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Rousseau and the Case for (and against) Censorship

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Rousseau is one of the most important modern defenders of censorship and one of the most important victims of censors. In his works can be found arguments both for and against censorship. Rather than being symptoms of the tendency to exempt himself from rules he wants to apply to others, these different cases form part of a consistent understanding. Rousseau argues both that communities depend on a moral consensus that must be kept immune to critical scrutiny and that, within the bounds of that consensus, open debate of laws and policies is a necessity. Moreover, he attempts to combine freedom of conscience and intellect with restraint in public expression of dissenting opinions. Each of these elements in his understanding is reflected in his literary practice and accounts for the variety in his methods of writing on different occasions.

In Rousseau we find both an attack upon and a case for censorship. Because his attack occurs mainly on the censors of his own works while his defense comes when he is discussing the books of other authors, it is tempting to accuse him of indulging in the all-too-human tendency to exempt oneself from rules one wishes to apply to everyone else. One might say that when Rousseau's works were suppressed he was getting exactly what he had been asking for. Nevertheless, this temptation should be resisted because Rousseau in fact has a consistent if complex view of the issue of censorship that resolves the apparent inconsistency. His complex view results from careful distinctions among different types of literary works and different political circumstances. Central to his position is a novel and influential insistence—implicit in both his general discussions of censorship and his own literary practice—that authors take public responsibility for their works. The novelty of Rousseau's position can be seen by comparing his own insistence on proclaiming himself as an author with his contemporaries' regular adoption of anonymity. Its consistency emerges from a consideration of the grounds, and then the limits, of his defenses of censorship.

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EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY CENSORSHIP AND AUTHORIAL RESPONSIBILITY

If we open a first edition of one of Rousseau’s books, for example the Social Contract, on the title page we see the name of the book, Rousseau’s name with the nickname “Citizen of Geneva,” and the indication that the book was published in Amsterdam by the publisher Rey in 1762. None of this is likely to be very noteworthy to a reader today, but expectations based on modern practice should not conceal the significance of this title page. Rousseau’s decision to provide accurate and complete information about his works was a marked departure from the practice of many of his contemporaries who wrote controversial books. Today it is a newsworthy public event when a book like Primary Colors is published anonymously, but if we look at the century or so leading up to the beginning of Rousseau’s literary career in 1750 we find books like Descartes’s Discourse on Method, Spinoza’s Tractatus, Locke’s Two Treatises on Government, Hume’s Treatise on Human Nature, and Montesquieu’s Spirit of the Laws, and several books by Rousseau’s best friend, Diderot, all of which were originally published anonymously. It may always be true that one cannot judge a book by its cover, but in Rousseau’s day one could also not judge it by its title page, which could lie about the author, publisher, and place and date of publication.

The system of censorship that led to such deceptive practices was a complex one (Hanley 1980; Roche 1989). Legal publication in France and elsewhere usually required prior consent from government-appointed censors who could deny publication for a variety of reasons. By law, books could be suppressed on the grounds that they undermined the government, morals, or religion, or because they attacked individuals. In fact, publication was also denied if the censor thought the book was poorly written or if someone with influence did not want it to be published. Voltaire’s observation that publication depended on whether the censor happened to be the “friend of my friend or the friend of my enemy” was an accurate one. This arbitrary and capricious system made publication into a sort of lottery. Add to this that success in running the obstacle course of censorship did not give immunity from prosecution. Helvétius, for example, found cold comfort in the permission received by De l’esprit when the book was condemned immediately after publication.

Chrétien-Guillaume Lamoignan de Malesherbes, the director of publishing for most of Rousseau’s literary career, attempted to make a liberal use of the illiberal system he inherited from his predecessors (Birn 1989; Shaw 1966). As Rousseau says, he governed the book trade “with as much enlightenment as gentleness, and to the great satisfaction of literary people” (Rousseau 1990–1995, vol. 5, 428). Malesherbes made frequent use of censors who were sympathetic to controversial causes, and he also greatly extended the use of tacit, or as he called it “illegal” permission to publish. When the office controlling the book trade was willing to tolerate a book but wanted to avoid giving the appearance of endorsing
its contents, it notified the publisher that permission for publication was denied but also unofficially informed him that it would not prosecute a discreet publication. Books published with tacit permission often gave a foreign city as the place of publication and usually were published anonymously to avoid punishment for the author if the book happened to be suppressed by some other public authority later on. In sum, the very existence of these books depended on no one’s taking public responsibility for them, not the government, not the publisher, and most definitely not the author.

Most successful writers adapted to the repressive conditions in which they found themselves by embracing this evasion of responsibility. Voltaire incessantly counseled his followers that “one must never give anything under one’s name” (quoted in Pappas 1962, 37) and scolded them when they were foolish enough to put their names on controversial books. He adopted as his motto, “Strike and conceal your hand” (quoted in Furbank 1992, 167). Others, such as the Baron d’Holbach, attributed their own works of atheistic materialism to other writers, sometimes to authors of sound reputation and impeccable orthodoxy who had recently died and could not deny the attribution.

This is the publishing world in which Rousseau began his literary career and, indeed, he commenced by publishing the First Discourse and a few pamphlets on music anonymously, but as he began to become famous he decided to use his fame to set an example of behavior and from then on never published anonymously. Friends, publishers, and even sympathetic government officials constantly urged him to behave as everyone else did, but he insisted on confronting the entire system of censorship head on. When, at the prompting of Malesherbes himself, his publisher advised him to drop his name from the title page of the Social Contract, Rousseau refused to do so. He resented the decision of another publisher (also in response to urging from Malesherbes) to publish an edition of Emile in France with the pretense that it was printed in Holland (Cranston 1991, 344–50 and Patterson 1984, 239–40). While others, like Voltaire, issued enraged denials when people attributed to them works they had in fact written, Rousseau was virtually obsessed with setting the record straight, publicly owning even works that had been published without his permission.

In addition to insisting on taking responsibility for his works, Rousseau regularly clashed with the censors prior to publication. For example, he refused to accept most of the suggested changes to Julie on the grounds that the censor was attempting to rewrite his novel (McEachern 1992). When the government censor of his abridgment of the Abbé de Saint Pierre’s Perpetual Peace demanded that he change a sentence, Rousseau refused and suggested that his wording be left as it stood and the censor’s version inserted on a separate sheet as an erratum (Rousseau 1959–1995, vol. III, 1550; see Roosevelt 1990, 247). This, of course, would make the provocative character of his original formulation and his disagreement with the censor as conspicuous as possible.
This is not to say that Rousseau failed to exercise any caution. He was occasionally willing to use others as a partial cloak for opinions he wished to support. This was his intention when he undertook to edit the Abbé de Saint-Pierre’s works (Rousseau 1990–1995, vol. 5, 342). It also explains his use of the Savoyard Vicar and Julie as the mouthpieces for unorthodox religious teachings. Rousseau complained bitterly when the opinions expressed by his characters were attributed to him and both characters do express some opinions which Rousseau did not share (Rousseau 1990–1995, vol. 1, 70; 1959–1995, vol. IV, 1029. See also Emberley 1986; Macy 1992, Masters 1968, 54–5; Nichols 1985, 545–50); nevertheless, even in these cases he insisted on taking responsibility for the publication of those ideas in his role as presumed editor.

His most significant precaution was to live in one country (France), be a citizen of a second (Geneva), and publish his books in a third (Holland). When addressing Rousseau by his nickname, “Citizen,” Diderot chided him for his withdrawal from society by saying that “a hermit makes a very peculiar citizen.” Rousseau, however, thought that this withdrawal maximized his freedom to write what he wished (Rousseau 1990–1995, vol. 5, 17). He believed that the independence he gained from his situation made it unnecessary to resort to anonymity.

In the end such precautions failed to disarm the reaction to Rousseau’s boldness, although they did allow him to make himself into a symbol of all victims of unjust oppression in the way that someone who published anonymously while living safely in high society could not. Shortly after the publication of the Social Contract and Emile in 1762, in a step that was extreme even by the standards of the day (Vanpée 1990, 159–61), censors across Europe decided that these books must be burned. Rousseau reacted to the suppression of his books by writing defenses of them that were, in turn, suppressed. His Letters Written from the Mountain, which attacked the censors, had the remarkable distinction of being declared unworthy of being burned by the public hangman in Geneva (Rousseau 1990–1995, vol. 5, 522). In each successive case Rousseau persisted in his claims that the suppression of his works was both illegal and unjust. This is the Rousseau who is famous as a champion of openness and transparency (see Starobinski 1988).

Rousseau claims that he is “the only Author of my century and of many others who has written in good faith” (Rousseau 1959–1995, vol. IV, 965). Although this is more modest than his first draft—in which he refers not merely to many, but to “perhaps almost all” centuries full of authors who wrote in bad faith (1741)—it seems hyperbolic when one considers the prosecution of other writers. Nevertheless, even people who were not particularly friendly to Rousseau tended to accept this characterization. D’Alembert, for example, who admitted that the threat of prosecution prevented him from saying more than one-quarter of the truth (Pappas 1962, 67) declared that Rousseau was perhaps the only writer who dared to speak his mind. This is so because “fear of outraging established opinions, of shocking through paradoxes, of passing as a cynic, of making enemies
and trouble for himself, none of all that stops him” (d’Alembert 1967, 464). This judgment was seconded by Diderot who seems to have been set ill at ease by the contrast between Rousseau’s boldness and his own relative caution (Furbank 1992, 420–22). To be sure, other writers who had embraced anonymity readily attributed Rousseau’s insistence on openness to a self-destructive vanity. Even a sympathetic Malesherbes thought that Rousseau aspired to a Socrates-like martyrdom (Rousseau and Malesherbes 1991, 347–8). Whatever the truth about Rousseau’s vanity or desire for martyrdom, he did provide arguments to justify his idiosyncratic insistence on taking responsibility for what he wrote. These arguments show why he attempted to undermine the understanding of authorial irresponsibility that greased the wheels of publishing in the Ancien Régime.

The first occasion Rousseau used for explaining his own practice was the so-called Second Preface to Julie. This “preface,” which was published independently of the novel, consists of a dialogue between Rousseau and a man of letters who has been plausibly identified as Diderot (Jackson 1986) and, in any event, like Diderot endorses the principle of anonymity. The preliminary issue of the dialogue concerns whether Julie is fact or fiction. In a manner that helped to stimulate interest in both the novel and its putative editor, Rousseau refuses to give a direct answer to this question. This leads to a discussion of the merits of the book and what it can hope to accomplish. After pointing out how far the lessons of Rousseau’s book are from current practice, “N” urges him to conceal his identity even as the editor of the book and offers to keep the secret. Rousseau responds, “I am naming myself at the head of this book, not to claim it as mine; but to answer for it. If it contains evil, let it be imputed to me; if good, I do not plan to boast of it.” In the shorter preface that accompanied the novel he says in addition, “Every honorable man must acknowledge the books he publishes” (Rousseau 1959–1995, vol. II, 27 and 5). Rousseau’s insistence on naming himself was a challenge to and rebuke of publishers, censors, and especially other writers who had no qualms about adapting to the system.

In Letters Written from the Mountain and the Letter to Beaumont, works written in response to the suppression of the Social Contract and Émile, Rousseau spells out the reasons for refusing to accept a system of censorship that thrives on anonymity (Rousseau 1959–1995, vol. II, 791–4). His censors in Geneva had argued that their prohibition and public burning of Social Contract did not require that they question Rousseau in advance about his authorship and the contents of his book. Their argument rested on a distinction between the author and the book. Because a penalty inflicted on a book has no effect on its author, public authorities have no need to concern themselves excessively with real authorship or actual contents of books. Rousseau points out that such a condemnation can hardly fail to damage the reputation of anyone known to be the author. It is only in the case of anonymity that the fate of the book can have no consequences for the author, who can “acknowledge these books to get himself honored for them, and renounce them to shelter himself” (792). Such authors,
even when they are apparently bitter critics of the government, tend to be merely clamoring for a larger share of the benefits that come with celebrity as a writer. Such social critics and the public authorities who order the burning of their books can share a good laugh at dinner over the prosecution that took place in the morning. Authorial vanity is not damaged by this arrangement because there are ways of making one’s authorship a very open secret without running any risk. Because there are no consequences for anyone, authors can write without worrying about being held accountable for what they say, and authorities can prosecute and burn without worrying about the justice of what they do. The apparent adversaries are in fact joined in a system of irresponsibility that serves both sides well. Only “clumsy” and “imprudent” authors like Rousseau who insist on putting their names on their books ruin the fun.

The system of irresponsibility produces disadvantages, however. In it, authors who have the frankness to own their works will suffer the consequences of irresponsible prosecution. Prosecutors will even regard putting one’s name on a work as an aggravation of the offensiveness of the work and therefore be more likely to take steps against it (793). As a consequence authors who wish to be at all bold will be forced to think about something other than the truth when they publish. As Rousseau says, “In order to be useful with impunity, one unleashes one’s Book onto the public and then one ducks” (792). Truth will suffer in a system that rewards and even compels anonymity.

Two types of authors will thrive in such a system: those who flatter the prejudices of the powerful who can injure or reward them, and those who hide behind anonymity. About the former Rousseau says in the Letter to Beaumont, “In listening to the people who are permitted to speak in public, I understood that they do not dare or do not wish to say anything except what suits those who command” (Rousseau 1959–1995, vol. IV, 967). Even very intelligent writers, Grotius for example, find themselves entangled in sophistry when they try to reconcile their desire for “embassies, professorships, or pensions” with their desire to be truthful (Rousseau 1990–1995, vol. 4, 146–7; see Namer 1978, 72). Rousseau is no more hopeful about the other sort of writer. In a section that contains a thinly veiled attack on Voltaire, Rousseau says the these cowards use anonymity to give vent to “the poison of calumny and satire” (Rousseau 1959–1995, vol. III, 792). Rather than inspiring them to be bold in expressing the truth, the shield provided by anonymity gives them freedom to pursue personal vendettas with impunity. In both cases, the system of censorship that fosters these types causes the predominance of self-seeking, bad faith, venom and irresponsibility. This is little short of a declaration of war against the major figures of the Enlightenment.

**The Grounds of the Defense of Censorship**

That Rousseau challenges a system of censorship that results in irresponsibility does not imply that he must be opposed to all forms of censorship. Taking
responsibility can involve accepting penalties for what one says. There is a side to Rousseau very different from the one that attacks the censors. The work that launched his literary career contains a note praising the Caliph Omar for urging the burning of the library of Alexandria and predicting that the sovereigns of Europe would soon be obliged to make efforts to rid their states of the “terrible art” of printing (Rousseau 1990–1995, vol. 2, 20). A few years later Rousseau attacked d’Alembert’s proposal for the establishment of a theater in Geneva. In the Social Contract he praises the Roman institution of censor and endorses an exclusive civil religion. Finally, in Emile he insists on eliminating popular children’s literature from his fictional student’s education because of its corrupting effects. Those who support censorship because they lament the hostility of intellectuals to community standards, the debasing effects of popular entertainment, the debunking of religious belief, and trends in the education of children can approach him as a potential ally. In short, throughout his career Rousseau supported a variety of types of censorship, and it is not surprising that he is regarded as one of the most important modern supporters of censorship (Bloom 1960) and even a systematic enemy of liberty in any genuine sense of the word (Crocker 1965, 1995; Talmon 1960).

The more closely we look at the picture the more unsettling are the features that emerge. For example, Rousseau is less worried about the lowest end of popular culture and the seamier sides of entertainment than he is about the highest of high culture. He attacks what is most respectable rather than what is least respectable. His targets are Molière, Racine, Corneille, La Fontaine, Hobbes, and Spinoza, figures who cannot be regarded as the gangsta rap groups or Hustler magazines of his day. What could be the basis of a criticism of these writers that would not apply to Rousseau himself?

The outlines of the critique of the sciences and arts that underlies Rousseau’s support of some forms of censorship are fairly generally agreed upon among scholars who approach Rousseau from a variety of perspectives and disciplines (Bloom 1960; Coleman 1984; Goldschmidt 1974; Gourevitch 1972; Masters 1968; and Strauss 1947, 1953). A few points within this consensus view deserve special emphasis as the foundation for Rousseau’s position on censorship. The first of these concerns philosophers; a second, intellectuals more generally; and a third, artists.

First, within his discussions of the sciences or what he also calls learned activities, Rousseau accuses all philosophers past and present—with virtually no exceptions—of holding opinions contrary to popular beliefs in such things as the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, the conscience, friendship, patriotism, and the sanctity of marriage. He grants that there have been a few philosophers who have not been vicious in spite of their unorthodox views, although most of them have been useless rather than virtuous (Rousseau 1990–1995, vol. 2, 40, 42, 111, and 115; vol. 3, 38 and 151; vol. 4, 2–3; and vol. 5, 312). Even in the best cases, he argues, philosophy tends to form bad citizens
either by making its adherents indifferent to social life because it attracts them to solitary contemplation or by making them disgusted with social life because it teaches them to despise nonphilosophers. In short, the study of philosophy tends to be an antisocial, misanthropic activity (Rousseau 1990–1995, vol. 2, 45–6, 193; see Payne 1976, 65–93).

Second, even philosophers who are discreet about their lack of orthodoxy have a bad effect by inspiring imitation from less discreet and less intelligent men of letters or intellectuals. Behind a mask of impartial reason, such people form an interest group devoted to gaining status at the expense of the rest of society (Rousseau 1990–1995, vol. 2, 13–14, vol. 1, 238–9). These are precisely the people who thrive in the atmosphere of irresponsibility created by the prevailing publishing practices. They spread pernicious doctrines, less because they believe them than because they desire to gain distinction among fellow intellectuals as the enemies of vulgar opinion. This desire for distinction makes them oppose any opinion that they believe is held by the majority. In Rousseau’s view, the most dangerous intellectuals are those who attempt to transform political life by subjecting commonly held moral opinions to critical scrutiny. Individuals of this sort have always existed, but the danger from the dissemination of their doctrines is particularly acute in modern times because of both the development of printing and the extreme boldness of modern thinkers (Rousseau 1990–1995, vol. 2, 20, 191, and 193; see also Keohane 1977). In effect, Rousseau turns a favorite tactic of these writers back against them: they try to strip the veil of disinterestedness and benevolence from political and religious authorities and Rousseau strips this same veil away from them.

Third, Rousseau’s attack on literature and the fine arts proceeds on somewhat different grounds than does his attack on learning. While philosophy detaches one from concern for the community and intellectual life and gives one contempt for public opinion, the fine arts and literature depend on the support of members of the community, of patrons of the arts (Rousseau 1990–1995, vol. 2, 15). One might think that the dependence of artists on public opinion would make them try to win favor by producing works that promote morality, but Rousseau discounts this possibility. He argues that the pursuit of the arts goes hand-in-hand with inequality based solely on wealth and with a concern with pleasing appearances rather than real moral qualities (Rousseau 1990–1995, vol. 2, 48–9). Furthermore, even the most public-spirited artists contribute to the depreciation of morality because they will always be praised more for their talents than for their virtue (18). Perfectly wholesome works of art created by mediocre artists would be as boring as sermons and drive the audience elsewhere in search of entertainment. In short, wealth and talent, not morality, are bound to be the highest standards of a society devoted to the arts.

Rousseau’s favorite example of an art that claims to promote morality while undermining it is the theater. He rejects a long tradition, dating back to Aristotle’s Poetics, that argues that the theater can have a good effect by purging
the passions and by depicting heroes worthy of imitation (Barras 1933). Against this tradition Rousseau argues that (aside from a few cases such as the nationalistic plays of ancient Greece) the theater merely inflames the passions and that the sort of imitation inspired by theatrical performances does not promote morality. He is far from denying that plays are capable of moving us. Indeed, he admits that even the most notorious tyrants and cold-hearted villains have frequently been moved to tears at the sight of the misfortunes of innocent characters in plays, but he also points out that they have remained tyrants and villains after they leave the theater. This is so precisely because theatrical identification is so pure it will have no enduring effect beyond making one wish to return to the theater to have one’s emotions pleasantly stimulated again and again (Rousseau 1960, 25). Outside the theater, identification with someone else’s sufferings is less pleasant because it demands that one take the trouble to help (24). In the theater we congratulate ourselves for our moral sensitivity while remaining isolated from irksome involvement with our fellows. It can be argued that Rousseau’s diagnosis of the ills caused by the theater points to a new sort of theater in which these ills are mitigated or cured (Barber 1978, 1982); nevertheless he regarded the theater of his time as all the more pernicious in that it substituted a sham sociability for the genuine article (Kelly 1996a).

In summary, Rousseau’s critique of the sciences and the arts claims that philosophy and intellectual life destroy the best parts of society—the beliefs that hold it together—while the arts enhance the worst parts of society—the luxury, inequality, and sense of isolation that divide it. While he condemns the “condition worse than ignorance” that preceded the restoration of the sciences and arts to Europe, he also insists that the immediately premodern moral situation might have been better than the modern one (Rousseau 1990–1995, vols. 2, 5 and 25).

THE LIMITS OF CENSORSHIP

It might seem that this sweeping condemnation of the sciences and arts calls for the most complete censorship possible. It is likely that Rousseau would approve of a statesmen in some remote corner of the world who had a gallows especially prepared for the first European to arrive with a book or the knowledge to make a printing press (Rousseau 1990–1995, vol. 2, 125). Nevertheless, this conclusion is only of limited use for understanding his position. After all, speech remains after books and performances of plays have been excluded. Once it is conceded that censorship cannot and perhaps even should not be total, the question of what sorts of speeches and writings should not be suppressed in the best possible political circumstances comes to the fore. Moreover, Rousseau did not live in anything resembling these optimal circumstances. What, beyond making oneself into a martyr of resistance, should be done in a situation that is already corrupted?
For convenience, Rousseau’s discussions of censorship can be divided into four different areas, each of which leads him to somewhat different conclusions. This division can clarify matters even though it is not always possible to make the separation between categories as clearly as one might wish. These areas are (1) the moral consensus underlying any community, (2) a community’s laws and particular policies, (3) its fundamental political principles, and (4) purely speculative philosophic doctrines. The first of these concerns artists, intellectuals, and philosophers alike. The second concerns intellectuals and philosophers. The third and fourth concern different types of philosophers.

Moral Consensus

Most crucial is the area of shared moral opinions of the society, its morals\(^1\) and beliefs, or what Rousseau calls “sentiments of sociability.” These sentiments are in a certain sense what constitute the community and give it an identity. They differ from fundamental principles because they lack any ultimate rational grounding or because they are not consciously examined by most members of the community. They are simply customs and beliefs that members of a single community share with each other. Rousseau insists that a community can demand conformity to these sentiments of sociability in the form of adherence to a civil religion.

Rousseau’s treatments of religion show his attempt to combine conformity with toleration. In effect, he divides religious matters into several discrete areas: ceremonies, moral teachings, dogmas that serve as the basis of moral teachings, and speculative dogmas having nothing to do with morals (Rousseau 1959–1995, vol. III, 694). In the case of ceremonies and the moral teachings that constitute a society’s sentiments of sociability, Rousseau insists on the greatest degree of conformity. He argues that ceremonies are legitimate objects of political control for the sake of social cohesiveness. With regard to moral teachings he claims that open dissent from these opinions can be understood as at best a declaration of independence from the community and at worst a declaration of war against it. At the other extreme, with regard to purely speculative dogmas (among which he counts such issues as creation versus eternity of matter, the divinity of Jesus, and transubstantiation) he insists upon a complete toleration. It is in the final area of religion, the point at which dogmas and morality (issues such as the existence of God, freedom of will, or immortality of the soul) are related to each other, that Rousseau’s position is most complex and difficult to grasp.

In part, the difficulty in establishing Rousseau’s position on this point stems from the very different statements he produced when writing to different audiences. On the one hand, when writing to religious skeptics he implies that any civil profession of faith must be purely negative once it goes beyond statements

\(^{1}\) The difficulty of translating the French term *mœurs* has been discussed numerous times by translators. See in particular Rousseau 1960, 149, and Rousseau 1990–1995, vol. 2, 203–4.
of principles of morality. In other words, it must explicitly exclude only intolerance (Rousseau 1959–1995, vol. IV, 1142; Rousseau 1990–1995, vol. 3, 119). On the other hand, addressing the Archbishop of Paris, he asserts, “In society each person has the right to be informed whether another believes himself obliged to be just, and the Sovereign has the right to examine the reasons upon which each person bases that obligation” (Rousseau 1959–1995, vol. IV, 973). This position leads to a more affirmative profession of faith such as the one in the Social Contract requiring a statement of belief in “a powerful, intelligent, beneficent, foresighted, and providential Divinity; the afterlife; the happiness of the just; the punishment of the wicked; the sanctity of the social Contract and the Laws” (Rousseau 1990–1995, vol. IV, 223). In the Letters Written from the Mountain, addressed to Genevan citizens who are neither skeptics nor dogmatic Catholics, Rousseau stakes out a position between these two, saying “Magistrates, Kings have no authority over souls, and as long as one is faithful to the Laws of society in this world, it is not at all up to them to meddle with what will happen to one in the other” (Rousseau 1959–1995, vol. III, 711). This statement leaves the positive content of the civil profession of faith open, depending on whether behavior and professed principles are taken as sufficient guarantors of justice. The tensions among these statements are a consequence of Rousseau’s effort in each case to find a common ground with his addressee, an effort that leads him either to overstate or understate his own position.

These positions, which seem irreconcilable in principle, can be very close in practice, amounting to a policy of “don’t ask, don’t tell” with regard to certain questions. The major point of each is to exclude a wide range of religious issues from both public control and open public debate. Even when Rousseau concedes that a government can form a national church codifying positions on rather speculative matters, he insists that nonbelievers can cheerfully participate in the ceremonies required by this church. Although he stops short of saying that they will publicly affirm belief in doctrines they hold to be absurd, he urges them to keep their genuine beliefs to themselves (Rousseau 1959–1995, vol. III, 702; 1965–1995, vol. 20, 315). He even insists that one can serve as a clergyman in a church whose speculative dogmas one does not share as long as those doctrines are not contrary to morality (Rousseau 1979, 308–10). He insists only that ministers faithfully execute their public duties as clergy and urges that their private beliefs not be matter for public speculation (Rousseau 1960, 9–15; see also d’Alembert 1967, 457, Coleman 1984, 19–31).

In these cases the nonbelievers object only to some speculative dogmas. A more interesting case concerns those who do not accept the dogmas that support morality. Rousseau’s works contain frequent assertions that it is impossible for atheists to be virtuous (Rousseau 1960, 97; Rousseau 1959–1995, vol. IV, 1142–3). In the Social Contract he praises Cicero and Cato for their attack on Caesar as being a bad citizen when he attempted to establish the mortality of the soul (Rousseau 1990–1995, vol. 4, 222–3). Such passages suggest that atheists cannot
be tolerated in a society endorsing a civil religion, but the broader contexts make this less clear. For example, when Rousseau attacks atheism in the “Letter to Franquières,” he argues only that atheists do not possess the sort of virtue that can make them stand against extreme adversity or rise above great temptation. He explicitly concedes that they can be excellent rulers and just citizens in less extreme circumstances. In the case of Cicero’s condemnation of Caesar, it is only the public teaching of mortality of the soul that is objected to and Rousseau indicates elsewhere that Cicero’s private views were not far removed from Caesar’s (Rousseau 1990–1995, vol. II, 45). In Julie Rousseau presents the character Wolmar, who is a moral man even though he is a quite radical skeptic on religious matters. Wolmar is not, however, a proselytizing atheist. Publicly he cannot be distinguished from believers. Although he is a “sincere and truthful man,” he is “discreet.” He attends church although he never says he believes anything he does not and “does with regard to the worship regulated by the laws everything that the State can require of a Citizen” (Rousseau 1959–1995, vol. II, 592–3). Rousseau’s primary wish is that citizens act as if they believed certain things and less that they actually believe them (Baker 1995, 161; Strauss 1953, 289). In the end, although in principle Rousseau allows sovereigns to inquire about the beliefs of citizens on dogmas relating to the foundation of morality, in practice he urges restraint on the part of both dissenting citizens and sovereigns. His civil religion has been called a failure because it makes it “impossible for a good citizen to profess atheism openly” (Boss 1971, 181). Rousseau would seem to consider it a success for precisely the same reason.

Thus Rousseau’s boldness in certain respects coexists with an equal reticence in others. The spirit behind this reticence is found in his reaction to a proposed essay on the subject “Are there respectable prejudices that a good Citizen ought to have qualms about combating publicly?” Rousseau responded, “If I had to treat [this question], I will not dissipate to you that I would declare for the affirmative along with Plato” (Rousseau 1965–1995, vol. X, 186 and 227). He argues that a community must make salutary beliefs immune to questioning, but at the same time tries to preserve room for private unorthodoxy on any point of religious dogma. Thus Rousseau is prepared to accept the unorthodox who do not publicly advance their dissenting opinions and who speak and act as if they accept all the sentiments of sociability. He claims that freedom of private belief can coexist with public acceptance of social standards. As he says in the Letters Written from the Mountain, his goal is “to establish philosophic freedom and religious piety at the same time” (Rousseau 1959–1995, vol. III, 802).

Policies and Principles

Rousseau’s insistence on consensus concerning the sentiments of sociability can lead to the conclusion that however zealous his ideal citizens are in defending their community against foreign enemies, they become passive to the point of
engaging in no genuine debate when it comes to domestic policy. It is fair to say
that, rather than arguing over perspectives on the general good, Rousseau's cit-
izens simply recognize or discover a preexisting consensus influenced by their
homogeneity (Cullen 1993). Moreover Rousseau is hostile to factions that push
for their own interests in public debate, and insists that in a good society citizens
will regard the laws as sacred and will be very resistant to change. Nevertheless,
while the sentiments of sociability make up an unquestionable public consensus,
with regard to both specific laws and policies on the one hand and fundamental
principles on the other, Rousseau consistently argues for a wide latitude for free-
dom of speech and press.

Perhaps the best illustration of Rousseau's commitment to open discussion of
particular policies can be found in his own activity in the dispute over establishing
a theater in Geneva. He had no hesitancy about leaping into this discussion. In
fact, in the Letter to d'Alembert, he also discusses some of the defects of French
attempts to outlaw dueling. When he was subsequently criticized for undermining
society by publicly objecting to existing laws rather than discreetly enlightening
the government minister responsible for the relevant matter, Rousseau reacted
defense that as a citizen of Geneva he was under only limited obligation to the
French laws under which he was living, he also argued that French citizens such
as Bodin, Fénélon, and Montesquieu had also criticized specific laws in their
writings. He boldly added that he suspected that government ministers were the
people least capable of being enlightened. Most significantly, he argued that in a
republic it would be an act of treason even to suggest such a need for restraint,
only very grudgingly conceding that there may be rare situations in which the
preservation of a community depends on leaving bad laws uncriticized. In sum,
citizens must always be free to discuss not only proposed new policies, but also
the defects of existing laws.

This raises the question of how unfettered debate over particular policies
or pieces of legislation can avoid opening the sentiments of sociability to criticism.
In fact Rousseau comes close to the belief of some communitarians today that
effective social criticism depends on respect for these beliefs, that one can suc-
cessfully improve a community only by appealing to and clarifying standards that
it already accepts (Walzer 1987, 33–66). This explains the peculiar character of
the Letter to d'Alembert. Throughout this work Rousseau goes out of his way to
emphasize that he is writing as an ordinary Genevan citizen and not as one of
d'Alembert's fellow intellectuals. He discusses the theater from the standpoint
of beliefs that are widely shared by Genevans. As readers often find to their frus-
tration, he does not openly subject these beliefs to rational scrutiny and his
arguments are not always easy to reconcile with those of his theoretical works.

These theoretical works, such as the two Discourses, Emile, and the Social Con-
tact, are very different. They are concerned directly with fundamental principles
and carefully refrain from addressing specific policies of existing communities.
Because some of these works argue that humans are not naturally social and consequently that their allegiance to a particular community is an arbitrary accident, it could be argued that they could undermine the sentiments of sociability that tie citizens to their community (see Strauss 1953, 287). In fact this is precisely the charge that Rousseau levels against the works of other philosophers, few of whom deny the naturalness of social life as radically as he does (Rousseau 1990–1995, vol. 2, 191–3). This would seem to lead to the conclusion that his own theoretical writings would be banned from exactly the sorts of communities Rousseau favors.

Rousseau, however, does not reach this conclusion. His attentiveness to the question of the suitability of his various works to various sorts of societies is indicated by his remark that his novel Julie would be burned in a less corrupt age than the one in which he wrote it. In the second preface to the novel he says that he identifies himself as “Citizen of Geneva” only on the title pages of those of his books that would do honor to his fatherland (Rousseau 1959–1995, vol. II, 27). In each of these books he writes as a citizen. This includes all of his major theoretical works. Rousseau claims that the Social Contract in particular was written with a view to Geneva, “where on the trip I had just made I had not found them forming what I thought to be sufficiently precise and clear concepts about the laws and freedom” (Rousseau 1990–1995, vol. V, 340; see Melzer 1990, 271–3). Thus the establishment of a clear understanding of the fundamental principles of politics of the sort that is undertaken in Rousseau’s boldest works is a necessity for a good community.

In his argument against the censorship of books such as the Social Contract, Rousseau endorses one sweeping principle. He says, “I am not the only one who, discussing political questions through abstraction, has been capable of treating them with some boldness. Not everyone does it, but every man has the right to do it” (Rousseau 1959–1995, vol. III, 812). He cites as examples of others who have written this way, Althusius, the Abbé de Saint Pierre, Montesquieu, and Algernon Sydney. Above all, he cites Locke who, Rousseau says, “treated [the same matter] exactly in accordance with the same principles as I did.” This statement is normally taken as an indication that Rousseau thought that the principles of his political thought agreed with those of Locke, a claim which is hard to justify on anything but the most general level (Rousseau 1962, vol. II, 184–5). In fact, the context indicates that Rousseau is in fact claiming that the way in which he expressed his political thought is identical to the way Locke expressed his. He is claiming that both of them accepted the principle that discussions of general and fundamental principles of politics which do not explicitly attack particular governments should not be censored. This principle is based on a distinction between abstract reasoning and arguments directly inciting to action (Rousseau 1959–1995, vol. III, 758 and 782–3). On the one hand, authors who aim at undermining a particular government (rather than objecting to individual policies or laws) fall under the same category as those who act against the
government. On the other hand, those who write on a sufficient level of generality cannot justly be punished for their works.

To be sure, embedded in this distinction is political dynamite. Critical examination of the principles on which a government claims to be based can be as threatening as direct attacks on the government. Rousseau’s response to this is twofold. First, a government can be stable only if it is founded on correct principles. Second, the correct principles are compatible with an indefinite variety of forms of government (Rousseau 1990–1995, vol. 4, 172–3). The first part of this response indicates that governments that cannot stand inquiry into their principles are already on shaky ground, and the second indicates that the proper mode of political reform is to correct the society’s understanding of principles rather than to change its form of government. Precisely when Rousseau’s thought appears to inspire revolutions, it can present itself as a conservative return to founding principles (see Miller 1984, 87–104). Depending on how one looks at Rousseau, he can appear as a revolutionary, a progressive, or even a conservative (Melzer 1990, 261–6). From any perspective, however, it should be acknowledged that he is a proponent of open discussion of both fundamental principles and particular policies.

**Philosophy**

The topic of purely speculative opinions on philosophic issues other than the fundamental political principles remains to be discussed. Here Rousseau tries to combine freedom of intellect with restraint on the expression of opinion, much as he does with religious belief. When writing to d’Alembert he distinguishes between “the frank expansiveness of philosophic intercourse” conducted in private and the discretion necessary in public discussion (Rousseau 1960, 11). He indicates that contemporary philosophers wish to erase the line between public and private or politics and philosophy.

As indicated above, he consistently argues that philosophy has always tended to make its adherents into bad citizens, but it is clear that he regarded his own philosophic activity as compatible with his devotion to justice. His boldness in defying authority while declaring the truth in his writings was restricted to telling the truth “in whatever is useful” (Rousseau 1959–1995, vol. IV, 967; see also Gourevitch 1980; Strauss 1947) rather than any truth whatsoever. To the extent that Rousseau made his philosophizing public, he did so by always linking it with an attack on the pride characteristic of philosophers who think they have the right to tell others what to do and think (Kelly 1996b, 421–3). He tries to cure philosophers and their imitators of this pride by making them more sensitive to the concerns of nonphilosophers and to their own nonphilosophic concerns. He insists that philosophers behave as good citizens first, and as philosophers second. This means that a good community might well censor philosophic works. More significantly it indicates Rousseau’s opinion that philosophers should engage in
self-censorship out of public-spirited motives. That this self-censorship usually need not extend to discussions of particular policies or to the fundamental principles of politics does not make it any less real or important.

In sum, censorship in a good society will be guided by the need both to protect sentiments of sociability and to stimulate public debate over laws that is guided by a correct understanding of the fundamental principles of political right. Both religious dissenters and philosophers can live in such a society, but only if they pay the price of self-censorship.

**Writing in a Corrupt Society**

Whatever may be true for good societies, it is clear that Rousseau's writings appeared in a political context which he considered to be almost hopelessly corrupt. When corrupt morals have destroyed sentiments of sociability, bad laws exist, false understandings of the principles of politics abound, and dangerous speculative doctrines run rampant, the proportions in this complex concoction of boldness and discretion must be reevaluated. In such circumstances Rousseau sees little positive role for censorship. It is such defenders of the theater as d'Alembert, not Rousseau, who think that a properly censored theater can promote morality. Efforts to restore morality through censorship will certainly take place in corrupt societies. In fact, Rousseau expects that control of censorship will be part of partisan struggle between the religiously intolerant and the philosophically intolerant. It should be recalled that the Encyclopedists (and d'Alembert in particular) attempted to have the government stifle their opponents, just as these opponents tried to stifle the Encyclopedia. Rousseau has little sympathy for either attempt and his own conduct shows his effort to set an example of how to respond to such a situation.

When intelligent people are "being ingenious about obscuring the glory of the fine and generous actions of antiquity, giving them some base interpretation and inventing vain causes and occasions for them" some good may come from efforts to keep an appreciation for the past alive (Rousseau 1990–1995, vol. 2, 121). Accordingly, Rousseau takes every opportunity to praise the virtues of antiquity, even though he has little hope of reversing the established trend. When public morals have already been corrupted, it is too late for the arts to do much harm (Rousseau 1990–1995, vol. 4, 215). In these circumstances Rousseau has no hesitation about writing bad plays for performance. Apparently assuming that the wicked never sleep, except perhaps in the theater, he even humorously calculates that keeping people in the theaters for two hours a day watching bad plays reduces the crime rate by one twelfth (Rousseau 1960, 59 and 118; 1990–1995, vol. 2, 196–7). In addition to suggesting that plays can be useful in corrupt societies, Rousseau also tries to use music and above all the novel to bring about a degree of moral reform. A change in taste in the direction of intimate private entertainment such as reading novels cannot remedy a bad political situation, but
it can palliate the moral corruption of private life (Rousseau 1959–1995, vol. II, 277; see Melzer 1990, 277–81). Finally, in these circumstances Rousseau uses philosophy to destroy the evils that were caused by philosophy (Rousseau, 1990–1995, vol. IV, 44). Measures that would be poison in a healthy community become medicine in other circumstances and novels that should be burned in Republican Rome can be helpful in monarchic France (Starobinski 1989, 165–232).

In such circumstances, the issue of whether one should call well-established public prejudices into question is more open than it would be in a good society. In the Letter to Beaumont Rousseau suggests that if the Archbishop talked to him privately he would admit that he shared Rousseau’s views. His objection would be only to the public expression of these views. The Archbishop might say, “But although all sensible people think as you do, it is not good for the common people to think that way” (Rousseau 1959–1995, vol. IV, 966). Thus, Rousseau makes the Archbishop say to Rousseau approximately what Rousseau had said to d’Alembert about revealing the true religious opinions of the Genevan clergy and what he had said elsewhere about the need to respect public prejudices.

Rousseau’s response to this application of his principle to himself is that, while this maxim may be true, its correct application varies according to circumstances. When an attack on prejudices would undermine benefits inseparable from those prejudices, restraint is necessary. “But when the state of things is such that nothing can be changed anymore except for the better, are prejudices so worthy of respect that reason, virtue, justice, and all the good that the truth could do for men must be sacrificed for them?” (967). Rather than contradicting Rousseau’s claim that there are public prejudices that a good citizen should not attack, this agrees with it. The pernicious prejudices of corrupt communities should be exposed for exactly the same reason that the wholesome ones of a good community should remain immune from attack. The exposure serves justice exactly as the immunity from exposure would.

This does not mean that one need not exercise any restraint in telling the truth when one lives in corrupt circumstances. One’s books can be read in many places and may survive to more wholesome times. Fortunately, combating harmful prejudices does not require saying things that would also destroy useful ones. At most, some of Rousseau’s writings directed toward attacking the errors of his contemporaries would become useless, but not pernicious (Rousseau 1990–1995, vol. IV, 45). Julie and perhaps the play Narcisse would be the only works Rousseau published during his lifetime that should be kept from morally sound audiences. Even this might not require censorship. In the second preface to Julie Rousseau argues that even a willingness to read novels is a sign of corruption. Thus a sound citizen body would not need to burn this novel because none of them would be tempted to read it (Rousseau 1959–1995, vol. II, 23).

Rousseau’s frequent attacks on other writers share the common charge that these writers are bold when they should be cautious and cautious when they
should be bold. Some, like Grotius and others, teach the powerful their rights and the weak their duties (967; see Rousseau 1990–1995, vol. 4, 146–7). Others, like Voltaire for example, undermine both the few restraints that exist for the powerful and the few consolations that exist for the poor (Rousseau 1990–1995, vol. III, 108–12). Thus Rousseau’s uniqueness with regard to telling the truth stems both from his willingness to live up to his motto of risking his life for the truth and from his ability to know when the truth should be told.

CONCLUSION

Rousseau’s position on censorship tries to harmonize two goals that can easily come into conflict. He wishes to protect a region of public morality beyond public (but not private) questioning but at the same time wants to promote both vigorous debate of issues of particular laws and policies and freedom to investigate general political principles. He suggests that censorship is ineffective in restoring a public morality that has largely disappeared or in bringing about a new one. If it is used as a means of change rather than preservation, it can only become the object of a factional power struggle. In such circumstances he is clearly on the side of those who exercise responsibility while attempting to evade the censors rather than on the side of those who use censorship for their own partisan purposes, whether that purpose be an attempt to restore the past or to establish a new orthodoxy.

Rather than openness or sincerity, the key word characterizing Rousseau’s policy as a writer is responsibility (cf. Grant 1994). Rousseauian responsibility has two parts. First, writers must take responsibility for their works by openly proclaiming themselves to be their authors or editors. Anonymous authors are all too prone to use their anonymity as a screen for private agendas and purely personal attacks. Rousseau rejects Voltaire’s motto, “Strike and conceal your hand.” Second, writers must exercise responsibility by practicing discretion on certain issues. Even a writer who enjoys the relative freedom allowed by living in corrupt times must write with the idea that his books will last beyond his age. Taken together, these two parts of Rousseauian responsibility explain the combination of boldness and caution characteristic of his works. Both his principles and practice consistently reveal his commitment to this view of responsible social criticism. A large part of his legacy is his creation of the image of the social critic as someone who adopts an adversarial stance toward the society in which he lives, attempting to influence politics while standing outside of the political process. Rousseauian responsibility requires that social critics make themselves into permanent outsiders, or at least marginal characters, to avoid becoming corrupted by the social vices they wish to attack. The allure of Rousseauian responsibility stems in large part from Rousseau’s intransigent and largely successful efforts to embody this image.

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