

## Jean Jacques Rousseau

Jean-Jacques Rousseau remains an important figure in the history of philosophy, both because of his contributions to political philosophy and moral psychology and because of his influence on later thinkers. Rousseau's own view of philosophy and philosophers was firmly negative, seeing philosophers as the post-hoc rationalizers of self-interest, as apologists for various forms of tyranny, and as playing a role in the alienation of the modern individual from humanity's natural impulse to compassion. The concern that dominates Rousseau's work is to find a way of preserving human freedom in a world where human beings are increasingly dependent on one another for the satisfaction of their needs. This concern has two dimensions: material and psychological, of which the latter has greater importance. In the modern world, human beings come to derive their very sense of self from the opinion of others, a fact which Rousseau sees as corrosive of freedom and destructive of individual authenticity. In his mature work, he principally explores two routes to achieving and protecting freedom: the first is a political one aimed at constructing political institutions that allow for the co-existence of free and equal citizens in a community where they themselves are sovereign; the second is a project for child development and education that fosters autonomy and avoids the development of the most destructive forms of self-interest. However, though Rousseau believes the co-existence of human beings in relations of equality and freedom is possible, he is consistently and overwhelmingly pessimistic that humanity will escape from a dystopia of alienation, oppression, and unfreedom. In addition to his contributions to philosophy, Rousseau was active as a composer and a music theorist, as the pioneer of modern autobiography, as a novelist, and as a botanist. Rousseau's appreciation of the wonders of nature and his stress on the importance of feeling and emotion made him an important influence on and anticipator of the romantic movement. To a very large extent, the interests and concerns that mark his philosophical work also inform these other activities, and Rousseau's contributions in ostensibly non-philosophical fields often serve to illuminate his philosophical commitments and arguments.

### Political Philosophy

Rousseau's contributions to political philosophy are scattered among various works, most notable of which are the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, the *Discourse on Political Economy*, *The Social Contract*, and *Considerations on the Government of Poland*. However, many of his other works, both major and minor, contain passages that amplify or illuminate the political ideas in those works. His central doctrine in politics is that a state can be legitimate only if it is guided by the "general will" of its members. This idea finds its most detailed treatment in *The Social Contract*.

In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau sets out to answer what he takes to be the fundamental question of politics, the reconciliation of the freedom of the individual with the authority of the state. This reconciliation is necessary because human society has evolved to a point where individuals can no longer supply their needs through their own unaided efforts, but rather must depend on the co-operation of others. The process whereby human needs expand and interdependence deepens is set out

in the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*. In that work, the final moment of Rousseau's conjectural history involves the emergence of endemic conflict among the now-interdependent individuals and the argument that the Hobbesian insecurity of this condition would lead all to consent to the establishment of state authority and law. In the *Second Discourse*, this establishment amounts to the reinforcement of unequal and exploitative social relations that are now backed by law and state power. In an echo of Locke and an anticipation of Marx, Rousseau argues that this state would, in effect, be a class state, guided by the common interest of the rich and propertied and imposing unfreedom and subordination on the poor and weak. The propertyless consent to such an establishment because their immediate fear of a Hobbesian state of war leads them to fail to attend to the ways in which the new state will systematically disadvantage them.

The *Social Contract* aims to set out an alternative to this dystopia, an alternative in which, Rousseau claims, each person will enjoy the protection of the common force whilst remaining as free as they were in the state of nature. The key to this reconciliation is the idea of the general will: that is, the collective will of the citizen body taken as a whole. The general will is the source of law and is willed by each and every citizen. In obeying the law each citizen is thus subject to his or her own will, and consequently, according to Rousseau, remains free.

## The idea of the general will

Rousseau's account of the general will is marked by unclarity and ambiguities that have attracted the interest of commentators since its first publication. The principal tension is between a democratic conception, where the general will is simply what the citizens of the state have decided together in their sovereign assembly, and an alternative interpretation where the general will is the transcendent incarnation of the citizens' common interest that exists in abstraction from what any of them actually wants. Both views find some support in Rousseau's texts, and both have been influential. Contemporary epistemic conceptions of democracy often make reference to Rousseau's discussion in Book 2 chapter 3 of *The Social Contract*. These accounts typically take Condorcet's jury theorem as a starting point, where democratic procedures are conceived of as a method for discovering the truth about the public interest; they then interpret the general will as a deliberative means of seeking outcomes that satisfy the preferences of individuals and render the authority of the state legitimate. The tension between the "democratic" and the "transcendental" conceptions can be reduced if we take Rousseau to be arguing for the view that, under the right conditions and subject to the right procedures, citizen legislators will be led to converge on laws that correspond to their common interest; however, where those conditions and procedures are absent, the state necessarily lacks legitimacy. On such a reading, Rousseau may be committed to something like an a posteriori philosophical anarchism. Such a view holds that it is possible, in principle, for a state to exercise legitimate authority over its citizens, but all actual states—and indeed all states that we are likely to see in the modern era—will fail to meet the conditions for legitimacy.

Rousseau argues that in order for the general will to be truly general it must come from all and apply to all. This thought has both substantive and formal aspects. Formally, Rousseau argues that the law must be general in application and universal in scope. The law cannot name particular individuals and it must apply to everyone within the state. Rousseau believes that this condition will lead citizens, though guided by a consideration of what is in their own private interest, to favor laws that both secure the common interest impartially and that are not burdensome and intrusive. For this to be true, however, it has to be the case that the situation of citizens is substantially similar to one another. In a state where citizens enjoy a wide diversity of lifestyles and occupations, or where there is a great deal of cultural diversity, or where there is a high degree of economic inequality, it will not generally be the case that the impact of the laws will be the same for everyone. In such cases it will often not be true that a citizen can occupy the standpoint of the general will merely by imagining the impact of general and universal laws on his or her own case.

## The emergence of the general will: procedure, virtue and the legislator

In *The Social Contract* Rousseau envisages three different types or levels of will as being in play. First, individuals all have private wills corresponding to their own selfish interests as natural individuals; second, each individual, insofar as he or she identifies with the collective as a whole and assumes the identity of citizen, wills the general will of that collective as his or her own, setting aside selfish interest in favor of a set of laws that allow all to coexist under conditions of equal freedom; third, and very problematically, a person can identify with the corporate will of a subset of the populace as a whole. The general will is therefore both a property of the collective and a result of its deliberations, and a property of the individual insofar as the individual identifies as a member of the collective. In a well-ordered society, there is no tension between private and general will, as individuals accept that both justice and their individual self-interest require their submission to a law which safeguards their freedom by protecting them from the private violence and personal domination that would otherwise hold sway. In practice, however, Rousseau believes that many societies will fail to have this well-ordered character. One way in which they can fail is if private individuals are insufficiently enlightened or virtuous and therefore refuse to accept the restrictions on their own conduct which the collective interest requires. Another mode of political failure arises where the political community is differentiated into factions (perhaps based on a class division between rich and poor) and where one faction can impose its collective will on the state as a whole.

*The Social Contract* harbors a further tension between two accounts of how the general will emerges and its relation to the private wills of citizens. Sometimes Rousseau favors a procedural story according to which the individual contemplation of self interest (subject to the constraints of generality and universality and under propitious sociological background conditions such as rough equality and cultural similarity) will result in the emergence of the general will from the assembly of citizens. In this account of the emergence of the general will, there seems to be no special need for citizens to have any specifically moral qualities: the constraints on their choice should be enough. However, Rousseau also clearly believes that the mere contemplation of self interest would be inadequate to generate a general will. This may partly concern issues of compliance, since selfish citizens who can will the general will might still not be moved to obey it. But Rousseau also seems to believe that citizen virtue is a necessary condition for the emergence of the general will in the first place. This presents him with a problem for which his figure of the legislator is one attempted solution. As a believer in the plasticity of human nature, Rousseau holds that good laws make for good citizens. However, he also believes both that good laws can only be willed by good citizens and that, in order to be legitimate, they must be agreed upon by the assembly. This puts him in some difficulty, as it is unlikely that the citizens who come together to form a new state will have the moral qualities required to will good laws, shaped as those citizens will have been by unjust institutions. The legislator or lawgiver therefore has the function of inspiring a sense of collective identity in the new citizens that allows them to identify with the whole and be moved to support legislation that will eventually transform them and their children into good citizens. In this story, however, the new citizens at first lack the capacity to discern the good reasons that support the

new laws and the lawgiver has to persuade them by non-rational means to legislate in their own best interests.

The figure of the legislator is a puzzle. Like the tutor in *Emile*, the legislator has the role of manipulating the desires of his charges, giving them the illusion of free choice without its substance. Little wonder then that many critics have seen these characters in a somewhat sinister light. In both cases there is a mystery concerning where the educator figure comes from and how he could have acquired the knowledge and virtue necessary to perform his role. This, in turn, raises a problem of regress. If the legislator was formed by a just society, then who performed the legislator's role for that society, and how was that legislator formed? How did the tutor acquire his education if not from a tutor who, in turn, was educated according to Rousseau's program by an earlier tutor?

## Rousseau's claim to reconcile freedom and authority

What then of Rousseau's key claim that freedom and authority are reconciled in his ideal republic through obedience to the general will? This claim finds notorious and deliberately paradoxical expression in Book 1 chapter 7 of *The Social Contract*, where Rousseau writes of citizens being “forced to be free” when they are constrained to obey the general will. The opening words of *The Social Contract* themselves refer to freedom, with the famous saying that “Man is born free, but is everywhere in chains”. This ringing declaration, however, is almost immediately followed by a note of paradox, as Rousseau declares that he can make this subjection “in chains” legitimate. The thought that Rousseau's commitment to freedom might not be all that it first appears is strengthened by other passages in the book, most notably his declaration that those subject to the general will are “forced to be free.” The value of freedom or liberty is at the center of Rousseau's concerns throughout his work. Since he uses the notion in several distinct ways, though, it is important to distinguish several uses of the term. First, we should note that Rousseau regards the capacity for choice, and therefore the ability to act against instinct and inclination, as one of the features that distinguishes the human race from animal species and makes truly moral action possible. In the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, for example, he characterizes animal species in essentially Cartesian terms, as mechanisms programmed to a fixed pattern of behavior. Human beings, on the other hand are not tied to any particular mode of life and can reject the promptings of instinct. This makes possible both the development of the human species and also its fall from grace, since individuals can ignore benign impulses (such as *pitié*) if they wish to. The freedom to act contrary to the “mechanism of the senses”, and the power of willing and choosing is, for Rousseau, something entirely outside the laws of the physical world and is therefore not subject to scientific explanation. Rousseau also takes this freedom to choose to act as the basis of all distinctively moral action. In *The Social Contract* the connection between freedom of choice and morality is central to his argument against despotic government, where he writes that the renunciation of freedom is contrary to human nature and that to renounce freedom in favour of another person's authority is to “deprive one's actions of all morality” (SC 1.4).

In Book I chapter 8 of *The Social Contract*, Rousseau tries to illuminate his claim that the formation of the legitimate state involves no net loss of freedom, but in fact, he makes a slightly different claim. The new claim involves the idea of an exchange of one type of freedom (natural freedom) for another type (civil freedom). Natural freedom involves an unlimited right to all things, an idea that is reminiscent of Hobbes's “right of nature” in *Leviathan*. Since all human beings enjoy this liberty right to all things, it is clear that in a world occupied by many interdependent humans, the practical value of that liberty may be almost nonexistent. This is because any individual's capacity to get what he or she wants will be limited by his or her physical power and the competing physical power of others. Further, inevitable conflict over scarce resources will pit individuals against each other, so that unhindered exercise of natural freedom will result in violence and uncertainty. The formation of the state, and the promulgation of laws willed by the general will, transforms this condition. With sovereign power in place, individuals are guaranteed a sphere of equal freedom under the law with protection for their own

persons and security for their property. Provided that the law bearing equally on everyone is not meddlesome or intrusive (and Rousseau believes it will not be, since no individual has a motive to legislate burdensome laws) there will be a net benefit compared to the pre-political state.

Rousseau makes a further claim in the same chapter of *The Social Contract*, namely that in conditions of civil society the citizen achieves “moral freedom,” by which he means obedience to a law that one has prescribed to oneself. Although this latter claim is presented almost as an afterthought, it is the form of freedom most directly responsive to the challenge Rousseau had set for himself two chapters earlier, which involved finding “a form of association” in which each citizen would “obey only himself.” Naturally, this raises the question of whether the citizen does in fact obey only himself when he obeys the general will. On the face of it, this claim looks difficult to reconcile with the fact of majorities and minorities within a democratic state, since those citizens who find themselves outvoted would seem to be constrained by a decision with which they disagree. Rousseau's solution to this puzzle is found much later, in Book 4 chapter 3 of *The Social Contract*, where he argues that those who obey laws they did not vote for remain bound by a will that is their own, since the democratic process has enabled them to discover the content of a general will in which that they share. Many commentators have not found this argument fully convincing.

Rousseau's invocation of three types of freedom (natural, civil, and moral) in the text of *The Social Contract* can appear confusing. The picture is further complicated by the fact that he also relies on a fourth conception of freedom, related to civil freedom but distinct from it, which he nowhere names explicitly. This is “republican freedom” and consists, not in my being subject to my own will, but rather in the fact that the law protects me from being subject to the will of any other particular person in the manner of a slave or serf. To find Rousseau's explicit endorsement of this idea, we have to look not to *The Social Contract*, but rather to some of his unpublished notes. Yet the concept is clearly implicit in the notorious “forced to be free” passage in Book 1 chapter 7, since he there explains that when each citizen is constrained to obey the general will, he is thereby provided with a guarantee against “all personal dependence”.

## Representation and government

One feature of Rousseau's political philosophy that has proved least persuasive to later thinkers is his doctrine of sovereignty and representation, with his apparent rejection of "representative government". At the center of Rousseau's view in *The Social Contract* is his rejection of the Hobbesian idea that a people's legislative will can be vested in some group or individual that then acts with their authority but rules over them. Instead, he takes the view that to hand over one's general right of ruling oneself to another person or body constitutes a form of slavery, and that to recognize such an authority would amount to an abdication of moral agency. This hostility to the representation of sovereignty also extends to the election of representatives to sovereign assemblies, even where those representatives are subject to periodic re-election. Even in that case, the assembly would be legislating on a range of topics on which citizens have not deliberated. Laws passed by such assemblies would therefore bind citizens in terms that they have not themselves agreed upon. Not only does the representation of sovereignty constitute, for Rousseau, a surrender of moral agency, the widespread desire to be represented in the business of self-rule is a symptom of moral decline and the loss of virtue.

The practical difficulties of direct self-rule by the entire citizen body are obvious. Such arrangements are potentially onerous and must severely limit the size of legitimate states. It is noteworthy that Rousseau takes a different view in a text aimed at practical politics: *Considerations on the Government of Poland*. Nevertheless, it is not entirely clear that the widespread interpretation of Rousseau as rejecting all forms of representative government is correct. One of the key distinctions in *The Social Contract* is between sovereign and government. The sovereign, composed of the people as a whole, promulgates laws as an expression of its general will. The government is a more limited body that administers the state within the bounds set by the laws, and which issues decrees applying the laws in particular cases. If the laws are conceived of as the people setting a constitutional framework for society, with the government's decrees comprising the more normal business of "legislation," then the distance between a Rousseauian republic and a modern constitutional democracy may be smaller than it at first appears. In effect, the institution of the sovereign may be inconsistent with a representative model, where the executive power of the government can be understood as requiring it. Such a picture gains credibility when the details of Rousseau's views on government are examined. Although a variety of forms of government turn out to be theoretically compatible with popular sovereignty, Rousseau is sceptical about the prospects for both democracy (where the people conduct the day to day running of the state and the application of the laws) and monarchy. Instead, he favors some form of elective aristocracy: in other words, he supports the idea that the day-to-day administration should be in the hands of a subset of the population, elected by them according to merit.

Two important issues arise in relation to Rousseau's account of relations between sovereign and government. The first of these concerns his political pessimism, even in the case of the best-designed and most perfect republic. Just as any group has a collective will as opposed to the individual private will



of its members, so does the government. As the state becomes larger and more diffuse, and as citizens become more distant from one another both spatially and emotionally, so the effective government of the republic will need a proportionally smaller and more cohesive group of magistrates. Rousseau thinks it almost inevitable that this group will end up usurping the legitimate sovereign power of the people and substituting its corporate will for the people's general will. The second issue concerns how democratic Rousseau envisaged his republic to be. He sometimes suggests a picture in which the people would be subject to elite domination by the government, since the magistrates would reserve the business of agenda-setting for the assembly to themselves. In other cases, he endorses a conception of a more fully democratic republic.

Although Rousseau rejects Hobbes's view of the sovereign as representing or acting in the person of the subject, he has a similar view of what sovereignty is and its relation to the rights of the individual. He rejects the idea that individuals associated together in a political community retain some natural rights over themselves and their property. Rather, such rights as individuals have over themselves, land, and external objects, are a matter of sovereign competence and decision. Individual rights must be specified by the sovereign in ways that are compatible with the interests of all in a just polity, and Rousseau rejects the idea that such rights could be insisted on as a check on the sovereign's power.

## Civil religion and toleration

The final full chapter of *The Social Contract* expounds Rousseau's doctrine of civil religion. Contemporary readers were scandalized by it, and particularly by its claim that true (original or early) Christianity is useless in fostering the spirit of patriotism and social solidarity necessary for a flourishing state. In many ways the chapter represents a striking departure from the main themes of the book. First, it is the only occasion where Rousseau prescribes the content of a law that a just republic must have. Second, it amounts to his acceptance of the inevitability of pluralism in matters of religion, and thus of religious toleration; this is in some tension with his encouragement elsewhere of cultural homogeneity as a propitious environment for the emergence of a general will. Third, it represents a very concrete example of the limits of sovereign power: following Locke, Rousseau insists upon the inability of the sovereign to examine the private beliefs of citizens. The tenets of Rousseau's civil religion include the affirmation of the existence of a supreme being and of the afterlife, the principle that the just will prosper and the wicked will be punished, and the claim that the social contract and the laws are sacred. In addition, the civil religion requires the provision that all those willing to tolerate others should themselves be tolerated, but those who insist that there is no salvation outside their particular church cannot be citizens of the state. The structure of religious beliefs within the just state is that of an overlapping consensus: the dogmas of the civil religion are such that they can be affirmed by adherents of a number of different faiths, both Christian and non-Christian.

Despite Rousseau's concern for religious toleration both in the chapter and elsewhere, modern readers have often been repelled by one striking note of intolerance. Rousseau argues that those who cannot accept the dogmas can be banished from the state. This is because he believes that atheists, having no fear of divine punishment, cannot be trusted by their fellow citizens to obey the law. He goes even further, to suggest the death penalty for those who affirm the dogmas but later act as if they do not believe them