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## Roger Scruton: Rousseau and the Origins of Liberalism: Study Guide

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# ROGER SCRUTON: ROUSSEAU AND THE ORIGINS OF LIBERALISM: STUDY GUIDE, 2008

## Steven Alan Samson

### Outline

- A. THESIS (19-24)
  - 1. It Is Easier to Destroy Institutions Than to Create Them
    - a. Labour's constitutional reforms
    - b. Liturgical changes
    - c. Revision of inherited institutions
    - d. No long-term cost/benefit analysis
  - 2. This Process of Revision Is Reasonable
    - a. Who can stand in the way of the liberal idea?
    - b. Rousseau
    - c. What is at stake is the inherited store of social knowledge
    - d. Rousseau made liberalism possible
  - 3. Rousseau Made Liberalism Possible
    - a. His view of life was also a form of life
      - 1) *Julie*
    - b. Music
    - c. Confessions
      - 1) Noble lie in its quintessentially modern form
    - d. Anticipation of class struggle, views on language and education
  - 4. Modern Liberalism
    - a. Classical liberalism
    - b. Interplay of liberty and equality
      - 1) Libertarians v. American liberals
    - c. Both types are hostile to vested authority
    - d. Rousseau's disgust
  - 5. Moral Liberty
    - a. Freedom to bind oneself
      - 1) Submission to law
    - b. Society founded in a contract of self-imposed obligations
    - c. Agenda of Rousseau's writings
    - d. Critique
- B. VALUE OF TRADITION (24-27)
  - 1. *Querelle des Bouffons*
    - a. Rousseau: no French music
    - b. Rameau vs. Rousseau
    - c. Fight against established practice
  - 2. Fight Against Established Practice
    - a. A collective effort
    - b. Emancipation from the rule of monody
    - c. Concept of the permanent and repeatable work
  - 3. Modern Liberals Scoff at the Idea of Tradition
    - a. A real tradition is not an invention
      - 1) Unintended byproduct
    - b. The process
    - c. Rameau's Treatise on Harmony
  - 4. Rousseau's Antipathy to Tradition
    - a. Authority
    - b. Attack on graphic notation

- c. *Auteur* [Fr., originator or innovator] as re-inventor
  - d. A rehearsal for the forthcoming drama
    - 1) Rousseau's against prejudice
    - 2) Self against others
5. Rousseau's Failure
    - a. His concession in *Confessions*
    - b. Attack on harmony and counterpoint
    - c. Romantic hero
  6. *Le Devin du Village*
  7. Rousseau Knew Where Authority Resides, Seeking It Out in Order to Dismiss It as a Sham
- C. LIBERALISM'S ROOT ERROR (27-31)
1. Inability to Accept **Inherited Forms of Social Knowledge**
    - a. Such knowledge arises "by an invisible hand"
  2. **Edmund Burke's** Attack on **A Priori** Thinking [Deductive; Based on Logic Rather than Experience]
    - a. Insufficiency of one's private stock of reason
    - b. Social knowledge exists through exercise
      - 1) Best understood through the failures of the planned economy
  3. **Ludwig von Mises** on Socialism: An Illustration from Austrian Economics
    - a. Information about the real pressure of human needs exists only in a free exchange [cf. Thomas Sowell's *Knowledge and Decisions*]
    - b. Socialism with centralized price controls destroys information
    - c. Rationalism [*a priorism*; cf. Benedict XVI's Platonism] in economics is irrational
  4. Oakeshott's Attack on Rationalism in Politics
    - a. Note **F. A. Hayek's** commendation of the **common law** system
    - b. Rousseau's legislation: abstract [rationalistic] *a priori* code
  5. Example of Implied Social Knowledge: Tradition of Western Music
  6. Social Knowledge Arises From the Search Over Time For Agreement
    - a. Common law
      - 1) Clear outcome of cases
      - 2) *Ratio Decidendi* emerges later
    - b. Freely engaged transactions
    - c. How to live in harmony with our fellows
  7. Context of Rousseau's Rejection of Society
    - a. Institutions must be the direct object of consent
    - b. We must stand outside our institutions and ask if we would have chosen them [cf. **John Rawls's** "veil of ignorance," which seeks to remove the "mote" of personal interest as an impediment to admiring the "log" of Rousseau's general will]
    - c. Institutions must reflect our own autonomous submission
    - d. Authority is then bestowed on the government by the governed
  8. Contract Does Not Amount to Much
    - a. Submission to a **general will** that brooks no opposition
    - b. Robespierre's "despotism of liberty"
    - c. Danger of Rousseau's paradoxes
  9. Dangerous Assumption That We Can Jettison All Institutions [Contrast Francis Lieber's Institutional Liberty]
    - a. **Root assumption** of liberalism: we can make rational choices without benefit of social knowledge
  10. How We Know What to Do: When We Have a Sense of **Right and Wrong**
    - a. Scruton: Without tradition we have "no conception of the good" (a concern of **John Rawls**)
      - 1) "A social contract between creatures with no conception of the good is a parody of rational choice."
  11. Starobinski: Rousseau Had an Emotional Need to Reject All Mediation between the Self

- And Its Desire
  - a. His goal: To remove the veil of society
  - b. **Society**: A realm of otherness, alienation
  - c. Immediate unity that is **amour de soi** (original self-love) = naturally good and free
  - d. **Evil**: The sundering of this primal unity
  - e. Fall to **amour-propre** [This is a proprietary sort of love; self-interest]
  - f. Social contract is redemptive
- 12. Later Versions: **Fichte, Hegel, Marx, Sartre**
  - a. Rousseau began a bad habit of blaming society for the evil deeds of people
- D. ANOTHER WAY OF SEEING ROUSSEAU'S SOCIAL CONTRACT (31-32)
  - 1. Rousseau's Social Contract Is Best Seen as a Rejection of Society Is an Obstacle to Choice; It Is Not a Redemption of Society through a Sacrament of Choice
  - 2. **Edmund Burke's** Critique of the Official Doctrines of Revolutionary France Confirms This Conclusion
    - a. "To dishonor the dead is to reject the relation on which society is built – the relation of obligation between the generations."
      - 1) Loss of trusteeship
    - b. Web of obligations shrinks to the present tense
  - 3. Pillaging of All Resources
    - a. Standard of choice
    - b. Depletion of social knowledge
- E. EMILE AS AN ILLUSTRATION OF THE LOSS OF KNOWLEDGE (32-37)
  - 1. Ironic Bow to an Aristocratic View of Life
  - 2. Ideas Prompted By Self-Love and Pity
    - a. **Task of the educator**: To open the mind rather than fill it
  - 3. Problem of Logistics
    - a. Emile's "discovery" of magnetism
  - 4. Consequence: Diminishing Bequest of Knowledge
    - a. Halting of knowledge accumulation
    - b. Destruction of all intellectual authority
    - c. Freedom confined to the present tense
  - 5. Sex Education and the Virtue of Chastity
    - a. Chastity requires discipline and preserving a sense of mystery
    - b. Modern **sex education** is conceived as "**liberation**" and as a "how to" manual (and is thus a vicarious form of pedophilia for the teachers)
  - 6. **Child-centered Teaching**
    - a. Idea that the purpose of teaching is to benefit the child
    - b. Social point of view is contrasted: Purpose of education is to perpetuate an inheritance of learning [cf. Rosenstock-Huessy below]
  - 7. **Knowledge-centered Teacher**
    - a. First duty is to find the pupil with the ability to learn what he has to teach
  - 8. Authority of a Teacher
    - a. Child as authority
  - 9. Rousseau's Objection to Obedience to Others
    - a. Child becomes fit for civil society by learning to obey his true nature
    - b. Rousseau's proprietary right over the child Emile [cf. "best interests of the child" doctrine, a form of *parens patriae*]
    - c. Compulsory school attendance [cf. earlier compulsory church attendance]
    - d. Purpose of modern education: The **removal of advantages** [cf. John Dewey's emphasis on socialization; see Comparisons below]
  - 10. Modern Educational Theory
    - a. Individualized learning process
    - b. Hostility toward memorization
  - 11. Goal of "Relevance"
  - 12. "Life Skills"

- a. Relevance revolution
  - b. Victory for ignorance
  - c. **Emile**: A treatise against education [Authenticity requires that we learn for ourselves]
13. Cult of “Sensibility”
- a. Misreading of Rousseau: Emotion and reason are inextricable
  - b. Apartness from nature defines our condition: we must overcome it
  - c. Emotions should be focused
14. We Overcome Alienation through Rational Choice
- a. We must remake the world in the image of freedom
  - b. Why a **social contract** is necessary: so that society can become an expression of or inner freedom rather than remaining an external force [**general will** idea]
  - c. **Redemption**: Everything made new, sovereignty of the self conserved
  - d. But what if the self and its freedom are myths?
- F. THE HEART OF ROUSSEAU’S VISION: A CULPABLE *A PRIORISM* (37-42)  
 [The old question of Nature (Rousseau’s Good) vs. Nurture (the corrupting influence of society)]
1. **Scruton’s Riposte**: The Human Being Is a Product of History
- a. Historical contingency carries us along; we must make the best of circumstances
  - b. **Legitimacy** should be sought in procedures rather than origins [*auctoritas*]
  - c. **Quest for origins** asks no answerable questions: It is an attempt of anchor society outside history [cf. the German Philosophical School as opposed to the Historical School]
2. **Custom**
- a. Hume’s benefit of the doubt and the subsequent benefit of doubting
  - b. Social constraints we are free to defy
  - c. Customs cannot be chosen
  - d. Irreplaceable source of social and moral knowledge
  - e. Limits of questioning customs
3. Belief in the Natural Innocence of Human Beings
4. **Pietas**: Underlying acceptance that we are not the producers but the products of our World
- a. **Social knowledge or custom**: We must strive to be worthy of an inheritance we did not create, and amend our it only when we have first understood it
5. Rousseau’s Deistic God: A “Real Absence”
- a. Divinized **Self** as God’s Vicar on Earth
  - b. Destruction of tradition [iconoclasm]
  - c. Holy war: Rousseau’s Supreme Being is not God but “a God-shaped hole in the heart of things” [A deliberate reference to Augustine’s description of fallen man]
6. Country of Chimeras: **Nothingness** (*Neánt*): Rousseau’s Nihilism
- a. Self-existing in solitude
  - b. Two sources of authority: God and self
  - c. The world is created by “society”: the real presence of the Devil [This is Manicheanism, one form of which was the Albigensian heresy]
7. Rousseau as an Iconoclastic **Religious Thinker** Bent on Destroying the “Old Gods”
- a. Scruton’s riposte: “Society” is not the instrument of our fall; it is the fertile topsoil of culture
  - b. By clearing custom away, the knowledge of evil is also taken away
8. Lesson to be Drawn from Rousseau
- a. Lenin: Who? Whom?
  - b. **Deep conflicts** concern knowledge, not power
  - c. Liberal attack on the traditional curriculum
  - d. Substitution of mock subjects
  - d. Depriving all of us of social knowledge

## Review

social knowledge	Edmund Burke	<i>a priori</i> thinking
Ludwig von Mises	F. A. Hayek	John Rawls
<i>amour propre</i>	social contract	general will
child-centered teaching	knowledge-centered teacher	purpose of modern education
Rousseau as a religious thinker	why liberals attack the traditional curriculum	