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Community over the Individual: An Egalitarian Thomas Paine

Abstract

Concerning himself not with the individual case but with the entire plague of misery he sees in society, Paine proposes the inheritance tax in order to close the gap between classes, saving society from revolution. Putting the community first indicates that Paine is an egalitarian.

Amy Ragland

Community over the Individual: An Egalitarian Thomas Paine

One cannot ignore the undertones of society that run through Thomas Paine's work. Concerning himself not with the individual case but with the entire plague of misery he sees in society, Paine proposes the inheritance tax in order to close the gap between classes, saving society from revolution. Putting the community first indicates that Paine is an egalitarian.

In his letter to the legislature and the executive director of the French Republic, Paine begins his egalitarian argument by saying his essay will show that society is aiming at a very different end-maintaining itself (608). As an egalitarian, he speaks of society trying to maintain itself, not the individual. By employing Paine's concept of an inheritance tax, society will act to maintain itself by attempting to close the chasm between rich and poor. He states in his preface that God made only male and female, not rich or poor (609). Recognizing that the chasm of wealth he sees separating the classes may lead to revolution, he comments that a state in which the possessors of property dread every idea of revolution cannot continue to exist. His inheritance tax will form a system that, while it preserves one part of society from wretchedness, shall secure the other from depredation (620). Preservation of society is Paine's main concern; that he wants to do it fairly suggests he is an egalitarian.

Some may argue that Paine is utilizing an individualist argument by attempting to protect the rich and the private property they have earned. He extends this protection by taking only ten percent of the inheritance rather than redistributing all of the property. Individualists continue to argue that protection of an individual's property is Paine's true end and that the payments are merely a crumb thrown out to keep the poor happy. However, the happiness of the poor will lead to the egalitarian end of a safer society. Once the misery is lessened, the threat of revolution will be removed, saving society. Therefore, as an egalitarian, Paine's first concern is with saving society, not the individual wealth of a few.

Not only does Paine want to save society, but he demonstrates an incredible distrust of the individual. Revealing his distrust, Paine states that the decision to do justice or not should not be left to the choice of detached individuals. This distrust of individuals demonstrates Paine's egalitarian concept that only society as a whole can make amends for the unjust distribution of wealth. He goes on to say that the reputation of it ought to be national and not individual (618). Individualists say that Paine's use of the word "justice" implies that each individual has the right to property, and by redistributing it, Paine is only returning to the individual what is rightfully his. Rather than taking from one person to give to another, Paine is advocating a relationship in which the community helps the community. He states that it is only by organizing civilization upon such principles as to act like a system of pulleys that the whole weight of misery can be removed (618). Paine realizes that the problem is too large for an individual to solve.

Individualists claim Paine as one of their own by pointing to his discussion of individual rights. For example, Paine states his belief that the condition of every person born into the world after a state of civilization commences, ought not to be worse than if he had been born before that period (610). Focusing on Paine's use of the words "every person,"

individualists claim that Paine wants everyone to have this right. They also point to Paine's idea that when a young couple begin in the world the difference is exceedingly great whether they begin with nothing or with fifteen pounds apiece (618). Individualists say this points to Paine's concern for equal process. By giving everyone the same chance, he is interested only in ensuring the individual right to equality of process, something very dear to the hearts of individualists. However, if the individualists would look only to the sentence before this one, they would see that Paine's individualist rhetoric is used for an egalitarian end. Paine states that it would multiply the national resources (618). As Paine implies, this increase in national resources will benefit the society. Typical of an egalitarian, Paine wants society to benefit first.

Paine's concern lies not with the individual but with the disease of poverty that he sees in society. As an egalitarian, he desires the distribution of wealth to close the gap and prevent society from destroying itself. His distrust of the individual only adds to his egalitarian ideals. Throughout *Agrarian Justice*, Paine makes his egalitarian point clear—society must correct the unequal distribution of wealth in order to preserve and prosper.

Bibliography

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