

Analyse the concept of freedom in Aristotle and Rousseau. What are the similarities and differences?

In the *Politics*, Aristotle's concept of freedom is where citizens are uninhibited from the constraints of life, leaving them free to exercise their excellence through the higher capacity tools of reason and speech. Twenty centuries later, Jean Jacques Rousseau writes of the devastating effects of civilised society on individual freedom. Rousseau puts forward the concept of the General Will as a solution to promote freedom. Although Aristotle and Rousseau have different ideas on democracy and slavery, both philosophers in fact share the same concept of freedom in their respective works.

Aristotle is a great advocate of the Greek polis mode, which he considers the epitome of a higher life as it allows citizens to exercise their superiority through the gifts of speech and reason. In the polis, every citizen has the freedom to express his opinion, and live true to Aristotle's opening statements that "man is, by nature a political animal." (Aristotle 350BC: Book I, Part I, Line 37) The citizen, being superior in all ways, must make the most of his excellence and not be hindered by menial chores. In this way, the citizens are not constrained by employment or household tasks, and have the freedom to fully exercise their intellect, to live the good life.

By citizen, Aristotle means any male, Greek person. Those from other countries are “barbarians” as they do not form the polis, which the Greeks and Aristotle highly regarded. (Aristotle 350BC: Book 1, Part I, line 8)

Women and children were not citizens because they lacked fully developed reason, or the ability to use such reason. Although Aristotle’s description of a citizen sounds exclusive, it does not hinder his concept of freedom, as these ideas are merely products of the context from which Aristotle was writing.

In the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau takes a very negative view on freedom in saying that natural freedom is not possible in a civilised society. In the state of nature where natural freedom exists, the savage man thrives only on pity and self-preservation, lacking the ability to draw comparisons. How can there be slavery if the concept does not exist? Although what Rousseau calls natural inequality exists where one is advantaged over another by physical anatomical means, it is not apparent as the savage man does not need or care for others, and because the simplicity of the state of nature does not allow for a more exquisite life in the advantaged. (Rousseau 1992:41) It is easy to see why, even though he agrees that the state of nature does not exist, Rousseau admires the savage man and his relative freedom.

Once man has entered into civil society through the invention of property, inequality becomes apparent and freedom is lost. With the introduction of property, “labour became necessary; and vast forests were changed into

smiling Fields which had to be watered with the sweat of men, and in which slavery and misery were soon seen to germinate and grow with the crops.”

(Rousseau 1992:49) Crafty men devised ways to shorten the amount of labour they had to do. Taking advantage of the poor, slavery was born.

Rousseau also criticises the social contract of civil society. He sees the social contract as a devious method devised to “protect the weak from oppression, retrain the ambitious, and secure for everyone the possession of what belongs to him.” It is man’s desire for security that laws and property are accepted into civil society, restricting the freedom of its citizens. Rousseau continues in the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* to outline a trend of decreasing freedom, until despotism is reached where “all individuals become equals again because they are nothing.” (Rousseau 1992:65)

In the *Social Contract* however, Rousseau offers an alternative where freedom exists in a civil society. All citizens enter into a contract where everyone is equal and agrees to follow the General Will. Even though entry into such a contract would be akin to giving up freedom, Rousseau believes that this is the only way man can exist freely in a civil society.

As explained earlier, Rousseau sees the General Will as a pathway for freedom. However, Aristotle would be against this demagoguery, dismissing

it as an extreme form of democracy that helps the needy and not what he considers the common good. (Aristotle 350BC:Book III, Part 7, Line 79)

Aristotle also went to great lengths to justify slavery, as the slave is “useful for the wants of life” and has no “deliberative faculty.” (Aristotle 350BC:Book I, Part 13, Line12) To Aristotle, the master and slave relationship is a reciprocal one, as the slave performs services for the master, while the master governs the slave, as the slave does not possess the functions for independent reason. Aristotle claims that “the master is only the master of the slave; he does not belong to him, whereas the slave is not only the slave of his master, but wholly belongs to him.” (Aristotle 350BC:Book I, Part 4, line 15) Rousseau, on the other hand, deplors slavery and the concept of possession of another man, even though he acknowledges that slavery exists in civilised societies with one man’s dependency for another man. Rousseau mocks the concept of slavery, demonstrating the illegitimacy of slavery by summarising the notion from the perspective of the master. “I make with you a convention wholly at your expense and wholly to my advantage; I shall keep it as long as I like, and you will keep it as long as I like.” (Rousseau 1994: Book I, Part IV)

Although Aristotle and Rousseau are writing from two different contexts and time periods, both philosophers offer a similar solution to the problems posed by freedom in civil society. Aristotle and Rousseau acknowledge that for a

degree of freedom to be induced and followed without inequity, all citizens should actively participate in their society, (although Aristotle's definition of citizen is exclusive to Hellenic males, as explained above). It is Aristotle's polis and Rousseau's General Will that allow citizens to create and impose laws. Even though Aristotle is against giving power to the needy, the concepts of freedom remain the same. Although the polis or the General Will appears to be an imposition of conventions upon a society, Aristotle and Rousseau both believe that this is the only way in which freedom can coexist with civil society.

Bibliography

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