



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on October 26, 2023

In Memory of Samuel von Pufendorf: Lasting, Though Forgotten, Influence on Our Founding Fathers

Samuel von Pufendorf, a prominent 17th-century philosopher and jurist, led a life that was profoundly influenced by his family's experiences during the devastating Thirty Years War and left a lasting, though now largely forgotten, influence on the American Founding Fathers. Born on January 8, 1632, in Dorfchemnitz, Saxony, Pufendorf's life journey was a remarkable tale of intellectual transformation and the pursuit of peace in a turbulent era. He died October 26, 1694.

Pufendorf's early life was marked by the ravages of the Thirty Years War, which raged across Europe from 1618 to 1648. His family, of noble descent, witnessed the horrors of war firsthand, as their estate was pillaged and their lives disrupted. This traumatic backdrop laid the foundation for Pufendorf's later commitment to the principles of natural law and the quest for a more just and orderly society.

Despite the challenges he faced, Pufendorf's talent for scholarship became evident at an early age. He pursued his education at the University of Leipzig and later the University of Jena. It was during his time at Jena that he was exposed to the works of renowned philosophers such as Hugo Grotius and Thomas Hobbes, whose ideas would significantly influence his own philosophy.

Samuel von Pufendorf's life as a professor and his contributions through his books played a pivotal role in shaping the intellectual landscape of his time and continue to influence political thought and legal theory. Let's delve deeper into these aspects of his life.

After completing his education at the University of Jena, Pufendorf embarked on a career as an academic. His first academic appointment was as a professor of eloquence at the University of Heidelberg in 1656. During this period, he began to develop his own philosophical and political ideas, heavily influenced by the works of his predecessors, including Grotius and Hobbes.

Pufendorf's academic journey took him to several renowned European universities, including the University of Lund in Sweden, where he was appointed as a professor of natural law and the law of nations. It was during his time in Sweden that he produced some of his most significant works, including *De Jure Naturae et Gentium (On the Law of Nature and Nations)*, which garnered international acclaim.

In this monumental work, Pufendorf explored the concept of natural law, arguing that certain ethical principles were inherent in human nature and that governments should be formed to protect these



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natural rights. His ideas laid the foundation for a more just and ordered society, emphasizing the importance of individual rights and the social contract between citizens and the state. Pufendorf's work was a critical development in the evolution of Enlightenment philosophy and political theory.

Another notable work by Pufendorf is *De Officio Hominis et Civis Juxta Legem Naturalem (On the Duty of Man and Citizen According to the Natural Law)*, published in 1673. This book further elaborated on the principles of natural law and the responsibilities of individuals within society. Pufendorf's ideas in this text contributed to the development of modern ethics and moral philosophy.

Throughout his academic career, Pufendorf was not only a prolific writer but also an influential teacher. His lectures attracted students and scholars from all over Europe, and he was revered for his ability to synthesize complex ideas and present them in a comprehensible manner. His pedagogical skills had a lasting impact on the next generation of philosophers and legal scholars.

In addition to his influential works on political philosophy and natural law, Pufendorf also made significant contributions to the field of international law. His ideas about the "community of nations" and the necessity of peaceful coexistence among states helped shape the foundations of modern international relations and diplomacy.

Samuel von Pufendorf's legacy as a professor and author remains profound. His writings continue to be studied and referenced in fields such as political science, philosophy, and law. His emphasis on reason, natural law, individual rights, and the role of government in securing liberty has left an enduring mark on the development of the legal systems of many nations.

Pufendorf's life exemplifies the transformative power of academic pursuits and the enduring impact of a brilliant mind committed to the pursuit of knowledge and the betterment of society. His books, lectures, and ideas continue to resonate with those who seek to understand the fundamental principles of governance, ethics, and the rights of individuals in a just and ordered society.

The aforementioned *De Jure Naturae et Gentium*, Pufendorf's magnum opus, published in 1672, is his most enduring work. In this seminal piece, he articulated his vision of a society governed by natural law, where individuals' rights and obligations were grounded in reason, rather than arbitrary authority. This concept would later prove to be instrumental in the Enlightenment and the development of modern political thought.

Pufendorf's ideas found their way to the American colonies and had a profound impact on the minds of the Founding Fathers. His emphasis on individual rights and the social contract influenced key figures such as John Locke and Thomas Jefferson. Pufendorf's belief in the sovereignty of the people and the need for government to serve the common good aligned with the principles of popular government would shape the American political philosophy and contribute immeasurably to the formation of the United States.

Moreover, Pufendorf's insights into international law and the idea of a "community of nations" were foundational in the development of diplomacy and the shaping of early American foreign policy. His works informed the thinking of American diplomats such as Benjamin Franklin and John Adams, who were instrumental in securing international recognition for the United States during and after the American Revolution.

Quotations from Samuel Pufendorf's works are found in abundance in the writing of our Founding Fathers. They quoted him extensively, including John Adams in his "To the Inhabitants of the Colony of Massachusetts-Bay." Pufendorf's *Law of Nature and Nations* and *The Whole Duty of Man According to*



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the Law of Nature were among the first volumes in the Library of Congress.

Pufendorf's contributions extended beyond the realm of political philosophy. He also made significant strides in the field of legal theory. His ideas on natural law and the rights of individuals influenced the evolution of modern legal systems, including the American legal tradition. His belief in the separation of powers, with a focus on a just legal system, laid the groundwork for the American system of government with its checks and balances.

Tragically, Pufendorf's life was marked by adversity. He experienced religious persecution in his homeland due to his conversion to Lutheranism, and he was exiled from Sweden for his political views. Nevertheless, his intellectual pursuits and his commitment to the principles of reason, natural law, and the pursuit of a just society remained unwavering.

Samuel von Pufendorf's legacy endures through his profound influence on the Enlightenment and the American Founding Fathers. His ideas on natural law, individual rights, and the role of government in securing liberty continue to shape the way we think about politics and governance. Pufendorf's remarkable journey from the chaos of the Thirty Years War to the heights of Enlightenment philosophy is a testament to the enduring power of ideas and the impact one individual can have on the course of history.

Finally, indulge me to include here some of Pufendorf's most powerful passages, the reading of which will instantly reveal why in our day, Samuel von Pufendorf's works are unread and his name is unknown:

"Else, being divided into factions, they are more concerned to ruin their rivals, than to follow the dictates of reason."

"Man has a power to act freely, that is, upon the proposal of one object, he may act or not act, and either entertain or reject; or if divers objects are proposed, he may choose one and refuse the rest."

"Now the end and use of an oath is chiefly this, to oblige men the more firmly to speak the truth, or to make good their promises and contracts out of an awe of the Divine Being, who is infinitely wise and powerful; whose vengeance they imprecate to themselves when they swear, if they wittingly are guilty of deceit."

"More inhumanity (to man) has been done by man himself than any other of nature's causes."

"Many dangers may be escaped, if we encounter them with courage, we are to cast off all effeminacy of the mind, and to put on resolution against all the terrible appearances that any event may set before us."

"But when by application of moderate expedients I cannot secure myself from the impending danger, I am then to oppose force with force, and am compelled to enter the combat. During which, if the injurious party continue to push on his malicious designs against me, and do not declare his sorrow and repentance for his fault and his willingness to renew the peace, I am at liberty to kill him."



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