

University of Kentucky

Gatton College of Business and Economics

Institute for the Study of Free Enterprise



INSTITUTE FOR THE
STUDY OF
FREE
ENTERPRISE

Exposition discusses the interplay between the passions and modern politics

- **Though we often attempt to understand modern politics through the lens of Locke and Rousseau, both fall short of providing effective tools which may be used in our modern political discourse**
- **Christian spiritual disciplines may alert us to methods through which we may temper the political “passions” that render Lockean and Rousseauan rational thought powerless to enact growth and change.**

Political discourse often incites cynicism instead of optimism in those (the youth) who will soon, if reluctantly, take the political reins from their parents’ and grandparents’ generations. David Bradshaw, professor of philosophy at the University of Kentucky, and ISFE affiliate, grapples with how best to inculcate future generations of philosophers in his classes to understand and work with others, using the teachings of Locke, Rousseau, and the Christian spiritual traditions. In this short exposition, Bradshaw points out that as students learn to understand both of these philosophers, they quickly learn how government has become captive to individuals “serving their passions in the interest of what they claim to be higher values.”

In his exposition, Bradshaw outlines how both Locke and Rousseau write from a place that attempts to justify the passions – greed, desire for domination, and pride for Locke, and envy, resentment, and pride for Rousseau. As Bradshaw puts it, “Rousseau thus offers a heady mixture of group solidarity, freedom from personal accountability, and the assurance of righteousness. It is no wonder that the fundamental framework of oppression and liberation he laid out has become today the dominant way of thinking about society, used by all who can with any plausibility claim to be victims.”

Moving on to Locke, he remarks, “That being said, in fairness one must note that the older and more staid vision of Locke is also, in its own way, deeply flattering. It tells me that I am free, independent, and the equal of all others in my fundamental rights and dignity. My freedom means that I am subject to no positive obligations other than those that I choose to take on, and that I can in principle walk away from almost any commitment.”

Bradshaw believes one antidote may be to learn from Christian spiritual disciplines how the passions might be tempered. To this, he offers that, “rational discourse is powerless against the passions. In a way, the more cogent such discourse is, the more it is threatening and therefore to be feared. One in the grip of the passions hears in any opposing argument merely the message You are wrong. If anything, this simply inflames them even more. What such a person needs is not to be refuted, but to be shown by living example that the freedom we all innately desire is possible. Even just to know that others are fighting against the passions can sometimes have a powerful effect.”