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978-0-521-00759-7 - Rousseau: The Sentiment of Existence

David Gauthier

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Rousseau

The Sentiment of Existence

Rousseau is often portrayed as an educational and social reformer whose aim was to increase individual freedom. In this volume, the distinguished philosopher David Gauthier examines Rousseau's evolving notion of freedom, particularly in his later works, where he focuses on a single quest: Can freedom and the independent self be regained? Rousseau's first answer is given in *Emile*, where he seeks to create a self-sufficient individual, neither materially nor psychologically enslaved to others. His second answer comes in the *Social Contract*, where he seeks to create a citizen who identifies totally with his community, so that he experiences his dependence on it only as a dependence on himself. Rousseau implicitly recognized the failure of these solutions. His third answer is one of the main themes of the *Confessions* and the *Reveries*, where he creates himself as the man made for a kind of love that merges the selves of the lovers into a single, psychologically sufficient unity that makes each "better than free." But is this response, like others proposed by Rousseau, a chimera?

David Gauthier is Emeritus Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the University of Pittsburgh. He is the author of many articles and several books, most recently *Moral Dealing*, and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada.

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Preface

C(ritic): *Another* book on Rousseau? Aren't there more than enough already?

A(uthor): More than enough *bad* books, certainly. I hope I'm not adding to their number.

C: That remains to be seen. I suppose you've convinced yourself you have something new to say about poor Jean-Jacques. But everybody thinks that.

A: Too true. But yes, I do believe you'll find something different here.

C: Rational choice, no doubt. Aren't you the man who reads Prisoner's Dilemmas into every previous moral and political philosopher?

A: Oh, you can find them in Rousseau. But that's not the theme of the book I've written. No graphs. No equations. I'm recording my encounter with Rousseau in the round, bringing the anthropologist, the educator, the political theorist, and the confessionalist together in one extended conversation.

C: And what do these people have to say to each other – and to you?

A: Quite a bit, really. For they are all talking about freedom. The anthropologist recounts the story of its loss – the fall of humankind, we might say. The educator and the political scientist have ideas about its recovery – about redemption.

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They don't agree, and they don't convince me – or as I try to show, Rousseau either.

C: And the confessionalist?

A: His effort at redemption is a more complex story. You'll just have to read the book.

C: Must I? Much of this sounds quite commonplace. Fall and redemption narratives are a dime a dozen. You sure this is new stuff?

A: Who knows? I'm not a scholar – as you've reminded me, I'm the Prisoner's Dilemma man. This book records my encounter with Jean-Jacques. Maybe others have had very similar encounters, but I haven't run across them. A very particular interplay between the confessionalist and the social theorist lies at the core of my encounter, and I haven't found that interplay discussed in those parts of the literature I know. But you've mentioned the almost endless number of books on Rousseau – to say nothing of the articles, monographs, dissertations, and so forth. Maybe my ideas are all there somewhere – though I flatter my own acumen if I say that if my ideas were already in the literature, they would have found a more visible place.

C: Which is to say that you believe your book original and consider it important.

A: Original? I hope so. Important? Not many books are really important. I'll be satisfied if there are other persons whose encounters with Rousseau are enhanced by reading mine.

C: Speaking of reading this book, whom do you have in mind?

A: Most people who encounter Rousseau do so in a very limited way. They take a course in philosophy or social thought and read the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* and the *Social Contract*. Or they study educational theories and read *Emile*. Or they are interested in French literary masterworks and read the *Confessions* and maybe the *Reveries*. This book offers them a reading of most of the works Rousseau published (and some that he never quite finished) that shows how they

are all related. So someone who has read, say, the *Confessions* might read this book to find out how it may fit into the whole of Rousseau's writings.

C: So you've written an introduction to Rousseau's thought?

A: Not in the usual sense. An introduction tries to convey the main ideas of each of Rousseau's works.¹ I try to show how Rousseau develops ideas that link all of them. I don't examine, say, his political theory as such, but I look at how it bears on his concern with freedom, its loss and possible recovery, and with the ideas that Rousseau relates to freedom – slavery, illusion and prestige, help and love.

C: Help and love?

A: Yes – you have to read widely in Rousseau to understand how these ideas are related, and how they inform his account of freedom and its loss. In exploring these connections, this book enables the reader to discover how ideas she finds in one of Rousseau's works are part of a significant larger whole – one that embraces his view of his life as well as his thought.

C: His life. Are you writing a biography of Rousseau focused on his thought?

A: By no means. To be sure, I'm concerned with the life Rousseau constructs for himself in the *Confessions* and the *Reveries*. This life includes his final attempt to show the attainment of redemption, or the recovery of freedom. But his real life, insofar as one can speak of such a thing, falls quite outside my purview.²

¹ The (Anglophone) reader seeking a very brief introduction to Rousseau's thought might choose Robert Wokler, *Rousseau* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). If she seeks a fuller but still readily manageable account, she might prefer Timothy O'Hagan, *Rousseau* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

² Here Maurice Cranston's regrettably unfinished three-volume work may be recommended: *Jean-Jacques: The Early Life and Works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1712–1754* (London: Allen Lane, 1983); *The Noble Savage: Jean-Jacques*

- C: You spoke earlier of the bad books on Rousseau –
 A: Yes, but I won't talk about them or even name them.
 C: What I actually wanted to know is – are there some good ones – other than the introductions and biographies mentioned in your asides?
 A: Works that I would recommend to the reader, supplementing my own approach to Rousseau? A very short list, for the Anglophone reader, would have to include *Men and Citizens* by Judith Shklar and *Transparency and Obstruction* by Jean Starobinski. Nicholas Dent has a useful dictionary of Rousseau.³ Of course there are other good books, but I'm not in the business of assessing them – my interest is in the encounter with Rousseau that I've tried to record.
 C: Which brings me to another matter – how did you come to encounter Rousseau? Not your usual line of business, after all.
 A: Ah, the powers of chance! My first teaching assignment – in 1958 – was a course in the history of modern political and moral philosophy – “modern” being used to cover the period from 1600 to 1900. I began with the social contract figures. Hobbes was the first person to catch my philosophical attention – largely because Howard Warrender showed that the tools of modern analytic philosophy could be used to illuminate his thought.⁴

Rousseau, 1754–1762 (London: Allen Lane, 1991); and *The Solitary Self: Jean-Jacques Rousseau in Exile and Adversity* (London: Allen Lane, 1997), with a foreword by Sanford Lakoff. Also to be recommended: Jean Guéhenno, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, vol. 1, 1712–1758; vol. 2, 1758–1778, English translation by J. and D. Weightman (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966).

³ See Judith Shklar, *Men and Citizens: A Study of Rousseau's Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction*, English translation by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988); and N. J. H. Dent, *A Rousseau Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

⁴ See Howard Warrender, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: His Theory of Obligation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957). Warrender is, I have argued, mistaken in his

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- C: You could hardly have found a parallel in that regard with Rousseau.
- A: Quite right. Rousseau first appealed to my political self, because of the communitarian ideal of *Political Economy* and the *Social Contract*. In those far off days I found myself on the fringe of the cultural socialism that made the British new left so exciting. Rousseau seemed to fit into all that.
- C: But that hardly explains your present book. You're no longer a leftist.
- A: Heavens, no. I learned some economics and abandoned communitarian socialism for individualistic liberalism.
- C: And Jean-Jacques?
- A: Well, first of all I found him critiquing, at least implicitly, his apparent communitarianism – and that is present in my book. But that's not the deepest point.
- C: Go on.
- A: Whatever one makes of the idea that contemporary Western society alienates the individual from his true nature, Rousseau was the first, I think, to express it, and to seek a way to restore man to himself. (Restoring woman to herself is another matter, rather neglected by Rousseau.) Exploring this aspect of Rousseau's thought launched me on my present inquiry, although the tale came to prove more complex than I had expected and to possess a quite unexpected new dimension when Rousseau's *maman*, Madame de Warens, and his novelistic heroine, Julie, joined the account. For their role is to suggest that man can be restored to himself only by finding a soul mate – another idea that Rousseau pioneers.

reading of Hobbes, which in any case has no direct bearing on Rousseau, but had I not read Warrender, I might never have taken an interest in the history of political philosophy.

- C: I think we're beginning to trespass on the text. So one final question. You've recorded an encounter with Rousseau. Is he really worth the encounter?
- A: Some final question! Of course there are people who would want to dismiss him as a paranoid narcissist. Others, though, might insist that we need a paranoid narcissist to reveal the dark beauty of our world.

A NOTE ON TRANSLATING ROUSSEAU

To convey the nature of my encounter with Rousseau, I must let him speak for himself much of the time. But this is a book written in English and primarily for Anglophone readers. So Rousseau must speak in translation.⁵ Whose?

Most of Rousseau's writings are now available in the set of *Collected Writings* with Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly as series editors.⁶ These translations are of fine quality and employ a consistent terminology. Using them enables the reader who wishes to place a quoted passage in its context to do so readily and without any terminological confusion. So I have chosen – most of the time – to use them.⁷

But in some passages Rousseau speaks to me differently than he did to the translators in this series. When he does, I have allowed myself to alter their translations – though I have used footnotes to alert the reader to the alteration.

⁵ For readers who want to refer to the French original, I give references in the text to the *Oeuvres complètes*, series editors Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 5 vols., 1959–95). I use the abbreviation OC followed by the volume and page numbers. I also give references to OC when I am not using a translation of Rousseau's text but only alluding to it.

⁶ The series is published for Dartmouth University by the University Press of New England (Hanover, NH, and London: 10 vols. to date, 1990–2004).

⁷ Passages quoted from volumes in this series are identified by CW, followed by the volume and page numbers.

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And in one work – Rousseau’s *Pygmalion* – I have simply preferred my own translations, which I think provide a better fit to my reading of the text.

Then there are those writings not yet translated (as of late 2004) in the *Collected Writings*. *Emile* provides no problem – there is a splendid translation by Allan Bloom,⁸ though even here I have allowed myself the odd alteration. *Considerations on the Government of Poland* has been translated by Victor Gourevitch⁹ – indeed, a case could be made for using his translations of Rousseau’s other political writings. But I judged that the *Collected Writings* would become the standard English reference.

There are three other works of Rousseau that I have quoted but that have not been translated into English so far as I know. These are the *Epistle to Parisot*, *Emile and Sophie*, and *Queen Whimsy* (*La Reine fantasque*). The translations are therefore my own.

A NOTE ON HOW THIS BOOK CAME TO BE

In 1992, I delivered a set of lectures, “Three Walks with a Solitary: Rediscovering Rousseau,” as Cecil H. and Ida Green Visiting Professor at the University of British Columbia. And in 1996, I delivered another set of three lectures, “Jean-Jacques’s Last Promenade,” as F. E. L. Priestley Memorial Lecturer at the University of Toronto. These lectures were drafted while I held a Visiting Fellowship in the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University.

I then integrated and expanded both sets of lectures into a single set of six, “The Social and the Solitary,” delivered in 1998

⁸ See Allan Bloom (ed. and tr.), *Emile, or On Education* (New York: Basic Books, 1979). Passages quoted are identified in the text by B1 followed by the page number.

⁹ See Victor Gourevitch (ed. and tr.), *Rousseau: The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Passages quoted are identified in the text by Go followed by the page number.

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as Benedict Lecturer in the History of Political Philosophy at Boston University, in conjunction with a graduate seminar on Rousseau offered by Knud Haakonssen. These lectures formed the first draft of the present book.

I wrote the second draft in 2000 on a sabbatical leave from the University of Pittsburgh spent happily in Paris, where I presented versions of Chapters 4 and 5 (in English!) to a seminar conducted by Monique Canto-Sperber at the Centre de Recherche en Épistémologie Appliquée (CREA) of the École Polytechnique.

It has taken me a ridiculously long time to complete a final draft.

I am indebted to many persons for comments, questions, and discussion at the academic institutions just mentioned, and at several other universities where I have presented papers on Rousseau. My encounters with these persons have enhanced the encounter with Rousseau related in this book.

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