

## **All or nothing: Rousseau's uncompromising vision**

*by John Hopper*

“Rousseau did not concern himself with single evils, he did not seek single cures. For him there was no compromise with existing society, no attempt at alleviating mere superficial symptoms. He rejected all partial solutions and with every word he wrote it was all or nothing with him.”—Cassirer

Though his *oeuvre* has been criticised for lacking cohesion and possessing perplexing ambiguities, Rousseau insisted his works all expressed a coherent philosophy - “all that is daring in the *Contrat Social* had previously appeared in the *Discours sur l'inégalité*; all that is daring in *Emile* had previously appeared in *Julie*.” He averred that all his writings were constructed on “one great principle.”<sup>1</sup> Even so, various types of ‘Rousseauism’ have arisen and what may be unique in his work is lost amidst varied interpretations<sup>2</sup>.

Some blame for this confusion must be attributed directly to Rousseau who acknowledged that his work could be difficult to interpret<sup>3</sup>. Further a work such as the Social Contract may be construed in a variety of ways; Rousseau constantly changes ground, arguing one moment from principles, the next from facts<sup>4</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter Gay *The Party of Humanity: Studies in the French Enlightenment* (London, 1964), pp. 211-2. The first quote cited is from the *Confessions*, the second from *Rousseau Juge de Jean-Jacques*.

<sup>2</sup> Joan McDonald *Rousseau and the French Revolution 1762-1791* (London, 1965), p.23.

<sup>3</sup> Gay, *op. cit.*, p.222. This admission is contained in a letter to Madame d'Épinay cited by Gay.

<sup>4</sup> McDonald, *op. cit.*, p.25.

However, the critics have not been without fault and their chief sins are two in number. A tendency to treat his work as a series of disconnected fragments<sup>5</sup>; this approach allows them to produce a plethora of conflicting hypotheses as to Rousseau's intentions, mistake epigrams for theories and judge him guilty of inconsistencies which they themselves have interpolated through twisting his words<sup>6</sup>. More culpably, some have claimed that Rousseau's personal shortcomings must be mirrored by a corresponding confusion and paranoia in his creative output; they thus condition themselves to expect inconsistencies. This proclivity permeates the sometimes vitriolic use of personal criticism to denigrate Rousseau's political ideas<sup>7</sup>. Yet, the validity of a doctrine is little, if at all, affected by its creator's personal shortcomings<sup>8</sup>.

Rousseau's disciples were just as capable of misinterpreting his meaning as his detractors - "disciples and critics alike treated him as a sort of elemental force rather than a thinker, and claimed to find the 'message of Rousseau' in his adventures instead of his ideas, or in his epigrams instead of his chain of argument"<sup>9</sup>.

Rousseau was not a thinker who vacillated in his attitudes. Many exhaustive studies of his writings affirm the essential unity of his worldview<sup>10</sup>. I would hope to safely assume that there is no danger of discovering that at one point in his career Rousseau was of a reformist

---

<sup>5</sup> Alfred Cobban *Rousseau and the Modern State* (Hamden Connecticut, 1964), p.18.

<sup>6</sup> Ernst Cassirer *The Question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (New York, 1954), pp.3-4; p.13. The page references are to Peter Gay's Introduction to Cassirer's work.

<sup>7</sup> J. L. Talmon *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (London, 1955), p.38, for example.

<sup>8</sup> Cassirer, *op. cit.* p.15. The page reference is to Peter Gay's Introduction to Cassirer's work.

<sup>9</sup> Gay, *op. cit.*, p.212.

<sup>10</sup> For example - Cassirer, *op. cit.* pp.124-5; p.127; Gay, *op. cit.*, p.252; Cobban, *op. cit.*, pp.157-8.

bent and sanctioned compromise with existing society, while further down the track he reveals himself as a committed revolutionary hellbent on destroying the existing social fabric ..... Would that it was so simple! Because, although Rousseau is consistent, his thought may be viewed on several different levels including theoretical, practical, material, spiritual, abstract, concrete and other dichotomous pairs. What I want to show is that while Rousseau was radical in his vision of an ideal society, he was nevertheless far more conservative in the sphere of practicalities.

Rousseau posited that before societies or communities existed human beings lived isolated from each other in a “state of nature” - a pre-moral state, free from original sin. This static, limited, possibly hypothetical environment was not, in Rousseau’s view, humanity’s natural state, merely its original state<sup>11</sup>. For Rousseau, humanity’s natural state, its destiny, could only be realised through the successful development of the potential harboured within each primitive - the dormant capacity to will, to choose, the power to perfect human nature<sup>12</sup>.

Exactly what triggered the awakening of this latent potential and convinced humans to forsake the comfortable, undemanding ‘state of nature’ for the hazardous social life, Rousseau is hard-pressed to explain to a critical reader today. He credits Providence with engineering physical catastrophes, ‘acts of God”, so as to force humans to band together for mutual assistance<sup>13</sup>.

---

<sup>11</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau *The Social Contract* (Harmondsworth, 1968), p.29. This view is put by Maurice Cranston in his Introduction to Rousseau’s work.

<sup>12</sup> Ronald Grimsley *The Politics of Rousseau* (London, 1973), p.36.

<sup>13</sup> Alfred Cobban “New Light on the Political Thought of Rousseau”, *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol.LXVI. No.22 (June 1951), p.278.

Hunting and gathering communities became obsolete with the advent of agriculture and metallurgy. These discoveries brought division of labour and the concept of property in their wake. Societies grew in sophistication though not necessarily in wisdom, inequalities developed, wars broke out.

The rich, having most to gain through the establishment of order (as defined by them) and the elimination of anarchy and violence, introduced the concept of political society. In doing so they transformed an innate natural right into a legal right founded on a theoretically universal consent. A sleight of hand that has been described as a “confidence trick that permitted the strong to oppress the weak under cover of the law”<sup>14</sup>.

Nevertheless, Rousseau affirms that the original purpose of political society, though subverted, remains unaltered. This purpose is to secure the liberty of its people and the protection of their lives and property - leaders are always created to defend freedom. However, as power tends to corrupt, inequalities develop. The three main phases in this degenerative cadence are - rich and poor; then powerful and weak; and finally, master and slave. The historical process comes full circle and ends in a new corrupted ‘state of nature’ based on force<sup>15</sup>.

Rousseau had an antidote to this sequence of decay. He rejected original sin and claimed that evil originated not with the individual but with society. This radical assertion flatly contradicted the conventional religious wisdom of his contemporaries. In Rousseau’s mind it is society that takes the amoral *amour de soi* of the individual’s natural state and transforms it into the selfish *amour propre*, the pride and egoism of ‘artificial’ social

---

<sup>14</sup> Grimsley, *op. cit.*, pp.39-41.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.41-2.

humans<sup>16</sup>. Hence, Rousseau demanded society, instead of corrupting people, should be structured in ways that can transform their natural *amour de soi* into an unselfish, altruistic civic *vertu*<sup>17</sup> the true basis of freedom<sup>18</sup>. But he attached stringent conditions to the achievement of this *vertu*.

He considered it practically impossible to regenerate an old society<sup>19</sup> - “liberty can be gained, but never regained”<sup>20</sup>. He sang the praises of tradition and custom<sup>21</sup>. Specifically referring to France, he staunchly defended the old customs, ancient principles and form of a state that had been produced by thirteen centuries of history<sup>22</sup>. Though, despite his nostalgia, Rousseau knew that humanity must keep moving forward in its quest for enlightenment<sup>23</sup> - “*la nature humaine ne rétrograde pas*”<sup>24</sup>.

Further, Rousseau’s prescription for preventing social contamination was most suited to be taken by young communities at the dawn of their political life. Such groupings were ideal because they were not burdened with a past and could establish their own traditions.

---

<sup>16</sup> Cassirer, *op. cit.*. pp.74-5.

<sup>17</sup> Norman Hampson *The Enlightenment* (Harmondsworth, 1968), p.209. In a footnote, Hampson equates *vertu* with simplicity, self-government and the citizen’s willing subordination of personal interests to the common good.

<sup>18</sup> Rousseau, *op. cit.*. pp.25-6. Stated in Maurice Cranston’s Introduction.

<sup>19</sup> Judith N. Shklar “Rousseau’s Images of Authority”, *The American Political Science Review*, Vol.58 (1964), p.927.

<sup>20</sup> Rousseau, *op. cit.*. p.89.

<sup>21</sup> McDonald, *op. cit.*. p.26.

<sup>22</sup> Cobban, *op. cit.* [1964], p.38.

<sup>23</sup> Gay, *op. cit.*, p.234.

<sup>24</sup> Cassirer, *op. cit.*, p.105. Cassirer cites from *Rousseau Juge de Jean-Jacques*.

Another variable that critically affected the potency of the Rousseauist elixir was the size of a community's population. Truly participatory democracy, where all citizens may gather for political debate, for Rousseau was feasible only in small states (Sparta was his classical ideal) or in a "nation of Gods"<sup>25</sup>. Rousseau thought every nation must have the form of constitution for which it is most suited, not the constitution most perfect *per se*. A polity that is best for one state may be the worst for another<sup>26</sup>. He believed in Montesquieu's political relativism - that diverse factors such as size, climate, fertility, diet and geography have a marked influence on the forms of government best suited to different countries. As a general rule "Monarchy is suited only to opulent nations, aristocracy to those of moderate wealth and size, and democracy to small and poor countries"<sup>27</sup>.

Rousseau detested artificiality and the emptiness of Parisian social conventions; to his mind luxury bred corruption. His rejection of materialism and progress for progress' sake was in conflict with the dominant spirit of the times, with the physiocrats' economics and with the unabashed hedonism of his arch-rival Voltaire. Jean-Jacques was convinced that luxuries complicate life without genuinely improving it<sup>28</sup>. Rousseau's Calvinist background contributed to his preference for simplicity; Calvinist theology is energetic, it involves the sanctification of daily activities. Rousseau felt obliged to justify each casual individual act as of benefit to all in the community<sup>29</sup>. He was an advocate of moderation, hostile to extremes<sup>30</sup>.

---

<sup>25</sup> Rousseau, *op. cit.*, pp.113-4.

<sup>26</sup> Cobban, *op. cit.* [1964], p.56. Rousseau warms to this theme in Chapters 9 and 10 of Book II of the Social Contract.

<sup>27</sup> Rousseau, *op. cit.*, pp.124-9. The direct quote is on p.125.

<sup>28</sup> Cobban, *op. cit.* [1964], pp.128-9. Cobban provides a detailed account of Rousseau's anti-luxe stance at pp.126-30 of this monograph.

<sup>29</sup> Rousseau, *op. cit.*, p.117.

And what of Rousseau's prescription for the uncorrupted state? He believes the deliberate decision to form a political association must be made between equals - not between rulers and subjects. The social contract must be drawn up in circumstances of natural freedom<sup>31</sup>. As Rousseau holds a pessimistic view concerning humanity's tendency to corruption by social forces, he demands that his ideal society be based upon laws to which its members have freely assented<sup>32</sup>.

But he has a problem. Given his almost religious passion for the law's 'celestial voice'<sup>33</sup>, how is it possible to explain that the intellectually backward, uninventive creature that is a human being in Rousseau's 'state of nature' was able to draft the sacred code of law - that code which will be the life principle, the heart of the political community<sup>34</sup>? Rousseau's

---

<sup>30</sup> See for example McDonald, *op. cit.*, p.32 and Cobban, *op. cit.* [1964], p.137. Cobban underscores his position with a direct quote from Rousseau: "*La riche tient la Loi dans sa bourse, et le pauvre aime mieux du pain que la liberté.*"

<sup>31</sup> Grimsley, *op. cit.*, p.115.

<sup>32</sup> Rousseau made this point very clearly in *Emile*: "There are two kinds of dependence: dependence on things, which belongs to nature; dependence on men which belongs to society. Dependence on things, having no morality, is not harmful to freedom and does not engender vices; dependence on men, being uncontrolled, engenders them all, and it is through this dependence that master and slave become mutually deprived. If there is some means of curing this evil in society, it is through substituting law for man and arming the general will with a real strength that is superior to the influence of any particular will. If the laws of nations could have, like those of nature, an inflexibility which no human force could overcome, dependence on men would again become dependence on things: in the commonwealth all the advantages of the natural state would be combined with those of the civil state; to the freedom which keeps man exempt from vice would be added the morality which lifts him up to virtue." Cite by Grimsley, *op. cit.*, pp.101-2.

<sup>33</sup> Cited by Grimsley, *op. cit.*, p.105.

<sup>34</sup> . . . . .

solution is, like his cataclysmic theory for the emergence of political society from the 'state of nature', rather speculative; though it does offer insight into his attitude to authority and its place in a society where everyone is held to be equal.

Rousseau asks us to believe that when the time is ripe<sup>35</sup> for a group of humans to emerge from the primitive state of war, divest themselves of crude concepts of property and evolve into a political society, at this very time will appear amongst them the charismatic and almost omniscient 'lawgiver'. The 'lawgiver' can do what the embryonic citizens are individually and collectively incapable of doing - draft a legal code which is tailor-made to their circumstances. All the people need do in their capacity as the sovereign body of this nascent society is assent freely to this legal code. In Rousseau's terminology, the 'general will' of the sovereign is embodied in its consent to these laws.

Rousseau does not endow this 'lawgiver' with any official authority. This paragon must cajole and persuade the populace, educate them to appreciate the wisdom of his path<sup>36</sup>; he is a righteous moral propagandist, a 'guru' leading them, of their own free will, to enlightenment. Thus paradoxically, Rousseau's democratic state of society cannot be initiated without the miraculous appearance of a 'moral' dictator who can seduce the citizenry into accepting his legal code as if it had been written in their hearts from the time of their birth<sup>37</sup>. This 'Messianic legalism' renders one sympathetic to the accusation that Rousseau exhibited a

---

<sup>35</sup> Rousseau, *op. cit.*, p.95. It is here that Rousseau elaborates on what he means by when the 'time is ripe' for a people to receive laws.

<sup>36</sup> Grimsley, *op. cit.*, p.107.

<sup>37</sup> In fairness, I must acknowledge that if one accepts Rousseau's notion that humanity has the innate ability to perfect itself, an ideal legal code could well be embedded in people's hearts from the beginning, merely awaiting a germinating impulse.

narrowness of vision in failing to appreciate that the drafting of legislation should be a consultative process embracing all sectors of society<sup>38</sup>. There is an ambiguity in Rousseau's attitude to authority and authority figures. The experiences of his early years filled Rousseau with an abiding contempt for authority which to him meant hateful submission to another's will. He also felt that servants cheat when masters are corrupt<sup>39</sup>. Yet he acknowledged the importance of authentic creative authority. The authoritative lawgiver can influence the liberation of a people by providing a just legal code<sup>40</sup> giving liberty to those who cannot create liberty for themselves. For Rousseau, just as a tutor must develop the natural self of a pupil, the lawgiver must educate an entire society. He also signals that even in the full freedom of adulthood it is natural for a former pupil to remain attached to a good master - psychological dependence is seen as a condition of freedom. The notion of salvation through great men is a most important theme for Rousseau. He claimed it is the addition of social inequalities to natural ones that causes human miseries. As he was more than aware of human weakness, Rousseau viewed even the best republic as a fleeting palliative, a means of controlling the base human passions unleashed by society. A *status quo* of peace and order was the best humanity could hope to achieve. This attitude of resignation had always been implicit in Rousseau's work<sup>41</sup>. However, to maintain the psychological frame of reference, I would argue that such a resigned attitude is not compatible with his belief that humanity was capable of perfecting

---

<sup>38</sup> John Morley *Rousseau* (London, 1873), Vol.2, p.129.

<sup>39</sup> Shklar, *loc. cit.*, pp.920-1.

<sup>40</sup> In his Introduction to the *Social Contract*, Cranston makes some telling comment on Rousseau's theory of the relationship between liberty and law. See Rousseau, *op. cit.*, pp.41-3.

<sup>41</sup> Shklar, *loc. cit.*, p.919; p.927; pp.930-2.

itself, nor does it sit well with the fact that Rousseau in his writings delineated with such passionate fervour his theories for the transformation of both individuals and society.

Rousseau's ambivalence towards authority is echoed in his view of the people's roles in his ideal state. When the people give their assent to the social contract, the legal code and the civil association that define their society, they act in their capacity as the sovereign authority of the political state. Rousseau is very clear that it is the sovereign alone that has the will, the legislative power<sup>42</sup>. However, the people in their everyday capacity as members of the state, as subjects, must obey the very laws that they instituted as the sovereign body. The government or executive power is "an intermediary body established between the subjects and the sovereign for their mutual communication, a body charged with the execution of the laws and the maintenance of freedom, both civil and political"<sup>43</sup>. Balance is crucial in Rousseau's opinion - the power of the government should equal the power of the citizens who are sovereign in one sense and subjects in another: "No one of these three factors can be changed without destroying the balance. If the sovereign seeks to govern, or if the magistrate [executive] seeks to legislate, or if the subjects refuse to obey, then order gives way to chaos ..."<sup>44</sup>. Hence balance, moderation, is again a key element in Rousseau's proposed society.

Much has been made of his famous statement that whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be "forced to be free"<sup>45</sup>. Indeed, taken out of context these words indeed possess a totalitarian tenor. But, it was a common eighteenth century view that humanity was possessed of a single unitary will. So, conflicts arose when corrupt social conventions led people to

---

<sup>42</sup> Rousseau, *op. cit.*, p.101.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p.102.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p.103.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p.64.

adopt standards contrary to the innate sense of justice possessed by each individual - the foundation of the general will; further, even the most liberal of regimes must enforce certain standards of conformity if a society is to exist in any sense at all<sup>46</sup>. A broad and context-related interpretation of this famous dictum is justified<sup>47</sup>.

When I consider the arguments for and against the view that Rousseau was totalitarian, politically radical or both, I conclude that, though a radical in some senses, Rousseau was on balance a moderate and against revolution<sup>48</sup>. The suspect use of biographical data to debunk Rousseau's work has already been mentioned. It is not right to assert Rousseau laid the foundations for leftist totalitarianism<sup>49</sup>. I see it as basic to all Rousseau's theories that individuals have the inbuilt capacity to perfect themselves through the correct use of the societal framework - humanity moulds society to meet its highest moral needs. Some have stood this idea on its head - asserting Rousseau believed society had the task of moulding people - and then claim this inversion represents the core of a distasteful, manipulative, totalitarian bent in Rousseau. Such a misinterpretation wrongly depicts Rousseau as advocating that the law to be used as a vehicle to change human nature, force it to conform to a mechanistic society, eradicate all old instincts, habits and customs<sup>50</sup>. But, Rousseau himself was clearly a firm believer in the sanctity of tradition, and viewed it as desirable that custom should replace the need for legal authority in regulating an ideal society<sup>51</sup>. However, due to his

---

<sup>46</sup> McDonald, *op. cit.*, pp.34-6.

<sup>47</sup> See in support Grimsley, *op. cit.*, p.104 and Cranston in his Introduction to Rousseau, *op. cit.*, pp.34-5.

<sup>48</sup> Cobban, *op. cit.* [1964], p.39.

<sup>49</sup> Talmon, *op. cit.*, pp.38-49, for example, is of this view.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p.49.

<sup>51</sup> McDonald, *op. cit.*, p.34.

aversion to the authority of men as opposed to the authority of ideas or things, Rousseau did prefer that a citizen should be “excessively dependent upon the republic” rather than dependent upon fellow citizens<sup>52</sup>.

Morley deemed Rousseau to be the “most directly revolutionary of all the speculative precursors” of the French Revolution, but concedes that in spite of the “desperate absurdity” of its assumptions, the *Social Contract* has some redeeming virtues<sup>53</sup>. In similar vein, while deploring what he perceived as totalitarian resonances in his philosophy, another critic allowed that Rousseau advocated a form of democracy and rejected the divine right of kings<sup>54</sup>.

In contrast to the optimistic belief that creation of a classless society will eliminate corruption, Rousseau, a moralist “essentially within the Christian tradition”<sup>55</sup>, concluded it is inevitable that governments will degenerate<sup>56</sup>. He is convinced of the inevitability of social decay and alert to the dangers that attend any violation of tradition<sup>57</sup>. Rousseau expected the executive to govern within the confines of a fixed legal code that it could not alter.

“The man who first had the idea of enclosing a field and saying this is mine, and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society”<sup>58</sup>. Despite the ringing rhetoric of this much quoted assertion, Rousseau can hardly be accused of being radical

---

<sup>52</sup> Rousseau, *op. cit.*, p.99.

<sup>53</sup> Morley, *op. cit.*, Vol.1- p.3; p.134; pp.189-91.

<sup>54</sup> Bertrand Russell *History of Western Philosophy* (London, 1946), p.674.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p.185.

<sup>56</sup> Ramon M. Lemos *Rousseau's Political Philosophy: An Exposition and Interpretation* (Athens, Georgia 1977), pp.181-2.

<sup>57</sup> McDonald, *op. cit.*, p.26.

<sup>58</sup> Rousseau, cited in Hampson, *op. cit.*, p.210.

in his attitude towards property. He is a defender of the right to morally justified property<sup>59</sup>. He held the thoroughly middle-class notion that an individual's property was sacrosanct - provided it was not excessive to personal needs, that it did not smack of conspicuous consumption. However, Rousseau maintained that the state must have the power to regulate the property system as a whole so as to prevent any blatant anomalies in the distribution of property within society. His ideas on property are not easily reconciled with either socialism or capitalism<sup>60</sup>.

Rousseau did not advocate universal suffrage for both sexes. His idea of citizenship only extended to a small minority of adult males. In this he was true to his Swiss birthright. A mere sixteen hundred of Geneva's population possessed citizenship status<sup>61</sup>. Rousseau had a soft spot for "Swiss rusticity" and the democrats of rural Switzerland were not reformers<sup>62</sup>. Progressive or liberal ideas were threats to the cantons' independence. When he eulogises about happy peasants regulating state affairs beneath an oak tree, Rousseau has the Swiss cantons in mind<sup>63</sup>.

Before voicing my conclusions, I feel it would be appropriate to place Cassirer's quote, the catalyst for this essay, into the context of that author's concepts of Rousseau's life and purpose. Cassirer wanted to imaginatively recreate Rousseau's environment and so locate

---

<sup>59</sup> McDonald, *op. cit.*, p.32, and Cobban, *op. cit.* [1964], pp.131-3, both cogently argue for this view.

<sup>60</sup> Cobban, *op. cit.* [1964], p.135, espouses this view. In passing, note that Lemos, *op. cit.*, pp.179-80, attempts to endow Rousseau's system with socialist overtones.

<sup>61</sup> Cobban, *op. cit.* [1964], p.44.

<sup>62</sup> Rousseau, *op. cit.*, p.17 and pp.19-20. Cranston's Introduction.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p.20. This allusion in Cranston's Introduction is to p.149 of this edition of the *Social Contract*.

his “dynamic centre of thought”<sup>64</sup>. He studied all Rousseau’s works, political, literary and autobiographical, his correspondence; he reflected upon Rousseau’s life, not to make some superficial foray into the sort of “biographical determinism”<sup>65</sup>, but to sympathetically appreciate the resonance between the various phases of Rousseau’s life and different sections of his writings - to discern the *leitmotif* which informs them both. Cassirer desired to penetrate to the mysterious point where the man and his work intersected and so illuminate the “dynamic centre” of Rousseau’s total being. He shows Rousseau travelled a long and difficult route to achieve his ambition of translating raw personal experiences into valid philosophical ideals. Cassirer feels Rousseau did not wish to codify or systematise his results, but believed that impulse, the impression of the moment, provided the most authentic basis for morality: “All the evil I ever did in my life was the result of reflection; and the little good I have been able to do was the result of impulse”<sup>66</sup>. Rousseau understood morality to flow from an inner voice, equally available to both peasant and philosopher<sup>67</sup>.

To draw the threads together, it is clear that in pragmatic terms Rousseau was no political firebrand - his dislike for extremes, his respect for necessary property, his belief in

---

<sup>64</sup> Cassirer, *op. cit.*, p.22. Peter Gay makes this observation in his Introduction to Cassirer’s monograph.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p.16. Peter Gay in the Introduction provides examples of ‘biographical determinism’ in a most extreme guise, taken from Irving Babbitt’s *Rousseau and Romanticism* (Boston, 1919).

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p.127. Cassirer is citing a letter drafted by Rousseau in 1767. As this essay may be construed as nothing but a massive reflection upon Rousseau’s thought, devoid of impulse, what good, in Rousseau’s terms can come of it or its far more illustrious predecessors - the whole panoply of Rousseauist literature!

<sup>67</sup> Hampson, *op. cit.*, p.195. On page 189 Hampson echoes Rousseau’s preference for impulse when he writes: “Of Rousseau in particular ... one can only say that the reader who does not feel the point can never hope to understand it”

tradition and his unquestioning acceptance of a very limited political franchise are all indications of political moderation or conservatism. He did not wish to destroy existing society and start afresh - when he attacked culture, he was vilifying the kind of artificiality and hedonism represented by eighteenth century Parisian society, not making a general condemnation of all civilisation<sup>68</sup>. Rather than attacking the repressive inequities of the *ancien régime*, Rousseau was more concerned to lambast the excesses of the *salons*<sup>69</sup>. Far from being an extreme advocate of popular sovereignty, where some of his views were concerned, Rousseau was considered reactionary by the *philosophes*<sup>70</sup>. Though he attacked the divine right of kings, Rousseau had a healthy respect for the divinity and was not opposed to what he considered the right type of constitutional monarchy<sup>71</sup>.

What is truly radical about Rousseau is his passion to establish morality as the basis of political life. As Cassirer highlights, this was really revolutionary; whereas other contemporary theorists viewed it as the handmaiden of progress, Rousseau assigned an ethical role to politics<sup>72</sup>. Ethics not only ensured justice, it sanctified the political process, because Rousseau saw the ethical conscience as a “divine instinct”: “Conscience ... infallible judge of good and evil, making men resemble God!”<sup>73</sup>. He had an uncompromising vision of the ideal society and the moral perfectibility of humanity in the social state.

---

<sup>68</sup> Cassirer, *op. cit.*, p.22. Gay's Introduction.

<sup>69</sup> Hampson, *op. cit.*, p.255.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p.184.

<sup>71</sup> Grimsley, *op. cit.*, p.109.

<sup>72</sup> Cassirer, *op. cit.*, p.66. Cobban (*op. cit.* [1964], pp.141) also states that Rousseau's single inspiring idea was ethical.

<sup>73</sup> Cassirer, *op. cit.*, p.109. Rousseau cited by Cassirer.

It was indeed “all or nothing” for Rousseau when it came to the vision of liberty and justice which underlay his political propositions. He rejected material progress as he believed this could only be achieved at the cost of spiritual decay - and it was humanity’s prime duty to perfect itself. Yet Rousseau has no desire to construct a system which may be relegated to the land of daydreams<sup>74</sup>. He wants humanity to realise that it must freely create and shape its destiny<sup>75</sup>. To borrow directly from Cassirer: “ ... direct intervention in politics was always far from his mind ... yet the truly revolutionary impetus came from him”<sup>76</sup>

---

<sup>74</sup> Grimsley, *op. cit.*, p.95.

<sup>75</sup> Cassirer, *op. cit.*, p.82.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p.69.