



What Rousseau Can Teach Today's Liberals and Conservatives about Discussions of Contentious Issues

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Equality and freedom often come into conflict in public debates about the role government should play in balancing the rights of individuals with the needs of society. Is it possible to talk about both together or are discussions about equality and freedom doomed to spiral into polarized shouting matches? Healthcare makes the problem quite clear: pitting “free market” vs. “socialized medicine” has not helped Americans find agreement. At its most basic level, the healthcare debate is about how to make care more equitable by making it accessible and affordable for more people, for example by requiring people buy insurance, while at the same time preserving individual freedom and personal choice. Equality and freedom are put in tension in health care as in many other policy areas such as welfare, the minimum wage, Social Security, gun control, freedom of speech, and matters of religious conscience related to sexual orientation and reproduction.

In all these debates, American liberals typically emphasize equality, while American conservatives usually emphasize individual freedom. Yet such contemporary American civic debates are rooted in a long and rich history that can be traced back to the Enlightenment and the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Although he wrote nearly 300 years ago, Rousseau still has things to teach liberals and conservatives alike about debating values like freedom and equality that are inherently in tension.

Freedom and Equality in Rousseau

Rousseau developed his use of the word liberty from the historical concept of the “freed slave,” deploying images of enslavement and yoking to test the possibilities and limits of freedom for the individual within the family and more broadly in society.

- On the one hand, Rousseau imagines a natural freedom in which individuals live free of all constraints. This corresponds to the conservative ideal that no individual or group should dictate how a “free” person should live, and helps us understand what “negative” freedom (as defined by Isaiah Berlin) refers to: an individual not burdened by an overbearing government that dictates how that individual should live or how his or her money should be spent (for example on taxes).
- Yet at the same time Rousseau’s concept of liberty resonates with the liberal worldview, because it gives equality to all within society and points to the need for rights, laws, and protections that guarantee for every individual equal opportunity in right and fact.

For Rousseau, striking this balance involves giving up absolute, individual freedom in favor of partial and negotiated civic freedom. His notion of the “general will” articulated in *Of the Social Contract* expresses the idea that society requires “transforming each individual who by himself is a perfect and solitary whole into part of a larger whole from which that individual would, as it were, receive his life and his being....”

Some critics have understood Rousseau's formulation of liberty, equality, and their necessary conditions and mutual constraints as a matter of separating individuals from community. Work from a diverse group of scholars, however, has shown that Rousseau's work has been important and enduring precisely because he avoided such an either-or philosophy and instead created a philosophy that holds individual and societal values in tension.

Why Liberals and Conservatives Should Talk about Both Equality and Freedom

Of course, it is challenging to link an abstract form of thought and principles with real-life, on-the-ground political and social issues. This challenge reaches from the French Revolution and into the present. Rousseau wrote novels and autobiographical works that blur the lines between philosophy, literature, pedagogy, and religion to explore how such issues could contribute to social and political debate. In these ways he bridged from his own abstract thinking to explorations of the possibility of implementing such ideas.

What must individuals give up in order to live together and what do they gain in return? Rousseau offers an array of ideas that continue to enrich conversation today as present-day concerns about individuals within vastly differing societies. In some areas, he was very advanced – such as in thinking about conscientious objection or religious values that collide with civic values – but in other areas he faltered – as in his views about limiting women to domestic roles, for example. But the tensions and challenges he identified remain urgent.

In today's United States, gridlock at the federal level has repeatedly prevented meaningful legislation from moving forward – revealing that reasonable discussions about competing societal values have been paralyzed. Recent work by liberals has addressed concerns about equality, while work by conservatives has addressed freedom. But too few thinkers are exploring relations between two core values. If thinkers and citizens are to better cooperate for everyone's sake, both sides have to realize that, even if their priorities are contradictory when held in the extreme, it is still possible to find balances that could be satisfactory to both sides.

A Role for Humanists

Humanists can help other experts and fellow citizens find fruitful balances. Revisiting complex historical problems allows humanists to contribute to discussions such as the one now unfolding about freedom of speech in relation to hate speech, or the ongoing debates about the safety net versus freedom of choice in healthcare, the right to die, and other social matters.

Humanities scholars have studied how literature, philosophy, anthropology and the arts can take on conflicts that seem intractable. Their work probes contradictions and shows that multiple perspectives can yield nuanced solutions. If the values of equality and freedom are ever going to be balanced, proponents of both will have to contribute to the discussion – and each side will have to respond to the other side's value concerns. Here, Rousseau's ability to discuss multiple, competing values together, without eliminating the tensions, can be an example and an inspiration for both liberals and conservatives today.

Read more in *Rousseau and Freedom* (with Stanley Hoffmann) (Cambridge University Press, 2010).