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DESIRE FOR TOBACCO AND NICOTINE PRODUCTS IN AFRICA THROUGH THE LENS OF ROUSSEAU'S PHILOSOPHY FROM THE ALIENATION OF DESIRE TO THE RECLAMATION OF FREEDOM

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ABSTRACT

Tobacco and nicotine product use raises questions that extend beyond public health to the philosophical foundations of human freedom, individual responsibility, and social justice. In Africa, changing consumption patterns, tobacco industry marketing strategies, and economic vulnerability call into question individuals' actual autonomy in the face of market pressures. Drawing on Rousseau's philosophy, this study examines the dialectical relationships between desire, dependence, and the alienation of the will. It advances the hypothesis that nicotine dependence, when embedded in a social environment that encourages the proliferation of artificial needs, reveals a contradiction between consumers' formal freedom and the effective conditions of their autonomy. Using an analytical, critical, and hermeneutic approach, the article brings Rousseau's concepts of moral freedom, amour-propre, perfectibility, the general will, and education into dialogue with contemporary challenges in tobacco prevention. It argues that combating dependence cannot be reduced to moral injunctions directed at individuals. Rather, it requires public policies grounded in the protection of vulnerable people, education for autonomy, and the regulation of economic interests that may undermine the common good.

Keywords: Alienation; Desire; Moral freedom; Public health; Tobacco use.

1 INTRODUCTION

Modernity has gradually established itself as an age of human emancipation, the rationalization of productive activity, and expanding opportunities for consumption. Yet an increase in the availability of goods does not necessarily entail greater individual freedom. On the contrary, the proliferation of objects of gratification may generate new forms of dependence and subject human existence to needs whose formation individuals no longer fully control.

This contradiction is particularly apparent in the use of tobacco and nicotine products. Although scientific advances have made their health consequences identifiable, these products remain the focus of commercial strategies and innovations that may sustain their appeal. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that tobacco causes more

than seven million deaths worldwide each year, while nicotine has addictive properties that are particularly concerning among adolescents and young adults (World Health Organization [WHO], 2026).

In Africa, the issue has an additional social dimension. Urbanization, a youthful population, economic disparities, and barriers to accessing certain preventive services are important factors in understanding the conditions surrounding consumption. The WHO Regional Office for Africa highlights, in particular, the risks associated with industry marketing and the emergence of new nicotine products (World Health Organization Regional Office for Africa, n.d.).

This study links tobacco industry marketing strategies, population vulnerability, and the difficulties encountered by African health protection policies. It approaches consumption as an issue involving health, the economy, and social relations simultaneously.

The contribution of this article is therefore conceptual and normative. It asks what makes a choice meaningfully autonomous when the preferences behind it are socially shaped and the chosen practice may become difficult to discontinue. Reading tobacco use through this lens shifts attention toward the relationship between personal agency and the institutions that sustain it. Africa is approached as a field of application encompassing diverse national and social settings, rather than as a homogeneous cultural or political space.

This analysis nevertheless calls for deeper philosophical examination. If consumption results from an individual choice, how can that choice gradually lead to dependence that limits the individual's ability to break free? Moreover, how can a society guarantee its members' freedom when certain economic mechanisms profit from their vulnerability? Finally, to what extent can the protection of public health be understood as a requirement of freedom rather than its negation?

These questions are illuminated by Rousseau's thought. In The Social Contract, Rousseau distinguishes genuine freedom from the mere satisfaction of impulses: "The impulse of appetite alone is slavery, and obedience to a law one has prescribed for oneself is freedom" (Rousseau, 1964b, p. 365; author's translation).

This proposition provides the starting point for our reflection. It invites us to examine the conditions under which desire ceases to express an autonomous will and becomes a source of dependence. Our central research question is therefore as follows: To what extent can Rousseau's political and moral philosophy help us understand tobacco and nicotine product use as a possible form of alienation of freedom, and provide a foundation for prevention policies that reconcile individual autonomy with protection of the common good in African societies?

Our hypothesis is that dependence on tobacco, nicotine, and related products, while not eliminating all individual decision-making capacity, can diminish consumers' practical autonomy and reveal social mechanisms of need formation that Rousseau's thought enables us to critique. The study combines conceptual analysis and critical interpretation of Rousseau's texts with contemporary public health knowledge. The argument proceeds along three lines: first, the social genesis of desire and the alienation of freedom; second, the contradiction between economic interests and the common good; and third, the possibility of a Rousseau-inspired policy of education and health protection.

This approach does not attribute a theory of nicotine dependence to Rousseau. Instead, it reconstructs the relevance of his concepts to a contemporary problem that differs from his historical concerns. The argument is interpretative rather than an empirical assessment of tobacco use or policy effectiveness. Its purpose is to clarify the ethical grounds of prevention and identify conditions under which collective protection can strengthen individual freedom.

1.1 The social genesis of desire and desire for tobacco as an expression of alienated freedom

1.1.1 The social genesis of desire

One of Rousseau's fundamental contributions to social philosophy is his distinction between natural human needs and those that social life helps to produce. In the Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men, Rousseau describes the gradual transformation of human relations through social comparison, property, and the proliferation of needs. As social relations develop, individuals no longer orient their existence solely toward satisfying basic necessities. They also seek recognition, distinction, and the approval of others. As Rousseau observes, "Being and appearing became two entirely different things" (Rousseau, 1964a, p. 174; author's translation).

This distinction offers considerable critical insight into contemporary strategies for commercially promoting nicotine products. Consumption does not involve only a physiological relationship between an organism and a substance. It may also occur within a symbolic world in which particular objects are associated with prestige, independence, belonging, or modernity. Advertising and social representations can give a product meanings that extend beyond its material use.

Two processes must nevertheless be distinguished: the social construction of a product's appeal and the pharmacological dependence that may result from repeated use. The former involves cultural and economic mechanisms shaping preferences. The latter involves nicotine's addictive properties and cannot be reduced to social imitation. Rousseau's philosophy helps explain the first dimension without claiming to replace the biomedical knowledge required to explain the second.

Rousseau's distinction between amour de soi and amour-propre provides a particularly useful tool for examining the relationship between consumption and social recognition. In Note XV of the Discourse on Inequality, Rousseau defines amour de soi as a natural feeling of self-preservation, whereas amour-propre is a relative sentiment arising from social comparison (Rousseau, 1964a, Note XV). Amour de soi concerns the preservation of existence. Amour-propre introduces social mediation: individuals perceive themselves through others' eyes and seek a worth that depends on their judgments. Rousseau (1959) states: "It is entirely natural for someone who loves himself to seek to extend his being and his pleasures, and to make his own, through attachment, whatever he feels will be good for him: this is purely a matter of feeling, in which reflection plays no part" (pp. 805–806; author's translation).

This distinction reveals a possible contradiction in certain consumption practices. An individual may seek a product because it conveys a valued self-image, even though using it entails health risks. In this situation, symbolic self-affirmation may conflict with the requirements of self-preservation.

It would, however, be philosophically reductive to regard every tobacco user as governed by amour-propre. Motivations vary and may include relational, emotional, economic, or dependence-related factors. Rousseau's relevance lies elsewhere: he shows that individual desire is not always independent of the social conditions in which it takes shape. A society that portrays particular forms of consumption as markers of distinction may influence its members' preferences. Consumer freedom must therefore be examined both at the moment of choice and in relation to the mechanisms that helped constitute the object of that choice.

Perfectibility helps explain why this social formation of desire remains open-ended. In Rousseau's account, the human capacity to develop new faculties does not guarantee moral progress; it also makes possible new needs and dependencies (Rousseau, 1964a). Applied to consumption, this ambiguity suggests that innovation should be assessed through its consequences for self-government. The same capacity to learn that allows preferences to be shaped by commercial representations can also support critical reflection on those preferences.

1.2 Desire for tobacco as an expression of alienated freedom

Rousseau's philosophy distinguishes natural, civil, and moral freedom. Natural freedom denotes the ability to act within the limits of one's strength. Civil freedom exists within an order of legitimate laws. Moral freedom involves the capacity to govern oneself according to principles one recognizes as one's own. It is in this final sense that Rousseau locates self-mastery.

Nicotine dependence illustrates, by analogy, the difficulties that arise when persistent desire conflicts with a considered decision. Users may recognize the risks of a practice, wish to stop, and nevertheless struggle to act on that decision. A gap thus emerges between judgment and the effective capacity to act in accordance with it.

This gap does not mean that individuals have lost all freedom or are morally inferior. It reflects a limitation of practical autonomy associated with an addictive phenomenon. Dependence should be understood as a condition requiring health and social support, rather than a fault warranting condemnation. From a Rousseau-inspired perspective, the philosophical problem concerns the conditions that enable individuals to regain an effective capacity for self-determination.

Freedom does not consist solely in being able to consume. It also entails a genuine ability to refuse, suspend, or abandon consumption. A society that formally guarantees freedom of choice while neglecting the material, educational, and health conditions necessary to exercise it risks confusing autonomy with the mere absence of prohibition.

Alienation, as used here, therefore denotes a tension within agency rather than its complete disappearance. Individuals may retain the ability to deliberate while finding that dependence narrows their practical alternatives. This distinction matters ethically: recognizing constrained autonomy creates a reason to offer support without denying users a voice in decisions concerning their lives. Reclaiming freedom would then involve both strengthening personal capacities and changing conditions that make the exercise of those capacities unnecessarily difficult.

2 THE TOBACCO INDUSTRY SOCIAL INEQUALITIES AND TENSIONS SURROUNDING THE COMMON GOOD

2.1 The pursuit of corporate prosperity

In The Social Contract, Rousseau seeks to establish the conditions under which a political order grounded in citizens' freedom and equality can be legitimate. The general will is not the mechanical sum of individual preferences. It expresses an orientation toward the common interest, which does not necessarily coincide with particular interests. This distinction makes it possible to examine tensions between the tobacco industry's economic objectives and the requirements of public health protection.

A company may legitimately seek revenue within the rules governing economic activity. However, when marketed products entail substantial health risks and a high potential for addiction, the pursuit of profit may conflict with the collective interest. WHO explicitly identifies a conflict between tobacco industry interests and public health interests.

A Rousseau-inspired reading suggests that political authorities cannot leave the definition of the general interest exclusively to economic actors. This does not imply that all private activity is incompatible with the common good. It means that particular interests must be subject to common rules when their consequences affect the community. Regulation of tobacco industry activities can thus be understood as an expression of political responsibility toward citizens.

The relevant political question concerns who determines the rules under which these competing interests are assessed. From the standpoint developed here, legitimate regulation requires publicly stated reasons and procedures open to scrutiny. A commercial benefit cannot, by itself, establish compatibility with the common good. Equally, invoking public health cannot exempt authorities from explaining their decisions. The general will functions as a standard of justification directed toward shared interests, rather than as a label that automatically legitimizes government action.

An analysis of tobacco use in Africa cannot disregard material living conditions. In economically precarious settings, spending on addictive products may place additional pressure on household resources. The African Union Commission (AUC) report observes that "household health expenditure increases, affecting essential purchases such as food and housing" (African Union Commission [AUC], 2013; author's translation). Tobacco use may contribute to poverty by diverting household spending away from basic needs, particularly food and housing. The report further states (AUC, 2013, p. 9; author's translation):

The losses and expenditure associated with noncommunicable diseases reduce the workforce and production, increase employers' costs through absenteeism and higher health insurance costs, lower returns on investment in human capital, reduce domestic consumption and tax revenue, and increase public health and social protection expenditure.

Dependence on addictive substances, by reshaping users' priorities and perceptions of their circumstances, may affect entire families and, indirectly, society as a whole. Potential consequences include family instability and the weakening or dissolution of relationships.

This relationship should not, however, be interpreted as unidirectional. Poverty may increase vulnerability to addictive behaviors, while tobacco-related expenditure and health consequences may exacerbate pre-existing economic difficulties. For example, dependence that develops in the context of financial hardship may accelerate the erosion of an individual's life plans.

2.2 Social inequalities and tensions surrounding the common good

The analysis must consider interactions among social conditions, access to care, information, the commercial environment, and individual behavior.

Rousseau's thought situates this issue within a broader reflection on inequality. In the Discourse on Inequality, social dependence accompanies the transformation of economic relations and the proliferation of needs: "From the moment one person needed another's help, and it became apparent that it was useful for one person to have provisions for two, equality disappeared and property emerged" (Rousseau, 1964a, p. 171; author's translation). Individuals confront not only natural necessity but also dependence on the social conditions of their existence. This perspective invites us to move beyond explanations that attribute addictive behavior exclusively to insufficient personal willpower. A prevention policy attentive to social justice must recognize that individual capacities to resist, prevent, and overcome dependence are shaped by available material and institutional resources.

Young people are a particularly important group in tobacco prevention policies. The risks associated with early nicotine exposure are documented, notably because of potential effects on brain development and the risk of long-term dependence. This issue acquires a distinctive philosophical significance when related to Rousseau's conception of education.

In Émile, or On Education, Rousseau argues that human formation must take account of individuals' gradual development and their capacity to acquire independent judgment. Education cannot be reduced to accumulating information or externally imposing behavior. It should enable individuals to develop the faculties needed to assess the consequences of their choices and resist influences that may undermine their independence.

Applied to tobacco prevention, this approach favors critical education about commercial strategies, the mechanisms of dependence, and social representations of consumption. Simply stating that tobacco is dangerous is insufficient. Education must also make intelligible the mechanisms through which a product becomes desirable and the conditions under which occasional use can develop into dependence. Prevention thus becomes a pedagogy of autonomy.

Educational proposals must also acknowledge unequal opportunities to act on health information. A message that is understandable and persuasive may have limited practical value when the recipient cannot access appropriate support. Prevention should therefore connect the acquisition of knowledge with usable pathways to assistance. This requirement follows from the article's distinction between formal choice and effective autonomy: information contributes to freedom when people can translate understanding into feasible action.

3 TOWARD A ROUSSEAU-INSPIRED POLICY OF HEALTH PROTECTION AND THE RECLAMATION OF AUTONOMY IN AFRICA

3.1 Rousseau's conception of education as a response to the problem

In Rousseau's political philosophy, the legitimacy of law rests on its orientation toward the common interest. Under certain conditions, this conception can justify public policies intended to reduce the health risks associated with tobacco use. Protection from secondhand smoke, advertising regulation, risk communication, and measures preventing minors' access to nicotine products can be understood as efforts to preserve the shared conditions of freedom. The WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, adopted in 2003, provides an international framework for these policies (WHO, 2003).

A rigorous interpretation of Rousseau nevertheless requires a distinction between protecting the common good and arbitrary paternalism. The general will cannot justify any restriction whatsoever. A public measure must serve an identifiable collective interest, be proportionate to the risks, and respect the rights of those concerned. Public health protection must not become a pretext for stigmatizing or socially excluding users. A genuinely emancipatory policy seeks to expand citizens' opportunities for action rather than subject them to permanent surveillance.

One of the most productive implications of Rousseau's philosophy is the idea that freedom requires the cultivation of judgment. A person exposed to commercial messages, social pressures, and addictive products needs the knowledge and resources necessary to make an informed decision. Prevention should be integrated into a comprehensive educational policy through which individuals acquire the knowledge needed to develop principles for living and participating in society. Such a policy could involve schools, universities, families, community organizations, and health services. Education therefore has a central role in addressing desire for tobacco and related products. As Rousseau (1969) puts it, "Plants are shaped through cultivation, and human beings through education" (p. 246; author's translation).

This education would include scientific information about the effects of tobacco and nicotine, critical examination of marketing strategies, the development of psychosocial skills, and referral to appropriate support services. It should avoid blame-inducing messages. Dependence is not simply an expression of moral weakness; it is a complex phenomenon whose management requires interventions informed by medical and behavioral knowledge. A Rousseau-inspired approach does not replace these interventions. It clarifies their philosophical purpose: restoring or strengthening the conditions of autonomy.

In practical educational terms, this orientation could involve examining how promotional messages associate products with independence, discussing the difference between wanting a product and being able to stop using it, and identifying trustworthy sources of assistance. Such activities would aim to develop judgment rather than prescribe a single moral identity. Their content should be adapted to learners' ages, languages, and circumstances. These are proposals derived from the conceptual analysis, whose educational effects would require separate evaluation.

A tobacco control policy that overlooks inequalities in access to information, care, and support services risks reproducing the disparities it seeks to address. In some contexts, health information is inadequate, opportunities for consultation are limited, and cessation support is difficult to access. State responsibility cannot therefore be confined to adopting regulations. It also requires the effective provision of preventive services, protective mechanisms, and support accessible to different social groups.

3.2 A Rousseau-inspired policy for reclaiming autonomy in Africa

From a Rousseau-inspired perspective, this requirement can be interpreted as a condition of substantive citizenship. Citizens' legal equality remains incomplete when their practical opportunities to protect their health and exercise autonomy are profoundly unequal. Health justice is thus a dimension of political justice. It requires public policies to address specific vulnerabilities without turning these differences into grounds for discrimination.

The argument ultimately rests on a fundamental distinction. Freedom to consume denotes the possibility of choosing a product within a given social space. Freedom from dependence entails a more demanding capacity: maintaining sufficient control over one's decisions and having the resources needed to change one's behavior. These freedoms are not identical. The former may persist formally even when the latter is constrained by established dependence. This distinction reframes the purpose of tobacco control.

The aim is not systematically to substitute the state's will for that of individuals, but to create conditions in which individuals can exercise their own will more effectively. Gouze (1992) observes: "While tobacco manufacturers have enormous budgets to encourage people to smoke, there is no money to help the millions who wish to stop, several thousand of whom contact us every year" (p. 127; author's translation). From this perspective, prevention, regulation of commercial practices, and health support become complementary instruments. Prevention seeks to limit the onset of dependence.

Regulation aims to reduce certain commercial influences and involuntary exposures. Health support enables those who wish to do so to receive assistance in reducing or stopping their consumption. These interventions share the goal of expanding genuine opportunities for self-determination.

Implementation should consequently be assessed against the freedoms these measures are intended to support. Relevant questions include whether preventive information is understandable, whether support reaches disadvantaged groups, whether users can seek assistance without humiliation, and whether regulatory decisions remain accountable to the public. Consultation with affected communities could help identify barriers that abstract policy principles overlook. This provides a direction for context-sensitive inquiry, rather than a claim that one institutional model would suit every African country.

4 CONCLUSION

Tobacco and nicotine product use in Africa involves public health, economic relations, social conditions, and the philosophical foundations of freedom. An analysis informed by Rousseau moves beyond an exclusively individual interpretation of dependence. It shows that human desires do not emerge independently of social relations and that autonomy cannot be equated with the mere possibility of satisfying an inclination. The Discourse on Inequality illuminates the social formation of needs and the role of collective representations in shaping behavior. The Social Contract provides principles for distinguishing immediate gratification from moral freedom and for understanding political responsibility toward the common good. Finally, Émile, or On Education provides a foundation for prevention understood as the cultivation of judgment and the development of autonomy.

This dialogue suggests that tobacco control should not mechanically oppose individual freedom and public intervention. It should seek the conditions under which they can be articulated. Legitimate health policy aims to reduce mechanisms of vulnerability, protect exposed individuals, and expand effective opportunities for decision-making, rather than treating users as morally deficient. In the African context, this approach requires particular attention to social inequalities, the protection of young people, access to health services, and the effects of commercial strategies.

The hypothesis is thus supported at the level of philosophical argument: dependence can constrain practical autonomy without erasing agency, while social arrangements can either reinforce or reduce those constraints. The analysis does not establish the prevalence of alienated consumption or measure the effects of particular interventions. Further work should examine how users themselves understand dependence and freedom, and how educational and institutional responses operate across different African settings. Such inquiry would test the practical reach of the conceptual framework developed here.

Rousseau's philosophy articulates a fundamental requirement: a society becomes truly free not merely by multiplying consumer goods, but by ensuring that its members have the means to avoid domination by the needs and dependencies that constrain them. Reclaiming freedom in relation to tobacco use must therefore be understood in conjunction with policies of social justice, education, and protection of the common good.

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