



Philosophy and the Human Situation

Rousseau and Positive Freedom

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In his monumental *History of Western Philosophy*, written during the Second World War, the philosopher Bertrand Russell makes the following remark: 'the dictatorships of Russia and Germany (especially the latter) are in part an outcome of Rousseau's teaching'. Jean-Jacques Rousseau is identified as an proponent of positive freedom. The abuse of positive freedom is linked by Isaiah Berlin to both Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia.

Rousseau described and defended his idea of positive freedom in his great work, *The Social Contract*. If you look at that book, it seems, on the surface at least, to be a humane work by a sensitive philosopher who is concerned to safeguard the individual freedoms of each and every one of us. This is what Rousseau says is the 'fundamental problem' for which his book is a solution. This is what he actually says: 'Find a form of association which defends and protects with all common forces the person and goods of each associate, and by means of which each one, while uniting with all, nevertheless obeys only himself...'. There are a number of points here, and I would not expect you to take them in on one reading. What Rousseau is trying to say is that we need to find a way in which we can form an association, that is, run the state, in which each and every person would only need to obey themselves, as opposed to being forced to obey other people. So, Rousseau's ideal state is one in which the laws don't impinge at all on any individual's freedom. Each person, although a member of the state, is still a free being.

Now this now seems rather puzzling. On the one hand we have Bertrand Russell and Isaiah Berlin connecting Rousseau with regimes that were notorious for their intolerance and repression, and on the other hand we have Rousseau, who claims that the whole purpose of his philosophy is to keep each person completely free. You might suspect that Berlin and Russell were talking about negative freedom, and Rousseau about positive freedom, and you would be right. However, let us see how this works out in detail.

What I shall do is explain what I take Rousseau's line of thought to be. This will, I hope, make it clear what Rousseau means when he makes his notorious claim that we are justified in forcing people to be free. Then I shall try to pinpoint that part of the argument which worries those (such as Berlin and Russell) who see particular dangers in positive freedom.

Rousseau's initial assumption is that questions which face a state (such as whether or not to go to war, whether to have high taxes and generous welfare provision or low taxes and minimal welfare provision) have a right or wrong answer. The right answer – which Rousseau calls 'the general will' – is that which is best for the state as a whole; or, as we might put it, is in the public interest. This assumption reflects one aspect of our attitude to political questions. Imagine the government brought forward a piece of legislation which abolished the state pension. If you are opposed to this, it will surely be because you think it is wrong. Either you think there should be a state pension, or you think there should not be. If you think there should be, then you must think that anyone who thinks there should not be, is wrong. For, obviously, if you don't think they are wrong then you are not disagreeing with them. And if you are not disagreeing with them, then you can't really think they ought not abolish state pensions. So Rousseau's claim that the answers to political questions can be right or wrong does seem to be reflected in what people say about their political beliefs.

With this in mind, let us accept, at least for the moment, Rousseau's idea of the general will: namely, that questions which face the state have a right answer (that which is in the best interests of the state). Now how do we know what is the right answer? Put another way, how do we know what the general will actually is? Consider an analogy. We all admit that simple maths problems have a right answer. How in this case do we know what the right answer is? It's perfectly simple; it is the answer we get if we do the maths in a clear and rational way. It is the same in the political case; the right answer to the political questions, is the answer we get if we think about the problem clearly and rationally. It is the answer we get if we consult our reason, rather than simply being swayed by our inclinations. For example, someone might

vote for higher taxes and welfare payments simply because it will make them better off. A second person might vote for lower taxes and welfare payments for the same reason. What they both should do, says Rousseau, is put aside their selfish interests and actually work out, clearly and rationally, which course of action is in the public interest.

First, we have the general will: the idea that there is a right answer to political questions.

Second, we have a way of finding out the general will: by thinking clearly and rationally. For the third step in the argument, a passage from Boswell's diaries describes his feelings after a night spent with a prostitute. Following the passage, Nigel Warburton makes the following comment: 'Here Boswell's confession reveals clearly the tension between two sides of his character. In his sober reflection he can see the foolishness of his having spent the night with a prostitute. Even soon after the event he is stricken with remorse.' Nigel then goes on to say: 'his higher self endorses a principle of charity and fidelity; his lower self succumbs to the temptations of the flesh. According to some theories of positive freedom, Boswell's 'true' freedom could only be realised by achieving a greater degree of self-mastery. To achieve 'true' freedom, your higher self must have control over the impulses of the lower self.

Otherwise you are simply a slave to your passing emotions and desires: lusts in this case'. Nigel's point can be fleshed-out with another example: someone who is addicted to alcohol.

Such a person will, at times, neglect everything about themselves and others in order to concentrate on getting their next drink. Such a person is a slave to their addiction. It would surely be better for them, as it would be better for Boswell, if they were in control of what they wanted to do. That is, if they could do what they really want to do rather than what their appetites drive them to do. In other words, says Rousseau, it would be better if we could do what we do as a result of thinking clearly and rationally, rather than simply being a slave to our appetites. Or, to put the point another way, we should all escape from the slavery of appetite to the freedom of reason. Doing so shows, as Rousseau puts it, that we are free moral beings and not simply beasts.

Working backwards, if we all try to be free moral beings rather than beasts, we will all think clearly and rationally. If we all think clearly and rationally, we will all arrive at the general will. And if we all arrive at the general will, we will all agree about what will be in the best interests of the state. So we get the conclusion that if we all try to be free moral beings, we will all agree with what will be the best for the state to do. The result of the exercise of our freedom is universal agreement to follow the general will.

Let us pause for a moment to remind ourselves of why this is positive rather than negative freedom. Negative freedom, recall, is freedom of opportunity; a matter of which and how many doors are open. This is not what Rousseau is talking about. Freedom, for him, is being free from the demands of our appetites. The freedom that would come from Boswell conquering his desires for prostitutes, or the alcoholic conquering his or her addiction to drink. If we all exercise this freedom together, that is, we all think clearly and rationally, we will all – each and every one of us – agree to follow the general will.

There is much to recommend Rousseau's theory. The general will is what is in the best interests of the state overall. As a result, no particular group can bias policy either to give them an unfair advantage or to discriminate against another group. The interests of everyone must be taken into account in looking for the actions which will bring about the greatest good overall. By contrast, in a democracy, the majority can implement a policy which will suit them at the expense of others. For example, elections since the war in Britain and America have favoured parties who promise to keep taxes low. Although this favours the majority, it is arguably neither fair to the disadvantaged, nor the best policy overall. Furthermore, Rousseau does provide a more edifying picture of ourselves than does democracy. In a democracy, many people (not everyone) inspect the various party policies to see what is in it for themselves. Will this party cut taxes? Will the other allow me to buy my house? Will my pension be secure? Instead, Rousseau asks us to act as moral beings rather than animals driven by appetite alone, and consider the broader picture. The broader picture, of course, invites us to vote according to what we think is best overall; that is, according to the general will.

This is all well and good, but Rousseau does seem to be operating with a rather naïve idea of what people are like. What about people who do not act according to the general will? When the general will asks people to contribute more tax, some lie about their earnings. When the general will is that people register for military service, some fail to put their name down. This, however, is not fair. Such people favour themselves (they pay less tax and do not expose themselves to danger at the expense of others; to cover for them, others will pay more tax

and face greater danger.) Furthermore, in Rousseau's eyes, they are not doing themselves any favours; they are following their inclinations for money and an easy life, rather than thinking clearly about what is for the best. As a result, like the addict, they are slaves to their inclinations rather than free beings.

Of course, we can make them free by forcing them to act according to the general will. This is exactly what Rousseau says we should do: 'Whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be constrained to do so by the whole body, which means nothing other than that he shall be forced to be free...'

I began by wondering how someone who was as concerned for freedom as was Rousseau, should end up being accused of providing a justification for such political and humanitarian disasters as Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia. The answer lies in thinking that not only is there a single answer to what is the best thing for a state to do, but also a simple method of finding that answer. Both of these assumptions can be questioned. Above, I considered an example of someone who did not put their name down for military service because they were shirking. However, what about someone who conscientiously objects to military service (as Bertrand Russell himself did)? Would it be alright to force them into uniform; would that be 'forcing them to be free'?

I don't think it would be alright. At least, if we do force them into the army, I do not think we should console ourselves with the thought that we are adding to their freedom. The notion that politics is a matter of everyone thinking clearly and rationally and all coming up with the general will is too simple. For a start, Isaiah Berlin's claim that, in the end, there is no guarantee that all human ideals will be harmonised. To see what difference this makes to the argument, let us assume that Berlin is right and they cannot be harmonised. Assume, in particular, that some people will take it that killing people is wrong, no matter what the provocation, while others will think there are ideals for which it is worthwhile to fight, and perhaps to kill. There could be no general will which accommodates both views. Indeed, it seems clear that there could not be a general will which accommodates everyone's principles over taxation and welfare either.

If the general will is in principle open to dispute, the political system Rousseau recommends to us will be fraught with danger. Someone (a Stalin, for instance) can come up with a general will which suits his particular principles. He might even be able to convince enough people that he is right. It is part of the system that anyone who disagrees can be forced to conform; indeed, in forcing them one is simply forcing them to act according to reason and thus helping them to be free. The communist block did lock dissenters up in mental asylums. The justification for this, such as it was, was that they were not thinking according to the official general will, they were obviously not thinking correctly.

The alternative is to reject this positive notion of freedom, opting instead for a negative notion such as that put forward in Mill's *On Liberty*. This is not the place for a full discussion of Mill. However, I'd like you to recall the first of his arguments for freedom of expression: that we ought not to regard ourselves as infallible in our political views, or indeed any other of our views. Rousseau's claim that there is a general will for a society which we can all be sure about is incompatible with Mill's sceptical attitude. Rousseau claims there is a single right answer, and we are justified in coercing everyone into line behind it. Mill's thought is that, as we cannot be sure we have the right answer, coercion would not, at this point, be any more justified than censorship.

These two different conceptions of freedom are reflected in the different conceptions Mill and Rousseau have of politics. As we have seen, Mill strongly advocates free public debate. One of his reasons for this sprang from the scepticism I mentioned a moment ago: if we do not allow a view to be debated, are we not falsely assuming that we are infallible? Would we not be missing out on any partial truths in the view? Mill's ideal of politics, therefore, is for there to be a free market place of ideas. Options are vigorously debated, and all established views are challenged and tested. Out of this free market, in which everyone has the opportunity to participate – remember, negative liberty is freedom of opportunity – will emerge views which have been put to the test and purged of at least some of their falsehoods. These are the views on which a state's policies should be based. Some way of deciding between competing views will need to be found (we generally use the vote), and whichever view emerges out of this public debate is the one on which the state will act.

Rousseau's conception of politics is very different. People should concentrate on reasoning correctly, and then getting everyone behind the right course of action. As the General Will is there to be found, such open public discussion as Mill favours will simply be a distraction: as

Rousseau says, the more that harmony reigns in the assemblies, that is, the more the voting approaches unanimity, the more also is the general will predominant; but, long discussions, dissensions, and uproar proclaim the ascendancy of private interests and the decline of the State. That is the more harmony there is, the more people are thinking correctly and agreeing on the right answer. The more discussion, the more evidence there is that they are being distracted from the right answer. As everyone has to get behind the general will, such distractions are an unwelcome intrusion.

In summary then, Rousseau's strong notion of positive freedom (that people are free in as much as they realise their true natures by participating in the general will) has proved dangerous in the politics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Positive freedom is too often not freedom at all; 'What they call their liberty is just the freedom to agree', as a character in Tom Stoppard's play 'Every Good Boy Deserves Favour' remarks. We should not support Rousseau's two ideas (a) that there is a right answer to political questions and (b) that it can easily be discovered. One alternative is to follow Mill and allow the answer to political questions to emerge out of free public debate. That is, a public debate governed by negative freedom, in which everyone has the opportunity to participate. This also has its problems (there are many dangers, as well as winners and losers in debates) but that would be the subject of another discussion.