

Introduction

The Recollection of Freedom

This book is about an extraordinary transformation in the history of modern political thought that begins with Rousseau and unfolds through Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche and Heidegger in their pursuit of the path to human wholeness.

Hitherto in the Western tradition, it was believed that human happiness, justice and satisfaction came from aspiring to transcend the world of time and changing circumstance and orient oneself by what is immortally lasting and eternal. That transcendental aim had been identified with metaphysical concepts such as Plato's Idea of the Good and with the Christian belief in immortal salvation through faith in God. Sometimes those aims were treated as a single path, sometimes as alternative paths to the same goal.

Beginning with Rousseau, and elaborated by the great historicist thinkers we variously identify with the Philosophy of Freedom or German Idealism, a complete reversal takes place. Happiness is now sought, not in a transcendental realm of pure unity and rest beyond the earthly realm of multiplicity and becoming but, on the contrary, in the realm of becoming itself. No longer are human happiness, justice and satisfaction to be sought through escaping the world of historical action, but through immersing oneself in its vital energies.

Why was this path taken? A hallmark of virtually all the political theories we consider in this book is their profound admiration for ancient Greek civilization, the world of the polis. All of them use their particular evocation of the ancient Greeks as a foil for exposing the shallowness, vulgarity, selfish individualism and materialism of the modern age. The Greeks' devotion to community and virtue, their striving for nobility and beauty, their disdain for the merely useful, shone forth as a stunning refutation of the utilitarian political reasoning of Hobbes, Locke and the Enlightenment. As Schiller saw it, every meaningful experience in life was given to the Greeks as a direct gift of nature in all its shining freshness. In order to rescue ourselves from the dreary

commercial materialism of the modern age, we must try to recollect and re-energize those latent traces of the ancients in ourselves.

But one apparently insurmountable obstacle stood in the way of this attempt to recapture the nobility and harmony of the ancient polis – the seemingly irrefutable triumph of the modern physics of matter in motion over the metaphysical cosmologies of the ancients. For the physics of Bacon and Newton appeared to have shattered forever the classical belief that the cosmos was primarily characterized by rest over motion, by unity over multiplicity, and by permanence over becoming. That cosmological belief of the ancients had been indivisibly connected to their prescriptions for human happiness. Because the world at large was characterized by the preeminence of the immortal truth over chance becoming, mirrored in the movement of the heavenly bodies or the eternal structures of geometry, it made sense to argue that we as human beings could achieve in our own souls a degree of that cosmic stability through cultivating the virtues of wisdom, justice and moderation. The ancients' prescription for happiness, in other words, was not merely anthropological. When Plato argues that the study of the Idea of the Good is the source of all human prudence and virtue, that is not simply the Idea of the *human* Good, but the transcendental unity that informs the entire world. Nature is primarily characterized by stability, balance, harmony and proportion, and because human nature is a part of nature, that, too, is the best way of life for man. Hence, to return to Schiller, we cannot directly experience, as could the ancients, the “naïve” openness to the revelation of nature that enfolds us in its sweep because, for us, nature is an external object, the nonhuman world of physics. He sums up the paradox this way: The ancients “felt naturally, while we feel the natural.”

All the thinkers considered in this book took it for granted that there was no way back behind the triumph of modern natural science to those ancient cosmologies. Nature, we now know, is random happenstance, a realm of sheer accident, chance and becoming. The human mind, far from being, as the ancients thought, the crown of nature and the mirror of its orderliness, has no intrinsic connection with nature as matter in motion at all. Instead, the mind is an external instrument that can, through an exercise of will, master nature so as to make it yield the material security and well-being that human beings need for bodily survival and physical comfort. Any talk of a higher realm of virtue and the longing for immortality was merely, as Hobbes scathingly put it, “absurd” and “insignificant” speech with no counterpart in measurable physical reality.

Ancient thinkers like Plato had believed that the eternal order of the cosmos provided a unifying third term between subject and object, self and other, and citizen and community. In the famous Image of the Sun in the *Republic*, the Idea of the Good makes it possible for things to come into being and for us to understand what they are. Modern natural science removes that third term, launching an irresolvable debate as to whether the mind imposes all structure

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on purposeless matter or whether the mind is passively determined by those same empirical processes. Locke frankly confesses that he cannot explain why things have the coherence they do. When the mind has analyzed the attributes and properties of any phenomenon, there remains an elusive underlying unity, neither solely in the mind nor solely in the thing, that can only be described as “something I know not what.”

Beginning with Hegel, drawing upon the path-breaking speculations of Rousseau, the Philosophy of Freedom discovers a new third term, a new source of unity – the time-bound realm of historical change itself. The unity of life will no longer be seen as transcendental and timeless, but as a sheer matrix of origination, the fecund source of all existence, both natural and human, what Hegel terms a “self-originating wealth of shapes.” Even more remarkably, Hegel argues that it is precisely in this realm of flux and contingency, supposed by the ancients to be the enemy of all virtue, that human virtue, including civic virtue, along with the sources of political community and artistic and intellectual merit, are to be found. Through the understanding that human existence is historical through and through, that everything is time-bound and mutable, that there is no such thing as a permanent human nature because human beings are self-makers – through that new understanding, paradoxically, we will be able to reclaim the precious Greek heritage that the victory of modern natural science and its political equivalent, the Enlightenment, had seemingly forever closed to us. Plato had famously likened human life to a cave of shadows, a mixture of light and darkness. Only the philosopher could find the path up and out of the Cave, to stand in the sunlight of the eternal. We now must understand, according to Hegel, that there is nothing *but* the Cave, nothing but historical existence. Whatever truth we can uncover will be intertwined with that mixture of shadow and light that is the condition of man’s time-bound existence.

The Philosophy of Freedom, as I argue in this book, was the attempt to return to a classical conception of human existence rooted in our communal connectedness with one another, a synthesis of the ancient Greek polis with the individual liberty of the modern age. This historicist philosophy tried to restore a full sense of cultural, aesthetic and civic satisfaction as against what was widely viewed as the vulgarity, narrowness and philistinism of Enlightenment individualism and the concept of the state as nothing more than a heartless utilitarian contract among producers and consumers of commodities. Plato and the classical conception of the good life provided both a precedent and a foil for German Idealism, especially Hegel, whose *Phenomenology of Spirit* is, I will argue, a conscious reenactment of the Platonic ascent of the soul to wisdom and happiness on historicist grounds. Rousseau, severe critic of bourgeois materialism, had been the first modern thinker to attempt to recover the classical vision of the polis on the basis of modern natural right. His struggle to reconcile freedom with happiness provided German Idealism, as we will see, with its central enigma. Kant and Schiller each take up one of the two poles inherited

from Rousseau's thought – the mastery of the inclinations through the freedom of will and the Romantic longing for oneness with nature, respectively – setting the stage for Hegel's grand synthesis of freedom and community, the "Absolute Science of Spirit," designed to promote both individual liberty and the common good while avoiding revolutionary violence. After exploring the Hegelian Absolute, I will examine a series of ongoing assaults on it from the Left (Marx) and (in the European sense of the term) the Right (Nietzsche and Heidegger). Of special importance will be the internal debate among these thinkers as to whether history is rational and progressive (Hegel and Marx) or a cycle of existential experiences deeper than any rational account can penetrate, and with no teleological direction (Nietzsche and Heidegger). With Heidegger, I will argue, we reach the fragmentation of the Philosophy of Freedom into the twentieth-century schools of critical theory, neo-Marxism and postmodernism, and a growing despair over the benevolent progress of history as the twentieth century is faced with the juggernaut of world war and global technology.

Throughout this whole debate, each thinker's reinterpretation of the historical process is mirrored in his reinterpretation of the ancient Greeks, and those differing visions of the ancient Greek polis provide roots for the practical and political implications of their political philosophies. In general, the increasingly illiberal tone of historicist philosophy after Hegel is mirrored in his successors' marked preference for an older, archaic epoch of ancient Greece in contrast with the classical age of the fifth century BC. In other words, because Hegel defends a moderately progressive liberalism, with an emphasis on the teleological and rational progress of history, his Greeks are those of Periclean and democratic Athens, with its shining achievements in art, music, literature and philosophy, a balanced civilization in which the life of the mind and a reasoned civic-spiritedness flourished. While Hegel appreciated the older Homeric and chthonic Greek religious traditions with their emphasis on heroism, tragic fate, the limits of human reason and freedom and a distrust of individualism, he believed that history was definitely on the side of the ethical universalism that was introduced by Plato and which mirrored the best in Greek culture, outlining a world to come in which the tribal societies of the polis would give way to the first world states of Alexander the Great and Rome.

By contrast, both Nietzsche and Heidegger, because they renounced the Hegelian faith in the teleological unfolding of history and its culmination in what they saw as the bourgeois, materialistic and egalitarian world of the present, and regarded this outcome as in truth a calamitous debasement of human greatness and rank, they also rejected the rational, cultural and political equipoise of the "aesthetic democracy" (to use Hegel's phrase) of the Periclean Age in favor of returning back behind it into the primordial tribal depths of Homeric heroism and what Nietzsche called "the tragic age of the Greeks" in its greatness, before these vital energies and sense of human greatness and mastery began to be leveled by the rationalism of Socrates. Whereas Hegel

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had viewed the gradual displacement of the older chthonic religion of reverence for blood and soil as an unqualified step forward for mankind, Nietzsche famously deplored how the symbiotic interaction of the Dionysian and the Apollonian – the chthonic and the rational – reaching a supreme flowering in Homer and Sophocles, was destroyed by Socrates, who allowed the hyper-rationality and formalism of the Apollonian to overwhelm and desiccate the vital Dionysian forces of passion, rank and strife in which its sublime beauty had originally been rooted. Nietzsche's early enthusiasm for Wagner stemmed from his belief that Wagner's operas were restoring the mythical and heroic to the modern age. As the detestation of modernity among Hegel's successors grew ever more intense, and as their wish to tap into the primordial energies of the pre-Socratic Heraclitean view of existence as "war" intensified, Hegel's moderate progressive liberalism gave way to Nietzsche's vision of a coming planetary battle for rule by a master race, and Heidegger's commitment to the National Socialist "community of destiny."

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There is a rich pedigree of commentary on the purely political teaching of Hegel's works. To varying degrees, they underemphasize the ontological premises of Hegel's historicism and try to extract from it pragmatic prescriptions about justice, virtue and civil society that can be stated in their own terms, similar to the approach one might take to the political theories of Burke, Tocqueville or J. S. Mill. There is another body of commentary that stresses, on the contrary, the formidable technical dimensions of Hegel's philosophical concepts and mostly, and again to varying degrees, underemphasizes their implications for ethics and a legitimate civil order. The same might be said of Marx, Nietzsche and Heidegger – some approaches to their works are more straightforwardly about political theory, while some pay more attention to their underlying ontological presuppositions, although it is not a consistent relationship. For reasons we will explore, Marx and Nietzsche deliberately avoid the sort of technical metaphysical speculations associated with Hegel, while in Heidegger, they come back strongly to the fore. My approach is to try to show how these two dimensions are inseparable, why it is ultimately not possible to extract an ethical discourse or pragmatic political prescription from the Philosophy of Freedom that is not necessarily grounded in, and intertwined with, its historicist philosophical principles at every turn.

The wish to extract the political theory from the historicist philosophy is, to be sure, understandable in view of the current extreme skepticism toward any such comprehensive "Absolute Science of Spirit" of the kind Hegel believed he had elaborated, not only on the grounds that no such monistic account of reality has withstood scrutiny but also on the grounds that the belief in it has had some unfortunate practical political consequences perhaps best expressed in the Marxist-Leninist formula "the unity of theory and practice." My point,

however, is that if we wish to attempt to understand these thinkers as they understood themselves, then we have to think their philosophies through as a synthesis of real-world prescriptions and a historicist account of the whole. Critiques can proceed from there, and there are certainly critiques to make.

My approach is a synoptic one, tracing a common pedigree of themes from Rousseau to Heidegger. Although I am in good company here, it is valid to ask whether linking these figures together as parts of one unfolding dynamic might undermine the claim each makes to originality and the need to study each author's works strictly in their own right. This might especially seem to be the case for Nietzsche, who deliberately tries to shed the clanking baggage of German academic philosophy and speak more in the voice of a poet, artist or man of letters, re-evoking from the world around him a freshness buried under Hegel's convoluted grey concept nets. My answer will be, first of all, that there is a very high degree of intertextual continuity among these thinkers in which they address each other explicitly. Schiller and Kant both engaged with Rousseau, and Hegel attempts to synthesize all three. Marx discusses Rousseau and Kant, and his terminology is heavily derivative from, while at the same time highly critical of Hegelianism. Nietzsche takes on Rousseau, Schiller, Hegel, and if not Marx by name, certainly socialism. Heidegger, who died in 1976, addresses all of his predecessors stretching back to the Hegelian original, forming a dialogue spanning a century and a half. Moreover, precisely because each of these thinkers believes that life is historical through and through, that no Platonic ascent from the Cave into the sunlight of the permanent truth is possible, they are unavoidably involved in criticizing what they see as their predecessors' flawed understandings of the meaning of history – understandings that contributed to the actual flawed unfolding of history itself – and using those flaws as the point of departure for what they believe to be their own healthier understanding of mankind's past and future. I will also argue that Hegel's original concept of existence as a "self-originating wealth of shapes" remains the underlying core assumption of his successors, modified as species-being (Marx), Will to Power (Nietzsche) and the ontology of Being (Heidegger). Even Nietzsche, it will emerge from this perspective, is rather more of a "technical" thinker, less of an artist, than meets the eye. I have also tried to compensate for any exaggerated uniformity that my synoptic approach might impose on such a richly varied continuum of thinkers by presenting their work in a series of highly exegetical, textually focused studies, attempting to show how their more general principles emerge from a thorough immersion in selective works. Finally, given the enormous range of scholarly interpretations of the theories and issues examined in this book, I have included a brief bibliographical essay for each chapter that attempts to give readers the lay of the land and direct them toward further reading, should they be interested.

I

Escape to Lake Bienne

How Rousseau Turned the World Upside Down

During September and October 1775, Jean-Jacques Rousseau lived on the small, forested island of St. Peter's on Lake Bienne in Switzerland. There, as described in the Fifth Promenade of *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, he experienced a revelation of unsurpassable pleasure about nature that made him want to stay there for the rest of his life, for, as he wrote, no other place had made him "so truly happy." This revelation supplies, in my view, the elusive link that Rousseau always maintained united his hugely disparate, on occasion flatly contradictory, writings around a single theme. It also unleashed a powerful tidal wave of forces that in the coming century and a half would sweep away much of the civilization of the Enlightenment and usher in some of the noblest achievements of modern thought and art along with the worst political catastrophes in human history.

Rousseau rocketed to fame with his attack on the Enlightenment and was a famous and controversial figure for his entire life. The first philosophical celebrity, he was known simply as "Jean-Jacques," rather like our one-name celebrities today (Oprah, Bono). Dressed in a flamboyant lilac-colored fur-edged caftan, he was the star of his own life. Responding to his call to live naturally, the French upper orders took walks and suckled their children for the first time. Since it was still a crime in France to dispute the biblical origin of man, he was frequently in hot water for his own views. More seriously, he has been called the intellectual godfather of the French Revolution – a revolution that aimed for the absolute equality of the human condition and not merely the Lockean rights to representation and the acquisition of private property. He has also been called the founder of Romanticism, an inspiration for Shelley, Heine and Holderlin, and the notion that the life of the artistic outsider is superior to citizen life and philosophy. His influence on Goethe's *Werther* is widely acknowledged. Goethe described how Rousseau had "touched the sympathies" of his generation of young men – "scattered far and wide over this country was

a community of silent admirers who revered his name,” set free by him from the “fetters” of “the conventional world.” Finally, although their styles of thought could not have been more diametrically opposed, Rousseau was a major inspiration for Kant, who dubbed him nothing less than “the Newton of the moral universe.”

The extraordinary range of Rousseau’s influence reflects the difficulty and diversity of his thinking, although he maintained that the contradictions among his works were merely apparent, not real. Each of them expresses its particular viewpoint with powerful rhetorical force, making their interrelatedness even harder to uncover. I suggest that the different political, moral and aesthetic alternatives he explores flow from three major themes: the critique of modern times, the state of nature and how the state of nature might be recovered in the present. After discussing them, I will return to the Fifth Promenade, where I believe the fundamental experience uniting them all can be discovered.

THE CRITIQUE OF BOURGEOIS LIFE

Rousseau burst into prominence when he won an essay prize competition set by the Academy of Dijon in 1750. The academy’s question was, “Has the restoration of the sciences and arts tended to purify morals?” Rousseau’s answer was a shocking No, the sole such response, and therefore the most attention-grabbing. It became his first major work, *A Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* (hereafter referred to as the *First Discourse*). It was also the beginning of Rousseau’s ability to send a frisson of contrarian excitement through the ranks of the very *philosophes* whose drawing-room refinement he made a career out of attacking. To understand the shock value, we have to consider the background of the Enlightenment.

By the time Rousseau wrote, England and France had undergone remarkable transformations since a century or so earlier. The old feudal order was giving way to powerful monarchies that actively promoted the spread of commerce and the advancement of knowledge for the benefit of ordinary people. Bacon had urged the use of science “for the relief of man’s estate,” a science that transforms the world and does not merely contemplate it, derived from Machiavelli’s summons to the conquest of Fortuna. Hobbes and Locke had argued that the social contract exists for the protection and security of the individual; that governments should encourage the rise of commercial private enterprise and that people should otherwise be left free to live as they wished – the state should not legislate personal morality. The American Constitution established the first formal separation of Church and State, the way of the future.

The classical view had been that man’s natural perfection came through performing the duties of a citizen toward the community. Man could not be fully human except in this way. Strictly speaking, there was no such thing as

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individualism by nature. This tradition had been built upon by medieval Christian, especially Thomistic, theology so that man is seen as fulfilling his duty to God in part by fulfilling his duties as a subject. The modern view, by contrast, was that human nature is fundamentally individualistic. That is, man is complete in his nature prior to and apart from his formation by civil society. What makes man an individual is that he is naturally concerned above all with his own self-preservation. Duties are not an intrinsic part of man's natural fulfillment, so that common duties are replaced by individual rights. According to Hobbes, the adjuration to duty was a deception by which people were oppressed by corrupt civil and religious authorities. At the same time, that adjuration invited the "vainglorious" to disrupt functioning governments in the belief that they possessed superior virtue. The solution was to understand that civil society exists expressly to facilitate the individual's pursuit of self-preservation and even comfortable self-preservation. Any society that achieves this is legitimate because it protects us from one another and redirects contumacious political ambition into the competition for economic advancement.

These processes took a long time to take root and did so at an uneven rate. Their most momentous beacons to date were the two great modernizing liberal revolutions in England and America. By Rousseau's time, the French monarchy had found its own power increased by promoting these measures for economic advancement, while the *philosophes* mounted attacks on remnants of the old premodern public morality – against censorship, religious intolerance and retrograde habits such as dueling. Rousseau attempted to put a brake on the progress of modernization, and he knew many would perceive him to be a philistine for doing so ("Here I am a barbarian because no one understands me" was the quote from Ovid with which he begins the *First Discourse*).

The core of Rousseau's great counterattack is best summed up in a later work, *Emile*. Modern man, he writes, is a "bourgeois," a word that originally simply meant a townsman (like the German *Burger*) and therefore a person likely to engage in commerce, but which Rousseau was the first to invest with the negative, even detestable qualities it was to assume for subsequent critics of modernity including Marx. Although the number of actual *bourgeoises* in the France of his day was likely no more than 8 percent of the population, Rousseau sees in this emerging human type a loathsome vision of everyone's future, not unlike Nietzsche's later vision of the spread of the Last Man.

According to Rousseau, the bourgeois is strung between two authentic alternatives. Natural man lives entirely for himself, but he is entirely self-sufficient. At the opposite extreme, the citizen is devoted entirely to the common good and the laws, a way of life that is completely alienating and unnatural but dignified in its austerity. In his evocation of the citizen, Rousseau departs from the Enlightenment preference for the Athens of the classical age in its view of the ancient world – Periclean Athens, cultured, affluent, tolerant and democratic, appeared to provide an ancient antecedent and inspiration for the improvements being spread by modernity. For Rousseau, by contrast, the

grimly collectivist republics of Sparta and early Rome were the high-water marks of the manliness, honor and patriotism of true citizenship.

It has been suggested that Jacques-Louis David's famous painting *The Oath of the Horatii* symbolizes the dichotomy in Rousseau's thought between these two authentic and opposite alternatives – on the left-hand side of the painting, stern Roman men with swords pledging a fight to the death against Rome's enemy Alba Longa; on the right-hand side, a family group tenderly comforting each other over the impending loss of their loved ones. A large space in the middle of the canvas separates these alternatives of patriotic duty and familial affection. One way of viewing the French Revolution in its most radical Jacobin phase is as the attempt to use the harshness of citizen virtue from the left-hand side of the painting to bring about a world that releases the sweet natural ties on the right-hand side. We will return to this later when we discuss the possibility that Rousseau's writings were responsible for the Terror.

The bourgeois, Rousseau argues, is a bastardized half-way house between the two authentic ways of life of natural man and citizen. Like natural man, the bourgeois lives for himself. But unlike natural man, he needs others to take advantage of, and is dependent on them for this very reason. In Rousseau's estimation, this has encouraged secret avarice and fraud under a mask of hypocritical politeness and civility. There is little real virtue in modern times, so more artificial civility is needed to paper over the fierce struggle to get ahead. The Enlightenment thinkers encouraged people to get along with others, to be "sociable," because it was best for their own individual interests. Virtue toward your fellow man is not practiced for its own sake but as a means for your own selfish ends.

The modern view of human nature as universally individualistic, along with the materialistic modern science that underpins it, Rousseau argues, broadcasts its cosmopolitanism and thereby reduces all societies, traditions and beliefs to these universalistic explanations of human behavior, making it difficult for people to believe unreservedly in their own particular peoples, traditions or faith – a corrosion of morality that further encourages an absorption in self-interest. The spread of prosperity and new productive techniques pampers the body, makes one weak and hungry for ever-new luxuries, and therefore more selfish and unable to rise above one's own good. For Rousseau, therefore, scientific and economic progress go hand in hand with despotism, because people abdicate more and more of their responsibilities as citizens to a central authority so as to devote themselves completely to their own self-advancement and pursuit of riches.

Finally, the progress of the arts and sciences, Rousseau argues, increases inequality because it rewards mental talent and makes all other human qualities seem worthless by comparison. As he mordantly remarks, one might think France suffered from having too many farmers and too few professors. The Enlightenment considered as one of its proudest achievements the spread of the idea that individuals should be able to rise in life through their own ability and