THE HISTORY OF IDEAS

ALSO BY DAVID RUNCIMAN

Confronting Leviathan: A History of Ideas

Where Power Stops: The Making and Unmaking of Presidents and Prime Ministers

How Democracy Ends

Politics: Ideas in Profile

The Handover

THE HISTORY OF IDEAS

Equality, Justice and Revolution

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For Helen

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PREFACE

This book, like its predecessor, *Confronting Leviathan*, is based on a series of podcasts that I put out during and after the Covid pandemic. The first book explored the theme of the state and its power across history, which seemed appropriate for a time when our political masters were locking us down in our homes for our own safety. This book is about imagining a better world, which is more fitting for the post-Covid era. Its central themes are equality, justice and revolution, and it examines the ways that different writers have tried to release us from the traps in which we find ourselves and to conceive of greater fairness and greater freedom in how we organise our collective existence. Each of the authors I write about wanted to know why we find ourselves in the situation that we do and how we could achieve something better. Sometimes the question is personal: why am I a slave? Sometimes it is general: why is modern life so stifling? In each case, I hope the answers are provocative and also, on occasion, inspiring.

These chapters are written to be read independently of each other but together they tell a story that runs from the middle of the eighteenth century to the end of the twentieth. It is about trying to see through and beyond what is immediately in front of us – or, as Samuel Butler suggested, to go behind the looking glass. This book covers very different styles of writing – philosophical, autobiographical, polemical, anecdotal – and they were produced in a very wide range of settings – from Georgian

England and ante-bellum America to Weimar Germany and post-war France. However, I hope they have more in common than separates them. They are all about liberating our political imaginations.

I have tried to retain the conversational style of the original podcasts, though each chapter has been extensively rewritten and adapted for this book. Spoken prose and written prose are very different forms and I have done my best to retain the spirit of the first while attempting to meet the standards of the second. In the spoken version I moved between the past and historical present tenses and I have retained some of that flexibility here. All these are my personal takes on the different authors and works that I discuss. Each chapter touches on their life stories, but there are more extensive biographical sketches of each writer at the end of the book and also a guide to further reading by and about each of them. There is, as always, so much more to say about the history of these ideas. But I hope this book is a good place to start.

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JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU, *DISCOURSE ON INEQUALITY* (1755)

When we think about some of the deepest puzzles of politics we often start with a 'what' question. For instance, we can start by simply asking: what is politics? I began the previous book in this series with a version of that question from the seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes: what is the state? And then the questions that follow: what is peace? What counts as order or security? What can keep us safe? But those aren't the only 'what' questions by any means. Later in this book I will be discussing the twentieth-century political philosopher John Rawls, who said that his starting point for thinking philosophically about politics was what he called 'the first question': what is justice? And his extension of that question: what counts as a fair society? What is the society in which we would choose to live if we didn't know how well off we might be?

Often Rawls's question and Hobbes's question are set against each other and presented as a kind of choice. Either you are a 'what-is-justice?' philosopher or you are a 'what-is-peace?' philosopher. You have to decide which matters more: fairness or political order. Apparently, on some accounts, it is very difficult to have both.

But these are not the only kinds of fundamental questions that we can ask about politics. In this book I want to start with a different set of questions that I would characterise as 'why' questions. Not what is politics in general, but why do we have

this as our politics in particular? Or, put another way, these are the 'how' questions. How did we end up here? How did we find ourselves being ruled like this? By implication, the basic question is often simply: how did we wind up with these idiots in charge? Asking why can also lead to asking 'where' questions. Where did all this start? And if this is where we've ended up, why couldn't we find a better path?

Why this? How come? Where did we go wrong? I'm pretty sure we all recognise that these sometimes feel like the fundamental questions of politics. They have certainly felt like the fundamental questions of politics an awful lot in recent years.

I'm going to start with someone who posed these sorts of questions in a definitive form in the middle of the eighteenth century. They come from a book that was published in 1755 by the Swiss (not French, as he's often characterised) philosopher, thinker and writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The book in question is sometimes called Rousseau's *Second Discourse* and sometimes his *Discourse on Inequality*. It contains his most coruscating version of the 'how'/'why' questions. How/why did we end up in a world where, as Rousseau puts it, 'a child should govern an old man, an imbecile should lead a wise man, and a handful of people should gorge themselves with superfluities while the hungry multitude goes in want of necessities'? The first question is of its time, at a period when children might still be kings. The second speaks to people across the ages, given that seeming idiots do so often end up in charge. But it's the third that really bites. How the hell did we end up in a world where the rich continue to stuff their faces while the poor lack even the basics? That, in the *Second Discourse*, is essentially Rousseau's question: not *what*, but *how* and *why.*

One of the interesting things about that question is that it's not where Rousseau starts. These are in fact the very last lines of the book: it ends with this puzzle. (The book doesn't actually end there since the main text is followed by a whole series of

slightly crazy footnotes into which Rousseau crams everything he couldn't stuff into his core argument: disquisitions and asides about all sorts from vegetarianism and the sex life of animals to some pretty weird anthropology; it's all worth reading.) But the book's argument finishes there because the 'why' question begins at the end. If the question is how we eventually ended up where we are, then you do have to work backwards. This is particularly true if you want to know where we went wrong. We have to retrace our steps. And who are 'we' here? For Rousseau it's a question of retracing our steps as a society, and ultimately, as he does in this book, as a species.

So the questions at the end are actually the starting point for Rousseau's argument. There is a somewhat different question at the beginning of the *Second Discourse* because the book was written in response to an essay competition of the kind they used to have in eighteenth-century France. The Academy (in this case of Dijon) liked to pose a big question and invite anyone who fancied their chances to try to answer it. The question for this competition – the one that Rousseau was ostensibly answering – starts with a 'what': what is the origin of inequality among people and is it authorised by natural law? The second half of that question suggests a yes/no answer, which is always a bit dangerous for an essay prize because someone could just say no and be done with it. Rousseau did indeed say no but luckily he went on at some length to explain why.

The book is called Rousseau's *Second Discourse* because five years earlier his *First Discourse* had been published as an answer to another essay competition question. That time round the question for the prize was as follows: 'Has the restoration of the sciences and the arts contributed to the purification of morals?' (The Academy had a taste for somewhat pompous turns of phrase.) It was another yes or no question and Rousseau's answer was emphatically another no. That question was essentially asking whether the arts and sciences have made us

better people – more decent, more honourable, leading better lives – and Rousseau said: no, no, no.

The first discourse was more important in Rousseau's story – certainly in his life story – than the second for a couple of reasons. First of all, as he said in his own account of his life, when he was thinking about that question and considering the possibility of entering the competition the answer came to him as a kind of revelation. A conventional wisdom of the time – the wisdom of enlightenment progress – assumed that the arts and the sciences, even if they don't quite lead to the purification of morals, certainly lead to the betterment of the human condition. But when Rousseau really considered it – he had been walking aimlessly in the countryside and deep in thought, as was his habit – he suddenly realised that this couldn't possibly be right. In truth, human beings were once much better off than they are now. Indeed, we were once better people, and what has happened to our morals is that what we call civilisation has corrupted both them and us. We are worse off precisely because of what is conventionally called 'progress', which turns out to be nothing of the sort. So we have the story entirely the wrong way round. Once Rousseau concluded that civilisation was a kind of trap he never budged from that position. He varied the emphasis he placed on it and the implications he drew from it across his many writings, but it was a genuinely life-changing revelation for him. After he had truly looked back, he never looked back.

The other reason the first discourse matters is that he won the competition – somewhat surprisingly, given the pomposity of the question and the clarity of Rousseau's answer. He was telling the Academy that their question was nonsense, but he won anyway. In winning the prize Rousseau's life was changed because it made him famous. It didn't make him as famous as he was to become later: truly world-famous (albeit in terms of the shrunken world back then), one of the most famous people in Europe, a genuine household name. But winning set him on the

road to international celebrity and it introduced him to French Enlightenment society, particularly in Paris, where he met the great men and women of the day. It was his calling card.

The first discourse may have changed Rousseau's life. But the second is the more significant, partly because it's simply better. It's certainly more interesting. Arguably, the first essay question that Rousseau had to answer made it a bit too easy to go against conventional wisdom because he was being invited to attack the pretensions of the arts and the sciences, and even artists and scientists sometimes wonder whether they've got a slightly inflated impression of themselves, or more often whether their fellow artists and scientists are too keen on their own importance. The intellectual elite can be an easy target. But in the *Second Discourse* the line of attack had to be much broader because he was talking about everyone. The *Second Discourse* is an argument about what it is to be human – and that includes all the non-artists and the non-scientists as well. It means all of us. It's an incredibly wide-ranging, sweeping analysis. It was clearly too sweeping for the judges because he didn't win the prize second time round. This one was too much for them.

Rousseau could be extremely annoying – he certainly had plenty of his own pretensions – and it may be that by making himself famous he had allowed his peers to decide they didn't really like him. But prizes come and go and prize-winners are soon forgotten. The entry that didn't win is still the better book. In fact, it's an utterly remarkable book, quite unlike any other. It's more widely read now than the *First Discourse*, even though it's not the book on which Rousseau's eternal fame has come to rest. There are later works for which he is now better known. His writing on education in *Émile* (1762); the self-exposing autobiography in his book *The Confessions* (1770), which more or less invented the genre of the tell-all life story; and his great work of political philosophy, *The Social Contract* (also 1762). But I've decided not to focus on *The Social Contract* here, not least because

the *Second Discourse* is the more original book. *The Social Contract* is also a highly arresting book but it is more philosophically self-contained and it has a narrower remit. The *Second Discourse* is about politics too – and education – but it goes beyond these categories. It is, in essence, an account of what it is for human beings to know themselves. In that sense, like *The Confessions*, it is a work of self-knowledge and self-revelation. But the subject here isn't just Rousseau himself, with all his curious peccadilloes and petty vanities. It is everyone.

To put it in more contemporary terms, Rousseau was writing about social self-harm, about the ways in which we are collectively at the mercy of our petty vanities. He believed that so-called 'civilised' society, particularly a society like mid-eighteenth-century France, was consistently harming itself, doing itself extraordinary damage, and that the human beings who made up this society were trapped in patterns of behaviour that were clearly bad for them. How did they get to this state, and why? Why was it so easy to fall into – and why is it so hard to escape – this self-destructive condition? The first thing to say about Rousseau's answer to these questions is that he doesn't try to present it as a choice, in the sense that he makes no attempt to identify the moment when we embraced this way of life and gave up on the alternatives. This isn't a fork-in-the-road story. It's more gradual than that. If anything it's an accident rather than a choice – or rather, it's a series of unfortunate events. Above all, it's a long story and Rousseau tells it as a story of countless generations of human experience.

At the same time, Rousseau doesn't simply present this as a tale of slow and steady decline from early promise to inevitable ruin. There are twists and turns along the way. Rousseau's version of the human story brings to mind a line from a very different writer and a very different kind of book: Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*. In that novel one character asks another, 'How did you go bankrupt?' and gets the celebrated

reply: 'Two ways, gradually then suddenly.' Rousseau's answer to how humanity went morally bankrupt is just that: gradually, then suddenly.

Hemingway was trying to convey about bankruptcy that much of the unravelling is contained in small, early steps of which we are barely conscious at the time: it's the little things that we do, the corners that we cut, the decisions we make that don't seem all that important, even if we sense they might be a little self-indulgent. Yet they build up, they accumulate, these little debts and little deceptions. And then the moment comes when there is a choice to be made, when things have to be done, and our resources suddenly are inadequate for the task at hand. That's when we discover that we don't actually have options, that the choice has already been made. When the bankruptcy comes it happens suddenly because it's already too late. Then we ask ourselves: how did we get here? And we realise that the story goes back to the beginning and that it started with the early missteps. That's the kind of story that Rousseau tells about all of us and for all of us in the *Second Discourse*.

So where does he think it actually begins? It begins with a version of what, as for Hobbes, has come to be known as 'state of nature' theory: an argument about what it is to be human in a pre-social setting. Rousseau's version echoes some – though by no means all – conventional eighteenth-century anthropology and uses language that many of us now find uncomfortable. He talks about what he calls 'primitive' societies, albeit primitive here meaning 'first', the primal state of humanity that is there at the beginning. Primitive also means pre-civilised, but you have to remember that when he says pre-civilised Rousseau does not think civilisation is a good thing. Rousseau never sneers at people who lack civilisation, even if he probably misunderstands and almost certainly caricatures them.

What was it like to live a natural existence? Rousseau says explicitly – and in direct contrast to Hobbes – that it was a time

of peace. In the state of nature humans were able peacefully and successfully to co-exist. We had no lasting incentive to harm each other. Why not? His answer turns on how we think about equality and inequality, which was the original question posed by the prize committee: what is the origin of inequality among people? Rousseau doesn't say that the natural condition of human beings is inherently equal. It's not that we were once all the same and that's what made us good to each other. We are all different. Some of us are strong, some of us are weak, some of us are naturally healthy and some much less so – and in natural societies if you get sick you will probably die, so inequalities of health really matter. But there is a kind of deeper equality here for Rousseau: healthy or unhealthy, before the advent of modern medicine (or, as it came to be called, healthcare) there was not a lot we could do about it. We are all equally at the mercy of the dictates of nature.

There is, though, a further equality, not between but within these separate categories of natural well-being. The unhealthy are equally vulnerable. But the healthy are equally self-sufficient. So the reason we can co-exist is that we are not co-dependent. The unhealthy will probably die prematurely. But the healthy can choose to live as they please. That does not mean that they will not conflict with each other. Rousseau doesn't believe that we are naturally nice any more than he thinks we are naturally nasty. We are human. But if we do get into conflict with other human beings we have an option, which is to walk away: self-sufficient individuals can just disappear into the woods if they have to. He's thinking of forager or hunter-gatherer societies: if you are a forager, just go and forage somewhere else if you don't like the people who are foraging around you. There is always a means of escape.

Rousseau makes the point explicitly that part of what he is arguing against is the vision of Thomas Hobbes, who had said that the state of nature is a state of war – the war of all

against all – where life is nasty, brutish and short and we cannot help but fight each other. Rousseau thinks that although conflict was sometimes natural it was also avoidable. There was nothing inevitable about it. One way to capture this difference is in the language of equality and inequality. What equalises us in the state of nature for Rousseau is that anyone can simply walk away from a fight; what equalises us for Hobbes is that anyone can attack anyone else. Another way to think about this is in terms of what happens when we're asleep. For Hobbes, sleep reveals our natural vulnerability: when you are asleep, no matter how strong you are when awake, you are unprotected from attack. For Rousseau, sleep is our natural escape valve: if you don't like someone just wait for that person to go to sleep and then disappear; you need never see them again. Sleep is an opportunity to get away for Rousseau; for Hobbes it is an opportunity to attack.

Nevertheless, the Hobbes versus Rousseau contrast does often get overblown. One example of that is a book that was published in 2019 by Rutger Bregman called *Humankind: A Hopeful History*. It joins the argument about whether we are naturally a conflictual or a cooperative species. Are humans prone to fight or are they prone to be friends? Bregman believes that in the modern world we've bought Hobbes's propaganda and we think that we need states because otherwise we will be at each other's throats. But it's wrong to think like that, he says. By nature we are more inclined to cooperate and actually it is states that make us more likely to fight. He may be right. Where Bregman is wrong is when he says that there is a choice in modern thought, such that you are on the side either of Hobbes or of Rousseau. Hobbes is the philosopher of hostility, whereas Rousseau is the philosopher of harmony: he is the friendly philosopher. That's pushing it far too far. Apart from anything else it's odd to think of Rousseau as the philosopher of friendship, given that his argument in the *Second Discourse* is quite explicitly about solitariness

and self-sufficiency. We can be at peace in nature because we don't depend on other people. We can be relatively indifferent to other human beings and that's what allows for security. When it comes to other people we don't need to care what they think of us and we don't need much to care what we think of them. On the whole we are free just to think about ourselves. And that does sound authentically like Rousseau, a man who was many things but emphatically was not nice, and who did spend an awful lot of time just thinking about himself.

In some ways Hobbes is the true philosopher of friendship, since he believes we are naturally drawn to it but also doomed to be disappointed by it. Hobbes's state of nature is where people want to be friends but they can't sustain the impulse because they can't trust each other. Rousseau isn't even sure they want – or need – to be friends. So I would put the contrast between Hobbes and Rousseau differently. The fundamental difference between their accounts of the state of nature is that Rousseau thinks in the state of nature we are not self-conscious, in the sense that we don't really compare ourselves to other human beings because we don't have to. Of course, we do make some comparisons. We will naturally compare ourselves to wild beasts and we will know that they are stronger than us, so if you meet a lion or a tiger you should flee as fast as you can. But that doesn't trigger in us feelings of inadequacy or self-consciousness. We might worry about lions but we don't worry whether we are better or worse creatures than lions, because our relative weakness is simply a fact about the natural world. Being eaten by a lion is a terrible fate but it need not affect our pride. (Being fed to lions by other human beings – in front of a mob in a Roman colosseum, say – is something else altogether, a humiliation as well as a horror. But nothing about a Roman colosseum – the show, the baying mob, the captured lions – would Rousseau call natural.)

For Hobbes, by contrast, pride is hardwired in humanity from the beginning. Hobbes is, among other things, the

philosopher of vanity – of human preening, of our desire to look better than other people, even if that means kidding ourselves – and he thinks that's part of what makes us human and what distinguishes us from lions, who might look like they're preening whereas in truth they are just being themselves. Rousseau doesn't agree. He thinks vanity doesn't arrive until later, with the advent of civilisation. To start with we were more like lions, even if we were sometimes their prey.

However, Rousseau does also believe that we naturally possess an innate self-centredness, which he calls *amour de soi*: love of self. It means we have a desire to preserve ourselves because all human beings, indeed all animals, are going to try to avoid death: it's only natural. Yet to call it 'selfishness' would be going a bit too far. It is simply a part of what it means to be alive. So far, so Hobbesian. But for Rousseau that drive for self-preservation in the state of nature goes with another quality that is very different and which he calls 'pity' and we might call sympathy ('pity' in Rousseau's context does not have its current connotations of mild contempt – it is closer to compassion). One way in which we connect with other human beings is that we do not like to see them suffer. Rousseau thinks this is just a fact of our human make-up: true then, true now, inescapably true. When we see another human being suffering – particularly a vulnerable human being, like a child – we will be moved by it. Not to be moved at all by the suffering of others is to be inhuman – or at the very least to be a psychopath.

The drive to survive we share with other animals; pity is quintessentially human. But Rousseau recognises that human beings are susceptible to another kind of response to other people: we feel their pain but we can also feel pain at their relative indifference to us when our suffering is not obvious (as perhaps most suffering is not). We do find ourselves wondering how we appear in their eyes. Our distress might arouse their pity but when we are not in distress – when we are just going about

our business – we may not be of much interest to other people. They don't care about our inner lives. Why should they? So, without being particularly preening creatures, we seek ways to build ourselves up, to attract their attention, to stand out. And we notice others doing the same – trying to be noticed. That gives us something to compare ourselves to. Their self-assertion makes us aware that attracting notice is a competitive business.

Rousseau calls this *amour propre*: that sense of self-love – or self-importance – that humans have in relation to other people. *Amour de soi* is self-interested. *Amour propre* is other-directed. At the same time, though all human beings are capable of feeling both kinds of self-centredness (even saints have some *amour propre*, which leads them to seek attention), there is nothing to say *amour propre* should predominate – let alone predetermine – the shape of any human society. The relative strength of these two very human qualities is contingent, and both of them co-exist with pity.

So what had to happen to make later human societies – such as eighteenth-century France – so riddled with status-driven behaviour and status anxiety? Why did *amour propre* win out, given that nothing about the state of nature requires it? *Amour propre* is merely dormant at the beginning of the human story. How did it become so dominant?

Rousseau's answer is that it happened gradually and suddenly, with a certain inevitability but also in leaps and bounds. *Amour propre* is not some external infection that arrived mid-way through the story of human evolution and sent us off the rails. It was always latent and it got brought to life. The difficulty is explaining precisely how, given that the conditions that trigger *amour propre* – competition, comparison, contestation – would also seem to presuppose its existence.

This conundrum is analogous to another matter that troubles Rousseau, the deep puzzle of the emergence of language, one of the hardest things to explain in human evolution. How

did we acquire language? What makes it so hard to understand is that it almost looks as though the cooperation needed to produce language also requires us to have language in order to cooperate. How do you agree what words mean unless you can talk about what words mean? Rousseau can hardly be blamed for feeling that he lacked a solid basis to answer this question – it would be a couple of hundred years before the evolutionary evidence would be assembled, and even today the origins of language remain contentious. What Rousseau recognises is that in the long story of how humanity got from what it was to what it has become there is a close and complex relationship between cooperation, competition and co-dependence. Language is a form of co-dependence and a source of competition as well as a means of cooperation. When we communicate we will inevitably compare ourselves with, and we will sometime wonder if we can trust, other people.

Rousseau argues that two events mark a decisive step-change in the human story, kick-starting the great awakening of *amour propre*: the twin inventions of agriculture and metallurgy (or what is now sometimes called the Agricultural Revolution, which happened around ten thousand years ago). As Rousseau puts it, human vanity does not begin with gold and silver; it begins with wheat and iron. When human beings move from hunter-gatherer or forager societies to agricultural or settled societies, when they start to till the land, remaining in one place in order to plant and grow the food they need, when they work out how to use the tools required for this endeavour, they also acquire patterns of hierarchy and ownership: my tools, my land. Those same tools also become the tools of a new kind of warfare: from ploughshares into swords. As all this unfolds, it produces a division of labour. If some people are making the tools, then some other people are going to have to provide food for them, and there will be a co-dependency: toolmakers need to be fed, and feeders need tools to produce the food.

But the change is more fundamental than that for Rousseau. It represents a transformation in how we experience space and time. In the natural state of humanity we live day-to-day: you get up in the morning, you go to sleep at night, and that's your life; no one has to think about tomorrow because tomorrow it is always possible to walk away from today. But once you are settled in one place, and particularly once you are planting and then waiting for what you plant to turn into food, you have to plan and think ahead. Planning and thinking ahead require human beings to worry about other human beings. Can they be relied upon? Will they wait? How will their impatience be contained?

Space changes too because now you are in one place, it becomes harder to walk away. Can you be sure that there will be somewhere you can walk away to? What if the next piece of land has been settled as well, and by people who are not your kind of people? It becomes a lot harder to go off grid once there are wheat and iron – by no means impossible, but harder.

By now humanity is on the slippery slope to the next stage, which is the point where things really start to go wrong: the invention of private property. Rousseau says the moment when the first human being established of a particular piece of land 'This is mine' and staked it out and gave it a boundary was the beginning of the end, or at least the end of the beginning. It begins what Rousseau thinks will turn out to be the worst effect of progress or civilisation so-called: the dominance of how things appear over how they really are. If you're going to stake a claim to the land, you're going to need a reason for it – and by definition for Rousseau the justification will be spurious. Naturally it isn't yours rather than mine or mine rather than yours. Property is not a natural phenomenon. So you're going to have to come up with an artificial argument to explain why you have some right to it. That argument will be fake; your entitlement will be a fiction. So we are on the road to fake arguments being

what matter, and the more skilful you are at a fake argument the better off you will be. How things seem will matter more than reality, appearance will be the currency that we trade in. Once that happens Rousseau thinks we really are in deep trouble.

Now the story accelerates again. The division between rich and poor gets reframed as a division between strong and weak. The rich justify what they do by saying that they're stronger, which explains their entitlement. From spurious claims to strength over weakness it's a small further step to the division between masters and slaves. Some human beings end up being owned by others. Property produces social divisions, which become entrenched and then get backed up by law, which requires the creation of states with coercive authority. The direction of travel is from gateposts to guards to laws to states. The first person stakes out the ground simply by marking it, but then realises that boundaries need to be guarded. To justify the existence of guards and the use of force, laws are required. Laws mean politics and then politics becomes the basis of coercion. At that point we are truly trapped.

Why is it allowed to happen? So what if one person says this is mine – why does everyone else let that person get away with it? The answer is that the many are naturally disadvantaged against the few because they lack a single voice with which to protest. The natural condition of mankind is, after all, a solitary one. We do not possess the means to come to an agreement about what it is we all want, even if what we don't want is already happening. It is easier for a single person, or for a small group, to tell a single, self-serving story about what's needed: a set of rules, maybe even a set of rights, that apply to everyone. It will be a spurious tale. But it could be highly persuasive, particularly if skilfully presented.

We fall into the trap because we come to feel we have no choice, that it is already too late to resist. To borrow a more recent term, there is a network effect at work here. The more

people who sign up to appearance over reality, the harder it is to insist on reality. Indeed, if signing up gets you fed, gets you protection, you really have to be brave to walk away. But Rousseau thinks it's not just a trap for the poor; it's a trap for everyone, including the rich. Even the person who says 'This is mine' is boxing himself in. Rousseau makes this argument as he brings the story up to his present day, a world in which the rich relatively have so much while the poor have so very little. If some have far more than they need while others have nowhere near enough, that is bad for the rich too. Eighteenth-century 'civilised' societies were places where even the well-to-do suffered from cramped, shallow lives, along with persistent ill health: they were diseased, they were duped by the false promises of spurious medicines, they were corrupted by luxury, they spent their time and their attention trying to look good while forgetting about what really mattered. Rousseau rails against the hypocrisy of civilisation, with its absurd double standards that insist on artificial values over natural ones.

In one sense it's a relatively familiar argument: Rousseau certainly wasn't the only person who saw through the painted sham of civilised behaviour. But it's important to say that Rousseau's argument goes beyond routine denunciations of the shallowness of modern life. What makes it both bracing and shocking is that he doesn't just reject the hypocrisy of a luxurious, civilised, avaricious existence. He rejects the trappings of a settled existence entirely, including those features that we have come to think of as natural. All of it is corrupted. Pity, for instance. We never abandoned pity – we still retain that capacity to suffer for the suffering of others, even in selfish societies like ours. But Rousseau thinks pity under civilisation is different from pity under the conditions of a primitive existence, where, as he puts it, fellow feeling is 'obscure but strong'. What he means is there isn't a lot of weeping and wailing, there is not a lot of emoting, but there is real conviction. In a state of nature, people won't

cry if they see someone else suffering, but they will do something about it. He thinks that under civilisation what you get are prominent and ostentatious displays of pity, but the actual feeling is weak. It's a view that still has bite. We cry when we see a child starving on the news but on the whole we don't do much about it. Pity becomes performative.

One of Rousseau's most radical arguments – and for many of his readers, then and now, his most shocking ones – is to reject even family life as a sham. The family looks like it's the one thing that connects us all the way back to the start of the human story. It was surely necessary even in the natural primitive state of humankind, the one inevitable co-dependency: fathers, mothers and children. But Rousseau says even that is not natural. Here he is arguing against another seventeenth-century English philosopher, John Locke, who believed that because of the way human beings are naturally constructed – pregnancy is arduous, childhood is vulnerable and weak, human beings take a long time relative to other animals to become self-sufficient – we need a lot of protecting. Mothers need support and protection during pregnancy; children need support and protection during early childhood. Inevitably this will result in a division of labour, on the standard account: fathers will look after mothers, mothers will look after babies. It's assumed to be natural: the only way that the human species can preserve itself.

Rousseau says no. It's not natural. He doesn't think in the state of nature there is a reason for fathers to wait around for the babies to be born. Some babies will live, some babies will die. He doesn't think even pity for children will be enough to cement family ties.

Rousseau believed that human beings are naturally both able and entitled to walk away from family life. What's more, he didn't just think it. He lived it. The most notoriously shocking feature of Rousseau's personal life is that he had five children but he did not raise any of them; they were given away. That

is, they were taken to the foundling home, which is perhaps not quite as bad as leaving them out on the hillside to die, but it's closer to that than any idea that we might have of leaving them in a warm, safe place where someone else will look after them. Rousseau effectively abandoned his children. He eventually married their mother – a woman sometimes described as a semi-literate laundry maid – but only after the children were long gone. Maybe he thought he was being true to himself. Who knows what his motivations were? But it's one of the reasons I don't think it's plausible to say of Rousseau that he is the nice philosopher. Hobbes and Locke, neither of whom had any children, were both much nicer than Rousseau.

Rousseau may not have been nice, but he wasn't nostalgic either. He didn't think that it was possible to go back to an earlier, truer, better time. Human societies could not retrace, let alone reverse, their slow, incremental, and then much quicker and ultimately fatal, missteps: through wheat and iron, through property and law, through the family and the state, to luxury, to privilege, to the farcical and absurd performance of a truly modern existence. We were once something naturally but we are not natural any more. Certainly we could all do with more nature in our lives. Rousseau would encourage us all to get out into the countryside, to breathe a more natural air, even if we can't quite fold ourselves away into the woods and forage to live like we used to. But he didn't think that as societies we could renaturalise ourselves. Societies are not natural entities and we have all become very social animals.

So if there's no going back, what *can* we do? This is where the political philosophy comes in; indeed, it is where his later, more famous work, *The Social Contract*, comes in. Rousseau agrees with Hobbes that politics is not natural. It is artificial: we have to invent it. That said, the story Rousseau tells in the *Second Discourse* is of a politics invented inadvertently, haphazardly, without forethought. If we could do it more consciously

than we have done in the past, then maybe there is an alternative to that stumbling path where we keep making non-choices and find ourselves in a place where we feel trapped.

The difference here between Rousseau and Hobbes is that Rousseau explicitly rejects the primary Hobbesian mechanism for achieving artificial order, which is political representation. The only way we can achieve peace, Hobbes says, is to franchise out our decision-making power to someone or something else. Let someone or something else choose for us for the sake of stability. Rousseau rejects this and he rejects representation because for him it is the problem of, not the solution to, what's wrong with modern, civilised life. Representation as the basis of politics means putting appearance over reality because we end up living under laws that we haven't created for ourselves. They are someone else's laws – someone else's justification – which means we will have alienated our true selves.

Rousseau wants us to reclaim our artificiality for ourselves. In *The Social Contract* he comes up with a deceptively simple means for achieving this, which is the possibility that we can reclaim politics by doing it collectively: we can amalgamate our wills into something called the general will, so that we as a people can say that we rule ourselves. But *The Social Contract* does not make it sound easy and Rousseau was clear it is really, really hard. Given what we have become, given who we are, to do law-making ourselves is incredibly difficult. It means making significant sacrifices – including giving up the pleasures of living for appearances' sake – and it won't be for everyone. It can probably only happen on a relatively small scale, in city-states like Geneva, which is where Rousseau was born and grew up. It requires a particular kind of social existence: what he calls 'austere democracy'. It is not a nostalgic vision – it has none of that cosy comfort – but it is looking back to a more spartan way of life. Less luxury, less commerce, less trade, a check on corporate power, restrictions of personal freedom for the sake of the

collective. This is not natural life but it is a more pared-down life, with fewer distractions, fewer comparisons, less *amour propre*, less pride. That's really demanding. It was demanding in the eighteenth century. God knows it's demanding now.

The *Social Contract* version of politics is not presented by Rousseau as a panacea. Rather, he is suggesting it as a test against which we can judge just how far we are from a politics that might make sense for us, that might emancipate us from the trap into which we have fallen. But for his critics Rousseau's politics is its own kind of trap: its tempting clarity conceals its impossible demands. Where does that lead? One of his critics, Benjamin Constant, looking back from 1819, blamed Rousseau for the catastrophe of the French Revolution and the Terror that followed, because he thought that *The Social Contract* was asking too much of modern citizens. That kind of austere collective self-rule was impossible in a society like France, a nation of tens of millions of people, by that point committed not simply to luxury but to trade and commerce and progress and the arts and the sciences and the private pleasures of personal freedom: a society made up of people like you and me. In the end, trying to save the state from the failings of political representation risks turning the state into a monster of oppression.

But I'm not sure that Rousseau ever believed political self-rule was possible in a society like France, whatever his followers might have imagined. I think he held it up deliberately as an almost impossibly demanding standard for politics to let his contemporaries see who they really were. In the *Second Discourse* he shows us how far we have come from what we once were. In *The Social Contract* he shows us how far we are from where we need to be.

The *Second Discourse* leads in other directions than just revolutionary politics. It points towards nineteenth-century theories of evolution because it is itself an evolutionary account of human development, emancipated from conventional ideas of progress.

We somehow have become ourselves without either choosing it or knowing it: there are forces at work that have shaped us and which are in us but of which we are not in control. Rousseau's version of evolution was not Darwin's because he had no idea of the science to come. But it foreshadows later arguments about what it is to understand the past in evolutionary terms and to think about the ways in which even our freedoms might be predetermined by our evolutionary inheritance. The argument of the *Second Discourse* also points towards the twentieth-century intellectual revolution in psychotherapy and psychology, because it is in part an argument about self-knowledge. What would it mean truly to understand our origins, truly to know who we are? What would it mean to think about the ways in which we are shaped not just by the big choices, not even always by the little choices, but by the decisions we give no thought to, some of which we don't even know that we've made? What would it then mean to analyse ourselves and try to understand what choices we still have left? That's Rousseau's project too.

If I had to say what the central difference was between Rousseau and Hobbes – between where I started the previous book in this series and where I am starting this one – it is that Hobbes wanted us to be reconciled to the doubleness of modern life. That was the background condition of being alive in the age of artificiality: we are going to be alienated from ourselves and we are going to have to learn to live with it. It's the price we pay for personal freedom, for creating a private space in which we can try to make something of ourselves, and then to ask others to take care and take notice. Rousseau says no: we can't flourish under those conditions and we shouldn't be reconciled to them. Self-assertion of that kind – founded on superficial self-definition and buttressed by representative truths – is a lie.

Rousseau doesn't think we can necessarily make ourselves whole again, and certainly not by retracing the story that takes us back to the natural origins of human inequality. That is more

likely to leave us depressed at our shallow lives. But he thinks we shouldn't give up trying, even under the artificial conditions of modernity, to be *more* whole, to own the artificiality for ourselves and not to accept that it's going to be something that comes to us from the outside and is bound to be alienating. We shouldn't give up. We should continue to fight to make modern life less alienating than it would otherwise be, particularly given what we have become: self-conscious creatures, human beings who spend a ridiculous amount of our time not pitying each other but comparing ourselves to each other, wondering whether we are better or worse than that person, wondering whether we can survive or not without that person, entering willingly and sometimes unwillingly and often unknowingly into relationships of co-dependency. Given that's who we are – given that we are no longer natural human beings – we should own it. Given that we are so obsessed with appearance, we shouldn't give up on the project of trying to make the appearances more real, better able to be appreciated for what they are. We should know ourselves better. Who's to say that Rousseau is wrong about that?

2

JEREMY BENTHAM, *AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PRINCIPLES OF MORALS AND LEGISLATION* (1780)

There is a convention that has been adopted in contemporary American political commentary known as the Goldwater Rule. It says that we should resist the temptation to diagnose the psychological condition of politicians – either as actual professional psychologists or as armchair psychologists – when we haven't actually treated them. (If we have treated them then doctor/patient confidentiality means we should keep quiet anyway.) It's too easy to say of this or that public figure that they clearly suffer from narcissistic personality disorder or psychopathic tendencies or whatever it is. In 1964 a group of psychiatrists was polled on whether the seemingly irascible and possibly irrational Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater was fit to be president. Goldwater sued the magazine that published the results and he won. Hence the rule that exists in his name. A lot of people found it very hard to abide by the Goldwater Rule during presidency of Donald Trump, but the principle still stands.

There isn't an equivalent to the Goldwater Rule for political philosophers. Perhaps there should be. A strong temptation often exists to diagnose a condition in order to 'explain' a philosopher's view of the world. In particular, there is a tendency to speculate about whether certain well-known thinkers were on

the autistic spectrum. I have read academic articles that say that Hobbes was clearly autistic; that Kant was clearly autistic; that Wittgenstein was clearly autistic. But perhaps the standout case is the one that is made about the philosopher who is the subject of this chapter – Jeremy Bentham.

In 2006 an article by two psychologists, Philip Lucas and Anne Sheeran, speculated about Bentham, genius, creativity and their relationship to autism. It made the case that, from what we know about Bentham, it seems very likely that he did indeed have Asperger's syndrome. What's the evidence? Bentham was an obsessive systematiser: he loved looking for patterns everywhere. He also was someone who was obsessed with language and with trying to pin it down. He invented many new words – often ugly or eccentric neologisms like 'abstractiveness', 'disprobabilise' and 'ratiocinatory', along with a few, like 'exhaustive' and 'omnicompetent', that have entered the language. It frustrated him that many words in everyday usage were highly evasive when he really wanted to know not just what he was talking about but what other people were talking about too. He was remarkably prolix. Over the course of his long life he wrote millions and millions of words. The Bentham Project, which tries now to publish all of those words – because most of them were not published in Bentham's lifetime – has been a generations-long endeavour at University College London. The volume of material is overwhelming and the project is ongoing. The scale of it is in part a product of Bentham's obsession with system, with trying to nail everything down. Bentham spent his life believing that it was always possible to make things clearer.

He was afraid of ghosts and he worried about masks. One of the features of Asperger's syndrome is a difficulty in reading conventional social cues, particularly non-verbal signals, so that the human face itself can sometimes seem to be a mask. Bentham always wanted to know what lay behind the human mask, in large part perhaps because he struggled to read it. He

was eccentric. He gave names to household objects: he called his teapot Dickie.

The account that Lucas and Sheeran give is sympathetic and scholarly. All in all it's quite convincing. But perhaps there should be a Bentham Rule for this sort of diagnosis of historical figures. It does tend to feed into a common caricature of Bentham. The conventional criticism of Bentham is that he is the philosopher who went too far – he didn't know when to stop because he lacked a form of basic social understanding. Hence the endless, lifelong outpouring of words and systems and lists, constantly breaking things down, enumerating them, counting and recounting them, trying to recalibrate them. Here was a philosopher who didn't know or understand all the shortcuts other people use to navigate the world and so missed too much about the human experience that, for want of a better word, more neurotypical people would understand: people who could read human expressions and human faces, people who could recognise human emotions, people who knew why the conventions were there.

That view feeds into the two flagship examples of what's thought to be wrong with Bentham's philosophy, which is known as utilitarianism. The first is one of the great practical schemes of Bentham's life and perhaps the project for which he is now best known – the Panopticon. Among the many other things that Bentham designed – including multiple suggested constitutions for various different states (France, Australia, Venezuela) – he designed a prison. It was meant to be a rational prison, based on the principle that a well-ordered jail would be one in which the governor could observe the prisoners but the prisoners could not see or know by whom they were being observed. The idea was that because they couldn't see and couldn't know when they were being watched they would behave better. The Panopticon – which Bentham spent half a lifetime trying to persuade the British government to build – was organised to maximise good

behaviour at minimum cost. But for many people it seems like a parody of Enlightenment thinking, the inhuman version of rational efficiency that misses what really matters, which is what it would feel like to be watched without knowing that you were being watched. 'Panopticon' has become a ubiquitous term for the horrors of a surveillance society. So the Panopticon is exhibit one against Bentham.

Exhibit two is utilitarianism itself, as summed up by Bentham's notorious catchphrase: 'The greatest happiness of the greatest number'. For Bentham the purpose of utilitarianism was to provide both the principle and the standard against which all human endeavours should be judged: do they add to the sum of human happiness? In some respects it looks like an unobjectionable point of view. We are all for happiness, aren't we? But for his many critics it is also a grossly reductive perspective because it is all about number. It's another of Bentham's adding-up schemes and his critics have often said that therefore it prioritises quantity over quality. It doesn't discriminate between the different types or kinds of happiness because, in order to be enumerated, they all have to be commensurable and translatable into a common currency. That currency is the calculus of pleasure and pain, though which all human endeavours are to be assessed. After all, what is it that we all want? Pleasure. What is it that we want to avoid? Pain. The rest is just window dressing.

As a result Bentham is sneered at as the person who famously thought that 'pushpin' (or let's say pinball) and poetry are just as good, and just as good for us, as each other: you take your pleasures where you find them. There aren't the higher pleasures and the lower pleasures. There's just whatever hits the spot. So he is caricatured as 'the calculating machine', which is how his Victorian critics (including Dickens) saw him, the man who just added up like a human abacus, unfeeling, unthinking, unrecognising of the variety of human life, the complexity of human