

Jefferson and rousseau influences

Philosophy



Thomas Jefferson considers himself a contributor to the Age of Enlightenment. Through many of his writings he expands on the philosophies of the great European writers of that era - Rousseau, Locke, Hume, and Leibniz. In "The Declaration of Independence," Jefferson directly adopts several themes found in the work of French writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau's "The Origin of Civil Society," provides a foundation for most of Jefferson's ideas in "The Declaration of Independence. In the opening of the "Declaration of Independence," Jefferson lays out several main themes that reflect Rousseau's concepts. Jefferson borrows from Rousseau's thinking on equality and freedom when writing, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights..." (Jefferson 80).

Rousseau speaks of equality by disproving the philosophies of Thomas Hobbes and Hugo Grotius. These men support the concept that "human race... refers only to a small, select class of people - the ruling class] (Rousseau 60). Rousseau thinks that the philosophies of these men lack justification and that "All men are born free, and everywhere he is in chains" (Rousseau 59). All men are equal only until they give up their freedom and equality in exchange for comforts and protection in their lives. In other words, Rousseau says man is born free, but because of society man become less and less free. The government, and its laws bind the people down, but the people gain benefits from the government.

Jefferson sees to Rousseau in justifying colonial claims to independence. Jefferson writes, "Whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it..." (Jefferson

80). This reflects Rousseau's thinking that, [the only foundation left for legitimate authority in human societies is Agreement] (Rousseau 61). Rousseau argues that all society exists because people have willingly granted rank and privilege to their ruler. When this agreement is broken, the ruling power is invalid.

In "The Declaration of Independence," Jefferson cites twenty-six examples of actions taken by the British monarchy that acts against the authority the American Colonies granted them. These form the basis of the declaration. Jefferson restates his thinking again saying, "A Prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be ruler of a free People." (Jefferson 83). Jefferson indirectly borrows from Rousseau's argument against Might into Right.

Rousseau says that this thinking reverses the process of cause and effect. "So soon as we disobey without impunity, disobedience becomes legitimate. And, since the Mightiest is always right, it merely remains for us to become possessed of Might" (Rousseau 62). In this passage Rousseau contends that might, or strength, is not a moral sanction. Rousseau contends that "Right" to govern can change when it is compromised. Jefferson uses this same line of thinking to rationalize the separation of the colonies from the British crown. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new Guards for their future security" (Jefferson 80, 81). Jefferson contends that the chain of abuses brought by the British crown has compromised their moral authority and therefore, their "Right" to rule over the colonies. In

Jefferson's mind, the physical " Might" of the British is controversial in considering the colonies' right to establish a new government.

Interestingly, there is another opportunity for Jefferson to incorporate Rousseau's philosophies into the declaration. Rousseau talks about slavery as an institution in " The Origin of Civil Society. " The original draft of the Declaration refers to the British crown's introduction of slavery in the United States as one of the immoral principles justifying independence from the monarchy. In other words, " one of the fundamental paradoxes of Jefferson's personal and political life has been his attitude toward slavery. " (Jacobus77).

Jefferson's position and actions on slavery have become the most controversial aspects of his legacy. It is not surprising that Rousseau's philosophies lead to the beginnings of both the American and French revolution. Jefferson and the other members of the Continental Congress have become capable of molding these thoughts into a document that will act as a philosophical outline for the founding of the United States. The Declaration of Independence allows the founding fathers an opportunity to build on some of the Puritan ethics of the founding new