

Phil 114, March 15 and 20, 2007
Rousseau: Are Freedom and Society Compatible?

The aims of The Social Contract

- To explain how there could be a society in which people are not dependent on the wills of others.
- Inflamed *amour propre* makes us dependent on the wills of others,
- but other aspects of social life may also make us dependent on the wills of others.

How can society be free of amour propre?

How might it be possible to prevent *amour propre* from becoming inflamed? We need to:

- (1) educate people that their value is their natural value, not their social value, and
- (2) prevent social value from offering a genuine alternative to natural value, so people are never confronted with a real choice between them.

“Natural value” comprises (i) the basis of moral worth, which is equally distributed, and (ii) natural talents, which are only roughly equally distributed, but can be developed without harming others and indeed may help them.

What social institutions would accomplish those ends?

- (1) An equal distribution of political power, economic means, and social distinction wherever possible (III, iv, 5),
- (2) where any inequalities (e.g., such as in office) correspond to differences in natural talents put in service to the benefit of all (III, v, 4, 10), and
- (3) where there is no personal dependence: i.e., no dependence on the will of some particular person. In the social contract, we become dependent on the general will, but not on anyone’s particular will. “[E]ach by giving himself to all, gives himself to no one” (I, vii, 8).

How can we bring about such a society?

- Men as they presently are cannot bring about a society that would be reliably free of inflamed *amour propre*, since they themselves are not free of inflamed *amour propre*.
- How can we get from here to there?
- Rousseau is pessimistic about this. His reliance on the “legislator,” and his warnings about the readiness of a people for good government.
- The main goal seems to be to show that there is a *there* to get to. This is hard enough.

Freedom

Freedom, for Rousseau, has several elements. It consists in:

- (1) *Not* doing what *another person* wills, because he wills it, when one would otherwise not will it oneself, but
- (2) doing what one wills, where what one wills may accommodate such constraints as are *not* imposed by the wills of *other persons*;
- (3) where “what one wills” in fact serves one’s *good* (not what one desires at any given moment); and
- (4) perhaps also where “what one wills” is something that one *recognizes* to serve one’s good.

Everyone is unfree in society as we know it. “One believes himself the others’ master, and yet is more a slave than they.”

- Even the masters seek what does not serve their good.
- Even the masters are dependent on the wills of others.

Why enter into society?

We have a clear idea of the potential evil of social life: dependence on the wills of others. Why not avoid those evils by simply avoiding social life altogether?

- (1) Official answer in the *Second Discourse*: It is not a live option for us.
- (2) Official answer in *Social Contract*: Society is a necessary means for self-preservation.
- (3) Suggested at many points: Certain goods are realized only in society. (See I, viii, 2.)

The problem

- How can we have the goods of society, without sacrificing our freedom?
- “To find a form of association that will defend and protect the persons and goods of each associate with full common force, and by means of which each, uniting with all, nevertheless obeys only himself and remains as free as before.”
- How can there be cooperation if everyone does whatever he wants?

The solution (in brief)

For each individual to subordinate his individual will to the *general will* (i.e. to do only what it permits).

What is the general will?

Two main features.

- First, the general will is, in some sense, what the association as a whole decides.
- Second, implementing the general will always promotes the *common good*.

What is the common good?

- (i) Based in shared interests: At least some of people’s interests are shared. Self-preservation, for example, is in everyone’s interest. The common good is the promotion of these interests.
- (ii) Understood in distributive, not aggregative terms: Promoting the common good is promoting everyone’s shared interests to an equal extent.
- (iii) What is the benchmark, from which we are measure how far anyone’s shared interests have been promoted? A benchmark of equality, in which no one has anything (I, vi, 7).
- (iv) Not controversial. There may be disagreement about what will best *promote* the common good, but there is not disagreement about what the common good *is*.

Is this really a solution?

- How are we left as free as we were before, if we’ve subordinated our wills to the general will?
- “Hence for the social compact not to be an empty formula, it tacitly includes the following engagement which alone can give force to the rest, that whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be constrained to do so by the entire body: which means nothing other than that he shall be forced to be free.”
- A totalitarian slogan?

How is one free in doing what the common good requires?

For the moment, assume that implementing the general will always promotes the common good. So our question is: Why does subordinating one’s will to the common good leave one as free as before?

- Yesterday you decided to do whatever the common good requires.
- Today, the common good requires you to do X, but, today, you don’t *want* to do X.
- Why are you free in doing X? In what sense are you doing your own will?

Answer? You are following your *earlier* will?

- First, what privileges your earlier will over your later will?
- Second, if this answer were the whole story, then the *content* of the contract would not matter. Complying with the terms of *any* contract would leave one as free as one was before.

- First, we get the laughable result that if yesterday I willed myself into slavery, then today I am free in doing what my master tells me.
- Second, Rousseau claims that *only* the social contract, with its unique content, leaves us as free as before (I, vii, 5).

A different answer: One is free in living up to the terms of the social contract, because one is obey terms that one *freely accepted*: i.e., one is obeying not simply a law that one prescribed to oneself, but a law that one *freely* prescribed to oneself.

Suppose, moreover, that the terms of the social contract are the *only* terms that one can freely accept.

- This would explain why Rousseau claims that *only* the social contract leaves us as free as before.
- It would also make it matter less whether one *actually* joined the social contract.

Why are *these* terms—doing one’s part for the common good on the condition that everyone else does the same: i.e., making an equal contribution to social cooperation for an equal share of its benefits—terms that one could freely accept and, moreover, the *only* such terms?

- To be free is, in part, to do one’s true will: to do what in fact promotes one’s good.
- Is one promoting one’s good in joining this contract?
- Suppose the choice is between joining the social contract, where this involves a commitment to making an equal contribution for an equal share of the benefits, on the one hand, and not joining the social contract, on the other hand.
- Here the answer seems clearly: yes, one is promoting one’s good by joining the social contract.

Problem: To be free is not simply to do what in fact promotes one’s good. It requires doing what, given the constraints, in fact promotes one’s good, *where the constraints are not imposed by the wills of others*.

- It is the wills of others that *forces* you to choose between contributing equally and benefiting equally, on the one hand, and not contributing and not benefiting, on the other.
- Their wills deprive you of the third option of benefiting *more* than they.
- So why isn’t this contract also unfree?

The answer, it seems, has something to do with *equality*. But what does equality has to do with freedom?

- Does it help that everyone constrains everyone else in the same way? But if I’m upset that I am unfree, why does it help to hear that everyone else is just as unfree?
- Alternative: What removes the option of your benefiting more is simply justice: that you are no more and no less entitled to the fruits of cooperation than anyone else is. The constraint is simply the constraint of justice, not the constraint of another’s will, something that another person at a given place or time decided.
 - Does this interpretation make the social contract question-begging? Only if the point of the social contract is to answer, “What is justice?” This is not Rousseau’s question. His question is how, if at all, freedom might be compatible with society.
 - This interpretation also makes sense of how one can alienate oneself to the general will, despite Rousseau’s suggestion that such alienation is impossible (I, iv). I can alienate myself only to a power that I believe will command what is just.

Why does the general will will the common good?

- Recall that the terms of the social contract are actually to subordinate one’s will to the general will, not to what the common good requires.
- We have just been assuming that these are the same: that the general will wills the common good.
- But why?

What is the general will? Several possibilities:

- (i) the decision that, if executed, would in fact realize the common good (“what I took to be the general will was not” (IV, ii, 8)),
- (ii) the decision that an individual believes, if executed, would realize the common good (“he does not extinguish the general will within himself” (IV, ii, 6)),
- (iii) the decision that the community believes, if executed, would realize the common good, or
- (iv) the decision of the community arrived at by a certain procedure.

Let’s identify the general will with (iv), because it seems the hardest interpretation to square with the claim that the general will wills the common good.

What is the procedure in question, and why should it produce decisions that promote the common good?

The procedure is majority (or supermajority (IV, ii, 10–11)) vote in which:

- (i) the proposed laws do not refer, implicitly or explicitly, to particular persons (II, iv, 5);
- (ii) the proposed laws apply to everyone (also II, iv, 5); and
- (iii) everyone votes (once again II, iv, 5)
- (iv) on the basis of sufficient information about the consequences of the proposed laws (II, 3, iii), but
- (v) without information about how others will vote (also II, 3, iii).

These strictures make each individual’s vote an expression of her sincere opinion about which law best serves the common good: which law would best serve everyone’s shared interests (II, iv, 5).

In what sense are you free in obeying a law that you voted against?

- In joining the social contract, you freely prescribed to yourself the following terms: that you would do one’s part to promote the common good.
- At the time of casting your vote, however, you did not think that the law that you were voting against promoted the common good.
- So, now, after the vote, in obeying the law that you opposed, in what sense are you obeying the terms that you prescribed to yourself?

Rousseau’s reply: The fact that the majority chose the law that I voted against itself shows that that law, in fact, does promote the common good. Why?

Rousseau here appears to be relying on the reasoning underlies the “jury theorem” of the Marquis de Condorcet. Suppose we ask a group of people whether p. Then:

- (1) If the group is sufficiently large (supported by condition (iii)),
- (2) if each person “votes” her sincere belief whether p (supported by conditions (i), (ii), and (v)),
- (3) if each person arrives at her belief independently of the beliefs of others (supported by condition (v)), and
- (4) if each person is more likely than not to have the correct belief (supported by condition (iv)),

then the majority answer is very likely to be correct. This probability increases toward the limit of one rapidly with the size of the group and/or with the probability that each individual will answer the question correctly.

The conditions that a referendum on a law must meet in order for the decision made by the majority to be an expression of the general will—namely, (i)–(v)—are conditions that ensure or make it likely that the referendum meets the conditions of the Condorcet Jury Theorem, with question whether p being the question whether the law at issue promotes the common good. It follows that the law willed by the general will is likely to promote the common good. Thus, being outvoted shows that one was mistaken.

Comments and questions:

“Real-life referenda don’t meet these conditions. So why think that the majority gets it right?” Rousseau agrees that if a referendum doesn’t meet these conditions, then there is no reason to trust the majority. But then the majority also doesn’t express the general will (IV, ii, 9).

“Can’t the general will still be wrong?” Yes, there is no guarantee. But Rousseau might still argue that one will never have good *grounds* for thinking that the general will is wrong.

This provides a solution to the problem of *political obligation*.

- For Hobbes: Suppose you believe that some policy doesn’t conduce to your self-preservation. Now suppose that the sovereign follows that policy. How can you, given that you care about your self-preservation above all else, go along?
- For Rousseau: Suppose you believe that some policy doesn’t serve the common good. Now suppose that the general will wills that policy. How can you, given that you care about your freedom, which in turns means caring about the common good, follow that policy?
- Rousseau’s solution: Once you see that the general will willed that policy, you will come to believe that it does serve the common good after all. (Contrast: e.g., “You promised to accept the majority’s decision.” “Others have just have much right to influence make decisions as you.”)

On this view, the only purpose of democracy is *epistemic*; it’s a good method to find out what the common good is.

- Why not, then, rule by supercomputer rather than rule by the people?
- Is participation in the political process *itself* important?