CONFLICTING READINGS OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU

by

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(Under the Direction of Daniel J. Kapust)

ABSTRACT

Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote extensively on his ideal political system, as well as in-depth biographical works, throughout his life. Within his political philosophy there is a great amount of varied interpretations, primarily based upon his concept of the general will, which is supposed to be exemplified by unanimous support as well as total input by all members of the community. In one sense it is highly democratic because all individuals in the society are involved in its expression, yet the means to cultivate such unanimity can be seen as restrictive upon individual liberty. Because of this complex issue, there are authors who interpret Rousseau’s work as authoritarian and others view him as a radical democrat with a desire to integrate a new form of liberty into modern political structures. This work intends to analyze this divide based upon his body of work and his intentions as expressed in his biographical writings.

INDEX WORDS: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Authoritarianism, Democracy, Social Contract, General Will, Calvinism
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CHAPTER 1

ROUSSEAU’S DUALISTIC NATURE AND POLITICS

Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s writings are fraught with contradictions that are highlighted in his personal nature, religious beliefs, and political philosophy. The very nature of Rousseau from his personality to his understanding of the world is fraught with contradiction. This then is further expressed through his widely read and evaluated political concepts. Varied readings further multiply and perpetuate these confusions. Divergent readings of Rousseau’s works illustrate the difficult process of interpretation, and present the dilemma of whether an author should be judged upon his or her historical impact or original stated intent.

Through his body of highly introspective autobiographical writing in the *Confessions* and *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, Rousseau expresses the turmoil he experienced as he attempted to find happiness in society while, much of the time, seeking solitude (Marks 1998, 92). He writes that this struggle began early in his life and influenced his developed views regarding religion and the ideal political system. In the *Confessions* Rousseau explains the early conflict between his childhood socialization and what he later came to believe is his nature:

Such were the affections [to my family members] that marked my entry into life; thus there began to take shape or to manifest themselves within me this heart, at once so proud and so tender, and this character, effeminate and yet indomitable, which, continually fluctuating between weakness and courage, between laxity and virtue, has to the end divided me against myself and ensured that abstinence and enjoyment, pleasure and wisdom have all eluded me equally (2000, 11).
This sense of constant emotional instability is often displayed throughout Rousseau’s works. The underlying internal contradictions regarding true nature and socialized nature greatly impact other areas of his life and thought.

Rousseau’s dichotomous relationship with religion, too, began early in his life. His religious affiliation changed multiple times between Catholicism and Calvinism, illustrating the struggle he experienced as he sought to discover his personal religious beliefs, the ideal implementation of religion in society, and the impact of an absolute deity upon individual freedom. His religious views were significantly impacted by his early life in, and love of, the Calvinist state of Geneva. Rousseau writes in a footnote in the Social Contract that

Those who view Calvin simply as a theologian fail to grasp the extent of his genius. The codification of [Geneva’s] wise edicts, in which he had a large role, does him as much honor as his [keystone work] the Institutes. Whatever revolution time may bring out in our cult, so long as the love of homeland and of liberty is not extinguished among us, the memory of this great man will never cease to be held sacred (1987, 40).

This praise of John Calvin indicates the deep ties Rousseau feels toward him based upon their shared ties to Geneva, and Calvin’s influence over the region’s political and social systems. Through idealization of Calvin’s religious and political system Rousseau internalized many Calvinistic concepts in his philosophy, especially in his notions of the ruling sovereign and civil religion as a means for education in the Social Contract (Gay 1987, 7).

In his teenage years, Rousseau was drawn into Catholicism by a woman, Mme de Warens, who became an influence in the greater part of his adult life. In the final chapter of his last work, The Reveries of the Solitary Walker, Rousseau writes that meeting Mme Warens “determined [his] whole life and by an inevitable chain of events shaped the destiny of the rest of [his] days” (140). Part of Mme Warens’ impact upon Rousseau is based upon the intense relationship they shared, but she also introduced him to ideas about religion
which he did not experience while living in Geneva. Drawing experiences in both Calvinistic and Catholic cultures, Rousseau philosophizes about the ideal religion in his state, one that melds societal and theological duties while at the same time teaching tolerance to subjects.

Contradictions are visible in various areas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s life, from his personality to his complex philosophy, and his method of writing he uses to explain his personal and political ideas. At every level of analysis this poses problems in interpretation. Most importantly for political theorists this leads to inconsistencies in the interpretation and implementation of Rousseauian concepts in government and politics. Rousseau’s dichotomous nature renders consistent philosophical analysis of his work difficult. Despite the conflicting interpretations of his work, Rousseau should be judged by his stated intentions rather than any negative outcomes arising from his philosophical lineage.

**Contradictory Nature**

Rousseau opens his *Confessions* by writing “I am not made like any [men] that I have seen; I venture to believe that I am not made like any that exist” (2000, 5). This notion of difference, also from the *Confessions*, regarding the duality of his nature situates Rousseau in a strange place in society. He sets himself apart from other individuals, and this exacerbates problems he experiences later in life as he succumbs to paranoia. During his last year of life, he wrote that “The defamation, depression, derision, and disgrace with which they [detractors] have covered me are no more susceptible of being increased than mollified” (1992, 3). These comments paint a picture of a person who is ill equipped to function within a public life despite, or perhaps because of, the recognition he received from his work.
Rousseau explains an integral reason why he feels this disconnect with society and how it relates to what he believes is the natural conception of good. In the sixth walk of *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, he begins his analysis with the assumption that “There is hardly any of our automatic impulses whose cause we cannot find in the heart” (1992, 74). In the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau explains that he believes the basic automatic impulse is pity, which is wholly separate from reason. The pity one experiences when another animal is in pain leads to empathy, and thus inspires the institution of Rousseau’s Golden Rule and the maxim of least harm to others (2000, 154). Because of this inclination towards empathy, Rousseau thinks that the desire to satisfy others leads to a pleasure “sweeter than any other” (1992, 75). This is what drew Rousseau to seek company with others. Though this desire to give to people made Rousseau become a part of society, problems arose from his generous nature that eventually pushed him away. He explains:

“my first favors were only a pledge for those which were supposed to follow; and as soon as some unfortunate man had hooked me with my own good deed, that was it from then on. This first free and voluntary good deed became an unlimited right to all those he might need afterward, without even my lack of power being enough to release me from his claim. That is how very delightful enjoyments were transformed into onerous subjections for me ever afterward. (1992, 76)

This perceived sense of entitlement that others felt toward Rousseau weakened his ability to be gracious even though he “liked, even passionately liked, being humane, beneficent, and helpful.” Yet this desire was quashed because his heart was no longer involved, but only a feeling of duty (1992, 77). According to his own interpretation, Rousseau is an overall good man who is disillusioned, and has lost the natural capacity to give as a result of his interaction with others and societal expectations.

Rousseau, again, writes about his dualistic nature when he says that “Two almost irreconcilable opposites are united within me,… on the one hand, an ardent temperament,
keen and impetuous passions, and on the other, ideas that are confused, slow to take shape, and only ever occur to me afterwards. It is as though my heart and my mind belong to different people (2000, 110).” He is quite cognizant of the contradictory nature of his own personality. Despite this recognition, he makes no overt connection between this collection of personality traits and the dichotomous nature of his philosophy, though perhaps the following sentiment alludes to an overall contradictory nature of existence: “Everything on earth is in constant flux, which permits nothing to take on a constant form. Everything around us changes. We ourselves change, and no one can be assured he will like tomorrow what he likes today (1992, 122).” Through this statement, Rousseau recognizes and allows for contradictory strains in his autobiographical works. Rather than this being a problem for him, it presents a more accurate picture of his existence.

**Relationship with Religion**

Rousseau’s changing attitudes toward religion throughout his life illustrate his philosophic nature. He was born in the Calvinist state of Geneva and accepted this religion until he was a teenager. At that time, he was swayed to Catholicism. These sects of Christianity played an important role at different stages of his life, and pinning his actual faith is made more complicated by his concept of civil religion as explained in *The Social Contract*. Rousseau treated religion in his personal life seriously and deeply contemplated theological matters. His bewilderment regarding which faith to follow personally and his philosophical statements regarding the ideal religion, show conflicting attitudes about an important aspect of Rousseau’s life.
Rousseau was born in the Calvinist state of Geneva, and this connection to John Calvin had an effect throughout his life. Calvin arrived in Geneva in 1536 after writing his first edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, and he began preaching a combination of religion and politics at the Evangelical Church of Geneva during the Protestant Reformation. As the Catholic Church was losing power, Protestant denominations were spreading. Soon thereafter, Calvin’s *Confession of Faith and Discipline* began to be used as an educational tool with hopes to curb the citizens’ “reckless gambling, drunkenness, adultery, blasphemy, and all sort of vice.” Through the 1560’s Calvin continued to have a direct effect on the codification of Genevan law as more power became consolidated in the church (Schaff 2007). This influence lasted well into Rousseau’s life, and even into the 19th century as Geneva maintained a Calvinist system of government and religion.

Though Rousseau was born in a Calvinist state, his autobiographical writings do not make mention of his religiosity as a child. In his *Confessions*, his Protestant background appears after he met Mme de Warens, a Catholic woman who had a relationship with Rousseau for most of his life. Mme de Warens was twenty-eight and Rousseau was seventeen when they met. She originally took on the role of boarding Rousseau and introducing him to Catholicism after he left Geneva for the first time, but they developed a sexual relationship as well. He writes about her in one of the final passages of his final work: “If it was not surprising that she could have benevolent feelings for an intense, but mild and modest young man… it was even less surprising that a charming woman, full of wit and grace, could inspire in me, along with gratitude, more tender feelings which I did not perceive.” Rousseau notes that this moment “shaped the destiny of the rest of [his] days” (1992, 140). Surely this impact on his life relates to their intense and long-lasting
relationship, but it also points to the influence Mme de Warens exerted over Rousseau and his ideas.

Mme de Warens was one of the first positive Catholic role models Rousseau encountered once he left Geneva. Prior to this, he held “an aversion peculiar to the inhabitants of my native city towards Catholicism, which was always presented to us as a hideous idolatry and whose clergy were painted in the blackest of colors (2000, 61). This negative outlook of the Catholic Church, and especially its ruling hierarchy, is not surprising coming from an inhabitant of a state that was so profoundly altered by the Protestant Reformation. Coming from this environment, Rousseau’s conversion to Catholicism was a strange process.

Rousseau met Mme de Warens shortly after he left Geneva for the first time in his life. In order to help him in his new situation in Italy away from his lifelong home, Mme de Warens arranged for Rousseau to stay at a boarding house run by Catholic clergy. While there he was to undergo religious training. This is where he was first introduced to Catholic dogma. He writes about his introduction to the new doctrines that:

I did not, strictly speaking, decide to become a Catholic; rather seeing the critical moment as still a long way off, I allowed myself time to become accustomed to the idea, imagining all the while that some unforeseen event would rescue me from my difficulty. To gain more time I resolved to present the best defense of which I was capable. Before long, however, my vanity had absolved me of any need to remember this resolution, and once I had observed that I sometimes embarrassed my instructors, I needed no further encouragement, but set about trying to confound them. (2000, 63)

This passage paints a picture of a person who began his conversion process with great hesitancy and unwillingness to accept new doctrine. Despite this confusing process, Rousseau finished his Catholic instruction and officially converted.

Rousseau remained a Catholic until he returned to Geneva later in his life after he had written his *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* and the *Discourse on Inequality*. He
writes in the *Confessions* about the profound impact the return to Geneva had upon him and how greatly he wanted to be a citizen of the state again as he was “received with open arms” and “fêted by people of all conditions.” Rousseau says that he then “abandoned himself wholly to patriotic zeal and, ashamed at being excluded from my rights as a citizen because I now professed a different creed from that of my forefather, I decided to embrace [Calvinism] again openly” (2000, 382-3). Rousseau’s reaffirmation of Protestantism because of the atmosphere in his home state illustrates his fluctuations in faith, but he did come to an explanatory conclusion for himself shortly after this event that adds another layer to his theological ideas. He writes:

> [since] the word of the Gospels is the same for every Christian, and the content of the dogma to which they subscribe different only in so far as attempts have been made to explain what is unintelligible, it was in each country the task of the sovereign to fix both the form of worship and these unintelligible points of dogma, and, consequently, the duty of the citizen to accept that dogma and follow the form of worship prescribed by the law. (2000, 383)

This passage points to yet another notable split in Rousseau’s attitudes toward religion. Rather than faith being solely a personal trait, he places its importance on that of the community. This transference of the personal to the state is not uncommon throughout his works, and is furthered by his discussion of the creation of the state and civil religion in the *Social Contract*.

This leads Rousseau to contemplate the ideal religion that can combine with a political system to strengthen its rule, the civil religion. Despite his personal ties to Christianity, he claims that it is unable to be a true civil religion because it “has no particular relation to the body politic, it leaves laws with only the force the laws derive from themselves, without adding any force to them… thus one of the great bonds of a particular society remains ineffectual.” A Christian society would “lack a bond of union” (1987, 100). In contrast to the importance of Christianity in his own religious, and societal, relationships,
he believes that it is not the religion of an ideal state because it does not emphasize the concept of community strongly enough. Rather since the reach of the policies of Rousseau’s state cannot surpass public utility, “it is of great importance to the state that each citizen have a religion that causes him to love his duties” (1987, 102). Rousseau’s ideal use of religion is to bind the individual to the state and the community. As long as it accomplishes this goal, it is acceptable. It is a “purely civil profession of faith, the articles of which it belongs to the sovereign to establish, not exactly as dogmas of religion, but as sentiments of sociability, without which it is impossible to be a good citizen or faithful subject” (Rousseau 1987, 102).

Rousseau’s personal struggle of searching for a faith coupled with his views on a civil religion illustrate a great contradiction within his own thought as the religion for his ideal state varies from his individual beliefs. After wavering between the Protestantism he was raised upon and the Catholicism introduced to him as he reached adulthood, he eventually decided upon adopting the faith that was particular to his home state to increase his sense of belonging in the community rather than looking solely at theological reasoning. These changing views, especially the contrast between individual faith and social utility, further illustrate contradictions in his nature.

**Political Concepts**

The previous sections deal with conflicting factors in Rousseau’s personal life, and this trend bleeds into his political philosophy which contributes to widely varied readings of his theories, as expressed by writers across the political spectrum. Much of this variation is based upon Rousseau’s concept of the general will found in *The Social Contract* (though upon examination of his other political writings the dualistic nature is visible). The general
will is a concept designed to remove individual self interest from citizens in his ideal state. He says that once people in a community enter into a political agreement, “only the general will can direct the forces of the state according to the purpose for which it was instituted, which is the common good” (1987, 29-30). At this point, purely private interests are no longer realized through legislation, and any such resemblance of them to the general will is coincidental.

Regarding the general will, Henry Rempel writes that “No small part of this reputation [of contradiction] rests on his famous – or notorious – assertion that when a recalcitrant member of society is compelled by the whole body to obey the general will, this only ‘forces him to be free’” (1976, 18). On the one hand, the general will is meant to represent a radically democratic notion that individuals create and follow only laws that they wish to promulgate. Yet conversely, if a member of the society disagrees with the expression of the general will he or she must be forced to follow it because that individual is not acting in the interest of the group. This seemingly authoritarian aspect of the state stands in stark contrast to Rousseau’s supposed intentions of promoting a democratic libertarian idea of government in which people act exactly how they wish to because they create all governmental principles.

William Bluhm poses the question:

“How otherwise could it be affirmed by some writers that Rousseau’s principles of democratic freedom furnish a description of totalitarian societies such as Nazi Germany and by others that these same principles constitute the basic assumptions of western liberal democracies?” (1984, 366-7)

To see where Rousseau can rest on the political spectrum, one can look at the contrast between his relations to such varied political systems as noted by Bluhm. Authoritarian states are based upon such premises as citizens’ love of the state, restrictions upon debate, highly charismatic
authoritarian leaders, and centralized means to influence citizens’ actions (Vestal 1999, 16-7). Such governments are essentially formed upon “a radical relation between state and traditional society,” which is where it is easy to see Rousseau’s influence. According to Nisbet, Rousseau addresses and supports these ideas throughout as he writes about the “absorption of all forms of society into the unitary mold of the state that we may observe in the first unmistakable appearance of totalitarian theory of society” (1943, 94). Nisbet continues to link contemporary authoritarian states to Rousseau’s philosophical underpinnings as he notes that they stem “from the consequences of the French Revolution just as its ideology with Rousseau.” The underlying goal of the French Revolution was to dissolve traditional power structures such as the family, church, and trade union and move their authority to the state though the “demolishment of social ties among people.” Man was to transform from a social being into a purely political being as the state replaced the former system of multiple relationships. Rousseau’s basic principal, grounded in collectivism, which was adopted in the French Revolution, sought to transform all aspects of life into political acts (Nisbet 1943, 96). All relationships are to be held together by the state rather than numerous groups based upon separate memberships. His central authoritarian concept is the ever invasive political realm which is to guide all personal decisions. In spite of Rousseau’s powerful and intrusive state, his “ideal was pure democracy in the realm of the political order but, the social consequences of his theory of the state are nonetheless as drastic as those of any modern totalitarian philosopher” (Nisbet 1943, 97). Nisbet recognizes Rousseau’s intentions to foster an ideology based upon liberty and extremely high levels of democratic input, but claims that implementing such a system would be destructive to existing power structures. He claims that greatly centralized and intrusive institutions would emerge as
individuals would not have the capabilities to act responsibly without top down authority in place.

This is the crux of Rousseau’s political philosophy. He struggles with a “radical individualism on one hand and an uncompromising authoritarianism on another.” The authoritarianism present in the *Discourse on Political Economy* contrasts with the libertarian aspects of individualism in the *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men* (Nisbet 1943, 97). Through these Rousseau’s diverging influences, some authors place him in the authoritarian camp with disregard to his democratic and libertarian ideals. Much of this confusion stems from his style of writing.

**Literary Style**

Rousseau’s struggles for consistency extend beyond his personal life, his philosophy, and into his style of writing. Edmund Burke, who was far from being a Rousseau supporter, writes that Rousseau’s works are marked by “A tendency to paradox, which is always the bane of solid learning… prevented a great deal of the good effects which might be expected from such a genius” (Salkever 1977, 204). Even Burke, with extensive negative critiques of Rousseau in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, thinks that there could be valuable lessons from Rousseau were it not for his contradictory style. In the work “Interpreting Rousseau’s Paradoxes,” Salkever notes that Rousseau implements paradoxes in the philosophic sense, “the simultaneous affirmation of two contradictory propositions.” He cites the seemingly incompatible praise of Spartan society in the *Social Contract* and Rousseau the “asocial dreamer” in the *Reveries*. Salkever contends that these paradoxes “are not unfortunate accidents of style or personality, but necessary reflections of the substance of
Rousseau’s understanding of the human condition” (1977, 205-6). Both Rousseau’s supporters and detractors recognize his contradictory style of writing, while usually the former sees it as a hindrance to understanding and the latter a necessary aspect of his complex works. Rousseau himself addresses this dilemma and offers insight into how it comes about in his political and autobiographical works.

Writing Process

Rousseau explains in his Confessions that writing is an arduous and time consuming task when he writes that “It is with unbelievable difficulty that my ideas arrange themselves into any sort of order in my head.” Rousseau likens his thought process to a scene change during an opera in which there is great disarray on the stage, and then there is an instant in which all parts fit together in a “delightful spectacle.” He continues:

“I write no letter on the most trifling subject that does not cost me hours of weariness; or, if I decide to write down straight away whatever comes into my head, I do not know how to begin or end, my letter is a long and confused rigmarole which, when someone tries to read it, hardly makes sense.” (2000, 111-2)

Rousseau cites the difficulty he has in writing, focusing on the imbalance between his thoughts and the physical process of putting them into words. His thoughts are chaotic until a moment in which they fit together. This does not make it easy for him to think and write at the same time, and the process of putting down a wholly realized idea before it leaves his mind is daunting. On the other hand, when Rousseau writes as he forms ideas, the piece becomes muddled to the point of inability to understand. This leads to a long process of revisions, marked by manuscripts that are “crossed out, scribbled on, muddled, [and] indecipherable,” providing visual evidence of the toll writing costs him (2000, 111).
Rousseau has a great deal of trouble expressing his thoughts and, according to his own analysis, this points to a possible problem at the basic level of interpretation of his writings.

**Paradoxical Consistency**

Paul de Man offers a reading of this theme of writing throughout his chapters on Rousseau in his *Allegories of Reading*. He cites a passage in the *Social Contract* in which Rousseau mentions public happiness and individual happiness. De Man notes that Rousseau believes that all individuals must have a sense of well being, yet this directly follows a paragraph “which denied the significance of an individual well being for the society as a whole.” De Man acknowledges that such contradictions, when viewed apart from Rousseau’s entire texts, may “represent a more faithful outline of Rousseau’s thought patterns, simply because the narrative developments and transitions that conceal incompatible affirmations merely by putting some space between them are lacking in this case” (1979, 252). Rousseau notes his own disjointed writing style, and when specific passages are analyzed apart from the linking sentences, the contradictions are readily apparent. Rousseau is aware that such contradictions appear in his works and offers some insight into them.

In a sense, Rousseau justifies this personal difficulty with writing through a statement in *Emile*. He says that “The impression of the word is always weak, and one speaks to the heart far better through the eyes than through the ears.” He believes that it is easier, and more effective, to arouse emotion through the iconic because the spoken and, by even further extension, the written no longer has an active force. This is so because in the quest for greater reasoning capabilities, “we have reduced our precepts to words” and have “made no
use of actions.” Rousseau contends that this refined reasoning “sometimes restrains, it arouses rarely, and is has never done anything great. Always to reason is the mania of small minds. Strong souls have quite another language. It is with this language that one persuades and makes others act” (1979, 321). Rousseau here makes a distinction between the language of the mind and the language of the soul. The language of the mind is based upon the word and has little kinetic power. The language of the soul more closely resembles historically earlier communication such as the cry of nature he cites in the Second Discourse, which has the power to call individuals to action, especially through pity (1997a, 146). Rousseau contends that the only writings that have such an ability to speak to the soul rather than the mind are the “writings of the ancients,” as their language was closer to emotion than those of Eighteenth Century Europe.

Rousseau explains how this change has come about in his Essay on Origin of Languages. He says that writing, “which might be expected to fix language, is precisely what adulterates is; it changes not its words but its genius; it substitutes precision for expressiveness.” Therefore writing is inferior to emotional speech in Rousseau’s eyes because the author is “forced to use every word in conformity with common usage; but a speaker alters meanings by his tone of voice… he stresses forcefulness more and a language that is written cannot possibly retain for long the liveliness of one that is only spoken.” As such conventions of writing extend, people begin to speak as they would write, thus making all language in effect written (1997a, 260). Because Rousseau views the relationship between effective communication and written language in this way, contemporary readers can gain insight into his struggle to maintain clear communication, yet retain the power of what he sees as an ideal historical language.
In his second preface to *Julie*, Rousseau addresses this subject when he writes “Read a love letter written by an Author in his study, by a wit trying to shine. If he has at least a little fire in his brain, his letter will… scorch the paper; the heat will go no farther.” Rousseau likens this Author to a writer who follows the contemporary language of writing rather than that of the ancients. This removes the passion of the communication, as the Author is unable to rouse the soul. He contrasts this with a “letter from a truly passionate lover.” Such a letter “will be delusory, diffuse, full of verbose, disconnected, repetitious passages. [The Lover’s] heart, filled with an overflowing sentiment, ever repeats the same thing, and is never done.” Rousseau writes that in such a letter, “there is nothing in it to be struck by. And yet one feels the soul melt; one feels moved without knowing why” (1997b, 10). This way of writing Rousseau links to the ancients, and it is this method that he hopes to employ in his works. He writes “He who prefers truth to his reputation can hope to prefer it to his very life. You want people always to be consistent; I doubt that is possible for a man; but what is possible is for him always to be true; that is what I mean to try to be” (1997b, 20). This stated commitment to truth affects the way Rousseau writes, as he believes that it cannot be accomplished through a concise literary technique. Therefore his writing can be repetitive and paradoxical. He recognizes that this means his works are rife with contradiction, notably when he pleads for laxity in the *Emile*, saying “Common readers, pardon me my paradoxes. When one reflects, they are necessary and whatever you may say, I prefer to be a paradoxical man than a prejudiced one” (1979, 93). This creates difficulties in understanding Rousseau’s actual beliefs. As it relates to his political philosophy, this is especially pertinent, as a wide array of political systems can be philosophically traced to his self-identified paradoxical style.
CHAPTER 2
ROUSSEAU AS AN AUTHORITARIAN PHILOSOPHER

Other writers and philosophers have noted the authoritarian strain in Rousseau’s works, and the dangers that they may pose to liberal and democratic societies. Karl Popper lumps Rousseau in with others who spurred the creation of authoritarian regimes when he writes:

The most cherished ideas of the humanitarians were often loudly acclaimed by their deadliest enemies, who in this way penetrated into the humanitarian camp under the guise of allies, causing disunion and thorough confusion. This strategy has often been highly successful, as is shown by the fact that many genuine humanitarians still revere Plato’s idea of ‘justice,’ the medieval idea of ‘Christian’ authoritarianism, Rousseau’s idea of the ‘general will,’ or Fichte’s and Hegel’s ideas of ‘national freedom’ (1963,81, emphasis added).

Popper, like Nisbet, recognizes that Rousseau bases his ideal on a form of pure democracy, but could create a highly restrictive government. Others suggest that he created “the premise or seed of a new authoritarianism” and that his philosophy “leads on to Stalin and not to John Stuart Mill” (Rempel 1976, 18). These critiques are from authors who have the historical hindsight to read a Rousseauian influence into the rise of authoritarianism, but similar critiques were promulgated, during, and soon after, Rousseau’s life.

Benjamin Constant began writing only about twenty years after Rousseau’s death, and is highly critical of the authoritarian implications that come about through his thought. A basic understanding of Constant’s political ideas leads to this criticism. His analysis of politics is based upon two opposed systems, that of the ancients and that of the moderns. He believes that ancient systems are based upon a positive mode of liberty in which the state is pervasive and that
modern systems rely on negative liberty which allows for individual freedom. Ancient liberty is collective, and though it allows individuals freedom in one sense, it also creates “complete subjugation of the individual to the authority of the community.” Constant’s criticism is based upon what would happen “if Rousseau’s conception of liberty (appropriate to ancient society) was applied to modern conditions.” He believed that the end result would be political tyranny and that “the Social Contract, so often invoked in favor of liberty, is the most terrible support of all kind of despotism” (Brint 1985, 326-7).

These analyses contend that Rousseau is an authoritarian philosopher, whether he intended to be one or not. Specifically, they assert that Rousseau supported authoritarianism concepts through his emphasis on the need for individuals to love the state, the inalterable general will and the lack of public rhetoric to protect it, and an educational system based upon the intent to mold people into political supporters. All of these aspects are necessary to maintain an authoritarian society, and Rousseau lends support to them at places in his works, primarily in the Social Contract and Discourse on Political Economy.

**Love of State**

Rousseau maintains that fostering love for the state is of utmost importance. If individuals must wholly submit to its absolute authority, then they have to believe that it is in their best interest. This love of the state is first fostered by a legislator who convinces people to join political society, and then it is strengthened by a civic religion that creates patriotism. This process begins before the state is even created as the charismatic legislator persuades individuals to utterly submit themselves. Rousseau creates a means to further political dominance as individuals continue to act in the interest of the state.
As explained in *On the Social Contract*, Rousseau believes that before the legislator comes into existence, there is a time of life in the state of nature in which the “original state cannot subsist any longer, and the human race would perish if it did not alter its mode of existence.” At this point, individuals must join together in order that they can act as one great force, for if they do not then the only source of power is direct force from one individual to another. Rousseau says that this association between men requires “the total alienation of each associate, together with all his rights to the entire community. For first of all, since each person gives himself whole and entire, the condition is equal for everyone; and since it is equal for everyone, no one has an interest in making it burdensome for the others.” Rousseau continues by explaining that this act of alienation is actually empowering the individual because it allows each person to dictate the laws that he will follow (1987, 23-4). It is not readily apparent to all individuals that the pact will be positive, and not all may appear to want equality due to previous distribution of resources, and, more importantly, availability of force. Though the total alienation of oneself is beneficial to all members in the state of nature, people must ultimately be convinced of this.

In order to convince individuals to enter into such an agreement prescribed by Rousseau, it would require an agent termed the legislator. This person needs a “superior intelligence that [beholds] all the passions of men without feeling any of them; who [has] no affinity with our nature, yet [knows] it through and through; whose happiness [is] independent of us, yet who nevertheless [is] willing to concern itself with ours; finally, who… procures for himself in a distant glory, being able to labor in one age and find enjoyment in another.” This specific individual has to be superior to all others, and Rousseau explicitly states that “Gods would be
needed to give men laws” (1987, 38-9). The word “god” implies that the legislator should have power over the populace, specifically the ability to persuade.

Rousseau explains that the legislator is not to be a ruler. He has to persuade people to follow him, but he is not responsible for the codification of their laws. He has to convince people that they are able to rule themselves, and more importantly, do so using their language so that he is not viewed as an outsider looking for personal gain through manipulation. Despite the initial emphasis on self governance, Rousseau’s detractors point to what they believe is the end result of a unitary mindset of the populace as a mark of despotism. The legislator’s biggest obstacle is having men implement an understanding which is to be formed by government. In order for the institution of government to be created, men would have to follow the social order of government before its creation. Since the legislator cannot use force or reasoning according to Rousseau’s concept of legitimacy, he must “have recourse to an authority of a different order, which can compel without violence and persuade without convincing.” This is accomplished through the use of religion. The legislator has to convince the people that he is directly linked to a god, but this is a very difficult task. Since it is so difficult, if the legislator can accomplish this then he is truly fit to create a government (1987, 40-1). It is important to note the use of religion in convincing people to take part in a social agreement of cooperation.

In an earlier writing, *A Discourse on Political Economy*, Rousseau’s legislator is vested with even more control over individuals when creating a political society. He still refers to the “celestial voice” of the legislator as it is “the voice alone that political leaders should speak when they command; for no sooner does one man, setting aside the law, claim to subject another to his private will, than he departs from the state of civil society, and confronts him face to face in the pure state of nature, in which obedience is prescribed solely by necessity” (Rousseau 2008, 5).
Leaders must maintain appeals to higher laws in order to maintain a political system. If a leader strays from this approach, individuals will question governmental authority. He must continue to use his strongest force, that of his example, because “even if the people were willing to permit him to release himself from the yoke of the law, he ought to be cautious in availing himself of so dangerous a prerogative, which others might soon claim to usurp in their turn, and often use to his prejudice.” It must be noted that though this force is not violent, it is still absolute power over individuals. Rousseau writes “With force in one’s hands, there is no art required to make the whole world tremble, nor indeed much to gain men’s hearts; for experience has long since taught the people to give its rulers great credit for all the evil they abstain from doing it, and to adore them if they do not absolutely hate it” (Rousseau 2008, 6.). There is no need for violence as long as leaders exploit other forces of social control such as maintaining an example.

The legislator gains authority through the use of religion and maintains authority by continuing to rule in the same vein as he adheres to the laws of the society. He convinces individuals to submit themselves to the state and to his own absolute control as long as he appears to follow them. The best way to do this is to “disguise his power, in order to render it less odious, and to conduct the State so peaceably as to make it seem to have no need of conductors” (Rousseau 2008, 6). This is not to say that the power exercised by the legislator is not reprehensible, it must only appear not to be. Through this statement, Rousseau gives credence to an authoritarian means of rule by the legislator before and after the formation of the state.

The religion that the legislator invokes must act as a civil religion “the articles of which it belongs to the sovereign to establish, not exactly as dogmas of religion, but as sentiments of sociability, without which it is impossible to be a good citizen or a faithful subject.” This
religion is not meant to fulfill any goal other than that of providing a stable society in which individuals subject themselves to laws for fear of punishment. Rousseau continues:

While not having the ability to obligate anyone to believe them, the sovereign can banish from the state anyone who does not believe them. It can banish him not for being impious but for being unsociable, for being incapable of sincerely loving the laws and justice, and of sacrificing his life, if necessary, for his duty. If, after having publicly acknowledged these same dogmas, a person acts as if he does not believe them, he should be put to death; he has committed the greatest of crimes: he has lied before the laws. (1987, 102)

This passage is perhaps the most striking when reading Rousseau as an authoritarian. Since there is no way to actually force an individual to wholly accept beliefs, those who do not can be stricken from society not because they do not believe in a deity, but because their disbelief means that they are likely not to fulfill their duties. This banishment is a preemptive measure and does not allow for individual freedom of choice. Yet, if a person is able to maintain membership in society while merely professing rather than acting on faith, then he will be killed because his profession of faith was not true. This passage advocates a single state religion, and though it may be minimal in practice after the government is established, it still requires unwavering support for the society to thrive. If one chooses not to believe in it, then there are only two options; exit from society or be put to death. Clearly, this is not a liberal political measure and is based upon the absolute authority of the state which extends as far as ruling out the possibility of a pluralistic society. Nisbet writes that within Rousseauian society, sin is an act against civil law and is based upon “respect for the Sovereign, allegiance to the state alone, and subordination of all interests to the law of the realm” (1943, 106). This summation points to a highly centralized system with little personal freedom.

This civic religion coupled with patriotism enhances strong control over individuals as they seek to only act in the interest of the state. In *A Discourse on Political Economy*, Rousseau writes that “It is not enough to say to the citizens, *be good*; they must be taught to be so;…”
patriotism is the most efficacious [means]: for as I have said already, every man is virtuous when his particular will is in all things conformable to the general will, and we voluntarily will what is willed by those whom we love.” Patriotism serves to enhance love of country. Since individuals want what is best for what they love, then this form of patriotism further enhances the means from which a civic religion makes individuals act in the interest of the state. Rousseau continues:

It is certain that the greatest miracles of virtue have been produced by patriotism: this fine and lively feeling, which gives to the force of self-love all the beauty of virtue, lends it an energy which, without disfiguring it, makes it the most heroic of all passions. This it is that produces so many immortal actions, the glory of which dazzles our feeble eyes; and so many great men, whose old-world virtues pass for fables now that patriotism is made mock of. This is not surprising: the transports of susceptible hearts appear altogether fanciful to any one who has never felt them; and the love of one's country, which is a hundred times more lively and delightful than the love of a mistress, cannot be conceived except by experiencing it. But it is easy to perceive in every heart that is warmed by it, in all the actions it inspires, a glowing and sublime ardour which does not attend the purest virtue, when separated from it. (2008, 8)

Patriotism is wholly separated from logic and is based upon undying love with submission to the state. Rousseau’s political system cultivates this strong form of love of country that puts individuals in an entirely subservient position to the interests of state through an expression of societal interests. This allows the state to follow any action with guaranteed support from citizens even if it is not in the citizens’ interests, and further illustrates Rousseau’s authoritarian nature.

Infallible General Will

In On the Social Contract, Rousseau explains his concept of the general will which is to be expressed by the sovereign but determined by the individuals within the society. He writes that after total individual alienation and the creation of political society, “only the general will can direct the forces of the state according to the purpose for which it was instituted, which is the
common good.” Common interest is the basis of the society, and the exercise of this is termed “sovereignty.” This general will cannot be transmitted to anything but the sovereign. In explaining how the self-interest of the individual is no longer expressed, he writes that “it is not impossible for a private will to be in accord on some point with the general will, it is impossible, at least for this accord to be durable and constant. For by its nature the private will tends toward having preferences and the general will tends toward equality.” Private interests are no longer recognized, and any resemblance the general will has with such interest is purely coincidental (Rousseau 1987, 29-30). The general will pushes individual interest aside, and consent by all becomes the most important aspect of society, rather than acting toward personal gain. This is how the general will can be construed as an authoritarian measure. It does not recognize self interests, and if it does happen to express an individual desire it is only by chance. The general will is only to act in the explicit interest of the collective state.

Rousseau continues in explaining the authority of the general will with the concept that its expression is indivisible; it can only act as a complete whole. Any description or model consisting of a division of interconnected parts comes from “not having formed precise notions of sovereign authority, and from having taken parts of that authority that were merely emanations from it.” Sovereignty is only the creation of law, not its application. For example, making peace and declaring war are not acts related to the sovereign because they rely upon previously created law. Sovereignty would be the expression of law regarding grounds for declaring war or peace. This continues the theme of the expression of the general will in all collective decisions. Expression of the general will becomes the purpose of government after self-alienation. Furthermore, Rousseau says that the “general will is always right and always tends toward the public utility” (Rousseau 1987, 30-1). As long as there is a general will, it is by
definition correct, and if it appears to be wrong, then it is merely an expression of various private interests.

Therefore as long as the general will exists, it is the absolute source of authority and any transgression from it is simply wrong. It is envisioned as a means of executing a direct democracy, but it becomes a centralized supreme authority in its expression, making it exhibit properties of authoritarian rule as it is realized in a single, unified voice. Nisbet concurs, and writes that “in the bearing of Rousseau’s general will upon traditional society that the full sweep of its totalitarian significance becomes manifest” because it requires “the unqualified obedience of every individual in the community, and implies the obligation of each citizen to render to the state all that the state sees fit to demand” (1943, 101-2). Due to the infallibility and supreme authority of the general will, it has the potential to be realized as a means of authoritarian rule.

**Shaping Men**

A problem would arise if an individual is unable to recognize what should be done in accord with the general will. Such an occurrence should be rare because the government promotes an educational system that ensures that individuals will recognize what it means to be a citizen of a state. Through shaping minds early on and throughout life, this dilemma can more easily be avoided than if it is only addressed when a citizen falls out of accord. Rousseau writes in his *Discourse on Political Economy* that “a careful and well-intentioned government, vigilant incessantly to maintain or restore patriotism among the people, provides beforehand against the evils which sooner or later result from the indifference of the citizens to the fate of the Republic.” The means to this end is clearly education as it makes “men love their country, respect the laws, and live simply, [as] little remains to be done in order to make them happy”
Rather than waiting for problems to occur, Rousseau places the importance on creating viewpoints through specific systems of tutoring sponsored by the state, which is to satiate the citizens and urge them to conform to a collective interest that is expressed in the general will.

To push individuals toward accepting the general will, Rousseau attempts to “predispose men through various means to republicanism and democracy by prescribing an education of sentiments.” These sentiments are not ideas or thoughts, but rather concepts that allow individuals to understand what is good. In *Emile*, he stresses that the state should educate citizens rather than leaving the job to the family because familial interests are usually corrupt and self-serving. To remove self-interest, the public must provide education, for even though a great many may support ideas that come from the family, these ideas are only a collective expression of individuality. He says that “to form citizens is not the work of a day; and in order to have men it is necessary to educate them when they are children” (Fermon 1994, 434). Leaving education to the state allows it to act in a single way for all citizens, creating adults who are all cultured in the exact same way, thus increasing uniformity based upon allegiance to the general will.

Waiting until men are grown to educate them would not allow for their sentiments to be correctly cultivated. They would have already experienced vast numbers of conflicting ideas with no way to comprehend which ones are truly good. Rousseau sees the importance of conscience rather than physical instinct, which he views as primitive. Physical instinct should be relegated to his state of nature because it will not work in organized society. He says that “Too often reason fools us, we have only too well acquired the right to accuse it; but the conscience never fools; it is the true guide of man; it is to the soul what the instinct is to the body” (Fermon 1994, 434). To educate someone to act within the general will, one must develop his conscience
before reason because it is the true measure of what is right. Sentiments and the conscience are closely related because they are sources other than reason from which men can judge what is right and wrong, and they are usually more apt to do so because reason is affected by self-interest, whereas the conscience pushes men to do what is right. This means that the state educates the young not to act based upon their reason, but rather their conscience. Through the education this instinct is guided by the aforementioned civic religion pushed by the educational system. State allegiance replaces independent thought.

The conscience is composed of innate sentiments rather than ideas. In order to make these sentiments appear, individuals have to be educated via an extensive educational process. After these sentiments are realized, they will allow for love of the good. Once this has been established, reason can be introduced to the individual. Rousseau says in the *Profession of Faith of a Savoyard Vicar* that “To know the good is not to love it; man does not have innate knowledge of it; but as soon as reason makes it known to him, his conscience brings him to love it; it is this sentiment which is innate.” The most important part of education is establishing the sentiment to see the good (as the state), which does exist innately in all individuals, but its expression is a learned trait. Once established, it allows one to love the good after reason has been taught. According to Rousseau, complete education “entails the education of reason and intelligence prior to the training of emotions and sensibility.” This should come after sentiments and consciences are realized because “Only then can one avoid the chaotic effect of trying to subdue the passions before the intellect is developed enough to understand what is at stake” (Fermon 1994, 434). Education is a process of learning how to think rather than what to think for Rousseau, though this path will inevitably lead to ignoring the self and looking toward promotion of the general will, thus teaching people to be subjects.
Restrictions upon Rhetoric and Debate

For Rousseau, once individuals subscribe to the community pact, there should be no use for rhetoric because what is good should be readily apparent. Garsten adds that “He pointed the way toward a new sort of rhetoric against rhetoric, a prophetic language of conscience and community that would go even further in closing off the realm of controversy than Hobbes’ [an absolutist] efforts ever had” (2006, 55). Rousseau seeks to eliminate rhetoric because he does not believe it should even be necessary in his ideal society. Regarding this, he writes:

If when a sufficiently informed populace deliberates, the citizens were to have no communication amongst themselves, the general will would always result from the large number of small differences, and the deliberation would always be good. But when intrigues and partial associations come into being at the expense of the large association, the will of each of these associations becomes general in relation to its members and particular in relation to the state. (1987, 32).

According to this statement, debate only serves to fracture the body politic that represents the general will and merely promotes collections of private interests that are not good for the state; they are rather good only for a specific group of individuals. He expects individuals to have differences, but only minor ones. These discontinuities can be taken care of after general decisions are made, but because of the lack of self-interest, all citizens know what constitutes the general will and act in accord. Rousseau focuses on the idea that rhetoric is not necessary because, when self-interest is banished, all parties desire the same ends, through investment in the community. It is with this that Rousseau expresses the authoritarian means of stifling dissent to preserve the authority of the state, which solely rests upon the general will acting in a single purpose. Though for Rousseau this is in the name of achieving a purely democratic process, others have interpreted this as a measure dangerous to democracy.

Nisbet addresses this lack of debate and writes that “A unified, general, will is incompatible with the existence of minor associations; hence they must be banished” (1943,
A state without rhetoric does not allow individuals to fracture into groups, thus they adopt the general will as their own interest. The state maintains that citizens will act in its accord because they are given no other options. Garsten writes more about Rousseau’s general disdain of oratory due to its splintering effects when he says that in Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* “he complained that Rome had been corrupted when it ‘filled up with Philosophers and Orators’ and had turned to ‘the frivolous eloquence that is the object of study and delight of futile men’” (2006, 60). The intent to limit debate is seen throughout Rousseau’s works as he clearly supported this measure traditionally not associated with democratic systems.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has analyzed Rousseau’s authoritarian aspects that are present in both far left and far right authoritarian states. Such states are based upon citizens’ extreme love of the state, lack of rhetoric and debate, charismatic centralized leaders, and a state supported means of shaping citizens’ minds and actions. For Rousseau, love of the state is fostered through a civic religion pushed by the legislator who acts as a persuasive force. No debate is allowed to prevent variation in thought and options are further limited through extensive forms of state education. All of these means are designed to protect the infallible general will.

Through this reading Rousseau’s ideal state is based upon the transformation of social man into political man where all relationships are maintained through the state. Under such a system, all actions become political and the state is the sole mechanism for interaction. This central authoritarian thought is the totally invasive political system which guides individual thought and action.
CHAPTER 3
ROUSSEAU AS A DEMOCRAT

In opposition to the interpretations that paint Rousseau as an authoritarian philosopher, there is a large contingent of writers who believe that through his political and autobiographical works, Rousseau is in actuality a radical democrat who roots his participatory political ideology in the liberty and autonomy of the individual. The seminal anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon says that Rousseau is “the apostle of liberty and equality” (Noland 1967, 35, emphasis added), and Allers subscribes to this interpretation when he writes that Rousseau’s “enquiries into the proper form of social existence are sparked by his search for means which make it possible to keep men moral, and to reform civilization so that it will become not a destroyer but a bulwark of freedom” (1958, 95). Rather than seeing Rousseau’s narrative of human history and restructuring of the political state into a highly pervasive institution as a process that constricts individual freedom, this view permits that readers instead see this narrative as a reinvigoration of authority at the individual level. Alexander expounds upon this line of thought when he writes that Rousseau “is a humanist and a rationalist… Because he is a humanist, he is a democrat; but his rationalism leads him to avoid the great pitfall of democracy – individualism of passion and desire” (1917, 609). This interpretation lends some credence to the aforementioned authoritarian readings of Rousseau because it notes the limitations upon individuals, but does emphasize that democratic ideals are the groundwork of Rousseau’s thought. Goldstick attributes such readings to a “theoretical tangle” involving the general will and common good that has led “some
uncharitable commentators… to brand him a proponent of tyranny; while it was all the time in fact a democratic, if misguided, line of argument” (1973, 184). Allers directly confronts this notion that Rousseau’s democracy ignores the importance of individuals as he criticizes authoritarian readings of Rousseau’s thought at the closing of his review of the *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men* or *Second Discourse*. He says that “The characteristic of authoritarianism is that the community is conceived as an end of higher dignity than the individual, and Rousseau would not subscribe to this doctrine. To Rousseau, the community is still the means and the individual the end, and understood within his context Rousseau is libertarian and not authoritarian” (1958, 120). Thomas Paine, too, espouses a similar praise of Rousseau, writing “we find in the writings of Rousseau… a loveliness of sentiment in favour [sic] of liberty” (1995).

As noted previously, Nisbet agrees with this assumption of Rousseau’s philosophy at least partially due to the libertarian aspects present in the *Second Discourse* (1943, 97). Though Rousseau’s works appear to be contradictory in many places, an emphasis on the *Second Discourse* illustrates the driving force of his politics. It focuses upon the groundwork of society with an intent to capture and strengthen what he believes to be the true nature of man as a being who ideally has complete control over his own life, yet is corrupted through the evolution of the community from the state of nature to the contemporary state in which individuals have little control over the institutions to which they belong. Though this section of the work does not exclusively focus upon the *Second Discourse*, since there is no mention of it previously a brief synopsis is warranted.
Second Discourse

Rousseau begins his discourse by noting that there are two types of inequality: “one which [he] call[s] natural or Physical, because it is established by Nature, and which consists in the differences in age, health, strengths of Body, and qualities of Mind, or of Soul” and the other “which may be called moral, or political inequality, because it depends on a sort of convention, and is established, or at least authorized by Men’s consent” (1997, 131). The first type of inequality appears on its own and is always present, even in the state of nature. The second type is constructed by humans and therefore does not occur in the state of nature, and it causes much more harm than the first type. The purpose of this work then is to examine this second type of inequality and to determine how and why it exists and more specifically to “mark in the progress of things, the moment when, Right replacing Violence, Nature was subjected to Law; to explain by what chain of wonders the strong could resolve to serve the weak, and the People to purchase and idea of repose at the price of real felicity” (1997, 131).

Rousseau explains the pristine state of nature when he writes that:

The extreme inequality in ways of life, the excess of idleness among some, the excess of work among others, the ease with which our appetites and our sensuality are aroused and satisfied, the excessively exotic dishes of the rich, which fill them with inflammatory humors and wrack them with indigestions, the bad food of the Poor, which most of the times they do not even have, and the want of which leads them greedily to overtax their stomachs when they get the chance, the late nights, the excesses of every kind, the immoderate transports of all the Passions, the fatigue and exhaustion of the Mind, the innumerable sorrows and pains that are experienced in every station of life and that constantly gnaw away at men’s souls: Such are the fatal proofs that most of our ills are from our own making, and that we would have avoided almost all of them if we had retained the simple, uniform and solitary way of life prescribed to us by Nature (1997, 137-8).

Human vices destroy the individual and they only exist due to the creation of the second type of inequality which is a manmade creation. Though they are based upon the basic human appetites that are present in nature, they are taken to excess upon the institution of false inequalities which push the wealthy to overconsume and leave the poor in a state in which they have to overwork
themselves just to meet basic human needs. He continues to explain that as a human becomes accustomed to this way of life “he becomes sociable and a Slave, he becomes weak, timorous, groveling, and his soft and effeminate way of life completes the enervation of both his strength and his courage” (1997, 139). This domestication leads to a situation in which people become beholden to the previously mentioned vices overall weaken and soften them, moving them farther away from Rousseau’s Spartan ideal.

Unlike other animals, man is propelled out of the state of nature due to his greater faculties. Rousseau writes that an “animal is nothing but an ingenious machine to which nature has given senses in order to wind itself up and, to a point, protect itself against everything that tends to destroy or to disturb it” and the same holds true for the “human machine, with this difference that Nature alone does everything in the operations of the Beast, whereas man contributes to his operations in his capacity as a free agent. The one chooses or rejects by instinct, the other by an act of freedom” (1997, 140). Man can create institutions along with inequality through intellect and reason that allow him to at least partially ignore the restraints that instinct places upon him. Regarding these instincts, or passions, the only goals sought in nature are “food, a female, and rest; the only evils he fears are pain, and hunger; [he says] pain, and not death; for an animal will never know what it is to die, and the knowledge of death and of its terrors, is one of man’s first acquisitions on moving away from the animal condition” (1997, 142). Basically man and animal are driven by the same desires, but it is man’s deeper understanding of these desires that create knowledge because he wants to fully grasp what is desirable and what is undesirable. Rousseau specifically writes that “so much more does the ignorance of vice profit [Savages] than the knowledge of virtue profits those” (1997, 152).
Man must create a means of communication, specifically language. Rather than deriding language as he does so in *On the Social Contract* in relation to governing bodies, Rousseau praises it as the impetus toward society and an interest in others’ lives. The earliest and “the most universal, the most energetic and the only language he needed before it was necessary to persuade assembled men, is the cry of Nature” (1997, 146). This form of language is laudable because it creates favorable outcomes as it is not used to promote factions, but draws people together as it is based upon simple desires for safety and community. This cry is a noise made of instinct and evokes the base emotion of pity from other individuals and inspires the institution of the Golden Rule, the maxim of least harm to others (1997, 154). Only when ideas began to “expand and to multiply” was there a need for all inclusive means of language and symbols (1997, 146). He then asks an open-ended question for the reader: “which is the more necessary, an already united Society for the institution of Languages, or already invented Languages for the establishment of Society?” (1997, 149). The formation of society and the formulation of language are so intertwined in Rousseau’s narrative, that there is no way to tell exactly which comes first chronologically. They are both dependent upon each other.

Rousseau points to the establishment of private property as the end of the state of nature when “The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, to whom it occurred to say *this is mine*, and found people sufficiently simple to believe him, was the true founder of society” (1997, 161). This is not a positive advancement for humans according to Rousseau and is based upon the concept of misused and illegitimate authority in which a minority is able to convince and control masses through simple manipulation, an early misuse of language. After the establishment of property, men seek vices and other consumable commodities for leisure that eventually become needs and “it became much more cruel to be deprived of them than to possess
them than was sweet, and men were unhappy to lose them without being happy to possess them” (1997, 165). Property eventually leads to an atmosphere of conspicuous consumption in which people have to keep up with and consume as much as others, and if they were unable to consume as much they came to see themselves as inadequate. This drive leads to “competition and rivalry on the one hand, conflict of interests on the other, and always the hidden desire to profit at another’s expense; all these evils are the first effect of property, and the inseparable train of nascent inequality” (1997, 171).

Rousseau sees that modern people “do nothing but incessantly boast of the peace and quiet they enjoy in their chains, and that they call the most miserable servitude peace: but when [he sees] the others sacrifice pleasures, rest, wealth, power, and life itself for the sake of preserving this one good which those who have lost it hold in such contempt; when [he sees] Animals born free and abhorring captivity smash their heads against the bars of their prison; when [he sees] multitudes of completely naked Savages scorn European voluptuousness and brave hunger, fire, the sword, and death in order to preserve nothing but their independence, [he feels] that it is not for Slaves to reason about freedom” (1997, 177). This leads to Rousseau’s opening to On the Social Contract, which says “Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains” (Rousseau, 1987, 17). The softening of man and the creation of unjust states based upon illegitimacy creates slaves. Through reasoning and logic, individuals have convinced themselves that they are free. Only those still close to the state of nature feel the urge to rebel, and those are the ones who should be the ones held as the model of freedom. The solution to allowing true freedom after the state of nature lies in the social contract which attempts to recapture an earlier stage of history in which individuals act in accord, yet retain their autonomy though act in each others’ interests.
Emphasis on Liberty

In the Second Discourse, Rousseau heavily emphasizes the liberty of the individual as a basic quality held by all people in the state of nature. His historical narrative of the history of man stresses this point. He writes that individuals form communities and submit to authority in order to provide for a common safety. About this, he asks “why did they give themselves superiors if not to defend them against oppression, and to protect their goods, their freedoms and their lives, which are, so to speak, the constitutive elements of their being?” (1997, 176). In this passage, Rousseau stresses that individual freedom is a trait shared by all humans, and that they seek to ensure this liberty through social organization. He continues by stating that “It is therefore incontrovertible, and it is the fundamental maxim of all Political Right, that Peoples gave themselves Chiefs to defend their freedom, and not to enslave them” (1997, 176). Rousseau cites the preservation of freedom as the true basis for political associations, and through his theories attempts to discover a system in which it remains as modern society has created a “miserable servitude” with its primary interest of peace. He says that this powerful inclination toward freedom is still present in some non-European regions as “naked Savages scorn European voluptuousness and brave hunger, fire, the sword, and death in order to preserve nothing but their independence” (1997, 177). Rousseau views these groups as though they are in a more favorable state because they are willing to fight to maintain their freedom since they have not been corrupted by Western government. He uses this anecdotal evidence to support his hypothesis that liberty is desirable and natural.

Rousseau continues to express the natural inclination toward freedom and liberty throughout the text of the Second Discourse. He goes so far as to state that the expression of freedom is the defining characteristic of the human animal when he writes that “Nature
commands every animal, and the Beast obeys. Man experiences the same impression, but he recognizes himself free to acquiesce or to resist, and it is mainly in the consciousness of this freedom that the spirituality of his soul exhibits itself” (1997, 141). Humans are different from other animals because they are bound to nature but are able to act on other impulses and desires. Through this knowledge of freedom, human nature is expressed, and it is the basis of all actions and associations. Rousseau contends that the family is the first form of association because it is organized based upon the need to care for children. He says that “Each family became a small Society, all the better united as mutual attachment and freedom were its only bonds” (1997, 164). The family is marked by individuals who want to be in the arrangement, and it is beneficial for all people. The emphasis he places on freedom in relation to the family is an important part of his politics as he attempts to establish such a system of mutual attachment on a larger scale in the Social Contract.

In the Social Contract Rousseau expresses very similar ideas about the nature of freedom and liberty in humans. He writes that “common liberty is one consequence of the nature of man. Its first law is to see his maintenance; its first concerns are those he owes himself; and as soon as he reaches the age of reason, since he alone is the judge of the proper means of taking care of himself, he thereby becomes his own master” (1987, 18). Because this liberty and self-awareness occur naturally in all individuals, each person rules himself and maintains the ability to determine their own desires and needs. Furthermore, an individual cannot reject this liberty in any way. Rousseau says that “Renouncing one’s liberty is renouncing one’s dignity as a man, the rights of humanity and even its duties. There is no possible compensation for anyone who renounces everything. Such a renunciation is incompatible with the nature of man” (1987, 20-1). He sees liberty as such an integral aspect of humans that there is no way to abandon it, as such an
act would completely go against any logical conception of what an individual needs. These previous passages relate to the status of freedom as a natural inclination as it was present well before contemporary societies were formed. Freedom is held in quite a different regard in more modern societies according to Rousseau’s narrative.

Rousseau heavily criticizes the negative aspects of modern society because governments denaturalize the individual and weaken the tendency toward liberty. He contrasts natural man and modern man, writing, “Savage man and civilized man differ so much in their inmost heart and inclinations that what constitutes the supreme happiness of one would reduce the other to despair. The first breathes nothing but repose and freedom, he wants only to live and remain idle” (1997, 186-7). This again stresses the natural disposition toward freedom. Because of new systems of organization, the emphasis on liberty has subsided. He again criticizes such systems and their misdirected goals; “Such was… the origin of Society and of Laws, which gave the weak new fetters and the rich new forces, irreversibly destroyed natural freedom, forever fixed the Law of property and inequality, transformed a skillful usurpation into an irrevocable right, and for the profit of a few ambitious men henceforth subjugates the whole of mankind to labor, servitude and misery” (1997, 173). Through political associations based upon force and hoarding of resources, inequality is expressed. In the Social Contract, Rousseau seeks to envision a system that can work in a modern age while at the same time reclaiming liberty that has been lost. He writes that in the process of creating a political community through a social contract that “Natural independence is exchanged for liberty; the power to harm others is exchanged for their own security; and their force, which others could overcome, for a right which the social union renders invincible” (1987, 34). Rousseau explicitly says that his political system is based upon liberty from the beginning though it is different from liberty in the state of
nature because it also provides protection against physical force. He makes this point again when he says that there are two objects when establishing law, “liberty and equality.” He emphasizes this aspect of liberty “because all particular dependence is that much force taken from the body of the state; equality because liberty cannot subsist without it” (1987, 46). Despite the prevalent readings of Rousseau as an authoritarian thinker, this focus on liberty runs throughout his thought. He specifically says that his social contract theory is based upon individual freedom. Contrasting interpretations go directly against what Rousseau stated as his intent for his philosophical endeavors.

Democratic Ideal

Though it is claimed by some that Rousseau prescribes authoritarian measures in his political philosophy, most notably in reference to the concept of the general will found in the Social Contract, its intent falls much closer to a form of direct democracy in which all individuals have the ability to influence legislation. Talmon agrees with this interpretation and writes that “there is nothing that Rousseau insists on more than the active and ceaseless participation of the people and every citizen in the affairs of the state” (Marini 1967, 453). Rousseau’s ideal state calls for an extremely high level of involvement by all members of the community because all members have an equal vote on all acts and legislation. On this, he says, the acceptance of the social contract produces a moral and collective body composed of as many members as there are voices in the assembly, which receives from this same act its unity, its common self, its life and its will” (1987, 24). Each member has a say in the actions of the community as a body. Through this association, the society is able fully to express the collective wills of individuals through legislation. Rousseau claims that “the populace itself cannot, even if
it wanted to, deprive itself of this incommunicable [legislative] right, because according to the fundamental compact, only the general will obligates private individuals, and there can never be any assurance that a private will is in conformity with the general will until it has been submitted to the free vote of the people” (1987, 40). He stresses the point of free votes in order to realize the general will.

Furthermore, when such a vote is take amongst the entire body, “the vote of the majority always obligates all the others” (Rousseau 1987, 82). Rousseau notes that the majority in a vote binds all members to their decision. Through open voting, the level of legislative support can be measured. Though a bare majority is an important determinant in voting, “between a unanimous and a tie vote, there are several unequal divisions, at any of which this proportionate number can be fixed in accordance with the condition and needs of the body politic” (Rousseau 1987, 82). Depending upon the size of the community, a different standard can be set for voting. There may be a situation in which a simple majority is not enough support for certain policies. The only difference is the percentage of votes required for legislation. The vote is still taken democratically with all members’ participation. Rousseau writes that in submitting this arrangement “in giving oneself to all, each person gives himself to no one. And since there is no associate over whom he does not acquire the same right that he would grant others over himself, he gains the equivalent of everything he loses, along with a greater amount of force to preserve what he has” (1987, 24). Bluhm interprets this as a demonstration of “the liberal character” of Rousseau’s ideal society “by linking the will of the individual with the general will” (1984, 372). Through this democratic process, the general will can be fully realized after all individuals positions are taken into consideration. Far from a restrictive model, this ideal provides that all member of the community have a direct part in the legislative process.
Conclusion

Rousseau realized that his work would face mistaken interpretations as he received criticism during his life. He writes in *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* to be careful when interpreting his work because:

“To judge men’s speeches by the consequences they produce is usually a poor way to assess their worth. Apart from the fact that these consequences are not always perceptible or easy to recognize, they vary infinitely, as the circumstances surrounding these speeches. Only the intention of the speaker gives them their worth and determines their degree of malice and goodness” (1992, 48).

Rousseau warns readers to look at his intent before they make incorrect assumptions about his philosophy. At the heart of his ideal political system is an emphasis on freedom and liberty, and this should be the basis by which he is judged. Rousseau is so important to political theory because he wrote in an era before both authoritarian and fully democratic states came into being. Because of his situation in history, he could not fathom the results of his philosophy’s (or parts thereof) adoption in any nation. Because of this, contemporary readers should judge him by his stated goals as he is not responsible for how others have interpreted his ideas.

Rousseau’s intent is pure democracy and the expression of the individual will. The detrimental affiliation he has to authoritarianism is a fault of those who read Rousseau and force authoritarian principles into his philosophy. Despite the fact that his contradictory writing style does make these authoritarian interpretations possible, Rousseau explicitly claims that his goal is to give individuals greater power than the political system in such a way that total individual autonomy is granted.

In summation, Rousseau’s influence on the area of political thought is quite substantial. This can be attributed to his complex political philosophy which at times seems to be at odds with itself. Due to this complexity, Rousseau has contributed to the far left and right and libertarian thought in addition to authoritarian doctrine. Understanding his contribution to both
of these traditions shows the immensity of his philosophical influence, and thanks to his autobiographical works we can more fully judge his intentions.
REFERENCES


