

## Why Human Beings are Difficult to Rule

POLSC 101 Understanding Politics

February 25, 2007

“It is easier, given his nature, for a human being to rule all the other kinds of animals than to rule human beings,” Xenophon writes in his book *The Education of Cyrus* (Xenophon 22). He is not the only philosopher to explore why human beings are so difficult to rule. Aristotle, in his books *The Politics* and *The Nicomachean Ethics*, discusses the relationship between the ruler and the ruled. John Locke observes that people love freedom and dominion in his book *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. Both Aristotle and Locke write about humans’ self-love, and this human characteristic explains why human beings are so difficult to rule. Based on the writings of Aristotle and Locke, human beings are difficult to rule because many of them lack the reasoning and virtue necessary to rule themselves, yet they reject the efforts of rulers to control them because they love freedom, dominion, and themselves.

People who have reason are, by nature, the rulers over other human beings, according to Aristotle’s book *The Politics*. Those who are ruled do not have the reason necessary to rule others. Aristotle also refers to these people as slaves. This theory relates to the first reason that human beings are difficult to rule, which is their inability to rule themselves. According to Aristotle, happiness is one of the ends toward which people aim. In *The Nicomachean Ethics*, he says that most people identify happiness with pleasure. This causes people to devote their lives to pursuing everything they find pleasurable, even if that means acting dishonorably or without virtue. Aristotle describes this kind of life as “slavish” and “suitable to fatted cattle,” which is based on his theory about the ruler and the ruled. A life of pleasure is “slavish” because they devote their lives solely to pleasure, and they lack the reasoning necessary to practice self-restraint and control their desire for pleasure. The rulers, who do have the reasoning necessary to curb their desire for pleasure, have the responsibility of

controlling the ruled – but this is difficult because, as we have said, humans tend to love freedom, dominion, and above all, themselves.

People naturally love freedom, according to Locke. “We [people] would be thought rational creatures, and have our freedom;” Locke writes, “we love not to be uneasy under constant rebukes and browbeatings...” (Locke 31). People do not like to be told what to do or not to do. It brings them discomfort and it goes against their natural desire for liberty. Locke observes this even in young children. He says that any task becomes “irksome” to them if it is forced upon them, “though before it were a thing of delight or indifferency” (Locke 51). Children do not like to be forced to do anything that goes against their own will. Locke then says that this is equally true with adults. If they are not taught as children to accept that freedom must sometimes be limited for the good of the community as a whole, this love of freedom makes people difficult to rule. It causes them to resist an order from someone in authority, even when they agree with it, just because it imposes on their freedom.

People love dominion over other even more than freedom, however, according to Locke. Human beings’ love of dominion is first evident when they are infants. Babies cry in order to have their needs and wants fulfilled by others. “They would have their desires submitted to by others; they contend for a ready compliance from all about them,” Locke writes, “especially from those that stand near or beneath them in age or degree...” (Locke 76). It may seem extreme to suggest that a baby wants to have power over others, but this example shows the natural inclination of humans to dominate others. If parents do not teach the child to control his natural desire for power, he may grow up to become a tyrant. This is also evident in the way children interact with animals and other non-human creatures. “[Children] often torment and treat very roughly young birds, butterflies, and such other poor

animals which fall into their hands,” Locke writes, “and that with a seeming kind of pleasure” (Locke 90). Locke warns that children should be taught not to do this because it leads to the hardening of the heart and breeds a lack of compassion for fellow human beings. Children who find pleasure in ruling animals with cruelty are more likely to become adults who rule or attempt to rule fellow human beings with that same cruelty, according to Locke. They love power over others, especially those who are weaker or whom they consider inferior. People who have this kind of unrestricted love of dominion are difficult to rule because they prefer to be the ruler of themselves and, if possible, to rule over others, so they rebel against people who try to rule them.

The final factor that makes people difficult to rule is self-love, which both Aristotle and Locke identify as a fundamental characteristic of human beings. In *The Politics*, Aristotle says that there is a necessary relationship between male and female for the purposes of reproduction because “mankind have a natural desire to leave behind them another like themselves.” People want to preserve themselves by creating children who are similar and share their qualities. Since parents admire the similarities between their children and themselves, love for one’s children is an extension of self-love. This becomes a problem when it interferes with a parent’s ability to educate his children, according to Locke. He says it is a parent’s duty to love his children, but parents often love their faults, too, which leads to them excusing bad behaviors instead of teaching children to act more virtuously. Locke writes that “parents think they may safely enough indulge their little irregularities...which, they think, well enough becomes that innocent age” (Locke 26). The bad habits that people develop when they are young, however, last longer than “that innocent age”, according to

Locke. Adults behave the same way they were taught to behave as children. This includes continuing bad behaviors they were not taught to cease.

Furthermore, people want to continue to be allowed to behave as they please and they rebel against anyone who tells them they cannot. “He...had the mastery of his parents ever since he could prattle;” Locke writes, “...now he is grown up, is stronger and wiser than he was then, why now of a sudden must he be restrained and curbed? Why must he...lose the privilege which the parent’s indulgence, till then, so largely allowed him?” (Locke 26). The habits that people develop as children are more difficult to break when they become adults, according to Locke, because they see no reason to act differently from the way they have always acted. They are accustomed to ruling themselves as a result of a lack of parental rule during their childhood. This makes them difficult to rule because they are not used to being ruled by others, so they reject political rulers’ attempts to correct their bad behavior.

In *The Education of Cyrus*, Xenophon observes that “human beings unite more against none more than against those whom they perceive attempting to rule them” (Xenophon 22). It is clear that he finds human beings difficult to rule, and the writings of Aristotle and Locke provide an explanation for Xenophon’s observations. People naturally love freedom, dominion, and themselves. If people are not taught to control these natural inclinations as children, they grow up to be adults who desire to rule themselves and rebel against anyone else who tries to rule them. People who love freedom without control reject being ruled because it imposes on their liberties. People who love dominion too much reject being ruled because they love power and want to rule over others. People who have too much self-love tend to love their children too unconditionally, which prevents them from properly educating their children; these children become adults who reject being ruled because they

are unaccustomed to being ruled by their parents or any other person. Many people cannot rule themselves, though, because they do not have the necessary habits to control their love of pleasure, freedom, dominion and their own selves. Therefore, people must be ruled by others who do have the reason and foresight that is required to rule. It is a difficult task, however, for a ruler to overcome human beings' natural desires in order to rule them for their own good, but success in this is what distinguishes good rulers from bad rulers.