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Compassion Without Charity, Freedom Without Liberty

*The Political Fantasies of
Jean-Jacques Rousseau*

◆

MAX HOCUTT

Socialists, progressives, and similar denizens of the political left love to boast about their compassion. They think it distinguishes them from “unfeeling” politicians on the right and gives them the moral high ground in all political debates. The socialist wants to feed the poor children; the capitalist would let them starve. Progressive politicians want to comfort the sick; their reactionary counterparts would watch them suffer. Leftists want to fight oppression; their foes on the right are agents of oppression. And so on. You have heard it all before; it is a familiar refrain—an attempt to win the argument not on the grounds that the leftists’ programs are better, but on the grounds that their motives are purer.

We owe the theme of this self-righteous litany, as we owe almost all themes of leftist radicalism, to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the eighteenth-century enfant terrible and author of *Social Contract*, *A Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, and other rhetorically brilliant but politically unsound works. Compassion was at once the virtue that Rousseau believed he possessed in greatest measure and the virtue he thought lacking from the unregenerate souls of his benighted fellows, who, he claimed, had been made greedy and unfeeling by society. It should be instructive therefore to discover how he understood compassion and what role he envisaged for it in an ideal

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political order. As we shall see, Rousseau's compassion was an insubstantial shadow of the real thing, for which he wished to substitute state coercion wrongly called *freedom*.

My discussion is in two parts. Part 1 relates to compassion, part 2 to freedom. The unifying theme is equality, which Rousseau believed to be essential to both compassion and liberty, although in fact it cannot be reconciled with either. A subtheme is the narcissistic quality of Rousseau's thought, which makes scant appeal to either fact or logic. What passes for argument is usually little more than clever word play. Instead of impersonal evidence, we are offered personal sentiment; in place of considered policy, rank fantasy.¹ The end result is a combination of an intemperate jeremiad, the *Origins of Inequality*, with a work of political pornography, the *Social Contract*. Not surprisingly, therefore, Rousseau's influence has been both considerable and disastrous.

Part 1: Compassion Without Charity

The "boy president" William Jefferson Clinton expressed Rousseau's notion of compassion very precisely, if somewhat colloquially, whenever he assured us, as he did frequently, that "I feel your pain." Notice that Clinton's emphasis in these declarations was on his *feelings*. I know of no evidence that he was ever led to *act* in ways that entailed his own sacrifice or inconvenience. Not incidentally, however, publicly professing his feelings did get Clinton elected to government offices, where he could wield power in imposing burdens on others, then retire to enrich himself by peripatetic boasting about his efforts to do so. This behavior illustrates two of the main features of leftist compassion—lack of any conceptual connection to personal charity and a belief that special reward is owed to those who express their compassion politically by giving away other people's money.

The prototype for this self-serving form of compassion was Rousseau. As he unwittingly reveals in his *Confessions* ([1765] 1953), his vaunted fellow feelings were so far from inspiring acts of charity as not even to ensure elementary decency. In one incident, he abandoned a traveling companion who was having an epileptic seizure on a street of an Italian town at which the two of them had recently arrived. On another occasion, he betrayed the trust of an employer who had befriended him by accusing a fellow servant girl of stealing an expensive ribbon that he himself had filched intending to make her a gift of it. When the older lover of his *maman* died, Rousseau's first thought was pleasure that he would take from getting the man's clothes. The day each of his four children was born, he took it to a foundling home, never to see it again.²

1. Both of these traits make ad hominem commentary unavoidable, and the reader will see that I do not avoid it.

2. These are the incidents about which Rousseau himself tells us. Much equally shameful behavior—for example, his treatment of David Hume, who had taken him in after the government of France threw him out—goes unmentioned, however. Clearly paranoid, Rousseau was almost certainly a pathological liar as well as a thief.

Rousseau acknowledges that these actions were less than admirable, but he always takes pains to assure us of the compassion he felt for their victims, and he is often moved to declare that people who thought ill of him would realize what a good person he was if only they could see past his feckless conduct into his tender heart. He could act irresponsibly, even viciously, but, as he frequently and proudly tells us, he would cry copious tears about it.

Compassion in Rousseau's State of Nature

A reader who did not know better might regard Rousseau's lachrymose substitute for practical virtue as merely a character flaw having no significance for political philosophy, but in Rousseau political philosophy *is* autobiography. Thus, his personal sense of compassion is transmogrified into high moral principle in one of his earliest and most influential works, *A Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* ([1754/1762] 1997).³ In that revolutionary tract, natural man—man as Rousseau imagines him to be in a mythical state of nature—is said to be innately compassionate. As Rousseau explains, however, this condition most emphatically does not mean that natural man is actively inclined to relieve the miseries of his fellows, much less do them positive acts of kindness. It means only that he is “bound to do no injury” (378). He is good in the highly restricted sense that he is not evil, benevolent in the sense that he is not malevolent. In Rousseau's account, the sole function of natural man's compassion is to constrain him from giving another creature pain, lest his own equanimity be upset by his victim's complaints. Like everything else in Rousseau, compassion is entirely self-referential. As he himself explains, he disliked the suffering of others because contemplating it caused him to suffer, too. He regarded himself as typical in this respect. We have, he said, “a natural repugnance at seeing any other sensible being, and particularly any of our own species, suffer pain or death” (378).

Such narcissistic compassion was the only kind that existed in Rousseau's state of nature because it was the only kind that, according to him, was needed there. As Rousseau envisaged primitive men, they lived—as ethologists now tell us that orangutans live—in more or less solitary isolation from each other, needing neither companionship nor assistance because everything they wanted was ready to hand. “I see [natural man] satisfying his hunger at the first oak, and slaking his thirst at the nearest brook; finding his bed at the foot of the tree which afforded him a repast . . . all his wants supplied [by] the natural fertility” of the earth (381). Accordingly, “nature has taken little care to unite mankind by mutual wants” and “contributed little to make [man] sociable” (390). Because “it is impossible to conceive why, in a state of

3. Here I refer to this work as the *Discourse*, although Rousseau wrote other works that he called discourses—for example, his prize-winning *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, which is sometimes called the first discourse. Quotations and paraphrases from both *A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* and *Social Contract* come from *Collections in Modern Political Theory*, edited by Stephen M. Cahn. After this point, therefore, I cite Rousseau (1754/1762) 1997 by page number only.

nature, one man should stand more in need of the assistance of another than a monkey or a wolf of the assistance of another of its kind; or granting that he did, what motives could induce that other to assist him” (390), men “maintained no kind of intercourse with one another” (393). Even love between man and woman was unknown. Natural man being interested only in coupling, “every woman equally answers his purpose,” and a man “did not know even his own children” (395).

Rousseau’s conception of “compassion” contrasts markedly with David Hume’s contemporaneous belief in “natural sympathy,” a more robust emotion. According to Hume, we are innately endowed with a disposition to share not just the sufferings and pains but also the joys and laughs of our fellows. Moreover, this emotion is not just felt; it also usually manifests itself in other-regarding behavior. It is, in fact, the basis of social morality—active consideration for others. Hume’s natural sympathy is, it is true, more limited in scope than Rousseau’s compassion. It is felt most strongly for our families and friends and is weakest with regard to strangers and distant foreigners ([1751] 1957, 18). Rousseau’s passive and self-regarding “compassion” would have been what we feel for the sufferings of beasts, with whom, according to Hume, we can have no real community (21).

Rousseau’s “compassion” and Hume’s “natural sympathy” also served different explanatory functions in their philosophies. Like Rousseau’s other principles, his postulation of natural compassion appears to have been an inference from introspection. Although he saw little evidence of compassion in other persons, he appears to have reasoned that because he felt compassion himself, others also would have felt it *if*, like him, they had not been corrupted by society. By contrast, Hume believed in natural sympathy because it seemed to him to explain why people frequently behave unselfishly toward others and because he could not understand how society could hang together on Thomas Hobbes’s pessimistic assumption that human beings are naturally so selfish as to be antisocial ([1751] 1957, 43). No doubt, Hume would have made a similar appraisal of Rousseau’s self-referential idea that human beings are so self-centered as to be *asocial*. In either Hobbes’s view or Rousseau’s, it is difficult to understand how human beings ever managed to form that complicated pattern of cooperation and mutual assistance that we call society. Hume’s theory, in contrast, has no such problem.

Property as the Supposed Cause of Inequality

In Rousseau’s story, natural man’s attenuated sympathy for his fellows is so far from serving as the basis for society as to become even thinner after its formation. “From the moment one man began to stand in need of the help of another,” says Rousseau (401), “the strong came to submit to serve the weak” (380), “every man [found] his profit in the misfortune of another” (414), and “insatiable ambition” (403) and “the pleasure of command” (404) replaced pity. In short, the placid orangutan turned into an avaricious beast, who needed “civil institutions to make him more mild” (401).

The cause of this calamitous Fall from Grace was the sin of *property*. In Rousseau's state of nature, men had possessions, but ownership was a foreign idea, not yet conceived. Because everything needed had only to be possessed to be enjoyed, no one claimed exclusive rights to it. Hence, natural men, the gentlest of all creatures, lived in peace, if not in harmony, enjoying the gifts God had made for them and having no use for property (401). Ownership ended this Eden. In Rousseau's famous words, "the trouble began when 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" (397). How that development could have come about is not clear. Given Rousseau's premises, it should have been impossible. What could have moved that first man to do what, according to Rousseau, he had no conceivable reason to do? How could people so "simple" that they lacked a concept of property have understood a claim to it, much less been persuaded to believe it?

The question seems unanswerable, but Rousseau undertakes in the *Discourse* to review the "sequence of miracles" by which he surmises that this disastrous turn of affairs came about (380). I say "surmises" because, of course, no records of the relevant events existed. This lack of evidence, however, gave no pause to Rousseau, who felt confident that resort to "the light of reason" would obviate the need for facts (414). He would justify his postulation—he called it a "conjecture"—of a long-lost Eden by arguing that it provided the only possible explanation for mankind's present wickedness (396). Here again we see a contrast with the ideas of Hume, who wanted to explain man's benevolence.

Property as Natural and Essential

Although Rousseau's explanation was soon to become the watchword for the French Revolution and later would inspire other revolutions, it was, we now know, wrong in almost every particular.

Begin with property. Rousseau made a valuable contribution to knowledge when he pointed out that property—which consists not in things but in rights with respect to them—is not merely sanctioned by social and legal conventions, but even constituted by them. If there could be such a thing as a state of nature, it would contain *possessions* but nothing describable as *property*. Thus, Robinson Crusoe did not own "his" island; he merely possessed and occupied it.

Rousseau forgot, however, that possession and occupancy are natural precursors to property. The conventions that usually define property—for example, the rule of first possession—reflect natural forms of conduct. Even the most casual observation of animal behavior reveals that the instinct to claim things as one's own is innate. Once a mate, a bit of food, or a piece of ground has come into an animal's possession, the animal will fight to keep it; only superior force will make it the possession of another. Rousseau knew this fact, but he dismissed it as irrelevant. We can, he said, "base no conclusion about men on the basis of fighting cocks" (395) and rutting stags

(394). Yet this clever rebuttal flies in the face of another principle. If we must explain the behavior of some species on the grounds that it is natural, scientific parsimony demands that we apply the same explanation to identical behavior in human beings.

Rousseau did not acknowledge this imperative because his thought was not scientific and analytical, but sentimental and theological. Despite his proclamation that property is conventional, he appears to have taken quite literally the dogma that the earth, being a divine gift to mankind as a whole, cannot be divided up for ownership by individual persons (397). Once you become enamored of this entirely baseless idea, it follows that partitioning off a piece of the earth and claiming it as your own is a “usurpation” (404) of what belongs to all, an act condemnable as a violation of Divine Law. John Locke, who shared the premise, had tried to get around the conclusion by including in God’s law a provision entitling men to that of which they had taken first possession, that with which they have mixed their labor, and that which they have acquired by fair exchange. Unfortunately, Rousseau would not have it. Possession, he said, was a matter of *force*, not *right*, and other men have no good reason to respect what one of them has taken by force, especially if it is more than the possessor needs for his personal maintenance (404).

Unwilling to admit that the institution of property has a basis in nature, Rousseau looked for another explanation and settled on the hypothesis that it arose from a plot by the rich. Calling it “the profoundest plan that ever entered the mind of man” (404), he declaimed,

Such was, or may well have been, the origin of society and law, which bound new fetters on the poor, and gave new powers to the rich; which irretrievably destroyed natural liberty, eternally fixed the law of property and inequality, converted clever usurpation into unalterable right, and, for the advantage of a few ambitious individuals, subjected all mankind to perpetual labour, slavery, and wretchedness. (405)

Given his belief in this undocumented conspiracy, Rousseau did not think to ask why absolutely every society that has ever existed has found it necessary to institute laws protecting property, or why the concept of justice is so tied to that of property as to be meaningless without it. The question would have been simply too inconvenient.

Yet the answer is plain to all who look for it. As common sense suggests and experience confirms, protections for property are necessary if it is to rest in the hands of those who can make the best use of it. Productive property is owned by individuals who, expecting to profit from its sound management or to suffer from its neglect, are more likely to use it well. And, as Adam Smith pointed out, but Rousseau would not see, productively used property benefits not just its owner but also other people ([1759] 1976, 184). Thus, the rest of us eat what the farmer grows, and we gain employment in the factory owner’s plant. As Hobbes had shown, none of these things would be possible in a state of nature.

Rousseau acknowledges that agriculture could not have been established without partitioned ownership of land (402), but he is so set against property that he sees this necessity as a reason to condemn agriculture as well. Declaring it and other “arts”—that is, technologies—to be the cause of surplus and “luxury,” he condemns the latter as “a remedy much worse than the disease it sets up to cure; or rather it is in itself the greatest of all evils” (417). In his jaded opinion, human beings would be better off if we were still picking up acorns in the forest and wearing animal skins against the cold. It is noteworthy, however, that this opinion, though asserted emphatically and lengthily, never manifested itself in Rousseau’s personal conduct. He never renounced the very considerable luxuries that he was himself fortunate enough to enjoy. One has to be suspicious of a philosophy that its proponents are unwilling to live by.

Wealth and Land

As we have just seen, Rousseau was wrong to deny that property has a basis in nature and a justification in utility. He had a similarly unrealistic idea about the wealth that derives from property.

Rousseau invariably talked as though he thought that some people are richer than others only because they have grabbed more than their fair share of things, leaving others without enough. Thus, he declares, “the loss of one man always constitutes the prosperity of another” (415). This declaration assumes that the world’s wealth exists as a fixed and limited quantity—just enough to satisfy all needs—lying around to be picked up like acorns so that acquiring it is a zero-sum game in which more for A necessarily means less for B. Rousseau, an autodidact who remained economically illiterate despite his extraordinary literary abilities, here shows no understanding of how demand contributes to shortage. He also reveals a failure to understand that apart from demand, there is no fixed or determinate definition of need.

Living in a society still largely agrarian, though beginning to change, Rousseau also might have made the mistake of confusing *wealth* with *land*, its most obvious source. Because the quantity of cultivated land is limited, ownership of any part of it reduces the residue that can be claimed by others. Fallacious though the inference is, Rousseau seems to have thought it reasonable to believe that ownership of land by some reduces the wealth that can be had by others. This conclusion was certainly the one that later would be reached by those who, inspired by his rhetoric, proposed to solve the problems of postrevolutionary France by breaking up large estates into small parcels for redistribution to the peasants. This policy did not work, but the same mistake apparently is being made today in subtropical Africa, with the wholly predictable result that large numbers of people are starving in regions that once produced surpluses of food. Such are the tragedies that result from basing economic policy on false ideas and good intentions.

These observations may seem unfair to Rousseau, but others saw the flaw in his thinking even if he could not. In *The Wealth of Nations* ([1776] 1981), Rousseau’s

Scottish contemporary Adam Smith showed that differences in national wealth result as much from methods of production as from land. As Julian Simon (1990) would emphasize two centuries later, what matters most is not a nation's *physical* resources, but rather its *human* resources. An energetic and virtuous people will prosper and make a thousand flowers bloom if only their government will leave them alone to develop their talents and pursue their ambitions. The economic problems of eighteenth-century France may have had less to do with the ownership of land than with its mismanagement by a hereditary aristocracy that, having become dissolute, was more interested in spending its wealth than in adding to it. In the nineteenth century, Alexis de Tocqueville ([1856] 1959) saw that this aristocracy, which had become arrogant and cruel as it became depraved and decadent, was already beginning to lose its ancestral lands to more sober, prudent, and industrious peasants or to newly wealthy manufacturers in the dawning industrial age. Rousseau, too, might have seen this development in his own time if he had been as dispassionate an observer as either Smith or Tocqueville.

Wealth and Labor

Although Rousseau was wrong about wealth, it is easy to see where he got his ideas. Living most of his life on the patronage of the rich and “high bred,” he worked intermittently at literary pursuits and music copying but never held a steady job for long, so he never had serious responsibilities. Unlike John Locke, who regarded labor as the chief basis for property rights, Rousseau had no very firm sense of that intimate connection between work and wealth that would later tempt Ricardo and Marx—wrongly as it happens—to propose measuring the value of things by the quantity of labor required to produce them. He knew, of course, that some relation exists between them, but it seems he never thought it through.

Whatever the reason, Rousseau evidently paid little attention to how wealth is generated. As discussed more fully in part 2, his *Social Contract* contains only the briefest comments about the all-important question of how people earn their livings: it is to be left up to them and determined by their circumstances (440). His preoccupation was with how wealth is distributed. In his view, no one should be either very rich or very poor (441), and all “excess” wealth should be “absorbed by the state” so that it will not be “dissipated by private individuals” (454). This backward—and disastrous—set of priorities has been that of leftist politics ever since.⁴ If only because chickens should not be counted until they hatch, successful societies worry about production first. Those that do not do so usually have little to distribute.

4. Although Plato's *Republic*, the model for all utopias, contains no talk of redistributing wealth, it also says virtually nothing about the economic basis of the state. Those who construct fantasies evidently feel little need to contend with realities—a disastrous failing in a political writer. For another horrid example, read the feminist utopia *Herland* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman ([1915] 1998). In it, food comes from the trees, and children who never cry are produced without the aid of men, by parthenogenesis.

Man as Quarrelsome Social Creature

As ill-founded as Rousseau's ideas about wealth were, his conception of human nature was even more misguided.

More than two millennia before Rousseau, Aristotle had recognized that human beings are naturally gregarious animals that, we now know, more closely resemble the sociable but quarrelsome chimpanzees than the solitary but peaceful orangutans. The longest period of infantile dependency in nature, with its debilitating demands on the mother, required that primitive humans belong to families, rudimentary societies for which the adult males provided food and protection. Before settled agriculture came into being about ten thousand years ago, food for the most part meant meat, which was hunted by organized groups of cooperating individuals bound together by kinship and need. These close-knit bands did not hesitate either to slaughter other animals or to make war on competing bands; they exulted in it. An early advocate of the rights of animals, the tender-hearted Rousseau could never have borne the thought, but primitive men probably killed for fun as well as for food, as hunters for sport do even today. Compassion, felt only by social creatures, was probably elicited in the hearts of primitive hunters only by the sufferings of other members of their tribe.

Apologists for Rousseau will reply that he never meant his myth of the placid orangutan literally. If we may take him at his word, though doing so is always risky with so clever and cunning a wordsmith, Rousseau regarded references to the state of nature as a literary device to facilitate a thought experiment (380). Wanting to imagine what men would be like with the influences that could plausibly be attributed to society being subtracted from their character, he undertook a sort of intuitive regression analysis into causes. He apparently thought (391) that Hobbes had been doing the same thing when he concluded that men are naturally rapacious and murderous. In fact, Hobbes had been engaged in a different experiment—trying to gauge from the frequency with which the law is broken how men would behave if the restraints now imposed on them were suddenly to be lifted by the disintegration of government, an eventuality Hobbes feared but Rousseau's words inspired. Thus, where Hobbes had been trying to show that law and order are indispensable to the enjoyment of all that is good, Rousseau was eager to claim that when we lacked them, we lived together in peace and harmony.

As the Terror that followed the French Revolution soon would prove, Hobbes's estimate of human nature was more nearly right. People do not kill, rape, and steal from each other because they have been civilized; they do so because they have not been civilized enough. This condition was obvious to Hobbes, and Rousseau ought to have been able to see it, too, but he lacked the perspective of a detached observer who desires to understand what he has witnessed. Instead, he had the unhappy and destructive outlook of an arrested adolescent who would rather condemn what he dislikes than analyze it dispassionately: "I'm perfect; change everything else."

The Theological Basis of Rousseau's Thought

It must be admitted, of course, that Rousseau had ample personal reasons for his discontent. Born to a Swiss watchmaker whose first wife died in childbirth and whose second threw their son Jean-Jacques out of the house before he reached puberty, Rousseau spent most of his adult life as the kept man of society matrons whose wealth he envied and whose personal demands and arrogant superiority he resented, even as he accepted the bed, board, and spending money they gave him. A man of genius and attainments, he must have chafed at having to cater to women who were his intellectual inferiors and who, living idly and extravagantly off the wealth of their dead husbands or absent paramours, had done nothing, as far as he could see, to deserve their good fortune. The *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* was his jeremiad against this society, which had made his degradation and humiliation complete.

All he needed was an objective basis for condemnation, and he found that in theology. A sentimental if heterodox Christian, who picked and chose his beliefs as he went along to suit his taste, Rousseau had the vague conviction that because nature (including human nature) was God's creation, it must have been good at one time and somehow turned bad later on. I know of no passage in which Rousseau explicitly states this view, but it is fundamental to his whole outlook.⁵ Given this a priori conviction, Rousseau ignored evidence to the contrary and formulated the thought that has become the foundation for all subsequent radicalism—a belief that man is not civilized by society, but corrupted by it; or, what comes to the same thing, a belief that civilization is itself a form of corruption.⁶

Rousseau's Socialist Followers

After Rousseau, Marx and others would follow Hegel in denying that there is any such thing as human nature considered apart from society, and the more sensible among them would limit themselves to claiming that bad men are the products of bad societies, while encouraging belief that good men can be created by good societies contrived by wise and disinterested socialists. In this view, there is no such thing as human nature, good or bad, until it is formed by society. In sober moments, Rousseau might have agreed, but carried away by his own rhetoric, he favored the doctrine that society makes inherently good men wicked because it is itself inherently wicked.

5. The most complete discussion of Rousseau's theology is his conversation with the Savoyard Vicar in *Emile* ([1762] 1979), Rousseau's novelistic treatise on education.

6. This vague idea is also the source of radical environmentalism, according to which human alterations in a sacred Nature are forms of sacrilege against the Divine, even if they promote human welfare. Rousseau, who loved long walks in the countryside, which he mistook for uncultivated landscapes, did not himself endorse this extreme view, but having written many paeans to unspoiled nature, he can be regarded as its father.

This conclusion was made plausible by the brilliance of Rousseau's rhetoric, but it was made possible by the fallacy in his method. Where other thinkers had interpreted the inherent goodness of nature to mean that we must first ascertain what is natural if we want to discover what is good, Rousseau evidently thought he could turn that procedure around and begin with what is good to discover what is natural. Having previously resolved to regard society as wicked, he therefore concluded that natural man is an asocial, if not an antisocial, creature—like himself. Because good and evil vary with personal preferences—you like what I dislike—whereas human nature is more or less fixed by a common biology, Rousseau's method will strike scientific-minded readers as backward, and it certainly yielded the wrong conclusion. The “father of romanticism” was, however, a thoroughgoing sentimentalist, who was not going to let mere facts stand in the way of conclusions dictated by his feelings.

Unfortunately, Rousseau's followers adopted this attitude. As leftists' adamant denial of the relevance of biology to behavior shows, they continue to this day to base their case on feeling rather than on fact. David Gelernter has remarked recently that well-meaning people on the left sometimes “care so deeply about right and wrong that they have no time to distinguish truth from falsity” (2002, 24). Disappointed by a harsh reality, such as the collapse of socialist regimes everywhere, many have taken to denying even that *there is* any such thing as truth or reality. Instead, they say, there are just so many diverse and mutually contradictory interpretations of things, each true for the person who feels it, but none true absolutely. In this way, socialism leads to epistemological relativism. French admirers of Rousseau, as well as their acolytes in departments of English literature everywhere, are particularly prone to this pernicious nonsense.

Karl Popper showed in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1962) and F. A. Hayek confirmed in *Law, Legislation, and Liberty* (1973–79) how this nihilistic attitude prevents leftists from seeing any value in existing political or economic orders, no matter how long those orders have lasted or how successful they may be. Lacking respect for the wisdom embodied in a society's moral and political traditions, leftists are convinced they can dream up something better out of their own heads and construct it out of the whole cloth of their imaginations. Ideals will suffice; never mind the facts.

The Personal as Political

This mix of hubris with otherworldliness explains the autobiographical quality of not just Rousseau's *Confessions* ([1765] 1953) but also his political tracts, which merely transformed his personal resentments and private fantasies into what purported to be impersonal philosophy and disinterested social policy.

Starting with what he detested most—namely, the disparity in wealth, power, and privilege between him and those on whose favor he depended—Rousseau postulated an idyllic past in which men were equal in rank because equally without property. Although acknowledging that some men are naturally stronger, cleverer, or more

agile than their fellows, he insisted that such inequalities made no difference in the state of nature. Because sufficient goods existed to serve the needs of all men alike, natural differences of intellect, agility, and strength neither gave any man a competitive advantage over any other nor served as a basis for rank. Men were as equal in each other's eyes as in God's (403). In Rousseau's estimate, we now regard human differences as important only because society has made them seem important by creating in people a frenzied striving for distinction, "a desire to surpass others" (403).

The contrary hypothesis—that social hierarchy is rooted in natural differences—Rousseau summarily dismisses as "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 truth" (379–80). Having thus neatly poisoned the wells, he does not pause to examine the evidence—a perfect illustration of his method. Begin with the presumptions that nature is necessarily good and that differences of rank and wealth are necessarily bad. Then you are committed, come what may, to the conclusion that differences of rank and wealth cannot be owing to nature and therefore must be wholly artificial and perverted. We then have no need to inquire whether this theory comports with the cold facts. We have already decided to believe it on the sole ground that it comports with our own warm sentiments. For Rousseau, the injustice of inequality was sufficiently self-evident that it needed no proof. What inequality needed was condemnation, and that ingredient he sought to provide in full measure.

The Inevitability of Inequality

The problem with Rousseau's condemnation is that its premise was mistaken. Inequality is not only natural, it is also inevitable—as apparently is envy of those with superior rank, advantage, luck, or ability. That no society without a pecking order has ever existed ought to make this reality clear to even the most obtuse egalitarian. As Rousseau himself remarks, the "desire for reputation, honours, and advancement . . . inflames us all" (411). A motive so universal could only be a product of biology. Because only a few persons can rise to the top, leaving the rest disappointed, Rousseau thought the desire for distinction regrettable.

Once again, however, he was mistaken. The desire for precedence facilitates social organization by encouraging those who should lead to identify themselves and to prove their capacities in competition with others. Thus, even Rousseau acknowledges in the end that ranks are indispensable. He merely wants them to reflect "personal merit," as able politicians banish "that unjust inequality which makes no distinction between good and bad men" (419). So, despite his vehement denunciation of inequality in the *Discourse*, Rousseau ends up in the *Social Contract* admitting that some inequalities are permissible. What is objectionable are great extremes of inequality: "no citizen should be so opulent as to be able to buy another; and none so poor as to be constrained to sell himself" (441). As these quotations indicate, Rousseau appears to have started with the extreme view that inequality is inherently evil, but he moved,

without noticing this movement, to the more moderate view that inequality is acceptable under certain conditions. In doing so, he made an advance over many of his followers. Having confused *equality* (sameness) with *equity* (fairness), they have come to believe that absolutely all inequality is unjust, hence wicked, by definition.

Suppose, however—to consider merely inequalities of wealth, to which Rousseau says that all others reduce—that a social order existed in which the richest citizens possessed several times the wealth of the poorest, who were nevertheless better off than their counterparts in every other society, actual or feasible. (The reader will see that this supposition is not so hypothetical: the poorest members of free societies are rich by comparison with their counterparts in other lands, if not by comparison with the richest members of their own societies.) As even the late John Rawls acknowledged, citing the Pareto optimality principle, it would be difficult under this hypothesis to understand what the poorest citizens had to complain about (1971, 66–67, 144–45). If they are unhappy with an arrangement as favorable as this, the explanation has to be envy—a self-destructive and socially corrosive emotion that ought not to be encouraged. This truth, though obvious, is often obscured by the misleading device of comparing the present society not to known alternatives but to a wholly imaginary society that never has been and never can be realized in actual fact.

I return to this topic in part 2, where I discuss how Rousseau’s obsession with inequality, confusion about the meaning of liberty, and lack of touch with reality led him to entertain the delusion that he could change human nature and set up a political order in which the citizens voluntarily act in concert because they all have each other’s interests at heart. One result has been the institution, by some of Rousseau’s followers, of some of the most evil political regimes ever known.

Part 2: Freedom Without Liberty

In *A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, surveyed in part 1, Rousseau claimed that seizure of property by some had turned others into serfs, slaves, and subordinates—all alike dependent on their newly acquired masters for the satisfaction of even their most basic needs. Thus, he claimed, where absence of property for all had meant both liberty and equality for all, inequality of property had meant loss of freedom for the many.

He reiterates this claim near the beginning of the *Social Contract*, where he famously asserts, “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains” (420). What he means by this brilliant trope is that people in the state of nature were free because they were self-sufficient. Then a greedy few appropriated the wealth that God created for the enjoyment of all, thereby cutting the rest off from their former means of subsistence. This development gave rise to a distinction of rank between the propertied and the propertyless, making the latter dependent on the former. People who had once prospered on the fat of the land now found that they had to work for others in order to subsist. Hence, property gave rise to dependency—loss of liberty as well as loss of equality. In part 1, where I spelled out this analysis, we also saw what was wrong with these ideas.

In the present part, I discuss how Rousseau hoped to correct the asymmetrical dependency of one person on another by making everyone dependent on the state, thereby making them all equally dependent on each other. Dependency was to be eliminated by being multiplied (442).

Liberty and Capacity

Let us begin our examination of this paradoxical proposal by noting that it embodies a muddled idea of freedom. Despite Rousseau's incessant talk of liberty, he was clearly not complaining that the poor lacked the *liberty* to do what they wanted to do; he was complaining that they lacked the *capacity*, or the *wherewithal*, to do it. To see the distinction (which is explained more fully in Hocutt 1975), contrast the following statements: (1) *I am at liberty to lift 500 pounds or to buy Trump Towers*, and (2) *I am able to lift 500 pounds or to buy Trump Towers*. The first statement, which is true, has to do with *permission*—what I *may* do; the second, which is false, concerns *power*—what I *can* do. Rousseau systematically conflated the two concepts. When he bemoaned the loss of freedom that, he believed, followed the institution of property, he meant to complain not about a dearth of permission, but about an absence of power. In his way of speaking, you are free to do only what you have the capacity, or the wherewithal, to do.

Although socialists have reinforced and perpetuated it, this way of talking was misleading. As Hobbes had already said and Hume had already repeated, freedom rightly so called is merely the absence of man-made impediments to and restraints on conduct. Strictly speaking, we are free to do what we are at liberty to do, even if we lack the means to do it. Thus, I am free to buy Trump Towers or to lift 500 pounds so long as I am under no enforceable prohibition to refrain from doing so. No matter that I lack the money to do the first and the muscle to do the second. Freedom ought not to be confused with power. To repeat: you are free if you are free from the arbitrary constraints of another person's will.

This truism has been obscured by two different uses of the word *freedom*: one to denote liberty, the other to denote capacity. Thus, Karl Marx regularly contrasted *bourgeois freedom* with *socialist freedom*, and Isaiah Berlin famously distinguished *negative freedom* from *positive freedom*. Although these distinctions are real and important, they are not about kinds of freedom. As Berlin knew, the only kind of freedom that truly deserves the name is liberty. Positive and socialist freedom are no more kinds of freedom than sea horses are kinds of horses. The phrase “freedom from want” denotes a good thing, but it is a metaphor not to be taken literally; “absence of want” would be more apt. *Freedom* literally so called is more narrowly defined.

One might reply that liberty is worth little if you lack the means to enjoy it. Marx regularly belittled “bourgeois freedom” as worthless, and Anatole France famously ridiculed it by snidely observing that rich and poor alike are forbidden (that is, not free) to sleep under bridges. But give people a choice between a country in which they may acquire real property and one in which they are precluded from doing so, and

soon you will see droves of unhappy but hopeful souls leaving the latter to join the former, as the dismal history of the former Soviet Union and its dreary satellites confirms. They will be kept in their political prison only with barbed wire and armed guards. Empty promises of heaven on earth will not suffice.

The reasons are obvious: freedom is not only intrinsically good; it is also instrumentally valuable. Where there is freedom to do something, there is usually also freedom to acquire the wherewithal to do it. Hence, contrary to socialist belief, the freest people are the ones most likely to have the means to enjoy their freedom—not because wealth increases liberty, but because liberty increases wealth. That relationship explains why the distinction between *liberty* and *capacity* is so important. Keeping it in mind enables us to put first things first.

The political divide is not between people who think only liberty is important and people who think only capacity is important. Everybody in his right mind values both. People differ, however, regarding which concept should have priority. On the one hand, some, like Rousseau, think that liberty can be increased only by increasing capacity, which they would seek to do by redistributing wealth so as to decrease inequality. On the other hand, some, like Adam Smith, believe that to increase capacity you must first increase liberty, even if one result of so doing is to increase inequality. Accordingly, Rousseau's confusion about liberty is not merely a matter of which word to use. It is at the heart of the political issue.

The Origin of Rousseau's Confusion

That Rousseau was confused about freedom becomes evident when we see how he misdiagnosed his personal problem. Although the essence of liberty is absence of compulsion and restraint by others, it is a striking fact that nobody either compelled Rousseau to live the life that he led or prevented him from selecting another. As is clear from his *Confessions*, he chose his path himself, of his own free will, because he preferred it to the alternatives. Instead of rejecting the wealthy matrons' generosity, he routinely sought it out, then welcomed it for the luxuries it afforded him and the freedom it gave him from the constraints of a job and from the responsibilities of a family. For a good part of his life, he was a best-selling author who boasts in his autobiography of having lived in the grandest homes in Paris. He lived well enough to have once had thirty fancy dress shirts stolen from him. He could have enjoyed the independence he professed to value most if he had been willing to lower his standard of living, fill a regular position, or manage his expenditures more prudently. Instead, he preferred in practice the patronage that he condemned in words.

Recall an incident he recounts near the end of the *Confessions*. There he reports having briefly enjoyed the use of a house and gardens provided by a woman in whose Paris mansion he had been a disgruntled fixture, with a bedroom next door to his matron. After a few months, he was forced to leave his pleasant new accommodations because he refused to accompany this woman on a trip for her health. When Diderot,

who had generously employed Rousseau to write on music for his famous *Encyclopedie*, reminded him of his duties to his wealthy benefactor, Rousseau also broke with him. Rousseau apparently expected to use the woman's domicile free of obligations. He seems to have regarded that privilege as a natural right that should accrue to him as a person of talent, without inconvenience to himself or the requirement of personal service.⁷

This incident illustrates Rousseau's attitude perfectly. Instead of taking concrete steps to get free of his despised dependence on the rich, he condemned in words what he chose in practice, and he followed a lifelong habit of compensating by resorting to fantasy.⁸ When things did not go as he wished, he imagined a frictionless world in which it would be unnecessary to take orders or accept gratuities in order to live the good life because everything necessary for doing so would be provided free of charge by the state, making it unnecessary for him to serve other individuals in order to get what he wanted—a seductive fantasy that socialists have perpetuated ever since to the great detriment of humankind everywhere.

Clearly, Rousseau's problem was that he wanted economic *independence* and *autonomy*, as well as *liberty* properly so called (441). Thus, he wanted neither to be answerable to the prohibitions, commands, and wishes of other persons nor to be limited in realizing his ends by insufficient material means. In short, he wanted what we all want—namely, the freedom *and* the wherewithal to do what we wish when we wish, without having to answer to anybody. The trouble is that Rousseau wanted this condition conferred on him free of charge and without responsibility, as if it belonged to him by natural right, which is why I said earlier that he had the attitude of an arrested adolescent who wants termination of parental restrictions but wishes no interruption of parental support.

Fantasy as Philosophy

Where was Rousseau going to find such a deal? He evidently hoped to find it in the quasi-utopia that he describes in *Social Contract*. In this work, Rousseau states his aim in two ways. At the very beginning, he says, "I want to inquire whether, taking men as they are and laws as they can be, it is possible to have some legitimate and certain rule of administration in civil affairs" (420). It is difficult to reconcile this statement with Rousseau's subsequent correct insistence that "conventions remain as the basis of all legitimate authority among men" (422). Given that view, a society's laws cannot themselves be illegitimate because they are its very measure of legiti-

7. At one place in the *Social Contract*, Rousseau says, "Every man has by nature a right to all that is necessary to him" (428), a confusion of needs with rights that becomes all the more objectionable when the only criterion of need is desire. This thoughtless doctrine has led to the sapheaded notion that people have a natural right to whatever they want, even if it must be at somebody else's expense.

8. In the *Confessions*, Rousseau tells of having become addicted to fantasy when as a boy he read with his father tear-jerker novels of a kind that he himself later wrote.

macy. The statement accords better with Rousseau's frequent but less insistent suggestion that there is a natural, because divinely instituted, measure of justice. Unfortunately, he muddles the issue even further when he declares that although "All justice comes from God," it needs a sanction in conventions to make it effective among men (434). The solution to the puzzle may lie in the fact that Rousseau's test of legitimacy is acceptability: a "legitimate" polity is one that the citizenry accepts. They presumably would not accept what was contrary to their nature, which was given them by God.

A little later in the same document, Rousseau states the aim of his inquiry somewhat differently, saying that he wants "To find a form of association which defends and protects with the whole force of the community the person and goods of every associate, and by means of which each, uniting with all, nevertheless obeys only himself, and remains as free as before" (425). This second statement need not be regarded as different in meaning from the first. If a guarantee of protection without loss of freedom would not make a political order acceptable to most people, then it is difficult to see what would. Unfortunately, as we shall see before we are through, Rousseau promises to protect persons and property by making men economically and politically equal, which will require limiting their freedom. But one thing at a time.

Many readers have taken Rousseau's promise in *Social Contract* to protect the citizen's goods as a guarantee of property, which would have meant that he had suffered a marked change of heart since writing the *Discourse*. This impression is reinforced when he says that the state will turn "usurpation into true right; enjoyment into ownership" (428). It soon develops, however, that only the citizen's *personal* goods, if anything at all, will be protected from seizure. All that owners of real property will be left with apparently is *titles*, and on the very next page Rousseau makes these titles worthless by declaring "the right which every individual has over his own property is always subordinate to the right which the community has over all" (429) and by announcing an intention to conscript all "excess" wealth. He neglects to observe that when the state assumes power over the fruits of property, it effectively takes away the property. That titles remain in the hands of individuals guarantees only nominal, not real, ownership.

Worse, if those who retain titles now have the new responsibility of managing their former property for the benefit of the state or other people rather than for their own profit, they will continue to suffer the burdens of property while ceasing to enjoy its benefits. Under this regime—ownership without enjoyment—the rich and talented will be required to work for their fellow citizens where formerly they worked mainly for themselves. Thus, as noted in the *Discourse*, "the members of the state owe it their services in proportion to their talents" (419). Because the state will be ruled by majority vote, the old masters will have become the new servants, and the former servants will have become the new masters. Slavery, which Rousseau roundly condemns as contrary to nature (422), will not have disappeared; it will merely have changed forms. Where the few once enslaved the many, the many will now enslave the few.

Majority Voting and the General Welfare

Rousseau insists, however, that the state's seizure and regulation of property will neither be an act of theft nor diminish the owner's liberty (428). Instead, he says, it will be made legitimate by the *social contract*, agreement to which will be required of all who expect to enjoy the rights of citizens (425).

Why would owners of property accept this new dispensation? Having firmly rejected the proposition that might makes right (422), Rousseau argues that state control of property will be acceptable to owners because the state, being more powerful than any individual, can protect their "possessions" better than they themselves could (425). From other statements in *Social Contract*, however, we know how little that guarantee is worth, so Rousseau does not dwell on it. Instead, he suggests that under government control the interests of all citizens will be served by their equal participation in democratic governance. Although the details are maddeningly vague, it appears that laws in the new state are to be enacted by majority vote of the assembled citizens and administered by magistrates whom these citizens select from among their fellows (466). Rousseau says that this procedure will improve the prospects that actions taken by the state express what he calls the *general will*, which always intends what he calls the *general welfare*.

Although this way of thinking continues to be influential, its central concepts are hopelessly ambiguous, if not entirely meaningless. Whenever a majority of the citizenry enacts a piece of legislation or elects a magistrate that the minority opposes as detrimental to their welfare, there is no meaningful sense in which the result can be called an expression of the will of the minority that suffers from it. As public-choice theorists James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock (1962) have reminded us, majorities do not serve *all* parties; they serve only that coalition of parties that, having a particular interest in common, is able to outvote a minority with contrary interests. Thus, to take a simple case, imagine a society of three persons: A, B, and C. A and B want a road built at the expense of C, who resists because he not only will not benefit from the road, but also will be made to bear its costs. Under the principle of majority rule, the result is all too predictable: C will be made to pay for a road that only A and B will use.

Of course, Rousseau was trying to describe an ideal in which this sort of thing could not happen. So his description of this ideal makes it a matter of *definition* that neither A nor B nor C would vote for something that did not serve all their interests alike. The trouble is that there neither is nor ever will be such a society. Assuming its existence presupposes a capacity to transcend oneself, a capacity that most people simply do not have, Rousseau is here a long way not only from "men as they are," but also from "laws as they can be." It is true that close friends and members of the same family often treat each other's interests as their own and act for the welfare of others in the group even when doing so requires sacrificing their personal ambitions, but despite socialist tendencies to confuse the political state and the family, the two are completely different. The state is the product of force, the family of love.

Political Altruism and Human Nature

No doubt Rousseau was urging us—that is, everybody everywhere—to love each other as brothers do, but even he knew that his proposal was too unrealistic to be realized. As he admits when he thinks about it, a society of Christians would not need law (479). As Hobbes had made clear, law is needed to curb the behavior of men whose sentiments do not conform to the morality of Christ.

If Rousseau was not deterred by this thought, it is because he sanguinely believed that people can be induced to take any shape that society seeks to impose on them, if only they are molded by the right institutions. Thus, he tellingly remarks, “He who dares to undertake the instituting of a people ought to feel himself capable, as it were, of changing human nature; of transforming each individual, who in himself is a perfect and solitary whole, into part of a greater whole from which this individual receives his life and being” (436).⁹

This presumption, the great delusion of the political left, gets everything backward (Pinker 2002). The truth is, rather, that human nature is rooted in human biology, and human society will take whatever shape it happens to be given by human efforts to meet unalterable needs in the variable circumstances. Human beings are the most adaptable of all creatures, but they never have been and cannot be turned into other-regarding angels. Denial of this truth has had the most horrendous results imaginable, as one utopian after another has demonstrated that even the most cruel and inhumane measures cannot alter human nature.

The General Will as a Meaningless Concept

No doubt realizing that people cannot be made into the self-sacrificing saints that his polity would require, Rousseau also tries to get around the realities with words, over which he had much greater control. Again, he makes it *a matter of definition* that once the social contract has been accepted, the individual and the general will can no longer be distinct (426). This equivalence will obtain, he says, because the individual who accepts the contract will agree to become an indivisible part of an organic whole (430)—a “public person” in whose interests the good citizen submerges his own, thereby making conflict between the two inconceivable (425). Thus, just as the actions of a man’s leg are indistinguishable from the actions of the man whose leg it is, so individual citizens’ interests will cease to be distinguishable from the state’s interests—the “body politic” created by their association (425). In short, because special interests will no longer exist, nothing will remain but the general interest, which every action of the state serves, by definition. True, Rousseau goes on to acknowledge that separate individuals will continue to have particular interests *as persons*, and he

9. This statement is a more accurate description of the presuppositions of the *Social Contract* than its own opening statement, in which Rousseau says he is “taking men as they are and laws as they can be” (420).

admits that these interests will often conflict with each other (426). Nevertheless, he assures us that all *citizens* will have the same interests *as citizens*.

The trouble is that this learned-sounding distinction is double-talk. Because citizens are always persons first, they will always have interests that conflict with other citizens' interests. Thus, special interests are always with us. It is the concept of a general interest—a combination of all interests, including those that are incompatible—that lacks denotation, not just as a matter of fact but of necessity. When a majority supports a policy, its will is real, but a majority is merely a variable coalition of minorities, and the interests served by the majority are merely the joint interests of the minorities that compose it at the time of its entirely temporary existence. It is ludicrous therefore to pretend that the competing interests of minorities miraculously cease to exist whenever a coalition of them becomes large enough to constitute a majority against the rest.

Nor does the postulate that everybody agreed in advance to acquiesce in the will of the majority mean otherwise.¹⁰ Agreeing to abide by the will of the majority is not the same thing as approving whatever the majority wishes, much less wanting whatever it wants. If that outcome is what the social contract is supposed to provide, then there never has been and never will be such a thing. Individuals and groups can cooperate toward common ends and agree not to fight over conflicting ends, but there can be no agreement that other persons' ends automatically become yours as soon as a majority favors them. Acquiescence in the action of a majority no more entails agreement with it than submission to a bandit's demands entails agreement with him.

Prudhon was wrong. Property is not theft, but taxation voted on one group by another is. That fact can be neither disguised nor changed by pointing out that the taxed group was allowed to vote against it. It is an error to confuse democracy with liberty.

Democracy Versus the General Will

Close readers of Rousseau's work will reply that he never formally identifies majority vote with the general will. Nor, they will add, does he explicitly equate the general will with the will of every individual citizen. They are right. The emphasis in Rousseau's political writings was not on the distributive but on the collective. In fact, it was Rousseau who taught socialists to think in terms of the collective, one of the worst sources of confusion in the history of intellect.

Unfortunately, this way of thinking is inherently—albeit, for collectivists, conveniently—ambiguous. In *Democracy and Liberty*, historian William Lecky describes Rousseau as the most inconsistent of political writers ([1896] 1981, ii, 204). He was also one of the most subtle. A rhetorician without parallel, Rousseau could be exquis-

10. Rousseau stipulates that everybody who continues to live in a society thereby accepts its laws: "When the State is instituted, consent is in residence; to live in a territory is to submit oneself to its laws" (466).

itely precise when he wanted to be, but he could also be vague or ambiguous when it served his purposes. Such a writer is capable of both strongly *implying* that the general will serves all interests because it is discovered by democratic means and explicitly *denying* this proposition. Thus, Rousseau begins by insinuating that a majority vote constitutes the general will, but he ends by telling us that no political procedure can do so (430).

Why not? Because despite all the talk of majority voting, Rousseau defines what he calls the *general will* not as what the people *do in fact* vote for but as what they *would* vote for *if they knew what would serve their interests* (431). Because people do not always know what is good for them, “[i]t follows from what precedes that the general will is always upright and always tends toward the public utility; but it does not follow that the deliberations of the people always have the same rectitude” (430), for although “the people is never corrupted, [it is] often deceived” (431). Thus, contrary to what you might have supposed, citizens do not determine the general will by voting; they merely express their fallible opinion as to what it is. Therefore, even unanimity does not guarantee that the general will has been found and expressed.

Rousseau does say that the general will always results from the deliberations of “an adequately informed public” (431), but because he nowhere defines this phrase, one can be forgiven for suspecting that a duly informed public is really one that knows its interests, which would make the claim tautological. It follows that if the general will is to become known, it will have to be discovered by an intellectual and political vanguard that is at once sufficiently acute to know what is in the public interest, sufficiently disinterested to prefer it, and sufficiently persuasive to talk everybody else into it. Rousseau was talking about philosopher kings or communist parties. His apparent endorsement of democracy turns out to be nothing of the sort. When we look more deeply and read further, we see that what he really wants is an *elective aristocracy*, “the best and most natural order” (449). This judgment is correct, of course, but it cannot be reconciled with the strict egalitarianism suggested by the *Discourse*. So he abandons egalitarianism, as we are told that “a rigorous equality would be out of place” (449).

Two Flaws in Rousseau's Concepts

The disclaimer is refreshing, if belated. It also evinces a newfound (though unarticulated) enlightenment, but it would not have been needed at all if Rousseau had not committed two errors: one logical, the other practical.

The logic error was to confuse the state, which is composed of a part of the citizenry, with the citizenry collectively considered, then to draw conclusions about the citizens distributively considered. The result was the cockamamie idea just canvassed—that what serves the state must also serve all of its citizens, and vice versa. As I showed a few paragraphs earlier, this theory is incoherent. The practical problem is choosing the wise and saintly rulers that Rousseau's elective aristocracy would require.

Rousseau says that where the state is sufficiently small, the citizenry will know those it elects to office well enough to choose disinterested people of good character, and he refuses to be responsible for larger states (370). But this situation throws us back on majority rule, and it leaves the procedural question unanswered. If people do not know their own interests, how will they make laws and elect magistrates who will serve them?

Like many another intellectual, Rousseau may have thought this question self-answering: just accept the leadership of intellectuals like him. Not being rich, such intellectuals will be compassionate. Not being poor, they will have less reason to envy the rich. Being learned, they will know how to improve things; being disinterested, they will seek to advance everybody's welfare. But why should we assume that intellectuals, whose specialty is words, will also be expert in practical affairs? And why should we expect intellectuals to be exempt from the human tendency to look out for their own interests first, just as everybody else does? Nobody who has ever spent time around a university believes Rousseau's plan to be a workable one.

Although Rousseau acknowledges that political corruption is not only a danger but even inevitable (456), he never suggests ways of putting limits on it, as did Montaigne. Instead, by talking incessantly of the "sovereignty" of the people, whose power to do what they wish is unlimited, he implies that no restrictions on the powers of government are necessary. Thus, he ends up virtually guaranteeing that the people in his "republic" will eventually be ruled by a self-anointed intellectual class having unlimited authority and guided only by its own concerns, which it will mistake for the general weal. No wonder, then, that Rousseau's critics have sometimes accused this supposed friend of liberty and democracy of setting the stage for the fascist and communist totalitarian dictatorships that plagued the world during the century just past!¹¹

John Rawls on the Social Contract

We still have no answer to the larger question: Why would the privileged classes agree to an arrangement wherein their wealth would be confiscated and their talents and energies would be conscripted for use by others? Remember: Rousseau says that the social contract is not legitimate without agreement. "The law of the plurality of votes presupposes unanimity at least once" (425). Therefore, he needs an answer to the question of how the social contract will obtain this unanimity.

Because Rousseau did not have an answer to this question, his twentieth-century acolyte John Rawls takes it up again in his much celebrated book *A Theory of Justice*

11. Bertrand Russell (1945, 685) makes this charge. Although the criticism has merit, I think it must be added that there is a reading of Rousseau in which the power of the state would be severely limited. In one passage, Rousseau defines the general will as that which is left when conflicting particular wills have been factored out, leaving "the sum of the differences." If the state were confined in that way, it would have a highly restricted set of powers. Needless to say, this reading has not been the usual interpretation of his views, nor is it easy to reconcile with the rest of what he says.

(1971), in which he writes that everybody *should* agree to a socialist redistribution of wealth and power because they *would* agree to it behind a “veil of ignorance” that conceals from them knowledge of the status they would be destined to have in the resulting social order. Fearful that, without the protections of egalitarian socialism, they might one black day find themselves among the less-fortunate members of society, even the rich and powerful will agree to accept the redistributive state’s promise of social and economic insurance against misfortune.

Unfortunately, Rawls fails to explain why someone *should* agree to something just because he *would* agree to it if he did not know better. To see the problem, consider an example owing, I believe, to Ronald Dworkin. Suppose that a painting I own has a market value of \$5,000. That I would agree to sell this painting for a mere \$50 if I did not know its worth does not mean that I should sell it for that amount now that I am better informed. Similarly, that a man who is rich, or expects to become so, *would* sign on to socialism if he did not know that he would fare better without it provides no reason whatsoever to conclude that he *should* do so when he knows full well that he will pay the costs while others reap the benefits.

Rawls says that such an attitude would be seen as unfair in a state of “reflective equilibrium,” but this reply, though impressively obscure, clearly begs the question: the correctness of the socialist ideal of “fairness” is precisely what is in doubt. Of course, this doubt presumes that individual men are interested mainly, if not exclusively, in their personal well-being; as this assumption is one that both Rawls and Rousseau make, however, we are here entitled to it, too.

The obvious conclusion is that there is no compelling reason why the rich, the talented, the energetic, the ambitious, or anyone else with a competitive advantage in the race of life should willingly sign on to Rousseau’s (or Rawls’s) social contract, with its promise of enforced equality for all but the few who manage to get on top by becoming part of the governing class. If the well-born and gifted are persuaded to sign on, it will have to be by force or fraud. Given human nature, no one can be expected to surrender an advantage willingly, even if this advantage is in large part prospective. Only an *argumentum ad baculum* could persuade him to do so, which is why Rousseau’s followers soon realized that if a change in regimes is to occur, it will have to be imposed by overwhelming force in a violent revolution.

Force as “Freedom”

Rousseau understood this necessity, too. He acknowledges as much when, abruptly abandoning the pretense that might does not make right, he says that some recalcitrant souls would have to be “forced to be free” (427). He was no doubt correct that force would be necessary to avoid political disunity in a state dedicated to confiscating property and commandeering talent, but only someone who has little understanding of true freedom and little appreciation for it could suggest that such coercion

constitutes liberty. Here Rousseau at least makes an uncharacteristic effort to justify his claim with arguments. His justification, however, is bogus.

We have already examined Rousseau's first argument—the thesis that by becoming part of the collective body and by participating in the enactment of laws and selection of magistrates, every citizen agrees to submerge his will in that of the whole and to accept its commands as his own. That alleged agreement is why, according to Rousseau, obeying the state entails no loss of liberty. A citizen who does so is merely doing what he has commanded himself to do; hence, he suffers no loss of liberty as a result. No matter that the state may command him to do what he does not want to do. Freedom, Rousseau assures us, does not lie in doing what you want to do, but in exercising control over your desires (427).¹² In this double-talk, we see once again the depth of Rousseau's confusion about freedom. People who do what they want to do are doing it *of their own free will*, as we normally use the expression (Hocutt 1975). Rousseau's claim to the contrary is not just false; it is incoherent.

Rousseau also says that every person who signs the social contract will be compensated for the loss of his natural liberties with the more valuable liberties to be provided under the new convention. Thus, "in giving himself to all, [each citizen] gives himself to nobody; and as there is not one associate over whom we do not acquire the same rights . . . we gain the equivalent of all that we lose" (425). The liberties that will be lost, however, are clearer than the liberties that will be gained in exchange. The only advantage that Rousseau names—the promise that the state will come to the aid of all who fall on hard times—is not a form of liberty, but rather a guarantee of security. I shall not spell out here the economic arguments for doubting the state's ability to back up this guarantee, but the spectacular collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellites should at least give us pause, and Ludwig von Mises (1981), who anticipated the collapse by seventy years, clearly states the reasons for it.

Diehard socialists will reply that the Soviet Union and its satellites never enjoyed "true socialism." Maybe not, but they came as close as it is reasonable to expect any state to be able to come, and their failure was inevitable given the principles that they professed but, revealingly, never put into practice. The centrally important fact is this: because human beings have vastly differing abilities and interests, there never has been and never will be a society without inequality. As experience has shown, any attempt to abolish inequality will be resisted mightily or subverted covertly, and it will require totalitarian powers and a willingness to sacrifice every-

12. Here Rousseau falls victim to a fallacy that goes back to Plato, who argued that a person doing what he wanted to do was not free because he was following the dictates of Desire, a metaphor that Plato apparently took literally. In the resulting view, freedom ceases to be *political* and becomes *metaphysical*: the "free" individual is the one who controls his desires rather than being controlled by them. Unfortunately, what this conception describes is not *freedom* but *self-control*. The two concepts are often confused with each other by being put under the single heading *autonomy*, which means *self-rule* but does not resolve the question of whether the alternative is literal rule by another or merely metaphorical rule by one's desires. This confusion is just part of a long-standing muddle about *free will*, a metaphysical idea that often is, but ought not to be, confused with freedom, which is irreducibly political.

thing, including human life, to achieve this unrealizable but holy cause. No wonder, then, that what men in socialist states got for the loss of their liberty was not equality but terror and mass murder (Pipes 2001).

It is true that the moderate versions of socialism adopted by welfare states still survive and boast of their replacement of personal charity with institutional compassion. Although organized provision for the poor is certainly consistent with human nature and may be practicable even when not optimal, it must be distinguished from the attempt to make everybody equal—an ideal that cannot even be defined coherently, much less achieved in practice. Furthermore, there are practical limits on public welfare. The most generous of the world's welfare states are facing serious financial trouble in the form of unfunded debt. They would have failed already if it were not for the capitalist economies on which they are parasitic.¹³ Finally, dependence on government welfare does not increase autonomy and dignity. As Charles Murray (1984) has shown in *Losing Ground*, it decreases them. There are no more dependent persons than the “welfare queen” and her offspring.¹⁴

Egalitarianism as Evil

The reply to this view might be that free economies foster competition that destroys compassion, leaving to fend for themselves those who are least able to do so. This reply overlooks the fact that charity is more common in capitalist countries than in socialist societies, which seek not to foster beneficence but to eliminate the need for it by collectivizing and institutionalizing it. The socialist idea is that individuals need not be compassionate where there is a compassionate state; but if it means anything to say that the *state* will be compassionate, it means that its *officers* will be. For reasons already stated, it is not clear what warrants this sanguine expectation. As experience has shown, government officials tend like other people to serve their own interests first, often to the detriment of their official duties. We would do well to remember the medieval church. Created to save souls, it ended up enriching bishops. Why should we expect better behavior from government bureaucrats?

Socialists frequently offer another defense: inequality between human beings is so evil that attempts to eradicate it are worthy even when they do not work. Even if socialists grant that, so far, all socialist measures have failed and that they have done more harm than good, in their minds these experiences prove only that they should persist in seeking policies that will succeed. If one government program proves ineffective, spend more money on it, or try another. Eventually something will work. Or so they fervently believe, and their belief cannot be refuted, for it is a faith that, like

13. The generous welfare programs in western Europe have also been made possible by the fact that the United States has borne the burden of their defense for the past half-century, leaving them free to spend more on domestic programs.

14. Murray's austere statistical argument for this conclusion is given vividness in the stories told by Theodore Dalrymple (2001).

other faiths, is resistant to evidence. Like Christianity, which is based on an unfounded hope for an otherworldly heaven, socialism is based on an unfounded hope for heaven in this world.

So far the socialists have never produced a heaven on earth, but they certainly have wrought or encouraged many earthly hells (Pipes 2001). Their failure to produce heaven is often excused on the grounds that their intentions are good even when their methods are bad, but the excuse is flawed. Ends cannot be evaluated correctly without considering the means available to achieve them, and if only evil means are available, the ends, too, must be regarded as evil. The results of socialist reluctance to engage in an advance survey of the available means to their end therefore have been predictably tragic. Uncritical dedication to equality has sometimes caused socialists to use the most inhumane means to achieve it. Socialist “compassion” was not sufficient to deter leaders of the Soviet Union, China, and other countries from killing millions of their own citizens, imprisoning millions of others, and terrorizing the rest—sometimes with the obscene excuse that eggs must be broken if omelets are to be made.

Perhaps it is time to notice that socialist means may be evil not *in spite of* the intrinsic goodness of the hoped-for end, but *because* the goal of equality, being unachievable, is itself evil (Rothbard 2000). As already observed, competition for status is natural to human beings, so attempts to avoid or abolish it are doomed to fail—which is why socialist regimes do not in fact oppose or seek to abolish hierarchy, but are merely corrupted by professing to seek that goal. Rousseau tellingly provides that the magistrates of his republic are to enjoy powers and privileges appropriate to their responsibilities. He disallows ranks not approved and controlled by the state, whose officers will always enjoy wealth and perquisites not available to anybody else. As this concession shows, even socialists know that ranks cannot be abolished. If only they would now realize that more human beings can be made happy if we will give up trying to make them all equal and seek instead to make them all rich, which we can do by first making them all free (Turner 2002).

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