Rousseau & the origins of liberalism
by Roger Scruton

The second in a series titled “The betrayal of liberalism.”

The modern world gives proof at every point that it is far easier to destroy institutions than to create them. Nevertheless, few people seem to understand this truth. Britain’s Labor Party has embarked upon a series of “constitutional reforms” that can be relied upon to undermine the old authority of Parliament, but that will put no new authority in its place. The churches have initiated massive liturgical changes, so losing their old consolations, their old beliefs, and their old congregations without making converts among the young. From the curriculum reformers in schools to the gay activists in the military, people are engaged in revising inherited institutions in the interests of their present members, each of whom is supposed to have an equal stake in whatever church, school, brigade, or work force he belongs to. Yet no one has the faintest conception of what the long-term costs and benefits will be.

This process of revision seems eminently rational and just to those who have embarked on it. Who can stand in the way of reform, when the liberal idea requires it? Yet the fact remains that reform will easily destroy an institution, but will not reliably replace it with another one. We have seen this in the churches, in the schools, in the universities, and in government. And we shall go on seeing it for as long as the liberal consensus prevails. It is for this reason that it is always worthwhile to return to the first and greatest of the liberal reformers, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose impact on modern culture and modern politics has been equalled by no other thinker of the Enlightenment. In the work of Rousseau, we discover what is really at stake in the contest between conservative and liberal in all the areas of social life where this contest can be witnessed. What is at stake is not freedom, equality, or power, but the inherited store of social knowledge.

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Rousseau’s discussions of the social contract, the general will, the nature of sovereignty and citizenship, the origins of inequality, and the possibility of democratic choice are of great philosophical interest. But they should be seen in the context of his work as a whole. Rousseau was not only a great philosopher; he was also a philosopher who thought through feeling and felt through ideas. All that emerges from his pen bears the stamp of an inimitable life; and if any writer were to make liberalism plausible, it would be Rousseau, who felt his way to the moral and emotional heart of it. His view of life was also a form of life, and he expressed it not only in his philosophical works, but also in an immensely influential novel—Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse—which can be favorably compared with the only other indisputable work of art from the hand of a philosopher: Plato’s Symposium.

In his compositions and his writings on music, Rousseau gave voice in another way and through another—though, for him, connected—medium to his fundamental outlook. And of course he gave to posterity, in his Confessions, the first and perhaps the finest example of the romantic autobiography—the noble lie in its quintessentially modern form. Add to those achievements his brilliant anticipation of the distinction between hunter-gatherer and agricultural societies; his insight into language and the depth of the scientific problem that it poses; and his profoundly original, profoundly influential, and profoundly dangerous views on education, and you quickly come to see that there is no way in which Rousseau can be adequately discussed, still less dismissed, in a single article. Nevertheless, there is a lesson to be drawn from him, which can without distortion be given in fewer words than the philosopher would ever have bestowed on a subject so important as himself.

I have already used the term “liberalism” in its modern sense—or one of its modern senses. It is not a term that Rousseau would have used; nor would he have recognized his ideas in those thinkers whom we now describe as “classical liberals.” Liberalism is an intellectual tradition formed from the interplay of two political ideals: liberty and equality. Liberals differ according to whether liberty or equality is more important to them. Libertarians believe that liberty should be traded for nothing else save liberty, whereas the present-day American “liberal” tends to sacrifice liberty for equality when the two conflict. Both libertarians and egalitarians are hostile to vested authority, and this hostility often unites the two in practice, even if it is hard to reconcile them in theory. Rousseau cared passionately for both liberty and equality. But he also brought to the fore some of the deep tensions between them. He observed with disgust what people did with their freedom, and his disgust was proof of the deep inequality that set him apart from so many of his contemporaries.

True liberty, for Rousseau, is “moral liberty.” It does not consist merely in a lack of obstacles. Liberty involves autonomous choice. People are free only when they can bind themselves. From this thought stems another, inherent in Rousseau, and made explicit by Kant, namely that freedom is also a submission to law: “obedience to a law which we prescribe to ourselves is liberty,” as Rousseau wrote in Du contrat social. For Rousseau, a society can be free only if freely consented to,
and obligations can be binding only if self-imposed. Hence, society must be founded in a contract: each person promises obedience in exchange for a like promise from everyone else. But there is a contradiction here, and Rousseau several times returns to it. The ability to promise, to commit oneself, to act autonomously—all these involve language, which in turn requires society. The autonomous agent does not exist in a state of nature: he is a social artifact. As Rousseau himself makes clear, our natural liberty is destroyed by the social contract, which puts “civil liberty” in the place of it. From civil liberty springs moral liberty, but it is only with the coming of moral liberty that we can bind ourselves by a contract. So, how can society be founded on a contract, when no contract can exist until society has been founded? Here is a potent paradox, and one which awakens in Rousseau the will to believe. We must live as if bound by a contract, while knowing this to be impossible.

Inequality is of two kinds—natural and artificial. Inequalities that arise in society, Rousseau believes, are limitations on freedom, both for those at the top and those at the bottom. The rich man becomes slave to luxury and dependent on others to serve and obey him; the poor man becomes slave to need and dependent on others to command and reward him. But again there is a paradox. In a free society, where each may pursue his projects, natural power translates into social power, and natural inequality into inequality of another kind. All social advantages stem from the interest that people have in each other. Looks, intelligence, strength, prowess, energy, liveliness, the very attachment to life—all these are unequally distributed. Yet, it is these qualities that we find most interesting, and that determine our chances in the world. To prevent social inequalities, therefore, we must ensure that people are not free to exploit their natural powers. Only a massive program of social engineering could succeed in bringing this about.

Rousseau was aware of the paradoxical nature of egalitarianism. His whole life was proof to him that natural talent leads to social distinction unless impeded by force. The human relations that most elicited his sympathy were fraught with inequality, both natural and social. The relations between Emile and his tutor, between Julie (La Nouvelle Héloïse) and her lover St. Preux (who is also her tutor), and between himself and the mother-figures who one by one take charge of him in the Confessions—all these offer living proof of the way in which social and natural inequalities feed each other. He observed how inequality is accepted and endorsed by love; and he observed the compassion that people feel, when permitted to look down on—and up at—their neighbors. Hence, the only equality that is ever dwelt upon in Rousseau’s writings is that which arises when power and authority go on holiday. Such equality is, as the Swiss philosopher Jean Starobinski has written in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Transparency and Obstruction (1988)—a “holiday affair,” typified by the idyll of the grape harvest in La Nouvelle Héloïse, when all classes, released from toil by sudden abundance, gather round for a common feast.

Why was Rousseau so eager to embrace the paradoxes to which I have alluded? What in his intellectual and emotional project entailed such a credo quia absurdum? The question takes us to the heart of Rousseau’s thinking. “J’aime mieux être homme à paradoxes qu’homme à
préjugés,” he wrote in *Emile*. Prejudices come from the desire to protect existing things; paradoxes from the attempt to question them. Paradox is the mark of a priori thinking—thinking from first principles in a situation where human nature has been encrusted by custom and habit. Man, in Rousseau’s account, has been corrupted by society. To rediscover our freedom, we must measure every activity against its “natural” counterpart. Not that we can return to our “natural” state; the very idea of a state of nature is a philosophical abstraction. Nevertheless, in everything there is another way, an as yet undiscovered route to authenticity, which will allow us to do freely what we now do only by constraint. No existing institution should be accepted, therefore, just because it is existing. All practices and customs should be questioned, measured against an a priori standard, and amended if they fail to come up to the mark.

This thought dictates the agenda of the *Discourses* and *Du contrat social*. It is also the evident premise of *Emile*. But to understand what exactly is wrong with it, I shall consider Rousseau’s views on music. For the cost of freedom and the value of tradition are most clearly visible in art.

Rousseau took a leading role in the *querelle des bouffons*—the dispute as to whether the comic opera of the Italians was preferable to the lyrical drama of Lully. And he famously ruled, in his *Lettre sur la musique française*, that there could be no such thing as French music—that the very nature of the French language poisoned the sources of melody and encouraged an artificial art, obedient to the rules of harmony alone. By this time, he had fallen out with the great composer and theorist Jean-Philippe Rameau, upon whose treatise Rousseau had drawn when composing the *Dictionnaire de musique*. Rousseau had scored a success with *Le Devin du village* (“The Village Soothsayer”)—a short opera in the Italian style. He had also presented several versions of a new scheme for musical notation, which jettisons the graphic representation of musical movement and identifies notes and quantities numerically. There is something admirable in Rousseau’s reckless confrontation with the musical tradition, and also in his ability to crown his philosophical objections with musical works. Yet a closer examination reveals that his contribution to the debate is not merely negative, but also wedded to negation—determined to find corruption in the surrounding musical practice precisely because it is an established practice, a reservoir of social knowledge.

Western music could never have reached these heights without its notation.

The system of musical notation that Rousseau attacked is still in use. It was not the work of any one person, but the outcome of a long process of problem solving, the very same process that had produced the tradition of harmony and counterpoint and risen to such astonishing heights in the
music of Couperin, Handel, and Bach. Western music could never have reached these heights without its notation, which emancipated our music from the rule of monody and improvisation and organized it around the concept of the permanent and repeatable work.

Modern liberals tend to scoff at the idea of tradition. All traditions, they tell us, are “invented,” implying that they can therefore be replaced with impunity. This idea is plausible only if you take the trivial examples—Scottish country dancing, Highland dress, the Coronation ceremony, Christmas cards, and whatever else comes with a “heritage” label. A real tradition is not an invention; it is the unintended byproduct of invention, which also makes invention possible. Our musical tradition is one astounding example of this. No single person created it. Each contributor built on previous achievements, discovering problems and solving them through the steady expansion of the common syntax. Notation developed side by side with harmony and counterpoint. No single person could ever have discovered the knowledge of the human ear and the human heart that these practices contain, any more than a single person could discover a language. When Rameau came to write his *Traité de l’harmonie* (“Treatise on Harmony”), he was not inventing rules, nor recording the conventions of a game. He was attempting to summarize a body of implicit knowledge, which is in all our heads as listeners and performers, but which has no first principles, no definitions, no a priori system.

Rousseau’s impatience with Rameau reflects a profound antipathy to the very idea of tradition. For a tradition, precisely because it is not invented, has authority. “Unintended byproducts” of invention contain more knowledge than any person can discover unaided. By attacking graphic notation, Rousseau was attempting to undermine one of the indisputable sources of authority in our society. He was attempting to show that a tradition could be disinvented and begun again, and that it could be begun again by a single, freely choosing sensibility. The attack on French music was a rehearsal for the forthcoming drama: Rousseau against prejudice, and, behind that, another and deeper conflict—one that pitted the self against others, and selfhood against otherness.

Of course, the attack was a failure. Rousseau’s rival system of notation makes the sight-reading of counterpoint impossible; it gives no lucid account of harmonic sequence or voice-leading. It is a match for the old notation only when representing unison melodies. This objection was made by Rameau, and Rousseau, in Book 7 of the *Confessions*, concedes the point. In the event, however, Rousseau was deterred neither by Rameau’s arguments nor by his own recognition of their force. Instead he turned against Rameau and all that the composer stood for. He began to attack harmony and counterpoint as marks of corruption, and to praise unison melody as the pure voice of nature. At all costs it was necessary to show that inherited convention could be overthrown by the freely choosing spirit and that the result would be closer to nature, and morally purer, than the routines which govern others.

Of *Le Devin du village*, it should be said that its music, though not without charm, would have been rescued from triviality had the composer troubled more over harmony and counterpoint. The decorative use of parallel thirds and the plodding common chords make this music both easy to
grasp and wearisome to hold. Its success at the time is no more difficult to credit than the success of Andrew Lloyd Webber today, and the score is clear proof, if proof be needed, that the tradition that Rousseau hoped to overthrow contained more knowledge than had entered his head.

Rousseau’s ventures into musicology illustrate his value as a thinker. If we wish to know where authority resides, then we should look first at Rousseau’s targets. He sought out real authority in order to dismiss it as a sham. Whatever institution he viewed as corrupting is likely to be a source of knowledge, and whatever he recommended in its place will be fraught with paradox. Rousseau’s attack on society in the name of “nature” exemplifies what to me is the root error of liberalism in all its forms, namely, the inability to accept, or even to perceive, the inherited forms of social knowledge.

By social knowledge, I mean the kind of knowledge embodied in the common law, in parliamentary procedures, in manners, costume, social convention, and, also, in morality. Such knowledge arises “by an invisible hand” from the open-ended business of society, from problems that have been confronted and solved, from agreements that have been perpetuated by custom, from conventions that coordinate our otherwise conflicting passions, and from the unending process of negotiation and compromise whereby we quieten the dogs of war.

It was such knowledge that Edmund Burke had in mind when he attacked the a priori thinking of the French revolutionaries in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). “We are afraid to put men to live and trade on their own private stock of reason,” he wrote, “because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations, and of ages.” Burke’s imagery is in one respect misleading. Social knowledge does not accumulate as money does, nor does it grow in the manner of scientific knowledge, which can be stored in books. It exists only in and through its repeated exercise: it is social, tacit, practical, and can never be captured in a formula or plan. The best way to understand it, indeed, is through the failures of the planned economy.

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**Rationalism in economics is irrational.**

The Austrian economists—for example, Ludwig von Mises in *Socialism: An Economic and Sociological Analysis* (1951)—argued, plausibly enough, that prices in a market contain information that is indispensable to economic life. This information exists only in the free exchange of goods and services; it is information about the real pressure of human needs. Hence the attempt to encompass economic life in a rational plan, with prices controlled from the center, will destroy the information on which the plan must draw. Rationalism in economics is irrational. Indeed, it is a living instance of the self-contradictions discovered by Rousseau whenever he searched for the first principles of human society.
The Austrian theory parallels Michael Oakeshott’s attack on rationalism in politics in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (1963). It can also be applied in other spheres where social knowledge is the foundation of rational conduct, as F. A. von Hayek has shown in *Law, Legislation, and Liberty* (1982). The common law, for example, contains information that could not be contained in a legislative program—information about conflicts and their resolution, about the sense of justice in action, and about human expectations, which is dispersed through the record of the law and is never available when legislation is the sole legal authority. Hence, the attempt to remake the legal order, through a legislative code that embodies all permissible solutions, is profoundly irrational. Such a code will destroy the source of legal knowledge, which is the judgment of the impartial judge as he confronts the unforeseeable course of human conflict. Rousseau’s social contract leads to an abstract and a priori code, established not by the attempt to rectify injustices as they one by one arise, but by the supreme act of a Legislator who, being not God but Jean-Jacques, is destined to fail. The Legislator is the unhappy Atlas on whom the unsustainable burden of humanity falls.

Another example of implied social knowledge—and one of supreme importance in our culture—is the tradition of Western music. The musical practices that irritated Rousseau contain practical knowledge that cannot be translated into his rational notation—knowledge of the inner relations of tones and harmonies that is dispersed through a tradition of polyphonic thinking. This knowledge becomes visible, though not verbal, in our musical notation, but it is lost in Rousseau’s numerical plan.

Social knowledge arises from the search over time for agreement. Even the common law, which leans on coercion, involves the attempt to find socially agreed solutions. Hence, the outcome of a case in common law is always clear: rights and liabilities are determined. But the principle—the *ratio decidendi*—may not be clear at all, and may emerge only later in the tradition of judicial reasoning. Law, custom, convention, ceremony, moral norms, and the market are the varying ways in which human beings attempt to live by agreement. The resulting social order will be marked by inequalities and constraints. How could it be otherwise? But it will arise, in the normal case, from transactions freely engaged in. If transactions are coerced, then the resulting conventions and norms will not contain the knowledge that is so important to us: the knowledge of what to do in order to live in harmony with our fellows.

Rousseau’s rejection of society in favor of free choice and uncorrupted nature should be seen in this context. It is not enough for Rousseau that institutions should arise from consent in the manner of the common law or the market; they must be the object of consent. We must stand outside our institutions and ask ourselves whether we would freely choose them from among alternatives. If the answer is yes, then this forms the basis of a social contract. In entering such a contract, we establish a legitimate order—but only then. For only then do our institutions reflect our own autonomous submission to government. Only then is authority bestowed upon government by the governed. Only then, in other words, does the self win against the others.
In Rousseau, of course, the contract does not amount to much. No sooner are we released from social burdens than we submit to a “general will” that brooks no opposition, and that adds to its commands the insolent assertion that, in obeying it, we are doing our own will. Freedom is no sooner obtained than thrown away. All who have studied Robespierre’s “despotism of liberty” will know how dangerous Rousseau’s paradoxes can be when their inner (that is to say, religious) meaning is brought to the surface.

Just as dangerous, however, is the assumption that we can jettison all institutions, traditions, and conventions and decide how to make them anew. This is the root assumption of liberalism, and it recurs in all versions of the social contract—even the hypothetical contract of the philosopher John Rawls. It implies that we can make rational choices, knowing what to do and how to do it, without the benefit of social knowledge—in other words, without the hard-earned legacy of consensual solutions.

It is not just that there is no reason to think that this is so. It is rather that there is every reason to think the opposite. We know what to do only when we have a sense of right and wrong, an implicit awareness of the unseen multitudes whom our actions affect, and the instinctive knowledge of what is admirable or despicable, that are percolated through the channels of tradition. Without traditions we have no “conception of the good,” as the philosopher John Rawls describes it. And, for all that Rawls says to the contrary, a social contract between creatures with no conception of the good is a parody of rational choice—the kind of parody that Rawls places before us, imagining that he has given a final proof, and not a refutation, of the liberal view of society.

Jean Starobinski attributes to Rousseau an emotional need to reject all mediation—every institution, custom, and practice that comes between the self and its desire. Whether in love, in religion, or in education, Rousseau’s goal is to remove the veil of “society” so that the individual can take immediate possession of the good that belongs to him by nature, and that has been withheld by the “others” who stand in his way. This perception of society, as a realm of “otherness” or alienation, has a religious meaning. For Rousseau, the self is naturally good and naturally free, living in a state of unmediated unity that is also a state of love: the amour de soi from which our life begins. Evil is to be explained by the sundering of this primal unity, the setting of the self against itself, which occurs when we live as others require. Society induces a fall from innocent amour de soi to guilt-ridden amour-propre. Only through the social contract, which remakes society as the expression of individual free choice, can we overcome our alienation. The contract therefore has a redemptive meaning and leads to a “civil religion,” imposing on every citizen the unmediated relation with the godhead that his nature requires.

The story is familiar in many later versions: Fichte, Hegel, Marx, and Sartre to take but four examples. Rousseau led the way in describing the only available sources of moral knowledge as
the instruments of our fall. Wherever the light of human goodness flickers, there Rousseau discerns the shadow of evil. He began what was soon to become a widespread habit of blaming “society” for the evil deeds of people, of calling for the reform of institutions rather than for the punishment of wrongdoers, and of perceiving in the worst of human crimes a paradisal innocence that the moral life itself had brought to nothing.

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There is another way of seeing Rousseau’s social contract, not as the redemption of society through the sacrament of choice, but as the rejection of society as an obstacle to choice. This other way of seeing the matter underlies Burke’s criticism of the official doctrines of revolutionary France. Society, Burke pointed out, is an open-ended partnership (he even said “contract”) between generations. The dead and the unborn are as much members of society as the living. To dishonor the dead is to reject the relation on which society is built—the relation of obligation between generations. Those who have lost respect for their dead have ceased to be trustees of their inheritance. Inevitably, therefore, they lose the sense of obligation to future generations. The web of obligations shrinks to the present tense. Such, for Burke, was the lesson of the French Revolution.

It is undeniably true that the contractual view of society grants enormous privileges to the living, and disenfranchises the rest. If taken seriously, as the sole ground of legitimacy, the social contract licenses the continuous pillaging of all resources in obedience to the whims of their temporary trustees. That is exactly what we have witnessed since the Enlightenment. All customs and all institutions have been measured and remade against the standard of choice. The question of their authority has been replaced by another—do we the living want them? If we don’t, then they must go. The social knowledge that comes into existence not from my free choice, but as the byproduct of other people’s—dead people’s—choices, has been little by little depleted.

A striking illustration of this loss of knowledge is given by Rousseau himself in Emile, the work that has acquired a Dewey-eyed following in America, on account of its wondrous impracticality. It is perhaps ironic that something of the aristocratic view of life is preserved in Rousseau’s whole-hearted attack on it; indeed, if Rousseau’s prescriptions have any force, the only way to educate a child is through the vast expense of a private tutor and a country estate.

At the same time, however, this child who depends on an aristocratic budget must stop short of
acquiring aristocratic ideas—or indeed any ideas, other than those that are prompted by the self-love and pity that are nature’s primeval gift to him. For Rousseau, the task of the educator is not to fill, but to open the mind of the child; not to inculcate a respect for authority, but to instill an attitude of questioning; not to tell the child what others have discovered, but to induce him to discover things for himself. Nothing short of a highly educated tutor, devoting himself full time to his ward, can substitute for the books and lessons that Emile is denied.

That only raises the questions of how the tutor is to obtain his knowledge, and how the process is to begin. In a curious episode, Rousseau describes the elaborate procedure whereby Emile is to discover the phenomenon of magnetism—a procedure that requires days of preparation and experiment, and that leads to less knowledge of the matter than could be gleaned from a single paragraph of writing. In order that Emile should discover truth for himself, truth must also be concealed from him. He is not allowed books, not allowed formal lessons, not allowed the normal means of class instruction, not really allowed childhood—since childhood exists only against the background of adult authority, where rites of passage are acknowledged and performed.

Even if it were possible to educate children in this way, one thing is certain: that each generation would know less than the one before. The labor of discovery would have to be endlessly repeated, and the process whereby knowledge accumulates would come to a halt. And that, of course, is Rousseau’s underlying intention—not to liberate the child, but to destroy all intellectual authority, apart from that which resides in the self. Emile is to be brought up as “un sauvage fait pour habiter les villes.” His natural freedom is to remain untainted by the amour-propre that is the poisoned gift of society. But he is the least free of children, hampered at every point in his search for information, deprived of all sources of socially engendered knowledge, and condemned to repeat the labors of past generations in his futile attempt to know as much as they did. We glimpse here what Burke had in mind: absent generations have been deleted from the picture, and freedom confined to the present tense.

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*Emile* is a fascinating work, and by no means to be dismissed. The best parts are those that elicit the least sympathy from the book’s normal admirers—the parts dealing with sex education and
the virtue of chastity. Here Rousseau was forced to admit that the method of experiment could not produce the desired result. Chastity comes about only when pleasures are forbidden, when the other sex is shrouded in mystery, and when an elaborate story is told, embellished and believed, concerning the beauty and remoteness of sexual union. Modern sex education is conceived as a “liberation” from fear, doubt, and disease—a “how to” manual for children, which is also a form of vicarious pedophilia for their teachers. But sex was the one matter in which Rousseau was prepared to acknowledge that the artificial, not the natural, is the source of moral knowledge, and that custom must win against choice.

The real message of Emile lies in the parts that have been most influential, and, in particular, in the idea that teaching is or ought to be “child-centered.” It is now orthodoxy among educationists that the purpose of education is to benefit the child. From the long-term point of view, however, it is not the child who is the measure of educational success, but the society that includes him. From the social point of view the purpose of education is to perpetuate an inheritance of learning. Knowledge is not a means of improving the child, the child is a means of enhancing knowledge.

The difference here is not merely a difference of attitude or style. It is a difference in philosophy. The “child-centered” teacher is in the business of helping children to “realize their potential.” The “knowledge-centered” teacher is in the business of passing on what he knows—ensuring, in other words, that his knowledge does not die with him. His first duty, therefore, is to find the pupil with the ability to learn what he has to teach; only then can he fulfill his goal as a teacher. If, having done so, he wishes to help other children to “realize their potential,” all well and good—provided he acknowledges that many of them can do this only by ceasing to learn.

The authority of a teacher stems from his knowledge. Children instantly recognize this kind of authority, and defer to the person who possesses it. In child-centered education, however, the only real authority is the child—the little Jean-Jacques who is busy “realizing his potential” in whatever messy way suggests itself.
Some might object to the use of the word “authority” here. Rousseau would not be one of them. He recognized that human beings are made to command and therefore to obey. It was not obedience that disturbed him, but obedience to others. Civil liberty is achieved by laying down laws for oneself; the child becomes fit for civil society by learning to obey his true (but socially occluded) nature. But this conception of obedience presents us with another Rousseauvian paradox, and one that lies at the heart of modern education and its failure: Rousseau asserts the tutor’s absolute right of property over Emile in order to make Emile absolutely free. Likewise, modern educationists assume, in the name of the child and his freedom, an absolute right to compel school attendance, while ensuring that nothing will be learned in school that will serve to distinguish one pupil from another. The purpose of modern education is to remove advantages, to deprive children of the attributes that grace them above their peers. Look at a present-day class in “attitude training” and you will have a vivid picture of what it means to be “forced to be free.”

Of course, the element of compulsion is hidden behind a screen of agile rhetoric. It is to Rousseau that we owe the concept of education as a process of free exploration and self-development, in which the teacher plays the role not of expert or authority, but of adviser, playmate, and friend. By shifting attention from the teacher to the child; by suggesting that if children do not learn it is not because of a lack of discipline but because of an excess of it; and by urging an “individualized” teaching process in which the relation between teacher and pupil is rewritten as a kind of partnership whereby “active learning” and “learning by acquaintance” replace the traditional approach of “learning by description”—in these and many other ways modern educational theory has served to institutionalize ideas first voiced by Rousseau. (The inherent destructiveness of this shift has now been proven throughout the Western world.) Rousseau also anticipated the contemporary hostility toward memorization. “Emile,” he decreed, “will never learn anything by heart”—thus reversing at a stroke an educational tradition that began with Plato’s Academy, one that made possible the vast accumulation of knowledge in medieval society.

In another respect, too, Emile anticipated the depths of modern folly. To Rousseau, the child’s natural freedom is so precious a commodity that he should never be introduced to knowledge save through concepts and interests that he already has. Nothing alien to his nature must be imposed on him; hence all lessons must engage with his existing interests. When educational theory rose to prominence in the Sixties, and took upon itself the task of abolishing education, “relevance” was announced as the goal. As a result, the educational value of a subject began to be measured, not in terms of the knowledge that it imparted, but in terms of the interests of those who had yet to understand it.

“Life skills” looks fascinating to a child who comes for the first time to this bagful of banalities. But what difference is made by it to the child’s ultimate vision of himself and reality, and how “relevant” will it seem to him when he looks back on it from the adult perspective? Conversely, mathematics, history, literature, and grammar address themselves hardly at all to the interests of those who have no knowledge of them; only in the course of study can their “relevance” be
perceived, and only then, under the influence of a transformation that they themselves engender, does a child begin to “need” their instruction. In the face of these, to my mind obvious, truths, the “relevance revolution” in education seems like a victory for ignorance, and it is a victory that owes as much to Rousseau as any other revolution that has shaken the modern world. Indeed, one can read *Emile* not as a treatise on education, but as a treatise against education. Such, it seems to me, is the real meaning of the statement that “one acquires clearer and more certain ideas of things, when one learns for oneself, than when instructed by another”—a statement that makes the conflict between self and other into the secret drama of the classroom.

Rousseau is often singled out as the originator of the cult of “sensibility,” the one who wished to place the emotions in the center of human life and at the same time to deprive reason of its former sovereignty. I don’t think this captures the real temper of his thought. Emotion and reason, for Rousseau, were inextricable, and our greatest emotions, he believed, derive from our predicament as rational beings—our predicament as freely choosing, self-committing agents, with a consciousness of self that sets us apart from nature. It is this apartness from nature that defines our condition and the bad effects that we must overcome. We overcome it not by giving free reign to passion—on the contrary, for Rousseau our emotions should be intensely focused, rather than promiscuously dispersed. Julie, in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, owes her tragic fate not to chastity and fidelity, but to the fact that she allows a socially engendered sense of duty to take precedence over a self-engendered, but chaste and faithful, passion.

We overcome our alienation, Rousseau believed, not through passion but through rational choice. We must remake the world in the image of freedom; we must rescue human life from custom and recast it as a thing intended, a shrine for the liberated self. That is why, in the last analysis, a social contract is necessary: so that society should cease to be an external force, and become instead an expression of our inner freedom. By beginning everything anew, from procedures that conserve the sovereignty of the self, we find redemption—so Rousseau and many others have thought. But what if the self and its freedom, conceived in this ahistorical way, are myths? Where then do we look for legitimate government and the foundations of political order?

There is at the heart of Rousseau’s vision a culpable a priorism—a failure to take seriously the fact that the human being, in all his aspects, including his capacity for rational choice, is the product of a history that stretches before and after him. The search for origins is doomed to failure; at every point we encounter the historical contingency, the arbitrariness of human destiny. We are thrown together without reason or cause, and must make the best of circumstances that have been
indelibly marked by a history that was not our doing. Hence, we should look for legitimacy not in origins but in procedures. Instead of asking whether the social order conforms to some abstract criterion of justice, we should ask whether, and if so how, a perceived injustice might be rectified; whether the individual can obtain redress for any injury; and whether crime is punished and loyalty rewarded. We should study the functioning of offices and roles and institutions, and ask whether they soften or heighten human conflicts. The quest for origins asks no such answerable questions. For it is a religious quest: an attempt to anchor society outside history, and to take a God’s-eye view of all our brief arrangements.

Rather than aiming at that unattainable perspective, we should follow Hume and give the benefit of the doubt—and the subsequent benefit of doubting—to those activities for which “custom” is the comprehensive name. Customs are shared and gain their significance from the fact of being shared, but are not, in the normal case, compulsory. Customs are social constraints that you are free to defy. They include all the normal ways in which we confirm and celebrate our social membership, all the normal ways in which the finite store of knowledge is enhanced and passed on, and all the normal ways in which conflicts are discovered and resolved.

How customs arise is immaterial; that they arise is the sign that human beings are able, against the odds, to form the large and complex societies that are necessary for their survival, and that could never be the subject matter of a contract. It is in the nature of customs that they cannot be chosen: they arise by an invisible hand from our consensual dealings. Hence, no custom could feature among the terms of a social contract. If we look on customs as the objects of self-conscious choice, then they cease to be customs and become “lifestyles” — as inheritance becomes “heritage” when put on sale. But customs are an irreplaceable source of social and moral knowledge; we should therefore neither hastily uproot them nor deceive ourselves into thinking that we know how they might be replaced. We don’t know and we cannot know, since the relevant kind of knowledge is socially created and historically dispersed.

This is not to say that customs should be unquestioningly accepted. But the “benefit of doubting” comes only after the benefit of the doubt — only when we have conceded that the survival of a custom is one powerful proof of its authority. Even if we should question customs, enough of them must be held constant if our questions are to have a purpose. When everything is questioned, then nothing makes sense — including the question.

Of course, if we believe in the natural innocence of the human being, our imperfect social arrangements will seem to us to be the sign of some terrible mistake. We might then try to think our way back into the state of primeval innocence, in order to see what would have been chosen by people who had yet to succumb to “society.” But there never was such a state of innocence. The possibility of error is inherent in our condition. Custom, too, is the product of error, for it is the way in which error is overcome.
he virtue that the Romans described as *pietas* consisted not in a rejection of customs, institutions, and laws, but, on the contrary, in an underlying acceptance—a humble recognition that we are not the producers but the products of our world. We must strive to be worthy of an inheritance that we did not create, and to amend it only when we have first understood it. Piety is not confined to the temple and the altar. It is an attitude to life, based in a recognition of our frailty and a respect for the dead.

In place of this, Rousseau erected a God who is not in the world but impassibly removed from it, whose traces on earth lie in a past so distant that they are now indiscernible. All honor is owed to this “real absence”—and to the self as His vicar on earth. No custom or ceremony is worthy of devotion, since all human institutions are polluted until freely chosen. Henceforth, our religious energies are to be diverted from the labor of repairing and upholding traditions, and devoted instead to the task of destroying them. Only in this way will we regain the Paradise from which we were sundered by our human fault. This explains the extraordinary zeal with which the followers of Rousseau embarked upon their revolution. Theirs was a holy war, a war against superstition in the name of God. But God was no more than a name. The “Supreme Being” of Robespierre, the “Being that exists by himself” of Rousseau, the abstract deity of Voltaire—all these terms denote not God himself, but the God-shaped hole in the heart of things, which is henceforth to be filled by human sacrifice.

In the sixth part of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Julie, by then living on sublimated terms with her former lover, writes to him that “the country of chimaeras is the only one in this world that is worthy of habitation, and such is the nothingness (néant) of human things that, apart from the Being who exists by Himself, nothing is beautiful except that which is not.” This sentence captures some of the religious origin of Rousseau’s social philosophy, and also the immense negative energy behind his account of our condition. The nothingness that he perceived in human things he also brought to them. His description of God is really a description of himself—the self existing by itself in solitude, among chimaeras of its own creation. There are only two sources of authority, two legitimate powers, in this world of usurpation: God and self. And in a mysterious way these are not two things, but one, joined in an imagined Paradise that, paradoxically, is more real, because more free, than anything actual. As for the world of ordinary human things, it contains nothing beautiful. It was created not by God or Rousseau, but by “society,” which is the real presence of the Devil.

That which he attacked as “society,” and as the instrument of our Fall, was really the fertile topsoil of culture, in which all that we value is rooted.

And perhaps, looking back at his great achievement across two centuries of ruin, this is how we should see Jean-Jacques Rousseau—as a religious thinker bent on destroying the old gods, but with only a void to put in place of them. That which he attacked as “society,” and as the instrument of our Fall, was really the fertile topsoil of culture, in which all that we value is rooted.
Sacred and profane, virtue and vice, good and evil—all these compete in the undergrowth of custom. Clear custom away, and you take away much evil. But you also take away the knowledge of evil. Hence, you make way for evil of another kind, in which people—inoculated against remorse and assuming an absolute right to demolish whatever impedes their rational plan for human happiness—embark on vast social experiments. This happened at the French Revolution. It has happened many times in modern Europe. It has even happened in America in the revolution that has destroyed American schools. And it will happen wherever people try to reconcile equality and liberty, and to destroy custom as the enemy of both.

There is a lesson to be drawn from Rousseau that is of great importance today. Social contests and tensions have been conceptualized in a way that favors the liberal cause. Every conflict is seen in terms of power: who enjoys it and who suffers it—“who? whom?,” in Lenin’s summary. But the deep conflicts concern not power but knowledge. Which institutions, which procedures, and which customs preserve and enhance the store of social knowledge? Liberals attack the traditional curriculum, for example, on the grounds that it confers power on white males, and “disempowers” the remainder. Hence women’s studies, black studies, gay studies, and all the other mock subjects that will in time destroy our universities. But the question of the curriculum has been wrongly posed. The traditional curriculum existed not because it empowered people, but because it contained an accumulation of social knowledge—knowledge of the human mind, the human character, and the human heart—whose utility is obvious to those who have studied it, but inconceivable to those who have not. The modern Rousseau, obsessed with inequality and social power, will therefore never understand the institutions that most offend him, and his relentless efforts to undermine them will deprive both him and everyone else of the knowledge required to put the damage right.

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