

# The Freedom of Slavery: Salvation and the Social Contract

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Like many Enlightenment thinkers, Jean-Jacques Rousseau was heavily influenced by Christian teachings, but ultimately was not in agreement with them. In the *Second Discourse*, he portrays natural man degenerating into civil man through the development of reason, closely paralleling the Genesis account of Adam's fall after eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. But Rousseau's suggestion that civil man's wicked nature will lead to a second, corrupted state of nature contrasts sharply from the Biblical doctrine that Christ's perfect nature will restore humanity to an Eden-like relationship with God. Man's desire for freedom plays a critical role in the narratives of both the *Second Discourse* and the Bible; by examining Rousseau and the Bible's portrayals of freedom, one can identify common themes as well as critical differences in their views on what man's state is and what it should, and will, be.

In both Rousseau's *Discourse* and the Bible, discussions of freedom center on critical transitions which fundamentally alter human nature. For Rousseau, the crucial point is the formation of the social contract; for Christians, it is the act of redemption. In Rousseau, by understanding their lost natural freedom, humans can better appreciate their gained civil and moral freedom. In the Bible, by understanding their previous sinful state, Christians can better appreciate their current forgiven one.

Rousseau uses the same slavery language to describe man's pre-political and pre-social state that the apostle Paul uses to describe man's pre-salvation state. Without reason to temper his passions or laws to restrain them, Rousseau's original man is naturally free, but also a slave to his instincts. Paul writes that prior to being freed by Christ, all used to be slaves to sin, following the ways of the world and gratifying the cravings of the sinful nature (Romans 6:17; Ephesians 2:2-3). In his pre-political state, Rousseau's original man is partially free, but neither he nor the Bible's pre-salvation man is wholly free, the one enslaved to animal instinct, the other to sinful desires.

In the *Second Discourse*, natural man values freedom above all else and will "sacrifice pleasures, wealth, power, and life itself for the sake of preserving this one good" (II.39). He thus becomes dissatisfied with his enslavement to instinct and, in an effort to increase his freedom, enters into a social contract and makes the key transition into a political society. To do this, he must irrevocably surrender his beloved natural freedom – the only freedom he has known up to that point – in exchange for civil and moral freedom, which can only exist in society. He loses the natural freedom of living unrestrained by anything outside of himself, but gains the civil freedom of owning property and the moral freedom of acting nobly and taking responsibly for his own actions. Reason and the social contract are what free natural man from slavishly following instincts by also instilling in him intellect and the law to be alternate influences on his actions.

The Christian manner of freeing humans from slavery to sin is quite different. For one, the development of reason and the social contract is something that originated from something inside man, as though it were part of a natural progression. In the Christian account, humans are dead in sin, incapable of freeing themselves from their enslavement. They need intervention from an outside source for deliverance. And unlike Rousseau's account, in which the social contract merely alters human nature through the emergence of sociability and reason, the Bible says that salvation entirely replaces one's sinful nature with

a new, Christ-like nature.

Rousseau's social contract frees men from slavery to instinct and confers upon them the freedom, which they previously lacked, to act morally. Salvation frees men from slavery to sin and confers upon them the freedom, which they previously lacked, to obey God. But while the social contract and salvation free men from instinct and sin, respectively, they also subjugate them to something, or someone, else. The same civil society that provides civil and moral freedom also enslaves individuals to laws and regulations. The salvation that frees one to obey God also makes one a prisoner and slave to Him. In Romans 6:22, Paul writes to the church, saying, "you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God." Paradoxically, attaining freedom from one master enslaves one to another.

In the case of Rousseau, the moral and civil freedoms gained from the social contract are in tension with, and eventually outweigh, the natural freedom lost from it. An individual retains freedom by contributing to make the laws, so the laws to which he is subjected are, in part, of his own making. In the Bible, man has no freedom prior to salvation. What seems like independence and mastery over one's own life is actually a disguised form of enslavement to sin. Man cannot serve two masters, but he must serve one. One can be a slave to God or a slave to sin, but independence is not an option.

So what is so significant about the transition from one state of slavery to another? The key difference is the master to whom one is enslaved. Slavery is about who's in control. Salvation requires submission to God's perfect will, rather than one's own sinful one. It also requires one to choose to become a slave of Christ, as opposed to already being in slavery to sin. Prior to salvation, the sinful state dominates and humans have no choice but to follow it. Slavery to God, unlike slavery to sin, comes with the freedom to obey or disobey. Paul instructs the early Christians, "Do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature." (Galatians 5:13). As all Christians know from experience, being a slave to God does not mean that one is incapable of sinning. The Christian is bound to God in the same way that a citizen is bound to the law. Even if a citizen breaks the law, she is still bound to the law as the authority over her life. Likewise, even if a Christian sins against God, she is still under his authority. Disobedient slaves are still slaves.

Rousseau's social contract parallels Biblical salvation in that it outlines a way for enslaved men to increase their freedom. But in contrast to Rousseau's general will, by which members of a society create the conventional laws that restrain them, Christianity is a willing submission to an external law fashioned by our Creator. Eventually, man's self-government leads to corruption, violence, and a second, impure state of Nature. Submission to God's sovereignty also leads back to an original state, but to one that is Eden-like, not corrupted. The final state in the Christian story is a fulfillment, rather than a degradation, of man's natural state, a restoration to a right relation between the Creator and His creations.

Ultimately, the discussion about the freedoms gained and lost from the social contract and from salvation hangs on the fact that since man cannot have complete autonomy, there must be something that controls him. The social contract puts him at the mercy of an imperfect sovereign, under the restrictions created by himself and by imperfect citizens like him. Christian redemption imprisons him to God, whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light; who has good, perfect, and pleasing plans; and who takes him captive that he might be free. ☩