
“THE ABYSS OF PHILOSOPHY”: ROUSSEAU’S CONCEPT OF FREEDOM

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The action of the soul on the body is the abyss of philosophy in the constitution of man, just as the action of the general will on the public force is the abyss of politics in the constitution of the State.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Du contract social” (1st version)¹

Freedom is the abyss, or absent ground, of Dasein.

Martin Heidegger, “Vom Wesens des Grundes”²

Two hundred and fifty years ago, in a scant few lines in the first part of his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau did something highly unusual: he enunciated a new principle of freedom, based on a new, and hardly self-evident, conception of the free will.

The crucial passage occurs early in the first part of the *Second Discourse*, when Rousseau abruptly turns from a description of “Physical Man” to an account of man “from his Metaphysical and Moral side”—the very words signaling the dualism that situates Rousseau’s thinking about the will on a conceptual trajectory that runs from Descartes’s distinction between body and soul to Kant’s distinction between phenomena and noumena:

It is not so much understanding which constitutes the distinction of man among the animals, as it is his being a free agent. Nature commands every animal, and the beast obeys. Man feels the same impetus, but he realizes that he is free to acquiesce or to resist; and it is above all in the consciousness of this freedom that the spirituality of his soul is shown.³

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- 1 Jean Jacques Rousseau, “Du contract social” (1st version), in *Oeuvres complètes*, Paris, 1959–95 (hereafter *OC*), 3 (Paris, 1964): 296.
 - 2 Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Reasons*, a bilingual edition, incorporating *Vom Wesens des Grundes*, trans. Terrence Malick (Evanston, 1969): 126–9.
 - 3 Jean Jacques Rousseau, *On the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men*, in *idem, The First and Second Discourses*, ed. Roger D. Masters, trans. Roger D. and Judith R. Masters, New York, 1964 (hereafter *Inequality*), 113; *OC*, 3: 141.

Voltaire scoffed at Rousseau's words, writing in the margin of his text, "Here is a very poor metaphysics." But other readers had a far different reaction, starting with Kant, who in the 1760s exclaimed that Rousseau had "discovered first and foremost beneath the diversity of the received forms of humanity the deeply hidden nature of man."⁴ Yet if the hidden essence of what is singularly human about the human being was simple enough for Rousseau to sum it up in a word—"freedom"—the implications were anything but.

In what follows I want briefly to place Rousseau's words within the broader context of Western thought, in order to survey the implications of his new concept of freedom in three different areas: epistemology, theology, eschatology—and then conclude with a few remarks about the paradoxical climax of Rousseau's thinking about freedom in his final work, *The Reveries of a Solitary Walker*.

Before proceeding, however, it will help to review briefly what Rousseau thinks that freedom involves. Unlike Hobbes and other materialists, Rousseau took freedom to be not a mere word for unimpeded action, but rather a mysterious power, revolving around an inexplicable spontaneity, the miraculous ability to initiate an act without a cause. Because Rousseau thinks that every single human being has this miraculous ability, the human being is "not simply a sensitive and passive being but an active and intelligent being." Or, to borrow an analogous formulation in Kant, "There is in man a power of self-determination, independently of any coercion through sensuous impulses."⁵

Hence the practical significance of Rousseau's metaphysical doctrine: as a result of its innate power of self-determination, the human being is a creature not simply of instinct but also of choice. The choices a human being freely makes over time take the form of habits. Whereas instincts are invariably fixed, habits, as an issue of will, are changeable. Whereas instincts belong to the involuntary and immutable realm of physics, habits are mutable; they belong to the voluntary and essentially indeterminate realm of what Rousseau calls "morals." Freedom, in short, gives human beings, whether in isolation or in concert, the capacity to start over, to form new habits, even to establish spontaneously a new constitution of the soul or of society.

4 Kant, *Bemerkungen in den "Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen,"* ed. Marie Rischmüller (Hamburg, 1991), 124. For Rousseau's influence on Kant, besides the classic work of Cassirer, see Richard Velkley, *Freedom and the End of Reason* (Chicago, 1989).

5 Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York, 1979) (hereafter *Emile*), 272; OC, 4: 573. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A534/B562.

It is for this reason that the category plays a critical role in every one of Rousseau's most influential texts, not just in the *Second Discourse* but also in *Emile*, where a good will enables the individual to achieve virtue, and in *The Social Contract*, where good wills exercised jointly—in a general will—enable a people to regulate itself rightly.

The first complication with Rousseau's concept of freedom is epistemological: how can he be certain that he has succeeded where others have failed to penetrate the deeply hidden nature of man? Rousseau himself describes some of the difficulties at the outset of his *Discourse*:

How will man be successful in seeing himself as nature formed him, through all the changes that the succession of time and things must have produced in his original constitution, and in separating what he derives from his own core [*fond*] from what circumstances and his progress have added to or changed in his primitive state?⁶

In the passage about freedom that appears in Part One of the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau does not present any empirical evidence at all for his bald assertion that the human being has free will. Indeed, in asserting his principle of freedom, he must “set all the facts aside,” as he notoriously says he will do earlier in the *Discourse*. That is because the freedom that he describes does not belong to the natural realm of visible phenomena, it is not (unlike pity and self-love) an observable part of the animal essence of the human being. Because it is a part of man's “metaphysical side,” the concept of freedom cannot be illuminated by the natural sciences.⁷

So how can we know that our will is really free? Rousseau's considered answer to this obvious question is both simple and disarming: we do not know. And we cannot.

“We do not know,” declares Rousseau's spiritual alter-ego in *Emile*, his great *Bildungsroman*. The Savoyard Vicar echoes the Pyrrhonic fideism of Montaigne: “We are ignorant of ourselves; we know neither our nature nor our active principle.”⁸ If a skeptic argues that the will is predetermined, there is no way to refute him. One can only represent the inward feeling of spontaneity that accompanies the exercise of one's will—and one can invite another to look inward, and see if he or she discovers a similar feeling within. Anyone averse to such a spiritual exercise is likely to mistake, or misunderstand, or not recognize at all, a sentiment that is anything but self-evident.

6 *Inequality*, 91, OC, 3: 122.

7 *Inequality*, 113, OC, 3: 141.

8 *Emile*, 268; OC, 4: 568.

In our own society, after all—as Rousseau’s narrative of social and political catastrophes makes clear in the course of the *Second Discourse*—the feeling of freedom has been all but lost. It has been perverted and concealed, deeply hidden, hence hard to acknowledge. Born free, man is everywhere in chains.

At least, this is the gist of Rousseau’s account in the *Second Discourse*.

The narrative of mankind’s calamitous descent into universal slavery in Part Two of the *Second Discourse*, in conjunction with Rousseau’s avowal of freedom in Part One, inevitably poses a theological riddle.

Rousseau, like the Vicar, holds as an article of faith that a powerful and wise will moves the natural world; *God* is his name for this “Being which wills.”⁹ Implicitly in the *Second Discourse*, and explicitly in *Emile*, he furthermore represents the will as the metaphysical aspect of the human being that makes each one of us akin to God, so that “I [can] sense Him in me,” in part through the sentiment of freedom. And note a paradox: what is singularly human about human nature is something *divine*, something as it were *supernatural*.

But how, then, to explain the endless series of evils so vividly rehearsed in the *Second Discourse*? Why would a God who is wise leave His divine creation free, yet everywhere in chains?

Rousseau is of course not the first thinker to be faced with this quandary, nor would he be the last. (Hegel faced the same problem, expressed in virtually the same terms, in his introduction to the *Philosophy of History*.)

Indeed, at first glance, Rousseau’s approach to the quandary seems fairly conventional: “Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man.”¹⁰ When evils befall mankind, man has only himself to blame. Whereas “a beast cannot deviate from the rule that is prescribed to it,” a man may deviate freely, and “often to his detriment.”¹¹ The “first depravity” of men “comes from their own will”¹² because men freely choose to live a life that is not in accord with nature—implicitly, this is one of the most salient morals of the *Second Discourse*.

But on another level Rousseau’s theology of freedom resurrects one of the oldest heresies in Christendom, that associated by Augustine with the name of Pelagius. It was Pelagius, writing in the fifth century AD, who famously advanced

9 *Emile*, 277; *OC*, 4: 581. That the Vicar’s views are Rousseau’s own is confirmed by texts such as Rousseau’s “Letter to Beaumont,” in which Rousseau defends his good faith against the charges laid by the Archbishop of Paris.

10 *Emile*, 37; *OC*, 4: 245.

11 *Discourse*, 113; *OC*, 3: 141. Cf. Augustine, *De libero arbitrio voluntatis*, III, 167: “If the will were in accord with its nature, it would surely maintain that nature, not harm it; and therefore, it would not be wicked. From this we gather the root of evil is this: not being in accord with nature.”

12 *Emile*, 293; *OC*, 4: 604.

the proposition that "God has conferred upon men liberty of their own will, in order that by purity and sinlessness of life they may become like unto God."¹³

Now compare Rousseau: "To prevent man from being wicked, was it necessary to limit him to instinct and make him a beast? No, God of my soul, I shall never reproach You for having made him in Your image, so that I can be free, good, and happy like You!"¹⁴

Like Pelagius, Rousseau insists on the innate goodness of the will. The "right" of freedom—taking *droit* in the twofold sense of justice and straightforwardness—arises from freedom itself: "I am not free to want what is bad for me."¹⁵ Even in our most abased state, insists Rousseau, "all our first inclinations are legitimate."¹⁶ So long as it does not stray, free will can do no wrong.

All wrongdoing must therefore be considered involuntary, a product of external causes: "I have always the power of will," says the Vicar, "but not always the strength to execute it."¹⁷ If the will in itself is innocent, then the source of evil must be sought not in the metaphysical or spiritual realm, but in the physical realm: in the frailties of the body; in the overriding attraction of tempting external objects; or in prejudices, needless passions, and the kind of corrupt society that engenders both in the vast majority of human beings.

That is the bad news.

The good news, according to both Rousseau and Pelagius, is that the divine power of free will gives the human being the power to start over. Defining evil as an issue of bad habits, rather than an unavoidable effect of the original sin of Adam, reduces sin to a problem of human "negligence," one curable through an act of human free will.¹⁸ Furthermore, if the causes of evil are exclusively to be found in the physical realm of material cause and effect, then "the Fall, and any possible redemption from it, can be explained in terms that are purely natural."¹⁹

It is precisely the claim that human beings possess such an independent power to reform themselves that Augustine and the mainstream Christian tradition condemned as heresy. "Since man could fall by will, by free choice," argued

13 Pelagius, as cited in Augustine, *De natura et gratia, contra Pelagium*, LXIV.

14 *Emile*, 281; *OC*, 4: 587.

15 *Emile*, p. 280; *OCIV*, p. 586.

16 *Emile*, 293; *OC*, 4: 604.

17 *Emile*, 280; *OC*, 4: 586.

18 Augustine, *De natura et gratia, contra Pelagium*, XIII. The affinities between Pelagius and Rousseau are usefully traced in Joshua Karant, "A Peculiar Faith," a dissertation submitted to the political science department of the University of Maryland, 2004, see esp. 102–13.

19 Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought* (Princeton, 2002), 43. Neiman gives a good account of Rousseau's theological views, and of their influence on Kant.

Augustine, “he could not rise again” by an exercise of will alone: “No man can be freed from evil . . . except by the Grace of God.”²⁰

Rousseau’s similar heresy was similarly reproved by the ecclesiastical authorities of his day, in both Paris and Geneva. His books were burned, his theology censured. In the face of such criticism, however, Rousseau was famously unrepentant:

The fundamental principle of all morality about which I have reasoned in all my Writings and developed in this last one [*Emile*] with all the clarity of which I was capable, is that man is a naturally good being, loving justice and order; that there is no original perversity in the human heart, and that the first movements of nature are always right.²¹

Rousseau’s “fundamental principle of all morality” determines the content of his eschatology, a naturalistic account of human destiny in the *Second Discourse* that nevertheless pivots around the miraculous power of the free will to transcend any and all natural limits. As a consequence of this inscrutably “spiritual” capacity to resist the commands of nature, the human being, once it is able to exercise its freedom in concert with others, develops the capacity that Rousseau, coining a new word in the *Second Discourse*, calls “perfectibility.” And as the *Discourse* and Rousseau’s other works make plain, the implications of mankind’s pliable and “perfectible” free will are dizzying. All of the classical thinkers—from Plato to Augustine—turn out to be in error, according to Rousseau’s account. They were wrong to think that the ability to reason was natural, and they were wrong to think that the human being was naturally directed, by its inborn capacity to embody an invariant form of reasoning, toward one final and universal state of perfection, a proper *telos*.

The principle of freedom and its corollary, perfectibility, rather suggest that the possibilities for being human are both multiple and, literally, endless. Faced with chance obstacles, a person’s habits or a people’s mores can spontaneously change—perhaps for better, but also for worse. Supervised carefully by a tutor or regulated through a shared code of laws, habits and mores can be deliberately formed and re-formed—again, perhaps for better, but also for worse. The ever-varying forms themselves—the specific patterns of aptitudes and inclinations, of beliefs and passions—can be reproduced more or less self-consciously through the emergent media of language, reason, and culture. Yet these forms, by the same token, may also be modified and transformed, by accident or by design—and, again, for better or for worse.

20 Augustine, *Retractationum libri duo*, 6.

21 Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Letter to Beaumont*, trans. Christopher Kelly, in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, Vol. 9 (Dartmouth, 2001), 28; *OC*, 4: 935–6.

In effect, the intrinsically uncertain and indeterminate power of freedom has turned the human being into an animal destined not to contemplate eternal truths but rather to grapple in ever-changeable ways with ever-changeable circumstances, in time producing a unique history, which appears largely as an unrelenting record of evils, a free fall into universal slavery.

But that is not the end of the story—not even in the *Second Discourse*. At precisely the most intolerable stage in his narrative of the Fall, in Part Two of the *Discourse*, just when things seem hopeless, Rousseau brings dramatically back into play his own great principle for “judging properly,” the principle of freedom.

After all, as he reminds readers, the Fall into universal slavery, like “the right of property” that precipitates it, is unnatural, a matter of convention, the consequence of a history that remains unfinished. Evil is essentially artificial, a product of society. In principle there is no reason to suffer evil at all. Dominated and deformed though the human being of modern times may at first glance seem, every person, like every people, is born free. Because we are inalienably free, we may always choose to change our minds, change our habits, and change our social institutions. We can, in principle, spontaneously start over. Resisting those who would have us renounce “the most precious” of our gifts, we can refuse to surrender our freedom, the “most noble of man’s faculties.”²²

In this sense, the last chapter of the story Rousseau has told still has to be written. The ending is up to us. Our historical destiny is, to an uncertain but critical extent, in our own hands—such is the significance of being free. By rising up against a regime that would instill only “the blindest obedience,” Rousseau reminds us, a people only acts according to the natural order, by reasserting its essential freedom. “And whatever the outcome of these brief and frequent revolutions”—a new beginning, or a relapse into bad habits—“no one can complain about someone else’s injustice, but only of his own imprudence or his misfortune.”²³

Contemporaries like Kant and Herder well understood the novelty and radical implications of this eschatology. Both in different ways appreciated Rousseau’s unusual stress on history as the site where the true essence of our species—freedom—is simultaneously realized and perverted, revealed and distorted.

A new way of thinking about the human condition had appeared in the *Second Discourse*—a rare event, and one reason why Rousseau’s writing conveys such an infectious air of agitated discovery, despite the gloomy substance of his historical argument. As Hegel put it two generations after the *Second Discourse*

22 *Inequality*, 167; *OC*, 3: 183.

23 *Inequality*, 177–8; *OC*, 3: 191.

was published, “The principle of freedom dawned on the world in Rousseau, and gave infinite strength to man, who thus apprehended himself as infinite.”²⁴

One plausible reaction to Rousseau’s teaching in the *Second Discourse* is that of Hegel, of Robespierre, and of Marx. The revelation of freedom as what is distinctively human about the human being—as man’s “species essence”—warrants embarking on a more or less Promethean project, to rid mankind once and for all of the catastrophic institutions that create universal slavery. Call this the emancipatory response to the principle of freedom, a response Rousseau himself articulates in the closing pages of the *Second Discourse*.

But it is not the only feasible response, since a human being is always free not only to act, but to refrain deliberately from action, like a Stoic who would prefer *otium* to the obligations of public life. Indeed, he who endeavors to live a life of public virtue makes himself a hostage to fortune, to a host of external forces and factors that are well beyond the power of one man’s will, or even a society’s general will, when it is not strong, to control and direct towards a good end.

“A motive for virtue,” confides Rousseau in his last will and testament, the *Reveries*, “is nothing but a trap. . . . I know that the only good which might henceforth be within my power is to abstain from acting, from fear of doing evil without wanting to and without knowing it.”²⁵ Lacking confidence in the strength of his own will, Rousseau himself chooses to retreat.

And there is a further paradox. This response—call it the quiescent response to the principle of freedom—is all the more inviting if a thinker is courageous enough to take the full measure of this principle. There is a reason, after all, that Rousseau called freedom “the abyss of philosophy,” and Heidegger called it “the abyss of human existence.”

For the principle of freedom, properly understood, describes a spontaneous capacity so radically indeterminate, so infinite, that more than one sage has been drawn up short, mortified at the prospects of what a wild will might entail in practice.

One possible resolution of the danger that a will, if free, can run wild has been to postulate a set of innate limits to the will, codified in an indwelling conscience or a set of ostensibly universal imperatives—and both of these possibilities were seriously explored by Rousseau, most notably in the Creed of the Savoyard Vicar. Another resolution has been to suppose that the law, in conjunction with a proper education, may inculcate a set of conventional limits on the exercise of free will—and, again, both of these possibilities were explored by Rousseau, in *The Social Contract* and *Emile* respectively.

24 Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Vol. III, pt III, sec. 1, chap. 2, §2, 3C.

25 Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, trans. Charles E. Butterworth, in *Collected Writings*, Vol. 8 (Dartmouth, 2000) (hereafter *Reveries*), 50, OC, 1: 1051.

Yet these books do not contain Rousseau's last word on the topic. In the *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* he confesses that "to act against my inclination was always impossible for me"—he simultaneously understands and resents the need for limits.²⁶ Transcending his resentment, he announces that he has chosen a new *ethos*: "In my present situation, I no longer have any other rule of conduct than in everything to follow my propensity without restraint."²⁷

But this does not imply that Rousseau is now prepared to act on his every passing whim. Unwilling to bridle the will, yet fearful of the consequences of acting on a will that is unbridled, the wise man sublimely aware of his freedom instead may finally choose to will *not* to will, and (as Heidegger famously put it) to "let being be."

And that, more or less, is where Rousseau's own odyssey ended: in untamed isolation and wild passivity. Innocent because indolent, he was happy to botanize, and to record his daydreams in writing, and to recollect his past. By restricting the play of his will to imagination and memory, Rousseau was finally able more or less constantly to follow his propensities without restraint, a good man lost in his thoughts, savoring anew those moments, fleeting yet sweet, when he had felt most "perfectly free."²⁸

26 *Reveries*, 51; *OC*, 1: 1053.

27 *Reveries*, 57; *OC*, 1: 1060.

28 *Reveries*, 90; *OC*, 1: 1099.

