

Virtue, Rights and Publicity: Thomas Paine's Democratic Thought

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Abstract:

This paper is a significantly truncated version of a chapter from my forthcoming monograph *Thomas Paine and the Idea of Human Rights*.

Though widely acknowledged by historians as one of the most important and influential pamphleteers, rhetoricians, polemicists and political actors of his age, the theoretical content of Thomas Paine's writing has nevertheless been almost entirely ignored. My study attempts to take Paine's political philosophy seriously. I explore his views concerning a number of definitive issues in modern political thought including the grounds for, and limits to, political obligation; the nature of representative democracy; the justification for private property ownership; international relations; and the relationship between secular liberalism and religion. In addition to developing (hopefully) novel interpretations of his texts, I pursue the broader thesis that Paine's thought offers a historically and philosophically distinct account of liberalism and an idea of human rights that is a progenitor of our own.

In this chapter - on Paine's democratic thought - I unpack his reasons for regarding the adoption of representative government as a matter of political right. I suggest that his account of representative democracy appears to contain a 'publicity principle', which seems to generate a commitment to an idea of civic virtue with a twofold function: (1) it enables Paine to respond to the egalitarian critique of representative sovereignty put forward by Rousseau and (2) it buttresses Paine's consent-based theory of political obligation. Having then made the case for the presence of an understanding of civic virtue within Paine's thought through the emphasis on publicity, I consider how it fits with his broader rights-based political theory, arguing that its coherence depends upon understanding the duties of citizenship as imperfect and paying due attention to his account of human nature and how it relates to political institutions.