



Freedom through Responsibility: A Social Contract Reading of A.G. Gardiner's *On the Rule of the Road*

Ms. V. Jennifer Rani

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Vels Institute of Science
Technology & Advanced Studies (VISTAS).

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ABSTRACT

A.G. Gardiner's essay *On the Rule of the Road* offers a powerful reflection on the issue of individual freedom and social responsibility. Though this essay enjoys wide recognition due to its civic and moral appeal, its philosophical background has not been discussed sufficiently. In this article, we will analyze this essay using the framework of the Social Contract Theory, which will be developed using the works of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. As it will be shown below, the concept of liberty, introduced by Gardiner, cannot be divorced from civic responsibilities and voluntary following of social rules. Using the examples from everyday life, Gardiner manages to show that individual freedom does not imply freedom from limitations but is the right exercise of one's rights in an orderly society. By advocating the values of mutual respect, discipline, and general welfare, Gardiner strengthens those principles which constitute democratic society.

Introduction

2.1 Background

Alfred George Gardiner (1865-1946) holds an illustrious position among twentieth-century English literature as being one of the most acclaimed essayists of his time. Known by the pen name of 'Alpha of the

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Plough', Alfred Gardiner was well known for his skill in turning common experiences of life into deep insights on ethical and social issues, and human behavior. Gardiner's essays are marked by simple language and philosophical insight coupled with a bit of humor. Instead of just being entertaining, Gardiner aimed to make people think by helping them realize their social responsibilities.

Of his much-anthologized essays, *On the Rule of the Road* still retains an important position within the syllabi of schools and universities alike. On reading this piece, one would think that it is all about a minor event where an old lady crosses the road right at its midpoint. But in truth, Gardiner uses this seemingly trivial instance to delve into a more profound discussion on the themes of freedom, law, and civic duty. Freedom, according to him, does not have much meaning without being accompanied by duty and responsibility. The author presents his ideas in very clear arguments and through relatable examples.

Despite being written at the beginning of the last century, the essay is still surprisingly topical for modern times. The processes of rapid urbanization, increased mobility, development of digital technologies of communication and extension of democratic institutions have made the debate about the problem of personal freedom versus public duty even more urgent. Modern societies still have to solve the problem of traffic control, public safety, ecology, spreading of misinformation in the virtual space, and other problems of this kind, where the problem of the relationship between the freedom of an individual and public duty becomes extremely relevant. It becomes clear that the observations of Gardiner can be applied beyond the context in which they were made and still provide us with important insights into the problem under discussion.

Context

Freedom and responsibility have been central themes in political philosophy and democratic theory for many years now. Liberal democracies understand the importance of freedom as an essential human right; however, they recognize that too much freedom may cause disorder and violation of the freedom of other people. This is why democracies put in place mechanisms which govern how individuals conduct themselves in a manner that preserves their freedoms. The essay by Gardiner portrays this issue of philosophy well because freedom becomes meaningful when it is responsible.

The notion of freedom is closely linked with the concept of civic discipline, which encompasses the voluntary adherence to laws and other social rules that enable people to live together in peace. The scope of civic discipline goes further than just obeying the law; it implies showing respect for other citizens and



understanding of the importance of being a member of society. In his piece "On the Rule of the Road," Gardiner makes traffic rules a symbolic representation of a citizen's responsibility.

In addition to this, the essay contains principles of democracy like equality, justice, cooperation, and mutual respect. It is important to note that democracy does not rely solely on its institutions but also on citizens willing to participate in establishing social peace. Rights and obligations are two sides of the same coin, not opposing each other. Gardiner notes that each person has his/her rights but, at the same time, the rights of each person affect others' rights as well.

It is an issue of great significance within the context of twenty-first century life, how individual rights and public responsibility are linked. Issues of health, conservation of the environment, being a citizen in cyberspace, and civic engagement all lead us into situations where the impact of our choices is not just private but has wider implications for society as a whole. Gardiner's essay sets out this very issue and shows us that true liberty cannot be separated from moral obligation.

It is argued in this paper that the essay by Gardiner is an application of those ideas which correspond to the theory of Social Contract proposed by Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Even though there are many parallels in the concepts, not enough scholarly effort was put into analysis of the essay from the perspective of the Social Contract. The application of the social contract will allow interpreting the essay not only as a moral lesson but as a demonstration of involvement of Gardiner in philosophical issues regarding the connection of personal freedom and civic responsibility in democracy.

Studies on A.G. Gardiner

Alfred George Gardiner (1865-1946) is one of the most prominent essayists in the English language of the twentieth century. Gardiner was a prolific author who wrote under the pen name "Alpha of the Plough." He had a unique writing style where he took common occurrences in life and turned them into philosophies of human nature, morality, and society. Literary critics often characterize Gardiner's essays as being easily understood but thought-provoking, especially because of his skill in combining humor, observations, and philosophy in concise language. His works are still part of school syllabi since they help people learn through experiences and develop moral reasoning skills.

Analysis of Gardiner's works usually focuses on the fact that he helped to shape the English familiar essay. In contrast to the philosophical treatise which contains many abstractive ideas expressed in complex language, his essays contain many social and moral problems presented in simple stories taken from real life. It helps people to think about complicated things like justice, freedom, tolerance, and responsibility



without dealing with complex theory. Thus, Gardiner is unique among other essayists because their literature talent is not only in good writing but in making people think morally.

Another major theme which recurs in most researches is the humanistic philosophy of Gardiner. The essays of Gardiner always emphasize the value of human dignity, but also appreciate the significance of harmony within society. Instead of encouraging a strict legalistic approach to life or blind submission to authority, Gardiner emphasizes the need for intelligent citizenship based on empathy, consideration, and morality. Therefore, humanist researchers have considered the essays of Gardiner to be an example of ethical humanism, with its stress upon cooperation, consideration, and the benefits of civilized public life.

It has also been emphasized that there is a strong element of moral instruction in Gardiner's essays. As compared to some of the other more didactic authors, Gardiner does not directly give his moral judgments to the reader. He rather sets up a situation in which the reader himself makes judgments and thinks on his own. This way of giving moral instruction has been appreciated for promoting the practice of thinking instead of accepting ethics passively.

In spite of this wealth of critical literature, however, most of the studies undertaken thus far have tended to study Gardiner in terms of literary, stylistic, or educational criticism. Fewer efforts have been made to study the philosophical premises behind Gardiner's views on such concepts as freedom, authority, and civic responsibility.

Previous Research on *On the Rule of the Road*

Of all the essays written by Gardiner, *On the Rule of the Road* has received much consideration owing to its timeless significance to moral education and civic consciousness. Discussions in educational literature often view the essay as a case study in discipline, proper behavior, and recognition of societal norms. The case of the old lady crossing the road at the center is usually cited to illustrate the conflict between personal desire and public safety. It is unanimously accepted that Gardiner uses this commonplace example to convey the message that freedom does not exist without responsibility.

Some scholars have analyzed the essay in terms of moral values. They have maintained that Gardiner inculcates virtues like discipline, tolerance, consideration of others, and responsibility in his essay. Morality is not presented in an abstract form by him; instead, he brings out ethical values in practical examples from day-to-day life of the readers. The reason behind the relevance of this essay in academic syllabi lies here.



Another equally important direction in researching the topic involves civic education. Some researchers have claimed that through the essay, learners get familiarized with the elements of citizenship in democracy as the concepts of cooperation, respect for one another, and obedience to laws that benefit everybody are emphasized in the essay. In other words, the discussion about rules on the roads is considered a metaphor of the bigger picture of being citizens in a democratic society.

The essay has also been analyzed from an ethical standpoint. It has been noted that in the essay by Gardiner, he goes above the issue of legality to pose a number of questions regarding morality. The ethical analysis of the essay is that true freedom demands people to be aware of the repercussions of their actions on others.

As far as the area of English language teaching goes, *On the Rule of the Road* is commonly regarded as an effective example of persuasive writing. The study of Gardiner's use of anecdotes, conversational tone, rhetorical questions, humor, and logic in conveying difficult concepts has been carried out. The work is valued not just for the moral message but also for its educational merit.

While these methods have added much to the comprehension of Gardiner's essay, they focus largely on its educational and moral implications. There is relatively little exploration of the philosophical implications of the ideas of freedom, power, and social cooperation contained in the essay.

Studies on Freedom and Responsibility

Freedom and responsibility have formed an important issue in politics, ethics, and democracy. It is a fact that many philosophers in the past as well as the present day hold the opinion that freedom can not be defined in terms of merely negative absence of constraint, but in terms of its connection with other people's rights as well as welfare.

Political philosophers have discussed the concept of liberty in a wide range of theoretical frameworks. For instance, liberal philosophers have focused on the aspect of rights and freedom, while social contract philosophers have asserted that certain freedoms have to be regulated voluntarily for peace and justice. Democratic philosophers have claimed that democracy works well if citizens voluntarily respect the law.

Democracy studies always focus on the two-way relationship between rights and obligations. Citizenship is seen to be more than just having the citizenship status, but rather taking part in the process of sustaining the democratic order and working towards the common good. The modern view of citizenship is thus one that focuses on civic engagement, diversity, participation, and ethics.



Ethics is also concerned with the relationship between the behavior of an individual and the welfare of the community as a whole. The idea put forward by these scholars is that ethics require individuals to understand the effect of their actions on the society and to make decisions in a way that harmonizes their individual interest and the interests of the society.

In the realm of literary analysis, it is important to understand that these philosophical arguments have not always been systematically related to the texts that fall under the category of moral essays. In this way, theories on freedom, citizenship, and social responsibility can be applied to literature to uncover its underlying ideologies.

Social Contract Theory

The Social Contract Theory is one of the key theories of political philosophy which attempts to explain the emergence of the civil society, state power and connection between freedom of the individual and social order. This theory suggests that people consciously give up some of their unlimited freedoms in return for safety, fairness and protection of their rights within a structured community. Instead of seeing the laws as an instrument of oppression, the proponents of social contract theory see the legal and social regulations as a means of ensuring peace, protecting individual freedom and serving the common good. While Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau have different views on the social contract, they both have the understanding that stable societies exist due to the equilibrium between individual freedoms and responsibilities.

On the Rule of the Road by A.G. Gardiner is one such instance of a literary rendition of the above philosophies. In what may seem to be an uninteresting discussion on the rules of the road, Gardiner illustrates the need to consider others when enjoying individual freedom. It can be argued that the thesis of Gardiner in which he posits that individual freedom is only meaningful in the context of shared responsibilities resonates closely with the themes of Social Contract Theory.

Thomas Hobbes: Order through Authority

One of the first and most famous articulations of Social Contract Theory is found in Thomas Hobbes's "Leviathan" written in 1651. According to Hobbes, prior to the formation of any sort of governance, man lived in the "state of nature", which is defined by conditions of insecurity and strife, where people always lived in fear of violence. Since all men had absolute freedom to do whatever suited their interests, there was no governing body to control and organize them, regulate their conduct, and solve any arising disputes. The state of nature was described by Hobbes as the condition where "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" was the life of man.



Hobbes sees laws as something that does not take away freedom but as creating a state wherein people can live peacefully. The authority is like the force that stabilizes the lives of people by protecting them from chaos.

The book, *On the Rule of the Road* by Gardiner, provides us with such an example based on the rule of the road regulation. When an old lady walks down the street in the middle of the road, she demonstrates absolute personal freedom that is not controlled by others. Although it seems like an expression of liberty of choice, in fact, it is a source of danger both for pedestrians and motorists. As Gardiner states, if everyone will do what he wants and will not follow any common rules, the streets will be in chaos and dangerous. Therefore, Gardiner clearly supports the Hobbesian idea that the society cannot function in a well-organized way without having social rules and public government.

John Locke: Liberty and the Protection of Rights

Although Hobbes stresses safety and order, John Locke has an optimistic view of human nature. According to Locke's "Two Treatises of Government" (1689), men are endowed with the basic right to their own lives, liberties, and possessions by birth. The reason why governments exist is to guarantee these rights rather than restrict them. The source of political power is the consent of those who are governed.

As a result, liberty for Locke is not a form of license but freedom enjoyed under a system of law that safeguards the equal rights of all citizens in society. Laws are voluntarily accepted since they do not take away but safeguard natural liberty.

The essay by Gardiner is consistent with the definition of liberty given by Locke. In the essay "On the Rule of the Road," Gardiner continually asserts that freedom does not mean the lack of rules. Rather, the social rules help everybody use their liberties in a safe and equitable manner. The necessity for pedestrians and motorists to follow traffic rules is seen not as something that limits people's liberties, but something that ensures the equal liberties of all.

This essay shows how the idea of mutual reciprocity applies to rights in Lockean philosophy. The existence of freedom for an individual is contingent on the presence of duties that other people undertake. Through the illustration of the importance of abiding by the laws that serve the interests of all, Gardiner shows that discipline and freedom are complementary concepts instead of being mutually exclusive.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The General Will and Civic Responsibility



Rousseau elaborates on Social Contract Theory through his focus on the connection between personal freedom and the welfare of the community as a whole. In his work, "The Social Contract" (1762), Rousseau claims that true political legitimacy stems from the "general will" which reflects not the private but the collective interests of society. People stay free since they engage in the making of laws aimed at the well-being of all of them.

Rousseau emphasizes equality and collective responsibility. Each citizen is equal in society and has a collective responsibility for contributing to the benefit of society. Individual benefits should not affect social unity since everyone's welfare is determined by the welfare of society as a whole.

The *On the Rule of the Road* by Gardiner is in many ways a perfect embodiment of these Rousseauian values. For instance, when Gardiner speaks about road discipline, he shows us how individual behavior influences other people's life. Adherence to traffic regulations cannot be understood only through one's personal interest; instead, it is an act of civic virtue that keeps everyone safe and free from restrictions. This essay tells us that true freedom appears only when people agree to help maintain social order voluntarily.

The focus of Gardiner on considerations, mutual respect, and responsibility reflects Rousseau's idea that being a citizen is not just about enjoying one's individual rights but also includes being committed to the public good. In this sense, "the rule of the road" turns out to be a symbol of the democratic society where freedom thrives in cooperation, equality, and responsibility.

All the three perspectives presented above can be used to develop a full interpretation framework of Gardiner's essay. Hobbes's perspective explains the need for rules to avoid chaos, Locke presents a way in which laws secure individual freedom, and Rousseau brings out the need for people to exercise their civic responsibility for the sustenance of the common good. When the three perspectives are considered, *On the Rule of the Road* will no longer be seen as just a moral essay about traffic laws but a literary piece reflecting on the philosophical aspects of citizenship in democracy.

Comparative Discussion

On the Rule of the Road by A.G. Gardiner has a lot in common in terms of philosophy with the tradition of social contract theories embodied in the thoughts of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. While Gardiner was not writing about politics, he touched upon certain aspects of civic life that resonate well with what those philosophers wrote about. Gardiner believed that freedom could be maintained by people when they follow certain rules that ensure protection of both individual freedom and community well-being.



The most striking parallel between Gardiner and Hobbes exists in terms of their understanding that rules are needed to avoid chaos. Hobbes claims that if there is no common power that would be able to control people's actions, life will be characterized by constant conflicts since everybody will follow their own desires. Gardiner offers an analogous example by using the image of road utilization. The actions of the elderly lady who decides to use the middle part of the road can be seen as an uncontrolled personal desire to do something, but at the same time such actions can lead to problems of all those who use the same public space.

Nevertheless, despite the common point, Gardiner and Hobbes are different when it comes to their understanding of the concept of authority. Hobbes gives priority to the notion of a sovereign who can guarantee obedience while Gardiner focuses more on the concept of self-discipline of the citizens. Instead of making the citizens obey by means of fear and coercion, Gardiner uses reasoning and respect in order to convince the readers. The assumption here is that the citizens understand the reasons why certain rules should be followed and choose to do so.

The views of Gardiner align perfectly well with those of John Locke. Locke believes that governments exist due to consent and the purpose is to protect the natural rights of people such as life and liberty. Consequently, laws do not restrict liberty, but ensure the protection of it so that all people have the same protection under the law. The view is shared with Gardiner in that he states that liberty needs to be limited to ensure that the rights of other people are protected. The laws about traffic are seen as tools which make it possible for everybody to drive on the road equally and safely.

The difference to note here is their areas of focus. Whereas Locke builds a political philosophy revolving around natural rights, constitutionality of governance, and the idea of political legitimacy, Gardiner is not worried about the structures of governance as much as he is about actions. The former's contribution is in the realm of political philosophy, while the latter's is in ethics.

Of the three philosophers, Rousseau's theory comes closest to aligning with Gardiner's approach in terms of civic responsibility and the common good. According to Rousseau, people attain true freedom by taking part in enforcing laws that represent the general will and benefit the community as a whole. Like Rousseau, Gardiner asserts that individual freedom is meaningful when the person takes into account other people's needs while exercising his freedom. Following the "rule of the road" turns into citizenship, rather than simply obeying the law. The individual's willingness to abide by certain laws ensures safety, equality, and harmony in society.



However, Gardiner does not completely embrace the political theory of Rousseau. In contrast to Rousseau's wide political theory concerning collective sovereignty and participatory democracy, Gardiner gives practical examples of such values from daily life in his essay. It is worth noting that Gardiner's essay does not contain any political arguments but shows how simple acts of civic behavior are in line with the idea of cooperation.

Together, all the social contract theorists shed light on various aspects of Gardiner's argument. Hobbes' theory helps explain why laws are essential in avoiding chaos; Locke's theory explains how the law enables individuals to retain their freedom by ensuring equality of all citizens; and Rousseau stresses the moral responsibility of citizens in promoting the common good through proper behavior. The essay by Gardiner brings out all these elements in a literary discussion on democracy, where freedom is not absolute and isolated. Freedom is realized through the assumption of responsibility that enables individuals to live harmoniously in an orderly society. From this point of view, *On the Rule of the Road* is an essay on laws as a philosophical concept of freedom and citizenship.

Findings

It can be said that the current work shows that *On the Rule of the Road* by A.G. Gardiner is a thought-provoking analysis of the connection between individual freedom and social duty. Although this essay seems to speak about the importance of compliance with the traffic laws, under the Social Contract approach, this essay deals with more philosophical questions related to the topics of freedom, law, and democracy. It is revealed that Gardiner constantly promotes the concept of controlled freedom, claiming that freedom exists only when it is practiced against the background of agreed social laws. Law, in turn, is not seen as an obstacle to freedom, but as something necessary for the safety and welfare of all people.

One of the important findings in the study above is that Gardiner perceives freedom as a collective social phenomenon, and not an unlimited right of individuals. The essay asserts that true freedom will only exist where people willingly allow the rights of other people while at the same time having certain duties to them. Using the analogy of discipline on the roads, Gardiner explains that social harmony does not come about because of lack of freedom, but because of proper management of freedom.

Among the three philosophers who have been discussed in this regard, the philosophy of John Locke is more likely to be used for interpretation of Gardiner's argument. The idea of natural liberty that needs to be ensured through law is quite similar to Gardiner's argument that rules are made to ensure liberty rather than



destroy it. It is because in both cases, it is clear that any rule that is made ensures the equal rights of each and every person and helps in ensuring liberty of each person without hurting the rights of others.

Hobbes' theory is nonetheless useful in explaining the idea of Gardiner. Hobbes says that unlimited freedom causes chaos unless regulated. Likewise, Gardiner shows that without universal rules, there will be chaos and danger. Unlike Gardiner, who uses moral persuasion to achieve his objectives, the reasoning of Gardiner shows the principle of Hobbes. According to Hobbes, orderly societies need universal rules.

The ethical aspect of citizenship is another way in which the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau contributes to the analysis. The idea of the general will and striving for the common good are part of the philosophy of Rousseau. It is mentioned in the essay that responsible citizenship not only means following the laws but also implies the need to do certain things that will contribute to the common good and well-being of society.

On the whole, the study reveals that *On the Rule of the Road* is much more than the mere exploration of the rules of the road. By blending together concepts that belong to Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, Gardiner shows that freedom can be attained only when it is paired with responsibility, law, and collaboration among people. Thus, *On the Rule of the Road* becomes the predecessor of democratic ethics and proves that an ideal and balanced society cannot be achieved without taking into account the concept of responsibility as well.

Conclusion:

This work aimed at analyzing *On the Rule of the Road* by A.G. Gardiner from the standpoint of Social Contract Theory. In particular, the analysis was done in relation to the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The text under discussion has long been studied as a moral and educational piece of writing. However, the current research found a certain gap in the existing literature regarding the philosophical meaning of the text. Namely, there has not been much attention paid to the examination of the thoughts of Gardiner on freedom, civic duty, and social order from the perspective of social contract theory.

This analysis demonstrates that in his discussion, Gardiner sees freedom as an idea that is always linked with responsibility. In this essay, the author consistently argues that freedom cannot be realized without taking into account the rights and interests of other people. An example about traffic rules serves as a good metaphor that allows one to show that regulations do not limit freedom; on the contrary, they provide a



framework within which everyone has equal freedom. This idea contradicts the stereotype that liberty means the lack of restrictions.

Comparative application of Social Contract Theory helps to interpret the above analysis even better. Hobbes' theory offers an explanation of why there is a need for regulations to prevent chaos and guarantee stability in society, thus providing a rationale for Gardiner's view that unrestrained individualism results in chaos and disagreement. Locke's theory gives the most philosophically close example to Gardiner's idea about controlled freedom by saying that there is no point in making regulations against natural rights. The philosophy of Rousseau sheds light upon the moral aspect of the essay by showing that the role of a good citizen involves balancing one's private concerns with the common good.

Firstly, this research makes an important contribution to current literature on the topic by providing an innovative approach that draws parallels between literary theory and political theory. Secondly, this research shows the importance of the essay in modern democratic states in which the discussion about individual rights, social responsibility, and ethics of citizenship is becoming even more urgent. Through the use of the approaches of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, this research proves that Gardiner's thoughts are not only relevant in their historical time but also deal with eternal issues of law, freedom, and living together.

Finally, Gardiner develops an ordinary conversation on how to conduct oneself on the roads into a deep philosophical discourse on democracy, civic duty, and the social contract. Gardiner shows through his essay that freedom is truly valuable only when people are willing to take up the responsibilities necessary to ensure that the rights and well-being of other people are protected. In the age of fast-paced changes in society, technological advancements, and a re-evaluation of individual freedom, Gardiner's message is both relevant and timeless.

The current paper raises numerous questions for future research as well. This type of inquiry can be developed by analyzing other essays written by Gardiner from the perspective of political philosophy or by comparing his views with the ideas of modern democratic thinkers. Further research may focus on the impact of literary texts on the process of civic education and ethical thinking in the context of education. The comparative research may analyze the depiction of concepts of liberty and responsibility in the democratic literature of various cultures. The interdisciplinarity of literary analysis, ethics, public policy, and citizenship studies can give additional perspectives on the role of literary narratives in the modern discussions of governance, civic engagement, and social responsibility.

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