



## Freedom, Dependence, and the General Will

Frederick Neuhouser

*The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 102, No. 3. (Jul., 1993), pp. 363-395.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0031-8108%28199307%29102%3A3%3C363%3AFDATGW%3E2.0.CO%3B2-E>

*The Philosophical Review* is currently published by Cornell University.

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/sageschool.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

---

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

## Freedom, Dependence, and the General Will

Frederick Neuhouser

In his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* Hegel credits Rousseau with an epoch-making innovation in the realm of practical philosophy, an innovation said to consist in the fact that Rousseau is the first thinker to recognize "the free will" as the fundamental principle of political philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Since Hegel's own practical philosophy is explicitly grounded in an account of the will and its freedom, Hegel's assertion is clearly intended as an acknowledgment of his deep indebtedness to Rousseau's social and political thought. What is not so clear, however, is how this indebtedness is to be understood: What precisely does it mean to say that the political theories of Hegel and Rousseau share the same first principle? In this paper I intend to follow up on this interpretive suggestion of Hegel's by elaborating, much more explicitly than he himself does, the sense in which Rousseau's political thought is founded on the principle of the "free will." While accomplishing this task will put us in a better position to clarify the obscure philosophical strategy behind Hegel's own social theory, my primary interest here is to illuminate the foundations of Rousseau's political thought, especially its account of the connection between freedom and the general will. I argue that it is necessary to distinguish two ways in which Rousseau takes the general will to secure, or realize, the freedom of individual citizens, namely, by functioning as an embodiment as well as a precondition of such freedom. Understanding both of these points will lead us to see that Rousseau's thought rests on two distinct, though not incompatible, accounts of how citizens whose actions are constrained by the general will are in fact subject only to their own wills and therefore free in their obedience to the general will. As we shall see, these two accounts are implicitly based upon distinct conceptions of political freedom,

---

<sup>1</sup>Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Werke* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), vol. 20, 306. See also §258R of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*.

which, for reasons I discuss below, can be characterized respectively as “subjective” and “objective” conceptions of freedom. My claim is that to ignore either of these conceptions is to leave out an essential element of Rousseau’s understanding of how citizens achieve their freedom within the rational state.

Hegel sets out his understanding of Rousseau’s contribution to political philosophy in a brief summary of his predecessor’s basic position:

The human being is free, and this is certainly his substantial nature. This freedom is not something that is surrendered in the state; rather, it is first constituted therein. Natural freedom, the predisposition [*Anteil*] to freedom, is not real freedom, for only the state is the realization of freedom.<sup>2</sup>

Two points emerge from this characterization of Rousseau’s view that are relevant to understanding what it means to found political philosophy on the principle of the free will. The first involves a claim about the essential nature of human beings, which is said to consist in *freedom*: Human beings live up to their true essence when they possess free will; or, as Rousseau himself puts it, “to renounce one’s freedom is to renounce one’s status as a man” (SC 1.4.6).<sup>3</sup> The second point formulates the most basic principle of political philosophy by asserting an essential connection between human freedom and the state: “The state is the realization of freedom.” The key to understanding Rousseau’s political thought (and ultimately Hegel’s as well) lies in grasping the nature of the relation that is said to hold between freedom and the state. Above all, what

---

<sup>2</sup>Hegel, *Werke* 20:307.

<sup>3</sup>SC 1.4.6’ refers to book 1, chapter 4, paragraph 6 of *On the Social Contract* (SC), ed. Roger D. Masters, trans. Judith R. Masters (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1978). Other works of Rousseau’s are cited as follows: *Emile*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979); *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* (DSA) and *Discourse on Inequality* (DI), in *The First and Second Discourses*, trans. Roger D. Masters and Judith R. Masters (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1964); *Geneva Manuscript* (GM) and *Political Economy* (PE), in *On the Social Contract; The Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (RSW), trans. Charles E. Butterworth (New York: Harper & Row, 1979); *The Government of Poland* (GP), trans. Willmoore Kendall (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985); *Oeuvres Complètes* (OC), ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1959–69), vol. 3.

is meant by the claim that the state “realizes” freedom? To say that the state realizes freedom is to imply that without the state freedom is not real or actual—or, in the words of Hegel cited above, that human freedom is first constituted in the state. On this view, the role of the state with respect to freedom is not, as Locke would have it, one of simply preserving and extending a freedom that individuals can possess independently of their membership in a political community. For Rousseau the freedom that defines our nature as human beings is first constituted in the state and therefore depends upon the state for its very existence. Thus, the most basic thought of Rousseau’s political philosophy can be formulated as follows: The justification of the rational state resides in the fact that such a state plays an indispensable role in constituting human beings as bearers of free wills and is therefore essential to the fulfillment of their true nature as free beings.

Elaborating this basic thought of Rousseau’s will involve, above all, specifying how the rational state realizes the freedom of its members. There are at least two ways one might conceive of the relationship between the state and freedom. First, the state might be thought of as bringing about a set of determinate social conditions that *make possible* the freedom of its members. On this view, the state would realize freedom by fulfilling (at least some of) the conditions that enable individuals to possess a free will. Membership in a rational state would then be a precondition of one’s essential freedom. A second possibility would be to understand political membership not as something that conditions, but remains external to, the freedom of citizens but rather as a mode of relating to the social world that is itself an instance of freedom. That is, being part of a rational state might be regarded as constitutive of, or as *embodying*, the freedom of the individuals who compose it. This is especially plausible if, as in the case of Rousseau, the rational state is held to be a democratic one in which (at least a part of) the freedom of citizens consists in their self-legislating activity. This set of conceptual possibilities can be summed up by saying that the rational state might relate to the freedom of its members either as a *precondition* or as an *embodiment* of that freedom.

An intriguing, and complicating, feature of Rousseau’s political philosophy is that it views the state as standing in *both* of these relations to the freedom of its members: Membership in the rational state makes freedom real by being both its precondition and its

embodiment. This interpretive claim immediately raises a question concerning the coherence of Rousseau's position: How can the state stand in both of these relations to one and the same thing? The key to answering this question in the case of Rousseau is to associate each of these relations with one of the two kinds of political freedom distinguished in the *Social Contract*, both of which are realized only in the state. In short, Rousseau's view will be that membership in the state *embodies* "moral freedom," which is defined as a species of autonomy, or as "obedience to the law one has prescribed for oneself" (SC 1.8.3).<sup>4</sup> At the same time, political membership is a *precondition* of "civil freedom," which Rousseau takes to be the ability of individuals to act unconstrained by the particular wills of others within a sphere of activity deemed by society to be external to the vital interests of the community as a whole. For now I shall consider moral and civil freedom simply to be two distinct kinds of freedom and only later ask about the relationship between them.

### Freedom through the General Will

Having indicated the general direction in which my interpretation is headed, I turn now to a more detailed examination of Rousseau's views as he himself presents them. I shall be concerned to articulate not only Rousseau's understanding of how a rational state realizes the freedom of its members but also his reasons for maintaining that a free will can exist *only* as part of a rational political order. The place to begin such an investigation is the central concept of Rousseau's political theory, the general will. For the general will is both a *political* concept—it embodies the principles of political as-

---

<sup>4</sup>Rousseau's term *liberté morale* easily misleads twentieth-century readers, who are apt to take 'moral' to refer to the ethical, to that which has to do with right and wrong. Rousseau very often uses 'moral' in a broader sense that denotes the intellectual, mental, or spiritual aspects of human reality, in contrast to the material or physical. It might be better to call the autonomy Rousseau describes here "spiritual freedom" in order to avoid confusing it with Kant's notion of moral autonomy, which is moral in both the broad and narrow senses.

sociation—and the principle that accounts for the *freedom* of the state's individual members. This dual function of the general will is expressed in the statement that “it is through the general will that [individuals] are citizens and free” (SC 4.2.8, translation amended). In what follows I begin to elucidate Rousseau's thought that it is through their political attachments, or “through the general will,” that individuals exist as free.

Rousseau invokes the concept of the general will in order to solve what he takes to be the fundamental problem of political philosophy—namely, to devise a form of political association that reconciles the associates' need for social cooperation with their essential natures as free beings. The difficulty of this task lies in the fact that effective social cooperation must be regulated by a social will in accord with the common good, whereas the freedom of individuals requires that their wills be subject to no will other than their own. Since the need to cooperate with others requires individuals to adjust or curtail their actions in accord with interests beyond their own purely particular good, they seem to have no option but to submit their wills to a will other than their own and thus cease to be free. As is well known, the key to Rousseau's solution to this problem lies in his doctrine of the general will. If this solution is to succeed, the general will must regulate social cooperation in accord with the common good and at the same time be the will of the individuals whose behavior it governs. If the latter condition is met, then individuals whose actions are subject to the general will can be said to be free, for in doing so they obey only their own will. Thus, individuals can achieve freedom through the general will only if the general will is also their own will. But what is involved in the latter condition? In what sense and under what circumstances can the general will be understood as the will of each individual? It is this question, more than any other, that must be answered if we are to grasp the strategy behind Rousseau's solution to the fundamental problem of political philosophy.

The most straightforward way of understanding how the general will can be the will of individual citizens is offered by the “social autonomy” model of freedom.<sup>5</sup> This conception of the freedom

---

<sup>5</sup>This term, as well as much of the following description of this concep-

that is realized in the rational state involves the thought of individuals who consciously identify with the general will in the sense that they regularly recognize and embrace the common good as their own deepest interest. Conceiving of freedom in this way depends upon seeing the general will (and the legislation that derives from it) as expressing a consciously shared conception of the common good: if the general will is grounded in an understanding of the common good that is both shared and affirmed by the individuals who make up the state, then in submitting to laws that derive from the general will they remain subject only to their own wills and therefore free. This model requires not only that individuals be able to come to a theoretical agreement as to what constitutes the common good; it also requires that they be capable of *willing* the common good. This requirement is based on the thought that if one had theoretical insight into the common interest without any conscious, voluntative relation to it—if one were able to discern the common interest but unable to affirm or endorse it—then actions regulated by a conception of the common good could not be said to derive from one's own will. Thus, if individuals are to remain free while subject to the general will, they must will the common good. But what is involved in such willing? In the first place, individuals must *have* a general will, which simply means that they can be moved by considerations of the common good, that something's being in the common interest can count for them as a reason for acting to attain it. But having a general will in this minimal sense is not sufficient to insure that one will be free (subject only to one's own will) in a society where the general will prevails. The reason for this is that one may have a general will without it being one's *dominant* will. For individuals who have general wills do not therefore cease to have particular wills, and these particular wills can—indeed, very often do—come into conflict with what the common interest dictates. Thus, individuals who inhabit a state in which the general will prevails (a society in which the general will, through law, effectively regulates the actions of individuals) can be consid-

---

tion of freedom, comes from Joshua Cohen, "Reflections on Rousseau: Autonomy and Democracy," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 15 (1986): 276–88.

ered free only if, as individuals, they possess *properly ordered* wills—that is, wills that are disposed to subordinate purely particular interests to the common good in cases where the two conflict. Such wills belong to individuals whose identification with the shared ends of the association is sufficiently strong to outweigh, at least most of the time, their commitment to purely particular interests. Thus, according to the social autonomy model of freedom, individuals remain free in a society governed by the general will only if they are internally constituted as *citizens*, which requires both that they can be motivated by the common good and that, as a rule, their general will speaks to them in a louder voice than their particular will.

It is not difficult to see that the freedom depicted by the social autonomy model is an inherently political species of freedom that can be realized only within the rational state. Moreover, this model views the state as essentially involved in the realization of freedom not because political membership satisfies preconditions of being free but because such membership is itself an embodiment of freedom—more precisely, an embodiment of a form of “moral freedom,” or autonomy, which consists in individuals governing their lives by laws they all help to frame in accord with a shared conception of the common good. Although this conception of freedom does play a prominent role in Rousseau’s political thought, the relationship between the freedom of individuals and the general will is more complex than this model, taken by itself, can allow for. This point is brought out most forcefully by two troublesome passages of the *Social Contract*. The first of these is the site of Rousseau’s well-known but poorly understood remark that “whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be constrained to do so by the entire body, which means only that he will be forced to be free” (SC 1.7.8). The second passage occurs in Rousseau’s discussion of voting procedures in the assembly. There he asserts that the citizens of a well-constituted state are free, even when required to submit to particular laws that do not conform to their own understanding of what the common good prescribes: “when the opinion contrary to mine prevails, that proves nothing except that I was mistaken, and what I thought to be the general will was not. If my particular opinion had prevailed, I would have done something other than what I wanted. It is then that I would not have been free” (SC



4.2.8).<sup>6</sup> Although these passages occur in different contexts, they both express the idea that one achieves freedom by being subject to the general will, even if one does not consciously recognize the general will as one's own. There must be, then, for Rousseau a sense in which the general will's being the will of each individual does not depend upon the individual's recognition of it as such—that is, there must be a sense in which the general will can be said to be my will (one might say: my deepest or truest will), even though I may lack the kind of subjective relation to it that is ordinarily taken to constitute willing. I may fail to discern the common good or to make it the object of my striving, and yet the general will is understood to be *my* will, and my subjection to it dictates freedom. That Rousseau intends to make such a claim seems to me incontrovertible; what is less certain is whether it is possible to make sense of this position, including its apparently perverse implication that an individual can be free even when required to act contrary to her own assessment of what she wants to do. The social autonomy model of freedom, however, is unable to make sense of such a position, and so, if we are to understand this aspect of Rousseau's view, we must look beyond this model for an alternative—or, better, a supplement—to the conception of freedom as social autonomy. The best way to do this is to examine more closely Rousseau's notorious claim that in the rational state it is possible for individuals to be forced to be free.

Let us begin by reviewing the passage in question in its entirety:

[I]n order for the social compact not to be an ineffectual formula, it tacitly includes the following engagement, which alone can give force to the others: that whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be constrained to do so by the entire body; which means only that he will be forced to be free. For this is the condition that, by giving each citizen to the homeland, guarantees him against all personal dependence; a condition that creates the ingenuity and functioning of the political machine, and alone gives legitimacy to civil engagements which without it would be absurd, tyrannical, and subject to the most enormous abuses (SC 1.7.8).

---

<sup>6</sup>I have changed Masters's 'private will' (*avis particulier*) to 'particular opinion' in order to make it consistent with the translation of *avis* as 'opinion' in the previous sentence.

The most common way of explicating this difficult passage is to take Rousseau simply to be arguing that citizens have a rightful obligation to obey the general will and that therefore the state's coercive power can be legitimately directed against them when they fail to do so.<sup>7</sup> This obligation to obey the general will is usually understood to derive from citizens' previous (actual) consent to the terms of the social contract, which include a promise to abide by those laws arrived at through agreed-upon procedural principles of majority rule. If Rousseau's passage is understood in this way, the issue it addresses appears to be not a distinctively Rousseauian problem but the problem faced by any social contract theory of providing an account of the citizen's obligation to comply with legitimately constituted legislation and of the state's corresponding right to use coercive force to ensure such compliance. Moreover, insofar as this interpretation views the *Social Contract* as grounding the citizen's obligation to obey the law in the obligation incurred through her original promise to do so, Rousseau's position comes out to be essentially indistinguishable from that of other social contract theorists, including Locke. But this reading, regardless of its merit as an account of the obligation citizens have to obey, fails to address the passage's central, and most puzzling, assertion—namely, that being forced to comply with the general will is nothing more than being “forced to be free.” In other words, the most fundamental question raised by this assertion is not how citizens come to have an *obligation* to obey the general will but how their being forced to fulfill that obligation can be consistent with—indeed, constitutive of—their being *free*.<sup>8</sup> What sense can it possibly

---

<sup>7</sup>For examples of this way of interpreting Rousseau's passage see the editor's notes to *On the Social Contract*, 138, and W. T. Jones, “Rousseau's General Will and the Problem of Consent,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25 (1987): 115, 128.

<sup>8</sup>This distinction between the issues of obligation and freedom is also made in the second of the two passages cited above, most explicitly at SC 4.2.7. After establishing that “the vote of the majority always *obligates*” (my emphasis), Rousseau goes on to ask how being forced to obey the law to which one is obligated can be consistent with *freedom*. While it is essential to distinguish the issue of obligation from that of freedom, it is also important to note that Rousseau's solution to the former is parasitic on his account of the latter, since he intends to ground our obligation to obey the

make to say that the would-be offender, forced to obey, is doing nothing other than following her own will?

It is sometimes said that the citizen who is forced to obey the general will can be thought of as simply being forced to follow his own will, insofar as the general will embodies those principles that he himself, in moments of undisturbed reflection, recognizes as the object of his own deepest commitment. In such a case the principles that define the general will would constitute the citizen's own constant (and therefore true) will, and the occasional impulse to follow his particular will in opposition to the general will would be a temptation to act contrary to what he, by his own acknowledgment, most wants to do.<sup>9</sup> Thus, disobedience to the law would represent a species of weakness of will, and one's original consent to the social contract—more specifically, one's agreement to subject oneself to the law-enforcing powers of the state—could be seen as the will's strategy for binding itself to a principle which it explicitly endorses but finds difficult to follow in every situation. Being forced to subordinate one's divergent particular will to the general will would then simply be to have one's actions brought into line with one's own constant will; but this would amount to nothing more than being forced to do what one most wants, which could also be described as being forced to be free.

This interpretation has the advantage of being able to give some meaning to the idea that one can be forced to be free; its disadvantage is that the explication it offers is not the one Rousseau himself suggests in the lines immediately following his famous utterance. Considering the amount of confusion that the phrase "forced to be free" has generated among interpreters, it is surprising to discover that Rousseau explicitly points out to us the thought that is supposed to make sense of his otherwise paradoxical formulation: "For this [the stipulation that individuals be constrained to follow the general will] is the condition that, by giving each

---

general will in the more fundamental imperative that exhorts us to realize our nature as free beings.

<sup>9</sup>This interpretation is suggested by a passage from the *Geneva Manuscript* (178) which was left out of the *Social Contract*, as well as by N. J. H. Dent in *Rousseau* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 179–80. Dent, however, goes on to give an account of the "forced to be free" passage that is much closer to the one I develop below.

citizen to the homeland, *guarantees him against all personal dependence*" (SC 1.7.8, emphasis added). It is quite clear, I believe, that Rousseau intends for this sentence, which is linked to its predecessor by the explanatory 'for', to be recognized as holding the key to the riddle posed by the expression 'forced to be free'. That is, he means for us to take seriously the thought expressed by this sentence—namely, that universal compliance with the general will effectively safeguards citizens from personal dependence and that this protection from dependence is so bound up with their freedom that obedience to the general will can be said to make them free, even when their obedience is not voluntary in the ordinary sense of the term. My aim in what follows will be to make sense of this difficult thought and thereby to elucidate one of the ideas that lies at the heart of Rousseau's conception of freedom and its relation to the political order. Doing so will require a discussion of two sets of questions raised by Rousseau's claim: First, how are we to understand the notion of dependence, and in what relation does it stand to the concept of freedom? If freedom is not simply identical with independence, why does Rousseau believe the two concepts to be so closely connected? The second set of questions concerns the relation that allegedly holds between the general will and the independence of citizens—most importantly, What is behind the assertion that the general will, if adhered to, safeguards citizens from personal dependence?

## Dependence and Freedom

Rousseau's claim that compliance with the general will makes citizens free because it safeguards them from personal dependence could be taken to imply that freedom simply consists in the absence of dependence and that therefore *independence* is synonymous with *freedom*. This view, which some interpreters have taken, appears to be reinforced by the fact that Rousseau more than once treats these two terms as though they were interchangeable.<sup>10</sup> But adopting

---

<sup>10</sup>John Plamenatz is one (otherwise reliable) interpreter who equates the two concepts ("Ce qui ne signifie autre chose qu'on le forcera d'être libre," in *Hobbes and Rousseau*, ed. Maurice Cranston and Richard S. Peters (Gar-

this view will have serious consequences for any attempt to make sense of Rousseau's philosophical project. For the fundamental problem to which his project as a whole is directed can be coherently formulated only by distinguishing freedom from independence. That such a distinction is required becomes clear once we recognize that Rousseau starts from the supposition that dependence is a fundamental, ineliminable feature of human existence. Although, as we shall see, he regards this dependence as having negative implications for our ability to be free, dependence does not strictly preclude freedom's being realized. In fact, Rousseau's thought can be understood as aiming, above all, to show how the basic dependence of human beings can coexist with their freedom. If this task is to be anything other than a logical impossibility, it must presuppose a conceptual distinction between freedom and independence. That Rousseau's thought operates with such a distinction cannot be gathered from his actual usage of the terms *liberté* and *indépendance*. Yet a careful reading of his central works, especially his *Discourse on Inequality*, compels one to conclude that this distinction, if only implicit in Rousseau's texts, is indispensable to his philosophy of freedom.<sup>11</sup>

How, then, is the distinction between freedom and independence to be drawn? Rousseau's concept of independence is best understood as closely related to the notion of self-sufficiency. As such, it can be defined only with reference to the more basic concept of *need*: To be independent is to be self-sufficient with respect to the satisfaction of one's needs, and dependence is simply the lack of such self-sufficiency. Thus, human beings are dependent in the broadest sense of the term when they must rely on resources outside of themselves in order to have their needs satisfied. Although Rousseau recognizes two species of dependence in general—

---

den City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972), 323–24). Rousseau himself sometimes fails to distinguish freedom from independence (e.g., at *Emile*, 84). At other times he appears to make a distinction and to do so in a way that is consistent with my interpretation (DI, 156; GM, 159); in at least one other place he explicitly draws the distinction differently than I do (OC 3:841).

<sup>11</sup>Here I take seriously Rousseau's statement (*Emile*, 108n) that he does not always "give the same meanings to the same words" but that the thoughtful reader will always be able to discover the underlying coherence of his thought.

dependence on things and dependence on other human beings—it is the latter category that is of primary importance to him. The reason for this can be traced back to his belief that dependence on things alone—that is, on things other than human individuals or groups—has little impact on one's ability to be free (*Emile*, 85). Thus, Rousseau portrays the independent individual as one who “has no need to put another's arms at the end of his own” (*Emile*, 84); in other words, he is able to satisfy his needs without the cooperation of other human beings. The primitive gatherer of fruit, reliant on the beneficence of nature but not on the assistance of others, is therefore not dependent in the sense that most interests Rousseau.

Thus, a consideration of Rousseau's concept of independence leads directly into his account of human needs. Although this aspect of Rousseau's thought is sufficiently rich to merit a lengthy treatment of its own, I shall restrict myself here to those points that are most relevant to elucidating the connection between dependence and freedom. It is important to note first that in this context the concept of need refers always, and only, to *perceived* needs. Characterizing a need as “perceived” does not imply that it is *merely* a perceived need (but not, say, a real or true need). Although Rousseau's texts do provide resources for distinguishing true (or real) needs from false (or illusory) needs,<sup>12</sup> this distinction is irrelevant here. What is important for understanding dependence is not some objective quality of needs (for example, whether they are in fact essential to one's well-being, properly understood) but their subjective character—that is, the way they present themselves to and influence the behavior of the subject to whom they belong. All

---

<sup>12</sup>Rousseau speaks of “true” or “natural” needs (e.g., *Emile*, 84, 86, 213, 333), but his use of these terms is inconstant. At DI, 137, he says that savage, as opposed to modern, man “felt only his true needs.” The impression is often given that “true” (or “natural”) means “given to the human by his biological nature” and hence that true needs are simply the primitive physical needs of the original state of nature. I suggest that Rousseau's notion of true needs is better understood as referring, roughly, to those goods that are essential to one's well-being properly understood, and that false needs are those that are perceived as such but are in fact destructive of, or not essential to, one's well-being properly understood. Thus, for Rousseau an essential feature of true needs is that they are compatible with one's being *free*.

needs, whether real or illusory, have the potential to give rise to dependence, as long as they are perceived as needs by the subject.

There are two subjective qualities of needs that make them crucial to the phenomenon of dependence—namely, the *force* and the *constancy* with which they present themselves to subjects as inducements to action. First, needs are powerful determinants of behavior and psychological well-being. The feeling of lack that accompanies an unfulfilled need possesses an urgency that is not easily ignored or endured. An unquenched thirst or an unrequited love has the power to torment individuals and to drive them to desperate action. It is this forceful quality of needs that accounts for the nearly irresistible hold that relations of dependence come to have over individuals who become entangled in them. Second, needs possess a constancy that many inclinations do not; in contrast to whims or fleeting desires, needs constitute an enduring part of the subject's appetitive makeup: when needs go unsatisfied, the urges to which they give rise do not simply disappear but continue to make their demands felt by the subject. Moreover, satisfying a need once does not amount to extinguishing it, for needs typically give rise to recurrent feelings of lack, which demand that the process of satisfaction be repeated. Whether fulfilled or unfulfilled, needs are not easily gotten rid of. This feature of needs is important, because it is what makes dependence an enduring state rather than a merely momentary phenomenon.

The needs that figure most prominently in Rousseau's thought fall into two main classes. The first comprises those goods (for example, food, clothing, shelter) that are involved essentially in the reproduction of life and whose significance for the human being derives primarily from the requirements of his physical constitution. The second class is made up of needs that have their origin not in our biological nature but in a form of self-love that Rousseau calls *amour-propre*, a passion that gives rise to the distinctively human yearning "to have a position, to be a part, to count for something" (*Emile*, 160).<sup>13</sup> *Amour-propre*, which is fundamental to our

---

<sup>13</sup>The problems involved in finding a suitable English translation of *amour-propre* are well known. For an excellent discussion of Rousseau's frequently misunderstood view of *amour-propre*, see Dent, chapter 2.

nature as spiritual (or moral) beings, is capable of manifesting itself in numerous ways and therefore of giving rise to an extremely diverse set of concrete needs. The need to be thought handsome or clever, the need to be loved, the need to have one's will and preferences respected—all are grounded in the promptings of *amour-propre* and can be understood as particular forms of the basic need generated by that passion: the need to have a recognized standing among beings of one's own kind or, in other words, the need to be acknowledged by one's fellow beings as possessing a value that makes one worthy of their esteem. This two-fold classification of needs is summed up by Rousseau in a footnote to the Second Discourse: "all our labors are directed to only two objects: namely, the commodities of life for oneself, and consideration among others" (DI, 223).<sup>14</sup>

These two kinds of needs give rise to the two main types of dependence with which Rousseau is concerned: *economic* and *psychological* (or psycho-moral) dependence.<sup>15</sup> The former consists in dependence on others in the production or acquisition of necessary commodities. It is a necessary consequence of the two most important economic facts of modern (and most of premodern) society: the material division of labor (for example, into tillers of the soil and workers of metal) and the division of society into economic classes of rich and poor (or, in more precise terminology, into owners and nonowners of the means of production). Psychological dependence is dependence on others for the recognition one needs in order for one's sense of one's value or standing among others to be reflected and thus confirmed in the external world. Rousseau's writings abound with sharply observed examples of dependence which he takes to be of this second type: the artist whose self-respect requires his audience's applause, the lover who

---

<sup>14</sup>Notice that the commodities of life are "for oneself," while the need for "consideration" inherently involves others. I explain and emphasize this feature of Rousseau's view below.

<sup>15</sup>Although the two types of needs appear to stand in a one-to-one correspondence to the two types of dependence, their relation is more complex, since, as we shall see, for civilized (as opposed to primitive) human beings *amour-propre* plays a significant role in constituting economic dependence.



cannot endure being denied his beloved's affection, the citizen who values the honor of his countrymen more than his own life.<sup>16</sup>

It would be a mistake to conclude, as some interpreters have done, that Rousseau regards one species of dependence as of greater consequence than the other; on the contrary, he sees correctly that economic and psychological dependence pose equally serious threats to individuals' freedom. Yet one interesting feature of his view is that it ascribes far more importance to *amour-propre* than to biology in its explanation of human dependence. The explanatory primacy of *amour-propre* manifests itself in two ways. First, *amour-propre* has a more immediate connection to dependence than does purely physical need. In addition to his vivid depictions of human dependence, Rousseau offers accounts, usually in narrative form, of the conditions under which the fact of human need gives rise to a state of dependence. In the Second Discourse Rousseau argues that dependence, understood as an enduring condition, is not a necessary consequence of our biological nature alone.<sup>17</sup> Savage individuals, isolated and independent, are able to satisfy their purely physical needs without the regular cooperation of their fellow beings. Physical needs result in dependence only when the production of necessary commodities acquires certain *social* characteristics (which itself presupposes that these needs have become more complicated and less easy to satisfy). That is, it is only with the division of labor, occasioned by the advent of metallurgy and agriculture, and with the subsequent division of society into rich and poor that individuals become economically dependent on other humans for the satisfaction of their physical needs. In contrast, the relation between psychological dependence and the needs of *amour-propre* is more straightforward. For the object of *amour-propre*'s striving is such that its attainment requires by its very nature the involvement of others. The individual's yearning for a recognized standing among others cannot be satisfied by the indi-

---

<sup>16</sup>It is important to bear in mind that psychological dependence is not necessarily pathological; on the contrary, it is essential to being human. Emile is dependent on Sophie's regard (and vice versa), and this is as it should be.

<sup>17</sup>This point is echoed in *Emile*, 185: "So long as one knows only physical need, each man suffices unto himself."

vidual herself, nor by subhuman beings.<sup>18</sup> Thus, in the case of *amour-propre* neediness is inseparable from dependence; the existence of psychological dependence presupposes no conditions beyond those of *amour-propre* itself: a simple awareness of oneself as an individual, a certain constancy of social intercourse, and the mental capacity to make comparisons between oneself and one's fellow beings.

*Amour-propre* has primacy over purely physical needs in Rousseau's account of dependence in a second sense: The needs of *amour-propre* not only give rise on their own to psychological dependence, they also play an important, perhaps dominant, role in the constitution of economic dependence. This is most easily seen in the fact that many of the needs that make us dependent on the labor of others (for example, the need for a sufficiently stylish wardrobe) stem directly from the promptings of *amour-propre*. Although the possession and consumption of things cannot by itself satisfy *amour-propre*, commodities frequently play a central role in individuals' strategies for gaining the respect of others. A less obvious but equally important point is that with the development of society, biologically based needs quickly cease to be purely biological in nature. What counts as a "commodity of life" is not determined by a fixed, strictly biological quantity (for example, the minimum required for survival and reproduction). Rather, our conception of the necessities of life changes with historical development and presupposes a conception of the minimal standard of living that is consistent with a humane existence. Thus, these biologically based needs come to be determined in part by considerations as to the kind of physical existence that it is *fitting* for human beings to have and hence by considerations that ultimately have their source in *amour-propre*. To fail to achieve this minimal standard is to lead a less than human existence, a circumstance which is incompatible with the recognized standing that *amour-propre* strives to attain. This blurring of the distinction between physical and psychological needs is due to the fact that for beings in whom *amour-propre* has begun to operate—and that includes all *human* beings—no aspect

---

<sup>18</sup>This is not to say that recognition by others cannot be, or is not typically, mediated by things.

of one's existence remains untouched by the concern for one's standing among others. Even those needs that derive most immediately from our biological nature take on a psychological significance and become essential to achieving self-esteem, as well as the esteem of our fellow beings.

Freedom, in contrast to independence, is defined without reference to the concept of need. It refers, rather, to a condition of the *will*, and more precisely, to a particular relation between the will and the world. The meaning of freedom is captured in a rough way by Rousseau's characterization of the free being as "one who does his own will" (*Emile*, 84). Freedom, it would seem, consists in an agreement of will and action; individuals are free when they "do what accords with their will" (RSW, 84). At times, however, Rousseau insists upon a slight but significant revision of this formulation: "Freedom does not consist so much in doing one's will as in not being subjected to the will of others" (OC 3:841).<sup>19</sup> What is the import of defining freedom negatively (as the absence of subjection to a foreign will) rather than in the more straightforward manner suggested above? Rousseau's endorsement of the negative formulation implies that "doing one's will" is too exclusive a definition of freedom and, hence, that there are instances in which one does not do what one wants without therefore being unfree. What Rousseau must have in mind are instances in which the force that prevents me from doing my own will comes from the "necessity of things" rather than from a foreign will.<sup>20</sup> That is, I may fail to do what I want because I lack the requisite strength, or because of limits imposed by the laws of nature. In such cases Rousseau will agree that my will has been frustrated but deny that my freedom has been compromised.<sup>21</sup> Rousseau's concept of freedom, then, cannot

---

<sup>19</sup>See also RSW, 83.

<sup>20</sup>See *Emile*, 85: "Dependence on things, since it has no morality, is in no way detrimental to freedom. . . ."

<sup>21</sup>The view that natural necessity does not compromise human freedom is based on the idea that the world of things is ordered by natural laws, which have a constancy and necessity that the particular wills of individuals do not. This makes the natural world reliable (and predictable) in a way that particular wills are not. Moreover, Rousseau appears to believe that the fact that nature is ordered is sufficient to guarantee that it will be benign with respect to anything "natural," including human freedom (e.g., *Emile*, 37).

be defined simply as a correspondence between an individual's will and her deeds. Such a definition equates freedom with the successful translation of will into action, and in doing so it overlooks a central characteristic of freedom, a characteristic that makes freedom, for Rousseau, an inherently moral phenomenon, namely, that freedom (as well as its opposite) always refers to a relation between one will and another: To be unfree is to obey a foreign will, and freedom is always being free of the will of another. We can do justice to this aspect of Rousseau's conception of freedom by replacing our initial characterization of the free individual as "one who does his own will" with the following: The free individual is one who *obeys* only his own will, or more explicitly, one who *obeys no will* other than his own.

This rather meager formula is not, of course, Rousseau's final word on the topic of freedom. It would be more accurate to describe it as his starting point. For although the thought of "obeying only one's own will" captures what is most essential to the idea of freedom, it is still a long way from a full account of what a free human existence would look like and how such an existence could be realized. It is no exaggeration to say that Rousseau's thought as a whole is devoted, above all else, to the task of providing just such an account. Central to this project is the question that could be said to inform each of Rousseau's major works: Under what conditions is human freedom possible? How must the world be constituted—both the external, social world and the inner, psychological world—in order for individuals to be able to obey only their own wills? It is in this context that the topic of dependence makes its entry into Rousseau's philosophy, for dependence on others represents the most important obstacle to the realization of freedom.

With this thought we return to the question posed at the beginning of this section: What relation exists between freedom and dependence? Although, as we have seen, the concepts of freedom and independence can be distinguished in thought, the phenomena to which they refer are closely connected in reality. The general nature of this connection is expressed in Rousseau's remark that dependence on others is "detrimental to freedom" (*Emile*, 85). One could also say that dependence is the *source* of subjection and, more precisely, that it is the source of subjection in two distinct senses: First, dependence is a condition that makes possible the subjection of one will to another. It allows us to make sense of the

otherwise puzzling phenomenon of obeying a foreign will instead of one's own.<sup>22</sup> For in certain, easily imaginable circumstances, requiring the cooperation of others for the satisfaction of one's needs makes it necessary, or gives one powerful incentives, to abandon one's will in favor of another's. But Rousseau makes the even stronger claim that dependence is *necessary* for subjection to arise: "since the bonds of servitude are formed only from the mutual dependence of men and the reciprocal needs that unite them, it is impossible to enslave a man without first putting him in the position of being unable to do without another" (DI, 140).<sup>23</sup> Rousseau's talk of "bonds of servitude" indicates that it is the enduring subjection of one will to another that requires dependence as its condition. For isolated instances of yielding to a foreign will can occur even in the absence of dependence; a simple threat of violence, for example, can result in obedience to another, and such encounters are conceivable even for the thoroughly independent beings of the original state of nature. The enduring subjection of individuals, however, is possible only for dependent beings—that is, for beings whose lack of self-sufficiency requires them to have ongoing interactions with others.

Second, dependence for Rousseau is more than just a necessary condition of subjection. Insofar as it is relatively extensive and exists in its natural form (that is, prior to being restructured in the ways advocated by Rousseau's philosophy),<sup>24</sup> dependence *virtually guarantees* that individuals will be unfree. This is to be attributed in part to the nearly irresistible force with which unsatisfied needs impel individuals to seek satisfaction. Beings who constantly have to choose between getting what they need and following their own wills cannot be expected to opt consistently for freedom over sat-

---

<sup>22</sup>Obedience to a foreign will is a phenomenon that calls for an explanation, because human beings by nature value being their own master and are *prima facie* strongly disinclined to cede to a will that is not their own. This is *one* of the claims implicit in Rousseau's view that human beings are naturally free.

<sup>23</sup>Or, more succinctly: "what yoke could be imposed on men who need nothing?" (DSA, 36n). See also DI, 139, where Rousseau depicts a state of perfect independence and asks, "[H]ow will [a man] ever succeed in making himself obeyed?"

<sup>24</sup>The unrestructured dependence referred to here is "natural" in the sense that it is the result of a development which, as a whole, was not an object of human foresight, plan, or will.

isfaction. But dependent individuals will regularly find themselves in this unhappy position only if their relations of dependence are so constituted that they give rise to systematic conflicts among wills. Hence Rousseau's view that the loss of freedom is a virtually unavoidable consequence of unrestructured dependence is also based on a supposition about the inevitability of conflict among the desires and particular interests—and hence among the wills—of interdependent individuals in the absence of an imposed order that harmonizes those interests. The division of society into economic classes which have directly antithetical material interests is but one of Rousseau's examples of a common form of dependence that guarantees a systematic conflict among wills.<sup>25</sup>

We are now in a position to consider how Rousseau's understanding of the relation between freedom and dependence dictates the basic terms of his solution to the fundamental problem of political theory, that of devising a structure for the ongoing social cooperation of human beings that allows for each individual to exist as free. First, however, it is important to note that Rousseau's formulation of his task—his specification of freedom as the end to be realized—bears witness to the important fact that freedom, not independence, is the supreme value of his political thought (and, indeed, of his philosophy in general). Rousseau's view is not merely that freedom stands above independence in the hierarchy of values but that independence has no intrinsic value at all. Indeed, whatever value Rousseau ascribes to independence is completely parasitic on the value of freedom. Thus, to the extent that Rousseau considers independence to be good, he does so not because it is intrinsically valuable, nor because self-sufficiency is the surest means to the satisfaction of one's needs, but solely because of the positive contribution independence can make to the ability of individuals to avoid subjection to foreign wills. By the same token, dependence is regarded not as bad in itself but as bad only insofar as it is detrimental to the freedom of the dependent individual.

Rousseau's view of dependence as the source of subjection suggests one obvious response to his central question concerning the

---

<sup>25</sup> Another important example is Rousseau's analysis of how the needs generated by inflamed *amour-propre* lead to inevitable clashes among wills. For a discussion of this and the distinction between inflamed and benign *amour-propre*, see Dent, chapter 2.

conditions under which freedom can be realized, namely, the perfect independence of all individuals. Further, it suggests that a political solution to the problem of subjection could be found in eradicating dependence on others in all of its forms, since to eradicate dependence would be to eliminate the condition which both makes subjection possible and virtually ensures that it will come about. Indeed, the link between dependence and subjection is a theme which occurs so frequently and with such urgency in Rousseau's texts that it is easy to get the impression that the eradication of dependence is the *only* possible remedy for the subjection of individuals. In the Second Discourse, however, Rousseau in effect considers, and emphatically rejects, just this solution. His portrayal of the original state of nature can be seen as an attempt to imagine what life would be like for beings who enjoyed a freedom predicated on the complete self-sufficiency of individuals. The beings Rousseau depicts are perfectly "free and independent" (DI, 156) (and free *because* they are independent); they obey no wills other than their own and are able to do so only because they are self-sufficient. Yet Rousseau makes it clear that such freedom, even if it were practically possible, would be achieved at too high a cost. His refusal to look to the original state of nature for the solution to dependence is based less on his belief about the impracticality of returning to the state of nature than on his view that such a solution would not be a desirable alternative. For the radical independence that makes such freedom possible can be maintained only in the absence of all enduring attachments to others. But, as Rousseau makes clear, the unencumbered beings of the original state of nature are not, and cannot be, *human* beings, for the absence of enduring social bonds precludes the existence of a wide variety of goods and capacities which are essential to being human and which are of sufficient intrinsic value that freedom may not be obtained at their expense: Perfect independence makes impossible not only conjugal love (one of "the sweetest sentiments known to men") but also language, reason, virtue, and subjectivity itself.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup>This interpretation of the Second Discourse is confirmed at GM, 159. There Rousseau also rules out a return to the "golden age" (described at DI, 151) as a possible solution to the problem of dependence. In this case, too, he rejects the idea of returning to a more primitive society not because

In accord with this view, Rousseau's strategy for reconciling the ineliminable dependence of human beings with the freedom which constitutes their essential nature will focus less on the eradication of dependence than on its restructuring. This strategy implies that human dependence admits of being reorganized in such a way that it ceases to be incompatible with the freedom of individuals. The principles that are to guide the restructuring of dependence—at least the political component of this restructuring<sup>27</sup>—can be found in Rousseau's conception of the general will. For, as we have seen, Rousseau claims that it is the individual's (forced or voluntary) compliance with the general will that "guarantees him against all personal dependence." Thus, Rousseau intends for the general will to be understood as willing a set of social and political institutions which alter the nature of individuals' dependence on others so as to eliminate, or at least significantly reduce, those aspects of dependence that make it inimical to freedom. Our task now is to understand how Rousseau's conception of the general will accomplishes this.

### Dependence and the General Will

A clue to the basic idea behind Rousseau's proposed restructuring of dependence can be found in the statement, cited above, in which the general will is said to guarantee individuals against "personal" dependence. This suggests that Rousseau's political solution to the problem of freedom involves transforming the dependence on individual persons into a dependence on the community as a whole. This suggestion is confirmed by Rousseau's remark later in the *Social Contract* that in the rational polity "each citizen is in a position of perfect independence from all the others and of excessive dependence upon the city" (SC 2.12.3). But what does it mean to

---

such a return would be impossible but because the golden age is "a state foreign to the human race."

<sup>27</sup>It is important to bear in mind that the sociopolitical measures espoused in the *Social Contract* are not in themselves a sufficient response to the problem of dependence. Individuals must also be internally constituted in accord with the principles outlined in *Emile*, if their psychological dependence is to admit of being structured in a way that is compatible with freedom. The most important consideration here is whether *amour-propre* appears primarily in its benign or inflamed form.



depend upon the city, as opposed to the individual persons who compose it, and how does depersonalizing dependence in this way make it possible for individuals to be free? In another context Rousseau says that the only social remedy for “dependence on men” is “to substitute law for man” (*Emile*, 85). Hence the “dependence upon the city” Rousseau envisages can be described more accurately as a dependence on the well-constituted republic, that is, on a community effectively governed by law that faithfully reflects the general will. As we shall see below, however, it is best to characterize the social arrangement endorsed by Rousseau, not as one in which one species of dependence (dependence on other individuals) is *replaced* by another (dependence on the law-governed republic), but rather as a social order in which the ineliminable relations of dependence among individuals are preserved but *mediated* by a system of well-founded law and thereby made less injurious to freedom.

The question to be answered, then, is how the rule of law orders the dependence of individuals such that dependence on others can coexist with freedom. A great deal could be said about Rousseau’s view of the rule of law and its virtues; in what follows I merely outline three ways in which Rousseau believes law to be capable of restructuring dependence such that the freedom of individuals can be realized. Although these three points can, and should, be distinguished from one another, they all share one fundamental attribute: In each case law mitigates the harmful consequences of dependence by establishing *equality* (again, in various senses) among citizens. This close connection between law and equality is explicitly recognized by Rousseau: “[law] reestablishes, as a right, the natural equality among men” (PE, 214).<sup>28</sup> He also acknowledges the deeper philosophical point which my interpretation of his position emphasizes, namely, that law aims at the equality of citizens, not because equality is valuable in itself, but because it furthers the end of freedom.<sup>29</sup> Each of the following three points, then, can serve as a particular illustration of the general idea that

---

<sup>28</sup>See also Rousseau’s advice to the Corsicans: “The fundamental law of your constitution must be equality” (OC 3:909–10).

<sup>29</sup>See SC 2.11.1, where equality is said to be one of the two principal objects of law for the reason that “freedom cannot last without it.”

bringing equality to mutually dependent individuals helps to safeguard them from the subjection into which their dependence is otherwise likely to deliver them.

The first way that law is to restructure dependence is by ensuring that citizens enjoy a significant (but not fully specified) level of *material equality*. The legislation of a well-constituted republic does not seek to establish an absolute equality of wealth among its citizens but only to impede the development of great material inequalities that are the inevitable consequence of unregulated economic activity.<sup>30</sup> Rousseau's concrete proposals range from laws that restrict inheritance or levy taxes on luxury goods to the suggestion that the existence of a class of propertyless individuals—more precisely, a class of individuals who own no means of production other than their own labor power—is incompatible with the freedom of citizens.<sup>31</sup> More important than the details of Rousseau's proposals is the idea behind them: Narrowing the distance between the extremes of wealth alleviates the economic dependence of the less advantaged and thereby reduces the likelihood that they will have to submit to the will of another in order to satisfy their material needs. Yet lessening, or even eliminating, the differences between classes does not do away with all economic dependence, for as long as there is a material division of labor within society, individuals will rely upon the cooperation of others in order to obtain the necessities of life. What distinguishes the material division of labor from the division of society into economic classes is that the former is compatible with a high level of equality among individuals, whereas the latter is not. Moreover, it is this difference that makes the material division of labor a less harmful form of dependence than the existence of classes, for interactions among

---

<sup>30</sup>Rousseau advises the Poles: "The tendency of your laws should be toward a continuous reduction of large inequalities of wealth and power, . . . a chasm that the cumulative operation of natural forces tends unavoidably to widen further" (GP, 65). See also SC 2.11.2.

<sup>31</sup>The first two proposals are made at OC 3:945 and PE, 234. Rousseau's critique of capitalist class relations is explicit at SC 2.11.2 ("no citizen should be so opulent that he can buy another, and none so poor that he is constrained to sell himself") and implicit in his depiction of a golden age without economic classes (DI, especially 151). For a detailed discussion of these themes in Rousseau, see Andrew Levine, *The Politics of Autonomy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1976), chap. 5.

mutually dependent individuals who meet on an equal footing are less likely to result in the sacrifice of freedom than those among highly unequal beings. Thus, legislation directed at bringing about the material equality of individuals should be understood as aiming not so much at a lessening or eradication of economic dependence as at its equalization.

In this first instance the capacity of law to restructure dependence is due not to a formal feature of law in general but to a particular end that Rousseau ascribes to law, the promotion of material equality. That law can be said to have such a content for Rousseau is a reflection of the fact that the general will (of which law is simply a determinate expression) is more than a set of purely formal criteria for the legitimacy of legislation; the general will, as Rousseau conceives it, also has a content in the sense that it wills certain broadly defined but nonvacuous ends. In some places, however Rousseau implies that the rule of law per se, regardless of the law's particular content, shields citizens from some of the pernicious consequences of dependence on others.<sup>32</sup> This suggests that Rousseau sees law as capable of restructuring dependence in a second way that relies solely on the formal character of law as such. The feature of law that Rousseau draws on in this context is its universality. Although more will need to be said about the kind of universality that is relevant here, it will involve some form of the idea of "bearing equally on all." Thus, the universality of law implies that those who are under it enjoy a species of equality, distinct from the material equality discussed above, which can be characterized as the *formal equality of citizens before the law*. The nature of this equality is roughly captured in the idea that the law is no respecter of persons; it regards individual citizens as abstract units that (in a sense to be specified) count as equals. This raises two questions in need of further attention: In what precise sense do citizens count as equals before the law, and how does this formal equality function as an antidote to dependence?

Although Rousseau's claim here is difficult to pin down precisely, the general thrust of his idea is that the rule of law helps to protect individuals from the capricious wills of those on whom they

---

<sup>32</sup>E.g., OC 3:491–92, 842–43.

depend.<sup>33</sup> Capricious wills are (for the most part) unconstrained by principles and are therefore inconstant, unpredictable, and arbitrary. Being dependent on capricious individuals poses a serious threat to one's freedom, because it is virtually inevitable that wills exhibiting only random motion will come into frequent collisions with other (random or nonrandom) wills. Rousseau's idea, then, must be that the laws of a rational state effectively order capricious wills by placing external constraints on what those wills may demand of others. Thus, without decreasing the level of their interdependence, the rule of law helps to preserve the freedom of individuals by shielding them from one of the most freedom-endangering consequences of dependence. While the basic thought here is plain enough, it is not at all evident why Rousseau believes that this capacity of law follows simply from its formal character as *universal* law. This claim is tersely formulated in Rousseau's remark that "any condition imposed on each by all can be onerous to no one" (OC 3:842). Here law is said to be universal in two distinct senses: it is imposed *on each* and *by all*. Not surprisingly, these two kinds of universality reappear in Rousseau's statement of what makes a general will general, namely, that it "applies to all" and "comes from all" (SC 2.4.5). But how can the universality of law in either of these senses account for its ability to protect individuals from the capricious wills of those on whom they depend?

In a number of passages Rousseau appeals only to the first kind of universality—the universal *applicability* of law—when making the point that law protects individuals from capricious wills. An example of this is his statement that "the worst of laws is worth even more than the best master, because every master has preferences and the law never does" (OC 3:842–43). Law, in both its formulation and enforcement, applies to all and tolerates no exceptions; "magistrates themselves are obliged to obey them" (OC 3:491). By making no distinctions among particular individuals, the law effectively creates a kind of equality among citizens—a guarantee of equal treatment under the law—which, at least within the domain

---

<sup>33</sup>This formulation is suggested by Frederick Barnard, *Self-Direction and Political Legitimacy: Rousseau and Herder* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 27.

of activity governed by law, deters one of the modes of behavior characteristic of capricious wills: the differential treatment of individuals on the basis of arbitrary preferences. But the universality of law in this sense alone still leaves plenty of room for what we would consider arbitrary treatment, not perhaps of particular individuals, but of classes of individuals.<sup>34</sup> For the law 'Only property owners may have access to the means of public communication' can be scrupulously applied to all citizens and still be arbitrary in an important sense. For this reason it is important to take into account the second sense in which law is said to be universal, namely, that it is imposed by, or comes from, all. The universality referred to here is best understood not as the actual participation of all citizens in the process of framing laws but as a condition that places a constraint on the content of admissible legislation by requiring that laws be possible objects of the rational consent of all citizens.<sup>35</sup> Since laws (like the one suggested above) which violate a fundamental interest of a class of citizens cannot be regarded as capable of gaining the rational consent of those citizens, they lack universality in this sense. The requirement that laws come from all implies a kind of equality of citizens before the law that consists in the fact that each citizen is regarded as having fundamental interests which no law may violate and which count as equal to the fundamental interests of every other citizen in the framing of legislation. Laws that are universal in this sense can be seen as a response to the problem posed by dependence on others, because by safeguarding (at least some of) the fundamental interests of individuals, such laws block one important kind of arbitrary treatment by capricious wills to which dependent individuals are otherwise susceptible.

The third way in which the rule of law transforms personal dependence into dependence on the republic is by making the community itself into a source of the esteem sought by individuals as a consequence of their *amour-propre*. Law accomplishes this by ensuring that individuals enjoy an *equality of respect* as citizens. This func-

---

<sup>34</sup>Rousseau acknowledges that the universal applicability of law (the sense under consideration here) does not preclude distinctions among classes of citizens but only references to particular individuals (SC 2.6.6).

<sup>35</sup>My understanding of Rousseau's statement that legitimate law must "come from all" is indebted to Dent's excellent treatment of this topic (179–84).

tion of law is a direct consequence of its universality in the sense discussed immediately above. For safeguarding the fundamental interests of individuals has the effect of securing for them a kind of recognized standing within the community that is itself a form of respect. Moreover, the availability of this respect is not contingent on the mutable opinions of particular individuals but is assured by a guarantee as reliable as the rule of law itself. Rousseau, of course, does not believe that the recognized standing individuals achieve as citizens of a law-governed community is sufficient to satiate *amour-propre* in all of its manifestations. His view, rather, is that one's standing as a citizen represents a partial but not insignificant confirmation of one's value for others, which, because it relies only on the institution of law, makes individuals less dependent on particular persons for the satisfaction of their need to possess a standing among their fellow beings.

### **Concluding Remarks: On the Possibility (and Impossibility) of Being Forced to Be Free**

Having examined the connections between freedom and dependence, on the one hand, and between dependence and the general will, on the other, we are now in a position to reconstruct Rousseau's response to the central question that arises from his claim that being constrained to follow the general will is nothing more than being "forced to be free": In what sense do the dictates of the general will constitute one's own will as an individual, even when one fails to recognize them as such? Rousseau's answer consists in the following thought: By restructuring human dependence such that subjection to the will of others ceases to be a virtually inevitable consequence of dependence, the general will brings about the objective social conditions that must be present if individuals are to be able to avoid subjection to a foreign will. The general will, then, can be said to be the individual's own *true* will, even when she does not consciously recognize it as such, because the general will wills the conditions necessary in order for her freedom (along with the freedom of all others) to be realized. Identifying the general will with the true will of each individual is based on the idea that the individual will, apart from whatever particular ends it may embrace, necessarily, and most fundamentally, wills its own freedom. But in

willing a certain end (its freedom) it must also will the conditions that make that end attainable. A will that chooses to act in ways that are inconsistent with what is required for the realization of its own freedom cannot be regarded as “doing its own will” and therefore cannot be considered truly free. Such a will—one which in effect wills its own subjection—is a self-negating, therefore contradictory, will.

This set of claims rests upon an understanding of how freedom is realized through the general will—call it the “freedom-through-personal-independence” model—which, in contrast to the social autonomy interpretation, views the rule of laws informed by the general will not as itself an embodiment of citizens’ freedom but as the latter’s precondition. Moreover, the kind of freedom that is claimed to be realized on this view is not moral freedom (because it does not necessarily involve determining one’s actions in accord with self-given laws) but rather the negatively defined freedom that Rousseau calls civil freedom. That is, the general will’s restructuring of dependence creates for individuals, not merely the abstract right, but the real possibility to act unconstrained by the will of others within a sphere of activity external to the community’s vital interests. Rousseau’s political thought, then, contains two distinct accounts of how individuals realize their freedom through the general will, accounts that differ with respect to both (i) the nature of the relation claimed to hold between freedom and the general will and (ii) the type of freedom said to be realized: According to the first, membership in the state is (i) a *precondition* of (ii) a negatively defined *civil freedom*, insofar as the rule of law effectively mitigates the freedom-endangering consequences of dependence; according to the second, membership in the state is (i) an *embodiment* of (ii) *moral freedom* (or social autonomy), insofar as citizens are ruled by laws they construct for themselves in accord with a shared conception of the common good.

Can Rousseau consistently maintain both of these accounts of how freedom is realized through the general will, or are the two views incompatible? In order to answer this question we must first locate more precisely the point at which the two views threaten to collide. The fact that Rousseau ascribes two kinds of freedom to the members of a rational state is not itself problematic. For civil and moral freedom are to be understood not as two rival conceptions of freedom but simply as two different forms that the freedom of

citizens assumes. Being free of constraints imposed by the wills of other individuals and being subject only to self-given laws are merely two different ways of satisfying the basic condition of freedom, which stipulates that one obey no will other than one's own. Neither is there a problem in Rousseau's assertion that the two kinds of freedom exist side by side within a single state. Since the sphere of moral freedom can extend only as far as the domain of law itself, and since the latter is not so extensive as to determine everything individuals do, the limits of the domain of law demarcate a sphere within which citizens enjoy a freedom that can be characterized only negatively, as a condition of not being constrained to obey the particular wills of other individuals.

If there is a tension between these two accounts, it resides not in the distinction between civil and moral freedom itself but in the way each account conceives of the relation that must hold between individual wills and the general will, if the general will is to be considered the will of each individual. In other words, the point of difference concerns the kind of relation that individuals who are in fact subject to the general will must have to that will if their subjection to it is to count as obedience to their own will and therefore as freedom. According to the social autonomy model, the general will counts as the will of individuals only by virtue of a certain *subjective* relation individuals can have to the general will, a relation that consists in a conscious affirmation of the principles that inform the general will. For this reason the freedom depicted by the social autonomy model could be characterized as a species of "subjective freedom." For the freedom-through-personal-independence model, however, the general will's being the will of each individual depends not on a subjective quality of individual wills but on an *objective* feature of the general will itself, namely, that what it wills is a set of conditions which, if realized, has the effect of freeing individuals from their otherwise necessary subjection to the arbitrary wills of others. Because the freedom one enjoys on this scenario is independent of one's subjective relation to the principles that structure the social world, it could be termed a kind of "objective freedom."<sup>36</sup> Thus, the tension between these two accounts

---

<sup>36</sup>It is worth pointing out that Hegel, in an appropriation of Rousseau's political thought, uses precisely these terms, 'objective freedom' and 'sub-



comes to the fore when the requirements of objective and subjective freedom come into conflict—that is, in those instances where individual citizens of a well-constituted state do not consciously affirm the principles by which they are governed, principles which, objectively speaking, are necessary for their own freedom. In other words, the conflict becomes manifest in precisely those situations where Rousseau speaks of individuals being forced to be free.

The question to be answered, then, is whether it is possible to bring together Rousseau's distinct accounts of freedom into a single coherent theory. The key to resolving the tension between these two models of political freedom lies not in embracing one at the expense of the other but in recognizing that, while each on its own represents a genuine species of freedom, each is also, in the absence of the other, a limited or merely partial freedom. This is obvious enough in the case of being forced to be free: to fail to affirm the principles which in fact constrain one's actions is to fall short, in an important way, of the ideal of being subject only to one's own will. While the notion of objective freedom provides the conceptual resources that make it possible to speak coherently of being forced to be free, such one-sided freedom remains a kind of unfreedom from the point of view of the subjective requirements of free willing. But the claim that each of the two conceptions is only partial freedom is no less true for the purely subjective freedom envisaged by the social autonomy model. The full freedom of citizens must consist in more than their simply having the appropriate subjective attitude to the principles by which they are governed, since to affirm principles that are ultimately destructive of one's freedom is itself a kind of unfreedom—that is, a failure to will in accord with one's own true will and its fundamental aspiration to be able to pursue its ends in the world free of external determination. Thus, the basic point underlying Rousseau's dual account of how citizens realize their freedom through the general will can be formulated as the claim that each of the two conceptions of freedom isolated here constitutes a necessary but not sufficient condi-

---

jective freedom', to refer to the two principal components of the conception of freedom that grounds his theory of *Sittlichkeit*. I intend to develop this insight in future work aimed at reconstructing the philosophical foundations of that theory.

tion of achieving what Rousseau regards as full political freedom. According to this reconstruction, then, two independent conditions, one subjective and one objective, must be met in order for individuals to realize full political freedom: (i) the laws that govern citizens must be objectively liberating—they must effectively mitigate the freedom-endangering consequences of dependence on other individuals; and (ii) citizens must also stand in the appropriate subjective relation to the laws that govern them—that is, the principles that inform the laws must be consciously embraced by citizens as their own.<sup>37</sup>

*Harvard University*

---

<sup>37</sup>I would like to thank Bill Bristow, Steve Engstrom, Raymond Geuss, Delia Graff, Andrew Levine, and Allen Wood for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. I am also indebted to the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung for its generous financial support of this work.