

John locke vs jean-
jacques rousseau
essay sample



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John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau are great political philosophers that have many similar insights about society and its political form. However, when closely examining the writings of these thinkers, one can easily discover many subtle differences among them. The two philosophers base their theories on different assumptions, which subsequently lead to dissimilar ideas about the origin of society and the constitution of governments. As a result, their views of the development of society greatly dissent from each other. Locke's and Rousseau's different versions in the development of society cause them to reach disparate conclusions concerning the legislative power, social unit, and revolution rights of the society. Locke believes that the government holds the legislative power, society as individual units, and the people have the right to overthrow the legislator; Rousseau believes that the people have the legislative power, society conforms as a general will, and the people have no right to revolt against the legislator.

Despite the similarities between Locke and Rousseau, their theories of the state of nature already differ in terms of morality, property, and freedom. Locke believes that men are born with morality ingrained in them; Rousseau states that men are born with no morality, and only follow their instinct and appetite. He claims that in the state of nature, " His [Man's] first law is to see to his preservation" (), clearly indicating the lack of morality in people.

Locke states that property is a natural right and can be acquired by labor; Rousseau, on the other hand, states that in the state of nature, men do not own property. Finally, Locke claims that in the state of nature, men have freedom and liberty. In opposition, Rousseau states that even in the state of

nature, men are slaves of their own desires. He proposes that it is impossible for a man to be absolutely free.

Due to the different assumptions of the true nature of man, Locke and Rousseau develop different ideas on why society is formed and its functions. Since Locke believes that men are naturally moral, he claims that, stemming from the family, society is formed simply because people naturally work together in a benevolent way. Rousseau believes that society is first initiated by the first emotion, love, a plot created by woman that originated the idea of family.

Locke claims that because of the invention of money, the jurisdiction and limit of property is corrupted. He shows that with the imaginative value of money fluctuating, the punishment to property violation becomes unclear, resulting in many “inconveniences,” or unjustly punished crimes.

Furthermore, the unlimited desire to money engendered greed, violence, and stealth among people. The fear of losing property in addition to the inconveniences, forced the society to produce a legislature to preserve the property of each member in it and execute punishment the ones who violate it. This legislature is the sovereign. However, Rousseau’s disagrees with Locke on the development of a political society. Rousseau claims that, “as men cannot engender new forces, but only unite and direct existing ones, they have no other means of preserving themselves than the formation, by aggregation, of a sum of forces great enough to overcome the resistance” (VI).

Therefore, in order to achieve betterment, people start to unite their forces, engendering a society. Furthermore, as Rousseau claims that men are slaves of their own desires and victims to force, they formed a government to achieve another sort of liberty. "What man loses by the social contract is his natural liberty and an unlimited right to everything that tempts him and to everything he can take; what he gains is civil liberty and the ownership of everything he possesses" (). Rousseau claims that by giving up natural liberty, which is vulnerable to desires and force, man gains civil liberty, which is more stable. A social agreement, in which everyone gives up some of his /her liberty for everyone else, is formed.

While Locke believes that the political form, or state, has legislative power in society, Rousseau claims that the people have the legislative power in it. Locke indicates that, by giving up some of one's rights, the state gains legislative power and is obliged to use this power to make laws that benefit the people, who hired it. Locke writes that, "This legislative is not only the supreme power of the common-wealth, but sacred and unalterable in the hands where the community have once placed it...over whom no body can have a power to make laws, but by their own consent, and by authority received from them." (XI 134)

Rousseau argues that the state should not be able to acquire legislative power, but simply acts as an executive. He claims that the legislative power comes from the people, for the sovereign is simply the general will of everyone, in which the state should obey and enforce. Rousseau states that, "Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme control of the general will, and, as a body, we receive each member as an

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indivisible part of the whole” (), showing that the aggregate mind of the people, the general will, has the legislative power as “ all” powers are given to it.

Locke stresses individualism in a society, while Rousseau bases the majority of his political theory on the submission to the general will, which is a collective unit. Locke emphasizes that in a society, one should still preserve life, liberty, and property. He claims that instead of being one unit, the society is a contract between all the individuals and the state. He also indicates that the state can only acquire the powers that the individuals are willing to give up, clearly showing his commend on individual liberty.

Rousseau, by stating that the people should give all the powers to the general will, obviously shows his praise to the conformed unit of the society. Each person’s value is degraded as they are referred to as merely a small portion of a whole. With this pattern, a rather curious development of conformity and individualism arises. According to Locke, men naturally work together, but strive for individuality in society; in contrast, Rousseau believes that men start off as individuals in the state of nature, but become a small part of a whole when entering society. This tendency clearly shows the difference between the concepts of society between Locke and Rousseau.

When the sovereign, be it man or group, fails to fulfill its job, Locke encourages the people to overthrow it and establish a new one. Rousseau, on the other hand, believes that it is never just to revolt against the sovereign because it is the general will of the people themselves. In Locke’s society, the state has been given the power to legislate as the people submit their rights to it. However, even though the state also has the executive right

of the law, it is subjected to the law too. When the state fails to enact its purpose-preserving the benefits of the society- it revolts against the contract and therefore dissolves. The people then can take away their consent of submission and replace the state with a new form of government. In Rousseau's society, the legislative is the sovereign, which is the general will of the people.

The general cannot err because Rousseau believes that " a person always wills his own good," and, therefore, " the general will is always enlightened" (). For this reason, the general will always go towards the public good, and so it is absurd if a people oppose themselves. A government, however, could dissolve " if the time should ever come when the [government] has a particular will of its own stronger than that of the sovereign and makes use of the public power which is in its hands to carry out its own particular will" (). In this case, there will two sovereigns, " one in law and one in fact" leading to dissolving of the body politic.

The different concepts of legislative power, social unit, and revolution rights between Locke and Rousseau should be the most significant differences between their thoughts on society. The differences are significant because these concepts are the basic blocks of society. They clearly state the status of the government, the people, and the relationship between the two. By familiarizing with the legislative power of a society, one can identify the government's form and the people's rights in the society. If the legislative power is in the hands of the people who are required to obey it, then it is obvious that the society is one with liberty and safety; if the legislative power is controlled by a single monarch, then inequality will become a

substantial problem in the society. Similarly, if one knows the social unit in a society, he/she can determine the individuality or patriotism in a society. If all the people are considered to be different individuals, then a tendency of self-interest and self-expression will engender; if the people are regarded as a partial of a general will, then they will participate in social or national affairs and focus more on the public welfare. Finally, by observing the revolution rights of the people, one can predict the absolutism of a government in the society.

By examining the differences in these three areas between Locke and Rousseau's concepts, one can thoroughly understand the key differences between their ideas on society. John Locke promotes individual interests, while Rousseau advocates the welfare of the society. This can be clearly seen by simply observing the three key differences that Locke and Rousseau have. In speculating who is more correct, one might conclude that Locke's theory leads toward democracy, while Rousseau's theory tends toward communism. With these extremes in mind, history has shown us that communism is unrealistic to human nature. However, for a big state, true democracy can never happen, as Rousseau claims, " were there a people of gods, their government would be democratic. So perfect a government is not for men." (4 democracy) There is no absolute ideal form of government. Again Rousseau says, " each[government] is in some cases the best, and in others the worst." (3 Division)