FYS 100 Sydney Watts

Fall 2015 Ryland 218

Essay II: “The Problem of Property”

Despite differences separating the form and function of Rousseau’s and More’s works, they would agree that the greatest obstacle to happiness within any society is the possession of property, specifically private property. The differences reside within the presentation of the issue and their solutions to resolve it. Rousseau neatly portrays the pox of private property as a sort of scam on mankind resulting in the manifestation of evil within society. He says that, had someone called out this lie of singular ownership, “how many crimes, wars, murders; how much misery and horror [would] the human race … have been spared” (Rousseau 109). Through a similar lens, More explains the issue of private property in a much more indirect fashion by relaying Utopian society, a place where no private ownership of property exists; such conditions result in men and women whom are devoid of greed, laziness, and selfish individuality. Instead, these inhabitants “devote their time to the freedom and cultivation of the mind. For that, they think, constitutes a happy life” (More 66). Each of these men delves into this issue of property in their own particular style, and consequently, one will find a unique solution from each. More’s answer lies within the bubble of Utopia as an indirect example; he simply provides a view into a society which operates on a system of communal property, equal distribution of labor and resources, and fair legal policies devoid of an overhanging societal hierarchy. Conversely, Rousseau directly attacks the malicious effects of private property and praises man’s natural state of being before the manifestation of common luxuries and societal greed.

Although More and Rousseau share a strong distaste for private property, each respective argument differs beyond that point. While More opts for a less direct method of criticism, Rousseau begins his reproach from the opening. He initiates his introduction to the plague of private property (and, in a broader sense, the introduction of civil society) by framing it as a sort of trick placed on mankind, saying that “[the man who first claimed land] by saying ‘This is mine’ and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society” (Rousseau 109). Soon after, he refers to this man as an “imposter” who might have been foiled if mankind stood up to say “‘the fruits of the earth belong to everyone and … the earth itself belongs to no one,’” but alas, no one stood, and the corruptive properties of individual ownership washed over the human race like an unyielding avalanche of successive depreciation (Rousseau 109). A slightly less eloquent yet equally effective introduction to private property’s pestilence is conveyed by More when he states that “there is nothing private anywhere” in Utopia (More 57). He continues on with a broad-stroked painting of Utopian life and society where “no one lounges around in idleness” and “many devote [free] intervals to intellectual activities” (More 61). Through these depictions, More is essentially insinuating that the absence of private property and its consequential evils allow for this cooperative, moral, and just society to be possible.

Further differentiation between Rousseau and More is found when the presentation of the problem of property is made by each author. Rousseau’s pitch explains humanity’s initiation into a gradual downfall of pseudo-progress, the origins of which stem from property. He says the possession of private property led to the gradual development of sentiments between sexes, resulting in groups of people rather than the individual savage. From these early beginnings of society, the human race began to “enjoy a great deal of leisure, which they used to procure … commodities … and this was the first yoke they imposed on themselves [without knowing], and the first source of evils they prepared for their descendants” (Rousseau 113:5-8). Their ever-present possession of these commodities resulted in a collapse into addiction-like symptoms, and Rousseau affirms this by stating, “being deprived of [commodities] became much more cruel than the possession of them was sweet,” and, “people were unhappy in losing them without being happy in possessing them” (Rousseau 113:11-14). However, unlike Rousseau, More relays his account on the problem of property by omission. He acknowledges that individually the Utopians own nothing, not even their own homes, which they “exchange … by drawing lots” every decade (More 57:27-8). More makes everything in Utopia communally owned and shared, depicts every inhabitant as a specialist in one specific art that they put towards the benefit of the community, and explains how much more effective a society can be when people come together. In this way, More presents the issue on property by addressing the myriad benefits when private property is removed. When a man holds his own land within a state, the state he resides within ceases to hold the penultimate importance within the man’s heart. Instead, his naturally self-centered human nature begins to center his heart on what belongs to him, and this selfishness corrupts him. It makes him incapable of the Utopian’s vast array of cooperative and societal achievements, because the man’s ability to think for a greater, communal wellness beyond his own property and pleasures is damaged by this individual ownership.

More indirectly elaborates further on the problem by explaining that the Utopians all “embrace the pleasures of the mind, which they consider the first and foremost of all pleasures,” a fact which demonstrates the Utopians’ values and living ethic (More 89:30-1). Such mental pleasures “[spring] primarily from the practice of the virtues and the consciousness of a good life,” for the Utopians (90:1-2). These virtuous, fair, uncorrupted people are special in the sense that they are lucky enough to remain devoid of the foreign societal influence, which certainly places an emphasis on material goods and possession of large, flashy properties. As a result, the Utopians are capable of cooperation, morality, and community in a way that no other society in their time was, and no society has been since. It is within this timeframe of societal development that Rousseau is referring too when he says “the golden mean between the indolence of the primitive state and the petulant activity of our own pride, must have been the happiest epoch and the most lasting … the human race was meant to remain there” (Rousseau 115:21-23; 29). This form of human development that Rousseau referred to is embodied by the Utopians. They managed to formulate a society that made use of the benefits of cooperative living while avoiding the ramifications. The idea of such a society is so implausible that Rousseau blatantly discredits it, saying that the evils of private property’s effects are an inevitable, unavoidable consequence of society; More confirms Rousseau’s stance simply by writing this fictitious piece, because such a place could only exist in the confines of the mind. None of these achievements would be obtainable if the inhabitants of this miracle island are subject to the damaging presence of personal property; the fellowship and camaraderie present within the Utopian community is impossible without their immunity to the poisons of mainland society.

Obviously with the differing styles of introducing and presenting this problem of property, we will naturally encounter differing solutions as well. Rousseau says that “so long as [men] applied themselves only to work that one person could accomplish alone and to arts that did not require … several hands, they lived as free, good, and happy men,” refusing to give society any chance in any respect (Rousseau 116:2-5). His philosophy dictates that “the instant one man needed … another … equality disappeared, property was introduced, work became necessary,” conveying his beliefs that man in his natural, individual stage is at his happiest because there is peace and a lack of mental capacity for the passions that drive men to do evil to one another (Rousseau 116:7-10). Rousseau’s solution does not lie in the concept of a perfect society with special circumstances, but in the overall regression of society to the point where inequality and property do not exist. Since he believes that “the idea of property [arose] from … manual labor,” and “natural inequality merges imperceptibly with inequality of ranks,” it is only sensible that Rousseau would want to revert to a period where these evils are nonexistent (Rousseau 118:2-4; 23-24). However, More depicts a slightly more realistic solution to the issues of property and their corrosive nature within the confines of a unified, communal society known as Utopia. Through the unyieldingly generous and accommodating natures of the Utopians, they are more than capable of sustaining their peaceable society and culture. “The whole island is like a household,” according to More, and within it everybody is trusted to take only what they need from the surplus, avoiding the temptations and corruptions of everyday life and thinking, and working diligently (More 73:23). Another facet in More’s solution is his method of preventing the inhabitants from being corrupted by valuable possessions, such as gold. He says that “such trinkets are worn only by children, [who] become ashamed of them on their own accord,” and by shackled slaves to permeate the idea of golden accessories as unattractive within their morally rectified society (More 76:17-19). Through these societal traditions, Utopian children are raised with a greater level of mental acclimation than most, and they are devoid of greed and pettiness.

Ultimately, Rousseau and More differ greatly in terms of their arguments and solutions concerning this issue of property. More adheres to a more indirect route; he simply provides a look into both 17th century and Utopian society, and he allows people to reach their own conclusions rather than explicitly guiding their thoughts. In contrast, Rousseau pens a more direct account on the subject, targeting both the issue of property and its subsequent effects on society and inequality, which replace man’s true happiness within his natural state. More believes that property-related problems can be resolved through a communal society in which all things are shared and owned by no individual, thereby eliminating feelings of jealously, envy, and greed, each of which drive man to horrible deeds. Rousseau believes that the only way to escape from the evils of property and its unavoidable consequences is to prevent them from happening and rather choose to be in our own natural state, free of need for cooperation, rather than softened by society. Both of these men consider causes of and solutions to a problem that is truly ambiguous to solve. This is undoubtedly a topic that will continue to be debated upon throughout the lineage of mankind.

Peter Plotas

Word Count: 1898

*I, Peter George Plotas, having a clear understanding of the basis, spirit and interpretation of the Honor System whereby our college community is governed, pledge my personal honor that I will uphold the standards of honesty and responsibility in all areas of college life, both academic and social. I will do all in my power to make the ideal of honor, in its highest sense, prevail among my fellow students. If at any time I should violate either the letter or the spirit of this pledge, I shall accept the full responsibility for myself.*

Works Cited

More, Thomas. *Utopia*. Translated by Clarence H. Miller. 2nd ed. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, and Maurice Cranston. *A Discourse on Inequality*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1984. Print.