

Obligation and Happiness in Rousseau

Let him see in a better constitution of things the value of good actions, the punishment of bad ones, and the pleasant *harmony of justice and happiness*.

—Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Geneva Manuscript* (emphasis mine)

1. Individual Autonomy and Collective Flourishing

In contemporary Anglophone moral and political philosophy Rousseau is perhaps best known as a thinker concerned to defend the value of individual autonomy, where this is understood as the ability to rationally order or conduct one’s own life without interference from others. The prevailing consensus is that, at bottom, the Rousseauian project is a sustained attempt to show just what it would mean to be self-governed, ‘obedient only to the laws one has prescribed to oneself’—to borrow one of the more memorable phrases from the *Social Contract*. According to one recent commentator who advances this general line of interpretation, the central question of each of Rousseau’s major works is, “How must the world be constituted—both the external, social world and the inner, psychological world—in order for individuals to be able to obey only their own wills?”¹

In this dissertation I contest neither the claim that Rousseau is a central figure, perhaps *the* central figure, in the modern philosophical history of the concept of autonomy, nor the basic point that for Rousseau there is something extremely valuable about individuals living freely. Rousseau clearly holds that social orders in which people do in fact live freely are in a quite unambiguous sense ‘better’ than those in which they do not. But what I argue is that Rousseau offers a justification for *why* the ideal of

¹ Frederick Neuhausser, *Foundations of Hegel’s Social Theory*, 70. In this respect, Neuhausser follows the assessment of none other than Hegel, who claims that Rousseau makes the free-will the ultimate principle of his philosophy. See Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. 3, 401.

autonomy is so valuable that is unexpected given contemporary habits of philosophical thought and yet turns out on reflection to be deeply compelling. By teasing out from some of his central works—primarily the *Social Contract*, *Émile*, and the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*—an underlying and often merely implicit normative theory, I show that Rousseau can help us understand why we ought to see the quest for the meaningful realization of autonomy as one of reason’s primary pursuits.

On the interpretation I propose, Rousseau is profoundly interested in questions like, ‘Just what is it that is so valuable about autonomy?’, or, ‘What is the good of autonomous freedom?’ And his answer is that the freedom of *individuals* develops essential human capacities that can only be expressed in and through just political *communities*, more specifically, through communities defined by cooperative participation in a democratic, law-governed state. If this is in fact his view, then autonomous freedom is not valuable in and of itself. It is not a stopping point in a story about normative justification. Rather, autonomous freedom is so precious *because* it is by securing one’s own autonomy through the construction of a just political community that man develops his “most excellent faculties” (*GM*, 159), transforming himself from “a stupid and bounded animal” into “an intelligent being and a man” (*SC*, 53). Thus, individuals should care about their freedom because it is only the free person who can truly “enjoy a common existence” (*GP*, 19), who can “lear[n] to enlarge upon his being and his felicity by sharing them with his fellow men” (*GM*, 162). Or to capture the point expressed in these phrases another way, for Rousseau, the quest for autonomy is the quest for its meaningful actualization in our cooperative and communal lives.

Throughout the dissertation, I characterize the kinds of communities that can genuinely realize autonomy as ‘flourishing,’ or even as ‘happy.’ And so my claim is that for Rousseau the moral and rational force of autonomous freedom stems from its contribution to the collective forms of human happiness found within a well-ordered political community. By thinking of the question of what it is for an individual to lead his own life as bound together in a conceptual unity with the question of what it is for the community in which he finds his place to flourish, Rousseau offers a philosophy of freedom and happiness that can capture the moral and rational authority of a free life by connecting the value of such a life to other aspects of our existence that we ought to find valuable. Demonstrating the internal relation between autonomy and happiness, Rousseau offers a program for unifying what can appear to be the disparate realms of individual and collective, reason and passion, legal legitimacy and civic sentiment. Or so, anyway, is my essential claim.

In unpacking and defending Rousseau’s justification of the value of autonomy, I suggest that the complex, dialectical interdependence of individual and collective in his vision of the good life has not been adequately appreciated by many of the most widely-read commentators, who have by and large opted for either of the following two readings: either Rousseau’s well-ordered society leaves no room for the individual to determine his own way in the world, despite the project’s ostensible emphasis on autonomy, or Rousseau’s account of leading one’s own life need make no necessary reference to the intrinsic value of community, so that his often-professed enthusiasm for finding one’s good in the good of the whole is a merely rhetorical excrescence that can be excised at no great cost. In short, the alternative seems to be between Rousseau as a proto-totalitarian,

masking his organicist theory of the state in the language of freedom and right, or as a closeted liberal, masking his Lockeanism beneath a veneer of collectivist rhetoric. But clearly neither interpretations can be correct if Rousseau holds both that individuals can only live freely when they live in the right sorts of political communities, *and* that a political community, in order to be legitimate, must preserve the freedom of each of its members. If autonomy without community is empty and formal, community without autonomy is the stuff of totalitarian nightmare.

2. Rousseau's Meta-Ethics: The Dual Justificatory Structure

Although I spend a great deal of time on the key concepts of Rousseau's political theory (e.g., the well-ordered society, justice, the general will, etc.), throughout the dissertation my aim is to consider his views on the normative foundations of authority at their deepest level of abstraction. Although intended primarily as an intervention in the history of political philosophy, I excavate the internal conceptual architecture of Rousseau's theory of normativity in order to treat as part of a unified whole key works from his *oeuvre* that are often treated under the separate rubrics of morality and politics. In doing so, I hope to give philosophical content to Rousseau's bold suggestion that "those who want to treat politics and morals separately will never understand anything of either of the two" (*E*, 235).

Operating at the level of Rousseau's meta-ethics, I characterize Rousseau's attempt to show the internal or mutually constitutive relation between individual autonomy and collective flourishing as his "Dual Justificatory Structure" (DJS). The main labor of this dissertation consists in elucidating the DJS, examining its implications,

and defending it as a model for thinking about the age-old question of why one ought to act justly.

On my interpretation, by linking autonomy with flourishing, the DJS offers a two-stage vindication of the rational authority of obligation. At the first stage, Rousseau concludes that obligations are grounded in the autonomous will. As he writes, “For what more certain foundation can obligation among men have than the free commitment of the one who obligates himself?” (*LM*, 231). And yet for Rousseau connecting obligation to autonomy is necessary but not sufficient for showing why we have reason to fulfill our duties to one another. By the lights of the DJS, unless autonomy bears a positive relation to flourishing, a life structured by the concept of obligation may well represent nothing more than an unreasonable assault on human nature. So, in the second stage, Rousseau concludes that what makes our moral and political duties truly obligatory is that they enable the forms of doing and faring well that can be attributed to the individual only insofar as he is part of a well-functioning social whole.

Rousseau’s DJS thus answers to the following eminently sensible philosophical intuition: vindicating the value of freedom ought to involve showing how and why living *freely* is a way of living *well*. So although Rousseau is acutely interested in “how...the world [must] be constituted...in order for individuals to be able to obey only their own wills,”² he is just as concerned with the question, ‘why is a life in which one obeys only one’s own will in any way *good* or worthy of cultivation?’

And yet this concern for the goodness of freedom, although central to inquiry into how one ought to live, has been blocked by developments in the philosophy of autonomy that take their inspiration from Rousseau—most centrally, the philosophy of Kant.

² Neuhausser, *Foundations*, 70.

Accordingly, a guiding thought lying in the background of my argument is that thinking our way out of a Kantian frame is the best way to appreciate not only what is most important about Rousseau's conception of autonomy, but also the role that the concept plays within our actual reflective lives. Let me explain further.

3. Rousseau *Contra* Kant

For post-Kantian readers of Rousseau the DJS wavers on the verge of philosophical incoherence, since for Kant considerations of happiness cannot enter into an account of the rational foundations of moral obligation. This is because by Kantian lights it is simply definitional that for there to be such a topic as moral *obligation* is for there to be standards of action that are binding with "absolute necessity," where this means that such standards are not based on any features of "the nature of the human being or...the circumstances of the world in which he is placed."³ Although this exclusion of the empirical or contingent from the bindingness of obligation is definitional, it is not merely stipulative. Rather, Kant argues that his is nothing other than the common notion of duty, brought to clarity through philosophical elucidation. Thus, the content of our ordinary thought, 'I am obligated to Φ ' or 'I have a duty to Φ ' can be explained as follows:

In the circumstances in which I find myself (whether through my own volition or not) Φ -ing is absolutely necessary.

In turn, *absolute* practical necessitation means that:

The reason that I have to Φ stems from no features about myself or you (or even about human nature in general) other than our shared capacity for free rational agency.

³ Kant, *Groundwork*, Ak 4:389.

Based on this quite specific sense of obligation, Kant concludes that although there are plenty of things one ‘ought’ to do because doing them makes our communities better places to live or develops our natural capacities for sharing or cooperation—in other words, things one ought to do for reasons that I have marked out as within the domain of *Rousseau’s* conception of obligation—these depend on considerations about our nature that in principle could have been otherwise. As such, for a Kantian these oughts cannot be the moral ought of obligation, since the practical necessitation they enjoin cannot be absolute.

From this Kantian perspective, if Rousseau does in fact ground obligation in happiness then Rousseauian ‘obligations’ are merely a very strong species of prudential advice to the effect that *if* one wants to promote human flourishing or create lasting conditions for happiness one ought to Φ (or refrain from Φ -ing). And the Kantian worry about ‘obligation’ in this Rousseauian sense is that if it turns out that an agent lacks these ends, either because of some unfortunate facet of his motivational psychology or because he has simply failed to form them, he is not in fact obligated to Φ . Kant could concede that no doubt it might be very difficult for us to imagine ourselves as the kind of beings that we are without thereby imagining ourselves to already have the ends that are promoted by being ‘obligated’ in this way, but this, once again, is a merely contingent matter. Our genuine obligations would still be obligatory even if we did not have ends the attainment of which depends on acting well toward others. One consequence of this view is that even if our nature were such that acting morally was *always* felt as painful or psychologically frustrating, our duties would still be binding on us.⁴ Once again, this is

⁴ Of course Kant also argues that we have a duty to assume that God did not make us this way, such that a harmony between duty and happiness is at least in principle possible.

just what it means to call them our ‘duties.’ By allowing happiness to enter into the justification of morality, one misses the categorical nature of moral obligation, which has as its necessary consequence that moral obligation looks to be merely an instrumental good to an externally defined end. For Kant, this has quite concrete ramifications in the case of politics, since it looks to license sacrificing the rights of individuals in those cases where doing so promotes the good of the whole.⁵

Operating to various degrees with the Kantian geography of the moral landscape indicated by this quick summary of Kant’s complex views on the relation between morality and happiness, the critical literature on Rousseau with which I engage has responded to his discussions of happiness and obligation in one of two ways. One response is that the very idea that happiness could play any role in vindicating obligation is simply the central incoherence around which Rousseau’s thought crumbles. This is why Rousseau is ultimately nothing more than a transitional figure, unable to fully embrace his proto-Kantian insights because of an unwitting allegiance to an outmoded *eudaimonistic* paradigm. On this view, despite Rousseau’s heroic attempts to understand the moral law as grounded in reason alone, he was “unable to break theoretically the hold of the eudaemonism which dominated all eighteenth-century ethics.”⁶

The other, more conceptually and interpretively sophisticated response is to think that Rousseau separates out questions concerning the rational ground of morality from questions concerning the psychological resources necessary for individuals to meet the demands of duty. This is one of the many domesticating moves of the Social Autonomy (SA) reading of Joshua Cohen, Nicholas Dent, Frederick Neuhouser, and John Rawls.

⁵ See here Kant, “On the Common Saying: ‘That may be correct in theory, but it is of no use in practice,’” in *Practical Philosophy*, especially Ak 8:290-298

⁶ Cassirer, *The Question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, 70.

According to SA, Rousseau's references to happiness are meant merely as a reminder that, since we are men and not angels, we need incentives to do what we ought anyways to do. There is no incoherence in Rousseau's account of the rational foundations of morality because in fact what grounds duty are only the constitutive commitments of autonomous freedom. So, for example, Cohen writes, "[Rousseau's] strong assertions about the need for...common happiness as an ingredient in individual happiness are offered...as conditions of the stability of a legitimate order, not as constitutive elements of the conception of legitimacy itself."⁷

In offering a very different account of the relation between obligation and happiness—one that takes the justificatory role of happiness seriously—I argue that the air of incoherence around the claim that we act for the sake of duty for the sake of happiness vanishes when we see that Rousseau's approach to vindicating moral authority depends on showing that, even if freely endorsed, morality could only be binding if such free endorsement does not in turn conflict with our natural tendencies for living harmoniously and happily. In the first instance, what justifies the rationality of moral obligation is that it represents the necessary and inescapable commitments of rational agency under conditions of necessary interdependence. But the second level of justification answers to the skeptical worry that, notwithstanding the *aura* of inescapability that moral obligation might come to have for a properly socialized agent, the entire practice of moral obligation itself stands in need of justification. To meet this demand one needs to show that such an exercise of reason is not merely something we would be better off without, "a psychological disaster for the person who has it."⁸ And

⁷ Cohen, *Rousseau: A Free Community of Equals*, 57 (emphasis mine).

⁸ T.M. Scanlon, "Contractualism and Utilitarianism," 127.

one does this precisely by demonstrating that morality enables collective flourishing. But since what it is for a collective to flourish cannot be characterized in terms that do not already make reference to the autonomous freedom of its members, flourishing is not a non-moral end to which morality serves as a mere means. The DJS shows that the relation between obligation and happiness is mereological rather than instrumental. In the political case this means that it makes no sense to hold that one might sacrifice rights for the good of the whole, since no whole can be good unless it secures the rights of its members.

Against the Kantian, returning to Rousseau's meta-ethics allows us to see our way back to a meaningful conception of the link between how I ought to act towards others and my own concern for being free—i.e., the connection between obligation and autonomy on which Kant insists—that does not depend on any extravagant Kantian account of the purity of the moral motive. By taking up Rousseau's pre-Kantian deployment of the concept of autonomy we can rescue a notion of obligation that is anchored in material, political, and institutionally embodied questions of what it is for our lives to go well and for our communities to thrive. Furthermore, since Kant thinks that his conception of obligation is not merely a philosopher's definition, but is in fact latent in common moral cognition, showing how such a conception is completely foreign to another philosopher also trying to elucidate the structure of what 'everyone already thinks' helps us balance philosophical reflection with reasonable intuition.

Courting the risk of anachronism, I stage an encounter between these two philosophers of autonomy in order to make the following positive claim: grounding obligations in those essential concerns *without which one cannot imagine a life as human*

endows them with all the necessity one could possibly demand. So returning to Rousseau serves as a sort of refusal to be bullied by the Kantian into handing over the term ‘obligation’ to a metaphysics of freedom divorced from broader considerations of the human good. To accept the bindingness of duty need not involve a conception of ourselves as “directed” to act in accordance with the moral law even if “every propensity, inclination, and natural tendency of ours were against it.”⁹

⁹ Kant, *Groundwork*, Ak 4:425.