

5 Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Inequality or Freedom?

The Discourse on Inequality is a brilliant work. This despite being wrong on almost every factual point and in many a supposed reference. It is not science – it is art, but then, so is politics. Fortunately, the author himself declares his intentions honestly, beginning his book with magnificent disdain, ‘Let us begin by putting aside the facts, as they do not affect the question.’

Thus far, what has been remarkable is the degree of consensus over the forces that shape history and therefore society. It is there in the comforting notion of ‘progress’ that all the philosophers seem to share. It is there in the admiration for science, and the respect for the institutions that created social life. But as the eighteenth century drew to an end, many of its values looked increasingly tarnished. The low opinion the rulers had of the ruled, the emphasis on privilege, and the aristocratic assumption that it was better not to work than to do so, along with a new indifference to practical problems such as public health and crime, all became increasingly anomalous and insupportable. New ways of looking at the world were needed, and a young Franco-Swiss philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, offered a complete reversal of the values of the time.

Rousseau did not think anything of civilisation, nor was he impressed by the achievements of science. He instead thought primitive man had been happier and better off. And he measured people’s value not by their possessions, but by the divine spark that he saw in them all, the immortal soul of Natural Man. His philosophy offers a more spiritual, romantic view of the world.

And it was anathema to many. Voltaire refused to abandon ‘civilisation’, to accept what he called an invitation to ‘go down on all fours’ saying that after 60 years or so, he had lost the habit. Dr Johnson said of Rousseau and his supporters, ‘Truth is a cow that will yield them no more milk, so they have gone to milk the bull.’

But many others were entranced and inspired.

Works

Rousseau was a thinker who had many hats. He was an expert on music, and on education; one of the key figures in the Romantic movement in the arts, and the standard bearer of the romantic tradition. But he was also an unscrupulous and selfish man who, despite the fine words of his child-centred educational philosophy, packed his own five illegitimate children off to the harsh world of the local foundling home, and refused even to see them. Rousseau was insecure too, convinced that everyone was out to get him, and considered offers of help always to be trickery. He constantly complained of being 'misrepresented' and by the end of his life was almost certainly suffering from the madness of full-blown paranoia.

At least he was sometimes able to see himself for what he was. Once, having wickedly accused a servant, a maid, of stealing something in fact he himself had taken, he admitted later, in his *Confessions*, that what he had done was actually the cowardly product of his childish resentment at being rebuffed by her.

But these confessions are also a self-indulgent work. His two most influential essays were written for others. The *Discourse on Inequality* and *The Social Contract* are dedicated to his fellow free citizens of Geneva, and to the 'Magnificent and Most Honoured Lords' who governed what was then a tiny, independent state. Not that he lived there for long, or that relations with the unappreciative burghers of Geneva were particularly good. *The Social Contract* was publicly burnt in the City Square of Geneva in 1762, along with Rousseau's idealistic work on education, *Emile*.

But things were rarely entirely straightforward for Rousseau. Born in 1712, in Geneva, his mother died just a week later from illness resulting from complications following the birth. So Rousseau had to be brought up by his father, Isaac, a watchmaker, and his aunt, and instead of going to school was educated at home. Jean-Jacques' older brother, François, did not like this arrangement, and ran away from home at the first opportunity, never to return. The younger Rousseau, however, had nothing but praise for his father, admiring him to a point little short of adoration. Unfortunately, at the age of ten, Jean-Jacques lost his father too, after the patriot unwisely challenged a gentleman to a duel, and was expelled from the city as a result. Jean-Jacques was then sent to the care of his uncle, which meant living just outside the city walls, where it was intended he

would continue a rarefied 'Romanesque' education until the time came for him to be an apprentice engraver.

But before this plan could come to fruition, Rousseau rebelled, refusing what he considered to be a demeaning trade, and, using a tactic his city had demonstrated some years before to gain its independence, changed his religion, becoming the ward of the de Warens of Savoy, some benevolent Catholic aristocrats. It was here, in the library of the French family, that Rousseau drank eagerly from a deep well of subversive writing drawn from the works of the great political philosophers, Hobbes, Machiavelli and Locke amongst them.

After reading Locke, as well as after his perusal of Sir Francis Bacon, Rousseau became part of a loose grouping with a peculiar form of political analysis, known as the Encyclopaedists. The group was so-called because celebrated members, such as Montesquieu and Voltaire, had contributed articles to the huge *Encyclopédie* of 1751–66. But Rousseau never really agreed with their fundamental position, typical of the Enlightenment, which was that religion and conventional philosophy were 'all empty' and should be swept away to allow for a more logical and rational, scientific calculation of the best way to organise life on earth. In addition, the Encyclopaedists believed, as many have since (completely unlike Rousseau) that new technology would usher in a better age, if given half a chance. Science would be the salvation of all mankind – unlike the religious creeds which only ever promised salvation to a minority.

At the age of 32, Rousseau arrived in Paris where he began to move in the sort of circles he felt he belonged in – being, after all, a citizen of Geneva and, as he never tired of telling people, born free. He became secretary to another aristocratic family, found a mistress, and began to write.

His first major work was, in fact, an attack on the ideas of the Encyclopaedists, and indeed the whole basis of the Enlightenment. In the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, Rousseau takes on the scientists, and says that, far from being our saviours, they are ruining the world, and that any notion of progress is an illusion even as we move further and further away from the healthy, simple and balanced lives of the past. The *Discourse on Sciences* is a conscious salute to the kind of society advocated by Plato, two millennia earlier, and both a contrast with and a challenge to the prevailing orthodoxy of his times. Notwithstanding, or probably (in France) because of that, the essay was considered a great success, and earned

Rousseau the Dijon prize. With this was also bestowed upon him, at last, a certain status as that creature the French, above all, cherish – the *philosophe*.

On Inequality

When the Academy of Dijon requested new essays on the theme: ‘What is the origin of inequality amongst men, and is it authorised by Natural Law?’ Rousseau took up his quill again (attentive readers will have noted the invention of the fountain pen was only in 1782, some years after Rousseau’s death), developing the idea he had sketched in the Discourse on Sciences, that man in his natural state, far from being greedy, or fearful, as described by Hobbes, is in fact in living in a peaceful, contented state, truly free. This is a freedom with three elements. The first is free will, the second is freedom from the rule of law (as there are no laws), and the third is personal freedom. It is this last that is the most important.

Rousseau says that the first people lived like animals. He says this not in any derogatory sense, merely in the sense that the original people sought only simple fulfilment of their physical needs. They would have had no need of speech, nor concepts, and certainly not property. Rousseau points out that much of the imagery in both Hobbes and Locke belongs to a property-owning society, not to the supposed ‘natural state’ prior to the invention of property rights. By realising this, ‘we are not obliged to make a man a philosopher before we can make him a man’. The first time people would have had a sense of property (he thinks) is when they settled in one location, when they built huts to live in. Even sexual union, Rousseau notes pragmatically, as well as reflecting on his own experience, is unlikely to have implied any exclusivity, being more likely to have been just a lustful episode no sooner experienced than forgotten, remembered least of all in terms of the children. Neither the father nor the mother is likely to know whose children they might beget, he argues, assuming that paternity is the defining characteristic and neglecting the mother’s very definite knowledge!

Since this primitive state is actually superior to those which followed it, Rousseau goes on to suggest that the only reason why this early society ever changed must have been as a result of some sort of disaster, perhaps one causing shortages of food or other hardship. This would have forced people to start identifying certain

areas as theirs, and maybe to start living in groups. This in turn would imply increased communication, and the development of language. And there is a second dimension to these changes: people began to judge themselves by a new criterion – how others thought of them. To Rousseau, this last is a change of the utmost significance, for it is self-consciousness that was the downfall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. And it is this self-consciousness that makes humankind permanently unhappy with its lot, and resentful or fearful of others.

Since then, most unfortunately, ‘... the whole progress of the human race removes man constantly further and further from his primitive state’. According to Rousseau, at this point following Hobbes, society necessarily leads people to hate each other, in accordance with their different economic interests. But Hobbes’ so-called ‘social contract’ is, in fact, made by the rich, as a way of doing down the poor. Actually, not even the rich benefit from it, as they warp themselves and become increasingly out of touch with nature’s harmony, raised needlessly above their own proper state, just as the poor are pushed below theirs. Justice instead, for Rousseau, is not, to be sure, crude equality, but rather the correct placing of individuals according to their talents and abilities – according to their merit. Unfortunately, society disrupts this balance (which is also the view put so strongly by Plato in his *Republic*). But Rousseau considers the very notion of the social contract to be flawed:

Since we have so little knowledge of nature and such imperfect agreement about the meaning of the word ‘law’, it would be very difficult to concur on a good definition of natural law. All the definitions we find in books have, besides the defects of lacking uniformity, the further defect of being derived from several ideas which men do not have naturally, and the utility of which they cannot conceive until after they have emerged from the state of nature.

Rousseau offers instead just two laws, or principles, that could be said to be ‘antecedent to reason’. The first is a powerful interest in self-preservation and our own well-being; the second is ‘a natural aversion to seeing any other sentient being perish or suffer, especially if it is one of our own kind’.

The only time ‘natural man’ would hurt another is when his own well-being requires it. In saying this, Rousseau is drawing a parallel

for humankind with the animals who – unlike their masters – never harm each other out of malice alone. If, in fact ‘I am obliged to refrain from doing any harm to my neighbour, it is less because he is a reasonable being [i.e. one capable of reasoning] than because he is a sentient one; and a quality which is common to beast and man ought to give the former the right not to be uselessly ill-treated by the latter’.

In fact, *On Inequality* is introduced by Rousseau with the observation that the most important challenge in philosophy is the injunction posed by the Oracle at Delphi, ‘Know thyself’. ‘The most useful and least developed of all sciences seems to be that of Man’, he writes. ‘It is this ignorance of man’s nature which creates such uncertainty and obscurity as to the correct definition of natural right.’ So long as we have no knowledge of natural man, ‘we shall wish in vain to ascertain the law which he has received from nature or that which best suits his constitution’.

And the preamble introduces the issue with the noble-sounding aim of seeking to ‘defend the cause of humanity’ from what at that point is only a shadowy and undefined enemy. The crime is never made entirely clear either, but by the end of the essay, ‘the rich’, the ‘law makers’ and various fellow travellers appear to have been accused, found guilty and indicted, even if not actually sentenced.

Rousseau’s begins his task by distinguishing between ‘two kinds of inequality’. The first is ‘natural or physical inequality’, consisting in differences of age, health, strength and intelligence; the second is ‘moral or political’ and consists of ‘the different privileges that some enjoy to the prejudice of others’ – things such as wealth, honour and power.

The philosophers who have examined the foundations of society have all felt it necessary to go back to the state of nature, but none of them has succeeded in getting there. Some have not hesitated to attribute to men in that state of nature the concept of just and unjust, without bothering to consider whether they must have had such a concept, or even that it would be useful to them. Others have spoken of the natural right each has to keep and defend what he owns without saying what they mean by the word own. Others again, starting out by giving the stronger, authority over the weaker, promptly introduce government, without thinking of the time that must have elapsed before the words authority and government could have had any meaning.

The philosophers who have talked ceaselessly of 'greed, oppression, desire and pride' failed to realise that they were introducing into nature ideas that only originated in society. Rousseau, at this point having in the process of outlining his thesis, veiled his references in suitably opaque language, suddenly becomes more specific: it is Hobbes that is the intellectual enemy, although others who imagine man to be a timid creature, 'always trembling and ready to run away at the least noise he hears or the smallest movement he observes', are also wrong. Although Hobbes had said that man is naturally intrepid and seeks 'only to attack and fight', only Rousseau reveals man as he truly is: the *Noble Savage*.

Let the civilised man gather all his machines around him, and no doubt he will easily beat the savage; but if you would like to see an even more unequal match, pit the two together naked and unarmed, and you will soon see the advantages of having all ones forces constantly at one's command, of being always prepared for any eventuality, and of always being, so to speak, altogether complete in oneself.

This is the favoured notion at the heart of Rousseau's alternative philosophy. To back it up, he tells the story of the Dutch sailor and the African. The sailor, disembarking at the Cape, gives the African a sack of tobacco weighing about the same as a bucket of coal to carry. When they have walked some distance and are alone, the African asks the sailor if he knows how to run. 'Run?' answers the Dutchman, 'Of course, I can run, and very well!' 'We shall see', says the African, and making away with the tobacco disappears over the horizon almost at once. The sailor, Rousseau finishes, 'bewildered by such marvellous speed', does not think of chasing him, and never sees again either his porter or his tobacco.

This imaginary story is offered to demonstrate the superiority of the natural man over the civilised man. But what then are the supposed advantages of civilisation? Rousseau deals unceremoniously with them. They are but:

the extreme inequality of our ways of life, the excess of idleness among some and the excess of toil among others, the ease of stimulating and gratifying our appetites and our senses, the over-elaborate foods of the rich, which inflame and overwhelm them with indigestion, the bad food of the poor, which they often go

without altogether, so that they over-eat greedily when they have the opportunity; those late nights, excesses of all kinds, immoderate transports of every passion, fatigue, exhaustion of mind, the innumerable sorrows and anxieties that people in all classes suffer, and by which the human soul is constantly tormented.

So Rousseau considered Hobbes' great mistake to have been to imagine the savage as sharing civilised man's greeds and passions. Instead, Hobbes should have realised that the state of nature was a happy one. It requires a sophisticated, rational knowledge of good and evil to make civilised man so wicked.

... let us not agree with Hobbes that man is naturally evil just because he has no idea of goodness, that he is vicious for want of any knowledge of virtue, that he always refuses to do his fellow men services which he does not believe he owes them, or that on the strength of the right he reasonably claims to things he needs, he foolishly imagines himself to be the sole proprietor of the whole universe.

In even the dark heart of the savage, there is already (what others, too, such as Adam Smith, as we shall see, claim as) the central humanising characteristic: pity, and concern for others. It is there in the savage, because it is there in the animal too. Rousseau says that horses avoid trampling living creatures for similar reasons, that no animal ever passes 'the corpse of a creature of its own species without distress', and that there are even animals which give their dead a sort of burial. The 'mournful lowing of cattle entering a slaughterhouse reveals their feelings in witnessing the horrible spectacle that confronts them'. What, Rousseau asks, are generosity, mercy and humanity but compassion applied to the weak, or to the guilty – or to the human race in general? Even if it were true, he adds, that 'pity is no more than a feeling that puts us in the place of the sufferer', it is still the natural sentiment that ultimately allows the preservation of the species. It is only the philosopher who 'puts his hands over his ears and argues a little with himself' whilst another is murdered outside his window.

(Certainly this is borne out by the events of the twentieth century. It was a sophisticated and highly rational system that devised and implemented the extermination camps, and even at the end of the

century, in a series of 'hands over ears' incidents, it was the intellectuals at the top of the United Nations who approved the abandonment both of ill-omened 'safe havens' in the Balkans, as well as of almost a million Tutsi Rwandans to their deaths at the hands of carefully planned and centrally coordinated mobs and militias.)

On the other hand, savage man, Rousseau writes, would wander in the forests without work, speech, home, or war, without relationships, without either need nor fear of his fellows, concerned only for a few simple physical needs. 'A savage may well seize the fruits which another has gathered', Rousseau imagines, or he may even try to enslave another he comes upon, but he cannot stop the other slipping away into the forest to gather some more for himself once his vigilance slackens. The tragedy of human existence is that someone eventually came upon a more permanent way of exploiting their neighbour. Someone invented private property.

'The first man who, having enclosed a piece of land, thought of saying "This is mine" and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society', says Rousseau. Before there was property, he adds, apparently misquoting Locke (who speaks of injustice), there could be no injury.

So, men 'ceased to doze under the first tree', instead developing tools from stones and branches, and using these to till the land and create huts, developing their notions of property, from which inevitably 'quarrels and fights were born'. Soon, society required 'a language more complex than that of crows or monkeys'. And there were other consequences. The conventional, 'nuclear' family was created, producing not only (what he at least professed to consider) the desirable by-product of men and women living together in conjugal and paternal love, but also some less desirable gender differences. Notably, women becoming 'more sedentary' as they become accustomed 'to looking after the hut and children whilst men go out to seek the common sustenance'. But the men too, become rather sedentary:

This new condition, with its solitary life... left men to enjoy a great deal of leisure, which they used to procure many sorts of commodities unknown to their fathers; and this was the yoke they imposed upon themselves, without thinking about it, and the first source of the evils they prepared for their descendants.

Not only did such commodities 'continue to soften both body and mind', but they themselves 'almost lost through habitual use their power to please', and as they had at the same time degenerated into actual needs, 'being deprived of them became much more cruel than the possession of them was sweet; and people were unhappy in losing them without being happy in possessing them'.

Thus it was that Man, who was formerly free, was diminished into subjection, slave to a multitude of 'new wants' and ambitions, notably the 'burning desire to enlarge his own fortune, not so much from real need as [from the desire] to put himself above others', as Rousseau puts it, in words with echoes today for consumer societies.

In due course, this urge to dominate becomes like blood lust. The consumers are like 'ravenous wolves which, having tasted human flesh, refuse all other nourishment'. The rich use their old slaves to subdue new ones, and dream only of subjugation and exploitation of their fellows.

Rousseau paints a mocking portrait of the rich man, seeking to protect his gains by pretending concern for his victims. 'Let us unite', says his rich man, 'to protect the weak from oppression, to ensure for each that which he owns, and create a system of justice and peace that all shall be bound to, without exception.'

Rousseau thinks his explanation of civil law is more convincing than those offered by philosophers who suppose some sort of universal social contract for, as he puts it, the poor have only one good – their freedom – and to voluntarily strip themselves of that without gaining anything in exchange would appear to be absolute folly. The rich, on the other hand, have much to gain, and consequently (he thinks) it seems reasonable to suppose the thing to have been invented by them, 'by those to whom it was useful rather than by those to whom it was injurious'. (Actually, in later writings, notably *The Social Contract*, Rousseau suggests that a way around the selfishness could be through a system of majority voting in which each individual's wishes become instead part of a 'general will', rather than reflecting directly anyone's particular desires.)

Rousseau's version of the origins of the division of labour is similarly perverse and even bizarre. Instead of the use of iron improving agriculture, he sees it as a burden on the producers of food. 'The more the number of industrial workers multiplied, the fewer hands were engaged in providing the common subsistence, without there being any fewer mouths to feed.'

Then we must consider all the unhealthy trades of modern society – labouring in mines, preparation of certain metals (such as lead) – and ironically, the migration to the cities, before we can claim society has improved people's lives. Not that Rousseau is saying we should return to 'living with the bears', a conclusion he hastens, as he says, to forestall.

By contrast, Natural Man, outside society, will not tolerate subjugation, 'as an unbroken horse paws the ground with its hooves' and rears at the approach of the bit, or animals break their heads against the 'bars of their prisons', yet civil society reduces all to slaves. And the explanation offered by such as 'Mr Locke' that the government is but like a father to us, Rousseau dismisses too, for, 'by the law of nature, the father is master of the child only for such time as his help is necessary and that beyond this stage, the two are equals, the son becoming perfectly independent of the father'. In fact, by giving up liberty, a man degrades his being.

Moving from the small picture to the larger, contemporary one, Rousseau offers a 'hands-off' state. The only way that the sovereign and the people can have a single and identical interest, so that all the movements of the civil machine tend to promote the common happiness, is for them to be one and the same. No one can be outside the law, for once they are, all the others are 'at their discretion'. Furthermore, there should be few laws, and new ones introduced only with the greatest circumspection, so that 'before the constitution could be disturbed, there would be time enough for everyone to reflect that it is above all the great antiquity of the laws that makes them sacred and inviolable'.

The *Discourse*, as we have said, is dedicated to Geneva, a city that retained its independence in the face of a Europe of much larger nation states, not by any pretensions of military power, but by playing the religious card at the appropriate and opportune time, and defecting from the other Catholic areas of Switzerland towards Protestant worship, under the protection of Lutheran Berne. This protection allowed Jean Calvin, the French theologian, time to reorganise the city state of Geneva along democratic lines, with a general assembly of all citizens (but not all adults), a Council of Two Hundred, and an executive council. Rousseau considered Calvin to be a great law-giver in the mould of the Romans. But Calvin's state was in fact not so progressive, and it quickly degenerated into the rule of the executive council – an oligarchy. Calvin himself persecuted religious dissenters, expulsion from Geneva became the norm, and executions were not out of place in the free city. Calvin

never considered women to be citizens, and as time went by the majority of the men were not either.

Rousseau's view of women is no more egalitarian – at best it is romantic in an unenlightened sort of way. In *Emile*, he confines the education of the fair sex to domestic science and recommends training from an early age in habits of docility and subservience. At the time of *Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau did not appear unduly worried by any possible defect in the democracy regarding the lack of rights for the women, writing:

Could I forget that precious half of the commonwealth which assures the happiness of the other, and whose sweetness and prudence maintain its peace and good morals? Lovable and virtuous women of Geneva, your destiny will always be to govern ours. Happy are we so long as your chaste power, exerted solely within the marriage bond, makes itself felt only for the glory of the state and well-being of the public!

Rather than challenge the system, the self-styled radical continues to stress instead the respect due to the governing magistrates:

The people must have respect for their leaders, for the magistrates of Geneva afford an example of moderation, of simplicity in morals, of respect for the laws, and the most sincere spirit of reconciliation. There is not in the universe a body of men more upright, more enlightened, more worthy of respect.

He finishes, sanctimoniously:

Magnificent and Most Honoured lords, the worthy and revered magistrates of a free people, allow me to offer you in particular my homage and my respect. If there is in the world a rank capable of conferring glory on those who occupy it, it is undoubtedly one acquired by your talent and virtue, the rank of which you have proved yourselves worthy and to which your fellow citizens have raised you.

Rousseau adds mysteriously, to any still sceptical readers, 'Beware, above all, of ever listening to sinister interpretations and malicious rumours, the secret motives of which are often more dangerous than the actions they report.'

But despite the unsavoury undercurrents, and irrespective of the truth or otherwise of the sinister rumours, the Geneva that Rousseau had reluctantly left in his youth and which remained the backdrop to his philosophising, was a successful and contented one: business was good and taxes were moderate. There was even a social security system, and corruption was almost unknown.

The details of institutions of government are not of much interest to Rousseau once their essentially malign character has been identified. He merely adds that if law and property are the first stage in human society, and the institutions of government are the second, then the third and last stage is the transformation of legitimate into arbitrary power. Human society leads people to hate each other in proportion 'to the extent that their interests conflict'. People pretend to do each other services whilst actually trying to exploit them and do them down. 'We must attribute to the institution of property, and hence to society, murders, poisonings, highway robbery and indeed, the punishments of those crimes.' That is at the individual level. On the national scale, 'Inequality, being almost non-existent in the state of nature... becomes fixed and legitimate through the institution of property and laws.' When society has, as it inevitably will, degenerated into tyranny and all are slaves again, the circle is complete, for 'all individuals become equal again when they are nothing'. And all the time 'Civil man' torments himself constantly in search of ever more laborious occupations, working himself to death, 'renouncing life in order to achieve immortality'.

Civil society is, in fact, a society of people 'who nearly all complain and several of whom indeed deprive themselves of their existence'. This is the logic of property ownership and capitalism.

Influence

What, then, is the legacy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau? His influence is greater than is perhaps often realised. He is one of the fathers of the peculiarly French school of philosophy which is concerned with *la condition humaine* and, in particular, with our attempts at finding our true selves. Freedom, the French challenge us, is actually within, obtained from finding our true identity, not from having satisfied

social conventions and stereotypes. It requires having the opportunity to live the kind of life we want to live.

Rousseau offers a view of social evolution in which the human animal is being moulded by its environment, deriving its attitudes and values from its surroundings. With regard to human nature, Rousseau is the optimist to Hobbes' pessimist. All people are born with the qualities that will lead them to success and happiness – given the right conditions. In *Emile*, as part of his account of bringing up a child, he makes this even more explicit, describing how the child acquires needs and feelings different from those it is born with, as an effect and result of its environment. If the child is unhappy, it is because of a fault with its surroundings, and the same is true, he thinks, for adults.

The *Discourse* itself is an essay that somehow manages to be already at least 1,000 years out of date even when it was written, in the early years of the Industrial Revolution – and surprisingly contemporary. Rousseau has not only 'put aside' the facts but seems to have 'put aside' such niceties as overall theory and logical structure. Yet *On Inequality* is still, undoubtedly, magnificent; and more than that, it contains truths about human nature which other philosophers somehow failed to see. The common people to whom it is addressed did, however, recognise them, and for that reason Rousseau's tract became one of the most influential works not only of its time, but of all time. That, surely, is the true measure of a political work.

Rousseau died in 1778, the same year as his critic Voltaire, possibly by his own hand, and certainly in sad and lonely circumstances. But as Goethe commented: 'with Voltaire an age ended, with Rousseau, a new one began'.

Key Ideas

Rousseau's recipe for human society can be expressed in just one word: 'Freedom'. Rousseau offers us a fairly implausible idea of what this might be, and supposes it to be in conflict and opposition to the structures of modern societies. But Rousseau's legacy is still important as a reminder of non-material values, and a more optimistic if romanticised notion of humanity. What he offers us may be largely false and often is hopelessly impractical, but it is also always an important, alternative understanding of ourselves.

- People are happy and satisfied in the 'state of nature', but the invention of property brings about competition, inequality and conflict.
- Most of the desires and wants of modern society are artificial, pointless and ultimately self-destructive.

Key Text

Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality* (1753)

8 Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was born in the Swiss city-state of Geneva in 1712 but he moved to France at the age of sixteen. He was to gain notoriety in France in the middle of the eighteenth century with his literary work on a range of issues. He originally came to prominence with his *Discourse on Science and the Arts* which won first prize in an essay competition organised by the Académie de Dijon in 1750. Subsequently Rousseau engaged with the Enlightenment figures of the *Encyclopédie* in pre-Revolutionary France, such as Voltaire and Diderot. However, despite his important contributions, arguments developed between Rousseau and the other *philosophes*, and he became increasingly peripheral, due to his radical beliefs and the gradual evolution of his defence of simple lifestyles against the high life favoured by his former friends in Paris. His most notable political works were his *Dissertation on the Origin and Foundation of the Inequality of Mankind* (1755) and *The Social Contract* (1762). However he was equally proficient in musicology, educational theory, botany and literature.

Following the publication of *The Social Contract* (and *Emile* in the same year) Rousseau was forced to flee Paris and Geneva, and he spent some time with David Hume in England, before arguing with him too. He eventually returned to France in 1767 and married Thérèse Lavasseur a year later. Rousseau lived a secluded though prolific life thereafter before dying aged 66 in Ermenonville. Although it is frequently asserted that he died unhappy, mad and suicidal (McClelland 1996: 250), there is some evidence to suggest that he took pleasure in the solitude and simplicity of his later life, which enabled him to enjoy the natural environment around him and acquire a principled position from which to rail against the aristocratic privilege which so horrified him.

Rousseau is often presented as a far-sighted architect of the events of the French Revolution of 1789 and indeed the events of the Terror thereafter. However, it is difficult to link developments that happened after his death directly to his thought. Certainly his writings inspired the republican revolutionaries, and, as we shall see, there are ambiguities in his work (not least about the form of government) which could be interpreted in an authoritarian fashion. Studying Rousseau's thought in depth, though, shows little indication of support for repression, and – perhaps more than many of the thinkers in this book – he focused on the issue of consent as an embodiment of human liberty and equality.

What is clear is that Rousseau held a deep contempt for the social, economic and political inequalities which characterised the world he witnessed in eighteenth-century France: here was an environment where success and wealth depended on aristocratic patronage rather than the intrinsic worth of the individual. He regarded the authoritative position of the aristocracy, a class which had acquired wealth and 'legitimacy' through persecution and theft, as the supreme manifestation of social inequality, and he saw these hierarchical social arrangements as a form of social unfreedom in which the rights of the less privileged were trodden down by the rich and powerful. Instead he proffered the exemplar of ancient Sparta as a system where hierarchy was minimised and individuals had much greater control over their everyday lives. It was his discomfort with the society in which his fellow *philosophes* moved that eventually led Rousseau to seek out a simpler life in which he could theorise political arrangements that would directly counteract the *ancien régime*.

In the *Discourse on Science and the Arts* we begin to see the foundations of the philosophical background which informed Rousseau's politics. Here we can observe Rousseau – a believer in the human capacity to reason, despite his valorisation of sentiment – challenging some of the key principles of Enlightenment rationalism. He presents the argument that the march of progress is not a movement that embodies constant improvement and refinement of human existence. Rather the opposite: society becomes increasingly sophisticated and complex, and old certainties are washed away, to be replaced by ephemeral phenomena which obscure the simple lifestyle that had characterised humanity in the state of nature. It was this rebuttal of traditional Enlightenment thought which marked out Rousseau as a powerful and original thinker. The *Dissertation on the Origin and Foundation of the Inequality of Mankind*, published in 1755, marked him out as an important political philosopher, particularly as it set out his concern that unjust inequalities derived from the existence of private property. Not only this, but government and the political regime came to be organised by the wealthy and powerful, and so government was used to bolster their position at the pinnacle of the social hierarchy. In this sense the march of progress saw a flawed legitimacy being acquired for social inequalities which Rousseau found highly objectionable. Indeed such was the institutionalisation of inequalities and their justification in political arrangements that he felt that a return to the simple and peaceful state of nature was not a feasible objective.

Emile, published in 1762, although an educational tract is, at the same time, a full account of the psychological ramifications of inequality. Rousseau is concerned that children should be brought up without any overt imposition on them of another's will, and that they should not have the opportunity to impose their will overtly on others. Only in such a situation would they attain a healthy self-respect (*amour propre*) and thus be fit to enter freely and as equals into a contract to govern society (see Dent 1988).

These ideas were developed and refined in Rousseau's most famous political work *The Social Contract*. It is clear that by 1762 he was becoming more concerned with the nature of sovereignty and government and the overcoming of inequalities

in a politics which promoted both equality and liberty. It is in this book that the key concepts which he uses to promote his version of a new social contract are identified. Here he develops his complicated notion of the general will, which is central to his theory of sovereignty and consequently to his perspective on government and the law. The book is a powerful indictment of hierarchical political institutions, and yet it remains open to question whether *The Social Contract* itself may not provide a recipe for hierarchy and authoritarianism under the auspices of radical democracy. Certainly Rousseau – with his primary concern for human liberty and the equal experience of it – was not a totalitarian (Cole 1993: xlix), but many critics have been quick to point out the results that have ensued when supporters, such as the Jacobins, have tried to put his philosophical ideas into political practice.

The *Second Discourse* and *The Social Contract* are the key texts of political thought in Rousseau's body of work, and therefore they will be the focus here. Nonetheless it should be acknowledged that his writings involved studies of political economy for the *Encyclopédie* and work on political institutions, particularly those of Corsica and Poland. He also produced popular literature, such as *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, as well as operas and studies of music. Perhaps more than those of any other thinker in the history of Western political thought, Rousseau's ideas were guided by his own experience and the paradoxes he encountered. It should therefore be noted that the complex way in which his life and his thought were interwoven can be identified through the autobiographical *Les Confessions* and other works written towards the end of his life.

The *Second Discourse* provides us with the reasoning behind Rousseau's assumption that freedom and equality are entities which support rather than contradict one another. He is concerned with recapturing some of the liberty and equality that pertained to individuals in the state of nature. This is not to say that the pursuit of equality is to interfere with natural difference, for Rousseau is clearly aware of natural inequalities between people. However he believes that natural differences of intelligence, strength and gender are essentially benign, in the sense that they do not of themselves lead to a state of war or persecution. What concerned him more was the existence of manufactured inequalities, which created political inequality. The society characterised by the outcome of progress saw massive inequalities of wealth, and consequently vast differentials of power and authority; in the modern world the primacy of self-interest rode roughshod over other natural dispositions, such as pity and compassion. Inequality, then, was a product of progress, and that progress brought about a Hobbesian state of war. But this state of war was neither natural nor were the combatants equally endowed. Essentially, the battle had become one in which the wealthy and powerful fought to protect their position from the weak. For Rousseau, the reason behind this parlous state was clear:

All the crimes of humanity ... were due ultimately to the appropriation of the earth by some individuals at the expense of others ... but not only was the

institution of private property responsible for the emergence of war; it must also have accounted for the establishment of government.

(Wokler 1995: 124)

In this sense, then, Rousseau identified corruption in the role of government, as it served to protect the establishment of the propertied classes and therefore to further manufacture and reproduce inequality. To set against this politics of inequality and violence, he offered a vision of a society which, whilst different to the irretrievable state of nature, was still a simpler and more virtuous political community. It was this vision which inspired Rousseau to outline a social contract which would be predicated upon the notion of the general will.

In *The Social Contract* Rousseau attempted to outline a theory of sovereignty which was founded in principles of liberty and embodied egalitarianism. The compact was to establish the relationship between the people and the state, and the liaison was to be entered into freely by individuals. The conception of liberty at work here was obviously envisaged in a strong form. Rousseau went beyond the idea of 'negative liberty' – the freedom of individuals to act without restraint from the state or others – and argued that the social contract would provide a more positive form of liberty. Thus individuals had to be provided with substantive opportunities and the capacity to embark freely upon elective, self-determined courses of action.

Obviously this involved a role for the state in guaranteeing that individual liberties were protected. The state was not autonomous, however. It always relied upon the consent of the people, since sovereignty always lay with the citizen body. Thus, for Rousseau, compliance with the laws set out by the state was not a constraint on individual freedom, because those laws derived their authority not from the state itself but from the sovereign body of citizens of which each individual was a part. Thus, to transgress against the law was to deny one's own freedom. It was this reasoning which led to one of Rousseau's most often quoted (and perhaps most misunderstood) ideas – that individuals would be 'forced to be free'. In effect this meant little more than that it was in collective bodies, and the laws which provided civil liberties therein, that individuals experienced their freedoms most profitably. In this sense, 'liberty would not be lost so much as gained when, in giving up our right to do as we please, we bind ourselves collectively to act as we choose' (Wokler 1995: 128). By the creation of a social contract in which the sovereignty of the people was established, the principle of consent to the functional role of the state was also put in place.

This brings us to perhaps the most significant concept in Rousseau's work: the notion of the general will. The argument constructed in *The Social Contract* puts heavy emphasis on our ability to set the common good above narrow self-interest. In other words, we could educate citizens (as happened in Geneva, according to Rousseau) to place their capacity for sympathy with common objectives above the egotistic urges which brought about violence and inequality. Thus he believed that an understanding of the general will lay within us all. No one would construct a general will and impose it upon those around them. Rather we had an

innate understanding of the general will, just as we understood our own 'particular will' (self-interest). Moreover, Rousseau was clearly aware of the conflict that was created if everyone followed their own agenda. Therefore he differentiated between the general will, which embodied the common good, and the 'will of all', which was no more than the sum total of particular wills and therefore involved conflict and dissension. It is fair to say that Rousseau was ambivalent about what the general will would actually look like when it came to practical politics, but it can be seen as the expression of the common intention of free and equal citizens in a polity to bind themselves and their fellow citizens to common decisions. At the same time, it is obvious how this kind of notion could be appropriated by those with less benign intentions in mind than Rousseau.

The political implications of Rousseau's thought are also covered in *The Social Contract*. Clearly the general will would have to be manifest in social legislation. The sovereign nature of the citizen body and the limitations on the power of the state would have to be enshrined in appropriate constitutional arrangements. Rousseau does not provide us with a blueprint of his desired alternatives to the institutions he despised. Of course, he could argue that the transitional process involved decisions that had to be made by the citizen body, not by philosophers. At the same time, however, he does argue for a Legislator: an independent figure to act as the law-maker, who would construct the appropriate arrangements for putting the sovereign body and the requisite political institutions in place. (It could be argued, given his belief that a foreigner might perhaps be the most appropriate Legislator, that Rousseau to some extent saw himself in this role in his work on Poland and Corsica.) He didn't prescribe any particular form of government. Again, that was a decision to be taken by each body of citizens – which of course left open the possibility of a benign monarchy in which the real sovereign power still lay with the people. Critics have often bastardised Rousseau's own thought to raise the spectra of charismatic totalitarians persuading the people to invest sovereign powers in them. Whilst this is possible in practice, according to Rousseau it would involve individuals surrendering their freedom to another, which the doctrine of the general will makes reprehensible.

Due in part to the eclectic nature of his work, Rousseau is difficult to pigeonhole. He resists some of the easier ideological categorisations that we can attach to other major figures in the history of modern political thought. However, it seems that the most fruitful comparisons to make are with fellow social-contract theorists, such as Hobbes and Locke. That said, they clearly had a different rationale for social-contract theory, in the sense that Rousseau made 'the social contract a way of explaining not how societies can be made stable but how societies can be made just' (McClelland 1996: 187). In this sense, Rousseau's work provided social-contract theory with a historically driven sense of the origins of inequality as well as a future-oriented politics of social justice.

The contrast with Hobbes on the state of nature is a key feature of Rousseau's thought. In fact there was agreement on the rather brutish and violent quality of this state; but whereas for Hobbes this was a reflection of human nature, which had to be reined in to provide social stability, Rousseau saw violence as the price of

progress. For him, the selfishness of 'social man' in the supposedly civilised world was not the solitary natural state but in fact the manifestation of the triumph of self-interest over more benign and altruistic faculties. This is the origin of Rousseau's famous dictum that 'man was born free, yet everywhere he is in chains'. Where Hobbes saw the social contract as a means of providing a political settlement that would dilute the essential brutishness of individual self-interest and unlimited competition, Rousseau saw it as a means of promoting and ensuring the common good.

Both Hobbes and Rousseau believed that the sovereign power had to hold legitimate authority, although the direction in which that power flowed from people to government obviously differed. In Rousseau's eyes 'sovereignty ... was not like a piece of property that could be freely disposed of: it was an inalienable possession, part of the individual's very humanity' (Jennings 1994: 117). This brought him into conflict with the work of Locke. Where Locke and Hobbes saw strength and virtue in the transfer of power to other bodies and institutions, Rousseau believed that authority always had to lie within the citizen body if legitimacy was to be retained. Thus he was strongly critical of the English model of parliamentary sovereignty, precisely because the basis of that system was to remove sovereignty from the people (indeed Rousseau suggested that the English people deserved the inadequate representatives they had, because they had acquiesced with the removal of their authority and placed it in parliament). Rousseau's views on the benefits (or otherwise) of private property also clearly contrasted with those of Locke. Unlike the latter, he believed that private property was not a natural phenomenon, and that it was part of a manufactured inequality which caused strife and havoc in the name of 'civilisation'.

Whilst it is reasonably straightforward to see how thinkers such as Locke, Smith or Marx have a direct influence on contemporary political theory, Rousseau's position is more ambiguous. Undoubtedly he was not always strictly consistent in his beliefs, although this should not detract from his importance as a key figure in Western political thought (Thomson 1990: 105). His work has provided inspiration for socialists, nationalists, anarchists and liberals since the Enlightenment, and in the contemporary era the attraction of Rousseau's theories to environmentalists should be apparent: his belief in simple living and his rejection of the 'achievements' that have been made in the name of progress. His writings will continue to inspire those concerned with democratisation, constitutional change and the weaknesses of liberal democracy. Just as certainly he will be held up as a pariah by those who fear the rise of authoritarianism – although this involves ascribing to him certain beliefs which are not always consonant with his actual thought. Perhaps the most important arena in which Rousseau's work will play an important part is in the ongoing philosophical debate between liberals and communitarians. The legacy that he provided in his philosophy – that freedom and equality are not always in contradiction, especially when understood as part of a collective enterprise – remains powerful today.

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EXTRACT FROM JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU, *A DISSERTATION ON THE ORIGIN AND FOUNDATION OF THE INEQUALITY OF MANKIND*

I conceive that there are two kinds of inequality among the human species; one, which I call natural or physical, because it is established by nature, and consists in a difference of age, health, bodily strength, and the qualities of the mind or of the soul: and another, which may be called moral or political inequality, because it depends on a kind of convention, and is established, or at least authorized, by the consent of men. This latter consists of the different privileges which some men enjoy to the prejudice of others; such as that of being more rich, more honoured, more powerful, or even in a position to exact obedience.

It is useless to ask what is the source of natural inequality, because that question is answered by the simple definition of the word. Again, it is still more useless to inquire whether there is any essential connection between the two inequalities; for this would be only asking, in other words, whether those who command are necessarily better than those

who obey and if strength of body or of mind, wisdom, or virtue are always found in particular individuals, in proportion to their power or wealth: a question fit perhaps to be discussed by slaves in the hearing of their masters, but highly unbecoming to reasonable and free men in search of the truth.

The subject of the present discourse, therefore, is more precisely this. To mark, in the progress of things, the moment at which right took the place of violence and nature became subject to law, and to explain by what sequence of miracles the strong came to submit to serve the weak, and the people to purchase imaginary repose at the expense of real felicity. [...]

The First Part

[...]

It appears, at first view, that men in a state of nature, having no moral relations or determinate obligations one with another, could not be either good or bad, virtuous or vicious; unless we take these terms in a physical sense, and call, in an individual, those qualities vices which may be injurious to his preservation, and those virtues which contribute to it; in which case, he would have to be accounted most virtuous, who put least check on the pure impulses of nature. [...]

Above all, let us not conclude, with Hobbes, that because man has no idea of goodness, he must be naturally wicked; that he is vicious because he does not know virtue; that he always refuses to his fellow-creatures services which he does not think they have a right to demand; or that by virtue of the right he truly claims everything he needs, he foolishly imagines himself the sole proprietor of the whole universe. Hobbes had seen clearly the defects of all the modern definitions of natural right: but the consequences which he deduces from his own show that he understands it in an equally false sense. In reasoning on the principles he lays down, he ought to have said that the state of nature, being that in which care for our own preservation is the least prejudicial to that of others, was consequently the best calculated to promote peace, and the most suitable for mankind. He does say the exact opposite, in consequence of having improperly admitted, as a part of savage man's care for self-preservation, the gratification of a multitude of passions which are the work of society, and have made laws necessary. [...]

It is then certain that compassion is a natural feeling, which, by moderating the violence of love of self in each individual, contributes to the preservation of the whole species. It is this compassion that hurries us without reflection to the relief of those who are in distress: it is this which in a state of nature supplies the place of laws, morals, and virtues, with the advantage that none are tempted to disobey its gentle voice: it is this which will always prevent a sturdy savage from robbing a weak child or a feeble old man of the sustenance they may have with pain and difficulty acquired, if he sees a possibility of providing for himself

by other means: it is this which, instead of inculcating that sublime maxim of rational justice, *Do to others as you would have them do unto you*, inspires all men with that other maxim of natural goodness, much less perfect indeed, but perhaps more useful; *Do good to yourself with as little evil as possible to others*. In a word, it is rather in this natural feeling than in any subtle arguments that we must look for the cause of that repugnance, which every man would experience in doing evil, even independently of the maxims of education. Although it might belong to Socrates and other minds of the like craft to acquire virtue by reason, the human race would long since have ceased to be, had its preservation depended only on the reasonings of the individuals composing it. [...]

The Second Part

The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, bethought himself of saying ‘This is mine’, and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society. [...]

So long as men remained content with their rustic huts, so long as they were satisfied with clothes made of the skins of animals and sewn together with thorns and fish-bones, adorned themselves only with feathers and shells, and continued to paint their bodies different colours, to improve and beautify their bows and arrows, and to make with sharp-edged stones fishing boats or clumsy musical instruments; in a word, so long as they undertook only what a single person could accomplish, and confined themselves to such arts as did not require the joint labour of several hands, they lived free, healthy, honest, and happy lives, so long as their nature allowed, and as they continued to enjoy the pleasures of mutual and independent intercourse. But from the moment one man began to stand in need of the help of another; from the moment it appeared advantageous to any one man to have enough provisions for two, equality disappeared, property was introduced, work became indispensable, and vast forests became smiling fields, which man had to water with the sweat of his brow, and where slavery and misery were soon seen to germinate and grow up with crops. [...]

Pufendorf says that we divest ourselves of our liberty in favour of other men, just as we transfer our property from one to another by contracts and agreements. But this seems a very weak argument. For in the first place, the property I alienate becomes quite foreign to me, nor can I suffer from the abuse of it; but it very nearly concerns me that my liberty should not be abused, and I cannot without incurring the guilt of the crimes I may be compelled to commit, expose myself to become an instrument of crime. Besides, the right of property being only a convention of human institution, men may dispose of what they possess as they please: but this is not the case with the essential gifts of nature, such as life and liberty, which every man is permitted to enjoy, and of which it is at least doubtful whether any have a right to divest themselves. By giving up the one, we degrade our being; by giving up the other, we do our

best to annul it; and, as no temporal good can indemnify us for the loss of either, it would be an offence against both reason and nature to renounce them at any price whatsoever. [...]

The savage and the civilized man differ so much in the bottom of their hearts and in their inclinations, that what constitutes the supreme happiness of one would reduce the other to despair. The former breathes only peace and liberty; he desires only to live and be free from labour [...] Civilised man, on the other hand, is always moving, sweating, toiling, and racking his brains to find still more laborious occupations: he goes on in drudgery to his last moment, and even seeks death to put himself in a position to live, or renounces life to acquire immortality. He pays his court to men in power, whom he hates, and to the wealthy, whom he despises; he stops at nothing to have the honour of serving them; he is not ashamed to value himself on his own meanness and their protection; and, proud of his slavery, he speaks with disdain of those, who have not the honour of sharing it [...] In reality, the source of all these differences is, that the savage lives within himself, while social man lives constantly outside himself, and only knows how to live in the opinion of others, so that he seems to receive the consciousness of his own existence merely from the judgment of others concerning him. [...]

It follows from this survey that, as there is hardly any inequality in the state of nature, all the inequality which now prevails owes its strength and growth to the development of our faculties and the advance of the human mind, and becomes at last permanent and legitimate by the establishment of property and laws. Secondly, it follows that moral inequality, authorized by positive right alone, clashes with natural right, whenever it is not proportionate to physical inequality – a distinction which sufficiently determines what we ought to think of that species of inequality which prevails in all civilized countries; since it is plainly contrary to the law of nature, however defined, that children should command old men, fools wise men, and that the privileged few should gorge themselves with superfluities, while the starving multitude are in want of the bare necessities of life.

EXTRACT FROM JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU, *THE SOCIAL CONTRACT*

Book I

I mean to inquire if, in the civil order, there can be any sure and legitimate rule of administration, men being taken as they are and laws as they might be. In this inquiry I shall endeavour always to unite what right sanctions with what is prescribed by interest, in order that justice and utility may in no case be divided.

I enter upon my task without proving the importance of the subject. I shall be asked if I am a prince or a legislator, to write on politics. I answer that I am neither, and that is why I do so. If I were a prince or a legislator, I should not waste time in saying what wants doing; I should do it, or hold my peace.

As I was born a citizen of a free State, and a member of the Sovereign, I feel that, however feeble the influence my voice can have on public affairs, the right of voting on them makes it my duty to study them: and I am happy when I reflect upon governments, to find my inquiries always furnish me with new reasons for loving that of my own country.

Chapter I: Subject of the first book

Man is born free;¹ and everywhere he is in chains. One thinks himself the master of others, and still remains a greater slave than they. How did this change come about? I do not know. What can it legitimate? That question I think I can answer.

If I took into account only force, and the effects derived from it, I should say: ‘As long as a people is compelled to obey, and obeys, it does well; as soon as it can shake off the yoke, and shakes it off, it does still better; for, regaining its liberty by the same right as took it away, either it is justified in resuming it, or there was no justification for those who took it away.’ But the social order is a sacred right which is the basis of all other rights. Nevertheless, this right does not come from nature, and must therefore be founded on conventions. Before coming to that, I have to prove what I have just asserted.

Chapter II: The first societies

The most ancient of all societies, and the only one that is natural, is the family: and even so the children remain attached to the father only so long as they need him for their preservation. As soon as this need ceases, the natural bond is dissolved. The children, released from the obedience they owed to the father, and the father, released from the care he owed his children, return equally to independence. If they remain united, they continue so no longer naturally, but voluntarily; and the family itself is then maintained only by convention.

This common liberty results from the nature of man. His first law is to provide for his own preservation, his first cares are those which he owes himself; and, as soon as he reaches years of discretion, he is the sole judge of the proper means of preserving himself, and consequently becomes his own master.

The family then may be called the first model of political societies: the ruler corresponds to the father, and the people to the children; and all, being born free and equal, alienate their liberty only for their own advantage. The whole difference is that, in the family, the love of the father for his children repays him for the care he takes of them, while, in the State, the pleasure of commanding takes the place of the love which the chief cannot have for the peoples under him.

Grotius denies that all human power is established in favour of the governed, and quotes

1 Arguably ‘Man was born free’ is a more accurate translation of this phrase – the extent to which this translation affects our perception of Rousseau’s ideas is also a matter of contention.

slavery as an example. His usual method of reasoning is constantly to establish right by fact. It would be possible to employ a more logical method, but none could be more favourable to tyrants.

It is then, according to Grotius, doubtful whether the human race belongs to a hundred men, or that hundred men to the human race: and, throughout his book, he seems to incline to the former alternative, which is also the view of Hobbes. On this showing, the human species is divided into so many herds of cattle, each with its ruler, who keeps guard over them for the purpose of devouring them.

As a shepherd is of a nature superior to that of his flock, the shepherds of men, i.e. their rulers, are of a nature superior to that of the peoples under them. Thus, Philo tell[s] us, the Emperor Caligula reasoned, concluding equally well either that kings were gods, or that men were beasts.

The reasoning of Caligula agrees with that of Hobbes and Grotius. Aristotle, before any of them, had said that men are by no means equal naturally, but that some are born for slavery, and others for dominion.

Aristotle was right; but he took the effect for the cause. Nothing can be more certain than that every man born in slavery is born for slavery. Slaves lose everything in their chains, even the desire for escaping them: they love their servitude as the comrades of Ulysses loved their brutish condition. If then there are slaves by nature, it is because there have been slaves against nature. Force made the first slaves, and their cowardice perpetuated the condition.

I have said nothing of King Adam, or Emperor Noah, father of the three great monarchs who shared out the universe, like the children of Saturn, whom some scholars have recognized in them. I trust to getting due thanks for my moderation; for, being a direct descendant of one of these princes, perhaps of the eldest branch, how do I know that a verification of titles might not leave me the legitimate king of the human race? In any case, there can be no doubt that Adam was sovereign of the world, as Robinson Crusoe was of his island, as long as he was its only inhabitant; and this empire had the advantage that the monarch, safe on his throne, had no rebellions, wars, or conspirators to fear.

Chapter III: The right of the strongest

The strongest is never strong enough to be always the master, unless he transforms strength into right, and obedience into duty. Hence the right of the strongest, which, though to all seeming meant ironically, is really laid down as a fundamental principle. But are we never to have an explanation of this phrase? Force is a physical power, and I fail to see what moral effect it can have. To yield to force is an act of necessity, not of will – at the most, an act of prudence. In what sense can it be a duty?

Suppose for a moment that this so-called ‘right’ exists. I maintain that the sole result is a mass of inexplicable nonsense. For, if force creates right, the effect changes with the cause: every force that is greater than the first succeeds to its right. As soon as it is possible to disobey with impunity, disobedience is legitimate; and, the strongest being always in the

right, the only thing that matters is to act so as to become the strongest. But what kind of right is that which perishes when force fails? If we must obey perforce, there is no need to obey because we ought; and if we are not forced to obey, we are under no obligation to do so. Clearly, the word 'right' adds nothing to force: in this connection, it means absolutely nothing.

Obey the powers that be. If this means yield to force, it is a good precept, but superfluous: I can answer for its never being violated. All power comes from God, I admit; but so does all sickness: does that mean that we are forbidden to call in the doctor? A brigand surprises me at the edge of a wood: must I not merely surrender my purse on compulsion; but, even if I could withhold it, am I in conscience bound to give it up? For certainly the pistol he holds is also a power.

Let us then admit that force does not create right, and that we are obliged to obey only legitimate powers. In that case, my original question recurs.

Chapter IV: Slavery

Since no man has a natural authority over his fellow, and force creates no right, we must conclude that conventions form the basis of all legitimate authority among men.

If an individual, says Grotius, can alienate his liberty and make himself the slave of a master, why could not a whole people do the same and make itself subject to a king? There are in this passage plenty of ambiguous words which would need explaining; but let us confine ourselves to the word *alienate*. To alienate is to give or to sell. Now, a man who becomes the slave of another does not give himself; he sells himself, at the least for his subsistence: but for what does a people sell itself? A king is so far from furnishing his subjects with their subsistence that he gets his own only from them; and, according to Rabelais, kings do not live on nothing. Do subjects then give their persons on condition that the king takes their goods also? I fail to see what they have left to preserve.

It will be said that the despot assures his subjects civil tranquillity. Granted; but what do they gain, if the wars his ambition brings down upon them, his insatiable avidity, and the vexatious conduct of his ministers press harder on them than their own dissensions would have done? What do they gain, if the very tranquillity they enjoy is one of their miseries? Tranquillity is found also in dungeons; but is that enough to make them desirable places to live in? The Greeks imprisoned in the cave of the Cyclops lived there very tranquilly, while they were awaiting their turn to be devoured.

To say that a man gives himself gratuitously, is to say what is absurd and inconceivable; such an act is null and illegitimate, from the mere fact that he who does it is out of his mind. To say the same of a whole people is to suppose a people of madmen; and madness creates no right.

Even if each man could alienate himself, he could not alienate his children: they are born men and free; their liberty belongs to them, and no one but they has the right to dispose of it.

Before they come to years of discretion, the father can, in their name, lay down conditions for their preservation and well-being, but he cannot give them irrevocably and without conditions: such a gift is contrary to the ends of nature, and exceeds the rights of paternity. It would therefore be necessary, in order to legitimize an arbitrary government, that in every generation the people should be in a position to accept or reject it; but, were this so, the government would be no longer arbitrary.

To renounce liberty is to renounce being a man, to surrender the rights of humanity and even its duties. For him who renounces everything no indemnity is possible. Such a renunciation is incompatible with man's nature; to remove all liberty from his will is to remove all morality from his acts. Finally, it is an empty and contradictory convention that sets up, on the one side, absolute authority, and, on the other, unlimited obedience. Is it not clear that we can be under no obligation to a person from whom we have the right to exact everything? Does not this condition alone, in the absence of equivalence or exchange, in itself involve the nullity of the act? For what right can my slave have against me, when all that he has belongs to me, and, his right being mine, this right of mine against myself is a phrase devoid of meaning?

Grotius and the rest find in war another origin for the so-called right of slavery. The victor having, as they hold, the right of killing the vanquished, the latter can buy back his life at the price of his liberty; and this convention is the more legitimate because it is to the advantage of both parties.

But it is clear that this supposed right to kill the conquered is by no means deducible from the state of war. Men, from the mere fact that, while they are living in their primitive independence, they have no mutual relations stable enough to constitute either the state of peace or the state of war, cannot be naturally enemies. War is constituted by a relation between things, and not between persons; and, as the state of war cannot arise out of simple personal relations, but only out of real relations, private war, or war of man with man, can exist neither in the state of nature, where there is no constant property, nor in the social state, where everything is under the authority of the laws.

Individual combats, duels, and encounters, are acts which cannot constitute a state; while the private wars, authorized by the Establishments of Louis IX, King of France, and suspended by the Peace of God, are abuses of feudalism, in itself an absurd system if ever there was one, and contrary to the principles of natural right and to all good polity.

War then is a relation, not between man and man, but between State and State, and individuals are enemies only accidentally, not as men, nor even as citizens, but as soldiers; not as members of their country, but as its defenders. Finally, each State can have for enemies only other States, and not men, for between things disparate in nature there can be no relation.

Furthermore, this principle is in conformity with the established rules of all times and the constant practice of all civilized peoples. Declarations of war are intimations less to powers than to their subjects. The foreigner, whether king, individual, or people, who robs, kills or detains the subjects, without declaring war on the prince, is not an enemy, but a

brigand. Even in real war, a just prince, while laying hands, in the enemy's country, on all that belongs to the public, respects the lives and goods of individuals: he respects rights on which his own are founded. The object of the war being the destruction of the hostile State, the other side has a right to kill its defenders, while they are bearing arms; but as soon as they lay them down and surrender, they cease to be enemies or instruments of the enemy, and become once more merely men, whose life no one has any right to take. Sometimes it is possible to kill the State without killing a single one its members; and war gives no right which is not necessary to the gaining of its object. These principles are not those of Grotius: they are not based on the authority of poets, but derived from the nature of reality and based on reason.

The right of conquest has no foundation other than the right of the strongest. If war does not give the conqueror the right to massacre the conquered peoples, the right to enslave them cannot be based upon a right which does not exist. No one has a right to kill an enemy except when he cannot make him a slave, and the right to enslave him cannot therefore be derived from the right to kill him. It is accordingly an unfair exchange to make him buy at the price of his liberty his life, over which the victor holds no right. Is it not clear that there is a vicious circle in founding the right of life and death on the right of slavery, and the right of slavery on the right of life and death?

Even if we assume this terrible right to kill everybody, I maintain that a slave made in war, or a conquered people, is under no obligation to a master, except to obey him as far as he is compelled to do so. By taking an equivalent for his life, the victor has not done him a favour; instead of killing him without profit, he has killed him usefully. So far then is he from acquiring over him any authority in addition to that of force, that the state of war continues to subsist between them: their mutual relation is the effect of it, and the usage of the right of war does not imply a treaty of peace. A convention has indeed been made; but this convention, so far from destroying the state of war, presupposes its continuance.

So, from whatever aspect we regard the question, the right of slavery is null and void, not only as being illegitimate, but also because it is absurd and meaningless. The words slave and right contradict each other, and are mutually exclusive. It will always be equally foolish for a man to say to a man or to a people: 'I make with you a convention wholly at your expense and wholly to my advantage; I shall keep it as long as I like, and you will keep it as long as I like.'

Chapter V: That we must always go back to a first convention

Even if I granted all that I have been refuting, the friends of despotism would be no better off. There will always be a great difference between subduing a multitude and ruling a society. Even if scattered individuals were successively enslaved by one man, however numerous they might be, I still see no more than a master and his slaves, and certainly not a people and its ruler; I see what may be termed an aggregation, but not an association; there is as yet

neither public good nor body politic. The man in question, even if he has enslaved half the world, is still only an individual; his interest, apart from that of others, is still a purely private interest. If this same man comes to die, his empire, after him, remains scattered and without unity, as an oak falls and dissolves into a heap of ashes when the fire has consumed it.

A people, says Grotius, can give itself to a king. Then, according to Grotius, a people is a people before it gives itself. The gift is itself a civil act, and implies public deliberation. It would be better, before examining the act by which a people gives itself to a king, to examine that by which it has become a people; for this act, being necessarily prior to the other, is the true foundation of society.

Indeed, if there were no prior convention, where, unless the election were unanimous, would be the obligation on the minority to submit to the choice of the majority? How have a hundred men who wish for a master the right to vote on behalf of ten who do not? The law of majority voting is itself something established by convention, and presupposes unanimity, on one occasion at least.

Chapter VI: The social compact

I suppose men to have reached the point at which the obstacles in the way of their preservation in the state of nature show their power of resistance to be greater than the resources at the disposal of each individual for his maintenance in that state. That primitive condition can then subsist no longer; and the human race would perish unless it changed its manner of existence.

But, as men cannot engender new forces, but only unite and direct existing ones, they have no other means of preserving themselves than the formation, by aggregation of a sum of forces great enough to overcome the resistance. These they have to bring into play by means of a single motive power, and cause to act in concert.

This sum of forces can arise only where several persons come together: but, as the force and liberty of each man are the chief instruments of his self-preservation, how can he pledge them without harming his own interests, and neglecting the care he owes to himself? This difficulty, in its bearing on my present subject, may be stated in the following terms:

‘The problem is to find a form of association which will defend and protect with the whole common force the person and goods of each associate, and in which each, while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone, and remain as free as before.’ This is the fundamental problem of which the *Social Contract* provides the solution.

The clauses of this contract are so determined by the nature of the act that the slightest modification would make them vain and ineffective; so that, although they have perhaps never been formally set forth, they are everywhere the same and everywhere tacitly admitted and recognized, until, on the violation of the social compact, each regains his original rights and resumes his natural liberty, while losing the conventional liberty in favour of which he renounced it.

These clauses, properly understood, may be reduced to one – the total alienation of each associate, together with all his rights, to the whole community; for, in the first place, as each

gives himself absolutely, the conditions are the same for all; and, this being so, no one has any interest in making them burdensome to others.

Moreover, the alienation being without reserve, the union is as perfect as it can be, and no associate has anything more to demand: for, if the individuals retained certain rights, as there would be no common superior to decide between them and the public, each, being on one point his own judge, would ask to be so on all; the state of nature would thus continue, and the association would necessarily become inoperative or tyrannical.

Finally, each man, in giving himself to all, gives himself to nobody; and as there is no associate over which he does not acquire the same right as he yields others over himself, he gains an equivalent for everything he loses, and an increase of force for the preservation of what he has.

If then we discard from the social compact what is not of its essence, we shall find that it reduces itself to the following terms:

'Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will, and, in our corporate capacity, we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole.'

At once, in place of the individual personality of each contracting party, this act of association creates a moral and collective body, composed of as many members as the assembly contains voters, and receiving from this act its unity, its common identity, its life, and its will. This public person, so formed by the union of all other persons, formerly took the name of *city*, and now takes that of *Republic* or *body politic*; it is called by its members *State* when passive, *Sovereign* when active, and *Power* when compared with others like itself. Those who are associated in it take collectively the name of *people*, and severally are called *citizens*, as sharing in the sovereign power, and *subjects*, as being under the laws of the State. But these terms are often confused and taken one for another: it is enough to know how to distinguish them when they are being used with precision.

Chapter VII: The sovereign

This formula shows us that the act of association comprises a mutual undertaking between the public and the individuals, and that each individual, in making a contract, as we may say, with himself, is bound in a double capacity; as a member of the Sovereign he is bound to the individuals, and as a member of the State to the Sovereign. But the maxim of civil right, that no one is bound by undertakings made to himself, does not apply in this case; for there is a great difference between incurring an obligation to yourself and incurring one to a whole of which you must form a part.

Attention must further be called to the fact that public deliberation, while competent to bind all the subjects to the Sovereign, because of the two different capacities in which each of them may be regarded, cannot, for the opposite reason, bind the Sovereign to itself; and that it is consequently against the nature of the body politic for the Sovereign to impose on itself a law which it cannot infringe. Being able to regard itself in only one capacity, it is in the

position of an individual who makes a contract with himself; and this makes it clear that there neither is nor can be any kind of fundamental law binding on the body of the people – not even the social contract itself. This does not mean that the body politic cannot enter into undertakings with others, provided the contract is not infringed by them; for in relation to what is external to it, it becomes a simple being, an individual.

But the body politic or the Sovereign, drawing its being wholly from the sanctity of the contract, can never bind itself, even to an outsider, to do anything derogatory to the original act, for instance, to alienate any part of itself, or to submit to another Sovereign. Violation of the act by which it exists would be self-annihilation; and that which is itself nothing can create nothing.

As soon as this multitude is so united in one body, it is impossible to offend against one of the members without attacking the body, and still more to offend against the body without the members resenting it. Duty and interest therefore equally oblige the two contracting parties to give each other help; and the same men should seek to combine, in their double capacity, all the advantages dependent upon that capacity.

Again, the Sovereign, being formed wholly of the individuals who compose it, neither has nor can have any interest contrary to theirs; and consequently the sovereign power need give no guarantee to its subjects, because it is impossible for the body to wish to hurt all its members. We shall also see later on that it cannot hurt any in particular. The Sovereign, merely by virtue of what it is, is always what it should be.

This, however, is not the case with the relation of the subjects to the Sovereign, which, despite the common interest, would have no security that they would fulfil their undertakings, unless it found means to assure itself of their fidelity.

In fact, each individual, as a man, may have a particular will contrary or dissimilar to the general will which he has as a citizen. His particular interest may speak to him quite differently from the common interest: his absolute and naturally independent existence may make him look upon what he owes to the common cause as a gratuitous contribution, the loss of which will do less harm to others than the payment of it is burdensome to himself; and, regarding the moral person which constitutes the State as a *persona ficta*, because not a man, he may wish to enjoy the rights of citizenship without being ready to fulfil the duties of a subject. The continuance of such an injustice could not but prove the undoing of the body politic.

In order then that the social compact may not be an empty formula, it tacitly includes the undertaking, which alone can give force to the rest, that whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be compelled to do so by the whole body. This means nothing less than that he will be forced to be free; for this is the condition which, by giving each citizen to his country, secures him against all personal dependence. In this lies the key to the working of the political machine; this alone legitimizes civil undertakings, which, without it, would be absurd,

tyrannical and liable to the most frightful abuses.

Chapter VIII: The civil state

The passage from the state of nature to the civil state produces a very remarkable change in man, by substituting justice for instinct in his conduct, and giving his actions the morality they had formerly lacked. Then only, when the voice of duty takes the place of physical impulses and right of appetite, does man, who so far had considered only himself, find that he is forced to act on different principles, and to consult his reason before listening to his inclinations. Although, in this state, he deprives himself of some advantages which he got from nature, he gains in return others so great, his faculties are so stimulated and developed, his ideas so extended, his feelings so ennobled, and his whole soul so uplifted, that, did not the abuses of this new condition often degrade him below that which he left, he would be bound to bless continually the happy moment which took him from it for ever, and, instead of a stupid and unimaginative animal, made him an intelligent being and a man.

Let us draw up the whole account in terms easily commensurable. What man loses by the social contract is his natural liberty and an unlimited right to everything he tries to get and succeeds in getting; what he gains is civil liberty and the proprietorship of all he possesses. If we are to avoid mistake in weighing one against the other, we must clearly distinguish natural liberty, which is bounded only by the strength of the individual, from civil liberty, which is limited by the general will; and possession, which is merely the effect of force or the right of the first occupier, from property, which can be founded only on a positive title.

We might, over and above all this, add, to what man acquires in the civil state, moral liberty, which alone makes him truly master of himself; for the mere impulse of appetite is slavery, while obedience to a law which we prescribe to ourselves is liberty. But I have already said too much on this head, and the philosophical meaning of the word liberty does not now concern us. [...]

Book II

Chapter I: That sovereignty is inalienable

The first and most important deduction from the principles we have so far laid down is that the general will alone can direct the State according to the object for which it was instituted, i.e. the common good: for if the clashing of particular interests made the establishment of societies necessary, the agreement of these very interests made it possible. The common element in these different interests is what forms the social tie; and, were there no point of agreement between them all, no society could exist. It is solely on the basis of this common interest that every society should be governed.

I hold then that Sovereignty, being nothing less than the exercise of the general will, can never be alienated, and that the Sovereign, who is no less than a collective being,

cannot be represented except by himself: the power indeed may be transmitted, but not the will.

In reality, if it is not impossible for a particular will to agree on some point with the general will, it is at least impossible for the agreement to be lasting and constant; for the particular will tends, by its very nature, to partiality, while the general will tends to equality. It is even more impossible to have any guarantee of this agreement; for even if it should always exist, it would be the effect not of art, but of chance. The Sovereign may indeed say: 'I now will actually what this man wills, or at least what he says he wills'; but it cannot say: 'What he wills tomorrow, I too shall will' because it is absurd for the will to bind itself for the future, nor is it incumbent on any will to consent to anything that is not for the good of the being who wills. If then the people promises simply to obey, by that very act it dissolves itself and loses what makes it a people; the moment a master exists, there is no longer a Sovereign, and from that moment the body politic has ceased to exist.

This does not mean that the commands of the rulers cannot pass for general wills, so long as the Sovereign, being free to oppose them, offers no opposition. In such a case, universal silence is taken to imply the consent of the people. This will be explained later on.

Chapter II: That sovereignty is indivisible

Sovereignty, for the same reason as makes it inalienable, is indivisible; for will either is, or is not, general; it is the will either of the body of the people, or only of a part of it. In the first case, the will, when declared, is an act of Sovereignty and constitutes law: in the second, it is merely a particular will, or act of magistracy – at the most a decree.

But our political theorists, unable to divide Sovereignty in principle, divide it according to its object: into force and will; into legislative power and executive power; into rights of taxation, justice, and war; into internal administration and power of foreign treaty. Sometimes they confuse all these sections, and sometimes they distinguish them; they turn the Sovereign into a fantastic being composed of several connected pieces: it is as if they were making man of several bodies, one with eyes, one with arms, another with feet, and each with nothing besides. We are told that the jugglers of Japan dismember a child before the eyes of the spectators; then they throw all the members into the air one after another, and the child falls down alive and whole. The conjuring tricks of our political theorists are very like that; they first dismember the body politic by an illusion worthy of a fair, and then join it together again we know not how.

This error is due to a lack of exact notions concerning the Sovereign authority, and to taking for parts of it what are only emanations from it. Thus, for example, the acts of declaring war and making peace have been regarded as acts of Sovereignty; but this is not the case, as these acts do not constitute law, but merely the application of a law, a particular act

which decides how the law applies, as we shall see clearly when the idea attached to the word 'law' has been defined.

If we examined the other divisions in the same manner we should find that, whenever Sovereignty seems to be divided, there is an illusion: the rights which are taken as being part of Sovereignty are really all subordinate, and always imply supreme wills of which they only sanction the execution.

It would be impossible to estimate the obscurity this lack of exactness has thrown over the divisions of writers who have dealt with political right, when they have used the principles laid down by them to pass judgment on the respective rights of kings and peoples. Every one can see, in Chapters III and IV of the first book of Grotius, how the learned man and his translator, Barbeyrac, entangle and tie themselves up in their own sophistries, for fear of saying too little or too much of what they think, and so offending the interests they have to conciliate. Grotius, a refugee in France, ill content with his own country, and desirous of paying his court to Louis XIII, to whom his book is dedicated, spares no pains to rob the peoples of all their rights and invest kings with them by every conceivable artifice. This would also have been much to the taste of Barbeyrac, who dedicated his translation to George I of England. But unfortunately the expulsion of James II, which he called his 'abdication,' compelled him to use all reserve, to shuffle and to tergiversate, in order to avoid making William out a usurper. If these two writers had adopted the true principles, all difficulties would have been removed, and they would have been always consistent; but it would have been a sad truth for them to tell, and would have paid court for them to no one save the people. Moreover, truth is no road to fortune, and the people dispenses neither ambassadorships, nor professorships, nor pensions.

Chapter III: Whether the general will is fallible

It follows from what has gone before that the general will is always right and tends to the public advantage; but it does not follow that the deliberations of the people are always equally correct. Our will is always for our own good, but we do not always see what that is; the people is never corrupted, but it is often deceived, and on such occasions only does it seem to will what is bad.

There is often a great deal of difference between the will of all and the general will; the latter considers only the common interest, while the former takes private interest into account, and is no more than a sum of particular wills: but take away from these same wills the pluses and minuses that cancel one another, and the general will remains as the sum of the differences.

If, when the people, being furnished with adequate information, held its deliberations, the citizens had no communication one with another, the grand total of the small differences would always give the general will, and the decision would always be good. But when factions arise, and partial associations are formed at the expense of the great association, the will of each of these associations becomes general in relation to its members, while it remains particular in relation to the State: it may then be said that there are no longer as many votes

as there are men, but only as many as there are associations. The differences become less numerous and give a less general result. Lastly, when one of these associations is so great as to prevail over all the rest, the result is no longer a sum of small differences, but a single difference; in this case there is no longer a general will, and the opinion which prevails is purely particular.

It is therefore essential, if the general will is to be able to express itself, that there should be no partial society within the State, and that each citizen should think only his own thoughts: which was indeed the sublime and unique system established by the great Lycurgus. But if there are partial societies, it is best to have as many as possible and to prevent them from being unequal, as was done by Solon, Numa, and Servius. These precautions are the only ones that can guarantee that the general will shall be always enlightened, and that the people shall in no way deceive itself.