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ROUSSEAU'S SOCIAL CONTRACT, THE COMMON GOOD, AND THE GUILTY

Rousseau's *Social Contract*—and especially his concept of *la volonté générale*—has often puzzled readers. While this is perhaps only to be expected of a work that Jean-Jacques himself told his editor Rey was “austere” and “fit for few readers,” the subsequent fame and influence of Rousseau's ideas compels us to reflect further on their meaning.

Perhaps some of the central puzzles in the text can be clarified if Rousseau's argument is reconsidered in the light of research in disciplines other than political theory narrowly defined. Elsewhere, for example, it has been suggested that the *volonté générale* is a concept based on Newtonian physics, which served as Rousseau's model in defining a standard of judging observed phenomena (Masters, 1968). Here we would like to suggest comparable insights that can be derived by considering the concepts of the “collective good” and “guilt” in such diverse fields as ancient Greek metaphysics, contemporary game theory and evolutionary biology, and 17th century theology.

I. The Common Good and the Problem of the One and the Many

Rousseau's knowledge of Plato—and most specifically of Plato's *Republic*—cannot be in doubt: in Book I of the *Émile*, Plato's work is taken as the model of an analysis of education and human social life which Rousseau will attempt to reconsider in his own work. Plato's best regime represents the clearest attempt among the ancients to depict a political regime that fully embodies the Common Good of a human society.

To understand the presuppositions of the Platonic Idea of the Common Good, we can hardly do better than to consider how Plato's best student, Aristotle, viewed the issue. In Book II of the *Politics*, Aristotle criticizes Plato's best regime on the grounds that it stresses

the “one-ness” of the community at the expense of the diversity or heterogeneity of the many who comprise the city. In short, for Aristotle, Plato’s best regime articulates the problem defined, at the level of metaphysics, as the identification of an “essence” or “nature” that makes any “thing” *one* entity or a whole.

In the regime proposed by Socrates in the *Republic*, the oneness of the city is to be achieved by an equality of the sexes (abolishing the heterogeneity of male and female “natures”), a community of women and children (abolishing the heterogeneity of the family), and a community of property (abolishing the heterogeneity of wealth and possessions). For Aristotle, the result of Socrates’ proposals would be contrary to any city that could actually exist because where everything is “common,” the attachment to those common things is “watery.” The regime of the *Republic* is thus defective because it focuses on the “one” to the exclusion of the heterogeneous “many” who must comprise any human community.

In Book I of the *Émile*, Rousseau’s treatment of the one-ness of the natural man and the fractional nature of the citizen shows that he was profoundly aware of this ancient issue. In seeking to transcend the contradictions which seemed to vitiate modern political life, Rousseau thus had to confront the question of how to combine a devotion to the “common good” (which is emphatically one and the same for each individual) and the heterogeneity of the private or individual interests of the many who comprise the city.

Hobbes had sought to resolve this problem by returning to the theory of society as a “convention” or contract that had been outlined by the pre-Socratics, but transforming their argument for individual benefit into a device for constructing a powerful centralized State. In the Hobbesian view, the collective good can result if and only if a leader or government (the Sovereign) can insure that obedience to the law will either provide greater individual benefits or have greater costs than are possible from selfishness.

The construct of the *Leviathan* thus differs from the regime of Plato’s *Republic* in a fundamental way. In the Hobbesian view, the only “one-ness” that is unambiguously natural is that of the individual human being. The collective good is merely a product of the individual assessments of the costs and benefits of forming a social contract. It is never possible for the individual to surrender or “alienate” the natural right to life; as a result, even the most legitimate regime cannot expect a subject to sacrifice life or property for the common

good except insofar as that individual does so out of fear that the failure to obey the law will produce even greater evils.

For Hobbes, and the moderns who follow his approach, the “common good” is merely a product of individual choice. As a consequence, there need be no sense of guilt or shame should the individual choose to reclaim his inalienable rights to “life, liberty, and estate” or “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” On the contrary, the tradition of Hobbes, Locke, and Jefferson requires that all citizens be fully conscious of their natural rights and willing to reclaim them should the governing authorities invade the sphere of judgment naturally belonging to the individual. Obvious in the domain of religious toleration, this aspect of what has come to be called modern liberal democracy can be derived—on the metaphysical level—from the assertion (made emphatically by Machiavelli and simply accepted by Hobbes, Locke, and other moderns) that political communities are and can only be “mixed bodies” of an artificial or unnatural nature. The only “one” that is truly “one” is the human body. The city, as city, is a “many” of convenience or convention.

Rousseau found this understanding profoundly disturbing. On the one hand, he was fully aware of the power of the criticisms of Socrates’ proposal in the *Republic* that had characterized the Western philosophic tradition from Aristotle to Hobbes. The total abolition of the one-ness of the private individual is unnatural, and would indeed be merely laughable were it not for the extent to which the regime of Sparta approximated it. The defects of the Spartan regime, the need to explain how such a unity could arise among animals who had lived in an asocial “state of nature” (*Second Discourse*), and the incompatibility of such an ancient city with Christianity (cf. *Social Contract*, IV, viii), rendered it particularly important for Rousseau to confront the Hobbesian alternative directly.

At the same time, Rousseau saw clearly three related defects in Hobbes’ thought. The first, and most obvious, is the abandonment of *any pretense at a regime with unity, and therewith of any sense of the common good. This contradicts our awareness that the legitimate political community has some element of one-ness, even if that unity doesn’t completely obliterate the private interests of its members. Some elements of social life—at a minimum, the defense against foreign invaders—are “common goods” in that all benefit from them, and if all benefit, each and every individual benefits.*

Second, Hobbes' solution to this problem presupposes that, on the emotional level, government rests on fear rather than a positive attachment to the community. Rousseau rejects the argument that rational calculation of purely individual interest leads to cooperation with others because he sees that such calculation leads to the exploitation of others in the absence of an omnipotent police force. The Hobbesian solution of relying on fear rather than simple interest can work within limits if enforcement is always effective, but the limits of such a State are soon reached. What is needed is something to give a positive attachment to the regime: emulation, pride, identification with the regime—in short, patriotism (*First Discourse*).

The third issue, perhaps of equal moment, concerns the absence of the feeling of guilt or shame in the Hobbesian solution. That the natural desires of humans are, in themselves, "no sin" (*Leviathan*, I, xiii) need not have been problematic for Rousseau; in the state of nature of the *Second Discourse*, such passions are viewed not merely as natural necessities, but as themselves "naturally good." But once humans have evolved such sentiments as *amour-propre* (pride), giving rise to unnatural feelings of social rivalry, Rousseau emphatically attacked the superficiality of a political solution that rested on rational calculation and fear to the exclusion of the "positive social sentiments" which alone could make life "sweet" and intrinsically pleasant (*Dialogues*).

In psychological terms, Rousseau saw—as had the Platonic Socrates in the *Republic*—that any complete account of the human emotions that are active in society must include pride, guilt, and spiritedness (*thymos*). From the perspective of Christianity as well, obedience to the law can hardly be expected if individuals do not feel guilt and shame at the thought of selfish desires to seek private benefit at the expense of others or of the common good. Although the Christian view stresses guilt and treats pride as a sin, whereas the pagans considered pride as a necessary component of the moral virtues (cf. Aristotle's *Ethics*), the moderns following Hobbes relegate all such emotions to a secondary status and focus principally on a rational calculation of self-interest and fear.

Since Hobbes' citizen must be trained to reclaim his "inalienable" natural right, the Hobbesian social contract cannot create a civil unity capable of eliciting guilt or shame on the occasion of a violation of the law or pride in the "Fatherland." That Rousseau himself took this argument with utmost seriousness is exemplified by the argument

of the “violent reasoner” in the *Second Discourse*—and, even more emphatically, by the fact that when Diderot attacked this position in the name of a traditional view of the common good, Rousseau accepted the implication that he shared the Hobbesian critique of the tradition (*Political Economy*).

For Rousseau, therefore, the political problem could be restated as a hitherto unresolved tension between the concept of civil unity expressed by the Platonic Socrates in the *Republic* and retained in the traditional view of the common good, and the Hobbesian challenge to that unity on the ground that only the individual is a natural whole. To be sure, Aristotle had suggested a way of transcending the contradictions between individual self-interest and collective benefits; indeed, by quoting Aristophanes’ speech in Plato’s *Symposium* (*Politics*, II), one might say that Aristotle even intimated that Plato himself shared such a dialectical view of the political relationship between the one and the many.

Rousseau, like Hobbes, held that this solution could not be adequate because it rested on an imperfect notion of the natural grounds of obligation. For Hobbes, this rejection was ultimately based on the defective physics of the ancients, whereas for Rousseau it stemmed from their undue reliance on reason and intellectual virtue, human capacities that are both unnatural and inaccessible to all but the rarest individuals. In Rousseau’s eyes, the classic philosophic understanding was impossible as the ground for the common good because it was the result, not the cause, of civilized social life (*Geneva Manuscript*, I, ii). For this reason, in fact, Rousseau turned to ancient political practice rather than ancient philosophy, praising above all the legislators of antiquity who knew how to use symbolic means of persuasion that did not depend on reason and intellectual virtue (*First Discourse*, *Social Contract*, II, vii; *Government of Poland*, Ch. 2).

II. Collective Goods, Rationality, and the “General Will”

On one level, Rousseau’s solution to the problem of the one and the many involved a reconsideration of Hobbes’ criteria of rational self-interest. The utterly rational individual, perceiving only individual benefits because the self is the only natural whole, should always seek to violate the common good if this can be done with

impunity. Cooperation can only arise, therefore, when it is consistent with the self-interest of all participants.

This argument, which was used by the Sophists in ancient Greece to establish the "conventional" status of human laws, became the basis of the modern natural right tradition; more recently, it has been formalized in the version of "rational choice" or game theory known as the "Prisoner's Dilemma." Even where there are benefits of cooperative behavior and conflict results in mutual harm, as long as there are no guarantees that one's rival will cheat, fear of being the "sucker" will lead rational individuals to compete with each other (Axelrod, 1983).

The same argument arises from the perspective of evolutionary biology, since natural selection serves to benefit those organisms that behave in ways that optimize "reproductive success"; of two individuals in the same species, it seems at first as though all forms of "altruistic" or helping behavior should be unnatural (Alexander, 1974; Masters, 1983a). The asocial state of nature in Rousseau's *Second Discourse* articulates a basic problem that has been radically emphasized by contemporary social scientists and biologists alike.

To be sure, evolutionary models in what is popularly called "sociobiology" show that individuals may often (though not always) be expected to cooperate with close kin with whom they share genetic inheritance; insofar as kin will transmit genes identical to those of an individual, "reproductive success" is now defined as "inclusive fitness"—i.e., including the offspring of close kin as well as of the organism itself (Hamilton, 1964; Wilson, 1975). In a Prisoner's Dilemma between brothers, it becomes rational to cooperate in many situations that would be competitive for unrelated individuals (Masters, 1983a).

This condition does not resolve the issue of the common good, for the family unit is far from relevant to cooperation within a large and impersonal society. Just as Hobbes admits that individuals in his state of nature cooperate within the family on the basis of "natural lust" (*Leviathan*, I, xiii), Rousseau views the family as the only "natural society." What is needed is an explanation for cooperation between rational, selfish individuals who are not biologically related to each other.

Reciprocity between individuals who will encounter each other on repeated occasions has often been used as a key explanation of social cooperation. From the perspective of rational choice or game

theory (Axelrod, 1983), as in models of “reciprocal altruism” in evolutionary biology (Trivers, 1971), a rational individual should cooperate with a stranger or non-kin if it is likely that, in the foreseeable future, the two may interact again with a reversal of roles. The resulting “tit-for-tat” strategy of social behavior makes it difficult to imagine the formation of societies that transcend the relatively small scale societies of preliterate tribes based on kinship or reciprocity and governed by the *lex talionis*.

Reciprocity might therefore explain the emergence of the primitive societies described in Rousseau’s *Second Discourse* as the condition that was “the best for man” (ed. Masters, pp. 150-51). Once again, however, such a solution does not account for the emergence of a large society with a centralized government, in which the common good becomes an independent basis of the unity of the whole community. As in the celebrated image of the deer hunt in the *Second Discourse*, primitive societies leave individuals or families free to split off from the group whenever their self-interest is not consistent with further cooperation (Gruter and Masters, 1986: 231-47).

When rational choice theorists look at the question of an individual’s reasons for contributing to a collective benefit, they conclude that—on purely selfish grounds—it is always most beneficial to pretend to contribute without actually doing so; such a “free rider” gains all the benefits of the collective good with none of the costs (Olson, 1965). In a democratic political regime, for example, a rational citizen should usually not bother to vote at all, for it is typically the case that a single vote will not influence the outcome at all—and the act of voting is certain to have real costs to the voter (Downs, 1954). Glaucon’s description of the “ring of Gyges” (Plato, *Republic*, II) describes a fundamental condition that is still the foundation of theoretical studies of social cooperation.

In contemporary choice theory, perhaps the sharpest statement of the Hobbesian problem is Garrett Hardin’s well known image of the “Tragedy of the Commons”: rational and self-interested individuals can always be expected to over-exploit collective goods as long as there is no coercive central government that has been formed by a common agreement to limit actions that are in the short term beneficial to individuals but mutually harmful over the long run (Hardin, 1968; Ophuls, 1973). The centralized State is, from the perspective of evolutionary biology, very hard if not impossible to explain (Campbell, 1972; Masters, 1983a).

That Rousseau saw the problem in terms akin to these contemporary theories is evident: "Is it not a necessary effect of the constitution of things that the vicious man profits doubly from his injustice and the probity of others? What more advantageous treaty could he conclude than one obliging the whole world, excepting himself, to be just, so that everyone will faithfully render him what is due him, while he renders to no one what he owes." (*Letter to d'Alembert*, ed. Bloom, p. 24). One can hardly imagine a philosophic formulation more directly parallel to the concept of a "free rider" (see also *Geneva Manuscript*, I, ii). Rousseau was quite right to take Hobbes' criticism of the traditional belief in the common good with utmost seriousness.

Rousseau's solution is extraordinarily ingenious (Masters, 1983b). While admitting Hobbes' challenge to the traditional definition of virtue, Rousseau notes that any collective or common good—once in existence—by definition provides benefits for the rational individual; precisely because society itself is *unnatural*, once civil societies have arisen they produce a dual interest in the individual: the private interest originating in the natural concern for the self (*moi*), and the common interest created by the formation of an unnatural unity (*le moi commun*).

Among contemporary choice theorists, the same solution has been outlined quite incisively by Howard Margolis (1982). The rational individual living in a large-scale society has two sets of interests, which compete with each other: individual cost-benefit calculations are combined with the individual's judgment of collective goods. This explains observed phenomena that are otherwise inexplicable from the perspective of rational choice theories. Humans in democratic societies do vote, after all—indeed, some vote even in elections whose outcome seems to be a foregone conclusion. Even more to the point, citizens pay taxes, volunteer to serve in combat during wars, and otherwise willingly contribute to collective goods in ways that the Hobbesian approach to rationality can only derive from fear.

Rousseau's solution, like that of Margolis, presumes the existence of two competing sets of interests in the individual: we all want what is good for our group *and* what is good for ourselves. The dynamic of the *volonté générale* is precisely that it provides a mechanism for understanding how this approach to the common good can be just as "rational" as the selfishness of the individual in a Hobbesian state of nature or a Prisoner's Dilemma in contemporary game theory.

There is no need here to rehearse Rousseau's concept of the general will. Rather, it should be sufficient to indicate the relevance of the footnote in which Rousseau emphasizes the inevitability of the contradiction between the "private will" and the "general will"; *l'accord de tous les intérêts se forme par opposition à celui de chacun* (*Social Contract*, III, iii; ed. Pléiade, III, 371). The rational individual can know the difference between individual self-interest and the common good *precisely because they are in contradiction with each other*. The very facts that had been used throughout the tradition to challenge the traditional concept of civic unity become, for Rousseau, the basis of generalizing the will in order to discover rational grounds for sacrificing one's private benefits for the collective good.

To be sure, most citizens will not base their obedience on reasoning like that developed in the *Social Contract*. The general will is never presented by Rousseau as a *description* of the thought process of the majority; the "violent reasoner" of Diderot's "Natural Right" is, like Hobbes (*First Discourse*) or Rousseau himself (*Geneva Manuscript*, I, ii), a philosopher engaged in the potentially destructive effort to find a rational explanation for human social institutions. As the subtitle of the *Social Contract* reminds us, Rousseau's work presents "Principles of Political Right" that are intended to provide a theoretical foundation for the just political community.

III. The General Will, Christianity, and the Shame of the Guilty

Rousseau's answer to the ancient problem of the one-ness of a political community composed of many private individuals changes the terms of political discourse. His thought is profoundly original because, in place of the concepts of "the Common Good," "Virtue," and "Obedience to Law," Rousseau focuses on the dialectics of the "Will." To put it more precisely, many thinkers have emphasized the contradiction between the "private interest" and the "general interest." Rousseau transforms this contradiction into the conflict between the "private *will*" and the "general *will*." It is important to reflect on the implications of this shift.

That humans should be understood in terms of willing or choosing, rather than in terms of "objective" interests, is implicit in Rousseau's criticism of a mechanistic or determinist philosophy of human nature in Part I of the *Second Discourse*: *Ce n'est donc pas tant*

l'entendement qui fait parmi les animaux la distinction spécifique de l'homme que sa qualité d'agent libre (Part I; *Pléiade*, III, 141). Rousseau asserts that "perfectibility" is the defining characteristic of human nature because there would be "dispute" over his claim that the uniqueness of our species is its "free will."

One reason for this reticence is doubtless the radical materialism of Hobbes, which was shared by a number of the philosophes among Rousseau's audience. For Hobbes, the words "free will" are, like "round quadrangle," inherently contradictory; this denial of any "metaphysical or moral" concept of the immaterial or spiritual will seems to have been shared by thinkers like d'Holbach, la Mettrie, and perhaps Diderot. Although Rousseau shared their rejection of the orthodox dogmas, he sought to contest their theories—and while Rousseau's criticism was motivated by practical concerns, it is important to ask whether it might also be traced in part to the personal religious beliefs of Jean-Jacques.

In constructing his "principles of political right," Rousseau focused on the *will* of the citizen, not on interests, passions, or other material causes of behavior. Since Hobbes had shown that it is perfectly possible to talk about the will without talking about "free will," Rousseau's formulation of the political problem is accessible to readers who share the rational or atheistic perspective of the philosophes; this emphasis on the *will* may thus explain some of the psychological acuteness of the political teaching of the *Social Contract*. Despite the prudential reasons for Rousseau's terminology, however, the conceptualization of the common good in terms of the "general will" cannot be entirely divorced from theological and metaphysical considerations.

To be sure, Rousseau was extremely careful to present his political teaching on strictly non-theological grounds. Even in the *Émile* and the *Nouvelle Héloïse*, Rousseau presents a "Profession of Faith" in the mouths of fictional characters in order to underline the objections to any "metaphysical" system. There is, nonetheless, some evidence that Rousseau himself rejected simple materialism in the name of a personal doctrine linking Deism, freedom of the will, and the "common good" of the entire universe. Hence, in the *Letter to Voltaire* of August 18, 1756, Rousseau wrote:

Je ne vois pas qu'on puisse chercher la source du mal moral ailleurs que dans l'homme libre, perfectionné, partant corrompu; et, quant aux maux physiques,

si la matière sensible et impassible est une contradiction, comme il me le semble, ils sont inévitables dans tout système dont l'homme fait partie . . . (*Œuvres complètes*, ed. Launay, II, 317).

While Rousseau's major works focus on the observable process of "perfectibility" (*Second Discourse*) and the resulting conflict of private wills with the common good (*Political Economy, Social Contract*), an understanding of his teaching may therefore be improved by considering what he meant by the phrase *bien général* when discussing "Providence" in the *Letter to Voltaire* (ed. Launay, II, 320).

As René Sève showed at the last meeting of the North American Rousseau Society in Ottawa, the concept of *la volonté générale* is in its origins a theological one. It was Malebranche who used this formula to articulate how God's will and God's justice could be related to the human experience of evil. Rousseau seems, however, to have gone to great pains to articulate his political teaching in a secular form that transforms such theological concerns into human phenomena that can be understood without reference to religious faith (and particularly without reference to Christian revelation).

When Rousseau first presented his understanding of the evolution of political life in the *Second Discourse*, he contented himself with the view that the earliest society consisted of a few *conventions générales* or Laws (Pléiade, III, 180) and interpreted this agreement in terms of a change in the "will" of those involved:

Le Peuple ayant, au sujet des relations Sociales, réuni toutes ses volontés en une seule, tous les articles sur lesquels cette volonté s'explique, deviennent autant de Loix fondamentales qui obligent tous les membres de l'État sans exception . . . (Pléiade, III, 184-85).

Diderot challenged the theoretical perspective of the *Second Discourse* in his article on *Droit Naturel* in Volume V of the *Encyclopédie*, restating the traditional defense of the common good as a rational and moral obligation. One of the arguments that Diderot used to challenge Rousseau's account of human evolution was a secular transformation of Malebranche's concept. Having described Rousseau's stage of the war of all, Diderot imagines a "violent reasoner" who presents the rational arguments against social cooperation discussed above; for Diderot, such a rationalist needs to be led to see that justice flows from the *volonté générale de l'espèce humaine*. When Rousseau rejects this criticism in Book I, Chapter ii of the

Geneva Manuscript, which was ultimately deleted from the *Social Contract*, he adopts the position of the Hobbesian “violent reasoner” as his own view while rejecting Diderot’s assumption that a *volonté générale* in human terms can be associated with the entire human race.

These details in the elaboration of Rousseau’s most famous concept remind us that, from the outset, he emphasized that the issue of justice and political obedience depends on an analysis of the “will”; it is also apparent, however, that he is concerned with the will of individual human beings, not the will of God. Even if “justice” comes from God—and there is reason to believe that Rousseau personally believed that it did—God’s will is not directly knowable as a foundation of human political life (*Social Contract*, III, vi); for all practical purposes, *vox populi, vox dei*.

The theological account of evil exemplified by Malebranche’s concept of God’s *volonté générale* leads the individual who has violated God’s law to experience guilt and repentance for substituting a private or sinful will for the will of God. While Rousseau’s political teaching substitutes an act of the sovereign people for a divine injunction, it too makes possible a feeling of guilt and contrition on the part of those who violate the law. For the theologian, Man is only free when he freely wills to do God’s will, since only by so doing is one free from the impulsion of material and sinful desires. In articulating a secular political teaching on the basis of this tradition, Rousseau likewise associates human freedom with acting on the basis of a higher will than that of the individual’s selfish desires.

This transmutation of traditional theological and philosophical debates about the origins of the good and of justice reflects in part a concern for the psychological response to evil and wrong-doing. For Rousseau, the materialists among the philosophes had followed Hobbes in mistaking a rational theory of explanation for a plausible public teaching; since reason is so unnatural to the human species, for most citizens the civic bond will depend on emotions and feelings rather than a rational calculus of costs and benefits. In the long note at the end of the “Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar,” for example, Rousseau speaks in his own name in ridiculing the idea of any view of moral obligation that could operate effectively without belief comparable to that of traditional religion. Fear of punishment after death (the most common form of the feeling of guilt) can

supplement a Hobbesian sovereign, but is still inadequate because “fear does not stimulate, it restrains” (*Corsica*).

This concern for the emotions and beliefs of the average or nonphilosophic citizen helps explain some formulations in the *Social Contract* that have bothered interpreters who consider only the tradition of political theory as narrowly defined in most textbooks. In particular, Rousseau’s famous assertion that punishing a citizen for violating the law is only “forcing him to be free” (I, vii; *Pléiade*, II, 364) takes on new meaning. From a conventional point of view, this is seemingly a contradiction in terms; from Rousseau’s perspective, it is a psychological explanation of why a criminal could “consent” to his own punishment (*Social Contract*, II, v; *Pléiade*, III, 376). For Hobbes, there is *no* rational reason why any guilty criminal should ever freely consent to being punished for his violation of the law. Rousseau found such a view both inconsistent with the observed feelings of *some* guilty individuals and dangerously reliant on fear as the only source of civil obedience. Someone punished for a crime can even feel a sort of pride in taking responsibility for his actions, thereby demonstrating that his participation in a human social community has been freely chosen with regards to responsibilities as well as benefits.

The *Geneva Manuscript* provides confirmation that Rousseau was concerned with the motivations and feelings of the citizen that had been ignored in Hobbesian political principles. In the first draft, the paragraph of the *Social Contract* (I, vii) that asserts a citizen could be “forced to be free” began:

Afin donc que le contrat social ne soit pas un vain formulaire, il faut qu’indépendamment du consentement des particuliers, le souverain ait quelques garants de leurs engagements envers la cause commune. Le serment est ordinairement le premier de ces garants; mais comme il est tiré d’un ordre de choses tout à fait différent et que chacun selon ses maximes internes, modifie à son gré l’obligation qu’il lui impose, on y compte peu dans les institutions politiques, et l’on préfère avec raison les sûretés plus réelles qui se tirent de la chose même (*Geneva Manuscript*, I, iii; ed. Launay, II, 398).

The concept of the general will is a rational, secular substitute for the religious obligations that, since the triumph of Christianity, can no longer directly serve as the basis of pride, shame, and the *feeling* of moral obligation (*Social Contract*, IV, viii).

IV. Conclusions

Rousseau's political teaching is more complex than it first appears. On the one hand, he brings together issues that had been articulated by philosophers as diverse as the Sophists, Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, and Diderot; on the other, he links these concerns to questions of theology and moral feeling that are not always articulated in political philosophy. Equally striking is the parallel between Rousseau's understanding of the problem and the contemporary formulations in theories of rational choice and sociobiology (Masters, 1983b). If nothing else, the fame of the *Social Contract* would seem to rest on the fact that Rousseau articulated some of the truly perennial issues in human thought.

If Rousseau's work remains of contemporary interest, however, it is also because of the originality and depth of his proposed solution of the political problem. For Rousseau, a rational and intellectually satisfactory *theory* must also explain why, in political practice, justice is primarily a matter of *feeling*. Unlike the utilitarian tradition derived from Hobbes, therefore, Rousseau combines a cost-benefit calculus of interest with a teaching that seeks to explain the public-spirited pride of the warrior and the shame of the guilty. By transforming a traditional theological concept into a secular political principle, Rousseau leaves the question of God to one side—or at least, makes it possible to convert this issue into a prudential matter of political religion for those of his readers who deny the existence or political relevance of God.

It remains to be seen, of course, whether Rousseau's "Principles of Political Right" can fully satisfy the needs of political discourse. Perhaps no single theoretical formulation could ever "resolve" the debates about justice and legitimacy in human societies. For the present, it is enough to have suggested that there are still good reasons to treat the *Social Contract* as one of the true "classics" in the Western tradition.

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