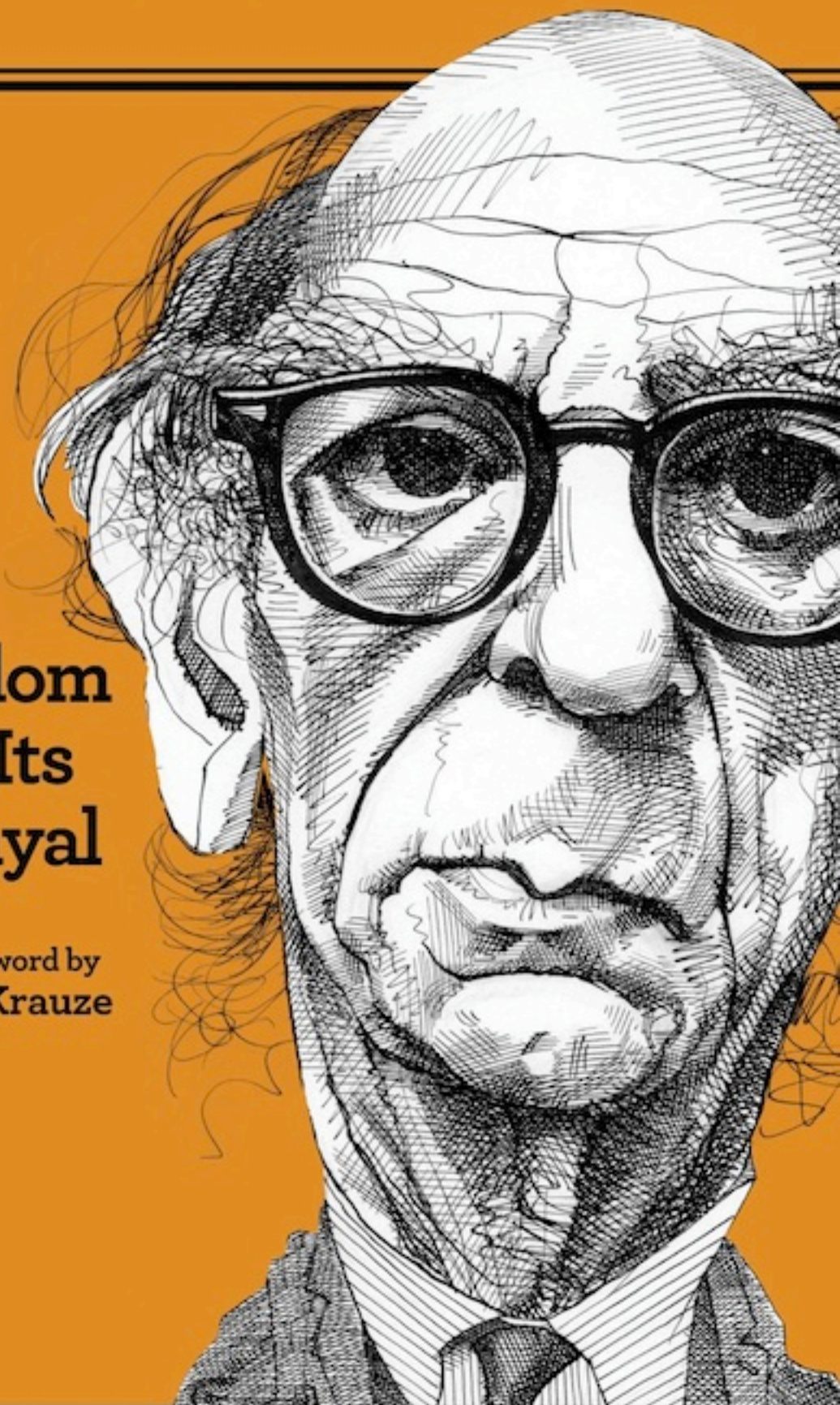


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Freedom and Its Betrayal

With a foreword by
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Rousseau

Starting from unlimited freedom I arrive at unlimited despotism.

Shigalev in Dostoevsky's *The Devils*

THE CELEBRATED HISTORIAN, Lord Acton, once observed about Jean Jacques Rousseau that he 'had produced more effect with his pen than Aristotle, or Cicero, or Saint Augustine, or Saint Thomas Aquinas, or any other man who ever lived'. And this observation, although obviously exaggerated, nevertheless conveys something which is not totally untrue. Against it may be cited the remark of Madame de Staël, who said: 'Rousseau said nothing new, but set everything on fire.'

What constitutes the greatness of Rousseau? Why is he regarded as an important thinker? What did he say? Did he make any new or original discoveries? Did he really say nothing new (is Madame de Staël right?), and if he did not, how is it that such words as Acton's can be applied to him at all?

Some say that his genius lies only in his wonderful eloquence, his hypnotic style, for example in the prose of the *Confessions*, a book very difficult for anyone to put down, a book which has had more effect upon readers than almost any similar work of literature. But was there then really nothing new in what Rousseau said? Was it really only old wine in new bottles? Some place his originality in the fact that, whereas previous thinkers addressed themselves to reason, Rousseau glorifies the passions. But this is scarcely true.

There is a great deal about passion and sentiment in Diderot and Helvétius, in Shaftesbury and Hume, who always say that, so far from suppressing men's feelings, as the more austere religions, and also philosophers like Plato and Spinoza, had demanded, man must not curb or maim his spontaneous nature. Certainly the emotions may have to be canalised or guided, but on no account must they be suppressed. On the contrary, more than any other thinkers who ever lived, the school of so-called empiricist thinkers in the eighteenth century stressed the value of feeling, of human spontaneity and warmth. No writer is more passionate, and indeed at times more sentimental, on that subject than Diderot.

If we look at Rousseau's writings, to all appearance the exact opposite is the case. Rousseau is not at all in favour of unbridled feeling. On the contrary, he says – and he has a great philosophical tradition behind him – that sentiments divide people, whereas reason unites them. Sentiments, feelings are subjective, individual, vary from person to person, country to country, clime to clime: whereas reason alone is one in all men, and alone is always right. So that this celebrated distinction, according to which Rousseau is the prophet of feeling against cold rationalism, is certainly, on the evidence of his writings, fallacious.

There are, according to Rousseau, certain questions about morals and politics, about how to live, what to do, whom to obey, to which many conflicting answers have been given by the accumulation of human feelings, prejudices, superstitions, played on by various causal – natural – factors, which have made men through the centuries say now this, now that. But if we are to obtain true answers to these questions, then this is not the way to do it. We must ask the questions in such terms as make them answerable; and that can be done only by means of reason. Just as in the sciences a true answer given by one scientist will be accepted by all other scientists who are equally reasonable, so in ethics and politics the rational answer is the correct answer: the truth is one, error alone is multiple.

This is all perfectly commonplace. Few philosophers have failed to say something of the kind, and Rousseau simply repeats the opinions of his predecessors in saying that it is reason which is the same in all men, and unites, and emotions which are different, and divide. What then was it that was so very original? Rousseau's name is, of course, associated with the 'social contract', but there is nothing new in that either. The notion that men in society, in order to preserve themselves, have had historically to enter some kind of compact; or if not historically, at any rate that they behave as if they had done so; that men in society, because some are stronger than others, or more malevolent than others, have had to set up institutions whereby the weak majority is able to prevent the strong minority from riding roughshod over them – that is an idea certainly as old as the Greeks.

What, then, is it, apart from minor variations, that Rousseau added to this theme? Some might say he effected a reconciliation between individual liberty and the authority of the community. But this was one question which had been discussed times out of number by his predecessors. Indeed, the central question which occupied thinkers like Machiavelli and Bodin, Hobbes and Locke, was this very question. Nothing is more familiar or more natural in the history of political thought than the question 'How is men's desire for liberty to be reconciled with the need for authority?' It is clear to all political thinkers that individuals wish to be free – that is to say, they wish to do whatever they wish to do, without being prevented from doing it by other people, or coerced into doing something they do not want to do – and that this freedom from coercion is one of the chief ends or values for the sake of which people are prepared to fight, one of the ends whose realisation is indispensable for leading the kind of life which most men wish to lead.

On the other hand, of course, there is the necessity for organised existence. Men do live in society, for whatever cause or reason; and because men live in society, individuals cannot be

allowed to do whatever they like, because this may get in the way of other people, and frustrate their ends too much. Therefore some kind of social arrangement has to be made.

Among earlier thinkers this very central problem had led to various answers. It led to answers which varied in accordance with the view of the human individual taken by these different thinkers. Hobbes, who took a somewhat low view of human nature and thought that man on the whole was bad rather than good, savage rather than tame, thought that strong authority was necessary in order to curb the naturally wild, unruly and bestial impulses of man; and therefore drew the frontier between authority and liberty in favour of authority. He thought that a good deal of coercion was needed to prevent human beings from destroying each other, from ruining each other's lives, from creating conditions in which life would be perilous, nasty, brutish and short for the vast majority of society. Therefore he left the area for individual liberty rather small.

Locke, on the other hand, who believed that men were good more than wicked, thought that it was not necessary to draw the frontier quite so far in favour of authority, and held that it was possible to create a society in which some of those rights which, according to him, men possessed before they entered into societies – while they were in the 'state of nature' – were still retained by them even in civil society; and allowed men a good many more individual rights than Hobbes did, on the ground that they were more benevolent by nature, and that it was not necessary to crush them, coerce them and restrain them to quite the severe degree demanded by Hobbes in order to create that minimum of security which alone enables society to survive.

But the point I wish to make is that the argument between them is simply an argument about where the frontier is to be drawn, and the frontier is a shifting one. In the Middle Ages, when political thought was largely theological, this took the form of disagreement about whether original sin, which made

man wild, wicked, voracious and unruly, was something stronger in him than natural or God-given reason, which made him seek after good and proper ends, implanted in him by God. In more secular ages, when these concepts became insensibly translated into secular terms, the same argument as to where the frontier was to be drawn took a more secular historical or psychological form. The question now was: 'How much liberty and how much authority? How much coercion versus how much individual freedom?' Some compromise had to be reached: and you simply arrived at the solution – at the estimation of where the frontier must be drawn – in accordance with what seemed to you to be the true constitution of human nature, in the light of, perhaps, such scientific data as the influence of climate, of environment, and other similar factors, which a thinker like Montesquieu, for example, takes into such great consideration.

The original aspect of Rousseau's teaching is that this entire approach will not do at all. His notion of liberty and his notion of authority are very different from those of previous thinkers, and although he uses the same words, he puts into them a very different content. This, indeed, may be one of the great secrets of his eloquence and of his immense effectiveness, namely that, while he appears to be saying things not very different from his predecessors, using the same kinds of sentences, and apparently the same concepts, yet he alters the meanings of the words, he twists the concepts in such a fashion that they produce an electrifying effect upon the reader, who is insensibly drawn by the familiar expressions into wholly unfamiliar country.

Rousseau says one thing and conveys another. He appears to be arguing along old-fashioned lines, but the vision which he projects before the reader is something totally unlike the schema which he appears to borrow from his predecessors. Let us take, for example, such central concepts in his teaching as the notion of liberty, the notion of contract, the notion of nature.

First, liberty. For Rousseau the whole idea of compromising

liberty, of saying 'Well now, we cannot have total liberty, because that will lead to anarchy and chaos; we cannot have complete authority, because that will lead to the total crushing of individuals, despotism and tyranny; therefore we must draw the line somewhere between, arrange a compromise' – this kind of thinking is totally unacceptable. Liberty for him is an absolute value. He looks on liberty as if it were a kind of religious concept. For him, liberty is identical with the human individual himself. To say that a man is a man, and to say that he is free, are almost the same.

What is a man for Rousseau? A man is somebody responsible for his acts – capable of doing good and evil, capable of following the path either of right or of wrong. If he is not free, this distinction becomes meaningless. If a man is not free, if a man is not responsible for what he does, if a man does not do what he does because he wants to do it, because this is his personal, human goal, because in this way he achieves something which he, and not somebody else, at this moment desires – if he does not do that, he is not a human being at all: for he has no accountability. The whole notion of moral responsibility, which for Rousseau is the essence of man almost more than his reason, depends upon the fact that a man can choose, choose between alternatives, choose between them freely, be uncoerced.

If a man is coerced, coerced by somebody else, by a tyrant, or even by material circumstances, then it is absurd to say that he chooses; for Rousseau he becomes a thing, a chattel, an object in nature, something from which no accountability can be expected. Tables and chairs, and even animals, cannot be regarded as doing right and wrong, for they either do not do anything, or know not what they do, and if they do not know they cannot be said to act; and not to act is not to be a human being. Action is choosing, choosing implies selection between alternative goals. Someone who cannot choose between alternative goals because he is compelled is to that extent not human. This would be the case if he

is an object determined in nature, as the physicists had taught, simply a bundle of nerves and blood and bones, a collection of atoms, as much under the sway of material laws as the inanimate objects of nature. Alternatively, if he is determined not as things are determined in nature, but in another way – because he is bullied or coerced by a tyrant, because he is made the creature of somebody else who plays upon his fears, or his hopes, or his vanity, and is manipulated like a puppet – a creature like that is equally not fully capable of freedom, not fully capable of action, and is therefore not fully a human being.

There is no saying but what a man in this condition – for Rousseau, a slave – might not be happy, but happiness is not the goal of men: the goal is to live the right kind of life. Therefore, for Rousseau, the proposition that slaves may often be happier than free men does not begin to justify slavery, and for this reason he sharply and indignantly rejects the utilitarianism of people like Helvétius. Slavery may be a source of happiness: but it is monstrous all the same. For man to wish to be a slave may be prudent, but it is disgusting, detestably degrading. For ‘slavery [...] is against nature’, and the unanimity of servitude is quite different from the unanimity of a genuine assembly of men. ‘To renounce liberty’, declares Rousseau, ‘is to renounce being a man, to surrender the rights of humanity, and even its duties. [...] Such a renunciation is not compatible with man’s nature.’

This means that for a man to lose his liberty is for him to cease to be a man, and that is why a man cannot sell himself into slavery, for once he becomes a slave, he is no longer a man, and therefore has no rights, no duties, and a man cannot cancel himself out, he cannot commit an act whose consequence is that he can commit no further acts. To do this is to commit moral suicide, and suicide is not a human action – ‘death is not an event in life’. Liberty, therefore, for Rousseau, is not something which can be adjusted or compromised: you are not allowed to give away now a little of it, now much more of it; you are not allowed

to barter so much freedom for so much security, so much freedom for so much happiness. To yield 'a little' of your liberty is like dying a little, dehumanising yourself a little; and the belief which is most passionately held by Rousseau, one of the values to which he devoted more eloquence than to almost any other, is this notion of human integrity, the fact that the ultimate crime, the one sin not to be borne, is dehumanisation of man, degradation and exploitation of man. He spends a great deal of his passionate rhetoric on denouncing those who use other people for their own selfish purposes – not because they make the people whom they use unhappy, but because they deform them, they make them lose their human semblance. That is, for him, the sin against the Holy Ghost. In short, human freedom – the capacity to choose ends independently, autonomously – is for Rousseau an absolute value, and to say of a value that it is absolute is to say that one cannot compromise over it at all.

So far so good. Rousseau has made clear that his attitude towards man entails regarding liberty as the most sacred of human attributes – indeed not as an attribute at all, but as the essence of what being a man is. But there are other values too. It is impossible simply to declare that freedom, individual freedom, permission for men to do what they like, a situation in which anybody does anything, is the ideal condition of man. This is for two reasons. In the first place there is the empirical or historical reason. For one reason or another, for one cause or another, men do live in societies. Why this happens, Rousseau never quite clearly explains. Possibly it is because of the inequality of gifts, which makes some men stronger than others, and enables them to assert their power over others, and so enslave them. Perhaps also because of some inevitable law of social evolution, perhaps because of some natural instinct of sociableness which drives people to live together. Perhaps, again, for some such reasons as those which the Encyclopedists spoke of: division of labour and co-operation for the purpose of leading a life which satisfies a

greater number of human wishes, and the wishes of more individuals, than the isolated life of savages could satisfy.

Sometimes Rousseau talks about the savage as if he was happy, innocent and good; at other times as if he was merely simple and barbarous. But be that as it may, men do live in society, and consequently have to create rules whereby human beings must so conduct themselves as not to get in each other's way too much, not frustrate each other excessively, not employ their power in such a way as to thwart too many of each other's purposes and ends. So now we are faced with the problem: How is a human being to remain absolutely free (for if he is not free, he is not human), and yet not be allowed to do absolutely everything he wants? Yet if he is stopped, how can he be free? For what is freedom, if it is not doing what he wants, and not being stopped from doing it?

Secondly, there is also for Rousseau a further and a deeper reason for coercion. Rousseau was, after all, a citizen of Geneva, and deeply affected by its Calvinist traditions; and therefore, for him, there is an ever-present vision of the rules of life. He is deeply concerned about right and wrong, about justice and injustice. There are certain ways of living which are right, and certain ways of living which are wrong. In common with the rest of the eighteenth century he believes that the question 'How should I live?' is a real question; and therefore, however we may come by it, by reason, or by some other route, that there is some answer to it.

Given that I have obtained this answer – or that I think I have obtained it – it will take the form of rules of life which, in effect, say 'Do thus: do not do thus', or statements of the form 'This is wrong: this is right. This is just: this is unjust. This is good: this is bad. This is handsome: this is ugly.' But once we have rules, once we have laws, principles, canons, once we have some kind of regulations which prescribe conduct, what is to happen to liberty? How can liberty be compatible with regulations, which

after all hem man in, prevent him from doing absolutely anything he wants, tell him what to do and what not to do, forbid him to do certain things, control him to a certain degree?

Rousseau is very passionate about this. He says that these laws, these rules of life, are not conventions; they are not utilitarian devices invented by man simply for the purpose of achieving some short-term, or even long-term, subjective purpose. Not at all. Let me quote from him again. He speaks of 'the law of nature, the sacred imprescriptible law which speaks to the heart of man and to his reason', and says that it is 'graven on the hearts of men better than all the rubbish of Justinian'. The power of willing or of choosing the right path, he claims, is not explicable by any mechanical laws. It is something inherent in man, and the subject matter of no natural science. The moral laws which man obeys are absolute, something from which man knows that he must not depart. In this respect Rousseau's view is a secular version of Calvinism, for the one thing which he perpetually insists upon is that laws are not conventions, are not utilitarian devices, but simply the drawing up in terms suitable to the particular time and place and people of regulations embodying sacred truths, sacred rules which are not man-made, but eternal, universal and absolute.

So we have a paradox. We have two absolute values: the absolute value of freedom and the absolute value of the right rules. And we are not allowed to compromise between them. We are not allowed to do what Hobbes thought might be done, namely to establish a *de facto* regime allowing so much freedom, so much authority, so much control, so much individual initiative. Neither of the absolute values may be derogated from: to derogate from freedom is to kill man's immortal soul; to derogate from the rules is to permit something absolutely wrong, absolutely bad, absolutely wicked, to fly against the sacred source of the rules, called sometimes nature, sometimes conscience, sometimes God – but which in any case is absolute. This is the dilemma

in which Rousseau is plunged, and it is very different from the problem of those previous thinkers who believed in adjustment, in compromise, in empirical devices as means for finding a solution which would of course not be ideal, but adequate; neither wholly good nor wholly evil, but more good than evil; something enabling human beings to carry on not too badly, reasonably well; something based upon common sense and due respect, moderate, decent respect for most of each other's wishes, so that people on the whole get, not indeed all they want, but protection for minimal 'rights', and more than they would get under some other system. This kind of outlook, typical of Hobbes and Locke, Helvétius and Mill, is for Rousseau totally unacceptable. An absolute value means that you cannot compromise, you cannot modify; and he puts this in a very dramatic fashion. He says that the problem for him is 'to find a form of association [...] in which each, while uniting himself with all, yet may still obey only himself alone and remain as free as before'.

This certainly puts the paradox in an appropriately paradoxical form. How can we at one and the same time unite ourselves with other people, and therefore found a form of association which must exercise some degree of authority, of coercion – very different from being entirely free or solitary in a state of nature – and yet remain free, that is, not obey these same people?

Rousseau's world-famous answer was given by him in the *Social Contract*, and it is that each man, 'in giving himself to all, gives himself to nobody'. This celebrated formula, evocative as it is, is as dark and mysterious now as it ever was. Rousseau loved paradox, but his strangeness as a thinker goes deeper than that. He was obviously deeply tormented by the dilemma of freedom versus moral authority, on neither horn of which he wished to impale himself. Then suddenly there came to him a blinding solution to it. In a letter to Malesherbes he gives a vivid account of how this revelation dawned upon him. He was on his way to visit his friend Diderot in prison when the solution of

the problem of human vice and virtue came upon him with a blinding flash of inspiration. He felt like a mathematician who had suddenly solved a long and torturing problem, like an artist to whom a vision had suddenly been vouchsafed, like a mystic who had suddenly seen the truth, the transcendental beatific truth itself. He tells us how he sat down at the roadside and wept and was beside himself, and how this was the central event of his entire life. The tone in which he communicates the answers to the ancient puzzles, both in the *Social Contract* and in other works, is exactly that of a man possessed by a single idea, of a maniac who suddenly sees a cosmic solution vouchsafed to him alone, somebody who for the first time in history has suddenly found the answer to a riddle which had for centuries tormented the whole of humanity, which previous great thinkers, perhaps Plato, perhaps the founder of Christianity, had in some degree anticipated, but which he and he alone had at last found in its full richness, so that nobody need trouble to look for the solution again.

He is, at such moments, like a mad mathematician who has found a solution which is not merely true, but demonstrable, by rules of such iron logic that nobody will ever reopen the question. What is this solution? Rousseau proceeds like a geometer, with two lines which intersect each other at one point and one only. He says to himself: 'Here is liberty and here is authority, and it is difficult – it is logically impossible – to arrange a compromise. How are we to reconcile them?' The answer has a kind of simplicity and a kind of lunacy which maniacal natures are often capable of. There is no question of compromise. The problem must be viewed in such a way that one suddenly perceives that, so far from being incompatible, the two opposed values are not opposed at all, not two at all, but one. Liberty and authority cannot conflict for they are *one*; they coincide; they are the reverse and obverse of the same medal. There is a liberty which is identical with authority; and it is possible to have a personal freedom

which is the same as complete control by authority. The more free you are, the more authority you have, and also the more you obey; the more liberty, the more control.

How is this mysterious point of intersection to be achieved? Rousseau's solution is that, after all, freedom simply consists in men wanting certain things and not being prevented from having them. What, then, do they want? What I necessarily want is that which is good for me – that which alone will satisfy my nature. Of course, if I do not know what is good for me, then when I get what I want, I suffer, because it turns out not to be what I had really wanted at all. Therefore those alone are free who not merely want certain things but also know what, in fact, will alone satisfy them.

If a man knows what will satisfy him, then he is endowed with reason; and reason gives him the answer to the question: 'What should I seek for in order that I may be – that my nature may be – fully satisfied?' What is true for one rational man will be true for other rational men, just as, in the case of the sciences, what one scientist finds to be true will be accepted by other scientists; so that if you have reached your conclusion by a valid method from true premisses, using correct rules, you may be certain that other people, if they are rational, will arrive at the same solution; or alternatively, if you feel sure of the rationality of your thought, but they arrive at some different solution, this alone shows you that they cannot possibly be rational; and you may safely ignore their conclusions.

Rousseau knows that, since nature is a harmony (and this is the great premiss, the great and dubious premiss of almost all of eighteenth-century thought), it follows that what I truly want cannot collide with what somebody else truly wants. For the good is what will truly satisfy anyone's rational demands; and if it were the case that what I truly want does not tally with what somebody else truly, in other words rationally, wants, then two true answers to two genuine questions will be incompatible

with each other; and that is logically impossible. For that would mean that nature is not a harmony, that tragedy is inevitable, that conflict cannot be avoided, that somewhere in the heart of things there is something irrational, that do what I may, be I never so wise, whatever weapons of reason I employ, however good I am, however upright, however clear-headed and reasonable and profound and wise, I may yet want something when an equally wise, equally good and virtuous man may wish the opposite of it. There will be nothing to choose between us: no criterion of morality, no principle of justice, divine or human. Therefore tragedy will turn out, after all, to be due not to human error, human stupidity and human mistakes, but to a flaw in the universe; and that conclusion neither Rousseau nor any other prominent eighteenth-century thinker, with the exception, perhaps, of the Marquis de Sade, accepts. But Sade was a notoriously vicious madman, and when Voltaire and Hume hinted at something of the kind, this was put down to the cynicism of the one and the scepticism of the other, in neither case to be taken too seriously; indeed neither Voltaire nor Hume were any too anxious to stress this aspect of their thought.

Consequently, if nature is a harmony, then anything which satisfies one rational man must be of such a kind as to be compatible, at any rate, with whatever satisfies other rational men. Rousseau argues that all that is necessary is for men not to seek the kind of ends which conflict with the ends of others. Why do they now tend to seek such ends? Because they are corrupt, because they are not rational, because they are not natural; and this concept of nature in Rousseau, although in certain respects like the concept of nature in other thinkers, nevertheless acquires a tone of its own. Rousseau is sure that he knows what it is to be a natural man: to him to be natural is to be good, and if all men were natural, they would all be good; what they would then seek would be something which would make each and all of them satisfied, taken together, as a single harmonious whole. For

the unanimity of rational beings, willing rational ends which, *ex hypothesi*, are one single end, though willed by many individual wills, is a very singular affair. Let me quote him again: 'As long as several men in the assembly regard themselves as a single body they have only a single will [...]. The constant willing of all the members of the State is the general will.' This 'general will' is something that 'penetrates into a man's innermost being, and concerns itself with his will no less than with his actions'.

We may well, at this point, ask what this general will is. What is there about these men in the assembly that generates something which can be called a single will which holds for them all? Rousseau's answer is that, just as all men who argue rationally reach the same truth about matters of fact (politics and morals apart), and these truths are always necessarily compatible, so men in the same condition of nature – that is to say, unperverted, uncorrupted, not pulled at by selfish interests, not pulled at by regional or sectional interests, not enslaved by fear or by unworthy hopes, men not bullied, not twisted out of their proper nature by the wickedness of other men – men in that condition must want that which, if it is obtained, will be equally good for all other men who are as good as they are. Therefore, so long as we are able somehow or other to regain, to recapture, what is for him the original innocent state of nature in which men were not yet prey to the many passions, to the many wicked and evil impulses, which civilisation has bred in the human breast, natural harmony, happiness and goodness will once more be the lot of human society.

Rousseau's notion of the natural man was, naturally, affected by the kind of man he was. Rousseau was a petit bourgeois from Geneva who lived his early life as a tramp, and who was at odds with the society of his time, and was the prey of many kinds of what nowadays are called inferiority complexes. Consequently his notion of a natural man is the idealised opposite of the kind of persons whom he particularly detested and disliked. He

denounces not merely the rich, not merely the powerful: few moralists have failed to regard these two classes as the natural enemies of society. He denounced, and is almost the first to denounce, a very different set of persons, and by this means deeply affected the consciousness of the next century. For all that he was a composer and a musical theorist, he detested the arts and the sciences; he disliked every form of sophistication, every form of refinement, every form of fastidiousness. He is the first person to say quite explicitly and openly that the good man is not merely simple, not merely poor – sentiments which many a Christian thinker has held – he goes further and thinks that the rough is better than the smooth, the savage better than the tame, the disturbed better than the tranquil. Rousseau is filled with deep resentment of cliques, of coteries, of sets; above all he suffers from a deep resentment of intellectuals, of those who take pride in cleverness, of experts or specialists who set themselves up over the heads of the people. All those nineteenth-century thinkers who are violently anti-intellectual, and in a sense anti-cultural, indeed the aggressive philistines of the next two centuries – whom Nietzsche called *Kulturphilister* – including Nietzsche himself, are the natural descendants of Rousseau.

Rousseau's tormented and tortured nature made him look with eyes of hatred upon people like Diderot, d'Alembert, Helvétius in Paris, who seemed to him fastidious, sophisticated and artificial, incapable of understanding all those dark emotions, all those deep and torturing feelings which ravaged the heart of a true natural man torn from his native soil. The natural man, for him, was somebody who possessed a deep instinctive wisdom very different from the corrupt sophistication of the towns. Rousseau is the greatest militant lowbrow of history, a kind of guttersnipe of genius, and figures like Carlyle, and to some extent Nietzsche, and certainly D. H. Lawrence and d'Annunzio, as well as *révolté*, petit bourgeois dictators like Hitler and Mussolini, are his heirs.

It is difficult, and indeed gratuitous, to classify this as a

right-wing or a left-wing phenomenon. It is mainly a kind of petit bourgeois revolt against a society from which the *déclassé* feels excluded. Rousseau makes common cause with the outcasts, the rebels, the free wild artists. That is what makes him the founder of romanticism and wild individualism, as well as the founder of so many other movements of the nineteenth century – of socialism and communism, of authoritarianism and nationalism, of democratic liberalism and anarchism, of almost everything save what might be called liberal civilisation, with its fastidious love of culture, in the two centuries which followed publication of the *Social Contract*.

Rousseau hates intellectuals, hates persons who detach themselves from life, hates specialists, hates people who lock themselves up into some kind of special coterie, because he feels that hearts ought to be opened, so that men may achieve emotional contact; that the simple peasant sitting under the ancestral oak has a deeper vision of what life is like, and what nature is like, and what conduct ought to be, than the buttoned-up, priggish, fastidious, sophisticated, highbrow person who lives in the city. Because he feels all that, he founds a tradition distinct from that of the romantic rebel, which then spreads all over Europe, and then to the United States, and is the foundation of that celebrated concept called the American way of life, in accordance with which the simple people of a society possess a deeper sense of reality, a deeper virtue and a deeper understanding of moral values than professors in their universities, than the politicians of the cities, than other people who have somehow become de-natured, who have somehow cut themselves off from the inner stream which is at once the true life and the true morality and wisdom of men and societies.

That is the kind of impression which Rousseau communicates when he talks about nature, and although we are told that there are at least sixty senses in which the word 'nature' is used in the eighteenth century, Rousseau's usage is unique. He goes further than anybody in identifying nature not merely with simplicity,

but with a genuine loathing of civilised, elaborate, sophisticated artistic or scientific values. Neither artists nor scientists must guide society – that is why he dislikes Helvétius and the Encyclopedists so acutely. Society must be led by the man who is in touch with the truth, and the man who is in touch with the truth is somebody who allows this divine grace, who allows the truth which nature alone possesses, to pour into his heart. This may be done only in the bosom of nature, only if we live the simple life. At first the simple life in Rousseau is merely a description of the kind of conditions in which the true answer may be vouchsafed. To those who crave for it, gradually it becomes that truth itself: it becomes difficult to distinguish, both in *Émile* and *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, between the conditions for knowing the answers to questions, and the answers themselves. For Rousseau, ultimately, the answer resides in being a certain kind of person: in having one's heart in the right place. To have a certain kind of knowledge – that is the key to all the problems.

In theory Rousseau speaks like any other eighteenth-century *philosophe*, and says: 'We must employ our reason.' He uses deductive reasoning, sometimes very cogent, very lucid and extremely well-expressed, for reaching his conclusions. But in reality what happens is that this deductive reasoning is like a straitjacket of logic which he claps upon the inner, burning, almost lunatic vision within; it is this extraordinary combination of the insane inner vision with the cold rigorous straitjacket of a kind of Calvinistic logic which really gives his prose its powerful enchantment and its hypnotic effect. You appear to be reading logical argument which distinguishes between concepts and draws conclusions in a valid manner from premisses, when all the time something very violent is being said to you. A vision is being imposed on you; somebody is trying to dominate you by means of a very coherent, although often a very deranged, vision of life, to bind a spell, not to argue, despite the cool and collected way in which he appears to be talking.

The inner vision is the mysterious assumption of the coincidence of authority and liberty. The coincidence itself derives from the fact that, in order to make men at once free and capable of living with each other in society, and of obeying the moral law, what you want is that men shall want only that which the moral law in fact enjoins. In short, the problem goes somewhat as follows. You want to give people unlimited liberty because otherwise they cease to be men; and yet at the same time you want them to live according to the rules. If they can be made to love the rules, then they will want the rules, not so much because the rules are rules as because they love them. If your problem is how a man shall be at once free and yet in chains, you say: 'What if the chains are not imposed upon him? What if the chains are not something with which he is bound as by some external force? What if the chains are something he chooses himself because such a choice is an expression of his nature, something he generates from within him as an inner ideal? If this is what he above all wants in the world, then the chains are no longer chains.' A man who is self-chained is not a prisoner.

So Rousseau says: 'Man is born free, and yet he is everywhere in chains.' What sort of chains? If they are the chains of convention, if they are the chains of the tyrant, if they are the chains of other people who want to use you for their own ends, then these are indeed chains, and you must fight and you must struggle, and nothing must stand in the way of the great battle for individual self-assertion and freedom. But if the chains are chains of your own making, if the chains are simply the rules which you forge, with your own inner reason, or because of the grace which pours in while you lead the simple life, or because of the voice of conscience or the voice of God or the voice of nature, which are all referred to by Rousseau as if they were almost the same thing; if the chains are simply rules the very obedience to which is the most free, the strongest, most spontaneous expression of your own inner nature, then the chains no longer bind you – since

self-control is not control. Self-control is freedom. In this way Rousseau gradually progresses towards the peculiar idea that what is wanted is men who want to be connected with each other in the way in which the State forcibly connects them.

The original chains are some form of coercion which the tyrant used to employ in order to force you to do his will, and it is this which poets have so wickedly embellished with their garlands; it is this which writers have so fulsomely and so immorally tried to camouflage by the encomia which they have paid to mere force, to mere authority. But what is wanted is something very different. What is wanted – I quote Rousseau again – is ‘the surrender of each individual with all his rights to the whole community’. If you surrender yourself to the whole community, then how can you not be free, for who coerces you? Not X, not Y, not this or that institution – it is the State which coerces you. But what is the State? The State is you, and others like you, all seeking your common good. For Rousseau there does exist a common good, for if there were not something which is the common good of the whole society, which does not conflict with individual goods, then to ask ‘How shall we live? What shall we, a group of men together, do?’ would be senseless, and that is patently absurd.

Consequently Rousseau develops the notion of the general will. It begins in the harmless notion of a contract, which after all is a semi-commercial affair, merely a kind of undertaking voluntarily entered into, and ultimately revocable also, an act performed by human beings who come together and agree to do certain things intended to lead to their common happiness; but still only an arrangement of convenience which, if it leads to common misery, they can abandon. This is how it begins; but from the notion of a social contract as a perfectly voluntary act on the part of individuals who remain individual and who pursue each his own good, Rousseau gradually moves towards the notion of the general will as almost the personified willing

of a large superpersonal entity, of something called 'the State', which is now no longer the crushing leviathan of Hobbes, but something rather more like a team, something like a Church, a unity in diversity, a greater-than-I, something in which I sink my personality only in order to find it again.

There is a mystical moment in which Rousseau mysteriously passes from the notion of a group of individuals in voluntary, free relations with each other, each pursuing his own good, to the notion of submission to something which is myself, and yet greater than myself – the whole, the community. The steps by which he reaches it are peculiar and worth examining briefly.

I say to myself that there are certain things which I desire, and if I am stopped from having them, then I am not free; and this is the worst thing which can befall me. I then say to myself, 'What is it that I desire?' I desire only the satisfaction of my nature. If I am wise, and if I am rational, well-informed, clear-sighted, then I discover in what this satisfaction lies. The true satisfaction of any one man cannot clash with the true satisfaction of any other man, for if it clashed, nature would not be harmonious and one truth would collide with another, which is logically impossible. I may find that other men are trying to frustrate me. Why are they doing this? If I know that I am right, if I know that what I seek is the true good, then people who oppose me must be in error about what it is that they themselves seek. No doubt they too think that they are seeking the good, they assert their own liberty to secure it, but they are seeking it in the wrong place. Therefore I have a right to prevent them. In virtue of what have I this right to prevent them? Not because I want something that they do not want, not because I am superior to them, not because I am stronger than they are, not even because I am wiser than they are, for they are human beings with immortal souls, and as such my equals, and Rousseau passionately believes in equality. It is because, if they knew what they truly wanted, they would seek what I seek. The fact that they do not seek this means that

they do not *really* know – and it is ‘truly’ and ‘really’ which, as so often, are the treacherous words.

What Rousseau really wishes to convey is that every man is potentially good – nobody can be altogether bad. If men allowed their natural goodness to well out from them, then they would want only what is right; and the fact that they do not want it merely means that they do not understand their own nature. But the nature is there, for all that. For Rousseau, to say that a man wants what is bad, although potentially he wants what is good, is like saying that there is some secret part of himself which is his ‘real’ self; that if he were *himself*, if he were as he ought to be, if he were his true self, then he would seek the good. From that it is but a small step to saying that there is a sense in which he already seeks this good, but does not know this. It is true that if you ask him what it is that he wants, he may enunciate some very evil purpose. But the true man inside him, the immortal soul, that which would speak out if only he allowed nature to penetrate his breast, if only he lived the right kind of life, and viewed himself as he really is, his true self, seeks something else.

I know what any man’s true self seeks; for it must seek what my own self seeks, whenever I know that what I am now is my own true self, and not my other, illusory, self. It is this notion of the two selves which really does the work in Rousseau’s thought. When I stop a man from pursuing evil ends, even when I put him in jail in order to prevent him from causing damage to other good men, even if I execute him as an abandoned criminal, I do this not for utilitarian reasons, in order to give happiness to others; not even for retributive reasons, in order to punish him for the evil that he does. I do it because that is what his own inner, better, more real self would have done if only he had allowed it to speak. I set myself up as the authority not merely over my actions, but over his. This is what is meant by Rousseau’s famous phrase about the right of society to force men to be free.

To force a man to be free is to force him to behave in a rational

manner. A man is free who gets what he wants; what he truly wants is a rational end. If he does not want a rational end, he does not truly want; if he does not want a rational end, what he wants is not true freedom but false freedom. I force him to do certain things which will make him happy. He will be grateful to me for it if he ever discovers what his own true self is: that is the heart of this famous doctrine, and there is not a dictator in the West who in the years after Rousseau did not use this monstrous paradox in order to justify his behaviour. The Jacobins, Robespierre, Hitler, Mussolini, the Communists all use this very same method of argument, of saying men do not know what they truly want – and therefore by wanting it for them, by wanting it on their behalf, we are giving them what in some occult sense, without knowing it themselves, they themselves ‘really’ want. When I execute the criminal, when I bend human beings to my will, even when I organise inquisitions, when I torture men and kill them, I am not merely doing something which is good for them – though even that is quite dubious enough – I am doing that which they truly want, though they may deny it a thousand times. If they do deny it, that is because they do not know what they are, what they want, what the world is like. Therefore I speak for them, on their behalf.

This is Rousseau’s central doctrine, and it is a doctrine which leads to genuine servitude, and by this route, from this deification of the notion of absolute liberty, we gradually reach the notion of absolute despotism. There is no reason why human beings should be offered choices, alternatives, when only one alternative is the right alternative. Certainly they must choose, because if they do not choose then they are not spontaneous, they are not free, they are not human beings; but if they do not choose the right alternative, if they choose the wrong alternative, it is because their true self is not at work. They do not know what their true self is, whereas I, who am wise, who am rational, who am the great benevolent legislator – I know this. Rousseau, who

had democratic instincts, leaned not so much towards individual legislators as towards assemblies, assemblies which, however, were right only to the extent to which they resolved to do that which the reason inside all the members of the assembly, their true self, genuinely desired.

It is in virtue of this doctrine that Rousseau lives as a political thinker. The doctrine did both evil and good. Good in the sense that he stressed the fact that without freedom, without spontaneity, no society is worth having, that a society as conceived by the Utilitarians of the eighteenth century, in which a few experts organised life in a sleek and frictionless manner, so as to endow the largest number of people with as much happiness as possible, is repulsive to a human being, who prefers wild, unruly, spontaneous freedom, provided that it is he himself who is acting; prefers this even to the maximum of happiness if that results from being worked into an artificial system, not by his own will, but by the will of some superior specialist, some manager, some arranger of society in a set pattern.

The evil that Rousseau did consists in launching the mythology of the real self, in the name of which I am permitted to coerce people. No doubt all inquisitors, and all the great religious establishments, sought to justify their acts of coercion, which subsequently may have appeared, to some people at any rate, cruel and unjust; but at least they invoked supernatural sanctions for them. At least they invoked sanctions which reason was not allowed to question. But Rousseau believed that everything could be discovered by mere untrammelled human reason, by mere unobstructed observation of nature, of actual three-dimensional nature, of nature simply in the sense of objects in space – human beings and animals and inanimate objects. Lacking the aid of supernatural authority, he therefore had to resort to the monstrous paradox whereby liberty turns out to be a kind of slavery, whereby to want something is not to want it at all unless you want it in a special way, such that you can say to a man: ‘You may

think that you are free, you may think that you are happy, you may think that you want this or that, but I know better what you are, what you want, what will liberate you', and so on. This is the sinister paradox according to which a man, in losing his political liberty, and in losing his economic liberty, is liberated in some higher, deeper, more rational, more natural sense, which only the dictator or only the State, only the assembly, only the supreme authority knows, so that the most untrammelled freedom coincides with the most rigorous and enslaving authority.

For this great perversion Rousseau is more responsible than any thinker who ever lived. The consequences of it in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries need not be enlarged upon – they are still with us. In that sense it is not in the least paradoxical to say that Rousseau, who claims to have been the most ardent and passionate lover of human liberty who ever lived, who tried to throw off every shackle, the restraints of education, of sophistication, of culture, of convention, of science, of art, of everything whatever, because all these things somehow impinged upon him, all these things in some way arrested his natural liberty as a man – Rousseau, in spite of all these things, was one of the most sinister and most formidable enemies of liberty in the whole history of modern thought.