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Enlightenment and Its Critics – 2003

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Part 2 of the Investigation: Individuality vs Collective Good

Individual Liberty: Worth Sacrificing for Public Safety and Reassurance?

In Thomas Hobbes's intriguing and analytical political treatise, *Leviathan*, John Locke's acclaimed discourse, *The Second Treatise of Government*, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's scintillating works, *The Social Contract* and *The First and Second Discourses*, individual liberty is the foundation of the pioneering political contract theories of government. Hobbes proclaims that the individuals in a society should create a unanimously chosen absolute third-party artificial animal to secure the peace and safety of all the individuals so they do not have to be in a constant state of war against each other. Locke asserts that through common consent, individuals should be able to decide on a civil government which assures the security of all its subjects. Rousseau affirms that a society's inclination toward a "social contract" is of uniting together as a single body to fulfill the general will and common welfare. Although these illuminative thinkers incorporate distinct routes to achieve their objective, their overarching purpose is essentially identical—to protect the natural rights of individuals through the creation of government. As a whole, Hobbes's commonwealth, Locke's civil government, and Rousseau's superhuman legislator explore the extent and willingness of individuals to entrust their natural liberty into the hands of another entity while sacrificing a portion of their own freedom due to a need for an arbitrary mediator, possibility of unexpected personal gain, and a lack of superior alternatives.

Problems evident in society are marked by the self-interest and exploitation of individuals. Hobbes declares that every man is equal to another because each of them thinks that other individuals are not as “wise as themselves” (Hobbes 184). Furthermore, he asserts that the “three principall causes of quarrel” are competition, diffidence, and glory (Hobbes 185). Personal gain motivates competition, safety influences diffidence, and reputation inspires glory, which are the major causes of the constant state of war between men. Similarly, Locke characterizes the state of war with “enmity, malice, violence, and mutual destruction,” and reveals that it is men’s “self-love,” “ill-nature, passion, and revenge” which cause “confusion and disorder” in society ((Locke 9, [3.19], 6 [2.13])). Likewise, Rousseau claims that the “first steps of inequality” were when men started to categorize others as the “handsomest, the strongest, the most dexterous,” etc., which produced “vanity and contempt” and “envy and shame” among individuals (Rousseau 118). All of these great thinkers indicate that individuals themselves are the source of the troubles in society. Because the individuals are the originators of problems in society, they should be responsible to resolve them as well. This would require some cooperation and compromise between the society members, which would ultimately require conceding some personal freedom. Therefore, individuals, the architects of social ills, should come together for the common good in order to enhance their peace and security.

Societal peace and personal security is imperative for a functioning community, which therefore, requires an arbitrary mediator to settle conflicts. According to Hobbes, the Fundamental Law of Nature is “to seek Peace, and follow it,” while the second natural law is “to defend [them] selves” (Hobbes 190). Similarly, Rousseau asserts that individuals in society unite to “secure the weak from oppression,” “defend all members,” and “maintain a perpetual concord and harmony” (Rousseau 125). He claims that social inequalities that hinder our peace

and safety result from the usurpation of power from the rich which divide the society in two unequal segments—one with “riches and conquest,” and the other with “virtue and happiness” (Rousseau 132). Finally, in the state of nature, Locke equates “the enjoyment of property” with freedom and “for [its] mutual preservation,” calls citizens to “join in society with others” (Locke 57 [9.124]). Tranquility, security, and property are common to all individuals in society. These rights cannot be attainable unless the entire society consolidates for its long-term prosperity, and therefore indirectly, for themselves. The perception of self-love and self-interest, peace and security, and equality and property, combine to cause conflict within society. To resolve these conflicts and preserve these rights, an arbitrator is necessary. Consequently, a “covenant,” “common consent,” or a “social contract” is required, which can help avoid constant “Warre” between individuals in society.

A government is necessary to keep harmony among the members of the society. These great thinkers recommend distinct propositions with a varying expense of liberty associated with each. Hobbes directs us toward an artificial animal that is in charge of maintaining the society’s peace and security by resolving the conflicts between individuals. He declares that a righteous absolute monarch will be the best solution, although other forms of government are viable as well. His experience with the English Civil War (1642-1651) exhibited that “*a Kingdome divided in it selfe cannot stand*” because the power was divided between the House of Commons, the Lords, and the King (Hobbes 236). Therefore, he proposes that “this great Authority being Indivisible” should be “annexed to the Sovereignty,” in the form of the Leviathan, preferably an implied absolute monarch that is unanimously and arbitrarily chosen (Hobbes 237). On the other hand, Locke argues that establishing a righteous absolute monarchy is a foolish concept; instead, he states that a “civil government is the proper remedy” (Locke 6

[2.13]). He argues that although consent from a unanimous majority would be ideal, it is “next to impossible” (Locke 45 [8.98]). This system works “by the will and determination of the majority,” and by consenting, every participant “puts himself under an obligation to every one of that society” (Locke 44 [8.96-97]). Furthermore, unlike Hobbes, Locke stresses the majority to choose the “wisest” or the “bravest” individual rather than an arbitrary member. On the other hand, Rousseau asserts in his *Social Contract* that by choosing a common ruler who obeys the social contract, one puts his or her power “under the super direction of the general will,” in which case “each member becomes an indivisible part of the whole” (Rousseau 164). The general will consists of the combination of each member’s private will. If the general will makes a decision on a particular sovereign, then the private will, will not get violated and the individuals will benefit as a result. Rousseau extends his idea by stating that a society with laws requires a legislator who displays “superior intelligence,” exhibits selflessness, and manifests omnipotence. Altogether, three radical approaches are proposed to secure public peace—an absolute monarch in the form of a Leviathan, a government that models a democratic republic, and a lawful society that functions under a supernatural legislator.

These three forms of governmental models emphasize the sacrifice of individual liberty, although to a varying degree. Upon entering the mutual covenant with the Leviathan, the individuals cannot quit it unless the Leviathan itself violates the sanctity of the covenant first. This requires patience, commitment, and a considerable amount of sacrificial personal freedom from a citizen. Locke’s proposal, on the other hand, is less stringent on an individual. If one participates in the political process, then he or she has to consent to the majority ruling. On the other hand, if they do not participate, they have a right to exit this contract. The distinction between express and tacit consent in Locke’s theory allows individuals flexibility in terms of the

preservation of their freedom. Rousseau's idea of a general will is the most practical of the three, yet his consideration of a godlike legislator is the least realistic. Because the general will is a result of each individual's private will, the freedom under Rousseau's social contract is the least sacrificed. Altogether, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau propose a different form of government, which has corresponding effects to an individual's private will.

Although individuals need to surrender a fraction of their liberty for the sake of public good, the individuals might unknowingly benefit as well. Rousseau states this fluidly through the proposal of the social contract. Although man loses "his natural liberty and an unlimited right to anything that tempts him," "he gains civil liberty and property in all that he possess" (Rousseau 167). Furthermore, "his faculties are used and developed," "ideas are expanded," "feelings are ennobled," and the "entire soul is raised" (Rousseau 166). Ultimately, the "transition from the state of nature to the civil state produces a very remarkable change in man"—one that "transform[s] him from a stupid, limited animal into an intelligent being" (Rousseau 167). Locke emphasizes that one of the positive outcomes of entering a society and its respective government is "the preservation of property, peace, and unity" (Locke 102 [19. 226]). Hobbes explains that even though the Leviathan has the "strength and means" to do as he wish, he does it to maintain the "peace and defence" of the people, which is advantageous to the individual (Hobbes 190). Therefore, providing for the common good is not a one-way road. Instead, it is a ceaseless cycle consisting of the relationship between the citizen and the government. The citizen surrenders a portion of his freedom and trusts his government to keep peace on his behalf. In turn, the government not only keeps peace and provides for the defense, but it also yields beneficial civil liberties to the citizens. This keeps the citizen at "imaginary

ease,” which keeps the individual content and the cycle continues (Rousseau 87). Altogether, sacrificing liberty can indirectly enhance the state of personal assurance.

Even though there are several advantages for individuals to bind in a form of a social contract, there are some alternatives to it as well. If the Leviathan does not hold up his part of the covenant, the individual has the right to abandon it. Hobbes does not, however, allow for a revolt even if the popular sentiment is within the common consent. Although this initially seems contradictory to the protection of natural liberty, an individual should be able to trust the actions of the Leviathan for long-term prosperity. Locke, on the other hand, allows for a revolt if the consent is majority. The people consented to the original ruler and if the current ruler does not uphold with the righteous values, he or she may be overthrown, even if the underlying motive is seemingly wrong. The ultimate decision of right and wrong will be made by a common judge in the form of God on decision day. Locke’s advice supports the citizens’ concerns at the expense of the ruler, thereby enhancing the liberty of the individuals. Unlike Hobbes and Locke, Rousseau does not offer a complete objection to his own theory. He claims that the general will is “always right;” however, if this decision produces negative consequences, then the individuals were “not enlightened,” which signifies a tyrannical majority (Rousseau 172). Rousseau offers ambiguity. His social contract encompasses appealing reasoning for sacrificing natural liberty, yet it does not offer a logical alternative if the contract fails to adhere. Overall, Hobbes’s binding contract, Locke’s flexible alternative, and Rousseau’s ambiguous approach portray the different levels of preserving individual liberty in their respective political contracts.

A society cannot exist without its citizens. Therefore, the rights and desires of the citizens must be preserved. An individual cannot sacrifice all of his rights and desires for the

betterment of the community, but he or she should not be utterly concentrated on individual prosperity to the extent that they abuse the rights of others in the community either. Therefore, a healthy balance needs to be created. Conflicts in society originate due to the self-interest and suspicion present among individuals. In order to solve this complicated issue, at least three proposals are offered by the three Enlightenment thinkers. Although all of them emphasize the sacrifice of a fraction of individual liberty, they imply personal gains as a result as well. One should selflessly serve their society as much as possible. If everybody agrees, then they will gain positively themselves too—both from the peace and security provided by the government and the general goodwill generated by other members of the society. If the risk of binding into a form of social contract does not have a positive outcome, then the citizens have a few ways from which they can opt out of the binding. This can occur either through disobedience or revolution. Furthermore, if an individual is not satisfied, he or she can either choose to leave society, or if there is a unanimous decision, then live without a government in eternal anarchy. This alternative consists of surrendering civil liberties in order to enhance personal freedom. Furthermore, in order to be selfishly attached to the idea of liberty, one loses human touch with other members of the community. Sacrificing societal cooperation, harboring suspicion, surrendering safety and peace, and renouncing guarantee of property is not worth it just for the sake of individual freedom. An individual should be willing to be able to provide for the greater good at his or her own expense. In addition, humans are naturally inclined to help each other. If one helps another, they not only serve for the betterment of the community, but indirectly, the betterment of themselves. Through the various proposals of the Enlightenment thinkers, numerous pathways are offered to create a functioning society. All in all, the positivity that

results from the public good through the sacrifice of a modest amount of personal freedom outweighs the selfish concerns of the individuals regardless of the form of social binding.

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