

# Rousseau and *The Social Contract*

Christopher Bertram



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**Christopher Bertram** is Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at Bristol University.

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Rousseau and  
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Christopher  
**Bertram**

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- Discourse on the Origins of Inequality, Essay on the Origin of Languages*, and *Letter to Voltaire*, are cited from Victor Gourevitch ed., *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) in the form G1: page number.
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*The regiment of Saint-Gervais had done its exercises, and, according to the custom, they had supped by companies, most of those who formed them gathered after supper in the St. Gervais square and started dancing all together, officers and soldiers, around the fountain, to the basin of which the drummers, the fifers and the torch bearers had mounted. A dance of men, cheered by a long meal, would seem to present nothing very interesting to see; however, the harmony of five or six hundred men in uniform, holding one another by the hand and forming a long ribbon which wound around, serpent-like, in cadence and without confusion, with countless turns and returns, countless sorts of figured evolutions, the excellence of the tunes which animated them, the sound of drums, the glare of torches, a certain military pomp in the midst of pleasure, all of this created a very lively sensation that could not be experienced coldly. It was late; the women were all in bed; all of them got up. Soon the windows were full of female spectators who gave new zeal to the actors; they could no longer confine themselves to their windows and they came down; the wives came to their husbands, the servants brought wine; even the children, awakened by the noise, ran half-clothed amidst their fathers and mothers. The dance was suspended; now there were only embraces, laughs, healths and caresses. There resulted from all this a general emotion that I could not describe but which, in universal gaiety, is quite naturally felt in the midst of all that is dear to us. My father, embracing me, was seized with trembling which I think I still feel and share. 'Jean-Jacques,' he said to me, 'love your country. Do you see all these good Genevans? They are all friends; they are all brothers; joy and concord reign in their midst. You are a Genevan . . .'*

*The Letter to D'Alembert on the Theatre*

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## INTRODUCTION

I first read Rousseau's *Social Contract* when I was about fifteen years old. The boyfriend of my French exchange partner's elder sister was interested in philosophy and he persuaded me to read a number of works of which Rousseau's was one. At the time, it was hard for me to distinguish Rousseau from Marx or Nietzsche since they all seemed to preach a message sharply at variance with the norms of English middle class society. Shortly afterwards, I acquired my own copy (and an edition of Hobbes's *Leviathan*) following the expulsion of their original owner from our public school.

In the thirty-odd years since, I have read the *Social Contract* and many of Rousseau's other works over and over again. The *Social Contract*, in particular, is an elusive text. It is somewhat fragmentary and poorly integrated. As a consequence, it has given rise to multiple and contradictory interpretations. To some of his readers, Rousseau has seemed to be the prophet of a participatory democracy; to others, he is the harbinger of twentieth-century totalitarianism. Some have seen the *Social Contract* as being apart from the main body of his work; others have found ways of integrating it with Rousseau's wider thought.

I cannot pretend here to have given anything like a definitive interpretation of Rousseau's text. There is, for good or ill, room for a multiplicity of Rousseaus.<sup>1</sup> But I have tried, throughout, to make his ideas plausible and attractive, insofar as that is possible. Certainly, I have endeavoured to resist the Cold War readings of Rousseau that saw him as advocating an enclosed and all-controlling society. By contrast, I have attended to the liberal and republican aspects of his thought and noted that many sentiments, arguments and statements that have been held up as evidence of his 'totalitarianism' are, in fact, shared with other thinkers – such as John Locke – who are remembered as paragons of liberty.

The fragmentary nature of the text makes for some difficult choices in a work of commentary. Unlike, say, Hobbes, Rousseau is not good at deploying systematic argument. His comments on the general will, for example, are interspersed through the text and the reader has to cope both with the experience of suddenly coming across a comment that appears radically to contradict what has been said a few pages before and, hence, with the task of making the various passages consistent with one another. Rousseau can also be highly repetitive, so, for example, we find that much of Book 2 [Chapter 6](#) recapitulates material that has been stated only two chapters previously. There is also the difficult question of how far we let the text stand on its own, and how far we bring to bear the wider context of Rousseau's writings. On the whole, and at the risk of repetition, I have tried to stick to the order of the text with the thought that the reader may be following the *Social Contract* alongside this work. There is also a difficult choice about what to leave out. Some commentators deal with the whole of Rousseau's book, others stick to the core passages of Books 1 and 2 which have been the most philosophically influential. I have tried to comment on the whole text with the exception of Book 4, [Chapters 3 to 7](#) which seem of little enduring interest even to the most committed Rousseau anorak. One writing decision which may jar with some readers is my use of the male pronoun throughout. I would defend this not only on grounds of euphony, but also because it reflects Rousseau's own regrettably sexist outlook: Rousseauian citizens are men.

As to the interpretive choices made in what is to follow, I should highlight two: first, I incline to construing the general will democratically, rather than counterfactually. By this I mean that I take seriously Rousseau's insistence that a legitimate state is one governed by the sovereign people according to their general will which is normally to be identified with decisions they actually take, so long as conditions are right. I therefore reject the idea that the general will corresponds to some ideal standard, at one or two removes from what the people actually think about it. But more will need to be said to clarify this point. Second, I place quite some weight on Rousseau's critique of Diderot from the unpublished second chapter of the *Geneva Manuscript* draft of the *Social Contract*: political institutions enable us to approximate – by artificial means – the rational nature that we cannot realise unaided. Again, more will need to be said.

Rousseau is an important figure in our intellectual heritage. At some times his stock is high, at others less so. He is liable to be feted or reviled as the ancestor and inspiration of child-centred learning, of hippie communitarianism, of green thinking, of radical democracy and so on. There is undoubtedly something right about this, but Rousseau usually resists attempts to pigeonhole him. If I were pressed to state a case for his enduring value, it would be this: Rousseau lived at a time when the application of scientific knowledge to social problems was seen as offering the possibility of transforming human life for the better. Rousseau was sceptical of this 'Enlightenment' project. That project is still with us today and similar bold claims are being made for it. But for Rousseau our deepest human needs consist in establishing a connection between ourselves and others which guarantees us our sense of ourselves as possessors of value. He himself ended his life with a sense of radical disconnection from the rest of the human race, but his insight that the very systems, the markets and hierarchies that enable us to achieve mastery over the natural world can at the same time combine to frustrate and isolate us, still retains its power.

In working on the *Social Contract*, I have often relied on two other commentators in particular. First, Hilail Gildin's *Rousseau's Social Contract: The Design of the Argument* is an indispensable

guide for any Rousseau scholar. Second, I was lucky enough to find a copy of Maurice Halbwachs's edition/commentary of *Du Contrat Social* in a second-hand bookshop. Halbwachs, a great sociologist as well as a philosopher, who perished in a German concentration camp at the end of the Second World War, provides a detailed commentary on every chapter and had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the relation between Rousseau's text and those of his forbears and contemporaries.

I owe thanks to many people for their witting and unwitting assistance in this project. Pascal Lemaignan and Bruce Dickinson, though unknown to one another, accidentally conspired many years ago to get me reading Rousseau in the first place. Stuart MacNiven, Jon Mandle, Bob Stern and especially Jinx Roosevelt commented on drafts of parts of this book. Andrew Chitty offered some early bibliographical help. I bounced various ideas to Jimmy Doyle, and sometimes he bounced them back. Nicholas Dent was good enough to correspond with me from time to time, and also offered very useful comments on the penultimate draft, as did Jo Wolff. The participants in my Rousseau course at the University of Bristol often gave me much to think about and I shall remember them with affection. Philippe Van Parijs and the members of the Chaire Hoover at the Université Catholique de Louvain and Bernard Silverman and the staff of the Institute for Advanced Studies at the University of Bristol both gave me highly congenial environments in which to write, away from the distractions of the Bristol Philosophy Department. I should also thank Pauline, Alex and Nick for their love and support during the composition of this book.

## NOTE

- 1 As Judith N. Shklar so wisely puts things, 'I have come to accept that he is one of those authors who says something personal to every reader, and that it is both vain and illiberal to insist that one's own reading is the only right one', *Men and Citizens*, p. vii.

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## ROUSSEAU, THE MAN

When we study the work of philosophers like Hobbes, Locke or Kant, we normally feel that we can do so without knowing much about their lives and personalities. Certainly, such facts can be interesting, but they are hardly essential to our understanding. Jean-Jacques Rousseau is hard to treat in the same detached fashion. He thought of his life and his work as a complete whole, and of his work as expressing a unique central principle, namely that man is naturally good and becomes evil only through society.<sup>1</sup> This commendable will to integrity can become a burden rather than an asset once the facts of his life and personality are known, since many of the facts that form the integral whole do not reflect well on him. Rousseau was an unstable and even paranoid individual for considerable periods of his life and despite promoting an ideal of authenticity and transparency in social relations has left us accounts of his life that sometimes cast doubt on his capacity for knowledge of himself. His psychological difficulties have also provided ammunition to a variety of hostile commentators who have sought to interpret his work in all areas as simply expressing his derangement. So it is important, from the outset, to have some



conception of his life and work as a whole, of his own view of them and how they fit together.

Students of philosophy or political theory, who come to know Rousseau primarily through the *Discourse on Inequality* and the *Social Contract* are often surprised to learn of the breadth of his achievement. His treatise on education – *Emile* – made a lasting contribution to childcare and pedagogy. His novel *Julie or La Nouvelle Heloise* was one of the most popular novels of the century. In music he became famous both as the composer of the smash hit opera of the 1750s – *Le Devin du Village* ('The Village Soothsayer') – and as one of the chief protagonists in a cultural war between the upholders of the French operatic tradition and the devotees of the simpler Italian style. As a cultural critic he also famously opposed d'Alembert's proposal that a theatre should be erected in Geneva by contrasting the theatre – where passive spectators have their emotions manipulated by actors who do not feel the passions they simulate – with the idea of genuinely inclusive festivals of the people. Through these various writings and through his lifelong interest in botany he promoted a new attitude to and appreciation of the natural world. Finally, in his various autobiographical writings Rousseau tried to explore how he became who he became and reveals his pain at his inability to realise relationships that embody the values of directness, transparency and immediacy.

## CONFESSIONS

Our first and primary source for Rousseau's life are these various attempts at autobiography. The most ambitious of these is the *Confessions*, but we also have a series of letters to the French censor Malesherbes, the paranoid but insightful *Dialogues*, and finally the wistful and beautifully written *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. The *Confessions* purports to be 'a portrait in every way true to nature',<sup>2</sup> and aims to sketch an inner history that will explain how Rousseau became himself, shirking no detail however embarrassing and humiliating to their author. However bad things are, though, the Rousseau of the *Confessions* seems confident that he will emerge from the

telling of his life with at least comparative credit when he says of his audience, 'Let them groan at my depravities, and blush for my misdeeds . . . and may any man who dares say, "I was a better man than he".'<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Rousseau's depiction of events, sometimes hilarious, sometimes tragic, is often remarkable for its frankness.

These moments of extreme candour contrast sharply with other episodes that betray an astonishing lack of self-knowledge. Rousseau often seems to have been genuinely mystified at the attitude that others took to him: why would they not endorse his own view of himself as uniquely committed to truth, honesty and friendship? He is quick to see others as being motivated by malice, is extremely suspicious of any generosity shown towards him, and increasingly sees so-called friends and associates as being implicated in a giant conspiracy against him. Although it is easy to see all this just as a manifestation of Rousseau's own psychological difficulties, a fair account will reveal that not all of the malice directed towards him was simply imagined. In Rousseau's case, Voltaire in particular seems not to have lived up to the maxim of tolerance sometimes attributed to him: 'I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.'<sup>4</sup> And following the publication of *Emile* and of the *Social Contract* in 1762, Rousseau became the victim of persecution from the states of both France and Geneva and, partly as a result, the object of overt public hostility. Under these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that someone as sensitive as Rousseau undoubtedly was should manifest his personality in an extreme manner.

## GENEVA

One of the central facts in understanding who Rousseau was – and who he believed himself to be – has to be his Genevan background. He was born in the city on 28 June 1712. The birth was a difficult one and his mother Suzanne, a member of the patrician Bernard family, only lived for eight days after the appearance of Jean-Jacques. This meant that his father, Isaac Rousseau, a watchmaker, was left to bring up the boy alone. Isaac, though a citizen, was far from wealthy and the increasingly impoverished family had to move to

the artisan quarter of St Gervais, a centre of radical dissent. Eighteenth-century Geneva was a state that, like so many since, was torn between its sociological reality as a plutocratic oligarchy and a legitimating myth of freedom, equality and democratic inclusion. The theologian Calvin, in his role as lawgiver, had devised a constitution for the Protestant city-state in 1541 and had vested sovereignty in the body of citizens. But at least by Rousseau's day, this was just the surface form of things. Although the citizens were nominally sovereign, actual power was vested not in the *Conseil General* (their annual assembly) but in the smaller *Grand Conseil* (200 members) and the *Petit Conseil* (25 members). Since even the citizens represented a mere ten per cent of the population (the rest being non-citizen immigrants and their descendants), effective political power was, therefore, in the hands of a very narrow oligarchy indeed. The question of who had the right to rule was a matter of bitter contestation that sometimes became violent and bloody. This was a conflict not just about the rights and wrongs of democratic and oligarchic forms of government, but also the proper meaning and interpretation of Genevan identity.<sup>5</sup>

Rousseau's father brought him up to have a strong sense of patriotic identification and a sense of republican virtue fostered by father and son reading the classics, and especially Plutarch, together. The ideal of the ancient republic that Rousseau picked up from those readings was something that he eventually imported into his aspirations for his homeland. Rousseau marked his own attachment to the city by styling himself 'Citizen of Geneva', though this was not something he was entitled to do between his conversion to Catholicism in 1728 and his reconversion in 1754. His attitude to the city emerges most strikingly in two pieces of writing: the dedicatory essay to the *Discourse on Inequality* and the *Letter to D'Alembert* on the Theatre. Given Genevan reality, the praise Rousseau heaps on the city in the dedicatory essay cannot be taken at face value, but probably represents an ironic attack on the city's oligarchy.<sup>6</sup> Rousseau is depicting the state not as it is, but as he would like it to be. He commends the republic for its democratic characteristics:

the sovereign and the people could have only one and the same interest, so that all the motions of the machine might always tend only to the common happiness; since this is impossible unless the People and the Sovereign are the same person, it follows that I should have wished to be born under a democratic government wisely tempered.

(G1: 114–15/OC3: 112)

But even if the institutions of Genevan life failed to measure up to Rousseau's aspirations, he nevertheless saw in its people the material from which virtuous citizens could be made. Nowhere does this come out more vividly than in the *Letter to D'Alembert*, where Rousseau invokes the image of the St Gervais regiment eating and dancing together and remembers his father pointing to the scene and telling his son to remember the brotherhood of all Genevans.<sup>7</sup> This notion of Geneva – though not its reality – thus expressed for Rousseau a political ideal: the possibility of realising in the modern world a republic of virtue to rival the Greek polis and the Roman republic, an amalgam of order and spontaneity where individual citizens partake freely in a relationship of unity.

## ADOLESCENCE

This childhood of Plutarch and republican festivity was not to last forever. Isaac Rousseau was forced into exile following a quarrel in which he was unwise enough to unsheathe his sword. As a result, the young Jean-Jacques was sent to live with a pastor named Lambercier at Bossey, outside the city. It was here that he experienced the delights of corporal punishment at the hands of the thirty-year-old Mlle Lambercier, a taste that would remain with him always. The Lambercier household was also the birthplace both of his acute sense of justice and of his *amour propre*. The first was born when he was falsely accused and punished for breaking the teeth of a comb. He recounts how he boiled with indignation at being blamed for something he had not done. His *amour propre* took flight when the young Rousseau and his cousin diverted a ditch which pastor Lambercier had dug to water a newly-planted walnut

tree. When the pastor discovers the diversion he exclaimed 'an aqueduct! An aqueduct', leading Rousseau to glow with pride at his precocity as a civil engineer.<sup>8</sup>

This happy period in his life did not last. Rousseau had to earn his living and was apprenticed as an engraver to a brutal master. One night the sixteen-year-old found himself locked outside the city gates, and, rather than face more punishment he decided to set off into the world. In neighbouring Savoy he was adopted by the young estranged wife of a Swiss nobleman: the Catholic convert Francoise-Louise de la Tour, Baronne de Warens. Mme de Warens promptly sent him off to Turin to be instructed in the Catholic faith. It is there, working as a servant in a noble household, that he committed an act which caused him lifelong shame: he falsely denounced a servant-girl for the theft of a ribbon that he himself had stolen, thereby bringing disgrace and probably penury on an innocent person. It is an episode that he returns to again and again in his autobiographical writings. His experience of being in service left him with a strong dislike of subjection to the will of others and a corresponding love of freedom and independence.

Rousseau soon made his way back to Mme de Warens's house and became, briefly, her lover. Sometimes he represents his life with her as idyllic, especially when he looks back in the *Reveries*, written at the end of his life. But at other times he recognises that the relationship with a woman he refers to as 'maman' is hardly one between equals. Nevertheless, it continued to be a model for love and friendship: with Mme de Warens he felt 'peace of heart, calmness, serenity, security, confidence',<sup>9</sup> feelings which were largely absent from his other relationships. We get a sense of how deeply unsatisfactory even this relationship was from the fact that he had to imagine himself with someone else during sex in order to preserve for himself his ideal conception of who she was.

## FROM VENICE TO VINCENNES

Mme de Warens soon tired of her protégé, at least as someone to share her bed with. In the years 1740 to 1749 the building blocks for his future career were assembled. He enjoyed a brief career as

a tutor (where he met Condillac for the first time). He also worked extensively on music and in 1742 presented a *Project for a New Musical Notation* to the Academy of Sciences in Paris.<sup>10</sup> It is also during this period that Rousseau started to think about writing a study of political institutions. He travelled to Venice as secretary to the French ambassador there and observed at first hand the sclerotic government of the Venetian republic. His stay in Venice was not only fateful for his political development, his exposure to the delicious music of Venice also shaped his aesthetic views.

The Rousseau of the 1740s was not, yet, the man who is famous today. He mixed freely with Diderot and his collaborators on the *Encyclopedie* and became a member of the Paris literary scene that he was later to reject. At this period he also met the woman who became the mother of the five children he was to deposit at the foundling hospital – Therese Levasseur, an illiterate laundry maid. We shall never know exactly what turned the Rousseau of the salons into the Rousseau we know today but, by his own account, he had a radically transforming experience in 1749 when he was on his way to visit Diderot who had been imprisoned at Vincennes. Rousseau had a copy of the *Mercure de France* with him and was reading it as he walked along. The paper carried the notice of a literary competition set by the Academy of Dijon who wanted contestants to discuss whether the re-establishment of the arts and sciences had contributed to the purification of morals. The sight of this question had a dramatic effect on Jean-Jacques:

If anything was ever like a sudden flash of inspiration it was the impulse that surged up in me as I read that. Suddenly, I felt my mind dazzled by a thousand lights; crowds of lively ideas presented themselves at once, with a force and confusion that threw me into an inexpressible trouble; I felt my head seized with a vertigo like that of intoxication. A violent palpitation oppressed me, made me gasp for breath, and being unable any longer to breathe as I walked, I let myself drop under one of the trees of the wayside.<sup>11</sup>

Rousseau later claimed that at that very moment he grasped the principle which he says underlies all his work, namely that ‘man is

naturally good, and it is through these [social] institutions alone that men become bad.<sup>12</sup>

However seriously we are disposed to take his story of this epiphany, Rousseau thereafter launched himself into an uncompromising critique of modern civilisation and especially of the enlightenment goal of a social order based upon the application of science to human problems. The first manifestation of this project was the brilliant essay which became the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*. With this he succeeded in winning both the prize set by the Dijon Academy and a widespread notoriety. For a moment, Jean-Jacques enjoyed great success which he built on with works like his *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* (another entry for a prize for the Dijon Academy, coming second this time) and contributions to Diderot's *Encyclopedie*. But it was not as a social theorist or as a philosopher that Rousseau was best known before 1762.

## MUSIC

In fact, in the mid-1750s Rousseau was at least as famous as a musical thinker and composer. He was one of the protagonists of the 'Querelle des Bouffons', a bitter argument between the protagonists of French and Italian music that followed the visit to Paris in 1752 of an Italian company performing Pergolesi's *La Serva Padrona*. Rousseau had also been the principal contributor on musical topics to Diderot's *Encyclopedie*. In both of these roles, he had greatly antagonised the dominant figure in French music, Jean-Phillipe Rameau. Rameau had become celebrated for establishing music on a set of universal principles drawn from mathematics and the physical sciences through his *Treatise on Harmony* and other writings. Rousseau thought that this whole 'scientific' approach missed the *imitative* essence of music. Rousseau believed that music should aim at communicating and arousing the passions in the listener through an appropriately designed melody. This was not, typically, something that could be done without regard to the subjective, human situation of the listener. Rather, in doing its work, music relied on culturally specific associations. However, not all cultures were equally suited for this task.

Rousseau alienated the French operatic establishment by claiming that the French language was by its very nature unsuited for music. This cultural conflict – which some French conservatives have seen as an attempt by non-French subversives (such as the Genevan Rousseau and the German Grimm) to undermine the integrity of French culture (and pave the way for social and political upheaval)<sup>13</sup> – has a curious after-history in the incorporation of some of Diderot's reflections on the matter in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*.<sup>14</sup>

Popular acclaim, as opposed to elite antagonism, came Rousseau's way in 1752 when his opera, *Le Devin du Village* was performed. The king loved it, and according to Berlioz 'never tired of singing *J'ai perdu mon serviteur*, more out of tune than any of his subjects'.<sup>15</sup> History, as Berlioz also records, has not been so kind in its judgement on *Le Devin*. The opera is a confection of simple tunes sung by simple folk: shepherds and shepherdesses. In one sense it is a realisation of Rousseau's aesthetic views (the simple tunes) but its success must in part be down to the fact that he was able to write the songs in the inherently unmusical French. The opera stayed in the repertoire until the 1820s, but then disappeared.<sup>16</sup>

## FICTION

Rousseau also extended his creative talents to fiction and, in 1761, he published *Julie or La Nouvelle Heloise*, an epistolary novel on the model of Richardson's *Clarissa*. Like *Le Devin* it too was a tremendous success. The novel depicts the tangled involvement of the heroine with the figure of St Preux and with her husband Wolmar. It was an opportunity for Rousseau to explore in fictional form many of the aesthetic and philosophical themes that he deals with more formally elsewhere. Contemporary readers were shocked at the novel's emotional intensity. (It is hard for modern readers of the text to get the same effect!) There were seventy-two editions in French by 1800 and the work was widely translated into other languages. David Hume considered it to be Rousseau's masterpiece.



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