

Freedom vs. Human Nature: The Battle of Hobbes, Locke, Jefferson, and Smith.

Question-and-answer format.

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2008-02-02 — <http://richardxthripp.thripp.com/essays>

Question One: How do Thomas Hobbes and John Locke differ in their ideas about human nature?

Hobbes believes that people must be united under the ironclad rule of a mortal god, be it a lone monarch or ruling assembly, to which we in unison say, “I authorize and give up my right of governing myself” (Fiero 601), that being the birth of a commonwealth. In his undeniable pessimism, Hobbes announces that our “natural passions” are “partiality, pride, [and] revenge,” so much so that the “laws of nature,” “justice, equity, modesty, [and] mercy” can only be maintained as long as we are constantly in “terror of some power to cause them to be observed” (600), which must be a mortal god, acting in concert with the immortal god, to enforce them at the threat of the sword. In contrast, Locke thinks of humans as blank slates. Hobbes’ “natural passions” only come about through our interactions with the world. Like with Hobbes, we all have the right to be “free, equal, and independent” (602), but we can only be removed from our property and subjugated to another if we consent. To “join and unite into a community” with stricter rules is fine, so long as “the majority have a right to act and conclude the rest” (602), as this does not harm the freedom of those who elect not to join. Contrary to Hobbes, if the rulers make laws for their benefit at the expense of the people, there is tyranny, and the people are entirely right to revolt. Simply, in the land of Hobbes, the people are the slaves of the rulers, but in Locke’s world, the rulers are the slaves of the people, hence the term, “public servant.”

Question Two: What ideas did Thomas Jefferson borrow from John Locke to write The Declaration of Independence?

Jefferson's idea that “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” are “unalienable rights” (Fiero 604) is harmonious with Locke's statement that we are, by default, “all free, equal, and independent,” though we may choose to give up freedoms for “comfortable, safe, and peaceable living” (602), always at our option. In tyranny, we must throw off the shackles of our oppressors, even if it requires a forceful and bloody revolution—this both Locke and Jefferson agree on. In Locke's powerful words, “tyranny is the exercise of power beyond right, which nobody can have a right to,” and the people, “acting without authority,” may oppose such so-called magistrates just as they would a foreign invader (603). Jefferson is similar, stating that when the rights to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” are alienated by a government, “it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it,” replacing it with a fair system (604).

Question Three: How is this excerpt from The Wealth of Nations¹ related to the excerpt from the same work in The Humanistic Tradition Volume II (Fiero 605)?

... every individual necessarily labors to render the annual revenue of the society as great as he can. He generally, indeed, neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it. By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good.

1 Abridged title for An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations.

In An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations, Smith writes that “we expect our dinner” not from “the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker,” but because of “their regard to their own interest” (Fiero 605). There is no charity in the hearts of our merchants, nor any loyalty in the shrewdness of our customers, yet everything is peachy because the invisible hand takes care of it all—business owners cut costs, raise quality, and lower prices, not to help consumers, but to trump their competitors and make more money for themselves. In Fiero's excerpts, the “invisible hand” is not named as such, but the whole page is dedicated to it, with Smith stating that when bartering, we must “never talk to [the merchant] of our own necessities, but of their advantages,” and that “the monopolizing spirit of merchants and manufacturers” must not be legitimized by the government, as it is “directly opposed to [the interest] of the great body of the people” (605). The idea of a wall of separation between business and state, where the “invisible hand” thrives in industries free of governmental regulation, is sanctified in Smith's passage in this question: the laborer “intends only his own gain,” but in doing so is “led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention,” and that end is promoting the public interest and society at large, whether the catalyst is merchants lowering prices, employees working harder for promotions, or home-owners operating yard sales to rid themselves of their possessions.

Question Four: How is the “Christian allegory” (Block 15-20) related to the assumptions of Thomas Hobbes, Thomas Jefferson, John Locke, and Adam Smith?

Hobbes, Jefferson, Locke, and Smith, despite their unique and differing ideas, all believe that we can better ourselves and build a wondrous society with effort. When looking for the cause of our short-comings, they look for individuals, not systemic blame, nor “original sin,” as

in Christianity. Hobbes sees the bad apples who harbor revenge and do not value the liberty of others. Jefferson and Locke know that a government is needed, but that the magistrates are not godly and can be disputed, when they become corrupt or self-serving, defying our rights to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (Fiero 604). Smith sees that the individual employees and business-owners, in their untiring efforts to benefit themselves and live securely, can “be of the greatest value” in contributing to society as a whole. They all were undoubtedly influenced by the Christian allegory: we are lost but can find ourselves through hard work, self-discipline, and god, or by extension, when you become fat, the path to morality is “greater personal discipline,” and when the economy fails, it is because “people fell into temptation and prosperity disappeared” (Block 16). However, the Age of Enlightenment is more refined: we are not hopeless, we can grow and better ourselves to build a heaven-like community on Earth; “the promise of reason [is] the realization of an enlightened social order” (Fiero 599), not an omnipotent God who controls us and everything. Halley's comet is not God's wrath, fate does not rule our actions, and the individual can make waves across society. These are the principles of reason's age and philosophers, who know logic, secular thinking, and are optimistic about humankind.

Works Cited

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Fiero, Gloria K. The Humanistic Tradition Volume II. 5th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006.

MLA citation [Replace “1 Jan. 0001” with the date you viewed this essay online]:

Thripp, Richard X. “Freedom vs. Human Nature: The Battle of Hobbes, Locke, Jefferson, and Smith.” Scholarly Essays by Richard X. Thripp. 2 Feb. 2008. 1 Jan. 0001
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