

Reviews

Rousseau and German Idealism: Freedom, Dependence and Necessity, by David James. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, xi + 233 pp. ISBN Hardback 978-1-107-03785-4

Political philosophy is in the midst of a Rousseau revival. Recent decades have seen a number of important interpretations of Rousseau as a powerful and systematic philosopher of freedom. Nicholas Dent (1989), Frederick Neuhouser (2003, 2008), Maurizio Viroli (2003), Matthew Simpson (2006), John Rawls (2007), Joshua Cohen (2010), and others have read Rousseau's major ethical and political writings as providing substantive and plausible answers to the following kinds of questions: under the complex conditions of material and social interdependence made necessary by modern society, what psychological and institutional measures must be in place for individuals to obey only their own wills and thus to be free? How are the coercive forces of law and state justified by the freedom they both protect and engender? For many of these commentators, Rousseau's emphasis on freedom as the master normative value locates him as a forerunner to Kantian moral and political philosophy.

In *Rousseau and German Idealism: Freedom, Dependence and Necessity*, David James joins the company of these interpreters in rationally reconstructing Rousseau's idea of socio-political freedom. He also compares Rousseau with subsequent philosophers of freedom, not only Kant but also Fichte and Hegel. But James offers an important corrective to a premise shared by many freedom-based commentators. Many of these commentators argue that Rousseau's conception of freedom is fundamentally a matter of avoiding domination, understood as arbitrary dependence on the wills of others. Based on this conception of Rousseau's problem, it looks like Rousseau was relatively optimistic about how to solve it. If the main threat to freedom is domination by the particular wills of more powerful people—for example, the domination of the slave by the master—then the solution to this problem is clear: equality before the law. The law substitutes asymmetrical dependence on particular dominating agents for symmetrical dependence on the general will. According to this interpretation, Rousseau is concerned about forms of domination in which one person directly and intentionally dominates another, and his solution is the liberal, rights-protecting state. By contrast, the central contention of James's book is that Rousseau has a much richer conception of the forms of dependence that threaten freedom, and so thereby also a broader conception of domination. As a result, James's Rousseau is less confident that legal measures alone are sufficient to secure freedom in modern society. At the same time, however, James's Rousseau is not advocating the surrender of the individual to the

collective, or any other such 'Spartan' solution sometimes emphasized by a different set of commentators (e.g. Shklar 1985).

What is Rousseau's broader conception of dependence and domination? Rousseau contrasts "dependence on things," i.e. dependence on natural forces, with "dependence on men," i.e. domination by the wills of others, and argues that only the latter is detrimental to freedom (Rousseau 1979: 85). The basic idea here is simple: if freedom is a normative property concerning relations between wills, then the mountain that stands in my way is not a threat to my freedom, no matter how badly I may wish to cross to the other side. On the other hand, the guard who prevents me from crossing might pose such a threat, at least if his authorization to do so is based on norms that do not in some sense stem from my will. James accepts this basic contrast, but he very helpfully isolates in Rousseau's thought an intermediary category: "dependence on men as mediated by dependence on things" (p. 18). To see the relevance of this category, consider the discussion of economic society in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*. Here, Rousseau shows how the rise of a cooperative division of labor as a way of satisfying human needs unfolds into a wealth-based economy that amplifies needs through luxury and creates the structural positions of rich and poor. It is this system itself that produces "domination and servitude" (Rousseau 1997a: 171).

For James's Rousseau "dependence on men as mediated by dependence on things" involves a nascent conception of structural domination, what James calls a "complex, impersonal form of dependence" (p. 25). Structural domination does not stem from individual dominating wills, but rather from ongoing patterns of decisions no one of which may be dominating in and of itself. For example, economic markets organized around a highly stratified division of labor and profit-seeking severely constrain each economic agent's possibilities, leaving "little room, if any, for genuine acts of self-legislation" (p. 25). Yet there is no discernible agent behind this constraint, even though markets arise through a multitude of trading and other activities each of which may be intentional and even conducted on terms that are free and fair. Drawing on Rousseau's comments on the emergence of social classes, luxury and the proliferation of false needs, as well as the division of labor, James shows that Rousseau appreciates the way in which diffuse forms of domination threaten freedom no less than direct relations of mastery and slavery.

In excavating this category of manmade yet non-intentional necessity in Rousseau's texts, James has several critical targets. For example, he objects to Philip Pettit's neo-republican political theory, as well as to interpretations that read Rousseau through a strictly Kantian lens. According to James, although neo-republicanism shares with Rousseau a conception of freedom as non-domination, it "tends to view the main threat to freedom almost exclusively in terms of direct, typically interpersonal forms of dependence, in which one agent is in the power of another agent...with the agent *consciously* exercising domination on the basis of the superior power that it enjoys" (p. 5; emphasis

in original). Similarly, Kantian readings of Rousseau also underestimate the extent to which constraints on freedom arise from indirect structural conditions “based on material inequality” (p. 14). James’s Rousseau is thus a useful counterpart both to other recent interpretations and to a well-known position in contemporary political philosophy.

As mentioned above, James’s Rousseau struggles with whether or not legal equality is sufficient to render economic dependence consonant with intersubjective freedom. Yet James rightly notes that Rousseau is hesitant about seeking to limit structural domination through a wholesale transformation of economic life. James’s Rousseau understands that drastic state intervention into the redistribution of wealth and property might threaten the value of freedom it aims to protect. Such a concern is clearly in view in passages like the following from Rousseau’s *Discourse on Political Economy*: “it is difficult to protect the property of individuals on one side without attacking it on another, and the regulations regarding inheritances, wills and contracts cannot possibly avoid constraining citizens to some extent in disposing of their own goods and hence in their right to property” (Rousseau 1997b: 23).

In place of a relatively optimistic Rousseau, confident that basically liberal mechanisms can achieve freedom by preventing direct domination, James’s Rousseau articulates, without resolving, a central question for subsequent political thought: in the interests of promoting freedom, how might states secure conditions that prevent structural domination, without thereby thwarting the more familiar forms of freedom valued by modern individuals? For example, is a situation in which a free market in labor systematically disenfranchises certain classes of people more or less threatening to freedom than a state-planned economy that secures symmetrical freedom and non-domination at the expense of freedom of choice? James’s book combines historical scholarship with attention to these still urgent political questions.

James’s broader goal is to use his reading of Rousseau to reorient our understanding of the way in which the three most-famous German Idealist philosophers grappled with the question of how to secure freedom under the necessity of “impersonal economic, legal and social forces” (p. 8). Here, James’s approach is neither to trace the specific historical influence of Rousseau on Kant, Fichte, and Hegel, nor is it to show that these later thinkers provide a better account of how to secure freedom under structural domination. Rather, James suggests that Rousseau has a clearer sense of the problem than his successors, and that their efforts to ground freedom in the modern state smooth over essential tensions that Rousseau lays bare. There are thus no clear solutions in James’s story, only a series of more or less failed attempts to understand how freedom might be possible given the way in which certain economic and socio-political structures constrain our lives.

James devotes separate discussions to Kant, Fichte, and Hegel, showing that each thinker’s attempt to ground freedom under conditions of necessity runs into internal contradictions. Kant’s solution to the problem of how collective autonomy might emerge from within the forms of competition and strife rampant in modern civil society rests on faith in a historical teleology that will forge meaningful

community from social antagonism. But Kant does not adequately argue for why such antagonisms will not in fact intensify moral corruption (pp. 72–85). Fichte's solution to the problem of structural domination is to impose rigid state control on the economy. But such intervention threatens to obliterate the freedom it aimed to protect (pp. 119–130, 138–142). Hegel synthesizes Kant and Fichte. For Hegel, the freedoms inherent in market society emerge through a historical process (Kant), but markets can only deliver on their promise if actively regulated by the state (Fichte). Unfortunately, however, the possibility of a systematically disenfranchised underclass as well as a class of the ultra-rich, both equally disconnected from the rest of social life, renders his attempt to reconcile freedom and economic necessity deeply unstable (pp. 154–155, 179–186). Moreover, Hegel cannot adequately show how individuals raised in civil society will form the dispositions of solidarity needed to secure the state (pp. 187–192).

James's comparisons between Rousseau and Fichte are particularly instructive. But unfortunately for the organization of the book as a whole, the red thread of structural domination is never posed with adequate clarity. There is an excessive shifting between concerns not all of which are equally relevant to the topic. For example, James devotes quite a bit of space to Rousseau's idea of "perfectibility," i.e. the way in which individuals develop "certain latent capacities through their interaction with the natural environment and, more importantly, with other human beings" (p. 14). He argues that Rousseauian perfectibility underlies the shared conviction of the three German Idealists that individuals can come to identify with various forms of practical constraints as constitutive of freedom. It is hard to see how exactly a discussion of mankind's capacity for self-transformation directly relates to overcoming the distinctly *structural* forms of domination, as opposed to domination more generally, which James so helpfully isolates. Moreover, perfectibility in Rousseau refers to the basic metaphysical fact that human capacities are not fixed. As the cause of both enlightenment and "all of man's miseries" (Rousseau 1997a: 141), perfectibility is neither an unalloyed good, nor synonymous with moral and political freedom.

By way of critical comment, let me now focus on James's claim that Rousseau has a broader conception of "what constitutes a restraint or constraints on freedom" than neo-republicans "sufficiently acknowledge" (p. 16). James must grapple more carefully with what neo-republicans actually say about markets and structural domination in order to defend his claim that Rousseau provides a contrasting view. Pettit's concern with structural, economic matters goes much deeper than James recognizes. Consider the following passage from *On the People's Terms*:

The way things are organized in a society may not be the work of will in a relevant sense...it may be the unintended, aggregate consequence of how people are independently motivated to act – but it can impact on free choice in a way that is closely connected to invasion [i.e. direct, personal domination]. It may constitute a structure or pattern that facilitates the invasion by some people of the choices available to others. It may amount to an *indirect, structural form of invasion, we might even say, as distinct from the*

direct, personal form of invasion that it occasions (Pettit 2012: 44; emphasis mine).

Here, Pettit clearly recognizes indirect, structural forms of domination. When Pettit discusses the “unintended, aggregate consequence of how people are independently motivated to act” he might appear to come close to the concern of James’s Rousseau about “dependence on men as mediated by dependence on things.”

Careful reading of the passage, however, reveals that for Pettit impersonal structures dominate by facilitating or rendering more likely the direct domination of one agent by another. So in articulating a more fine-grained contrast between Pettit and Rousseau one would need to show that for Rousseau structures are in themselves dominating rather than mere instruments for personal domination. In other words, for Rousseau is it the very system of property and wealth that dominate? Or is the role of the system only to render a particular rich person more likely to dominate a particular poor person? Is capitalism dominating because it forces all workers to alienate their labor or because it enables particular bosses to mistreat their workers? In both cases, only if Rousseau takes the first option is his theory substantially different from Pettit’s.

As with most interesting interpretive questions, merely citing passages from Rousseau will not settle the matter. Certain passages suggest that all that is at issue for Rousseau are person-to-person forms of domination. For example, Rousseau writes that with respect to material distribution, all the state ought to care about is that “no citizen be so very rich that he can buy another, and none so poor that he is compelled to sell himself” (Rousseau 1997c: 78). Domination is thus understood as a relation between the rich person and the poor person. On the other hand, other passages suggest that for Rousseau what dominates are social structures that produce rich and poor. For example, Rousseau criticizes “the utility each person derives from the social confederation, which strongly protects the immense possessions of the rich and scarcely lets a wretch enjoy the hut he built with his own hands” (Rousseau 1997b: 31). On this conception, even if no rich person actually takes the poor man’s hut, he is still not free. This is because the entire constellation of laws and system of taxation dominate by robbing the poor of their own labor power.

In ascertaining whether Rousseau has the conceptual resources to understand structures as in-themselves dominating, it would have been helpful to know more about how James understands the relation between freedom as non-domination and the general will, as well as the internal, conceptual connection Rousseau sometimes posits between freedom, justice, and equality. Addressing these themes might also help us see to what extent Rousseau’s conception of freedom anticipates Kant and Fichte’s conception of *Recht* as a system of reciprocal limits on freedom. Nevertheless, James’s book has done a great service in furthering conversation about pre-Marxist conceptions of domination, and in helping us appreciate how Rousseau’s views on freedom might still make a decisive contribution to political reflection today.¹

Rafeeq Hasan
 Department of Philosophy, Amherst College
 USA
 rhasan@amherst.edu

NOTES

¹ I thank Jared Holley and Geneviève Rousselière for comments on an earlier draft. It goes without saying that all errors or infelicities remain entirely my own.

REFERENCES

- Cohen, J. (2010), *Rousseau: A Free Community of Equals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dent, N. (1989), *Rousseau: An Introduction to His Psychological, Social and Political Theory*. London: Blackwell.
- Neuhouser, F. (2003), *Foundations of Hegel's Social Theory: Actualizing Freedom*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- (2008), *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love: Evil, Rationality, and the Drive for Recognition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pettit, P. (2012), *On the People's Terms: A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rawls, J. (2007), in S. Freeman (ed.) *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Rousseau, J. J. (1979), *Emile or on Education* trans. Allan Bloom. New York: Basic Books.
- (1997a), 'Discourse on the origin and the foundations of inequality among men', In *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Victor Gourevitch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (1997b), 'Discourse on political economy', In *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings* ed. and trans. Victor Gourevitch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (1997c), 'Of the social contract', in *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*.
- Shklar, J. (1985), *Men and Citizens: A Study of Rousseau's Social Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Simpson, M. (2006), *Rousseau's Theory of Freedom*. New York: Continuum.
- Viroli, M. (2003), *Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the 'Well-Ordered Society'*, trans. Derek Hanson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Narrative Identity, Autonomy, and Mortality: From Frankfurt and MacIntyre to Kierkegaard, by John J. Davenport. New York: Routledge Press, 2012, xv+217pp.

Relatively recently, a slew of influential philosophers—notably David Carr, Alasdair MacIntyre, Paul Ricoeur, and Charles Taylor among them—have argued