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# Rousseau

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<b>Preface</b>	<b>x</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>xii</b>
<b>System of References</b>	<b>xiii</b>
<b>Chronology</b>	<b>xv</b>

**Introduction One 1**

The Subject of this Book	1
The Aims of the Book	2
The Plan of the Book	3
Why Read Rousseau?	5
Further Reading	7

**Life and Key Works Two 8**

Rousseau's Life	8
Rousseau's Works Outlined	20
Key Themes and Ideas	38
Conclusion and Prospect	47
Further Reading	48

**The Three *Discourses* Three 49**

The Purpose of this Chapter	49
The First Discourse	50
The Second Discourse	57
Analysis of the Second Discourse	68
The Third Discourse	74
Summary and Prospect	78
Further Reading	80

***Émile* Four 81**

Introduction	81
<i>Émile</i> : Books I–III	86

Émile: Book IV	95
The Profession of Faith (Creed) of the Savoyard Vicar	107
Émile: Book V – Sophie, or The Woman	116
Émile’s Political Education	122
Further Reading	123

### ***The Social Contract* Five 124**

Introduction and the Purpose of this Chapter	124
The Social Contract – Book I	126
The Social Contract – Book II	134
The Social Contract – Book III	153
Overview and Conclusion	157
Further Reading	158

### **Culture, Religion and Politics Six 160**

The Purpose of this Chapter	160
Custom and Culture	160
Civil Religion	169
Poland and Corsica	174
Further Reading	179

### **Autobiography Seven 181**

Introduction	181
The Confessions	184
Rousseau Judge of Jean-Jacques: Dialogues	197
The Reveries of the Solitary Walker	203
Further Reading	209

### **Rousseau’s Legacy and Influence Eight 210**

Introduction	210
Rousseau and the Enlightenment	212

Rousseau and the French Revolution	215
Rousseau, Kant, Hegel and Marx	218
Rousseau and Romanticism	224
Rousseau's Contemporary Presence: Some Examples	227
Further Reading	232

<b>Glossary</b>	<b>233</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>235</b>
<b>Index</b>	<b>243</b>

# One

## Introduction

### THE SUBJECT OF THIS BOOK

This book is about the key ideas of the great eighteenth-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Born in Geneva in 1712, he died at Ermenonville (then just outside Paris but now virtually a suburb) in 1778. Most famous nowadays for his contributions to social and political theory, with *The Social Contract* of 1762, an essay on the fundamental questions of social justice and political legitimacy, being his best-known work in this area and probably overall, he also wrote a best-selling novel, *Julie, or The New Héloïse* (1761); a very important book on educational theory though with a wider intent, *Émile, or On Education* (1762); an extraordinarily original and influential autobiography, *The Confessions*, written between 1764–1770 and published posthumously; other works of self-interpretation and self-defence; essays on language and musical theory, a dictionary of music and a successful opera; works on botany, and a host of other things. This prodigious and wide-ranging output earned him an enormous if controversial reputation at the time, and many of his ideas have continued to have a powerful impact ever since.

The course of his life is also very remarkable. His mother died just a few days after his birth; he left Geneva on an impulse when he was not yet sixteen, converted to Roman Catholicism, was taken in by and became the lover of a woman thirteen years older than himself. That relationship failing after several years, he went to Paris to make his name, had his opera performed at Fontainebleau before

Louis XV and Madame de Pompadour, became an intimate of the leading Enlightenment thinkers of the time, but then withdrew wholly from fashionable society. He was subjected to persecution for his ideas, his books being publicly burnt in Paris and in Geneva, came to England with the great empiricist philosopher and historian David Hume, suffered an acute paranoid breakdown and eventually returned to Paris where, after a further period of severe mental distress, he seems finally to have found some repose of mind and body before his death. All these matters will be considered in more detail in Chapter 2 (and see also the chronological table on pp. xiv–xix). This is far from being the life of a cloistered academic who is troubled only by a misplaced comma!

Clearly this is a body of work – and a man – of formidable interest, and this book aims to go some way towards explaining the nature and significance of his ideas and why his thinking merits our attention.

### **THE AIMS OF THE BOOK**

This book aims to present and assess in a clear and accessible way the arguments and ideas that are, as I believe, central to Rousseau's achievement and make him a writer deserving of our interest. A study of these arguments and ideas is necessarily a study of the works in which they are expressed, so I will look quite closely at a selection of Rousseau's writings, and touch on many of the rest of them. I quote fairly extensively from Rousseau's works so that direct acquaintance with his manner and style can be had – albeit in translation – but also so that the basis of the interpretations I shall be offering can be seen. However, as noted, my principal concern is to understand and assess Rousseau's core arguments and ideas so the treatment overall will be thematic and issue-driven, not just a matter of expository presentation and summary.

I have tried to make the material accessible to those who have little or no previous knowledge of Rousseau's thought, of the concerns that exercised him and the key ideas for which he is celebrated,

though I acknowledge that there are some difficult parts. I hope to be able to say enough about his work to demonstrate its importance, why it continues to exert a hold over the imagination of many, and why it justifies sustained reflection and assessment, which I hope some readers will feel sufficiently interested to go on to undertake. However, because of the limited aims of this present account, I shall for the most part avoid involvement in interpretative controversy and scholarly debate and try to offer a treatment that is clear, plain and reasonably definite even if this means being a bit cavalier about some tricky issues. I feel it is better to offer a decided line of account in a fairly uncluttered way rather than get lost in the confusion of a thousand qualifications, whilst accepting that certain complexities will get passed over. The Further Reading section at the end of each chapter will quickly lead one to different approaches and assessments which will supplement and challenge this present one. The idea of any definitive account of Rousseau's thinking is highly implausible. I have tried to present a responsible and cogent assessment without any pretence of finality.

### THE PLAN OF THE BOOK

As noted above – and spelt out more fully in Chapter 2 – the range and variety of Rousseau's output is very great and it would be impossible in a book of this kind to try to do justice to all the elements it contains. I have selected for attention those among his works which I consider to be the most significant and enduring, and in assessing these I have picked out the themes that seem to me the most interesting and challenging. For the most part I shall be taking the works I consider in chronological order, but, as I said earlier, my treatment of these will be guided by attention to the key arguments and ideas I am foregrounding.

#### 4 Rousseau

The works to which I give most attention are:

*Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts* (1750)

*Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755)

*Discourse on Political Economy* (1755/58)

*Émile, or On Education* (1762)

*The Social Contract* (1762)

*The Confessions* (written 1764–70; published posthumously)

However, I shall touch, in more or less detail, on a great many others as well.

The themes in Rousseau's thinking to which I give greatest prominence are these:

- his account and critique of the corruption of man that civilisation brings;
- his concern with power relations between people;
- his celebration of 'natural' man;
- the role of the sentiments of *amour de soi* and *amour-propre*;
- his account of the foundations of political legitimacy and the role of the general will;
- his emphasis on liberty, fraternity and equality in a just and humane society;
- his account of the role of national culture and religion in the lives of individuals and in a just society.

Though much, I fully accept, is put to one side by highlighting these points, they are certainly highly interesting and important matters arising from Rousseau's work and worthy of close attention.

Very roughly, Chapter 3, which treats of the three *Discourses*, concerns the issues of man's corruption and of power relations between people in society. Chapter 4, on *Émile*, considers natural man, and the significance of *amour de soi* and *amour-propre*. Chapter 5, on *The Social Contract*, treats of political legitimacy, the general will, liberty and equality; Chapter 6 looks at fraternity and the role of culture and religion in society. Chapter 7 considers *The Confessions*



and, for reasons that will become clear there, returns to the idea of ‘natural’ man; and, finally, Chapter 8 looks briefly at Rousseau’s intellectual legacy and influence. However, much else is also considered as we go along, and the above is only a broad indication of where the themes and the works considered interact. In Chapter 2, I shall be giving a conspectus of Rousseau’s life and works.

### WHY READ ROUSSEAU?

This book highlights Rousseau’s ideas in the areas of individual psychology, social and moral theory and political philosophy. In each of these areas he made highly original contributions which still, in my estimation, have great force and penetration.

Rousseau develops an account of human relationships as very commonly pervaded by an aggressive desire to gain ascendancy over others, to glory in their abjection. This leads, in his view, to the development of a false self, a *persona* (mask) created to try to achieve invidious distinction which alienates people from their own true need and good and makes them cripplingly dependent on the regard and acclaim they solicit from others. Relations between individuals are shot through with deceit and manipulation, and social processes and structures incorporate and consolidate patterns of domination and subordination, mastery and subjection. There is in this the most acute psychological and social observation that is revelatory, in my estimation, not just of what went on in eighteenth century Paris but of a very great deal of what goes on in the lives of individuals and in the dynamics of society today. With these ideas Rousseau anticipates some of the central concerns of both Hegel and Marx, for all that they distance themselves from him (as noted in Chapter 8 below).

To set against this nightmarish vision of man and society, Rousseau argues that human well-being and happiness require relations of mutual respect, equality of status and full participation in the life, and legislative authority that determines the laws, of a society. Only in this way can man’s true nature and needs find

expression and satisfaction. He stresses the inherent dignity of and regard due to every person, and considers at length the forms of sovereignty, legislative organisation and processes that can best acknowledge this in a just, enduring and prosperous community. He argues for a form of civil authority in which everyone would have an equal voice in determining the declarations of that authority, in so doing setting an agenda for political change, the full ramifications of which we are still struggling with today, or so it seems to me. Although, of course, no one person's influence ever provides the whole story, the fact that today no arguments for political legitimacy can gain any sustained hearing, at least across much of the world, unless they incorporate the enfranchisement of all adult members of a society must in some part be due to the power of Rousseau's ideas.

Rousseau also argues that a great deal of what passes for morality and moral education is little more than coercion and bullying, which so far from improving the individual generates the very vices it purports to restrain. He seeks to put in place of this an ethic based on compassion for the vulnerable and oppressed, responded to with gratitude for help and support received, which involves a reciprocity of regard and care rather than submission to the pressures of moral demands. Finally in this thumbnail sketch, Rousseau's work celebrates simplicity of taste, manners and lifestyle, emphasising a delight in nature and in the development of individual sensibility and genius – so-called 'Romantic' ideas that were to have a massive influence.

Whether the temper of mind I have sketched here is found congenial I am unable to predict. But that we have here an array of ideas that is rich, powerful and striking is hard to deny, and I hope simple curiosity – if nothing else – would make one want to know more. I hope this book will go some way to satisfying that curiosity, but perhaps also convey something of a very distinctive and forceful mind at work.

I turn now to a somewhat fuller account of Rousseau's life, and to giving an overview of the range and variety of his works.

**FURTHER READING**

- Robert Wokler, *Rousseau – A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. An outstanding overview of Rousseau's work in a brief compass.
- Ronald Grimsley, *The Philosophy of Rousseau*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973. Another fine essay looking at all aspects of Rousseau's achievement.
- Allan Bloom, 'Jean-Jacques Rousseau' in Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (eds.) *History of Political Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987 (third edition). An illuminating survey essay.
- Peter Gay, 'Reading about Rousseau' in Peter Gay, *The Party of Humanity – Studies in the French Enlightenment*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1964. A highly interesting essay on how Rousseau has been read over the years.
- N.J.H. Dent, *A Rousseau Dictionary*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992. Covers all of Rousseau's work in a dictionary format.
- Colin Jones, *The Great Nation – France from Louis XV to Napoleon 1715–99*. London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 2002. An engaging and accessible history of France during Rousseau's time.

# Six

## Culture, Religion and Politics

### **THE PURPOSE OF THIS CHAPTER**

The purpose of this chapter is, in the first instance, to consider further the issue of the development and consolidation of 'the social spirit' (SC IV: 8, 305, OC III: 465) to which Rousseau attaches so much importance as a condition for the emergence and maintenance of a just and humane civil community. As will be seen below, his discussion of 'civil religion', in the last chapter of SC from which the reference to 'the social spirit' is taken, which I have not so far discussed, is also centrally concerned with this issue and thus is treated here too. Finally, I shall look at Rousseau's excursions into 'applied politics' as contained in his essays on Poland and Corsica to see how these works may deepen our understanding not only of the significance Rousseau attaches to the cultivation of the social spirit but also of how the general principles of legitimacy and justice argued for in SC may need to be qualified or compromised in the face of the recalcitrant facts of an actual social and political situation. By doing this we may hope to round out a sense of the scope and limits of Rousseau's political thinking overall.

### **CUSTOM AND CULTURE**

In the last chapter, we saw that obedience to the general will required each member of the community to attach weight to the person and goods of every other member of that community. And, despite the fact that doing so is, in Rousseau's estimation, the key to

living in and enjoying the benefits of a stable, just, egalitarian and prosperous community, and one that meets each person's need for recognition and respect compatibly with everyone else's, he plainly and surely rightly believes that such obedience does not come readily. Certain conditions need to obtain if such obedience is not to be merely coerced, or mechanical, but the gladly embraced spring of each citizen's conduct. A key passage, cited before, highlights some of the issues here:

Each individual, as a man, may have a particular will contrary or dissimilar to the general will he has as a citizen. His particular interest may speak to him quite differently from the common interest: his absolute and naturally independent existence may make him look upon what he owes to the common cause as a gratuitous contribution, the loss of which will do less harm to others than the payment of it is burdensome to himself . . . he may wish to enjoy the rights of citizenship without being ready to fulfil the duties of a subject.

[SC I: 7, 194–5, OC III: 363]

How can the sense that the contribution one makes to the common cause is 'gratuitous' be overcome, and a greater congruence or compatibility between the individual's particular will as an independent being and the general will they have as a citizen be secured?

Rousseau considers this issue at some length in DPE, as we saw earlier (Chapter 3; see DPE: 140–50, OC III: 252–62), saying: 'If you would have the general will accomplished, bring all the particular wills into conformity with it; in other words, as virtue is nothing more than this conformity of the particular wills with the general will, establish the reign of virtue' (DPE: 140, OC III: 252). And he goes on:

It is not enough to say to the citizens, *be good*; they must be taught to be so; and even example, which is in this respect the first lesson, is

not the sole means to be employed; patriotism is the most efficacious: 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 . . . Do we wish men to be virtuous? Then let us begin by making them love their country.

(DPE: 142, OC III: 254)

As we shall soon see, such views are strongly present in Rousseau's essays on Poland and Corsica, and although and perhaps surprisingly there is no discussion of patriotism in *The Social Contract*, similar considerations but in a different form are clearly present in the argument of that.

Before taking this further, it will be useful to make some distinctions. Broadly and roughly, we can distinguish four attitudes an individual (as an independent being) could take towards complying with the requirements of the general will, of the law, as follows. First, their compliance could be merely coerced, undertaken simply because of the threat of punishment. In this instance, were they to see the opportunity, it is reasonable to suppose that they would try to evade these requirements, and the likelihood of any stable and enduring community existing where this is the attitude of many members is very small or non-existent. Second, compliance could be viewed as a trade-off; this is roughly the attitude expressed in the quotation from SC Book 1, Chapter 7 cited above. But here too, should it appear that the benefits can be secured without the cost being paid then continued compliance is not to be expected, with similar consequences for the maintenance of a stable and just society as indicated in the first case. Third, compliance may have become largely mechanical, a not-thought-about way of behaving. This at first sight appears to indicate perfect conformity (and Rousseau does often enough speak of the importance of force of habit). But there are two reasons for thinking that this still comprises an unsatisfactory relationship between the

individuals' will and the general will. First, unreflective habits are apt to be disrupted or lost if circumstances change much or other interests enter the picture. They lack vitality and adaptability, making them appropriate only to very fixed conditions. But also, second, this way of looking at the matter suggests that, somehow, the requirements of the general will are there and in place for citizens to become habituated to. But, as we know, such requirements are supposed in complex ways to emerge from and relate to the concerns and commitments of all the members of the community, and unless there were some more active form of engagement with the common good sufficient to enable the requirements of the general will to be established in the first place there could be nothing to become habituated to.

This, then, brings us to the fourth possibility: that compliance could emerge from an understanding and active embrace of the ends that the law fosters, that is, the equal basic well-being and respect of all members of the community alike. Recall Rousseau's words: 'We voluntarily will what is willed by those whom we love'. This is plainly the kind of attitude that he thinks is most important to enable and sustain a just society, involving some identification by the individual members of their own good with the good of those others who comprise their community.

But how deep and pervasive should such 'identification' be? When Rousseau speaks of the 'conformity' of particular wills and the general will, what character should that take? A further distinction here is useful. On the one hand, what could be intended could be the reduction of private, individual goals and enjoyments to the minimal with each person giving themselves over to communal pursuits and activities concentrating their efforts, their ideas of what is worthwhile, on the promotion of the common good of the whole society, maximally identifying themselves with that. On the other hand, all that may be in view is that where there is conflict between an individual's pursuit of their particular interest and the pursuit of the common good through obedience to law, the latter is gladly

afforded priority but without there being any question overall of the erasure of private concerns.

There are passages where Rousseau seems strongly to favour 'maximal identification' as I have roughly outlined the character of that. Thus, when discussing the task of the legislator he writes:

He who dares to undertake the making of a people's institutions ought to feel himself capable, so to speak, of changing human nature, of transforming each individual, who is by himself a complete and solitary whole, into part of a greater whole from which he in a manner receives his life and being . . . of substituting a partial and moral existence for the physical and independent existence nature has conferred on us all . . . if each citizen is nothing and can do nothing without the rest . . . it may be said that legislation is at the highest possible point of perfection.

[SC II: 7, 214, OC III: 381–2]

And in the opening pages of *Émile* he writes:

Good social institutions are those that best know how to denature man, to take his absolute existence from him in order to give him a relative one and transport the / into the common unity, with the result that each individual believes himself no longer one but a part of the unity and no longer feels except within the whole.

[E I: 40, OC I: 249]

However, there are other passages that suggest only that priority need be given to the demands of the common good though, of course, the willingness to grant that will have its preconditions in terms of some sense of unity with others. Thus in Book II, Chapter 4 of SC, Rousseau writes:

Each man alienates . . . by the social compact, only such part of his powers, goods and liberty as it is important for the community to control . . . the Sovereign . . . cannot impose upon its subjects any fetters that are useless to the community.

[SC II: 4, 204, OC III: 373]



This would make no sense unless it was accepted that it was fit and proper for human beings to retain scope for the use and enjoyment of their powers, goods and liberty without reference to the community at least in some instances. Even in his most intensive writing about patriotism, referred to already, Rousseau says only that ‘a carefully and well intentioned government’ should keep ‘within narrow bounds that personal interest that so isolates the individual’ (DPE: 150, OC III: 262). And, late in *Émile*, Rousseau makes a powerful point, that love of country and community requires a ‘natural base’ and could not exist without it. In criticising Plato’s removal of private families from his ideal republic, Rousseau says:

I speak of that subversion of the sweetest sentiments of nature, sacrificed to an artificial sentiment which can only be maintained by them – as though there were no need for a natural base on which to form conventional ties; as though the love of one’s nearest were not the principle of the love one owes the state; as though it were not by means of the small fatherland which is the family that the heart attaches itself to the larger one.

[E V: 363, OC I: 700]

This being so, at least as Rousseau sees it, there cannot be any question of private ties and affections being wholly or even very substantially displaced and suppressed in the name of maximal identification with the interests of the state as a whole.

What, then, is Rousseau’s considered view of this? It is, I think, that the cultivation and maintenance of a significant measure of engaged concern with the well-being of one’s fellow citizens is certainly essential to sustaining a just and humane community, and achieving this requires a great deal of attention and detailed provision because the tendency for private or sectional interests to dominate goes deep. But he did not think that this concern for, love of, one’s fellows should displace almost all other concerns becoming a nearly exclusive interest. What has to be secured is that it has priority where there is conflict, not that it becomes all-encompassing.

What affording it such priority will concretely require will plainly depend on the range and character of the requirements that concern for one's fellows under the direction of the general will involves. Even should these be fairly limited – and Rousseau is nowhere very explicit about this – if they are to engage one's full-hearted commitment one's fellow citizens must be more to one than simply people it happens that one is thrown together with. They will be, rather, people with whom one has some sense of shared life, pleasures, attitudes and values, to put it no more exactly than this.

We find Rousseau exploring these issues at some length in his *Letter to d'Alembert on the Theatre*. This substantial essay, which Bloom has called 'like a morality play, entitled "the Spirit of Enlightenment against the Spirit of Republican Virtue"' (Bloom: PA xv) was prompted by the publication in 1757 of an article on Geneva by d'Alembert in his and Diderot's *Encyclopedia*. In this, he had argued that the life of the city of Geneva would be improved by allowing theatrical performances, which were not at that time permitted. d'Alembert writes that providing the conduct of the actors themselves was duly regulated by law:

Geneva would have theatre and morals [manners], and would enjoy the advantages of both; the theatrical performances would form the taste of the citizens and would give them a fineness of tact, a delicacy of sentiment, which is very difficult to acquire without the help of theatrical performances . . . Geneva would join to the prudence of Lacedaemon the urbanity of Athens.

(Bloom: PA 4)

As noted earlier in Chapter 2, Rousseau saw – and probably rightly – the hand of Voltaire in these comments. Voltaire had settled just outside Geneva in 1755, and it is likely that he was seeking a larger stage for the performance of his plays than his own home allowed for.

Rousseau argued strenuously against d'Alembert's proposal. He

insisted that a theatre could only flourish if it provided amusement for the audience. Yet in amusing them, he asserted, it diverted them from finding their pleasure in performing their civic duties and thus weakened the customs and sentiments that made them the good people they really were. The theatre, Rousseau argues, is decidedly not an agent of moral improvement; it panders to and consolidates existing tastes and engenders no real passions but only ersatz feelings that take the place of real, engaged involvement with important concerns. In an extended critical treatment of Molière's *Le Misanthrope*, Rousseau objects to the fact that Alceste, a good, honest lover of his fellow men, is made to look ridiculous and contemptible whereas Philinte, the smooth man of the world, is shown as superior and as getting the better of him. Rousseau stresses that this play is a work of genius demonstrating the power of the theatre at its strongest; yet because it shows human goodness and virtue being mocked it can scarcely be said to show the role of the theatre as a force for good.

Rousseau also holds that undue prominence is given in plays to the 'love interest', and that this encourages the preoccupations of women in unacceptable ways. What will happen with regard to the wishes and enjoyments of women if a theatre is established? In one of his least edifying passages of argument, Rousseau says that theatregoers will all demand finery and want to go out to see and be seen in their outfits. As before, all pleasure will be taken away from the necessary and beneficial tasks of the family and community; expense and idleness will take their place. Nor can legislation work effectively to curb these ill effects. Even supposing that the effects were, after moral decay had begun to set in, still seen as ill and hence as needing legislative control, such legislation would only be successful if most people shared the concerns that it intended to foster. But, as the whole bent of his argument has shown, the establishing of a theatre, attendance at performances and the content of the plays themselves all work against a sense of common life and loyalty which the law needs to draw on in order

to secure obedience. Sitting shut up in the dark as isolated individuals counteracts the need for people to live and work together to sustain a just and prosperous community. Yet it does not follow that in a republic there should be no entertainment:

On the contrary, there ought to be many. It is in republics that they were born, it is in their bosom that they are seen to flourish with a truly festive air. To what peoples is it more fitting to assemble often and form among themselves sweet bonds of pleasure and joy than to those who have so many reasons to like one another and remain forever united? . . . It is in the open air, under the sky, that you ought to gather and give yourselves to the sweet sentiment of your happiness . . . Plant a stake crowned with flowers in the middle of a square; gather the people together there, and you will have a festival. Do better yet; let the spectators become an entertainment to themselves; make them actors themselves; do it so that each sees and loves himself in the others so that all will be better united.

(Bloom, PA: 125–6, OC V: 114–5)

However strained Rousseau's arguments may appear to be (and be) at points, and however little his republican festivals may attract, the depth of his concerns here is undeniable. Indeed, they have an echo in many current concerns with the displacement of local cultural customs and festivals by forms of global entertainment, and in concerns that entertainment has become very much a matter of passive consumption rather than active participation.

The absolutely key issue here for Rousseau is ensuring that the customs, opinions and sentiments which are common and accepted among all the citizens are those that make accepting and adhering to laws requiring respect and equality a welcome expression of what each wants their fellow citizens to enjoy. Returning to the text of SC, Rousseau encapsulates his ideas when discussing what he calls a fourth kind of law, after fundamental laws, civil laws and criminal laws:

Along with these three kinds of law goes a fourth, most important of all, which is not graven on tablets of marble or brass, but on the hearts of the citizens. This forms the real constitution of the State, takes on every day new powers, when other laws decay or die out, restores them or takes their place, keeps a people in the ways in which it was meant to go, and insensibly replaces authority by the force of habit. I am speaking of morality, of custom, above all of public opinion; a power unknown to political thinkers, on which none the less success in everything else depends.

(SC II: 12, 228, OC III: 394)

Yet religion has a very central place in this as well, and it is to this matter that I now turn.

### CIVIL RELIGION

Rousseau's views on 'civil religion' – 'a purely civil profession of faith of which the Sovereign should fix the articles, not exactly as religious dogmas, but as social sentiments without which a man cannot be a good citizen or a faithful subject' (SC IV: 8, 307, OC III: 468) – are presented in the penultimate chapter of *The Social Contract*. I considered his treatment of individual religious conviction in the discussion of 'The Profession of Faith of a Savoyard Vicar' in Chapter 4 and will not refer further to that, except with regard to one point concerning atheism in a while.

It is appropriate to take up this matter at this point, since, as will soon be seen, it is the role of religion in reinforcing, or undermining, the social bond between citizens and in sustaining or discouraging commitment to obedience to the law that is at the heart of Rousseau's concerns when discussing these issues. Many critics have read his arguments in favour of the need for a civil profession of faith as displaying what may be interpreted as totalitarian elements in his thinking. He writes, for instance, that the sovereign can 'banish from the State whoever does not believe' the articles of that profession; and he goes on: 'If any one, after publicly recognising these dogmas, behaves as if he does not believe them, let him

be punished by death' (SC IV: 8, 307, OC III: 468; all subsequent quotations will be taken from Book IV, Chapter 8 of *The Social Contract*). These remarks seem plainly to say that religious observance will be enforced by the threat of very severe sanctions in a way that involves extreme intrusion by the state. On the other hand, Rousseau says that the civil religion will contain one 'negative dogma', the rejection of intolerance. So either he is all but contradicting himself, or there is more here that needs working out. I shall proceed on the latter supposition.

I said a moment ago that Rousseau's dominant concern in this chapter is with the need to consolidate the bonds of union between the members of a civil community, so that they will treat the good of all as having priority over their own exclusive, individual good and gladly treat their fellows with equal respect and care. Now, he holds that religious allegiance is one of the great sources shaping an individual's values and ends, and it is therefore necessary to determine how such allegiance comports with the central values incorporated in civil association as he has identified those and the commitment of citizens to them. If we follow the pattern of his argument, we will see that it is this concern that guides his assessment of the actual and possible relations between obedience to civil authority and the requirements of religious commitment.

In Rousseau's view, there are four possible types of relations here. First, religious allegiance and what it dictates could remain wholly unregulated by civil authority, by the Sovereign. Second, such allegiance could, as far as possible, be marginalised, treated as a purely personal matter of no import for the well-being and order of the civil community. Third, it may be regulated by the civil power; and lastly, religious allegiance could, in some key respects, be linked to sustaining the requirements of the civil order. Rousseau favours this last possibility, both because of what he believes are the great benefits for a just and prosperous community that would result but also because of serious problems with the other possibilities indi-

cated. The primary benefits, in his estimation, are these. If religious sentiments become attached to the requirements of mutual respect and care that are fundamental to the character of civil society as he has characterised it, then acceptance of these requirements will be felt to carry with it divine favour and blessing, and rejection of them or failure to abide by them divine displeasure in addition to any civil rewards or punishments. Such sentiments invest civil obedience with a deeper significance so that it becomes more complete and fully embraced. But this is not to give to the laws an authority which otherwise they would be devoid of, by conjuring up fears of divine retribution to enforce compliance with some otherwise groundless requirement. Rather, it is a question of an 'addition' to 'the force [the laws] have in themselves'; and since this is the purpose it determines also the limits to the place for religious prescription in connection with civil requirements. Thus Rousseau writes:

The right which the social compact gives the Sovereign over the subjects does not . . . exceed the limits of public expediency. The subjects then owe the Sovereign an account of their opinions only to such an extent as they matter to the community. Now, it matters very much to the community that each citizen should have a religion. That will make him love his duty; but the dogmas of that religion concern the State and its members only so far as they have reference to morality and to the duties which he who professes them is bound to do to others. Each man may have, over and above, what opinions he pleases, without its being the Sovereign's business to take cognisance of them.

If, in the light of this, we return to the apparently alarming remarks about banishment and death for those who do not accept the articles of the civil profession of faith, cited above, they can perhaps be seen to wear a somewhat less disturbing meaning. For one who rejects the dogmas of the civil religion is not banished as impious, but as 'an anti-social being, incapable of truly loving the

laws and justice'. We may, of course, still find this very objectionable, not least because we are entirely used to the idea of people's capacity to love the laws and justice without the involvement of religious sentiments, though there are, of course, many millions of people for whom there remains a very close connection indeed. But if this is so then the root of the objection is to Rousseau's being excessively concerned with shaping all the resources that make for good citizenship rather than to the enforcement of religious conformity. If the dogmas of a civil religion did attach to the observance of the basic requirements of law, than a rejection of those dogmas would be apt to signal a person's intent to flout the law. And no civil authority can remain indifferent to that.

What, then, of Rousseau's objections to the three other possible types of relationship between civil authority and obedience to law and religious allegiance? Rousseau emphasises that if religious allegiance is unregulated by, or not connected with the maintenance of, the civil authority it will comprise a commitment that will be socially disruptive or subversive of loyalty and commitment to the community. It may be contended, for instance, that religious requirements preclude, or exempt one from, obedience to some or other laws of the state. Even if conflict of this kind is avoided, Rousseau argues that the divisions of loyalty will result in a weakened commitment to the preservation of the civil body. In addition, religious zeal is apt to divide the peoples of the world into the saved and the damned, and to spur the former to doing whatever they deem fit to 'redeem' the latter and rid the world of the pestilence they represent. Such persecutions cannot but threaten the stability and prosperity of a society. Rousseau's criticisms of religious intolerance considered in the *Creed* are clearly echoed here.

Rousseau thus distinguishes three 'kinds of religion'. The first is 'confined to the purely internal cult of the supreme God and the eternal obligations of morality'; the second is 'codified in a single



country, [and] gives it its gods, its own tutelary patrons'. The third Rousseau calls 'the religion of the priest', in which there is a 'theological system' separate from the political system. In this instance, the clergy of a religious denomination comprise a corporate body with a corporate will distinct from the sovereign general will but claiming an authority at least equal to that. Rousseau objects to this last that it subjects men to contradictory duties so that they cannot be 'faithful both to religion and to citizenship'. To the second, he says that whereas it provides a support to the community in that it 'teaches . . . that service done to the State is service done to its tutelary god' it also deceives men and becomes tyrannical. It makes 'a people bloodthirsty and intolerant . . . and regards as a sacred act the killing of every one who does not believe in its gods'.

The first kind of religion, with its emphasis on the obligations of morality, might seem to be more congenial to Rousseau's thinking. But he argues that it leads to indifference to the earthly prosperity and safety of the citizens and leaves the state open to usurpation of public authority since 'in this vale of sorrows, what does it matter whether we are free men or serfs?' Finally, it also leaves the state easy prey in time of war for 'What does it matter whether they win or lose? Does not providence know better what is meet for them?' What Rousseau has in view in connection with these comments is, of course, particularly Christianity, and he writes:

But this religion [Christianity], having no particular relation to the body politic, leaves the laws in possession of the force they have in themselves without making any addition to it; and thus one of the great bonds that unite society considered in severalty fails to operate. Nay, more, so far from binding the hearts of citizens to the State, it has the effect of taking them away from all earthly things. I know of nothing more contrary to the social spirit.

It was from this passage that I drew the reference to 'the social spirit' with which this chapter began. We amply see now how central is Rousseau's concern with fostering and strengthening this.

In concluding this section, I want to return, as I indicated, to one relevant point in the *Creed* concerning atheism. In the long footnote almost at the end of the text of that we considered earlier in Chapter 4, Rousseau, whilst agreeing that religious fanaticism is more ‘pernicious’ than atheism, went on to say that it is a ‘grand and strong passion which elevates the heart of man’ whereas atheism, ‘makes souls effeminate and degraded, concentrates all the passions in the baseness of private interests, in the abjectness of the human I, and thus quietly saps the true foundations of every society’ (E IV: 312 note, OC IV: 632–3). O’Hagan, in a fine discussion of this material, comments:

This apocalyptic passage targets atheists for being necessarily selfish, unwilling to strive for their fellow human beings, or even to reproduce them. In contrast to this image of moral decay, the image of the healthy, if barbarous, fanatic is relatively attractive . . . There he stands, more as a brutal contrast to the degeneracy of modern society than as a model of the citizen to come.

(O’Hagan: 234)

The closing words are surely right. As we have seen, whilst Rousseau thinks that each citizen should have a religion it should throughout be constrained by the ‘negative dogma’ of the prohibition of intolerance.

### **POLAND AND CORSICA**

Finally in this chapter I want to take a selective look at Rousseau’s two essays in what I called ‘applied politics’, the *Considerations on the Government of Poland* and the *Constitutional Project for Corsica*, from the same general perspective – Rousseau’s concern with the maintenance of the bonds of union among citizens – that I have deployed in my consideration of elements in the *Discourse on Political Economy*, the *Letter to d’Alembert* and the treatment of civil religion. Neither of these works was published in Rousseau’s lifetime (the essay on Corsica is, in fact, an unfinished fragment). GP was completed in 1772, written

in response to an approach from Count Wielhorski, a representative of the Confederation of Bar, a body dedicated to the preservation of Polish identity against Russian imperialism. PCC was begun in 1764 after Rousseau had been contacted on behalf of the leader of the Corsican rebels, Pasquale Paoli, to propose a new constitution for what they hoped would soon be an independent Corsica. Rousseau had written, as cited earlier, in striking terms of Corsica in Book II Chapter 10 of SC:

There is still in Europe one country capable of being given laws – Corsica. The valour and persistency with which that brave people has regained and defended its liberty well deserve that some wise man should teach it how to preserve what it has won.

(OC III: 391)

If Rousseau was pleased to be seen as that ‘wise man’ his endeavours, such as they were, came to nothing. In 1768 the rebellion was suppressed by the French, who had bought the island from the Genoese.

Although there are naturally enough marked differences of content between these works, there are strong thematic similarities and I shall try to bring these out. Rousseau stresses, right at the start of GP, that an institution needs to ‘conform . . . to the people for whom it is intended’ (G P: 177, OC III: 953). A few pages later on, he writes:

It is national institutions which form the genius, the character, the tastes, and the morals of a people, which make it be itself and not another, which inspire in it that ardent love of fatherland founded on habits impossible to uproot, which cause it to die of boredom among other peoples in the midst of delights of which it is deprived in its own.

(G P: 183, OC III: 960)

He follows this with scorn of the cosmopolitan spirit which echoes remarks made at the start of *Émile* (see E I: 40, OC IV: 249–50):

There are no more Frenchmen, Germans, Spaniards, even Englishmen, nowadays, regardless of what people may say; there are only Europeans. All have the same tastes, the same passions, the same morals, because none has been given a national form by a distinctive institution. All will do the same things under the same circumstances; all will declare themselves disinterested and be cheats; all will speak of the public good and think only of themselves; all will praise moderation and wish to be Croesuses; they have no other ambition than for luxury, no other passion than for gold.

(G P: 184, OC III: 960)

Rousseau's thought here is that when and where bonds of attachment and common life are attenuated we do not find in fact a widening of the sense of belonging but rather a reversion to an atomised, egoistic individualism. So, Rousseau continues, 'begin by giving the Poles a great opinion of themselves and their fatherland' (G P: 184, OC III: 961). In a similar vein he writes, in PCC:

The first rule to be followed is the principle of national character; for each people has, or ought to have, a national character; if it did not, we should have to start by giving it one.

(PCC: 293, OC III: 913)

**What is the key to the formation of national character? Rousseau gives paramount emphasis to education:**

It is education that must give souls the national form, and so direct their tastes and opinions that they will be patriotic by inclination, passion, necessity . . . Every true republican drank love of fatherland, that is to say love of the laws and of freedom, with his mother's milk. This love makes up his whole existence; he sees only his fatherland, he lives only for it; when he is alone, he is nothing: when he no longer has a fatherland, he no longer is, and if he is not dead, he is worse than dead.

(G P: 189, OC III: 966)

Recalling points made earlier in this chapter, Rousseau's language in this passage is very much in terms of 'maximal identification' by the individual of their good with the good of the whole. And the overriding purpose of this is to 'attach citizens to the fatherland and to one another' so that the requirements of law are not a burden or constraint, but the direction of each person's wish for themselves and others.

Rousseau fully recognises that with neither Poland nor Corsica is one beginning with a 'blank sheet' but with long-established customs, and particularly orders of precedence and hierarchies among the subjects. Interestingly enough, despite the very great stress on equality among citizens in the arguments of SC, he advises caution in the process of freeing the peasants of Poland:

To emancipate the peoples of Poland is a grand and fine undertaking but bold, dangerous, and not to be attempted thoughtlessly. Among the precautions to be taken, there is one that is indispensable and that requires time. It is, before everything else, to make the serfs who are to be emancipated worthy of freedom and capable of tolerating it . . . It would be rash of me to guarantee . . . success . . . But regardless . . . recognise that your serfs are men like yourselves, that they have in them the stuff to become all that you are.

[G P: 197, OC III: 974]

For myself, I do not see in this any real compromise of Rousseau's theoretical principles, but rather a recognition that their realisation requires preparation and an appropriate context. His conviction seems to me unchanged, and his message will have been a challenging one for Count Wielhorski and his confederates. Throughout, in fact, Rousseau advocates working with existing ideas of honour and prestige and causing these to be turned gradually to new objects, new achievements. If the desire for distinction is ineradicable from the spirit of a people, then it is on the basis of accomplishments of service to all that these distinctions of persons will best be made since in that way all may benefit.

With the same intent of ensuring that destructive and invidious inequalities do not persist, Rousseau devotes a considerable amount of time to the corrupting influence of money, arguing that it is devious and secret in its workings concealed from public view and accountability. He urges as far as possible payment in kind for public services and the reintroduction of the *corvée* not, of course, on feudal principles, always with a view to preventing the corruption of competitive private interests. One of his most spectacular suggestions comes from the same root. In Chapter IX of GP, Rousseau considers the right of veto of proposed legislation that was, at that time, possessed by individual members of the legislative body in Poland. Whilst agreeing that it has an important role to play, Rousseau contends that it has been exploited for petty, personal reasons and has made legislative and indeed administrative action almost impossible. In the light of this, Rousseau suggests the following:

If, then in the event of an almost unanimous resolution, a single opponent retained the right to annul it, I would wish him to be answerable for his opposition with his head, not only to his constituents in the post-session Dietine, but also subsequently to the entire nation whose misfortune he brought on. I should like it to be required by law that six months after his opposition he be solemnly tried by an extraordinary tribunal established solely to this end, made up of all the nation's wisest, most illustrious and most respected persons, which could not simply acquit him, but would either have to condemn him to death without possible pardon, or to bestow upon him a reward and public honours for life, without ever being able to adopt a middle course between these two alternatives.

(GP: 219, OC III: 997)

This amazing idea would certainly have the effect of ensuring that anyone who intended to exercise their veto was doing so for reasons which, at the very least, a panel of their peers would find compelling. And, in that way, we might expect generality of interest

to be finding voice in the veto, not just some private caprice. Rousseau is at least honest enough to accept that 'Institutions of this kind . . . are too remote from the modern spirit to allow the hope that they might be adopted or appreciated' (ibid.), but it is pleasant to speculate what, for example, the conduct of the members of the Security Council of the United Nations would be like if something of this kind could be made to apply to the exercise of national vetoes in that.

In this brief review of these works, we have seen a recurrence of Rousseau's central concern: a concern with the development and direction of a national or civic culture which makes each citizen's duty to acknowledge the rights and needs of others not a burdensome requirement but more nearly what they would design and wish for as their own way of realising their union with and care for their fellows. It is to be doubted that many view their obedience to law in these terms nowadays. But Rousseau is surely right in his conviction that if the sense of union, the social spirit, becomes very attenuated then a society is near to dissolution, or at best inequality and injustice will be widespread with many merely coerced by law and not true subjects. Perhaps it was ever so, but – as remarked at the end of the preceding chapter – Rousseau here offers a vision which remains capable of stirring the moral sense and inspiring a wish for things to be different. It is possible that his own strong personal sense of social exclusion made him particularly concerned with the conditions for and character of belonging, but his general thought that without a fairly widespread sense of belonging shared by many citizens we have a fragile society little concerned for the benefit of all is a powerful one. How that sense is sustained and consolidated must, therefore, be an urgent concern for anyone interested in a just society.

#### FURTHER READING

Zev M. Trachtenberg, *Making Citizens: Rousseau's Political Theory of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1993. Lays special emphasis on significance of culture.

Anne M. Cohler, *Rousseau and Nationalism*. New York: Basic Books, 1970. A good account of Rousseau's views on patriotism and the nation.

Timothy O'Hagan, *Rousseau*. London: Routledge, 1999, Chapters X–XII. A good account of civil religion, and of Rousseau's religious thinking generally.

F.M. Barnard, *Self-Direction and Political Legitimacy: Rousseau and Herder*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988. Gives a particular place to national culture.