

## Forced to be Free: Rethinking the Terms of Rousseau’s ‘Social Contract’

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There is a great deal of room for misunderstanding in the pages of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s work. His prose is not as weighed down by jargon as Heidegger’s or as difficult to wade through as Hegel’s—by all accounts his writing is easy to parse! And yet, at times, his writing seems to leave too much up in the air. As such, his work has been both a guiding star for the political left and decried as a wolf in sheep’s clothing. Much of this disparity in opinion can be traced back to a common concern that Rousseau’s attempt to create a basis for legitimate political power seems to take place at the expense of individual freedom. But this raises a question: what is freedom for Rousseau?

Rousseau’s concern for the preservation of *some* type of freedom could not be overlooked by even the least discerning of readers. In the sixth chapter of *The Social Contract*, Rousseau states the fundamental problem he wishes to address—that we may:

Find a form of association that defends and protects with all common forces the person and goods of each associate, and, by means of which, each one, while uniting with all, nevertheless obey only himself and remains as free as before. (Rousseau, 2011, p.164)

And, yet, as clear as Rousseau states the goal underpinning his political theory, the reader is still left with questions upon completing *The Social Contract*.

Daniel Cullen, author of *Freedom in Rousseau’s Political Philosophy*, writes that “while the word ‘freedom’ is constantly on his lips, it is difficult to isolate a single, self-consistent, and fully articulated theory of freedom in his writings.” (Cullen, 1993, p.3) It is this lack of clarity that has prompted criticism of Rousseau’s work to appear in the unceremonious pages of Bertrand Russell’s *A History of Western Philosophy*—in which Russell names Rousseau as an ideological forebear to the Nazi Party. (Russell, 1945, p.790) In spite of his claim to be writing in support of freedom, it is Rousseau’s apparent abandonment of it that has led writers to react in such hostile ways. Misinterpretations of his theory of freedom are led by his claim that we must “force man to be free” (Rousseau, 2011, p.167) such that he might “place all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will.” (ibid, p.163)

Rousseau takes the fundamental problem of political philosophy, as laid out in the excerpt above, to be the formation of a political structure that caters to its citizens' need for social cooperation while also accommodating their nature as essentially free beings. The difficulty of this task rests on the idea that successful social cooperation must be regulated by a governing 'will' that operates in accordance with the common good, while individual freedom would seem to require that individuals be subject to no will other than their own. As Frederick Neuhouser (1993) points out, because cooperation entails the adaptation of one's behavior to the interests of others, individuals would seem to be left with no other option but to relinquish their freedom to some other being or body politic. (p.367)

Rousseau takes the 'general will' to be the solution to this problem. However, how we go about unpacking the general will depends a great deal on what we take freedom to be. Neuhouser's description in *Freedom, Dependence, and the General Will* supplies a good starting place. Neuhouser writes that "if the solution is to succeed, the general will must regulate social cooperation in accord with the common good and at the same time be the will of the individuals whose behavior it governs." (ibid) This is achieved when the individuals in a society help to construct the general will with the common good of all in mind. In following the laws set forth by the general will, the individual is said to be subject only to a system of governance to which she has contributed.

However, we are still left here with the question of what it means to be free. The description above of the role that the general will plays in the preservation of freedom suggests that freedom is nothing more than one's ability to exercise her will. Indeed, in *The Social Contract*, Rousseau does appear to define natural freedom in such limited terms. Natural freedom, writes Rousseau, is the kind of freedom held by individuals prior to joining a political society. He writes:

This common liberty is one consequence of the nature of man. Its first law is to see to his preservation; its first concerns are those he owes himself; and, as soon as he reaches the age of reason, since he alone is the judge of the proper means of taking care of himself, he thereby becomes his own master. (Rousseau, 2011, p.157)

In the pre-political world, the individual is concerned only with meeting her own needs, subject to no one but herself. At a minimum, one's natural freedom is exercised when her will, unimpaired, is actualized. It is from this rather bare-bones account of freedom that many writers take issue with just how much is being asked of the individual who submits to the general will. "What man loses through the social contract is his natural liberty and an unlimited right to everything that tempts him and that he can acquire," writes Rousseau. (ibid, p.167) And he goes to great lengths to justify the individual's exchange of natural freedom for the sake of preserving social cooperation. Rousseau writes:

Finally, in giving himself to all, each person gives himself to no one. And since there is no associate over whom he does not acquire the same right that he would grant others over himself, he gains the equivalent of everything he loses, along with a greater amount of force to preserve what he has. (ibid, p.164)

Though his energy is spent on explicating the complex *need* for the general will, his critics have focused on whether the individual can rightly be said to *want* to participate in such a system. After a brief description of the individual's exchange of freedoms as she enters the political society, Rousseau moves to another topic. Regarding his discussion of freedom in *The Social Contract*, he writes that he has "already said too much on this subject." But this description does not exhaust what Rousseau has to say; a more robust understanding can be found in his *Second Discourse*.

In the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau outlines our descent from freedom to forever in the chains of an inter-dependent society. It is here that his account of the relationship between the individual and the political society is most thoroughly laid out. And Rousseau is clear, even in this earlier text, that the problems he is discussing are to be solved only through the kind of social contract his later text would address. (ibid, p.85) Though he does not intend to use his *Second Discourse* to explain in-depth the contract he has proposed, the text hints at the forthcoming work. In parsing out the details of the individual's transformation of natural freedom to social obligation—as laid out in Rousseau's *Second Discourse*—we can more clearly see what Rousseau thinks we have lost to the body politic, and what, then, the general will is meant to help us regain.

"They all ran to chain themselves, in the belief that they secured their liberty," writes Rousseau. "For although they had enough sense to realize the advantages of a political establishment, they did not have enough experience to foresee its dangers." (ibid, p.79) Rousseau's narrative of human development is one in which, prior to coming together to form social bonds, the individual is rather happy in her natural freedom. In this pre-social period, the individual's life is one of animalistic desire for only the most immediate needs—food, shelter, reproduction. There is no concern about the influence, desires, or opinions of others. There is no obligation. There is no shame. In this natural state, humans differ from animals only in that they possess the ability to leave it.

It is freedom, writes Rousseau, that separates man from beast. (2011, p.52) While humans deliberate, Rousseau writes that animals act on instinct. Though humans feel the same impetus from nature that mandates animals' actions, man "knows he is free to go along or resist." (ibid, p.53) This, combined with a disposition toward self-perfection, leads man away from the ebbs and flows of nature. The desire to improve "draws him out of that original condition in which he would pass tranquil and innocent days." (ibid) In the state of nature, all of the individual's basic needs

are met, and in such a state of freedom, “what kind of misery can there be?” It is the knack for self-perfection, and the freedom to pursue it, that led the individual out of her happy state. And so a dichotomy arose—“In instinct alone, man had everything he needed in order to live in the state of nature; in a cultivated reason, he has only what he needs to live in society.” (ibid, p.61)

The pleasant world that Rousseau describes is upset by the individual’s introduction to others. The individual encountered difficulties in her search for resources, and these difficulties encouraged cooperation. Those best at catching fish became fishermen, those best at tracking animals became hunters, and the cultivation of various strengths and weaknesses helped to develop relational ideas in the human mind. As relationships developed, so did the concept of comparison and reflection:

The new enlightenment that resulted from this development increased [man’s] superiority over the other animals by making him aware of it. [Man] trained himself to set traps for them; he tricked them in a thousand different ways. And although several surpassed him in fighting strength or in swiftness in running, of those that could serve him or hurt him, he became in time the master of the former and the scourge of the latter. Thus the first glance he directed up on himself produced within him the first stirrings of pride. (Rousseau, 2011, p.70)

Rousseau writes that from pride grew a desire to be needed. And dependance grew with the ever-increasing contact between members of the species—first based upon the mutual benefits of working together, and then upon the “developments of the heart.” (ibid, p.72)

Humans became accustomed to one another, and comparisons once focused on utility turned to “ideas of merit and beauty that produce feelings of preference.” (ibid, p.73) But with love comes jealousy, writes Rousseau, and those who looked upon others soon wished to be looked at themselves. “The one who sang or danced the best, the handsomest, the strongest, the most adroit, or the most eloquent became the most highly regarded.” (ibid, p.49) *Amour propre*—a ‘self-love’ or pride—developed in the hearts of man. (ibid, p.62) Michael Locke McLendon writes:

People began to live in close proximity with one another, they became a condition of each other’s existence. They become cognizant of how others look to them and they imagine how they might appear to others, and begin to judge one another and themselves on this basis of their observations. (McLendon, 2014, p.334)

For Rousseau, this was the first steps toward inequality. What is clear from Rousseau's narrative of natural freedom is that more was lost to society than simply the ability to act in accordance with one's own will. In outlining the freedom held by individuals prior to their entrance into the social contract, Rousseau places more emphasis on the individual's subjection to the opinions of others than any loss of ability to act as one wishes. The individual maintains the ability to act freely but loses her independence. He writes:

Although man had previously been free and independent, we find him, so to speak, subject, by virtue of a multitude of fresh needs, to all of nature and particularly to his fellowmen, whose slave in a sense he becomes even in becoming their master. (2011, p.77)

By taking part in the general will, the individual is meant to regain a form of respite from the gaze of others. Rousseau believes the general will can provide such a service in return for the rights one relinquishes in becoming part of a community. By entering into this agreement, one in which political authority is leveled, the general will relieves the pressure to compete for power by making those with influence subject to the same will as those without. With the removal of political inequality, so goes the need to appease those around us. Governed by the general will, the individual need not judge herself against her neighbors, for they have no status that she cannot also claim to hold.

For Rousseau, the exchange of freedoms which takes place as we join the general will does not leave the individual short-changed. The individual's gains exceed a mere contribution to legislation. She also reaps the benefits of its implementation. In particular, she regains the freedoms associated with the natural state as described by Rousseau in his *Second Discourse*. That is to say, not merely a freedom to act in accordance with her own will, but the independence that was lost as social ties were formed.

Coming to Rousseau's defense, some writers have sought to emphasize the voluntary nature of the general will (Masters, 1968, p.323) or Rousseau's focus on morality with the hope that this may help to give his general will legitimacy. (Riley, 2001, p.148) But in each case, his defenders seem to look past what Rousseau lays out as the principle changes that occurred when man lost his natural freedom to society. Neuhouser's account of the general will (one that, it seems to me, reflects the typical account) describes freedom as merely the ability to act in accordance with one's own will. But in Rousseau's *Second Discourse*—a work which outlines what he claims to be the catalyst for his eventual political theory—it seems clear that he means for the general will to restore a much more robust form of freedom than is made apparent in *The Social Contract* alone. By placing emphasis on pride, shame, and other social experiences, Rousseau suggests that the kind of freedom he means to restore for the individual is a freedom from opinion, a freedom from coercion, and

a freedom from socially-driven appetites by removing the forms of inequality that lead to social subjugation.

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