



Born Free

JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU

In 1766 a small dark-eyed man in a long fur coat went to see a play at the Drury Lane theatre in London. Most of the people there, including the king, George III, were more interested in this foreign visitor than in the play being performed on stage. *He* seemed uncomfortable and was worried about his Alsatian dog, which he'd had to leave locked in his room. This man didn't enjoy the sort of attention he got in the theatre and would have been far happier out in the country somewhere on his own looking for wild flowers. But who was he? And why did everyone find him so fascinating? The answer is that this was the great Swiss thinker and writer, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78). A literary and philosophical sensation, Rousseau's arrival in London, at David Hume's invitation, caused the sort of commotion and crowds that a famous pop star would today.

By this time the Catholic Church had banned several of his books because they contained unconventional religious ideas.

Rousseau believed that true religion came from the heart and didn't need religious ceremonies. But it was his political ideas that caused the most trouble.

'Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains,' he declared at the beginning of his book, *The Social Contract*. It's no surprise that revolutionaries learnt these words by heart. Maximilien Robespierre, like many of the leaders of the French Revolution, found them inspirational. The revolutionaries wanted to break the chains that the rich had placed on so many of the poor. Some of them were starving while their rich masters enjoyed a high life. Like Rousseau, the revolutionaries were angry about how the wealthy behaved while the poor could barely find enough to eat. They wanted true freedom together with equality and brotherhood. It's unlikely, though, that Rousseau, who had died a decade before, would have approved of Robespierre sending his enemies to the guillotine in a 'reign of terror'. Cutting off your opponents' heads was closer in spirit to Machiavelli's thinking than to his.

According to Rousseau, human beings are naturally good. Left to our own devices, living in a forest, we wouldn't cause many problems. But take us out of this state of nature and put us in cities and things start to go wrong. We become obsessed with trying to dominate other people, and with getting other people's attention. This competitive approach to life has terrible psychological effects and the invention of money just makes it all far worse. Envy and greed were the result of living together in cities. In the wild, individual 'noble savages' would be healthy, strong and, above all, free, but civilization seemed to be corrupting human beings, Rousseau felt. Nevertheless, he was optimistic about finding a better way of organizing society, one that would allow individuals to flourish and be fulfilled, yet which would be harmonious with everyone working towards a common good.

The problem he set himself in *The Social Contract* (1762) was to find a way for people to live together that would allow everyone to be as free as they were outside society while still obeying the laws of the state. This sounds impossible to achieve. And perhaps it is. If the cost of becoming part of society was a kind of enslavement, that would be too high a price to pay. Freedom and strict rules imposed by society don't go together, since the rules can be like chains preventing some sorts of action. But Rousseau believed that there was a way out. His solution was based on his idea of the General Will.

The General Will is whatever is best for the whole community, the whole state. When people choose to group together for protection, it seems that they have to give up many of their freedoms. That's what Hobbes and Locke both thought. It's hard to see how you can remain genuinely free and yet live in a large group of people – there have to be laws to keep everyone in check and some restrictions on behaviour. But Rousseau believed that as an individual living within a state you can both be free *and* obey the laws of the state, and that rather than being in opposition, these ideas of freedom and obedience can combine.

It's easy to misunderstand what Rousseau meant by the General Will. Here's a modern example. If you asked most people, they'd prefer not to have to pay high taxes. In fact that is a common way for governments to get elected: they simply promise to lower the rate of taxation. Given the choice between paying 20 per cent of their earnings as tax and 5 per cent of their earnings as tax, most people would prefer to pay the lower amount. But that is not the General Will. What everyone says they want if you ask them is what Rousseau would call the Will of All. In contrast, the General Will is what they *ought* to want, what would be good for the whole community, not just for each person within it thinking selfishly. When working out what the

General Will is we have to ignore self-interest and focus on the good of the whole society, the common good. If we accept that many services, such as the upkeep of roads, need to be paid for from taxation then it is good for the whole community that taxes are high enough to make this possible. If they are too low, then the whole society will suffer. That then is the General Will: that taxes should be high enough to provide a good level of services.

When people get together and form a society, they become a kind of person. Each individual is then part of a greater whole. The way Rousseau felt that they could stay truly free in society was to obey laws that were in line with the General Will. These laws were created by a clever legislator. This person's job was to create a legal system that helped individuals keep in line with the General Will, rather than pursuing selfish interests at others' expense. True freedom, for Rousseau, is being part of a group of people doing what is in the interest of that community. Your wishes should coincide with what is best for all, and laws should help you to avoid acting selfishly.

But what if you oppose what would be best for your city-state? You, as an individual, may not want to conform with the General Will. Rousseau had an answer here. But it's not one that most people would like to hear. He famously, and rather worryingly, declared that if someone failed to recognize that obeying a law was in the interest of the community, then that person should be 'forced to be free'. His point was that anyone who opposed something that was really in the interest of their society, while they might feel they were choosing freely, wouldn't genuinely be free unless they fell into line and conformed with the General Will. How could you *force* someone to be free? If I forced you to read the rest of this book, then that wouldn't be a free choice you had made, would it? Surely forcing someone

to do something is the opposite of letting them make a free choice.

For Rousseau, however, this wasn't a contradiction. The person who couldn't identify the right thing to do would become freer by being forced to conform. Since everyone in a society is part of this larger group, we need to recognize that what we should do is follow the General Will, not our selfish individual choices. On this view, only when we follow the General Will are we truly free, even if we are forced to do so. That is Rousseau's belief, but many later thinkers, including John Stuart Mill (see Chapter 24), have argued that political freedom should be freedom for the individual to make his or her own choices as far as possible. Indeed, there is something slightly sinister about the idea of Rousseau, who had complained about humanity being in chains, suggesting that forcing someone to do something is another kind of freedom.

Rousseau spent much of his life travelling from country to country to escape persecution. Immanuel Kant in contrast barely left his home town, though the impact of his thought was felt throughout Europe.