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A Skeptic's Certainty and Their Politics

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A Skeptic's Certainty and Their Politics

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by
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Introduction

“They are looking for information and guidance and want to know what to do. They are not looking for rumors.” This was part of reporter Philip Rucker’s response as he questioned the report done by the Department of Homeland Security which suggested the new coronavirus could be suppressed by heat and humidity. Trump replied: “Hey Phil, I’m the president and you’re *fake* news. And you know what I’ll say to you? I know you well, I know you well. Because I know the guy, I see what he writes. He’s a total *faker*.”

In the same press conference, Trump was asked by another reporter if he was aware of the medical status of Kim Jong-un. Trump replied: “I think the report was incorrect. I think the report was done by a network that was incorrect. I’m hearing they used old documents...I hope it was an incorrect report.” When a CNN reporter followed up asking if Trump had been in contact with the North Koreans, he again refused to answer, spoke on the strength of his and Kim’s relationship, and ended with: “I think it was a *fake* report, done by CNN.” The same CNN reporter responded with: “But can I ask you a question?” To which Trump replied: “No, that’s enough.” The same reporter stated: “But that wasn’t my question...” Trump responded: “The problem is you don’t write the *truth*, you know, as far as I am concerned I want to go to the next one.” The reporter continued pressing Trump, asking a follow up question, to which Trump ended by saying: “CNN is *fake* news, don’t talk to me.”¹

If you have Twitter, watch or read the news, or even listen to a conversation on the street, you would know that a tendency has developed to deem particular facts, ideas, people, and

¹PBS NewsHour, *WATCH: White House coronavirus task force gives pandemic update -- April 23, 2020* (YouTube: April 23, 2020).

networks as “fake news.” What I find most interesting about this is not just the compulsion to label something as “fake,” but the underlying commitment to truth, certainty and the skeptical attitude that this proclamation makes clear. While one surely could claim something “fake” after it has been submitted to substantial questioning and investigation, the majority of “fake news” claims lack substantiation of any kind. “Fake news” rhetoric has morphed into a tool that can be implemented toward ideas, opinions and facts that one personally, not objectively, disagrees with. This political declaration of truth-knowing is dangerous for it not only uncritically assumes a position of absolute certainty, but it also precludes conversation and debate which might lead toward actual certainty.

While the prevalence of “fake news” might appear to be a new phenomenon, it actually speaks to an important relationship between skepticism and certainty which has a rich philosophical history. As we see with the above example, this relationship - and its political implications - is one that still haunts us, and as such, demands further attention. Does a commitment to certainty necessarily call for a skeptical attitude? What are the political consequences of skepticism? How might we understand traditional political positions - from revolutionary politics to reformism, liberalism to conservatism - as motivated by the quest for certainty, as informed by a skeptical epistemology? To answer these questions, I turn to the work of René Descartes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Edmund Burke.

My first chapter focuses on René Descartes, who obliterates the old way of approaching philosophy. Instead of relying on the learning and application of forms to understand the world, he asserts that we no longer need prior knowledge; we simply need to enact our equal capacity to reason through using our mind. Due to the certainty of our capacity to reason, he establishes a method which requires skepticism in order to develop certainty. His method while demonstrating

the importance of doubt, still forces us to consider what certainty means both individually and collectively, and in doing so, raises many political questions. I argue that his method illuminates two political tendencies: revolution and conservatism.

In my second chapter, I examine Jean-Jacques Rousseau who was worshiped like a God during the French Revolution. However, through investigating his work, I suggest that a tension emerges between the content of his ideas, which seem to be revolutionary through and through, and their implementation, which speaks to more conservative trends. Ultimately, I argue that this tension is driven by two different motivations: the first being to establish equality and the second being the productive necessity of inequality.

In my third chapter, I investigate Edmund Burke, who is considered to have founded conservatism. I claim Burke's thought is often simplified, but through examining his skepticism, we can bring forth its complexities. I argue that Burke's skepticism leads him to rely on the concept of inheritance, resulting in a political ideology that opposes revolution, but still prioritizes reform. As such, I argue that he is fundamentally interested in the question of change and that his criticism of the French Revolution had little to do with the changes they wished to implement, but had everything to do with the manner in which it was done.

Throughout this project, I aim to show that the relationship between skepticism and certainty is a philosophically prosperous one. Not only does it bring attention to the complexity of these thinkers and the nuance of their political positions, but it also reveals that skepticism is a narrative in progress which brings forth vastly different political outcomes and questions.

1

Descartes' Politics: From the Individual to the Collective

Prior to Descartes, the dominant epistemological school of thought was the Aristotelian school.² It was thought that an individual was only able to make sense of the world around them through the application of set principles, that is, until Descartes. He found this approach of understanding to be utterly problematic, for it carried a tremendous capacity to bring about false certainties. So, instead of adhering to these false principles, Descartes took it upon himself to discover a new way in which we can know with absolute certainty. A feat in which he accomplished:

And after having thus reconstructed the edifice which it pleased him to pull down, he will loudly and boldly declare it indestructible. Doubt no more in God, nor the soul, nor the real world; Descartes has found the principle of certainty, and the notions he has deduced from it he now assures us are as certain as geometrical theorems. He has abandoned doubt; but he has exhausted, he has conquered it; he has seized upon the right of examination for his own use, but he has disarmed it. For a moment a revolutionist in philosophy, he appears to have had the pretension to close the gate on revolutions for ever. Yesterday he doubts, to-day he imposes himself.³

Descartes “found the principle of certainty” through having “exhausted” and “conquered” doubt. He declares that certainty is a direct function of the mind, and that through the utilization of reason alone, we can decipher the world around us. He is so sure of his new edifice, that the man who once doubted everything, doubts no longer, and instead “imposes himself.”

²Joseph Pitt, "Problematics in the History of Philosophy," *Synthese* 92, no. 1 (1992), 123.

³ Louis Blanc, *History of the French Revolution of 1789*, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1848), 217.

Despite Descartes' assertion of certainty, he received tremendous criticism for his new approach.⁴ Some questioned his indoctrination of God, claiming that his method was created solely to prove the existence of God. Alternatively, Descartes was also called an atheist because he dared to question God's existence altogether. Figures such as David Hume argued that Descartes' focus on the cogito was wrong, and that the senses and the body are important and should not be so easily dismissed.⁵ Descartes' ideas regarding space and time were also scrutinized and later disproved by Sir Isaac Newton through his discovery of gravity, but it should be noted that he spent considerable energy in order to disprove Descartes.⁶

Despite Descartes' critics, his work demonstrates the importance of doubt and still forces us to consider what certainty means both individually and collectively, and in doing so, raises many political questions. I argue that his method - one which requires skepticism aimed at the development of certainty - illuminates two political tendencies: revolution and conservatism.

He boldly begins his *Discourse on Method* by stating all men are inherently equal in their ability to reason:

Rather, it provides evidence that the power of judging well and of distinguishing the true from the false (which is, properly speaking, what people call "good sense" or "reason") is naturally equal in all men, and that the diversity of our opinions does not arise from the fact that some people are more reasonable than others, but solely from the fact that we lead our thoughts along different paths and do not take the same things into consideration.⁷

⁴Descartes et al., *The Harvard Classics, vol. 34: French and English Philosophers (Descartes, Rousseau, Voltaire, Hobbes)*, ed. Charles William Eliot, (P. F. Collier & Son, 1910), 115.

⁵ Pitt, "Problematics," 125-126.

⁶Andrew Janiak, "Newton's Philosophy", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab: Stanford University, Winter 2019), section 3.

⁷René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy (Fourth Edition)*, trans. Donald Cress (Indianapolis; Cambridge: Hackett, 1998), 1.

While this diversity of thought had been considered to reflect an inherent unequal ability to reason, Descartes claims it reflects the opposite. Due to our equal capacity to reason, he argues that we arrive at different conclusions “solely” because we do not take “the same things into consideration.” Had we followed the same “paths,” we would arrive at the same end.

Diversity of thought, while reflecting an equal capacity to reason, also forced Descartes to investigate what it means to be certain:

I noticed there was about as much diversity as I had previously found among the opinions of philosophers. Thus the greatest profit I derived from this was that, on seeing many things that, although they seem to us very extravagant and ridiculous, do not cease to be commonly accepted and approved among other great peoples, I learned not to believe anything too firmly of which I had been persuaded only by example and custom; and this I little by little freed myself from many errors that can darken our natural light and render us less able to listen to reason.⁸

Through travel, he realized that many things he would find to be peculiar in one place would be “accepted and approved” in another. Witnessing diversity - the rejection of one practice or custom here, but the acceptance of that same practice or custom there - forced Descartes to question what he had previously accepted to be true. Diversity revealed the blind acceptance of culturally relative ideas and customs, which he himself fell victim to by virtue of living in society. Traveling outside of his country forced him to recognize this diversity which, in turn, directed him to question his own beliefs: “I learned not to believe anything too firmly of which I had been persuaded only by example and custom.” This self-driven reflection is a direct result of the recognition of diversity through experience. Experience taught him to be skeptical in order to cast aside the errors he accumulated while living and learning in society.

⁸René Descartes, *Discourse*, 6.

Experience offers significant insight because it reveals the lack of concrete truths while highlighting what is not known. However, if experience reveals so much, how is it that Descartes can then claim that “studying within [himself]” (solitude), proved to be much more successful “than had [he] never left either [his] country or [his] books.”⁹ This feeling of having greater success through solitude speaks to the confusion Descartes discovered in the world. Diversity of opinion clouds the use of one's reason. Solitude contains freedom from society, and by virtue, freedom from confusion. If we conceptualize Descartes in this way, the significance of solitude is evident - solitude is where the individual can “spend all the power of [their] mind in choosing the paths that [they] should follow.”¹⁰ Solitude is where the individual can fully harness their reason to investigate what can be certain for them. As such, we can now see how experience and solitude operate for Descartes, and that there is a necessity for both in the investigative process of certainty. With this established, we can return to a driving question Descartes has regarding the use of individual reason: How can everyone be taught to use their reason? To this, Descartes creates his method.

His method involves four rules.¹¹ The first is “to take nothing as true that is not already plainly known as such,” and “avoid hasty judgments and prejudices.” What does he mean here? To “take nothing as true that is not already plainly known as such” tends toward basic rules, particularly involving mathematics. For example, two plus two equals four is a plain truth. The avoiding of “hasty judgments and prejudices” is reflective of Descartes’ desire to undo all prior opinions he held so that he can re-establish what is certain. It also highlights how the process of

⁹René Descartes, *Discourse*, 6.

¹⁰René Descartes, *Discourse*, 6.

¹¹René Descartes, *Discourse*, 11.

discovering what can be true is in fact a process and investigation; it requires forgetting what one already knows and beginning anew.

The second rule is to divide all of the difficulties found within a particular claim in order to be better able to resolve the issues. What is meant by this rule is expressed through an example in his *Meditations*.¹² He writes about a person having a basket full of apples who is worried that some of the apples are rotten. In this case, the person needs to empty out all the apples and investigate each apple to assure it is free of rot before returning it to the basket. This same principle is found within his second rule - divide up what is uncertain and then investigate each claim until it is found to be certain. The third rule is to conduct thoughts in an orderly fashion, starting with what is already known or simplest to know, so that one can “ascend little by little, as by degrees, to the knowledge of the most composite things.” The fourth and last rule, is to be thorough so that nothing has been omitted. This requires exploring every path before reaching a conclusion.

When following Descartes’ method, an individual is compelled to use their reason to establish what is certain. The significance of this method lies not only in its comprehensibility, but that it reflects the individual’s agency when deciding what is certain. This agency emerges as a theme in Part One of his *Discourse*. His declaration of equal ability to reason calls forth any person to investigate their beliefs and customs. As such, he is teaching a universal method, one that operates outside the confines of social class, education and wealth. This conceptually provides limitless power to the individual and how they understand the world around them. The individual is free to question, explore, and investigate, while needing nothing more than their mind to do so. It

¹²Newman, Lex, "Descartes’ Epistemology", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab: Stanford University, Spring 2019), section 2.2.

is clear that a new wave of agency and critical thought emerges from the beginning of Descartes' *Discourse*.

One might now assume that this individual call to be skeptical would immediately translate into rebellion and revolution, but instead, Descartes suggests the very opposite. In Part Two of his *Discourse*, a hesitancy to make change within the political and social sphere appears. Through a reference to Sparta, he begins to discuss the importance of order and the acceptance of authority:

And, speaking of things human, I believe that if Sparta was at one time very flourishing, this was not because of the goodness of each one of its laws taken by itself, seeing that many of them were very strange and even contrary to good morals, but because, having been devised by a single individual, they all tended toward the same end.¹³

The “flourishing” of Sparta is because every individual “tended toward the same end.” But what does “flourishing” mean in this context? Based on what is known about Sparta, this is reflective of the state’s power, specifically its military power and the loyalty of its citizens. He also notes that many of the laws “were very strange and even contrary to good morals,” but this appears to be of little relevance to him. What is relevant is that each citizen was obedient and that the city-state was able to prosper. Furthermore, it is significant to realize that the importance of individual reason exists within this example too; however, it takes on a different role. The laws “having been devised by a single individual” create a cohesiveness “toward the same end.” Politically, only one individual can act while the rest must follow. As such, the individual must keep their pursuit of certainty to themselves and obey laws and customs so the state can function.

If the separation between the individual and the collective was not already made clear with the Sparta example, he then explicitly writes about it in relation to political and social matters:

¹³René Descartes, *Discourse*, 7.

This is why I could in no way approve of those troublemaking and restless personalities who, called neither by their birth nor by their fortune to manage public affairs, are forever coming up with an idea for some new reform in this matter.¹⁴

He affirms the need for authority by claiming that those who are to “manage public affairs” are strictly people who are born into the position or are brought to that position by fortune. To those who do not occupy a political position of power but express ideas of reform, he is critical of them and labels them “troublemaking and restless personalities.” This critique, based off of his Sparta example, is linked to the continuous production of new ideas of reform which disrupt the social order because they are not created by the sole person in power. The introduction of new ideas creates variability within a particular society which would not orient everyone towards the same ends, and thus, would hinder the state’s ability to prosper. Again, we see the separation Descartes is establishing between the individual and the collective.

At this point, we might ask: Why is it that once we move into public affairs, the individual’s agency loses its relevance and significance for Descartes? This question calls us to return to Descartes’ original focus on the individual establishment of certainty. We already saw that his method requires doubting until one is absolutely certain, and so, this desire for absolute certainty appears to also result in a nervousness to disrupt anything outside of the individual’s thoughts before they are certain. He writes: “These great bodies are too difficult to raise up once they have been knocked down, or even to hold up once they have been shaken; and their fall can only be very violent.”¹⁵ He is hesitant about disrupting “these great bodies” in any capacity because he recognizes that once they are knocked down or shaken, they will not be able to be put back up.

¹⁴René Descartes, *Discourse*, 9.

¹⁵René Descartes, *Discourse*, 8.

The moment these bodies are disrupted, society would lose the very thing that has grounded them, hence why he is critical of those who attempt to constantly put forth ideas of reform.

As this passage continues, we see how deeply his nervousness affects even his original views:

Moreover, as to their imperfections, if they have any (and the mere fact of the diversity that exists among them suffices to assure one that many do have imperfections), custom has doubtless greatly mitigated them and even prevented imperceptibly corrected many of them, against which prudence could not provide so well.¹⁶

His anxiety regarding the use of individual skepticism against social and political orders leads him to dismiss the very imperfections which he initially took fault with. He further claims that “custom has doubtless greatly mitigated” these imperfections and has even corrected many such imperfections. Was it not this same diversity in custom and these imperfections which lead him to establish a method in the first place? He continues:

And finally, these imperfections are almost always more tolerable than changing them would be; similarly, the great roads that wind through mountains little by little become so smooth and so convenient by dint of being frequently used, that it is much better to follow them than to try to take a more direct route by climbing over rocks and descending to the bottom of precipices.¹⁷

The fear of not having order due to acting on false certainties forces him to further dismiss these imperfections all together by claiming that they are “almost always more tolerable than changing them would be.” He uses the imagery of roads winding through a mountain to reflect the need to act in a way that maintains the existing order. The “great roads,” meaning the current systems which rule society, are made “smooth and so convenient by dint of being frequently used, that it is much better to follow them than to try to take a more direct route.” This call for social obedience

¹⁶René Descartes, *Discourse*, 8.

¹⁷René Descartes, *Discourse*, 8.

further the gap between the individual's skepticism and its utility with society. Descartes concludes the above passage by claiming that if we "try to take a more direct route by climbing over rocks" we will fall and end up at "the bottom of precipices." This again reflects his obligation to certainty, particularly toward political and social change. Reform requires a skepticism that is precise and results in complete certainty before taking action. Until this certainty is established, everything else must be maintained because if we "try to take a more direct route," we risk our downfall.

Through this analysis of Descartes, we are able to consider the implications of shifting away from what is considered certain, the connection between certainty and skepticism, and how the same depositing of certainty affects the individual within different contexts. Descartes establishes that the only thing he is certain about is an individual's capacity to reason. Before his method, certainty was established by what was taught and customary. His method subsequently removes the ability to blindly accept particular ideas and practices as certain because certainty is now the result of an individual's pursuit of it through the process of doubt. As such, people must think critically about themselves and their external world in order to know anything concretely. This skeptical thought is powerful because it reveals not only what is arbitrary within society, but also that the individual chooses what paths to take, what to believe, and what to accept.

Descartes' method wakes one up to their potential, the desire for certainty motivates them, and skepticism keeps them awake. Conceptualizing certainty and skepticism in this way reveals its revolutionary implications. There can no longer be a blind obedience and acceptance of laws and customs. People are now aware and thinking which is dangerous politically and socially because order and custom now depend on one choosing to maintain it. However, while there is this

awakening of the individual, we must also recognize that it is followed by an assertion of authority and order.

Descartes' prioritization of individual reason forces one to act with whatever the custom or law is because it creates an environment which is orderly, and thus conducive to the individual's search for certainty. Returning to his example of Sparta, the rationale as to why it thrived was because of their maintenance of structure through law. With everyone following the same path socially and politically, there was cohesion, security, order and the preservation of the state. As such, the freedoms one sacrifices through obeying custom and law are thought to be mitigated because in the end, the individual is able to pursue what is certain. Furthermore, because laws are devised from one person, obedience to these laws orients the collective toward the same end which results in the further efficiency of the state and avoids disarray. The maintenance of order through this top down model of governing also allows political certainty to be realized by those in power, and thus allows for these certainties to be implemented into law. As such, we see that the need for the individual to obey is not just necessary for the individual's sake, but also for the discovery of political and social certainty as well.

However, the framing of obedience as a necessary component for the individual and the political pursuit of certainty disguises the serious implications of this model. By placing emphasis on the individual's quest for certainty, the ability for the individual to act or voice anything outside of law or custom becomes problematic. We see that the potential threat for social and political disunity as a result of individual action forces restrictions on individual freedom. Furthermore, this framing of obedience to law and custom, paired with the exclusion of individual agency, also results in the consolidation of political and social agency to those already in a position of authority.

This conception of the process of certainty acts as a counter to the revolutionary agency established earlier.

Additionally, while we saw that the adoption of a skeptical attitude results in an awakening of the individual, politically this skepticism results in disapproval towards immediate change. The importance of skepticism and certainty are amplified within the political and social sphere because a mistake in what is certain could risk the very preservation of the state. Therefore, one needs to be absolutely certain before acting and by virtue of this need for absolutism, change must be a slow and sure process. Furthermore, with the omission of the individual's voice within the political sphere, this assumes doubt over who is able to reason. This hierarchical approach regarding whose certainty matters not only emerges as a result of Descartes' political skepticism, but also serves to challenge his original claim of an equal capacity to reason.

Through tracking the role of certainty and skepticism in Descartes' *Discourse on Method*, we see two inclinations appear: one toward revolution and one toward conservatism. While his method propels an individual to discover what can be certain for them, the expression of their findings is limited. The moment we enter into society, we are expected to obey laws, custom, and authority because the risk of dismantling the social order from the assertion of false certainty overrides the value of voicing any new, and perhaps uncertain, ideas at all. Certainty, which is the establishment of something beyond doubt, creating these polar opposite movements is striking. This vast difference forces us to reconsider how certainty and skepticism operate, what they reveal, and under what conditions they can be useful.

Rousseau's Certainty: Equality in Theory and Practice

If Jean-Jacques Rousseau's involvement in politics is unquestioned, his reception and influence is as mixed as it is extensive; he has indeed been constructed as both an enemy and protector of liberty. Figures such as Jacques Pierre Brissot, who led the Girondins during the French Revolution, disliked Rousseau and his relatively anti-universalist principles. Likewise, Baron d'Holbach, another philosopher who took his influence from Denis Diderot, especially took notice of Rousseau's indoctrination of the "Spartan martial spirit" and the "narrow chauvinism [Rousseau's] thought appeared to encourage." However, after the fall of Bastille in July of 1789, Honoré Gabriel Riqueti, comte de Mirabeau, who was a leader in the beginning of the French Revolution, praised Rousseau "for his central role in preparing the Revolution," writing that "never should one speak of liberty and the Revolution without paying homage to this immortal 'vengeur de la nature humaine'."¹⁸ Unsurprisingly, while Rousseau's position within academic circles was ambiguous, he otherwise was "the unrivaled chief teacher and prophet venerated by revolutionary popular culture." During the one year anniversary of Bastille's fall, a parade commenced and the Place de la Bastille was decorated with garlands and revolutionary symbols. A large bust of Rousseau, with a civic crown on its head, was "carried in triumph around the ruins" while the crowd sung "a specially composed hymn summoning all to invoke the 'holy name of Rousseau, this sublime name'."¹⁹

¹⁸Jonathan Israel, *Revolutionary Ideas: An Intellectual History of the French Revolution from The Rights of Man to Robespierre* (United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, 2014), 21.

¹⁹Jonathan Israel, *Revolutionary Ideas*, 130-131.

While it was the range of Rousseau's reception which initially provoked my interest, I became increasingly curious to explore how his work could give rise to such a spectrum of political positions. Through a close reading of *The Social Contract*, I will suggest that this reception is a result of a tension between the content of Rousseau's ideas, which seem to be revolutionary through and through, and their implementation, which speaks to more conservative trends. Ultimately in this chapter, I aim to highlight that the tension between potentiality and actuality is driven by two different motivations - the first, to establish equality and the second, the productive necessity of inequality. Alongside these motivations, I will point to the idea of transparency, being that it is central for Rousseau in his understanding of the transition from the state of nature to that of society.

In *The First Discourse: Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* Rousseau writes:

In truth, human nature was no better than now, but people found security in the ease with which they could see through one another, and this advantage, of which we no longer appreciate the value, saved them from many vices.²⁰

We see that a sense of certainty develops from the ease of being able to see through one another, and it is precisely this loss of certainty from transparency that has catastrophic effects:

What a parade of ills accompany this uncertainty! No more sincere friendships, no more real regard for another, no more deep trust. Suspicions, resentments, fears, coldness, reserve, hatred, and betrayal habitually hide under that uniform and perfidious veil of politeness, under that lauded sophistication which we owe to the enlightenment of our century.²¹

Without the certainty of transparency, we find ourselves in an abysmal state-no way to know ourselves, no way to know others and no trust or unity. We instead are now suspicious, resentful,

²⁰Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and The First and Second Discourses*, ed. Susan Dunn et al (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2002), 49.

²¹Rousseau, *Social Contract*, ed. Dunn, 50.

reserved but “habitually hide under that uniform and perfidious veil of politeness.” Uncertainty breeds not only uniformity because people are afraid to be themselves, but it also breeds a fear of others. We have no ability to form sincere connections with people and operate only within the superficial “veil of politeness.” Thus, we are all chained and perpetuate the same system that is ruining humankind. As we can see, certainty as established through transparency is paramount in understanding not only what is lost in society but also in understanding Rousseau’s politics in *The Social Contract*.

If we begin by looking at the opening lines of *The Social Contract*, we are able to get an idea of what Rousseau aims to do politically:

My purpose is to consider *if*, in political society, there can be any legitimate and sure principle of government, taking men as they are and laws as they might be.²²

These lines highlight exactly what Rousseau strikes to be certain about, namely *if* there can be “any legitimate and sure principle of government.” However, what is notable about this opening is that this investigation is anchored by his underlying certainty of what men are. For my purposes in grappling with Rousseau’s political ideas, it is necessary for us to discover what, for him, constitutes the nature of man. This explanation lies partially in his understanding of the state of nature to civil society, a progression where transparency, equality and inequality come together.

Rousseau’s vision of the state of nature is in many ways a response to Hobbes; the latter wrote that it is “solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.”²³ Rousseau, in his essay *Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality Among Mankind*, argues that the state of nature is where

²²Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. by Maurice Cranston (New York: Penguin Classics, 1968), 49.

²³Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: Or the Matter, Forme & Power of a CommonWealth, Ecclesiasticall and Civill*, ed. by A.R. Waller (Cambridge: University Press, 1904) 84.

humans thrive and are complete. It is there that individuals, driven by passion rather than the constraints of learned culture, -are most like themselves-simple and complete. Rousseau writes:

I see him satisfying his hunger under an oak, and his thirst at the first brook; I see him laying himself down to sleep at the foot of the same tree that afforded him his meal; and there are all his wants completely supplied.²⁴

Within this primitive picture, the individual is self-sufficient and able to be so because the passions remain centered around basic survival. For Rousseau, these notions of basic survival do not always equate to a life of solitude because the passions occasionally drive the individual to interact with another of their species:

Hunger and other appetites made him at different times experience different modes of existence; one of these excited him to perpetuate his species; and this blind propensity, quite void of anything like pure love or affection, produced nothing but an act that was merely animal. Their need once gratified, the sexes took no further notice of each other, and even the child was nothing to his mother, the moment he could do without her.²⁵

While there are these interactions, what remains interesting is that the individual does not notice another until one feels the appetite to continue the species and even with this recognition, it is done with “blind propensity.” The very moment the appetite is satisfied, “the sexes [take] no further notice of one another” and continue as if the interaction never happened. Likewise, as soon as the child is able to sustain itself, it means “nothing to [it’s] mother.” While there are these interactions, there appears to be a gap between recognizing another human in terms of understanding them as a being and seeing them as merely a tool for self-survival, just how the man saw the oak tree.

While humans remained dominated by their passions, reproduction forces humans to adapt and invent in order to survive because resources which were at first easy to find eventually became

²⁴Rousseau, *Social Contract*, ed. Dunn, 90.

²⁵Rousseau, *Social Contract*, ed. Dunn, 114.

scarce. This ability to invent is what Rousseau calls *perfectibilité*, which is the capacity to progress and serves as human's simultaneous source of enlightenment and vice:

There was a necessity for becoming active, swiftfooted, and sturdy in battle. The natural arms, which are stones and the branches of trees, soon offered themselves to his reach. He learned to surmount the obstacles of nature, to fight when necessary with other animals, to fight for his subsistence even with other men, or indemnify himself for the loss of whatever he found himself obliged to yield to a stronger.²⁶

While it becomes necessary for humans to evolve physically in order to survive, their perception of the world around them also evolves. “Natural arms” or axes “soon offered themselves to [their] reach.” Even though branches and stones existed prior, the point is that they were not seen as useful until survival depended on their combination. Likewise, an individual now needs to be prepared to fight in order to survive, and thus needs to be aware of their surroundings in ways they had not before. Self-preservation now requires one to learn how to make relational judgments about who is stronger, but in order for this judgment to be made, one needs to learn about their own capabilities. Through the inevitable experience of battle and competition, the individual is tested and learns about themselves through the recognized differences in strength or strategy they have with others.

As nature continues to change, and competition continues to increase, perception and recognition continue to evolve. However, what is interesting is that instead of perceiving difference in times of threat, humans begin to perceive the quality of likeness:

[...]and seeing that they all behaved as he himself would have done in similar circumstances, he concluded that their manner of thinking and feeling was quite conformable to his own; and this important truth, when once engraved deeply on his mind, made him follow, by an intuition as sure and swift as any reasoning, the best rules of conduct, which for the sake of his own safety and advantage it was proper he should observe toward them.²⁷

²⁶Rousseau, *Social Contract*, ed. Dunn, 114.

²⁷Rousseau, *Social Contract*, ed. Dunn, 115.

Through seeing another behave in the same manner they would have, one is made to follow “by an intuition as sure and swift as any reasoning” the “best rules of conduct.” This recognition of another as someone like them provides the individual with an intuitive understanding of the person, regardless of experience. This is a significant moment within Rousseau's narrative as it pertains to transparency because one can intrinsically know what to do based on their ability to recognize another as thinking and feeling in a similar manner as they would. It is this repeated recognition of likeness which allows one to realize that their “common interest might authorize him to count on the assistance of his fellows” which Rousseau labels “free associations.”²⁸ These “free associations” obligated no one and lasted only as long as the “transitory necessity that had given birth to it.”²⁹ This recognition of likeness not only provides for a priori understanding of the other, but also opens up the possibility for an unprecedented conscious joining of forces. These “free associations” were achievable because humans felt they “[understood] each other perfectly.”³⁰ It was only through seeing another behave as they would have, and thus having the motivations of each other clear in mind, which allowed individuals for the first time to think plurally in terms of survival, and thus join together for a common goal which otherwise might not have been achievable.

As Rousseau's progression through the state of nature continues, humans proceeded to become “more industrious in proportion as [their] mind[s] became more enlightened” meaning instead of sleeping under the oak tree, one now finds shelter in cabins. This transformation, which

²⁸Rousseau, *Social Contract*, ed. Dunn, 115.

²⁹Rousseau, *Social Contract*, ed. Dunn, 116.

³⁰Jonathan Marks, "Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Michael Sandel and the Politics of Transparency" (*Polity* 33, no. 4 (2001)), 624.

Rousseau deems the “epoch of the first revolution,” paired with the learned success of “free associations,” is what led to the family unit and an “introduction of a species of property.”³¹

Humans learned that there is a benefit in numbers, particularly because it affords an increase in ability to defend and protect property:

[...]no one could have any great temptation to seize upon that of his neighbor, not so much because it did not belong to him, as because he did not need it; and as he could not make himself master of it without exposing himself to a very sharp fight with the family that was occupying it.³²

With the establishment of a familial unit, “no one could not have any great temptation to seize upon that of his neighbor” because of the realization that one would be outnumbered, and thus be at a disadvantage. Rousseau concludes that these individuals found it “shorter and safer to imitate, than to attempt to dislodge” and so we find the creation of small societies through this new sedentary life.

In this new social state, “everyone began to notice the rest, and wished to be noticed himself; and public esteem acquired a value.” Some traits became more respected than others such as who was “the handsomest, the strongest, the most dexterous, or the more eloquent.”³³ For Rousseau, these preferences become the first step toward inequality and vice.³⁴ While one felt a sense of vanity and contempt for possessing the preferred traits, another felt envy and shame for not. Over time, it became the individuals’ prerogative “to appear what they really were not” so that they could gain an advantage in society, and on an even more basic level, simply fit in with custom.³⁵ Through this process, individuals become chained to culture, and thus lose the ability to

³¹Rousseau, *Social Contract*, ed. Dunn, 116.

³²Rousseau, *Social Contract*, ed. Dunn, 116-117.

³³Rousseau, *Social Contract*, ed. Dunn, 118.

³⁴This is not to say that natural inequality had not existed prior, it just never had permanent effects due to the self-sufficient and nomadic nature of humans.

³⁵Rousseau, *Social Contract*, ed. Dunn, 122.

freely be themselves because their value became set off of how well they could fit a mold. As society grew more enlightened, the weight of these chains grew heavier, and eventually we arrive at the society Rousseau wrote of in *The First Discourse* - a society plagued by uncertainty due to the loss of transparency. With this understanding, we will see how Rousseau's "general will" attempts to re-establish transparency and also equality through the idea of a shared common will.

In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau makes clear two different wills: the "will of all" and the "general will." The will of all is concerned with private interest, while the general will is concerned with the common interest. We arrive at the general will by taking away "the pluses and minuses [from the will of all] which cancel each other out" leaving whatever "remains [as] the general will."³⁶ Right away, the general will is attempting to resurrect transparency while simultaneously combating inequality because "if the general will is to be clearly expressed, it is imperative that there should be no sectional associations in the state, and that every citizen should make up his own mind for himself."³⁷ The expression of "every citizen" is of the utmost importance, because without it, the general will can not be determined. Furthermore, the general will overrides the value in "appear[ing] what they really [are] not" and instead calls for humans to be exactly who they are, so that ultimately, they can be united by a common will. Rousseau is calling for transparency and equality as the means of uniting people in a world where it has become disadvantageous for the individual to be transparent because that could mean risking the very social status which determines their own value. However, this deep change in the fundamentals of man begs the question of how the general will could be implemented, particularly when some individuals profit off of the perpetuation of inequality. It is here that we are introduced to the sovereign.

³⁶Rousseau, *Social Contract*, trans. Cranston, 72-73.

³⁷Rousseau, *Social Contract*, trans. Cranston, 73.

One might think that the role of a sovereign fundamentally undermines the premise of equality; however, Rousseau makes clear that equality is not lost:

It is not a covenant between a superior and an inferior, but a covenant of the body with each of its members. It is a legitimate covenant, because its basis is the social contract; an equitable one, because it is common to all; a useful one, because it can have no end but the common good; and it is a durable covenant because it is guaranteed by the armed forces and the supreme power. So long as the subjects submit to such covenants alone, they obey nobody but their own will; and to ask how far the respective rights of the sovereign and the citizen extend is to ask how far these two can pledge themselves together, each to all and all to each.³⁸

The relationship between citizen and sovereign is not one of inferior and superior, but is an agreement to “the body with each of its members” only. This agreement is “legitimate” because its basis is found within the people. It is fair because it is the same for everyone, including the sovereign, and it is useful because it can have “no end but the common good.” The sovereign and the citizen must “pledge themselves together, each to all and all to each” which again reflects a sense of equality and unity, even when there is an active authority figure concretely enforcing the rights of the citizen. As much as the sovereign is enforcing such rights, the sovereign’s rights are likewise contingent on the citizen’s willingness to obey. Although it might not be entirely obvious, transparency is relevant within this dynamic as well. The relationship can fundamentally only exist as long as the citizen and the sovereign are transparent with one another, hence the need to pledge “each to all and all to each.” Both of their positionalities are dependent on one another being transparent in terms of intention and action, which means operating under the terms that make the covenant equitable and legitimate. We can again see this need for transparency and furthermore how it becomes necessary for establishing and maintaining equality, particularly in an objectively hierarchical relationship.

³⁸Rousseau, *Social Contract*, trans. Cranston, 77.

However, Rousseau in the above passage also writes that the covenant is durable because it is “guaranteed by the armed forces and the supreme being.” Both the idea of an armed force and a supreme being stuck out to me as running counter to the overwhelming sense of equality and need for transparency otherwise found within the passage. The need to have someone physically enforce the general will raises questions of if the citizens are viewing the will as their own. If they were, why would there need to be armed forces to ensure its durability in the first place? Likewise, the “supreme being” within this context refers to God, but claiming that the covenant is durable because of God forces us to consider how this could be. Particularly when Rousseau claims “all justice comes from God, who alone is its source” and that “if only we knew how to receive [justice] from that exalted fountain, we should need neither governments nor laws.”³⁹ Laws remain to be the “conditions on which civil society exists” and we are unable to receive knowledge from God, but yet the covenant is also made durable because of God.⁴⁰ If we need laws and can not receive laws from God, we are left to consider where just laws can come from:

To discover the rules of society that are best suited to nations, there would need to exist a superior intelligence, who could understand the passions of men without feeling any of them, who had no affinity with our nature but knew it to the full, whose happiness was independent of ours, but who would nevertheless make out happiness his concern, who would be content to wait in the fullness of time for a distant glory, and to labour in one age to enjoy the fruits of another. Gods would be needed to give men laws.⁴¹

The fact that “Gods would be needed to give men laws” suggests the impossibility of the task of discovering what laws are “best suited to nations.” However, even if the task is impossible or requires a God, we still are introduced to the lawgiver. The lawgiver “is the engineer who invents

³⁹Rousseau, *Social Contract*, trans. Cranston, 80.

⁴⁰Rousseau, *Social Contract*, trans. Cranston, 83.

⁴¹Rousseau, *Social Contract*, trans. Cranston, 84.

the machine; the prince is merely the mechanic who sets it up and operates it.”⁴² What does he mean when he uses the word “machine” and that it is something to be “set up and operated?” Knowing what we do about the relationship of the sovereign and the citizen, presumably this is a reference to laws, which if we recall, were supposed to come from the general will. If the lawgiver is establishing laws, and Gods would be needed to give men laws, it is reasonable to conclude that the lawgiver is a God-like figure. I argue the presence of the lawgiver complicates what otherwise is a clear call for transparency and equality in civil society.

The relationship between the lawgiver and the sovereign and citizens is fundamentally different from that of the citizens and that of the sovereign and citizen. The lawgiver is the “engineer who invents the machine” while the sovereign is “merely the mechanic who sets it up and operates it.” The word choice of “inventor” juxtaposed with “*merely* the mechanic” provides an undeniable sense of superiority in favor of the lawgiver, which outwardly appears to run counter to the attempts of establishing equality. Likewise, the general will, which was supposed to be established by the people and served to unite them because it was their own laws and thus an extension of them, is actually created by the lawgiver who discovers the laws to which society operates. Here we see notions of equality come into tension with the necessity of inequality. The citizens are uniting to establish their general will but the lawgiver, because of their superior qualities, can override the citizens. This leads us to question what exactly the general will is:

[...]the general will is always rightful and always tends to the public good; but it does not follow that the deliberations of the people are always equally right. We always want what is advantageous to us but we do not always discern it. The people is never corrupted, but it is often misled; and only then does it seem to will what is bad. ⁴³

⁴²Rousseau, *Social Contract*, trans. Cranston, 84.

⁴³Rousseau, *Social Contract*, trans. Cranston, 72.

The general will is still geared toward the public good, however the people are “often misled” and thus will what is “bad” because they are “not always able to discern” what is advantageous to them. This inability for people to know what is good for them, paired with their frequent ability to be deceived, is why there is a need for the lawgiver. Through this claim, the necessity of inequality becomes apparent because without the lawgiver, the people could never know what the “common good” is. However, if the people discovered that their efforts and involvement in establishing the general will were useless, it is not hard to imagine how this would easily destroy the uniting and equalizing effects transparency established through the general will for the citizens. It is the recognition of this potential reversal, which helps to explain why the lawgiver's position, in terms of office and power, is deliberately made obscure.

The lawgiver is “extraordinary not only because of his genius, but equally because of his office, which is neither that of the government nor that of the sovereign.” The lawgiver also has seemingly unchecked, undetectable power. The lawgiver “must have recourse to an authority of another order, one which can compel without violence and persuade without convincing.”⁴⁴ What is this “authority of another order?” It is divine intervention:

It is this which has obliged the founders of nations throughout history to appeal to divine intervention and to attribute their own wisdom to the Gods; for then the people, feeling subject to the laws of the state as they are to those of nature, and detecting the same hand in the creation of both man and the nation, obey freely and bear with docility the yoke of public welfare.⁴⁵

If we return to Rousseau's description of the “supreme being” as making the covenant durable, this ability for one person to claim divine intervention proves to be extremely significant. Essentially, this trick forces (for without this trick, one otherwise might not obey) the citizen to “obey freely

⁴⁴Rousseau, *Social Contract*, trans. Cranston, 87.

⁴⁵Rousseau, *Social Contract*, trans. Cranston, 87.

and bear with docility the yoke of public welfare.” While most would consider this to be a lie, Rousseau astonishingly calls it “sublime reasoning,” but it nonetheless serves to condition man toward what the lawgiver perceives to be the common good:

This sublime reasoning, which soars above the heads of the common people, is used by the lawgiver when he puts his own decisions into the mouth of the immortals, thus compelling by divine authority persons who cannot be moved by human prudence.⁴⁶

If the people cannot recognize through their own reason that the lawgiver (to their knowledge, the sovereign) is correct, they will be compelled “by divine authority” to follow what the lawgiver prescribes. The lawgiver can lie without being discovered, so much so, it “soars above the heads of the common people.” He is both everywhere and nowhere; he exists outside of the government, sovereign and has absolute power, all the while remaining undetected by the people.

As it was shown to us before through Rousseau’s account of man, inequality precludes transparency. This still is true, however, something is different in the case of the lawgiver because Rousseau endorses their superiority and praises their obscurity from the citizens. The loss of transparency on behalf of the lawgiver to the citizen is built into his politics, and subsequently is not treated as a loss but rather a necessary movement. Inequality is deemed productive and necessary because without it, the general will could never remain geared toward the common good. The citizens remain oblivious to the fact that they have no say in their laws, and that they are actually being conditioned to obey the “yoke of public welfare.” The role of the lawgiver shows that inequality is necessary and politically productive because of the transformative effects it can have on man; however, man must remain unaware of this process. In this way, we conclude from Rousseau that the perception of transparency in politics is, in many ways, necessary, but actual

⁴⁶Rousseau, *Social Contract*, trans. Cranston, 87.

transparency is not; in fact, actual transparency would undermine the work being done to condition man toward public welfare. Likewise, political inequality is necessary but must remain hidden because if realized, it would reveal that the general will does not actually come from the citizens directly, but that it is imposed on them.

If we now return back to the opening line of *The Social Contract*, this understanding allows us to engage the potential of the aforementioned “if” more directly:

My purpose is to consider *if*, in political society, there can be any legitimate and sure principle of government, taking men as they are and laws as they might be.

It appears to me that we could go one of two ways - the first being that we take the illusion of transparency and inequality as necessary in order to establish equality, and the second being the fictional capacity of the lawgiver, and thus the impossibility of equality. Beginning with the former, if we have a society that profits off of inequality and has no way to unite together because of the mistrust and deception which has become customary, it is arguable that society would need to be conditioned toward equality. However, this conditioning would need to be conducted by someone who knows how to obtain equality within society, while also establishing equality in secret for the people would likely not endorse such a transformation. So, we find the illusion of transparency amongst the people in that they are uniting under the idea of the general will, which they have no control over, and we find inequality in the relationship between the lawgiver and the citizen. Both of which remain necessary in the establishment of equality. However, to frame the possibility of establishing equality as conditional on having a lawgiver who is to be a God in human form, strikes to be mere fiction. As such, if the lawgiver itself is impossible, it follows that equality is also unobtainable - and so we reach the latter of the possible directions.

Returning back to the former, the only reason the manipulation of the people is acceptable is because it serves the purpose of the common good. However, this assumes that the lawgiver is able to know (with absolute certainty) truths that the people are incapable of knowing, such as what the common good is. Due to this, the lawgiver is afforded the freedom to condition the people with absolute power. This linkage between certainty and power makes sense; however, one must push back and ask how this certainty can be tested, or if it even can be tested. When we consider the claim “worthless tricks may set up transitory bonds, but only wisdom makes lasting ones” it appears time can be the only judge of the lawgiver's supposed certainty.⁴⁷ What does this mean for the citizens living under the hidden direction of the lawgiver? Blind obedience and thus, no agency due to the illusion of transparency of the general will from the lawgiver - imagine all that could be lost if the lawgiver is wrong but likewise, all that could be gained if the lawgiver is correct. Is it the granting of absolute power worth the risk?

We might also ask to what end? Both in terms of the individual and societal longevity. Although equality might be obtainable, it appears that the individual through this conditioning jeopardizes their very personhood. Likewise, the very restructuring of society could result in the complete collapse of it. Rousseau notes that “a people does not become famous until its constitution begins to decline. We do not know for how many centuries the constitution of Lycurgus gave happiness to the Spartans before there was talk about them in the rest of Greece.”⁴⁸ If a constitution fails, does this not mean those who wrote it were wrong? Rousseau glorifies Sparta, but Sparta no longer exists. Thus, time will tell that Lycurgus was objectively wrong by Rousseau's standard because he did not establish a lasting bond. Furthermore, it seems that the

⁴⁷Rousseau, *Social Contract*, trans. Cranston, 87.

⁴⁸Rousseau, *Social Contract*, trans. Cranston, 84.

collapse of Sparta is not even a problem for Rousseau considering he instead emphasizes how we could not possibly know for how many *centuries* “Lycurgus gave happiness to the Spartans,” while assuming the effects of the constitution were that of happiness to begin with. Sparta was a warrior society, had many slaves, and was centered around ideas of duty and obedience toward the state - interesting qualities Rousseau equates with “happiness.”

With Sparta serving as the example for Rousseau, paired with what he presents in *The Social Contract*, it seems to me that the reconditioning of man under particular terms may render an equal man and a place where transparency can once again be realized, but it is only made possible through the secret stripping down of man and the manipulation of what remains. Can this transparency even be called transparency if it is realized through imposition? Can equality be established within a framework where it is not realized and enforced by the power of an institution? Regardless, the basic notion that this political certainty has existed before through Sparta and could exist again, is dangerous, particularly when the ability to determine if it is faulty is dependent on time. Which, as we consider Maximilien Robespierre, it will show just how dangerous the notion of political certainty can be.

Robespierre campaigned on a vision of democracy from *The Social Contract* arguing that the rule of the people was to “ensure the triumph of the good, pure, general will of the people - what the people would want in ideal circumstances - and this needed to be intuited on their behalf until they had received sufficient education to understand their own good.”⁴⁹ He issued a journal which served as a platform for him to express “both his theoretical and his practical political concerns.” He pushed to be a representative of the Third Estate, which he was elected to in 1789

⁴⁹Ruth Scurr, *Fatal Purity: Robespierre and the French Revolution* (London: Vintage, 2007), 211.

and before he left to go to Versailles, he published a pamphlet entitled ‘The Enemies of the Fatherland Unmasked,’ which is reflective of his political paranoia and the need to establish transparency.⁵⁰

In August of 1792, he was elected to the municipal Commune governing Paris just two days after the fall of the monarchy. His speeches during this time “had a peculiar combination of acute political suspicion and personal animosity towards anyone who disagreed with him.”⁵¹ He was often quoting some version of Rousseau, and quoted directly the phrase: *le peuple veut le bien, mais il ne le voit pas toujours* meaning the people want what is good, but they do not always see it.

⁵² On November 5th of 1792, Robespierre was elected to the new National Convention, which held significant power being that it’s members were elected to provide the new constitution of France. Later that month, the Convention decided on making France a republic to which Robespierre was determined to separate the members of the Convention who wanted the republic for selfish reasons and those, like Robespierre, who wanted to found the republic on the principle of equality and the general interest.⁵³ Prior to this decision, Robespierre had been “too busy” to publish his journal, but after the republic was decided on, he saw it as an opportunity to revisit his long standing fear of executive power.

In one article, Robespierre quotes a passage from Rousseau where he is describing the qualities of the lawgiver:

To discover the rules of society that are best suited to nations, there would need to exist a superior intelligence, who could understand the passions of men without feeling any of them who had no affinity with our nature but knew it to the full, whose happiness was independent of ours, but who would nevertheless make out

⁵⁰Scurr, *Fatal Purity*, 209.

⁵¹Scurr, *Fatal Purity*, 173.

⁵²Scurr, *Fatal Purity*, 173.

⁵³Scurr, *Fatal Purity*, 210.

happiness his concern, who would be content to wait in the fullness of time for a distant glory, and to labour in one age to enjoy the fruits of another. Gods would be needed to give men laws.

However, instead of leaving the passage as is, Robespierre adjusts it and formulates his own version to be published as well:

You will need philosophers as enlightened as they were intrepid: who experienced the passions of man, but whose first passions would be the horror of tyranny and the love of humanity; treading underfoot vanity, envy, ambition and all the weaknesses of petty souls, inexorable toward crime armed with power, indulgent toward error, sympathetic toward misery and tender and respectful toward the people.⁵⁴

This new version not only eliminated the association of the lawgiver as God and framed it so “an unusually admirable human being-Robespierre himself, for example” could act as the lawgiver, but it also took the idea of the lawgiver as an impossibility and shifted it to the realm of possibility.⁵⁵

Less than a year later on July 27, 1793, Robespierre was voted onto the Committee of Public Safety where under his leadership, the committee came to exercise dictatorial control over the French government, all the while claiming the Rousseauistic ideals of “a prim society of patriotic, uncorrupted, serious equals.”⁵⁶ And so we find that the lawgiver, with all of its absolute power, becomes a reality.

Less than two months later, The Reign of Terror begins led by none other than Robespierre. During this time, Robespierre jailed and killed anyone who was *perceived* to be against his Revolution. This paranoia, while in many ways reflects the original need for transparency, it also, to some extent, reflects its practical impossibility - one can never really know the motivations of another because we are humans, not Gods. Nonetheless, Robespierre’s reality

⁵⁴Scurr, *Fatal Purity*, 210.

⁵⁵Scurr, *Fatal Purity*, 210.

⁵⁶Scurr, *Fatal Purity*, 275.

became the only reality that mattered. He operated with absolute certainty as the lawgiver, believing that he was revolutionizing France, but as time has shown us, he was not only wrong, but ruined any progress the Revolution had made toward equality. As such, we are left again to consider if the risk of having a lawgiver is worthwhile and by doing so, question the possibility and/or limitations of political certainty. This questioning of political certainty brings us to the second potential of the “if,” that being the fictional capacity of the lawgiver.

“Gods would be needed to give men laws” but yet, Rousseau introduces the lawgiver not as a God, but as a man. The lawgiver is someone who has incredible genius, and thus an ability to know what the common good is and therefore serves to correct the general will when the people are misled. The lawgiver, as argued earlier, has absolute authority. He is the “engineer” of the political system, while his office remains outside of the government and sovereign. He is the man behind the curtain, an omnipotent being. In every respect, the lawgiver parallels that of a God, but Rousseau still distinguishes them as human. An example of this is when Rousseau writes of divine intervention being “used by the lawgiver when he puts his own decisions into the mouth of the immortals.” Differentiation is done to separate the lawgiver from that of the immortals; however, the lawgiver has the power to “put his own decisions into the mouth of the immortals” and effectively convince the citizens to follow his decisions. In this way, we can see how Rousseau writes that the lawgiver is not a God, but when it comes to his power, is very much a God. While Rousseau continues to claim the lawgiver is a man, within the particular system as presented in *The Social Contract*, the line between God and man is blurred. It is this blurring and confusion that surrounds the lawgiver which makes it apparent that an entity sporting the qualities of a lawgiver would not only be rare, but altogether unthinkable. As such, this impossibility forces us to consider

if Rousseau was aware of the impossibility of the lawgiver, and if not, why? And if so, what is the purpose of the lawgiver?

Jean Starobinski, who has written and analyzed Rousseau extensively as a literary critic, approaches Rousseau and the entirety of his work from a psychoanalytic lens. Starobinski argues that Rousseau's need for transparency began within himself and thus expanded outward rendering Rousseau paranoid about "an overbearing world of infinite obstacles." Starobinski argues further that Rousseau's politics are a commitment to liberate man from the "ornamentation and masking that defined aristocratic society."⁵⁷ Although this is a simplified account of Starobinski's argument, it does reflect why Rousseau clung to transparency and a desire to return to his state of nature. In this way, we could conceive of the argument that it did not matter if the lawgiver was largely fictional in practice, but that for Rousseau himself, it was important he was able to establish the possibility, no matter how slight, of a return to the state of nature and the resurrection of transparency. While this shift of focus to Rousseau's "neurosis" allows us to make sense of his work (especially the inconsistencies), there is still much to be gained if we pay attention to the text itself, particularly through the struggle he displays in distinguishing the lawgiver from God.

As we analyze this struggle, what remains most striking is Rousseau's determination to maintain that the lawgiver is a man, not a God. Even when Rousseau writes that laws would need to come from Gods, he still declares that the lawgiver is human. No matter how much the lawgiver operates as a God, Rousseau continues to deem them as a man. This suggests that Rousseau is grappling with a particular tension - the potential for equality and the actuality of equality. The continued delineation of the two (man and God) reflects his yearning for the possibility of equality

⁵⁷Stefanos Geroulanos, *Transparency in Postwar France: A Critical History of the Present* (Stanford: Stanford Press, 2017), 1-2.

in society while the substantive role of the lawgiver reflects the opposite. The actuality of such a lawgiver in itself is impossible, and it is through this impossibility, which suggests that equality within society is unrealizable. In this way, Rousseau's project becomes far more dynamic. It was already shown that there is a tension between the desire for equality and the simultaneous need to have a lawgiver with absolute power and who is deceitful toward the citizens in order to establish equality. While the struggle Rousseau displays reflects the same problem of potentiality and actuality, instead of it being intentional, it feels rather unintentional. This speaks not only to the weight of the tension, but also to the fact that the question of the potential of equality within society remains a question, even if he seems to have an answer.

Rousseau's political conclusions are confusing, contradictory and counterintuitive for a number of reasons. However, his continued engagement with the tension between the potential and the actual should not be overlooked. If we pay attention to the inconsistencies which emerge from his attempt to reconcile equality with society, we are left to question the risk and benefit of political certainty, the ability or inability for the individual to transform to the collective, and ultimately and most profoundly, what can connect us together as humans, particularly in civil society. While Rousseau's conclusions lend themselves to both poles of the political spectrum, so do the questions which emerge from his work. As such, we once again find ourselves left uncertain on how these tensions can be resolved, if at all.

3

Burke's Skepticism: Revolution vs. Reform

Before I delve into the specifics of the chapter, I would be remiss to not point out the significance it has for me. I began this project curious about the role of skepticism, particularly the ways in which it grants the freedom to question what we hold to be true and thus gives each individual the ability to determine what is certain, as we saw so powerfully with Descartes. But, as this is true, I was also curious to see how skepticism might work in the opposite way. As much as skepticism can provide freedom and agency, skepticism is always a narrative in progress and one that can be retold. Skepticism can also generate an avoidant turning back and over-reliance on what is immediate. This second movement of skepticism will be my focus.

In this chapter, I will turn to Edmund Burke, who is considered to be the founder of modern conservatism, despite the fact that in the 19th century, he had a split political reception just like Jean-Jacques Rousseau did. Burke was deemed “the greatest Englishman since Milton” by Thomas Macaulay, and this same verdict was later endorsed by John Morley.⁵⁸ Alternatively, Burke was practically pilloried by Karl Marx in *Das Kapital* where Marx wrote:

The sycophant-who in the pay of the English oligarchy played the romantic *laudator temporis acti* against the French Revolution just as, in the pay of the North American colonies at the beginning of the American troubles, he had played the liberal against the English oligarchy- was an out-and-out vulgar bourgeois.⁵⁹

Marx refers to Burke as the sycophant, and as such, minimizes Burke's political ideas as being nothing more than a servile obedience to the English oligarchy. He accuses Burke of superficially

⁵⁸Dennis O'Keefe, *Edmund Burke: Major Conservative and Libertarian Thinkers*, (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013) 90.

⁵⁹Karl Marx et al., *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, (United States: Modern Library, 1906), 832.

playing the “romantic *laudator temporis acti*” against the French Revolution, precisely because the French Revolution was attempting to destroy the same unequal systems which the English oligarchy profited from. All in all, Marx views Burke as nothing more than a puppet for the English oligarchy and the continuation of its principles against any equalizing efforts made on behalf of the proletariat.

Mary Wollstonecraft also has an equally important critique of Burke. In response to Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, she writes in her *Vindication of the Rights of Men*:

Misery to reach your heart I perceive, must have its caps and bells; your tears are reserved, very naturally considering your character, for the declamation of the theater, or for the downfall of queens, whose rank throws a graceful veil over vices that degrade humanity; but the distress of many industrious mothers whose helpmates have been torn from them, and the hungry cry of the helpless babes, were vulgar sorrows that could not move your commiseration, though they might extort an alms.⁶⁰

Due to Burke's elitism, Wollstonecraft accuses him of not only caring for just the aristocrats, but of being incapable of feeling any emotion toward the rest of society. She notes that even the cry of hunger from helpless babes still could not provoke his compassion and pity but yet, he is very readily able to cry at “the downfall of the queen” whose very existence serves to place a “graceful veil” over the unequal and oppressive systems which govern the people.

While both Marx and Wollstonecraft offer quite damning criticism of Burke, I do however wish to consider the purpose of Burke's position, particularly because “no other philosophical writing on politics succeeded in predicting so accurately and with such relevant specificity the course of subsequent events.”⁶¹ Burke began writing *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in

⁶⁰Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, (London: J. Johnson, 1790).

⁶¹Michael Mosher, "The Skeptic's Burke: Reflections on the Revolution in France, 1790-1990," (*Political Theory* 19, no. 3, 1991), 400.

January or February of 1790, while the book itself was published in November of that same year. This is to say that Burke was writing during the “peaceful year of the Revolution” and still warned with remarkable accuracy of what would follow in France.⁶² As such, Burke deserves to be explored beyond the simplifications which Marx and Wollstonecraft make of his political ideology. I will therefore attempt to bring forth some of Burke’s complexities.

While we saw in “Rousseau's Certainty: Equality in Theory and Practice” that Rousseau began from the premise that equality is necessary and good in principle but then came to the conclusion that equality might not be politically feasible in actuality, I will argue that Burke’s skepticism leads him to begin his thinking with the acceptance of inequality as a present and necessary reality. I will claim that because of this acceptance of inequality, Burke is able to engage with the tension between the potentiality and actuality of equality directly, which results in a political ideology that opposes revolution, but yet prioritizes reform.

Burke undoubtedly relies on the idea of inheritance, but while he has been criticized for placing a superficial value on tradition, we are able to see why it is of genuine importance to him:

You will observe that from Magna Charta to the Declaration of Right it has been the uniform policy of our constitution to claim and assert our liberties as an entailed inheritance derived to us from our forefathers, and to be transmitted to our posterity—as an estate specially belonging to the people of this kingdom, without any reference whatever to any other more general or prior right. By this means our constitution preserves a unity in so great a diversity of its parts. We have an inheritable crown, an inheritable peerage, and a House of Commons and a people inheriting privileges, franchises, and liberties from a long line of ancestors. This policy appears to me to be the result of profound reflection, or rather the happy effect of following nature, which is wisdom without reflection, and above it.⁶³

⁶²Michael Mosher, “The Skeptic's Burke,” 400.

⁶³Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. by J. G. A. Pocock, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1987), 29.

Burke views inheritance similarly to how we view culture: it is cultivated over time, it has with it the capacity to unite, it carries with it a sense of respect as well as a desire to reflect on how it came to be, and establishes a deep valuemment of what it represents. As such, Burke brings attention to the fact that across England's constitutional history, their "uniform policy" has been the claiming and asserting of liberties as a result of "inheritance derived to [them] from [their] forefathers, and to be transmitted to [their] posterity." While the idea of inheritance does contain the passing of material assets, it is not limited to this. As a society, we inherit laws and systems of governance, which for Burke, represent wisdom that is cultivated and reflected upon from every generation which came before. This generational connection is an intimate one for Burke in that he suggests a parallel between ancestral inheritance and national inheritance. The laws and systems come to exist from a shared lineage of forefathers, which in turn creates a familial connection from every citizen to England, so much so that Burke notes England to be an "estate specially belonging to the people of this kingdom."

While Burke identifies this claiming of estate as a birthright, we must also point out the resonance this has to both Marx and Wollstonecraft. It is almost as if Burke does not consider the total implications of what he is arguing. By specifically stating that the laws of England were specially drafted by England's forefathers, and thus establishes a magical and respectable bond from the citizens to their country, it appears rather cosmetic. When considering someone who descends from an ancestry of peasants and has very little, it is superficial to ignore this aspect and instead glorify the fact that they are still an Englishman or Englishwoman. It is also rather cruel to then pretend that they have equal inheritance to the estate of England. While this is a problematic

consequence of Burke's ideology, he still chooses to depend on inheritance, which is in part a reflection of his elitism, but also largely a result of his skepticism.

As noted before, inheritance has remained the "uniform policy" of England for centuries, as well as having the unique capability of "preservi[ng] a unity in so great a diversity" of the parts of their constitution: the crown, peerage, House of Commons as well as the differing individual levels of inheritance. As such, this is what first leads Burke to believe that the policy is "the result of profound reflection." However, Burke then corrects himself, and writes that it is actually not just a result of reflection, but that it is "the happy effect of following nature." This immediate change of outlook is where we see his skeptical attitude. Inheritance has proven itself time and time again to be the necessary component of political stability. So, this reflects to Burke that inheritance is a natural order and one that can and should be depended on.

Due to this assumption of certainty, Burke reasons that the following of the natural order results in the preservation of the state:

Our political system is placed in a just correspondence and symmetry with the order of the world and with the mode of existence decreed to a permanent body composed of transitory parts, wherein, by the disposition of a stupendous wisdom, molding together the great mysterious incorporation of the human race, the whole, at one time, is never old or middle-aged or young, but, in a condition of unchangeable constancy, moves on through the varied tenor of perpetual decay, fall, renovation, and progression. [...] By adhering in this manner and on those principles to our forefathers, we are guided not by the superstition of antiquarians, but by the spirit of philosophic analogy.⁶⁴

Inheritance establishes a political system where the structure itself is permanent, but those who make up the structure differ. This political system, as it is maintained from inheritance, allows for various wisdoms to enact upon the laws themselves, as well as allowing for these laws to be

⁶⁴Burke, *Reflections*, 30.

continually incorporated and influenced by the people of England. In this way, we can see how inheritance results in a political system that is “of unchangeable constancy” being that it creates a foundation through a set structure, which allows for specific laws to go through “the varied tenor of perpetual decay, fall, renovation, and progression” without any risk to the state itself. Again we see that Burke's word choice of “unchangeable constancy” also reflects the certainty he prescribes to anything which follows from the natural order. It is not enough for Burke to claim that the political system is dependable, he takes a step further to claim that this dependability is unwavering.

We also see in this passage that inheritance, aside from establishing a necessary foundation for the preservation of the state, also serves to guide the present. When we “adher[e] in this manner” we are guided “by the spirit of philosophical analogy” as opposed to “the *superstition* of antiquarians.” For Burke, if we maintain tradition, we are able to use analogy to compare a present situation to a past one in order to make an informed decision. But, without tradition, we are left to conceive of every action, law, and structure as the result of something unknowable to us, thus requiring our blind faith or “superstition.”

Through this analysis, an interesting paradox emerges from Burke's skepticism. On the one hand, Burke recognizes that the world around him is constantly changing, and thus he responds by emphasizing the “unchangeable constancy” of the political system because it stems from an already certain natural order. But, on the other hand, Burke is reluctant to conclude that any decision, aside from the maintenance of a particular political structure, can be certain. Burke recognizes the limits of what an individual can know, and so through comparison, we are able to make informed decisions based on history, which leaves us with a better understanding than if we approached

decisions in a vacuum. While the former still reflects a dependability that can and should go unquestioned, the latter reflects something that demands questioning and comparison in order to make decisions. With this understanding of what is driving Burke's idea of inheritance, we can now continue to see how this manifests in a political ideology that is against revolution, but still prioritizes reform.

In much of *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke is doing comparative work between England's history and the beginning of France's Revolution. Burke draws on two critical periods in England's history - the Reformation and Revolution - when England was without a king and "had lost the bond of union to their ancient edifice." However, for him, what separates England from France is that England did not "dissolve the whole fabric" of the constitution but instead, "regenerated the deficient part of the old constitution through the parts which were not impaired" whereas France has done the opposite and is attempting to organize the state "by the organic *moleculae* of a disbanded people."⁶⁵ We can begin to see that for Burke, the maintenance of inheritance is what allows for reform, not the destroying of it:

Besides, the people of England well know that the idea of inheritance furnishes a sure principle of conservation and a sure principle of transmission, without at all excluding a principle of improvement. It leaves acquisition free, but it secures what it acquires. Whatever advantages are obtained by a state proceeding on these maxims are locked fast as in a sort of family settlement, grasped as in a kind of mortmain forever.⁶⁶

Even though inheritance can be perceived as establishing a fixed system, Burke argues that it does not "exclud[e] a principle of improvement." He claims that while the idea of inheritance is upheld, "acquisition [is left] free" so, even when the constitution is passed down, it still is able to be

⁶⁵Burke, *Reflections*, 19.

⁶⁶Burke, *Reflections*, 29.

improved. When these “advantages are obtained by a state proceeding on these maxims” they are “locked fast as in a sort of family settlement, grasped as in a kind of mortmain forever.” Even though the use of “in a kind of mortmain forever” again reflects the idea of permanency, Burke notes that reform is necessary. Aside from already claiming that England’s constitution had to renew its “deficient” parts, he also points out that: “A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation.”⁶⁷ For Burke, inheritance provides necessary grounding through the maintenance of political structure, so that one is able to have a foundation from which they can not only receive guidance when making decisions, but also have stability in order to explore and discover how to improve what no longer serves the people. As such, Burke’s criticism of the French Revolution had little to do with the changes they wished to implement, but had everything to do with the manner in which it was done.

During the early days of the French Revolution, King Louis XVI called a meeting of the Estates-General, which was a representative assembly of the three orders of France: the clergy (First Estate), the nobility (Second Estate), and the commoners (Third Estate). Prior to this meeting, the representatives from each order wrote down a list of grievances to bring to the meeting of the Estates-General, which took place on May 5th, 1789. However, during the meeting the orders were immediately divided on how to call the voting system-either by head count or by estate. While this issue occupied the estates for over a month, on June 17th the Third Estate decided to break off and form the National Assembly, which threatened to proceed with or without the other two orders. The king then decided to lock the National Assembly out of their meeting hall on June 20th, so the National Assembly took to the king’s tennis court and swore they would not leave

⁶⁷Burke, *Reflections*, 19.

until the new constitution was created. This protest resulted in the king forcing the other two orders to join, forming the National Constituent Assembly.⁶⁸ While the intention behind the formation of the National Constituent Assembly was to be a movement towards equality, it actually resulted in doing everything but that:

Believe me, sir, those who attempt to level, never equalize. In all societies, consisting of various descriptions of citizens, some description must be uppermost. The levelers, therefore, only change and pervert the natural order of things; they load the edifice of society by setting up in the air what the solidity of the structure requires to be on the ground.⁶⁹

The National Constituent Assembly, as it was led by the Third Estate, just simply removed the official label of the orders and thus “confound[ed] all sorts of citizens, as well as they could, into one homogeneous mass.”⁷⁰ For Burke, this was unnatural because in every society, there is diversity among its citizens, and it is natural that some citizens will have an objectively more important position than others; at some point, someone has to make the final decision. So, because the Assembly tried to ignore this reality and acted as if every citizen was the same, they were left with a complete inability to understand the changes France needed; they throw the strongest parts of their social structures into the air when in reality, they are required to be on the ground.

While it might seem that Burke is again playing the *laudator temporis acti* in order to fault any change that does not coincide with his certain order, what Burke really is concerned about is the Assembly’s assertion of certainty:

They have some change in the church or state, or both, constantly in their view. When that is the case, they are always bad citizens and perfectly unsure connections. For, considering their speculative designs as of infinite value, and the actual arrangement of the state as of no estimation, they are at best indifferent about

⁶⁸Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “French Revolution,” (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc: March 27, 2020).

⁶⁹Burke, *Reflections*, 43.

⁷⁰Burke, *Reflections*, 162.

it. They see no merit in the good, and no fault in the vicious management of public affairs; they rather rejoice in the latter, as more propitious to revolution. They see no merit or demerit in any man, or any action, or any political principle any further than as they may forward or retard their design of change; they therefore take up, one day, the most violent and stretched prerogative, and another time the wildest democratic ideas of freedom, and pass from one to the other without any sort of regard to cause, to person, or to party.⁷¹

For Burke, the natural order is undeniably dependable because it has been tested and proven over time. The maintenance of this natural order is what allows for laws to be deliberated, adjusted, and implemented by the “great mysterious incorporation of the human race.” Therefore, reform is realizable only through adhering to this process and cannot be achieved through impulsivity. So, being that the Assembly has “constantly in their view” the need to uproot this natural order, they are regarded as “bad citizens” with “perfectly unsure connections.” While this claim is again reflective of his own skepticism in that he is unwilling to accept anything that deviates from what he knows to be true, he does also bring attention to an important tension between the potentiality and the actuality of ideas, as shown in “Rousseau's Certainty: Equality in Theory and Practice.”

The Assembly, already having attempted to homogenize its citizens, continues to consider their “speculative designs [to be of] infinite value” while remaining indifferent to the “actual arrangement of the state.” They are so certain in their ideals that they fail to see the “merit or demerit” of any man, action or political principle. There is no deliberation for they only consider something long enough to see if it matches or goes against “their design of change.” The Assembly asserts certainty on the basis of mere speculation without any grounding in reality, and this is what is dangerous for Burke. He sees no contemplation, no moderation, and no diversity of thought - just extremism and impulsivity, the result of which is political and social catastrophe:

⁷¹Burke, *Reflections*, 56.

This was unnatural. The rest is in order. They have found their punishment in their success: laws overturned; tribunals subverted; industry without vigor; commerce expiring; the revenue unpaid, yet the people impoverished; a church pillaged, and a state not relieved; civil and military anarchy made the constitution of the kingdom; everything human and divine sacrificed to the idol of public credit, and national bankruptcy the consequence;

The Assembly, because they acted against the natural order, now find, as if it is a logical consequence, “their punishment in their success.” By overturning laws, they did away with the justice process; by claiming men equal, they were left with little industry, no commerce, and still no way to pay for public expenses. Churches pillaged, constitutions destroyed, everything “human and divine sacrificed to the idol of public credit” while France became bankrupt and its people remained poor.⁷² And as if this was not enough, Burke continues with the following:

and, to crown all, the paper securities of new, precarious, tottering power, the discredited paper securities of impoverished fraud and beggared rapine, held out as a currency for the support of an empire in lieu of the two great recognized species that represent the lasting, conventional credit of mankind, which disappeared and hid themselves in the earth from whence they came, when the principle of property, whose creatures and representatives they are, was systematically subverted.⁷³

The Assembly created a currency that was backed by the “impoverished fraud and beggared rapine” of the church and state, which already “represented the lasting, conventional credit of mankind.” But while the Assembly handed out this new currency and framed it as “support,” they were unable to see the damage of their impulsivity. From this moment on, the very things which could have saved France from ruin “disappeared and hid themselves in the earth from whence they came.” Had the Assembly relied on the foundations of their political structure, perhaps they would

⁷²There is an interesting comparison to be made to Marx and his views on capitalism. The fact that “everything human and divine” can be reduced to a credit value is detestable for Burke. However, being that Burke was an aristocrat, the irony should not be lost either.

⁷³Burke, *Reflections*, 34.

have achieved the reform they so desperately desired but instead, they dissolved everything and as such, were left only able to conceive of ideals, which ultimately destroyed France in the process.

Through this brief analysis of Burke, we are able to see that his skepticism veers toward an anti-revolutionary attitude. However, this is not because he wants to protect the English oligarchy nor is it because he desires to maintain oppression, but rather because he thinks that immediate action precludes any possibility for improvement. As shown through Burke's account of the French Revolution, we see that reform needs to be a gradual process - one which requires the foundations established by inheritance to be maintained in order to be leaned on. Without these foundations, we are guided by the uncertainty of suspicion and speculation; when these uncertainties are acted on without contemplation and deliberation, we find ourselves believing we have made progress, but as time carries on, realize we have actually regressed.

Perhaps revolution is not useful toward achieving larger goals such as equality, but it does allow for agency and grants a voice to those who have not been heard. Furthermore, what happens when a state needs to be structurally changed in order to move toward an ideal? If we take inheritance seriously, this appears to not be a possibility because it would risk the collapse of the state itself. Burke did predict the outcome of the French Revolution, and so, there must be validity to his ideology; yet the consequence of his thinking remains a question. While gradual reform is not difficult to withstand if you are an aristocrat, it means something entirely different to those who are oppressed. We must examine under what terms an ideal can be realized and at one point, if any, a balance can be struck between reform and revolution, for there is utility in both.

Conclusion

The relationship between skepticism and certainty not only brought attention to the complexity of these thinkers and the subtlety of their political positions, but it also complicated how we view the skeptical narrative.

Descartes' method propels an individual to question, explore, and investigate what can be certain, but the expression of these findings are limited. The moment we enter into society, we are expected to obey laws, custom, and authority because the risk of dismantling the social order from the assertion of false certainty overrides the value of voicing any new, and perhaps uncertain, ideas at all. The tension which emerges between the individual and the collective, as a result of the individual's skepticism, directs us to consider a wealth of questions: Does the prosperity of the state always require the partial elimination of individual agency? If an individual is expected to be politically subservient, what is the utility in otherwise maintaining a skeptical attitude? Does the reserving of political opinions only to those in positions of power override the equal capacity and right to reason of all individuals?

Rousseau's longing for transparency as a way to reunite and equalize individuals is contradicted throughout his own demonstration. In order for transparency to be realized, citizens must be secretly reconditioned by the lawgiver through the general will. Does equality need to be realized through blind habituation? The lawgiver's substantive role is that of a God and, as such, is granted unchecked and unlimited authority. Why? Because this lawgiver is assumed to know how to gear citizens toward social welfare. Is the granting of absolute power dangerous? Does it inevitably lead to political certainty and is such certainty even possible? While Rousseau maintains that the existence of the lawgiver is conceivable, what emerges from his work is the impossibility

of such a being. This tension between the possibility of equality and the actuality of establishing equality as demonstrated through the role of the lawgiver leads us to wonder whether such ideals are achievable. Does the fictitious nature of the lawgiver suggest that equality in society is also mere fiction?

Burke's skepticism leads him, unlike Rousseau, to prioritize the actual and historical above the theoretical or ideal. As a result, he concludes that inheritance is a natural and sure principle because it has withstood the test of time. Inheritance is not only about unchanging constancy, but every social and political structure which stems from it serves as a foundation that should be leaned on during the inevitable unpredictability of change. But, we are left to ask: At what point does an assertion of certainty become one of compliance? Not only do inherited customs guide us, but they also ground us in our political and social realities so that when we make decisions, we act not from the impulsivity of our ideals, but from a deep relationship with our personal and communal reality. The question remains: Can reality ever be a certainty? What is it about an ideal that makes it inevitably uncertain? From this uncertainty, it is not surprising that to Burke, reform cannot be realized through revolutions, but only through the very maintenance of well-worn political structures. If this is the case, what happens to those ideals that require the rearrangement of particular political structures? Are some ideals more unattainable than others?

By investigating the relationship between skepticism and certainty in the work of Descartes, Rousseau, and Burke, we have found that our understanding of these thinkers and their politics has been complex, ultimately reflecting the larger question of the limits of certainty. The question of certitude is one that cuts across time, space, and politics. It continues to emerge and manifest itself in new ways, that not only speak to the centrality of the question for the history of

political thought, but also to the responsibility we share in seeking an answer. Whether or not we will ever discover the answer, the point is that we dared to try.

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