist thought." (Sommerville, 354)
3. Unlimited power. Contrast: sovereigns only have some powers but not others, with limits coming from people rather than God. (Sommerville, 355)
4. Not limited by laws. Comparison with God: make laws, above laws (Daly, 234).
  - a. Early contrast: the king's "ordinary" powers, regulated by the law; thought to be compatible with the king's having "absolute" powers concerning policy (Daly, 232).
  - b. Contrast: view that the sovereign must act within the law, limits to discretion.

- c. Note: some backsliding by Royalists after civil war. “Hobbes chided the king’s advisers for denying that the government was absolute ... Certainly royalist writers were at pains to claim that the king’s power was legally limited. Where did this leave the absolute power which had been conceded to him for so long? Seldom does the strange history of the term ‘absolute’ show up more significantly than now, for, while royalists were united on the powers of the monarchy, they were divided on whether or not it ought to be called absolute” (Daly, 239). See also Sommerville, §v.
5. Unconditional power. Contrast: sovereigns retain power only if they meet certain conditions, such as acting for the public good or *salus populi*, meeting “fiduciary” requirements (Daly, 238).

### What the absolute sovereign can do

1. Sole maker of laws (Sommerville, 349). Contrast: make laws only together with another body, like Parliament. Some described a sovereign with the ability to make laws alone as having “arbitrary” power. Whether “arbitrary” power is synonymous with having “absolute” power depends on the writer: some asserted it, others denied it (Daly, 242, e.g.).
2. Ultimate interpreter of laws (Sommerville, 349). Contrast: interpretation of laws done by another body, like the courts.
3. Raise taxes alone.
  - a. Contrast: need consent, i.e. Parliament
  - b. Contrast: individual property rights against the state (Daly, 233)
  - c. Again, there was considerable unease about this even among royalists who defended what they called an “absolute” monarchy. They tended to describe a sovereign with the sole power to raise funds without meeting a condition (“necessity”) as having “arbitrary” power. See Daly (233, 242–43) and Sommerville (367–68).

### What the subjects of an absolute power cannot do

1. Refuse to obey the sovereign's commands ("passive" resistance) (Daly, 235).
2. Use force to oppose or replace the sovereign ("active" resistance) (Daly, 235, 237-8), (Sommerville, 348).

### References

Daly, James. "The Idea of Absolute Monarchy in Seventeenth-Century England." *The Historical Journal* 21 (1978): 227-250.

Sommerville, Johann P. "Absolutism and Royalism." In *The Cambridge History of Political Thought 1450-1700*, edited by J. H. Burns and Mark Goldie, 347-372. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

