Why Rousseau still matters

BY: CHRISTOPHER BERTRAM

Christopher Bertram argues that understanding self-love is essential to solving the big political problems we face today

Jean-Jacques Rousseau is a figure of continued importance for us, and for the problems – social, political, cultural, personal – that we face today, even though he died over a quarter of a millennium ago. He had an insight into the problems of living and of living well in competitive, hierarchical and status-conscious societies such as his own and the ones we still live in today. He also had some solutions, both individual and political, to the problems of modern life. Those solutions have struck many people, and not altogether wrongly, as dangerous and impractical. Still, they continue to inform, either directly or indirectly, a great deal of modern thinking on legitimacy, freedom, justice and social order.

The core of Rousseau’s thinking is his moral psychology or philosophical anthropology. It is central both to his view of the fall of humankind from grace and in the solutions that he proposes for the ills of the human condition. It is also, unfortunately, a part of his thinking that is widely misunderstood, partly for good reasons to do with obscurities in his texts. In fact it is probably the case that most of the reception of Rousseau’s thinking in the humanities has been the reception of a “Rousseau” who espoused views somewhat different from the ones the actual Jean-Jacques was trying to express. We aren’t necessarily helped, in the task of recovery, by the man himself, whose literary abilities and appetite for rhetorical flourish mean that highly-quotable snippets – such as the claim that citizens of a just republic are forced to be free – are recycled into interpretation. The form of
exposition can also be a problem: the two works in which Rousseau gives the most systematic exposition of his psychological views are the second *Discourse* (on inequality) and *Emile*. The *Discourse* is a speculative hypothetical reconstruction of the prehistory and history of the human race; *Emile* is a treatise on education which eventually turns into a novel. Both are a good distance from the conventional academic treatise.

The central element of Rousseau’s moral psychology is self-love, or care for self. Human beings, like all creatures, are driven to preserve themselves and their lives. Rousseau’s view is a long way, however, from any kind of approach where self-interest, or the maximization of utility, or the maximization of inclusive fitness is the explanatory driver. This is because Rousseau differentiates our desires into two basically different kinds, a differentiation that is reflected in his employment of two categorically different terms for self-love: *amour de soi*, and *amour propre*. Rousseau’s interest here is not simply explanatory but also prescriptive: the two kinds of passion inform a partly perfectionist view about how we should live. In the *Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau expresses the distinction thus:

“Self-love [*amour de soi-même*] is a natural sentiment which inclines every animal to attend to its self-preservation and which, guided in man by reason and modified by pity, produces humanity and virtue. *Amour propre* is only a relative sentiment, artificial, and born in society, which inclines every individual to set greater store by himself than by anyone else, inspires men with all the evils they do one another, and is the genuine source of honour.”

This passage, and the note of which it forms a part, have probably done most to establish the view that *amour propre* is, for Rousseau, a wholly negative passion, conducive to conflict, vanity, pride, and cruelty. Over the past twenty years or so,
philosophers such as Nicholas Dent have done much to overturn that view and to put in its place an alternative according to which *amour propre*, whilst indeed being the source of “all the evils they do to one another” is also, potentially, the source of morality, reason, civilization and justice. Let me just explain the distinction a little.

*Amour de soi* is a passion or a drive that conduces to our preservation as natural creatures. So when we seek food for the sake of nutrition, or clothe ourselves to preserve our bodily heat, or seek shelter from a storm, or defend ourselves against the attack of a wild animal, we are, for Rousseau, directed by *amour de soi*. *Amour propre* is different. It is an irreducibly social sentiment which moves us to seek the good opinion of others and to value our status relative to others. Essentially it is concerned with what has come to be called, in the discourse of some modern political theory, “recognition”. *Amour propre* is both “very different” from *amour de soi* and an outgrowth of it. The drive to self-preservation that Rousseau has guiding us in our natural environment is transformed in a social environment into something else, perhaps not surprisingly, since the good opinion of others is now necessary both in itself but also for the securing of the goods (food, shelter, warmth) that *amour de soi* seeks.

As I’ve already noted, Rousseau gives his most systematic expositions of his moral psychology whilst doing other things (speculating about prehistory or education). There’s a temptation just to throw away this scaffolding – as bad science, bad history or both – and simply give a context-free account of how his moral psychology applies to the problems of political society. But this is actually quite hard to do, and I think it helps to grasp how and when *amour propre* becomes a problem by looking at some aspects of Rousseau’s genetic accounts.
In the *Discourse on Inequality’s* account of social evolution, *amour propre* first surfaces when we have settled human communities for the first time. In *Emile’s* treatment of infantile development it makes its appearance in the child at puberty. In both cases it is intimately involved with sex and with sexual competition. To take the version from the *Discourse*, individuals come to desire others and to see others as desirable, and they start to make comparisons among their peers and to note that some are better singers or dancers than others. It is a crucial moment for Rousseau in the emergence of human subjectivity. People start to have a sense of themselves as they appear in the consciousness of others and start to derive a self-conception partly from what they take others to be thinking of them. It is now that the reactive attitudes, such as shame and resentment, are born. Rousseau depicts a certain amount of violence stemming first from jealousy but also from a consciousness of rank or status. Whereas for Hobbes in *Leviathan* characters like Begbie from *Trainspotting* are ever-presents of the human race, for Rousseau those willing to pick a fight over a trivial slight, a matter of honour, real or perceived, are the products of history.

Though there is thus a certain amount of unpleasantness in this period, it does not, for Rousseau, display the full range of pathologies that mark our modern condition. Indeed, he describes it as “the happiest and most lasting epoch”. More has to happen than merely sexual competition and comparison. Primitive humans were, according to Rousseau, largely self-sufficient. Their appetites did not exceed the means to their satisfaction.

But human nature, and human needs, are plastic. With technological developments in metallurgy and agriculture it becomes possible for people to produce more and, consequently, to develop more extensive and complex needs. Crucially though,
these needs cannot be secured by individuals acting alone, but depend on co-operation mediated by the division of labour. Instead of simply relying on my own forces, now I need you to get what I want and you need me. As a consequence, I have a further motive, a material motive, for orienting my action towards the aim of getting you to do what I want. We might add that I also have more grounds for making comparisons between people (some are more useful than others), more grounds for pride or shame, and more reason to get myself to appear to other people as useful to them. Importantly, I also have a motive, when it is useful for me, to misrepresent my true feelings about you in order to secure your co-operation. You also have a similar motive. Hence the possibility for the genesis of a kind of existential anxiety: do you really love me (as I crave to be loved) or are you just saying that you do because you need my assistance?

Here we are close to the core of Rousseau’s concerns, but there are a few more compounds to throw into the toxic mix. Rousseau doesn’t spell it out especially clearly, but these same agricultural and technological developments also give rise to private property and thus quickly and predictably to haves and have-nots. Now the relations of interdependence are not straightforwardly reciprocal, but are also asymmetric. Some people need others (perhaps they need a job) a great deal more than those other people need them (“there are plenty more where you come from”). And inequality of wealth is also, eventually, accompanied by inequalities in power and status.

At the beginning of the *Social Contract*, after the famous line telling us that “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains”, Rousseau continues “One believes himself the master of others, and yet is more a slave than they are”. He is making
the point that even those at the top of a hierarchy of power depend for that power on the opinion, the co-operation, and indeed, the acquiescence of others. In this he echoes the arguments put by Etienne de la Boétie in his *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude* or, for that matter by Cassius in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, though there is something of an inversion. They were conveying the idea that those in power are not better than the rest of us and that freeing ourselves from them ought not to be a difficult matter, given sufficient courage. Rousseau is saying that too, but he is also saying that in a society of interdependence and hierarchy, unfreedom is extremely pervasive and even those at the top have to conform to the opinion of others, have to flatter, cajole, adjust themselves, if they are to get what they want. The figure who best sums up for Rousseau the ills of modernity is, perhaps, the “European Minister” of the second *Discourse*. Rousseau imagines the bemusement that a Carib (that is a native inhabitant of the Caribbean) might have to such a person:

“…in order to see the purpose of some many cares, these words, power and reputation would have to have some meaning in his mind; he would have to learn that there is a sort of men who count who they are looked upon by the rest of the universe for something, who can be happy and satisfied with themselves on the testimony of others rather than on their own. This indeed is the genuine cause of all these differences: the Savage lives within himself; sociable man always outside himself, is capable of living only in the opinion of others and, so to speak, derives the sentiment of his own existence solely from their judgement.”

It is, however, easy to misread this passage. The minister is capable of living “only in the opinion of others”, he derives the sentiment of his own existence “solely from their judgement”. Rousseau’s thought is that there is a kind of corruption,
alienation, inauthenticity, loss of self and unfreedom that results from exclusive dependence on the opinion of others. It would be a mistake, though, to draw the conclusion that Rousseau believes that we should simply disregard what others think and depend entirely and narcissistically on our own evaluation of ourselves and our merits. Once *amour propre* is loose in the world, it is an inescapable feature of our psychology. It is something that it is difficult to tame, but it has to be done. Part of our assessment of ourselves and our merits will inevitably draw on the opinion and estimation of others, but, for Rousseau (though this is much clearer in *Emile* than it is in the second *Discourse*) we must rely on our own judgments of real value informed by the opinion of competent others rather than chasing the good opinion of the world for its own sake.

How problematic are these phenomena really? No doubt opinions will differ, but anyone familiar with academic life and the British university system cannot be unaware of some of the pathologies: the urge to compare, to assess oneself relative to others, to claim “international excellence” and to take extreme offence at anyone who disagrees. And who hasn’t heard an academic complaining bitterly about status and salary compared to some other profession, or that academics can no longer afford houses in Hampstead, seemingly oblivious of the percentile in which their own salary sits in the national income distribution? Nor is this limited to individuals. Institutions have a clear interest in seeing how their performance compares with others, but that urge to compare can take two forms. The first asks whether what we do around here is up to scratch, both absolutely and comparatively. Is our research solid? Is our teaching sound? Comparative information is important here, just so that we know that our own view of the matter
isn’t wildly out of kilter with what everyone else thinks. (Of course, we may come to the conclusion that everyone else is wrong, after thinking things through…)

The second form asks whether we are in the top N of institutions, sets as an explicit goal to be in that top N, and chases funding geared to rank order. That sort of assessment can be really damaging, since all the other goals that we might have get subordinated to this central one. Then the goal itself gets transformed into a drive to score highly on the ranking rather than to score highly in what the ranking purports to be a ranking of.

Rousseau had two solutions to the problem of *amour propre*: an individual solution and a collective one. In *Emile* a child is given a very special education, aimed at avoiding the premature emergence of *amour propre* and ensuring that it does not take an inflamed form when it does emerge. Emile is highly, though not entirely, self-sufficient but, at the point where the treatise turns into a novel, receives conformation of his value in the eyes of another through the love of Sophie (although as those who know the text are aware, they don’t really live happily ever after, perhaps because Rousseau’s urge to tell a good story gets the better of his pedagogical intentions).

The *Social Contract* argues explicitly that our freedom can be reconciled with the need for social order and political authority and (only implicitly) that the status of equal citizenship and a strong spirit of patriotism can be satisfied by a just society. Specifically, this means a small and roughly egalitarian society where citizens subordinate their particular interests to the “general will” that is the product of their common deliberation. Famously, of course, Rousseau argues that sovereignty cannot be represented and that an active citizenry must make the laws directly.
Both of these solutions are flawed, and both, on his account, required for their success the mysterious appearance of a superhuman agent: the tutor in *Emile* and the legislator in the *Social Contract*. I hardly need to say that it is better if neither educational theory nor political philosophy relies on such devices. Though Rousseau espoused these two solutions as demonstrating the possibility, at least in principle, that humankind was not fated to permanent oppression and unfreedom, he was in fact highly pessimistic about whether we would ever climb out of the hole we have dug for ourselves as a species. At the end of his life he attempted to emancipate himself from the demands of *amour propre* entirely, and announced at the beginning of the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* that he was alone in the world (omitting to notice, perhaps, Mrs Rousseau, Thérèse Levasseur, somewhere in the background). But a reading of the work as whole reveals that Rousseau is a modern human like the rest of us and, as hard as he tries, he cannot eradicate his desire for the recognition of others and his pain at their hatred and contempt. I take it, though, that if Rousseau has convinced us that *amour propre* and the need for recognition is a pervasive problem in human life, then we want more than just the logical possibility of a society that would satisfy it in a non-inflamed way or a theoretical account of an education (even if those attempts had been successful). Rousseau himself was willing to take a few steps towards practicability with his writings on Poland and Corsica, in which he tried to extend his principles to much larger societies than small city-states, and we can see various later theorists as, in some sense, doing the same. So, however horrified Rousseau would probably have been by revolutionary France, and however much the Abbé de Sièyes – the great theorist of the first phase of the French revolution – might have breached Rousseau’s principles – especially concerning representation
– we can see something Rousseavian in the idea of the modern nation state. And we can also see, in thinkers as diverse as Hegel and Rawls, an attempt to redeploy something like the concept of the general will, in their thinking about the nature of a rational or a just social order.

Perhaps the first thing to say here, since it is already implied by some of my earlier remarks, is that modern nation states do not adequately satisfy the demand for recognition, for the satisfaction of (non-inflamed) _amour propre_. Certain treatments of Rousseau’s thought might be taken to have the implication, on a very casual and inattentive reading, that they just possibly could. So someone who took the view that the state of the _Social Contract_ satisfies the demands of _amour propre_ by ensuring everyone of their equal status as a citizen might think that the modern state in guaranteeing a certain formal equality of rights and status also does so. It is characteristic of some Kantian readings of Rousseau to suggest that if everyone can, at least under one description, that of citizen, be treated with respect, then the demand for recognition has been met. Frederick Neuhouser, in his recent book Rousseau’s _Theodicy of Self-Love_, has shown this view to be inadequate as an interpretation of Rousseau: a condition of general acknowledgement and respect is met for Rousseau (at least much of the time) in a society as basic as that of the “golden age”, where “the first duties of civility” arose. Yet in such a society, and _a fortiori_ in the more complex and unequal societies that follow it, inequalities in merit or performance can give rise to serious inequalities in esteem. A person in such a society or in ours, who enjoys full rights of membership but who is regarded as inferior on grounds of appearance or performance, who can take no pride in their achievements, will not have satisfied their _amour propre_. 
This has implications for at least one variant of the liberal political project, that associated with John Rawls. A society that secured for all the conditions under which they could enjoy democratic citizenship on fair terms and which permitted inequalities in wealth and income only to the extent that those inequalities turned out to be functionally necessary to the material well-being of all (perhaps they would be to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged), might still fail to be a society in which all could be assured of the satisfaction of their *amour propre*. Many years ago, Michael Young in his book *The Rise of the Meritocracy* outlined and satirised a society where the old advantages of birth and social status had been eradicated, but where the disadvantaged were now doubly penalised: they were materially worse off and they were worse off because of their own faults, their own lack of excellence. There is at least the danger in Rawlsian liberalism, and perhaps more in social democratic appropriations of it, of a similar syndrome. In the UK, insofar as government expresses a concern with equality, it is often a concern with social mobility, with widening access, with widening opportunity. These things are certainly important, but a highly unequal society in which a large number of people have a better opportunity to occupy the most favoured positions, is still a society that is defective in Rousseauvian terms for the way that so many people are exposed to the shame and humiliation of failure.

This leads me on to my final point. In various bits of research I have done, I’ve been motivated by a concern with the Rousseauvian ideal of a democratic political community. Among other things, this ideal has inspired me to reflect on public reason and on what it means for citizens to justify their social order to one another, and on the relationship between the conversation that citizens might have and the whole business of political philosophy. I’ve also written a little on the way in
which the Rousseauvian ideal intersects with the problem of global distributive justice. The position I’ve defended there has involved the idea that, in order to secure certain goods of citizenship, political communities must be fairly small (and certainly smaller than the whole world) and that there should therefore be a plurality of states in the world. This in turn implies that if the decisions that communities take about economic and demographic policies are to matter, there will inevitably be a certain degree of unobjectionable inequality in the world as a whole. In this respect, at least, I occupy a position not dissimilar to John Rawls, who in his last book, *The Law of Peoples*, argued that strong principles of redistribution should hold within states, but that a mere obligation of assistance, of sufficiency, holds towards the global poor.

I have to say that it is not a position that I am happy with. On the one hand stand the demands of political community and of securing a social order in which authority is reconciled with freedom and the satisfaction of *amour propre*; on the other is the sheer brute fact of global poverty and inequality and the further fact that we are increasingly linked together in global networks of trade and cooperation, and where the consequences of our actions in one part of the world (perhaps with respect to carbon emissions) have dire consequences for those of our fellow human beings who are in most desperate need. If I had a great idea about how to reconcile these different aims, I might have written a different essay to this one. The project, though, of reconciling political community and global interconnection in a way that preserves freedom and human dignity is, in my view, the essential one for political philosophy to pursue in our time.

It seems to me there is an echo in this problem of reconciliation of the passage from the *Social Contract* where Rousseau is discussing the need to leave the state
of nature and enter into the first political society: “I assume men having reached
the point where the obstacles that interfere with their preservation in the state of
nature prevail by their resistance over the forces which each individual can muster
to maintain himself in that state. Then that primitive state can no longer subsist,
and humankind would perish if it did not change its way of being.”
Now, to preserve humankind we need to solve the problems of freedom, justice
and *amour propre* on an altogether larger scale.

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