

INTRODUCTION



*"We hold these truths to
be self-evident"*

GREAT THINGS sometimes come from rewriting under pressure. In his first draft of the Declaration of Independence, prepared in mid-June 1776, Thomas Jefferson wrote, "We hold these truths to be sacred & undeniable; that all men are created equal & independant [sic], that from that equal creation they derive rights inherent & inalienable, among which are the preservation of life, & liberty, & the pursuit of happiness." Largely thanks to his own revisions, Jefferson's sentence soon shook off its hiccups to speak in clearer, more ringing tones: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." With this one sentence Jefferson turned a typical eighteenth-century document about political grievances into a lasting proclamation of human rights.¹

Thirteen years later, Jefferson was in Paris when the French began to think about drawing up a statement of their rights. In January 1789—several months before the fall of the Bastille—Jefferson's friend, marquis de Lafayette, veteran of the War of American Independence, drafted a French declaration, most likely with Jefferson's help. When the Bastille fell on July 14, and the French Revolution began in earnest, the demand for an official declaration gathered momentum. Despite Lafayette's best efforts, no one hand shaped the document as had Jefferson for the American Congress. On August 20, the new National Assembly opened discussion of twenty-four articles drafted by an unwieldy committee of forty deputies. After six days of tumultuous debate and endless amendments, the French deputies had only approved seventeen articles. Exhausted by the continuing contention and needing to turn to other pressing matters, the deputies voted on August 27, 1789, to suspend discussion of the draft and provisionally adopt the already approved articles as their Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen.

The document so frantically cobbled together was stunning in its sweep and simplicity. Never once mentioning king, nobility, or church, it declared the "natural, inalienable and sacred rights of man" to be the foundation of any and all government. It assigned sovereignty to the nation, not the king, and pronounced everyone equal before the law, thus opening positions to talent and merit and implicitly eliminating all privilege based on birth. More striking than any particular guarantee, however, was the universality of the claims made. References to "men," "man," "every man," "all men," "all citizens," "each citizen," "society," and "every society" dwarfed the single reference to the French people.

As a result, the publication of the declaration immediately galvanized worldwide opinion on the subject of rights, both for

and against. In a sermon given in London on November 4, 1789, Richard Price, friend of Benjamin Franklin and frequent critic of the English government, waxed lyrical on the new rights of man. "I have lived to see the rights of men better understood than ever, and nations panting for liberty, which seemed to have lost the idea of it." Outraged by Price's naive enthusiasm for the "metaphysical abstractions" of the French, the well-known essayist and member of Parliament Edmund Burke dashed off a furious response. His pamphlet, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), gained instant recognition as the founding text of conservatism. "We are not the converts of Rousseau," Burke thundered. "We know that *we* have made no discoveries, and we think that no discoveries are to be made, in morality. . . . We have not been drawn and trussed, in order that we may be filled, like stuffed birds in a museum, with chaff and rags and paltry blurred shreds of paper about the rights of man." Price and Burke had agreed about the American Revolution; they both supported it. But the French Revolution upped the ante enormously, and battle lines soon formed: was it the dawn of a new era of freedom based on reason or the beginning of a relentless descent into anarchy and violence?²

For nearly two centuries, despite the controversy provoked by the French Revolution, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen incarnated the promise of universal human rights. In 1948, when the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 1 read, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." In 1789, Article I of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen had already proclaimed, "Men are born and remain free and equal in rights." Although the modifications in language were meaningful, the echo between the two documents is unmistakable.

The origins of documents do not necessarily tell us something significant about their consequences. Does it really matter that Jefferson's rough draft went through eighty-six alterations made by himself, the Committee of Five, or Congress? Jefferson and Adams clearly thought so, since they were still arguing about who contributed what in the 1820s, in the last decade of their long and eventful lives. Yet the Declaration of Independence had no constitutional standing. It simply declared intentions, and fifteen years passed before the states finally ratified a very different Bill of Rights in 1791. The French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen claimed to safeguard individual freedoms, but it did not prevent the emergence of a French government that repressed rights (known as the Terror), and future French constitutions—there were many of them—formulated different declarations or went without declarations altogether.

More troubling still, those who so confidently declared rights to be universal in the late eighteenth century turned out to have something much less all-inclusive in mind. We are not surprised that they considered children, the insane, the imprisoned, or foreigners to be incapable or unworthy of full participation in the political process, for so do we. But they also excluded those without property, slaves, free blacks, in some cases religious minorities, and always and everywhere, women. In recent years, these limitations on "all men" have drawn much commentary, and some scholars have even questioned whether the declarations had any real emancipatory meaning. The founders, framers, and declarers have been judged elitist, racist, and misogynist for their inability to consider everyone truly equal in rights.

We should not forget the restrictions placed on rights by eighteenth-century men, but to stop there, patting ourselves on the back for our own comparative "advancement," is to miss the

point. How did these men, living in societies built on slavery, subordination, and seemingly natural subservience, ever come to imagine men not at all like them and, in some cases, women too, as equals? How did equality of rights become a "self-evident" truth in such unlikely places? It is astounding that men such as Jefferson, a slaveowner, and Lafayette, an aristocrat, could speak as they did of the self-evident, inalienable rights of all men. If we could understand how this came to pass, we would understand better what human rights mean to us today.

The Paradox of Self-Evidence

Despite their differences in language, the two eighteenth-century declarations both rested on a claim of self-evidence. Jefferson made this explicit when he wrote, "We hold these truths to be self-evident." The French Declaration stated categorically that "ignorance, neglect or contempt of the rights of man are the sole causes of public misfortunes and governmental corruption." Not much had changed in this regard by 1948. True, the United Nations Declaration took a more legalistic tone: "WHEREAS recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world." Yet this too constituted a claim of self-evidence, for "whereas" literally means "it being the fact that." In other words, "whereas" is simply a legalistic way of asserting a given, something self-evident.

This claim of self-evidence, crucial to human rights even now, gives rise to a paradox: if equality of rights is so self-evident, then why did this assertion have to be made and why was it only made in specific times and places? How can human rights

be universal if they are not universally recognized? Shall we rest content with the explanation given by the 1948 framers that "we agree about the rights but on condition no one asks us why"? Can they be "self-evident" when scholars have argued for more than two hundred years about what Jefferson meant by his phrase? Debate will continue forever because Jefferson never felt the need to explain himself. No one from the Committee of Five or Congress wanted to revise his claim, even though they extensively modified other sections of his preliminary version. They apparently agreed with him. Moreover, if Jefferson had explained himself, the self-evidence of the claim would have evaporated. An assertion that requires argument is not self-evident.³

I believe that the claim of self-evidence is crucial to the history of human rights, and this book is devoted to explaining how it came to be so convincing in the eighteenth century. Happily, it also provides a point of focus in what tends to be a very diffuse history. Human rights have become so ubiquitous in the present time that they seem to require an equally capacious history. Greek ideas about the individual person, Roman notions of law and right, Christian doctrines of the soul . . . the risk is that the history of human rights becomes the history of Western civilization or now, sometimes, even the history of the entire world. Do not ancient Babylon, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam all make their contributions, too? How then do we account for the sudden crystallization of human rights claims at the end of the eighteenth century?

Human rights require three interlocking qualities: rights must be *natural* (inherent in human beings); *equal* (the same for everyone); and *universal* (applicable everywhere). For rights to be *human* rights, all humans everywhere in the world must possess them equally and only because of their status as human beings.

It turned out to be easier to accept the natural quality of rights than their equality or universality. In many ways, we are grappling still with the implications of the demand for equality and universality of rights. At what age does someone have the right to full political participation? Do immigrants—non-citizens—share in rights, and which ones?

Yet even naturalness, equality, and universality are not quite enough. Human rights only become meaningful when they gain political content. They are not the rights of humans in a state of nature; they are the rights of humans in society. They are not just human rights as opposed to divine rights, or human rights as opposed to animal rights; they are the rights of humans vis-à-vis each other. They are therefore rights guaranteed in the secular political world (even if they are called "sacred"), and they are rights that require active participation from those who hold them.

The equality, universality, and naturalness of rights gained direct political expression for the first time in the American Declaration of Independence of 1776 and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen of 1789. While the English Bill of Rights of 1689 referred to the "ancient rights and liberties" established by English law and deriving from English history, it did not declare the equality, universality, or naturalness of rights. In contrast, the Declaration of Independence insisted that "all men are created equal," and that all of them possess "unalienable rights." Similarly, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen proclaimed that "Men are born and remain free and equal in rights." Not French men, not white men, not Catholics, but "men," which then as now means not just males but also persons, that is, members of the human race. In other words, sometime between 1689 and 1776 rights that had been viewed most often as the rights of a particular people—freeborn

English men, for example—were transformed into human rights, universal natural rights, what the French called *les droits de l'homme* or “the rights of man.”⁴

Human Rights and “The Rights of Man”

A brief foray into the history of terms will help pin down the moment of emergence of human rights. Eighteenth-century people did not often use the expression “human rights,” and when they did, they usually meant something different by it than what we mean. Before 1789, Jefferson, for example, spoke most often of “natural rights.” He began to use the term “rights of man” only after 1789. When he employed “human rights,” he meant something more passive and less political than natural rights or the rights of man. In 1806, for example, he used the term in referring to the evils of the slave trade:

I congratulate you, fellow citizens, on the approach of the period at which you may interpose your authority constitutionally, to withdraw the citizens of the United States from all further participation in those violations of human rights which have been so long continued on the unoffending inhabitants of Africa, and which the morality, the reputation, and the best interests of our country, have long been eager to proscribe.

In maintaining that Africans enjoyed human rights, Jefferson drew no implications for African-American slaves at home. Human rights, by Jefferson’s definition, did not enable Africans—much less African-Americans—to act on their own behalf.⁵

During the eighteenth century, in English and in French, “human rights,” “rights of mankind,” and “rights of humanity” all proved to be too general to be of direct political use. They referred to what distinguished humans from the divine on one end of the scale and from animals on the other, rather than to politically relevant rights such as freedom of speech or the right to participate in politics. Thus, in one of the earliest uses (1734) of “rights of humanity” in French, the acerbic literary critic Nicolas Lenglet-Dufresnoy, himself a Catholic priest, satirized “those inimitable monks of the sixth century who so entirely renounced all ‘the rights of humanity’ that they grazed like animals and ran around completely naked.” Similarly, in 1756 Voltaire could proclaim tongue-in-cheek that Persia was the monarchy in which one most enjoyed the “rights of humanity” because Persians had the greatest “resources against boredom.” The term “human right” appeared in French for the first time in 1763 and could mean something like “natural right,” but it did not catch on despite its use by Voltaire in his widely influential *Treatise on Tolerance*.⁶

While English speakers continued to prefer “natural rights” or just plain “rights” throughout the eighteenth century, the French invented a new expression in the 1760s—“rights of man” (*droits de l'homme*). “Natural right(s)” or “natural law” (*droit naturel* has both meanings in French) had longer histories going back hundreds of years, but perhaps as a consequence, “natural right(s)” had too many possible meanings. It sometimes meant simply making sense within the traditional order. Thus, for example, Bishop Bossuet, a spokesman for Louis XIV’s absolute monarchy, used “natural right” only when describing Jesus Christ’s entry to heaven (“he entered heaven by his own natural right”).⁷

“Rights of man” gained currency in French after its appear-

ance in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Social Contract* of 1762, even though Rousseau gave the term no definition and even though—or perhaps because—Rousseau used it alongside “rights of humanity,” “rights of the citizen,” and “rights of sovereignty.” Whatever the reason, by June 1763, “rights of man” had become a common term according to an underground newsletter:

the actors of the *Comédie française* today played, for the first time, *Manco* [a play about the Incas in Peru], of which we previously spoke. It is one of the most badly constructed tragedies. There is a role in it for a savage which could be very beautiful; he recites in verse everything that we have read scattered about on kings, liberty, the rights of man, in *The Inequality of Conditions*, in *Emile*, in *The Social Contract*.

Although the play does not in fact use the precise phrase “the rights of man,” but rather the related one, “rights of our being,” the term had clearly entered intellectual usage, and it was in fact directly associated with the works of Rousseau. Other Enlightenment writers, such as baron d’Holbach, Raynal, and Mercier, then picked it up in the 1770s and 1780s.⁸

Before 1789, “rights of man” had little crossover into English. But the American Revolution prompted the French Enlightenment champion marquis de Condorcet to make a first pass at defining “the rights of man,” which for him included security of person, security of property, impartial and fair justice, and the right to contribute to the formulation of the laws. In his 1786 essay “On the Influence of the American Revolution on Europe,” Condorcet explicitly linked the rights of man to the American Revolution: “The spectacle of a great people, where

the rights of man are respected, is useful to all others, despite the difference in climate, customs, and constitutions.” The American Declaration of Independence, he proclaimed, was nothing less than “a simple and sublime exposition of these rights that are at once so sacred and so long forgotten.” In January 1789, Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès used the expression in his incendiary anti-noble pamphlet, *What Is the Third Estate?* Lafayette’s January 1789 draft of a declaration of rights made explicit reference to “the rights of man,” as did Condorcet’s own draft of early 1789. From the spring of 1789—that is, even before the fall of the Bastille on July 14—talk of the need for a declaration of the “rights of man” permeated French political circles.⁹

When the language of human rights emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century, there was at first little explicit definition of those rights. Rousseau offered no explanation when he used the term “rights of man.” The English jurist William Blackstone defined them as “the natural liberty of mankind,” that is, the “absolute rights of man, considered as a free agent, endowed with discernment to know good from evil.” Most of those using the phrase in the 1770s and 1780s in France, such as the controversial Enlightenment figures d’Holbach and Mirabeau, referred to the rights of man as if they were obvious and needed no justification or definition; they were in other words self-evident. D’Holbach argued, for instance, that if men feared death less, “the rights of man would be more boldly defended.” Mirabeau denounced his persecutors, who had “neither character nor soul, because they have no idea at all of the rights of men.” No one offered a precise list of those rights before 1776 (the date of George Mason’s Virginia Declaration of Rights).¹⁰

The ambiguity of human rights was captured by the French

Calvinist pastor Jean-Paul Rabaut Saint-Etienne, who wrote to the French king in 1787 to complain about the limitations of a proposed Edict of Toleration for Protestants like himself. Emboldened by the rising sentiment in favor of the rights of man, Rabaut insisted, "we know today what natural rights are, and they certainly give to men much more than the edict accords to Protestants. . . . The time has come when it is no longer acceptable for a law to overtly overrule the rights of humanity that are very well known all over the world." They may have been "well known," yet Rabaut himself granted that a Catholic king could not officially sanction the Calvinist right of public worship. In short, everything depended—as it still does—on the interpretation given to what was "no longer acceptable."¹¹

How Rights Became Self-Evident

Human rights are difficult to pin down because their definition, indeed their very existence, depends on emotions as much as on reason. The claim of self-evidence relies ultimately on an emotional appeal; it is convincing if it strikes a chord within each person. Moreover, we are most certain that a human right is at issue when we feel horrified by its violation. Rabaut Saint-Etienne knew that he could appeal to the implicit knowledge of what was "no longer acceptable." In 1755, the influential French Enlightenment writer Denis Diderot had written of *droit naturel* that "the use of this term is so familiar that there is almost no one who would not be convinced inside himself that the thing is obviously known to him. This interior feeling is common both to the philosopher and to the man who has not reflected at all." Like others of the time, Diderot gave only a vague indication of

the meaning of natural rights; "as a man," he concluded, "I have no other natural rights that are truly inalienable than those of humanity." But he had put his finger on the most important quality of human rights; they required a certain widely shared "interior feeling."¹²

Even the austere Swiss natural law philosopher Jean-Jacques Burlamaqui insisted that liberty could only be proved by each man's inner feelings: "Such proofs of feeling are above all objection and produce the most deep-seated *conviction*." Human rights are not just a doctrine formulated in documents; they rest on a disposition toward other people, a set of convictions about what people are like and how they know right and wrong in the secular world. Philosophical ideas, legal traditions, and revolutionary politics had to have this kind of inner emotional reference point for human rights to be truly "self-evident." And, as Diderot insisted, these feelings had to be felt by many people, not just the philosophers who wrote about them.¹³

Underpinning these notions of liberty and rights was a set of assumptions about individual autonomy. To have human rights, people had to be perceived as separate individuals who were capable of exercising independent moral judgment; as Blackstone put it, the rights of man went along with the individual "considered as a free agent, endowed with discernment to know good from evil." But for these autonomous individuals to become members of a political community based on those independent moral judgments, they had to be able to empathize with others. Everyone would have rights only if everyone could be seen as in some fundamental way alike. Equality was not just an abstract concept or a political slogan. It had to be internalized in some fashion.

While we take the ideas of autonomy and equality, along

with human rights, for granted, they only gained influence in the eighteenth century. The contemporary moral philosopher J. B. Schneewind has traced what he calls "the invention of autonomy." "The new outlook that emerged by the end of the eighteenth century," he asserts, "centered on the belief that all normal individuals are equally able to live together in a morality of self-governance." Behind those "normal individuals" lies a long history of struggle. In the eighteenth century (and indeed, right up to the present), all "people" were not imagined as equally capable of moral autonomy. Two related but distinct qualities were involved: the ability to reason and the independence to decide for oneself. Both had to be present if an individual was to be morally autonomous. Children and the insane lacked the necessary capacity to reason, but they might someday gain or regain that capacity. Like children, slaves, servants, the propertyless, and women lacked the required independence of status to be fully autonomous. Children, servants, the propertyless, and perhaps even slaves might one day become autonomous, by growing up, by leaving service, by buying property, or by buying their freedom. Women alone seemed not to have any of these options; they were defined as inherently dependent on either their fathers or husbands. If the proponents of universal, equal, and natural human rights automatically excluded some categories of people from exercising those rights, it was primarily because they viewed them as less than fully capable of moral autonomy.¹⁴

Yet the newfound power of empathy could work against even the longest held prejudices. In 1791, the French revolutionary government granted equal rights to Jews; in 1792, even men without property were enfranchised; and in 1794, the French government officially abolished slavery. Neither autonomy nor

empathy were fixed; they were skills that could be learned, and the "acceptable" limitations on rights could be—and were—challenged. Rights cannot be defined once and for all because their emotional basis continues to shift, in part in reaction to declarations of rights. Rights remain open to question because our sense of who has rights and what those rights are constantly changes. The human rights revolution is by definition ongoing.

Autonomy and empathy are cultural practices, not just ideas, and they are therefore quite literally embodied, that is, they have physical as well as emotional dimensions. Individual autonomy hinges on an increasing sense of the separation and sacredness of human bodies: your body is yours and my body is mine, and we should both respect the boundaries between each other's bodies. Empathy depends on the recognition that others feel and think as we do, that our inner feelings are alike in some fundamental fashion. To be autonomous, a person has to be legitimately separate and protected in his or her separation; but to have rights go along with that bodily separation a person's selfhood must be appreciated in some more emotional fashion. Human rights depend both on self-possession and on the recognition that all others are equally self-possessed. It is the incomplete development of the latter that gives rise to all the inequalities of rights that have preoccupied us throughout all history.

Autonomy and empathy did not materialize out of thin air in the eighteenth century; they had deep roots. Over the long term of several centuries, individuals had begun to pull themselves away from the webs of community and had become increasingly independent agents both legally and psychologically. Greater respect for bodily integrity and clearer lines of demarcation between individual bodies had been produced by

the ever-rising threshold of shame about bodily functions and the growing sense of bodily decorum. Over time, people began to sleep alone or only with a spouse in bed. They used utensils to eat and began to consider repulsive such previously acceptable behavior as throwing food on the floor or wiping bodily excretions on clothing. The constant evolution of notions of interiority and depth of psyche from the Christian soul to the Protestant conscience to eighteenth-century notions of sensibility filled the self with a new content. All these processes took place over a long time period.

But there was a spurt in the development of these practices in the second half of the eighteenth century. The absolute authority of fathers over their children was questioned. Audiences started watching theatrical performances or listening to music in silence. Portraiture and genre painting challenged the dominance of the great mythological and historical canvases of academic painting. Novels and newspapers proliferated, making the stories of ordinary lives accessible to a wide audience. Torture as part of the judicial process and the most extreme forms of corporal punishment both came to be seen as unacceptable. All of these changes contributed to a sense of the separation and self-possession of individual bodies, along with the possibility of empathy with others.

The notions of bodily integrity and empathetic selfhood, traced in the next chapters, have histories not unlike those of human rights, to which they are so intimately related. That is, the changes in views seem to happen all at once in the mid-eighteenth century. Consider, for example, torture. Between 1700 and 1750, most uses of the word "torture" in French referred to the difficulties a writer had in finding a felicitous expression. Thus, Marivaux in 1724 referred to "torturing one's mind in order to draw out reflections." Torture, that is, legally

authorized torture to get confessions of guilt or names of accomplices, became a major issue after Montesquieu attacked the practice in his *Spirit of Laws* (1748). In one of his most influential passages, Montesquieu insists that "So many clever people and so many men of genius have written against this practice [judicial torture] that I dare not speak after them." Then he goes on rather enigmatically to add, "I was going to say that it might be suitable for despotic government, where everything inspiring fear enters more into the springs of government; I was going to say that slaves among the Greeks and Romans. . . . But I hear the voice of nature crying out against me." Here too self-evidence—"the voice of nature crying out"—provides the grounding for the argument. After Montesquieu, Voltaire and many others, especially the Italian Beccaria, would join the campaign. By the 1780s, the abolition of torture and barbarous forms of corporal punishment had become essential articles in the new human rights doctrine.¹⁵

Changes in reactions to other people's bodies and selves provided critical support for the new secular grounding of political authority. Although Jefferson wrote that "their Creator" had endowed men with their rights, the role of the Creator ended there. Government no longer depended on God, much less on a church's interpretation of God's will. "Governments are instituted among Men," said Jefferson, "to secure these Rights," and they derive their power "from the Consent of the Governed." Similarly, the French Declaration of 1789 maintained that "The purpose of all political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man" and "The principle of all sovereignty rests essentially in the nation." Political authority, in this view, derived from the innermost nature of individuals and their ability to create community through consent. Political scientists and historians have examined this conception of political

authority from various angles, but they have paid little attention to the view of bodies and selves that made it possible.¹⁶

My argument will make much of the influence of new kinds of experiences, from viewing pictures in public exhibitions to reading the hugely popular epistolary novels about love and marriage. Such experiences helped spread the practices of autonomy and empathy. The political scientist Benedict Anderson has argued that newspapers and novels created the "imagined community" that nationalism requires in order to flourish. What might be termed "imagined empathy" serves as the foundation of human rights rather than of nationalism. It is imagined, not in the sense of made up, but in the sense that empathy requires a leap of faith, of imagining that someone else is like you. Accounts of torture produced this imagined empathy through new views of pain. Novels generated it by inducing new sensations about the inner self. Each in their way reinforced the notion of a community based on autonomous, empathetic individuals who could relate beyond their immediate families, religious affiliations, or even nations to greater universal values.¹⁷

There is no easy or obvious way to prove or even measure the effect of new cultural experiences on eighteenth-century people, much less on their conceptions of rights. Scientific studies of present-day responses to reading or watching television have proved difficult enough, and they have the advantage of living subjects who can be exposed to ever-changing research strategies. Still, neuroscientists and cognitive psychologists have been making some progress in linking the biology of the brain to psychological and eventually even to social and cultural outcomes. They have shown, for example, that the ability to construct narratives is based in the biology of the brain and is crucial to the development of any notion of self. Certain kinds

of brain lesions affect narrative comprehension, and diseases such as autism show that the capacity for empathy—for the recognition that others have minds like your own—has a biological basis. For the most part, however, these studies only address one side of the equation: the biological. Although most psychiatrists and even some neuroscientists would agree that the brain itself is influenced by social and cultural forces, this interaction has been harder to study. Indeed, the self itself has proved very difficult to examine. We know that we have an experience of having a self, but neuroscientists have not succeeded in pinning down the site of that experience, much less explaining how it works.¹⁸

If neuroscience, psychiatry, and psychology are still uncertain about the nature of the self, then it is perhaps not surprising that historians have stayed away from the subject altogether. Most historians probably believe that the self is to some extent shaped by social and cultural factors, that is, that selfhood meant something different in the tenth century from what it means to us today. Yet little is known about the history of personhood as a set of experiences. Scholars have written at great length about the emergence of individualism and autonomy as doctrines, but much less about how the self itself might change over time. I agree with other historians that the meaning of the self changes over time, and I believe that the experience—not just the idea—of it changes for some people in decisive ways in the eighteenth century.

My argument depends on the notion that reading accounts of torture or epistolary novels had physical effects that translated into brain changes and came back out as new concepts about the organization of social and political life. New kinds of reading (and viewing and listening) created new individual expe-

riences (empathy), which in turn made possible new social and political concepts (human rights). In these pages I try to untangle how that process worked. Because my own discipline of history has for so long disdained any form of psychological argument—we historians often speak of psychological reductionism but never of sociological or cultural reductionism—it has largely overlooked the possibility of an argument that depends on an account of what goes on inside the self.

I am trying to refocus attention on what goes on within individual minds. It might seem like an obvious place to look for an explanation of transformative social and political changes, but individual minds—other than those of great thinkers and writers—have been surprisingly overlooked in recent work in the humanities and social sciences. Attention has been focused on the social and cultural contexts, not on the way individual minds understand and reshape that context. I believe that social and political change—in this case, human rights—comes about because many individuals had similar experiences, not because they all inhabited the same social context but because through their interactions with each other and with their reading and viewing, they actually created a new social context. In short, I am insisting that any account of historical change must in the end account for the alteration of individual minds. For human rights to become self-evident, ordinary people had to have new understandings that came from new kinds of feelings.

1

“TORRENTS OF
EMOTION”

Reading Novels and Imagining Equality

A YEAR BEFORE ROUSSEAU PUBLISHED the *Social Contract*, he gained international attention with a best-selling novel, *Julie, or the New Héloïse* (1761). Although modern readers find the epistolary or letter form of the novel sometimes excruciatingly slow to develop, eighteenth-century readers reacted viscerally. The subtitle excited their expectations, for the medieval story of the doomed love of Héloïse and Abelard was well known. The twelfth-century philosopher and Catholic cleric Peter Abelard seduced his pupil Héloïse and paid a high price at the hands of her uncle: castration. Separated forever, the two lovers then exchanged intimate letters that captivated readers down through the centuries. Rousseau's contemporary takeoff seemed at first to point in a very different direction. The new Héloïse, Julie, falls in love with her tutor, too, but she gives up the penniless Saint-Preux to satisfy the demand of her authoritarian father