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Contemporary Civilization

Materiality and Liberty in Rousseau & Hobbes

Foundational to the forms of political authority Hobbes presents in the *Leviathan* and Rousseau presents in *On the Social Contract* is the idea of liberty. Political authority exists to maximize *liberty* of a self-determining population for Rousseau, and for Hobbes, to maximize *liberty* by keeping men from the *State of Nature*. Liberty is a central to their ideal forms of government but their definitions and concept of liberty are notably different.

In this essay, I will explore the origins and implications of what liberty is to both Hobbes and Rousseau. Hobbes defines liberty in a more material sense, and Rousseau defines it in a more immaterial sense. Rousseau, I claim, is fundamentally interested in the human psyche, while Hobbes is not. Therefore, Rousseau's concept of liberty, and consequently of political authority, extends into the psychological, internal world of its subjects, while Hobbes' political authority does not. In order to analyze the development and significance of this difference, I will trace liberty in their discussion of the States of Nature, Law, and Religion in order to ultimately posit that, perhaps not obviously, it is Rousseau's ideal government which is ideologically more restrictive in liberty and dangerous than Hobbes' absolutist Sovereign. It is under Rousseau's well-intentioned concept of liberty that we can see the most subtle, pernicious forms of authoritative and paternalistic government emerge.

In Hobbes' view, liberty is physical: as long as the subject is physically unrestrained from external factors to execute their will, they are free. He starts Chapter XXI, entitled *Of The Liberty of Subjects*, "Liberty or Freedome signifieth (properly) the absence of Opposition; (by Opposition I mean externall Impediments of motion;)" (*Leviathan*). The role of the Sovereign then is to remove any physical impediments of "motion" above all else. There is no greater impediment to one's liberty than to live in Hobbes' *State of Nature*, because of constant fear and physical war of "all against all" (*Leviathan*). Therefore, the Sovereign must, at all cost, prevent this state. Hobbesian liberty is gained through the social contract in exchange for the license individuals had in the *State of Nature*. This Hobbesian notion of liberty I will refer to as *material liberty*.

Rousseau's concept of liberty is more expansive than Hobbes'. Rousseau's liberty includes *material liberty*, but it also extends into the psychological and moral realms. In Rousseau's society, individuals must be self-determining, free agents in order for government to function correctly. He develops this concept of liberty of the individual through moral liberty: "... [It is] moral liberty, which alone makes man truly the master of himself. For to be driven by appetite alone is slavery, and obedience to the law one has prescribed for oneself is liberty." (*Social Contract, Book I, Ch.8*) Moral liberty is gained, in addition to civil liberty, by individuals when they enter the social contract. For Rousseau it is not enough to be physically free to exercise our will, we must be able to master our will— to be aware of how desires arise and overcome them if need be. This moral liberty, when exercised collectively, rises to the level of the society: "If, when a sufficiently informed populace deliberates, the citizens were to have no communication, the general will ... would always be good." (*Social Contract, Book II, Ch. 4*) This "general will" is the manifestation of many individuals correctly exercising their moral liberty. The "general will" functions correctly under ideal deliberative circumstances, free from external influences. Since the "general will" is the basis of political authority, protecting this moral liberty is of central importance for Rousseau and for his formulation of political authority. Collectively, I will refer to this Rousseauian concept of liberty, the moral liberty required for the "general will" to manifest itself, as the *immaterial liberty*.

Under both forms of political authority, individuals gain liberty in exchange for entering a social contract. However, for each form of government, the mechanism of the exchange of liberty from the authority to the individual is different. For Hobbes, liberty is granted *by* the *Sovereign*, and the exchange is transactional. For Rousseau, immaterial liberty is necessary *for* the *Sovereign* to function, so the exchange is cyclical. In order for Rousseau's political authority to establish and preserve itself, it must protect and cultivate the moral liberty of individuals that allows it function correctly in the first place. Preserving and maintaining *immaterial liberty* is necessary for the existence of the state. Rousseau states that the "general will is always right, but the judgement that guides it is not always enlightened. It must be made to see objects as they are, and sometimes as they ought to appear." (*Social Contract, Book II, Ch. 6*) Here, Rousseau argues, paradoxically, for ideological paternalism. The state is not only responsible for education (to "enlighten") but for deception when necessary ("as they *ought* to appear"). For Hobbes, the absolute *Sovereign* can impose absolute control, but the purview of his political influence is largely physical. Hobbes is not concerned with the inner world of the individual, since the existential purpose of the *Sovereign* is solely to prevent the war of "all

against all.” This comes about, not by changing their nature, but by setting up laws which contain in. Therefore, not only do Hobbes and Rousseau have different concepts of *liberty*, liberty relates to state differently. For Rousseau *immaterial liberty* is essential to creation and preservation of a state, and non-existent for Hobbes. However, in order to fully examine liberty and the we must also consider how the authors view the individual to which the liberty granted in exchange by the political authority.

Hobbes sees humans as self-interested but does see them as psychologically or morally flawed. Hobbes associate’s morality with law, and “where the law is silent” man is free to do as pleases. In this way individuals are free to self-determine, albeit only within the scope of where the law is silent. Wherever political authority is silent, individuals are free, and political authority is largely silent with regards to the internal, psychological world. This contrasts Rousseau’s view. Rousseau sees humans as permanently psychologically flawed *by society*. In Rousseau’s *State of Nature* humans live harmoniously in a paradisiacal state. It is only *after* individuals develop reason, private property, and begin to see this themselves as individuals does *amour propre* arise: an egocentric love of oneself that comes from comparing yourself to others. For Rousseau, this psychological and moral failing can only be overcome if the individual completely alienates his individuality to the state, and subjects himself, wholly, to the “general will.” Hobbes is only concerned with physical safety because political authority has no responsibility, and nothing to correct, within the internal world of individuals. For Rousseau humans are psychologically and morally flawed and can only overcome their flaws, while retaining freedom, by acting collectively in complete accordance to the “general will.”

This leads to a major paradox within Rousseau’s ideal form of political authority - the paradox of alienation. By making political authority responsible for instilling moral liberty (freedom from slavery of instinct) the individual must completely alienate their liberty *to* the political authority. If the very point of moral liberty is to be able to think for oneself and overcome instinct, complete alienation of the individual to the state, a state which may deceive their own populace, seems problematic and likely to devolve into an authoritarian/overly paternalistic government. Individuals are as Rousseau paradoxically says, “forced to be free” (*Social Contract, Book I, Ch. 7*). Citizens in Hobbes can be indifferent to political authority no matter how good or bad, they are individuals operating within the bounds of law put in place by the Sovereign. It is ironic then that Rousseau puts *immaterial liberty* at the forefront of thinking, yet his system of governance can possibly result in less of it, while Hobbes’ in more of it.

Rousseau's focus on the individual internal psychology garners the love of socialist thinkers in his scathing critique of modern society in the *Discourse on Inequality*. But it is the same focus that takes an unexpected, an arguably inconsistent turn when he presents his ideal form of political authority in *On the Social Contract*. The image of government he presents is a compelling and influential view of a political authority by individuals and for individuals. *Immaterial liberty* is central to governance and necessitates that political authority influences the internal world of its citizens. This necessity does not exist for Hobbes because of his more simplified, non-psychological view of the individual. Rousseau is expanding the purview of political authority and we must be acutely aware of this fact and of its implication. Namely that if a government becomes too ideological paternalist its members may mindlessly conform to that society. In striving for freedom, we end up becoming enslaved. The possible negative effects of *immaterial liberty* often get overlooked when contrasted against the more salient criticism of Hobbesian absolutism which only focuses on *material liberty* (if at all). It is in large part because of their different concepts of liberty they offer different answers to the central question political philosophy: where should the line separating political authority and individual be drawn (if at all)?