ROUSSEAU

A Free Community of Equals

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Contents

Acknowledgments *ix*
List of Abbreviations *xi*

Introduction 1

1. A Free Community of Equals? 10
   Free and in Chains? The Society of the General Will *14*
   Realism? Natural Goodness and Democracy *16*
   Three Aims *20*

2. The Society of the General Will 23
   The Fundamental Problem *24*
   A Solution: The Society of the General Will *32*

3. Reflections on the General Will's Sovereignty 60
   Groups, Sovereignty, Consensus, Majorities, and Rights *60*
   A Solution to the Fundamental Problem? *84*

4. The Natural Goodness of Humanity 97
   Three Properties of Human Nature *100*
   Motivations *106*
   Natural Goodness *110*
   A Genealogy of Vice *113*
   Complementary Motivations *122*
   Natural Goodness and Reasonable Faith *127*

5. Democracy 131
   Some Institutions of the Society of the General Will *135*
   Principles and Institutions *140*
   Four Strategies of Argument *145*
   Popular Democracy or Executive Dominance? *166*
   A Democrat After All? *175*

Notes 177

Bibliography 189

Index 195

Introduction

I first read Rousseau in 1973. A beginning PhD student in philosophy, I was taking John Rawls's course on social and political philosophy. I think we read parts of the *Social Contract* and *Discourse on Inequality*. I found Rousseau's work annoying and confusing. It seemed high on ringing phrases, self-indulgence, and portentousness, low on clarity and sustained argument. Despite Rawls's interpretive efforts, I was not getting what Rousseau was about.[1] Things improved some two years later when I was a teaching assistant for the same course. Still, I was having trouble with both trees and forest.

Despite these misgivings, I stayed with it. Rousseau's themes were so important, and his impact so large: I had to assume that the fault was mine.

A cluster of points about themes and impact seemed especially important to me. I was interested, for example, in Rousseau's ideas of direct democracy, which inspired modern ideas of participatory democracy. In this connection, I wanted to understand Marx's idea of a "withering away of the state," and could not see anything in Marx's enthusiasm for the direct democracy of the Paris Commune that was not in Rousseau's account of popular legislative assemblies. Although I was concerned about the charge that authoritarianism and terror were close cousins of these enthusiasms, I was reassured by what Kant—beyond reproach on authoritarianism and terror—said of Rousseau: Rousseau had "set me straight," and taught "[me] to respect mankind." Kant compared Rousseau and Newton: "Newton first saw order and lawfulness going hand in hand with great simplicity, where prior to him disorder and its troublesome partner, multiplicity, were encountered, and ever since the comets run in geometrical paths; Rousseau first discovered amid the manifold human forms the deeply hidden nature of man, and the secret law by which Providence is justified through his observations."[2] Having spent much time trying to understand Hegel's political philosophy, with its critique of individualism, I also felt the force of the appreciative (if somewhat grudging, in the context) remark in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*: "The principle of

freedom emerged in Rousseau, and gave man, who apprehends himself as infinite, this infinite strength. This provides the transition to the Kantian philosophy, which theoretically considered made the principle its foundation."[3] And I had a growing sense of Rousseau's impact on Rawls, who once said in passing that his two principles of justice could be understood as an effort to spell out the content of the general will.

In addition to being struck by these lines of influence, I was drawn to Rousseau's identification of and claim to have solved what he calls the "fundamental problem" of the social contract: "To find a form of association that will defend and protect the person and goods of each associate with the full common force, and by means of which each, uniting with all, nevertheless obey only himself and remain as free as before" (SC 1.6.4). I was interested, too, in the effects of private property and inequality on political equality. On these subjects, I was struck both by Rousseau's critical discussion of private property and inequality in his *Discourse on Inequality*, with its concern about psychological and political effects, and its relative lack of attention to concerns about the (un)fairness of inequality. Finally, I thought that Rousseau rightly resisted the temptation to read his moral convictions into a science of history.

Rousseau, in short, had powerfully influenced the moral-political thinkers who most interested me; he had addressed the issues about democracy, civic equality, and political autonomy that seemed most fundamental; and he combined morally forceful social criticism with an understanding of the fragility of moral progress, and its costs. Here was an optimism of heart not head—a hopefulness about human possibilities, without extravagant assurances of progress or the intellectual conviction that history was on his side.

As I taught Rousseau in courses at MIT in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the pieces started falling into place. After a few years, I thought I had a more coherent account of Rousseau than was available in the English-language literature, at the least the parts of the literature of which I was aware. Moreover, I was troubled that there was not a very good treatment of Rousseau written in a more analytical style. So sometime in the early 1980s, I decided to write a book on Rousseau's political theory.

The book, as I initially conceived it, would do four things. First, it would explore Rousseau's ideas about democracy, in

particular about participation and citizen engagement with the substance of political issues, but also more generally about political institutions. Much in those ideas seemed attractive, but their attractions required that they be formulated apart from his obviously implausible picture (implausible in contemporary terms) of citizens in a small republic gathering in person in a legislative assembly, or his exaggerated expectations about social and political consensus. Second, it would explain and assess Rousseau's more abstract conviction—expressed in his statement of the fundamental problem—about the possibility of combining autonomy with political authority, his thought that legitimate political authority is a form of self-legislation, a condition of "moral freedom" in which one obeys "the law one has prescribed to oneself" (SC 1.8.3). Third, it would explain the intimate connections between Rousseau's convictions about equality and freedom. And fourth, it would provide an account of Rousseau's political views with a level of clarity and attention to argument that would distinguish it from much of the literature on Rousseau. In 1985, with an academic leave supported by an ACLS (American Council of Learned Societies) fellowship, I read more widely in Rousseau's corpus, explored lots of the (not very satisfactory) secondary literature on Rousseau, and started to write.

This book is the result, written in just the way that one should never write a book: fitfully, with many stops and starts, over too many years.

I produced about 25,000 words in 1985–6, and published a shortened version of the material as a review essay in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (1986). Many of the leading ideas in Chapter 2—about Rousseau's problem, the nature of the general will, how the society of the general will solves Rousseau's problem, and why we should not think of Rousseau as a "self-effacing Hobbesian"—appeared in that early essay. I also sketched the ideas, developed in greater detail in Chapter 5, about the strategies of institutional argument.[4]

Because my attention was drawn to other projects, some of which involved developing a conception of deliberative democracy that was partly of Rousseauean inspiration, I found it hard to sustain the focus on the book needed to finish it. As a result, I filled out the details slowly, largely in the context of teaching political philosophy seminars at MIT. I am very grateful

to the many students in those courses for their comments and criticisms.

Not that the problems in finishing it were only matters of distraction. Two large, substantive problems stood in the way.

First, I did not have a very good grasp of Rousseau's doctrine of the natural goodness of humanity: an unfortunate limitation because this idea, Rousseau says, runs through all his work. In particular, Rousseau describes his account of inequality in his *Second Discourse* as a "genealogy" of vice (B 28). I could not see how exactly to understand that genealogy, because I did not see how to fit it together with the account of the society of the general will in the *Social Contract*. Readers of Rousseau sometimes see a conflict between a "primitivist" Rousseau of the *Discourse on Inequality*, celebrating our natural state of unreflective innocence, and a Rousseau in the *Social Contract*, who had made his peace with culture and authority. I was sure that this view was wrong, but was having trouble seeing how the pieces hung together. I assumed they did, not least because of Rousseau's own confident assertions about the unity of his work: responding to criticisms about his own inconsistencies and vacillations, he says "I have written on various subjects, but always with the same principles: always the same morality, the same belief, the same maxims, and if you will the same opinions" (B 22). He identified the doctrine of natural goodness as "the fundamental principle of all morality about which I have reasoned in all my Writings" (B 28). Although this idea is never stated in the more specifically political writings—its fullest expression is in *Emile*, and it does not appear in the *Social* Contract—it seemed clear that a confident grasp of the political theory required an understanding of this central theme.

In 1988 (I believe), I read galleys of Nicholas Dent's excellent book *Rousseau*, and found his account of Rousseau's psychological views eye-opening. Aided by Dent's interpretation (see below, Chapter 4 n. 9), I found a way to fit Rousseau's doctrine of natural goodness together with Rousseau's views about autonomy, authority, and democracy, as part of an account of how the society described in the *Social Contract* might be realized. I incorporated this material into the evolving manuscript, which I continued to work on largely in the context of teaching. In 1994–5, I extracted the account of natural goodness, and expanded it as a separate paper: my contribution to an edited collection

of papers written by students of John Rawls who had worked on issues in the history of moral and political philosophy. I folded that paper back in, thought the book might be getting close to finished, and sent the manuscript to Mark Philp for his Oxford University Press series.

In 1999, I taught a short course at Oxford on Rousseau. I am grateful to the participants, including Philp and Andrew Williams, for very helpful discussion. In preparing for the course, I was struck by a second very important limitation on my understanding of Rousseau. I reread the early chapters of his *Government of Poland*, and concluded that I was underplaying (to a fare-thee-well) the more "communitarian" strands in Rousseau's work: not his republican focus on the importance of a vigilant citizenry animated by civic virtue, but his emphasis on social solidarity and national attachment, on the "reforms required to make love of fatherland the dominant passion" (P 188), on "distinctive practices . . . always exclusive and national" (P 181) as a basis of political solidarity, and associated suspicions about political disagreement and concerns about its destructive effects. In some of the more recent pieces of the book, I have tried to remedy this deficiency. Rousseau's views, I believe, draw together an egalitarian-democratic ideal of a free community of equals, founded on a conception of individuals as free and animated by self-love, and owing much to the modern contractualist tradition, with a sometimes-communitarian political sociology, focused on the social solidarities that are arguably required to unite the independent members of a society of equals.

The communitarian political sociology is not the part of Rousseau I find most attractive. But it is a very powerful presence, with strong resonances in Rousseau's important writings on language and music.[5] No sensible interpretation can put it to the side, and not only for reasons of interpretive fidelity. Those of us who are attracted to the ideal of a free community of equals need to take seriously the fact that one of its great exponents combined it with an (unattractively) anti-political communitarianism, with a large emphasis of solidarities built on national distinctiveness, and the fear that disagreement is the canary in the coal mine, rather than a normal condition of the only kind of political life worth hoping for.

Finally, in Fall 2008, after several false starts and on a promise to the publisher, I taught a seminar at Stanford on Hobbes and

Rousseau, and finished the work in the context of the course. I am very grateful to the students in the seminar for their indulgence, their helpful comments and criticisms, and their encouragement. Assaf Sharon in particular made some very helpful suggestions, all of which I have followed. (And Marilie Coetsee provided essential assistance in completing the manuscript.)

Although I say that I have finished it, I am acutely aware of its many limitations, some of which reflect the odd writing process, stretched over too many years, managed in fits and starts. I want to call attention to one of the many substantive omissions that limits the discussion. Rousseau believed that women should be excluded from politics and he believed that the justification of that exclusion is provided by the "nature" of women.[6] I have assumed here—assumed, but not argued—that it is possible to provide a reconstruction of important elements of Rousseau's political philosophy while simply abstracting from his view that natural sexual differences are of decisive social significance. In simply assuming this for the purposes of the discussion here, I do not mean to suggest that it is obviously true—though I do believe that it is true.

Although the book is limited in this and many other ways, I am confident that it improves on the cleaner but vastly oversimplified book I would have finished twenty years ago, had I been able to concentrate exclusively on it. I am also sure that it is, for better or worse, a less coherent book than I would have done then, or would have written now, had I started from scratch rather than adding pages and interspersing paragraphs. Despite these limitations, I am persuaded by readers of the manuscript that it makes enough of a contribution to be worth publishing. In particular, I think it presents a picture of Rousseau's distinctive contribution to the tradition of democratic thought: his ideal of a democracy as a free community of equals. I think there is much to be said for this ideal, and that Rousseau provided its initial formulation.

One last point on the writing. Because it took such an unusual path, I have not been very attentive to the more recent literature on Rousseau. In particular, I regret that I have not been able to engage in the text with Frederick Neuhouser's wonderful book *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love*, which appeared in Fall

2008.[7] Nor have I discussed the treatment of Rousseau in Rawls's *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy* (see n. 1, above). The published material on Rousseau is different from what I heard in 1973 and 1975, but I never would have been able to write this book without the initial direction provided by Rawls's lectures, and the continuing inspiration provided by his model.

Rousseau's Corpus

This book, as I have said, focuses on Rousseau's political theory. It thus omits large areas of Rousseau's work that are of extraordinary interest, or touches on them only insofar as they bear on the issues of political theory. In his remarkable biography of Rousseau, Leo Damrosch says: "In a series of amazingly original books, of which the *Social Contract* is the best known, he developed a political theory that deeply influenced the American Founding Fathers and the French revolutionaries, helped to invent modern anthropology, and advanced a concept of education that remains challenging and inspiring to this day. His *Confessions* virtually created the genre of autobiography as we know it, tracing lifelong patterns of feeling to formative experiences and finding a deep unity of the self beneath apparent contradictions; modern psychology owes him an immense debt."[8] All that, without having attended school for a single day. And there is much else: *Le Devin du Village*, a comic opera admired by Gluck and the very young Mozart, performed 400 times (including at Fontainebleau and the Paris Opera, the first performance after the fall of the Bastille); a less successful play, *Narcissus, or the Self-Lover*, which was performed by the Comédie-Française in 1752; and *Julie, or the New Héloïse*, one of the most popular novels of the eighteenth century.

I follow Rawls in separating Rousseau's writings into three broad groups.[9] In his early and more "critical" writings, including his *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* and *Discourse on Inequality*, as well as his *Letter to d'Alembert on the Theater* (in which he objects to a proposal that a theater be built in

Geneva), Rousseau challenges the dominant Enlightenment view that the advance of science and understanding has improved the human condition, making human life freer, happier, and more virtuous. As an alternative, Rousseau argues for a connection between enlightenment and the evolution of social and political constraint, unhappiness, and vice. A central part of his story is the emergence of a rage to distinguish ourselves, and, more fundamentally, a destructive preoccupation with how we fare relative to others.

Then, second, we have Rousseau's more positive writings: *Social Contract*, *Emile*, and *Julie*, as well as the constitutional writings on Poland and Corsica, and his important account of the Genevan constitution and political system, written in response to the condemnation there of *Emile* and the *Social Contract*. In these works, Rousseau offers an account of political institutions and education, designed to show how we might repair our corrupt conditions, return to a free, happy, and virtuous life while benefiting from the development of human powers that occurred under corrupt conditions[10], and maintain legitimate political institutions in the face of the inevitable pressures to degenerate that come from, inter alia, concentrated executive power.

Finally, in his more personal writings, including the *Confessions*, *Dialogues*, *Rousseau*, *Judge of Jean-Jacques*, and his beautiful *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, Rousseau explains and justifies himself, affirms through detailed self-revelation his own singularity and authenticity, claims that he has not been trapped in the elaborate web of deception, hypocrisy, manipulation, and pathological preoccupation with status and reputation that we have woven for ourselves, and (perhaps) suggests that we, too, may be able to extricate ourselves from it. How, if Rousseau's own earlier depiction of our corrupt state is correct, could anyone have freed him- or herself from it in sufficient measure to have written Rousseau's books? Marx faced a similar kind of question: how, if what Marx said about the pervasiveness of ideology is correct, could Marx himself have seen through the mystical veil covering society's life process, and grasped the laws of motion of capitalism? Marx's answer was tied to an account of the evolution of capitalism and the experience of the working class in that evolution. Rousseau's answer to the comparable question about

ideology and understanding points to the distinctiveness of his own life as an outsider.

In this book, I concentrate principally on the concerns in the second set of writings. Although I draw freely on the others, I address the issues they raise only insofar as they contribute to addressing the issues in Rousseau's political theory—fundamentally, the ideal of a free community of equals—that provide the book's central focus.

I

A Free Community of Equals?

Organized societies are marked by profound differences of power and advantage. Some people make decisions—about war and peace, taxes and public projects, health and education, public security and family life, rules of exchange and permissible forms of worship—with fateful, life-shaping, and life-shattering impact on the lives of less powerful others. Some lives are blessed by economic, social, and cultural advantages that others lack. Those differences of power and advantage result from some mix of sheer fortuity and human decision. To the extent that they reflect human decisions, or could be addressed and ameliorated through such decisions, what could possibly justify those differences of power and advantage? Can they be justified at all?

Jean-Jacques Rousseau offers a distinctive answer to these great questions. In strikingly spare, intense prose, he gives us a picture of a *free community of equals*, a social-political world in which individuals realize their nature as free by living together as equals, giving the laws to themselves, guided in those lawgiving judgments by a conception of their common good. Moreover, a free community of equals, Rousseau tells us, is not an unrealistic utopia beyond human reach, but a genuine human possibility, compatible with our human complexities, and with the demands of social cooperation.

Rousseau presents his ideal of a free community of equals with greatest force in his most important work of political thought, *Of*

the Social Contract. That book carries the subtitle *Principles of Political Right*. His aim, as the subtitle indicates, is to provide principles that distinguish right and wrong in the organization of our social and political life. "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains. One believes himself the others' master, and yet is more slave than they. How did this change come about? I do not know. What can make it legitimate? I believe I can solve this question" (SC 1.1.1).

Solving it—finding the principles of political right—requires that we address a "fundamental problem." We need "[t]o find a form of association that will defend and protect the person and goods of each associate with the full common force, and by means of which each, uniting with all, nevertheless obey only himself and remain as free as before" (SC 1.6.4).[1] What kind of society ensures that the individual members of the society are both secure—protected in their person and goods by the collective power of the society—and also fully autonomous—each a self-legislating member, obedient only to him- or herself?

That is the fundamental problem because self-love and freedom are both basic to our human nature. Self-love is a sense of our own worth and concern about our well-being. Because it is essential to our nature, we have a basic interest in ensuring protection of our person and of the goods we need to survive and live well. But not just any kind of protection will do. Not, say, the protection of a benevolent lord, nor of the sovereign in Hobbes's leviathan state. More generally: not protection that depends on submission and thus insults our freedom. Human beings are "born free," with the capacity to resist the pull of our inclinations, make judgments about the best aims and proper principles of our conduct, and regulate our own conduct in light of those judgments: "It is . . . not so much the understanding that constitutes the specific difference between man and other animals, as it is his property of being a free agent. Nature commands every animal, and the Beast obeys. Man experiences the same impression, but he recognizes himself free to acquiesce or to resist" (D2 140–1). Moreover, this capacity—this "power of willing, or rather of choosing" (D2 141)—is the source of humanity's special worth, and the basis of our standing as responsible, moral agents, with rights and duties. So "[t]o renounce one's freedom is to renounce one's quality as man, the rights of humanity, and even its duties" (SC 1.4.6; D2 141, 179).

Rousseau aims, then, to describe a form of social association that provides security without demanding an alienation of our freedom because he is concerned that our "chains"—the social rules and expectations necessary to establish a "common force" that protects person and goods, as well as the rules established by that power—may conflict with the freedom that belongs to our nature and lies at the basis of our worth. We need security without renunciation, a political order that is morally legitimate because it both provides protection to each person, and also respects the dignity of its free members by ensuring their full autonomy: by establishing a form of self-rule, each as free as before.

This problem—combining autonomy and the order on which our security depends—resists easy solution. Consider a collection of people who live in a common territory and regularly interact. Each person's security and well-being—meeting the concerns that grow from self-love—depend on how other people act. Ensuring the security of person and goods then (arguably) requires *authoritatively imposed* constraints on the conduct of others. Why authoritatively imposed? If each person is to be secure, then *some* constraints on conduct are needed; and unless we are dealing with a world of angels—looking for a scheme that works "for the people of Utopia" but is "worthless for the children of Adam" (M2 270)—effective constraints must be backed by power sufficient to motivate compliance. But such power, again arguably, requires backing from an authority that is regarded as rightfully imposing the constraints, and fixing obligations to obey: "[t]he stronger is never strong enough to be forever master, unless he transforms his force into right, and obedience into duty" (SC 1.3.1). But if authoritatively established constraints are necessary to "defend and protect the person and goods of each associate," then how can we meet the concerns that grow from self-love while also ensuring "moral freedom"—the full political autonomy that consists in "obedience to the law one has prescribed to oneself" (SC 1.8.3; LM 232)?

According to a familiar line of thought—Hobbes's *Leviathan* provides its classical formulation: we cannot. Security and the pursuit of happiness depend, as Hobbes said, on peace. But given the "known natural inclinations of mankind" and the facts of human interdependence, peace requires *submission*. Each person must exchange self-government rights in return for safety

and the hope of happiness: an agreement that proceeds "as if every man should say to every man *I authorise and **give up my right of governing myself*** [my emphasis] *to this man, or to this assembly of men, on this condition, that thou give up thy right to him, and authorise all his actions in like manner*."[2] Hobbes deployed this argument in support of a leviathan state, whose members are subject to the sovereign's unconditional authority. It is widely agreed that his political absolutism exaggerated the necessary terms of trade: the extent to which we must sacrifice our self-government for the sake of security. Suppose, then, that an authority less expansive than an absolute Hobbesian sovereign suffices for achieving peaceful order. Still, we may wonder how each citizen could achieve *full* political autonomy—meaning that each person gives the law to him- or herself, regards him- or herself as its author—within an organized society. A sphere of personal freedom within the bounds of law: no large problem in theory. A share of public freedom, as joint author of laws: also no large problem in theory. But remaining "as free as before" by giving the law to yourself, by being the legislator of the authoritatively imposed constraints that apply to yourself and other members: that is another matter.

But it is Rousseau's idea. Hobbes's large purpose in *Leviathan* is, he says, "to set before men's eyes the mutual relation between protection and obedience" (Lev. 491). Contrast this with Rousseau's idea that "the essence of the political body" is "the concurrence of obedience and freedom" (SC 3.13.5), a harmony that ensures protection, without demanding a morally unacceptable subordination of will: "in the relations between man and man the worst that can happen to one is to find himself at the other's discretion" (D2 176). The idea is fundamentally different, and it may strike us a nice thought. But what could it possibly mean? How *could* each "[unite] with all" under common rules for security, while obeying only him/herself and so remaining "as free as before"? How is it possible to combine the social union under common, enforceable rules that provides protection with the political autonomy Rousseau describes? How can we achieve the "moral freedom" that consists in giving the law to oneself, while living together under authoritatively imposed constraints with others who share with us the dignified, freedom-affirming status of self-legislators (SC 1.8.3)?

That is the question, and Rousseau's answer—a realistic ideal of a free community of equals—has two components, corresponding to two kinds of doubt about the possibility of an answer: doubts about *content* and doubts about *realism*. I will consider them in turn in this chapter, and then in detail in the rest of the book.

Before proceeding, however, I want to mention a third possibility problem, which I do not discuss in any detail in the rest of the book. This problem arises from doubts about "accessibility": is there any route leading from current circumstances to the society of the general will? The society of the general will might be humanly possible but inaccessible, if we have become too corrupt. Corresponding to the three problems of possibility, we can distinguish three ways that political thought might be utopian: it might rest on values that simply cannot be jointly realized under any conditions; it might endorse values whose realization is incompatible with human nature; and it might embrace an ideal that cannot be realized by a social trajectory that begins from current conditions (barring some catastrophe that "wipes the slate clean"). Rousseau certainly focused less on the problem of accessibility than on the other problems, though his proposed constitution for Poland suggests serious—which is not to say successful—engagement with it.[3] In any case, I will not address it here.

Free and in Chains? The Society of the General Will

Accepting authority *appears* to be a matter of letting oneself be ruled by the decisions of others (perhaps the majority), by treating those decisions as binding, as decisions that are rightly made and with which one ought to comply. How can *self*-government—the moral freedom or autonomy that consists in giving the law to yourself—be reconciled with these bonds of political authority? To show that the idea of autonomy (self-legislation) in chains (a common lawmaking authority) is even coherent, we need some way to dispel the appearance that acknowledging political authority requires letting oneself be ruled by others.

Rousseau addresses this problem with his conception of a society guided by a *general will*. The idea of the general will is one of the essential ideas in Rousseau's political philosophy, and I will be describing the ideal of a society regulated by a general will in more detail later. Suffice to say here that ideas of equality and the common good are fundamental to it, thus fundamental to achieving autonomy in a political society. In the society of the general will, citizens share an understanding of the common good and that understanding is founded on the members' commitment to treat one another as equals by refraining from imposing burdens on other citizens that those members would be unwilling to bear themselves. Thus the content of the understanding of the common good reflects an equal concern for the good of each citizen; citizens take that shared understanding to be the ultimate basis of their political deliberations, and express it by jointly settling on the laws of their community; finally, they acknowledge political obligations as fixed by laws founded on the common good, and the limits of collective legal regulation as fixed by the need to justify such regulation by reference to the common good (reading together SC 2.1.1, 2.4.5, 2.6, 2.11.2): "From whatever side one traces one's way back to the principle, one always reaches the same conclusion: namely, that the social pact establishes among the Citizens an equality such that all commit themselves under the same conditions and must all enjoy the same rights" (SC 2.4.8). Moreover, when they are "subjected only to conventions such as these, they obey no one, but only their own will" (SC 2.4.8).

How does the general will, thus interpreted, provide a solution to the fundamental problem? To sketch briefly an answer that I will discuss in detail later: Because the content of the conception of the common good that lies at the basis of the laws reflects an equal concern with the well-being of each citizen, the society provides security for person and goods. And because citizens share the conception, and the laws emerge from that shared conception, each citizen remains free in fulfilling his legal obligations.[4]

The essential point about content is that Rousseau's solution requires that individuals commit to regarding themselves as belonging to a political community whose members are committed to regarding one other as equals: acknowledging one another as political equals, with equal status in establishing the

laws; recognizing one another as equally subject to the laws; and agreeing to regulate their association by reference to reasons of the common good, which give equal weight to the good of each citizen. Moreover, Rousseau proposes to institutionalize the general will's supremacy through a direct democracy, whose equal citizens regularly assemble to reaffirm their social bonds and decide on the fundamental laws best suited to advancing their common good, and in which limits on social-economic inequality help to sustain the institutions.

Rousseau's solution to the fundamental problem, then, aims to reconcile full autonomy with the authority required for personal security, and full autonomy with equality and community. Under conditions of social interdependence, we achieve full autonomy or self-government only by living in a community of equals. Requirements of equality do not stand as limits on free association, but instead are both ingredients of and preconditions for such an association. And community is not the enemy of liberty and equality, but a setting defined by a commitment to both.

In short, Rousseau's solution to the fundamental problem is his ideal of a *free community of equals*: *free*, because it ensures the full political autonomy of each member; a *community*, because it is organized around a shared understanding of and supreme allegiance to the common good; and a community *of equals*—a democratic society—because the content of that understanding reflects the good of each member.[5]

Realism? Natural Goodness and Democracy

But can we live this way? Assume for now that the ideal of a free community of equals solves the fundamental problem. In any case, it has its attractions. But can people live this way? Can human beings really live in a free community of equals, or is that ideal a utopia, well beyond our reach?[6]

Here we have the second problem of possibility—the problem of realism—and it has two elements. I will call the first element the problem of *motivational possibility*. A free community of equals requires a shared understanding of and allegiance to the

common good; it is founded on a commitment to treat others as equals, to refrain from imposing burdens on them that one would not be prepared to shoulder oneself. In the face of widespread vice—pettiness, pride, jealousy, envy, and selfish indifference to human suffering—reasonable people may wonder whether that ideal is humanly possible, whether its motivational demands are compatible with our human nature.

Hobbes would doubtless have raised this objection. He argued that we needed to alienate our rights of self-government to a leviathan state. And his case for that unhappy conclusion rested on a philosophical anthropology—an anthropological pessimism—that makes Rousseau's solution motivationally unrealistic, whatever its attractions as a political ideal. Surveying the "known natural inclinations of mankind" (Lev. 489), Hobbes found desires for individual preservation and happiness; he noted the strength of human fears about violent death; he observed (in at least some people) passions of pride, envy, and greed rooted in a sense of natural differences of worth and a concern that social standing mirror those presumptively natural differences; and he found that people are often blinded by those passions—prompted by them to act for near-term advantages and against their own longer-term interests in preservation and happiness.[7] Departing from these observations, he concluded that human beings need to live under the rule of a sovereign with unconditional authority. Only a sovereign with such unbounded authority would have power sufficient to overawe subjects—to tame their passions (pride in particular) with fear, and thus ensure the peace required for preservation and felicity (Lev. chap. 18). "For by this authority, given him by every particular man in the commonwealth, he hath the use of so much power and strength conferred on him, that *by terror thereof* [emphasis added] he is enabled to form the wills of them all, to peace at home" (Lev. 120).

Hobbes's case for political submission is driven, then, by a general pessimism about human capacities for self-regulation, even an individual's own prudential self-regulation in pursuit of a longer-term good.[8] But Hobbes was particularly skeptical about the idea that people might be motivated by reasons of the common good. When people act rationally, they are moved by long-term benefits to themselves, and not by the

thought that their conduct treats others as equals, or is part of a system of conduct that ensures such treatment. And insofar as we are prone to passions of pride, we will reject equality as inconsistent with our naturally superior worth and an insult to our dignity.[9]

To be sure, Hobbes believes that we *are* naturally equals in our fundamental bodily and mental powers. Moreover, his ninth law of nature condemns pride and commands "*that every man acknowledge other for his equal by nature*" (Lev. 97). But the principal reason for following that command—as with the other laws of nature—is that compliance increases chances for peace, which in turn increases chances for one's own preservation and felicity.

Rousseau's answer to the problem of motivational possibility would have been easier if he had found Hobbes an insufficiently acute observer of humanity. But Rousseau largely accepted Hobbes's dismal description: "Men are wicked; a sad and constant experience makes proof unnecessary" (D2 197). We observe widespread vice—selfishness, pride, jealousy, envy—and underlying that vice a "frenzy to achieve distinction" (D2 184), an "ardent desire to raise one's relative fortune less out of genuine need than in order to place oneself above others" (D2 171). This frenzy for distinction and desire for relative gain have their roots, Rousseau argues, in an inflated, false sense of self-worth: the same sense of pride that drove Hobbes to endorse a leviathan sovereign to rule over the proud, the vainglorious who are not prepared to regard others as their equals by nature (Lev. 220–1). In principle, a sense of duty, its content tied to the common good, could override these tendencies to vice, thus taking care of the problem of motivation. But Rousseau did not put much weight on this possibility because he was skeptical about the motivational strength of the sense of duty. When the passions oppose our sense of duty, the sense of duty cannot be expected to win (see below, pp. 123, 144–5).

Achieving full political autonomy, then, requires a community of equals. But if a commitment to treating others as equals has no basis in human psychology, then autonomy is not in the human cards. We might then reject Rousseau's solution as objectionably utopian, or condemn human nature as sadly barren soil for the demands of political morality: find that a free

community of equals is too demanding for humanity, or that humanity is too low for justice. Whatever the right response, if we could directly infer intrinsic properties of human nature from observed motivations—if, for example, we were entitled to conclude that the observed "ardent desire" for relative advantage is a direct expression of an original human predisposition, part of our human nature—then the society of the general will would be incompatible with our nature. We would be forced to pessimistic conclusions about the possibility of a free community of equals.

Rousseau's response is that we have no reason for confidence in any such direct inference from observations about human motivation and conduct to the intrinsic properties of our nature. We, therefore, have no reason to endorse the thought or its pessimistic implications. That, in brief, is the point of Rousseau's idea of the "natural goodness" of humanity. He aims to defeat an argument that begins with the evidence provided by "sad and constant experience" and concludes by rejecting an ideal of a free community among equals. In response to the problem of motivational possibility, Rousseau advances an account of human nature organized around the contention that human beings are *naturally good*, "but that society depraves him and makes him miserable" (RJ 213). And this account blocks the inference from dismal experience to a dismal human nature, and, more to the point, underwrites the possibility of our being well-motivated citizens, with suitably public concerns, in the society of the general will.

Showing that a free community of equals does not make impossible demands on human motivation is, however, insufficient to address concerns about realism. A free community of equals must also be *socially and politically possible*: can an ongoing society meet the conditions described by that ideal? I will call this the problem of *institutional possibility*. To show that a free community of equals is institutionally possible, we need, for example, to understand how, in a workable political society, people might come to acquire a general will, with its characteristic regard for others as equals and associated concern for the common good; how members might come to assign the general will priority in public decisions; how the general will might regulate the terms of cooperation; and whether the general will

can retain that regulative role, despite a range of pressures from other passions and interests that work against it.

Three Aims

That is Rousseau's program. I will explore it here, examining the fundamental problem and the solutions to the two problems of possibility. In Chapters 2 and 3, I discuss the fundamental problem and its solution: the first possibility problem, the problem of content. In Chapter 4, I present the conception of human nature and natural goodness, and then take up the first aspect of the problem of realism, the problem of motivational possibility. In Chapter 5, I discuss the second problem about realism, its institutional side. I explore the more concrete proposals, including democratic lawmaking, public participation, and law, about how to institutionalize the general will in ways that will elicit the humanly possible motivations that support it.

I have three aims. First, I want to highlight the general plausibility of the program of reconciling the values of autonomy and equality both with one another and with a conception of human community. Urging the possibility of such reconciliation—the ideal of a free community of equals—was Rousseau's distinctive contribution to political philosophy.

Second, I want to present a way to think about Rousseau's distinctively "participatory" conception of democracy, with its emphasis on direct citizen involvement in lawmaking. I will suggest that that conception of democratic order derives from the conjunction of Rousseau's normative ideal of a free association regulated by a "general will" and his psychological views about the formation of self-understandings and motivations. Once we distinguish the normative ideal from the specific institutional implications that Rousseau draws from it we will be in a position to consider how that ideal might be realized or approximated under modern conditions, in which Rousseauean direct democracy is implausible. In Habermas's terms, we will be in a position to consider how "the old promise" of a community of free and equal members, guiding their collective conduct through their common reason, can be redeemed if it is "reconceived under the conditions of complex societies."[10] I will not describe the

terms of such redemption here, but open some space for its consideration.[11]

Third, I want to explore the relationships between two tendencies within Rousseau's political thought. Rousseau's political ideal of a free community of equals has a strongly liberal cast: it is founded on values of individual self-love and freedom, justified through a compact among individuals conceived of as free and equal, aimed at advancing the basic interests of individuals, concerned to establish relations of equality under law, and it requires that equal citizens give priority in politics to their common good. The arguments are secular; the only reason for the exercise of political authority is public utility; there is no trace of an organic conception of society; nor is authority designed to serve the cause of human perfection.

Another strand in Rousseau's thought might be called communitarian, or republican: for the elements that concern me, "communitarian" strikes me as more accurate. What defines this strand is an emphasis on a shared social and national solidarity, an attachment to a distinctive way of life, and on political agreement as the natural outgrowth of that common attachment. Rousseau often (though not always) seems to treat political disagreement as a sign of impending disaster: he worries about what happens when "votes are no longer unanimous" (SC 4.1.4), and sometimes endorses very demanding requirements of civic unity and solidarity. Among those demanding conditions are a mandatory civil religion, strong attachments to place, compatriots, and distinctive usages, and a pervasively vigilant sense of civic responsibility. Thus, in a striking passage in *Emile* (I will return to it later), Rousseau says: "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 *I* into the common unity, with the result that each individual believes himself no longer one but part of the unity and no longer feels except within the whole. A citizen of Rome was neither Caius nor Lucius; he was a Roman. . . . The Lacedaemonian Pedaretus runs for the council of three hundred. He is defeated. He goes home delighted that there were three hundred men worthier than he to be found in Sparta" (E 40).

I will suggest a way to understand the connections between these different tendencies in Rousseau's view. Rousseau, I will argue, is prepared to entertain the possibility that human nature

requires us to accept demanding conditions of civic solidarity as preconditions for a free community of equals: absent pervasive ethno-national devotions, he suggests, we will be psychologically unable to sustain the free community of equals that is authorized by the social compact. The social compact itself and the conception of a free community of equals do not establish strong communitarian demands of solidarity: those demands are part of Rousseau's political sociology of a free community of equals. Although I do not find that sociology compelling, and do not think that Rousseau so fully endorsed the most exaggerated statements about ethno-national solidarity, I think it is essential to appreciate the substance and the roots of this more communitarian side of Rousseau's political thought. One result of reading Rousseau this way—as philosophically liberal, and sociologically communitarian—is that it suggests, as a more general thought, that the issue between more communitarian and more liberal traditions of political thought may lie less in the core of their political philosophies than in their distinctive social psychologies and political sociologies. And that means that, while their disagreements run deep, they may also share more common ground than we sometimes suppose. In any case, convictions about the possibility of a free community of equals need some story about civic solidarities. If Rousseau's is too narrowly confining, an alternative is needed. There is no evading the issue, not in a political philosophy that deserves the name "political."