



ROBIN DOUGLASS

ROUSSEAU & HOBBS

Nature, Free Will, & the Passions

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Robin Douglass

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At a few points in this book I have borrowed passages from articles I have published previously and I thank the publishers of those journals for permitting me to reuse that material here: 'Rousseau's Debt to Burlamaqui: The Ideal of Nature and the Nature of Things', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 72, no. 2 (2011); 'Rousseau's Critique of Representative Sovereignty: Principled or Pragmatic?', *American Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 3 (2013); 'The Body Politic "is a fictitious body": Hobbes on Imagination and Fiction', *Hobbes Studies* 27, no. 2 (2014). Drafts of most of the chapters, in one form or another, have been presented to conferences and workshops at the universities of Amsterdam, Bristol, Exeter, Manchester, Sussex, Verona, York, Manchester Metropolitan University, and the European University Institute. I am grateful for the instructive feedback received from the audiences on each occasion. A number of people have discussed elements of this work with me in great depth and/or have generously taken the time to comment on (in some cases multiple) drafts of the manuscript. I would

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A Note on Sources and Translations

All references to Rousseau's texts are given to the following collected editions of his work:

- OC *Œuvres complètes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, 5 vols, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (Paris: Gallimard, 1959–1995).
- CC *Correspondance complète de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, 52 vols, ed. Ralph Alexander Leigh (Geneva: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1965–1971; Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1972–1977).
- CW *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, 13 vols, ed. Christopher Kelly and Roger D. Masters (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1990–2010).

Where both are available, references are given to the French edition and then the English translation, in each case by volume and page numbers (e.g. OC1:3/CW2:4). The only exception is with references to *Du contrat social*, which are given simply to book and chapter numbers for ease of reference with other editions (e.g. i.2). References to Hobbes's *Elements of Law*, *De cive*, and *Leviathan* are also given in this form to chapter and section/paragraph numbers. Similarly, where appropriate, references to other primary sources are given to book and/or chapter and/or section numbers, rather than page numbers (e.g. iii.4, or v.vi.vii).

Where suitable, references are given to scholarly English translations of primary sources. Where these have been either unavailable or inadequate the translations provided are my own. Occasionally I have felt it necessary to alter (silently) the English translation or preserve the original French term. Most notably, both *amour de soi-même* and *amour-propre* are sometimes translated into English as self-love, but given the importance Rousseau attached to the distinction between these two varieties of self-love I have retained the French terms. I have also standardized all translations of *amour de la patrie* to love of fatherland. I have refrained from updating references to 'man' and usages of the male pronoun into gender neutral language when discussing the ideas of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century authors, as it is often unclear (especially with Rousseau) whether the referent is men alone or all humans.

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Introduction

In a word, I see no tolerable medium between the most austere democracy and the most perfect Hobbism.

J.-J. Rousseau, 'Lettre à Mirabeau'

On 18 July 1767, the French economist and Physiocrat, Victor Riqueti Marquis de Mirabeau, wrote to Jean-Jacques Rousseau requesting his opinion on a recent publication.¹ The work in question, *L'ordre naturel et essentiel des sociétés politiques* (1767), was by fellow Physiocrat, Pierre-Paul Le Mercier de la Rivière, and supplied one of the most important statements of Physiocracy's political and economic proposals. Chief amongst the political proposals was the idea of legal despotism, which involved an enlightened absolute monarch executing positive laws that are in accordance with the 'natural and essential order'. A legal despotism, so the Physiocrats thought, could ensure that laws which conform to the natural order are authoritatively enforced, yet this would still count as rule by law, rather than rule by the arbitrary will of a despot.²

Rousseau's response to Mirabeau was emphatic. The idea of legal despotism was completely wrongheaded because even if it is in a despot's interest to govern legally, his passions will too often lead him to act contrary to his real or enlightened interest. For all of their attempts to calculate the despot's true interest, the Physiocrats had failed to study the human heart and the 'play of the passions'. The systems they proposed would thus be suitable only for 'the people

¹ 'Mirabeau à Rousseau, le 18 juillet 1767', in Rousseau, CC33:239–240.

² On the salient distinctions between legal and arbitrary despotism see Le Mercier de la Rivière, *L'ordre naturel*, especially pp. 278–284, 305–317.

of Utopia' and not for 'the children of Adam'.³ At best, legal despotism relied on an ill-conceived understanding of human nature. At worst, it was simply an oxymoron. The problem of politics, Rousseau continued, is to find a form of government where law is placed above man. The Physiocrats' proposals failed to supply a satisfactory resolution to this problem and, expressing his regret that such a government could probably never be found, Rousseau instead claimed that it is necessary to turn to the other extreme and establish the most arbitrary despotism, or 'the most perfect Hobbism'. There could be no tolerable middle ground, for it is the conflict between man and law that throws the state into continual civil war.⁴ These were the two extremes that Rousseau posited as being the only tolerable and stable political conditions; either place man above law by making the sovereign a mortal God, or place law above man, guided only by the celestial voice of the general will.

The 'Lettre à Mirabeau' provides one of Rousseau's most pessimistic reflections on eighteenth-century politics. Elsewhere, however, he appears to have held out some hope that law could be placed above man; indeed, the problem of doing so permeates his principal political writings. As early as the *Discours sur l'économie politique*, originally composed for the fifth volume of the *Encyclopédie* (1755), Rousseau wrote of how the rule of law could resolve the problem of politics:

By what inconceivable art could the means have been found to subjugate men in order to render them free? . . . How can it be that they obey and no one commands, that they serve and have no master, and are all the more free, in fact, because under what appears as subjugation, no one loses any of his freedom except what would harm the freedom of another? These marvels are the work of the law. It is to law alone that men owe justice and freedom.⁵

Rousseau's most developed account of how law could be placed above man was set out in his 1762 masterpiece, *Du contrat social*, which he later described as a work 'so decried, but so necessary; there you will see the Law put above men; there you will see freedom laid claim to, but always under the authority of the laws'.⁶ The concern was evidently still on Rousseau's mind between 1771 and 1772 when he was drafting his last significant political work, the *Considérations sur le*

³ 'Rousseau à Mirabeau, le 26 juillet 1767', CC33:239–240. Rousseau eventually permitted Mirabeau to publish their correspondence, even though Mirabeau thought Rousseau had misunderstood some of the Physiocrats' key ideas. More generally see Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge*, pp. 222–239.

⁴ 'Rousseau à Mirabeau, le 26 juillet 1767', CC33:240.

⁵ Rousseau, *Discours sur l'économie politique*, OC3:248/CW3:146.

⁶ Rousseau, *Lettres écrites de la montagne*, OC3:811/CW9:234.

gouvernement de Pologne, in which, omitting any mention of Hobbism or civil war, he reaffirmed that placing law above man is the fundamental problem of politics.⁷

Rousseau insisted that every ‘legitimate Government is republican’ and on his definition a republic was simply a state in which the prince is both guided by and minister of the law, ‘for then alone the public interest governs and the public thing means something’.⁸ Rousseau thought that Thomas Hobbes’s principles, by contrast, were ‘destructive of every republican government’.⁹ In *Leviathan* Hobbes had ridiculed Aristotle for thinking that in a commonwealth ‘not Men should govern, but the Laws’, since behind any law there is always either the will of one man or the will of an assembly of men (be it aristocratic or democratic), and ‘without such Arbitrary government . . . Warre must be perpetual’.¹⁰ Although the sovereign is well advised to govern by fixed and clearly promulgated laws, while remaining ‘obliged by the Law of Nature’ (an obligation owed only to God ‘and to none but him’),¹¹ Hobbes’s account of sovereignty still challenged the very possibility of placing law above man and especially its association with republican or democratic government. Rousseau probably never read *Leviathan*, in either English or Latin, but he nonetheless appears to have viewed Hobbes’s political proposals as being diametrically opposed to his own. That Rousseau viewed the problem of politics and its potential resolution in such starkly dichotomous terms provides the point of departure for my inquiry.

The main purpose of this study, then, is to analyse Rousseau’s engagement both with the political thought of Hobbes and with Hobbes’s ideas as they were received in eighteenth-century France and Geneva. As the quote from Rousseau suggests, his target was often as much Hobbism as it was Hobbes’s ideas themselves, and it is worth noting from the outset that these two targets were not one and the same. The caricature of Hobbism with which Rousseau worked frequently misrepresented the nuances of Hobbes’s thought. At times Rousseau appears to have engaged directly with Hobbes’s work. Elsewhere he attacked what he took to be the pervasive legacy of Hobbesian ideas on the political thought of his day, while on other occasions he even subverted the prevalent understanding of Hobbism in order to criticize his contemporaries.

⁷ Rousseau, *Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne et sur sa réformation projetée*, OC3:955/CW11:170.

⁸ Rousseau, *Du contrat social, ou principes du droit politique*, ii.6.

⁹ Rousseau, *Lettres écrites de la montagne*, OC3:811/CW9:235.

¹⁰ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, xlvi.35–36.

¹¹ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, xxvi.15–16, xxx.1. Given these considerations it is not evident that Hobbes’s theory really did exemplify arbitrary as opposed to legal despotism.

Rousseau engaged with both Hobbism and Hobbes's ideas in a number of different contexts and for a variety of reasons, the nature and bearing of which I seek to uncover and evaluate throughout this book. In doing so, I show that some of Rousseau's most important philosophical ideas were either set out in direct opposition to Hobbes, or developed in an anti-Hobbesian context. What emerges from this study is thus an original interpretation of Rousseau's political philosophy, which stresses and interweaves aspects of his thought that are frequently understated or neglected.

I proceed in this chapter by discussing the rationale for further studying the relationship between Hobbes and Rousseau, before providing a brief outline of the structure of the argument developed in subsequent chapters. I then sketch an overview of the reading of Rousseau's political thought to be advanced, highlighting three themes central to my interpretation. Finally, I bring this chapter to a close by briefly addressing some methodological issues and assessing which of Hobbes's texts, if any, there is considerable evidence of Rousseau actually having read.

Hobbes and Rousseau

The idea that the relationship between Hobbes and Rousseau is in need of further examination might seem somewhat surprising. Comparisons between the two thinkers recur throughout Rousseau scholarship and are frequently found amongst more general studies in the history of political thought. It is thus worth surveying some of the most prominent characteristics of the extant scholarship to reveal where there remains scope for further analysis. For brevity's sake, what follows is confined to the main developments in the literature since the middle of the twentieth century. The sample of studies I consider is selective, but it represents some of the most important trends in shaping the different ways in which the relationship between the two thinkers is now understood.

Around the middle of the twentieth century a number of important studies advanced distinctively Hobbesian readings of Rousseau. According to Leo Strauss, for example, Rousseau was greatly indebted to Hobbes, deferring to his acceptance of the authority of modern natural science and attack on classical natural law. Rousseau deviated from Hobbes only because he fully appreciated the implications of his predecessor's premises. It was thus on truly Hobbesian principles that Rousseau originated the first crisis of modern thought by abandoning nature, or human nature, as a basis of right. On Strauss's reading, Rousseau struggled with his ancient and modern leanings

but finally succumbed to a modern and Hobbesian tradition of political thought and natural right.¹² The most thorough examination of Rousseau's relationship with this modern tradition remains Robert Derathé's influential study, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et la science politique de son temps*, originally published in 1950. While recognizing that Rousseau set many of his ideas out against Hobbes, some of Derathé's most important contributions were in arguing for Hobbes's influence on Rousseau. Perhaps most notably, Derathé maintained that Rousseau's psychology of man was inspired by Hobbes's.¹³ In much the same spirit, Georges Davy argued that Hobbes laid down the very foundations for *Du contrat social* and, for Bertrand de Jouvenel, Rousseau's theory could simply be described as 'Hobbesism turned inside out'.¹⁴ Characteristic of many of the studies of this period, then, was an attempt to show that Rousseau's thought was really very Hobbesian, or at least a lot more so than he would have willingly admitted.

Strauss's influence looms large over much of the most important contemporary scholarship on the relationship between the two thinkers, especially in America, where Hobbes is more generally taken to represent a distinctively modern tradition of political thought in contrast to a classical tradition best represented by Plato. Arthur Melzer reads Rousseau through the dichotomy of Plato or Hobbes and even suggests that Rousseau's intention was to reconcile the two.¹⁵ Conversely, David Lay Williams has recently argued forcefully for the influence of Plato over Hobbes in order to dispel Hobbesian readings of Rousseau (which he claims were prominent for the best part of the twentieth century), yet his study is still structured around the Straussian dichotomy.¹⁶ To be sure, this dichotomy at times proves instructive for understanding Rousseau's thought, not least because the Straussian reading of Hobbes—irrespective of whether or not it does Hobbes's thought any justice—shares some important resemblances with the ways in which Hobbes's ideas were read and discussed in much eighteenth-century French thought. Williams's study is invaluable for those interested in the relationship between Hobbes and Rousseau because it convincingly challenges at least one prevalent line of interpretation. Nonetheless, Rousseau's engagement with Hobbesian ideas cannot be reduced to the question of Plato or Hobbes, since this engagement permeated many other debates in which Plato and Platonism were not the antonyms of Hobbes and Hobbism.

¹² Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, especially pp. 266–274.

¹³ Derathé, *Rousseau et la science politique*, pp. 109–110, 137–141.

¹⁴ Davy, *Hobbes et Rousseau*, p. 14; Jouvenel, 'Essay on Rousseau's Politics', p. 124. See also Taylor, 'Rousseau's Debt to Hobbes'.

¹⁵ Melzer, *Natural Goodness*, p. 115.

¹⁶ Williams, *Rousseau's Platonic Enlightenment*, especially pp. xv–xxx, 27–59.

Even if not Straussian in influence, much of the existing literature on Hobbes and Rousseau has adopted a predominantly ahistorical approach, conducting philosophical evaluations and comparisons of some of the two thinkers' key ideas, such as the state of nature, the social contract, and sovereignty.¹⁷ These are precisely the topics where there is evidence that Rousseau was engaging with Hobbes, yet there is a marked absence of historically nuanced readings of the ways in which he employed and refuted ideas he associated with Hobbes. Given this, it is perhaps unsurprising that it has been historians associated with the Cambridge approach to the history of ideas who have recently led the way in calling for more scholarship examining the two thinkers. Quentin Skinner signalled that insufficient research has been directed towards Rousseau's reading of *De cive*,¹⁸ and Richard Tuck is currently reassessing the relationship between Hobbes and Rousseau in some depth. Building on his ideas from *The Rights of War and Peace*,¹⁹ Tuck presented six Benedict Lectures at Boston University in 2000 on Hobbes and Rousseau.²⁰ These lectures provide the most extensive study of the relationship between the two thinkers since the collection of essays by Howard Cell and James MacAdam published in 1988.²¹ From a historical perspective, Tuck's scholarship is much more adequately informed than most of the extant literature. Yet the Rousseau that emerges from his study remains a figure greatly indebted to Hobbes, for Tuck is especially interested in uncovering, to use his own words, the 'Hobbesianism of Rousseau'.²² His project is largely concerned with revealing the affinities between Hobbes and Rousseau, in part so that he can defend Hobbes from some of Rousseau's most pressing criticisms. Tuck's approach could be viewed as one that uses Rousseau to improve our understanding of Hobbes, whereas the approach I pursue here is quite the reverse: to use Hobbes to improve our understanding of Rousseau.

¹⁷ For a sample of contributions in this respect see Winch, 'Man and Society'; Ryan, 'The Nature of Human Nature'; Mandle, 'Rousseauian Constructivism'; Trachtenberg, 'Subject and citizen'; Steinberg, 'Hobbes, Rousseau and the State'; Evrigenis, 'Absolute Chaos, Absolute Order'; Shell, 'Stalking *Puer Robustus*'; Chernilo, *Natural Law Foundations*, pp. 97–120.

¹⁸ Skinner, 'Surveying the *Foundations*', p. 256. In much of the Anglophone literature it is assumed that Rousseau read *Leviathan*, or that what knowledge he had of Hobbes's works is unimportant for analysis of the two thinkers.

¹⁹ Tuck, *Rights of War and Peace*, pp. 197–207.

²⁰ Given that these lectures have not yet been worked up for publication, I have avoided engaging directly with them and only reference arguments that Tuck has set out in *The Rights of War and Peace* or in his other published works. Nonetheless, my general understanding of Tuck's position has been informed by the unpublished lectures.

²¹ In the preface to the collection the authors claimed that theirs was the first book-length study of the two thinkers and invited further research of a similar depth, yet this invitation has largely gone unanswered. See Cell and MacAdam, *Rousseau's Response to Hobbes*, p. vii.

²² Tuck, *Rights of War and Peace*, pp. 197–207.

Tuck's analysis stresses the extent to which Rousseau appears to have endorsed a number of Hobbesian positions that were widely dismissed by his contemporaries, most notably the rejection of sociability as the foundation of natural right.²³ These moves lend support to Tuck's Hobbesian reading of Rousseau. Yet a number of important questions remain unresolved, convincing answers to which have long eluded scholarship on the two thinkers. The most general problem has never been satisfactorily answered. That is, if Rousseau was really so Hobbesian then why did he repeatedly set his ideas out in opposition to Hobbes? Was he just unaware of his Hobbism or did he seek to conceal it?²⁴ In short—the question at the heart of Tuck's inquiry—what exactly did Rousseau think he was doing?²⁵

I endeavour to answer these questions by situating Rousseau's engagement with Hobbes in its intellectual context and revealing the deeply polemical character of his critique. The most important text for understanding this critique is Rousseau's *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité*, and most of his subsequent references and allusions to Hobbesian ideas can be traced back to, and are best understood in light of, his arguments in the *Discours*. Where scholars such as Tuck have interpreted Rousseau as siding with Hobbes over Hobbes's critics in the modern natural law tradition, I argue that the *Discours* was instead set out against both Hobbes and his critics in this tradition. Rousseau aimed to show that both Hobbes's critics in the natural law tradition and contemporary proponents of *doux commerce* theory actually rested their justifications of the social order on fundamentally Hobbesian premises, despite their protestations to the contrary. By showing that these critics were really no better than Hobbes, Rousseau sought to challenge both Hobbes and Hobbes's critics on new grounds.

Rousseau might sometimes appear to have endorsed Hobbesian positions precisely because he thought that the existing refutations of Hobbes were largely unsatisfactory or mistaken. Yet to disagree with Hobbes's critics is not necessarily to agree with Hobbes and one has to be careful not to conflate evidence of the former with that of the latter. Nonetheless, Rousseau did take very seriously problems of a distinctively Hobbesian nature, occasionally leading him to endorse positions that resembled Hobbes's theory, although more often to set his position out in opposition to Hobbes. While much of my argument is directed against those who have interpreted Rousseau's political thought as Hobbesian, then, I resist the contrary temptation of presenting Rousseau's thought as

²³ Tuck, *Rights of War and Peace*, pp. 197–202.

²⁴ For the description of Rousseau's position as 'Hobbism concealed' see Evrigenis, *Fear of Enemies*, pp. 134–138.

²⁵ See also Glaziou, *Hobbes en France*, p. 234.

unequivocally anti-Hobbesian. The relationship between the two thinkers is far more nuanced than either the straightforwardly Hobbesian or anti-Hobbesian characterizations of Rousseau's political thought admit.

That Rousseau's criticisms of Hobbes often resonated as much against Hobbes's critics as they did against Hobbes himself has not been appreciated previously and the full elucidation of this aspect of Rousseau's engagement with Hobbes is the principal historical contribution of my study. Rousseau's invocations of Hobbes often served a polemical purpose—even if Hobbes was not always the target of that polemic—and while this is most evident in the *Discours sur l'inégalité*, it remains the case through to at least *Du contrat social*. Yet Rousseau's engagement with Hobbes is not only of historical interest, for he set out some of his most important philosophical ideas in direct opposition to positions he attributed to Hobbes. With these in mind, I advance a distinctive interpretation of Rousseau's political philosophy, emerging from my reading of his encounter with Hobbesian ideas. Before sketching out the salient features of this interpretation, I first provide a brief overview of the key findings and arguments of each of the following chapters.

In the first chapter I set out the intellectual context for Rousseau's engagement with Hobbes by surveying Hobbes's French reception during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Rather than providing a comprehensive exploration of Hobbes's reception, my analysis focuses on those thinkers who may plausibly be thought to have influenced Rousseau's interpretation of Hobbes. Attacks on Hobbes increased as the eighteenth century progressed and his reputation underwent a marked deterioration during this period, even though many of his ideas appear to have diffused into the thought of the time. If anything, this serves only to obfuscate questions regarding Hobbes's influence on Rousseau, for it was frequently an indirect one, indicating why it is just as important to focus on eighteenth-century Hobbism as it is on Hobbes's texts themselves. Accordingly, the focus of subsequent chapters does not always fall on ascertaining direct influence, but rather on considering how Hobbesian ideas framed the issues that Rousseau confronted in his political writings.

The second and third chapters build on the historical reception of Hobbes's ideas and especially their opposition to modern natural law theories. In Chapter 2 I examine Rousseau's engagement with Hobbesian ideas in the *Discours sur l'inégalité*, in which he attempted to associate Hobbes's odious reputation with the arguments of his adversaries. Against the natural law theorists, Rousseau sought to collapse the prevalent bifurcation between Pufendorian sociability and Hobbesian Epicureanism; and, against the *doux commerce* theorists, he endeavoured to show that those who defended the role of commerce and luxury

in civilizing modern societies actually rested their defences on Hobbesian premises regarding man's nature. At the same time, Rousseau explicated two of his key principles in opposition to Hobbes: man's free will and natural goodness. These principles would animate Rousseau's philosophy and much of the remainder of the book involves showing how they play out in his political thought.

In the third chapter I assess the extent to which Rousseau's political thought was aimed at overcoming problems of a fundamentally Hobbesian nature. At times Rousseau appears to have accepted that political society has to be justified against, and remedy the deficiencies within, Hobbes's account of the state of nature. Certain affinities between their political philosophies are thus evident, most notably concerning the need for an absolute and incontestable sovereign, and regarding the challenges that religion poses to political unity. Yet much of Rousseau's political thought was set out against both Hobbes and his critics in the modern natural law tradition. Rousseau considered that his predecessors in this tradition had offered only illegitimate justifications of the social order, which involved the alienation of man's freedom by establishing dependence on someone else's will. To preserve man's freedom in the social order Rousseau radically inverted the Hobbesian account of sovereignty—so often used to justify the submission of the people—by directing it towards republican conclusions and showing how law could stem from every individual's will. Rousseau aimed to make law sovereign, yet this should not be mistaken for the conventionalism that was to become associated with Hobbes's philosophy. Instead, to distance himself from the likes of Hobbes and Pufendorf, Rousseau insisted that a legitimate social order, although established by conventions, must be in accordance with nature as a regulative normative standard.

Where in the third chapter I examine the significance of Rousseau's theory of free will for making sense of his opposition to Hobbes, in the fourth chapter I focus principally on his account of natural goodness. I argue that the political theories Hobbes and Rousseau each developed were largely shaped by their rival accounts of human nature and the passions they thought natural to man. Although both thinkers stressed the importance of ordering the passions to preserve the unity of the body politic, the possibilities for doing so were in each case constrained by their contrasting depictions of man's natural state. Rousseau's theory of the passions is well understood in relation to the tradition of French neo-Augustinianism, and in many respects the Augustinian account of man's post-lapsarian state resembled the Hobbesian picture of the state of nature. On the Augustinian–Hobbesian account, man's individualistic passions are inflamed and political institutions would have to turn these passions to good use for peace ever to be secured. Rousseau, however, rejected this post-lapsarian