
Locke and Rousseau

Students and scholars alike are often deceived by the association between Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau as founders of the social contract. Grouping these authors together often causes people to forget the essential variations presented by each man. The issue of liberty, for example, takes on an entirely different meaning when viewed from the eyes of either Locke or Rousseau.

In understanding John Locke's opinions on liberty in *The Second Treatise of Government*, it is important to begin with his definition of the idea. Fundamentally, Locke identifies liberty as the ability to do whatever one pleases without ever having to be dependent on another (Locke 2.4:116). However, Locke also recognizes that there are certain logical restrictions on this freedom, which he terms natural law: "A state of perfect freedom...within the bounds of the law of nature" (Locke 2.4:116). These natural laws prevent an individual from harming another man's "life, health, liberty, or possessions" (Locke 2.6:117), and thus maintain order within a society. By restricting certain actions, natural laws shape a new form of freedom called societal liberty, where citizens may be under the control of a legislative power, but only one which is consented to by all (Locke 4.22:126).

Under societal liberty, a new government, sovereign, and set of laws seem unnecessary. Locke explains, however, that over time a political society must be created in order for people to retain their freedom. Since men are naturally inclined to seize property (Locke 5.26:127), they eventually require preservation of their property because people "in this state [feel] very unsafe, very insecure" (Locke 9.123:178). Therefore, to reestablish liberty and preserve property, man, in common, agrees to be presided over by a unifying government (Locke 9.124:178). The true brilliance of Locke's proposition comes in his defense of liberty under this established government. For man only relinquishes two powers - the ability to do whatever one wishes which is now regulated by a legislature (Locke 9.129:180), and the power of punishment which falls under executive authority (Locke 9.130:180). Despite these two forfeitures, each individual is guaranteed the opportunity to "preserve himself his liberty and property" (Locke 9.131:180). Likewise, individuals of the society are granted a consistent interpretation of the otherwise vague laws of nature (Locke 7.89:159). In this way, there is never a tradeoff of liberty for security, but an equal enhancement of both.

Maintenance of a government that upholds freedom requires a few institutional arrangements. In order for the commonwealth to initiate this organization, the community must unanimously consent to the new establishment (Locke 8.96:163). Next, the body must agree, "to act as one body, which is only by the will and determination of the majority" (Locke 8.96:163). Furthermore,

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the commonwealth instills a great deal of power within the legislature (Locke 11.135:183), and the power to enforce laws within the executive (Locke 12.144:189).

Lastly, Locke warns against the ways in which freedom can be restricted within society. The first form is legislative abuses, which Locke anticipates by requiring the legislature to act according to standing laws and always in the interest of the commonwealth (Locke 11.136:184). Secondly, the executive can also use his power to limit the freedom owed to the public. Once again, however, Locke foresees this problem by stating that, "When they are hindered by any force...wherein the safety and preservation of the people consists, the people have a right to remove it by force" (Locke 13.155:194). Locke protects against any injustice aimed towards the liberty of the commonwealth and summarizes his entire concept of freedom with the Latin words, "Salus populi suprema lex" (Locke 13.158:196): The people's safety is the supreme law.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in *The Social Contract*, although discussing the same topic of liberty, approaches the argument from a different perspective. Freedom, in Rousseau's mind, is the right to function completely independent of others (Rousseau 1.7:58), and to be the judge and master of his own decisions (Rousseau 1.1:46). Political government is eventually sought to protect liberty because, "there is a point in the development of mankind at which the obstacles to men's self-preservation...are too great to be overcome by the strength of any one individual" (Rousseau 1.6:54). At this point, individuals come together to form a society in which these obstacles can be overcome (Rousseau 1.6:54). Rousseau argues that, despite the new society and government, liberty is protected in three aspects; the social contract is based on freedom and self-preservation and thus will never contradict itself (Rousseau 1.6:55); nothing is lost in the new establishment, "in giving himself to all...he gains the equivalent of all that he loses, and greater strength for the conservation of what he possesses" (Rousseau 1.6:55). The ultimate goal of government, society, and the individual is the greatest good which consists of "liberty and equality" (Rousseau 2.11:86).

In organizing a political authority which protects freedom as Rousseau has anticipated, the first step is to unanimously agree on a social contract aimed towards the general will (Rousseau 1.6:55). Next, the civilians of the new society form a sovereign, or collective entity, to exercise the universal general will (Rousseau 2.1:63). With the social contract and sovereign in place, the people continue by discovering a legislator, "who frames the laws, therefore, has not, or should not have, any rights of making law" (Rousseau 2.7:78). Lastly, a government is created to ensure crucial correspondence between the sovereign and subject, execute the laws, and maintain liberty (Rousseau 3.1:92). Despite the detailed instructions Rousseau gives in establishing a protective political society, he does recognize that violations of freedom can still occur.

The two most probable restrictions on freedom, Rousseau claims, concern the sovereign's

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power and minority presence. Rousseau states that, "To violate the act through which [the sovereign] exists would be to destroy itself, and that which is nothing can give rise to nothing" (Rousseau 1.7:57). Secondly, it appears as though Rousseau assumes that a general will is established easily and without controversy, but what would take place if a powerful minority dissented against the majority? Rousseau explains that in this case the majority would force the minority to understand and consent to the general will, and thus the minority, "will be forced to be free" (Rousseau 1.7:58).

Although John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau display similar interests in the social contract and a political society's preservation of freedom, their individual methods often vary. In order to completely understand each author's perspective on liberty, they must be viewed separately. In doing so, we see the first signs of a political organization which is able to successfully maintain freedom despite a system of government and laws.

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