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I

TWO JOURNEYS TO UTOPIA

UTOPIAS OLD AND NEW

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was not a professional philosopher. He never pretended that he was. His great claim was that he alone had been 'the painter of nature and the historian of the human heart'.[1] It was an art that did not demand great logical rigor or systematic exposition of abstract ideas. Rousseau did not even aspire to these accomplishments. He did not think that perfect consistency was really very important. What did matter was always to be truthful.[2] By truthfulness he meant what we generally tend to call sincerity, and in his case it involved an overriding will to denounce the social world around him. It made him one of the greatest of the nay-sayers. His denial was comprehensive, embracing civilization as a whole. And in his tone of undeviating contempt for all he saw around him, he was singularly consistent. Moreover, if he was the very prototype of the *homme revolté*, he was not without a deep sense of order, and his ideas found expression in a form of social criticism that was both formal and traditional in its structure.[3] For Rousseau was the last of the classical utopists. He was the last great political theorist to be utterly uninterested in history, past or future, the last also to judge and condemn without giving any thought to programs of action. His enduring originality and fascination are entirely due to the acute psychological insight with which he diagnosed the emotional diseases of modern civilization. Both the radical new ideas and the tradition of utopianism were essential to his critical task.

The classical utopists, of whom Sir Thomas More was both the first and greatest, were not visionary reformers. Their aim was to

[1] *Rousseau Juge de Jean-Jacques* in *Œuvres Complètes* (ed. Pléiade, Paris, 1959), I, 728 (hereafter cited as *O.C.*). (Unless translations are attributed, they are my own.)
[2] *La Nouvelle Héloise* (hereafter cited as *N.H.*), 'Seconde Préface', *O.C.*, II, 27.
[3] For Rousseau as 'homme revolté', see Sven Stelling-Michaud, 'Rousseau et l'Injustice Sociale', Samuel Baud-Bovy *et al.*, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Neuchâtel, 1962), 171–86, and Eric Weil, 'Jean-Jacques Rousseau et sa Politique', *Critique*, VII (1952), 4–28.

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picture the awful distance between the possible and the probable by showing in great detail how men *could* live, even though they *always* refuse to do so. Utopia is an attack on both the doctrine of natural sin, which imposes rigid limits on men's social potentialities, and on all actual societies, which always fall so short of men's real capacities. The object of all these models, however, was never to set up a perfect community, but simply to bring moral judgment to bear on the social misery to which men have so unnecessarily reduced themselves. For the fault is not in God, fate, or nature, but in ourselves—where it will remain. To recognize this, to accept it, to contemplate and to judge: that was the function of the classical utopia. Utopia was neither in space nor in time. It was designed solely to induce moral recognition in the reader.[1] If one thinks that the only purpose of political philosophy is to provide serviceable guides to action for politicians and political groups, then indeed utopia was a useless enterprise. If critical understanding and judgment, however, are also real ends, then the construction of such models is not only justifiable, it is a perfect instrument.[2] In neither case is the commonplace contrast between 'realism' and 'utopianism', as one between the practical and the impossible, relevant.[3] Whatever value this distinction may have in discussing the political thinking of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it is pointless when applied to classical utopianism, which was neither historical nor activist in its concerns.

In Rousseau's case utopia was a perfect way to express ideas that were dictated by personal imagination and by a profound need for self-revelation and self-vindication. Of metaphysics he knew little, nor did he care. There is no sign that he took an interest in history as the study of man's actual development in time. Neither his correspondence nor his public writings show the least concern with current affairs. Only when he was personally involved did he finally turn to a serious investigation of Genevan politics. It has

[1] For a more general account of utopian political thought, see the author's 'The Political Theory of Utopia: From Melancholy to Nostalgia', *Daedalus*, XCIV (1965), 367–81.

[2] This point has been especially recognized by the distinguished anthropologist and ardent admirer of Rousseau, Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. by John Russell (New York, 1964), 61.

[3] Jean Fabre, 'Realité et Utopie dans la Pensée Politique de Rousseau', *Annales Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, XXXV (1959–62), 181–216.

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indeed been well noted that Voltaire had his Calas affair and many like it, but that Rousseau was interested in only one case: his own.[1] The result of this self-absorption was, however, not just a quantity of autobiographical writing. It also led to an outraged awareness of the distance between the self and the hostile external social world which he could express in quite impersonal terms. The utopian form was ideally suited to convey his concern for the contrast between what is and what ought to be. With it came the characteristic indifference to history.[2] Moreover, Rousseau shared the typical utopian sense of the distance between the probable and the possible. He also knew that suffering was not necessary since he 'had discovered that the source of all men's miseries and wickedness was in their false opinions'.[3] The task, therefore, was to show men models of what they could be, if only they were to abandon their chains—an eventuality he did not in the least expect.

One difficulty presented by Rousseau as a utopist is that he offered two models rather than one. One model was a Spartan city, the other a tranquil household, and the two were meant to stand in polar opposition to each other. Most of Rousseau's interpreters have felt that somehow or other these two should be reconciled.[4] In fact there is nothing astonishing about his proposing these two models, rather than a single utopia. It had often been done before. Plato and Seneca have never been accused of being half head and

[1] Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: La Transparence et l'Obstacle* (Paris, 1957), 25. However, even this egoism can be defended as the necessary stance of a self-aware observer; see, for example, Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Fondateur des Sciences de l'Homme', in Baud-Bovy *et al.*, 239–48.

[2] 'Lettre au Prince de Wurtemberg', 10 novembre 1763, *Correspondance Générale de Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (ed. Théophile Dufour, Paris, 1924–32), x, 205–17 (hereafter cited as *C.G.*). The only discussions of historical events occur in his commentaries on the writings of the Abbé de Saint-Pierre and these were commissioned articles which he found uncongenial work. *Confessions*, IX, *O.C.*, I, 407–8, 422–4. Certainly he presented no alternative, more 'realistic' plans, nor did he investigate any historical examples other than those mentioned by the abbé. C. E. Vaughan, *The Political Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Oxford, 1962), I, 359–422 (*La Paix Perpetuelle et la Polysynodie: Extraits et Jugements*).

[3] *Lettres à Malesherbes*, *O.C.*, I, 1136.

[4] For example, J. H. Broome, *Rousseau* (London, 1963), 103; Robert Derathé, 'L'Unité de la Pensée de Jean-Jacques Rousseau', in Baud-Bovy *et al.*, 204–18; Bertrand de Jouvenel, 'Théories des Formes de Gouvernement chez Rousseau', *Le Contrat Social*, VI (1962), 343–51. Some writers have, of course, suggested that Rousseau was simply incapable of choosing a consistent model; for example, Albert Schinz, *La Pensée de Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Paris, 1924), 24–45, 102–6, 247.

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half heart, part classical and part romantic, yet both used two models, an age of innocence and an age of conscious virtue, to illuminate actual corruption. To be sure, both argued that the age of reason must absorb and rise above the virtues of the lost natural state.[1] However, other writers, most notably Fénelon, did not use the two models in this way, but rather treated them, as Rousseau was to do, as two equally valid, though different utopias. And Fénelon was one of the few authors of whom one can say with some assurance that Rousseau had read him. Certainly he admired him.[2] One must, to be sure, be very cautious in linking Rousseau to Fénelon, or to any other religious moralist of the century preceding his own. No superficial similarities can hide the fact that Rousseau was concerned with earthly felicity and they with eternal salvation. Moreover, Fénelon's *Télémaque* is a 'mirror of princes', and that is something Rousseau could not conceivably have wanted to imitate. However, the 'mirror of princes' has the same function as utopia: to judge the actual by confronting it with the perfect. Moreover, Rousseau fully understood the aim of Fénelon's *Télémaque*. Fénelon prepares Emile to recognize the evils that he will meet on his travels. Emile is taught how to observe, not how to act.[3]

The most significant aspect of *Télémaque* is not its possible direct influence on Rousseau, but simply that it illustrates a tradition of

[1] Plato, *The Statesman*, 217b–277a; Seneca, *Letters to Lucilius*, Nos 90 and 95. There is no particular reason, however, to suppose that Rousseau was a close student and follower of these two, or any other, classical authors. Tracing his sources would seem to be both futile and impossible. See George Pire, 'De l'Influence de Sénéque sur les Théories Pédagogiques de J.-J. Rousseau', *Annales Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, XXXIII (1953–5), 57–92, and 'Du Bon Plutarque au Citoyen de Genève', *Revue de Littérature Comparé*, XXXII (1958), 510–47. A similar neo-Stoic 'solution' to Rousseau's models was presented by Ernst Cassirer, *The Question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, trans. by Peter Gay (New York, 1954), 65, 98–99, 104–5, 122. However, it has been just as plausibly argued that, far from preferring Sparta, Rousseau *really* chose domestic bliss as his ultimate model; for example, see H. Gaston Hall, 'The Concept of Virtue in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*', *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, *Yale French Studies* (Fall–Winter 1961–2), 20–33.

[2] Albert Cherel, *Fénelon au XVIIIe Siècle* (Paris, 1917), 143–4, 321, 393–8, 466–8. For Rousseau's admiring remarks about Fénelon, see *Confessions*, VI, 229, XII, 620; *Rousseau Juge de Jean-Jacques*, II, *O.C.*, I, 863–4; *Les Rêveries du Promeneur Solitaire*, III, *O.C.*, I, 1013; *Emile*, trans. by Barbara Foxley (London, 1948), 367, 376–7, 431.

[3] *Emile*, 431.

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using different utopias together without suggesting any contradiction. *Bétique*, the utopia of spontaneous rural simplicity, illuminates all the vices of a denatured civilization.[1] *Salante*, the creation of a single legislator, is a model of organized civic virtue, which serves to show up the social degradation of France under Louis XIV.[2] Although Rousseau did not choose to adopt Fénelon's thin mythological disguises, the purpose of his two utopias was quite similar, and certainly no more mystifying. His quiet village, and golden age, also held a message addressed to all men, while his Spartan city was a damning mirror held up to the élite of Paris. What is strikingly novel is his insistence that one must choose between the two models, between man and the citizen. This necessity for choice, moreover, is not a call for a decision, but a criticism. It contains the core of Rousseau's diagnosis of mankind's psychic ills. All our self-created miseries stem from our mixed condition, our half natural and half social state. A healthy man, the model for any system of education, would have to adhere consistently to a single mode of life. Nature is no longer an option open to men. Education as a conscious choice is a social experience. The alternatives are therefore not nature or society, but domestic or civic education. Is a man to find his maturity in a recreated Golden Age or as a citizen of a Spartan republic? He cannot have both, but he must try one or the other if he is to escape from his present disorientation and inner disorder. To find self-fulfillment, a child must be educated against society, in isolation from and rejection of all prevailing customs and opinions. Then he may be fit to found a family and live with it in rustic peace. It is the least harmful of social possibilities. The only other soul-satisfying choice is to lose oneself in a collectivity, in a Spartan order where a totally artificial environment recreates for each citizen the conditions of nature's regularity and harsh disciplining order. Both utopias are unnatural, but each meets the psychic needs of men for inner unity and social simplicity. Indeed because both are consciously created social structures, both eliminate those disturbing natural impulses

[1] Télémaque, *Œuvres Choisies de Fénelon* (Paris, 1879), VII, 78–83. See also the tale of the good savages, the Manduriens, *ibid.* IX, 94–6.
[2] *Ibid.* X, 112–27; XVII, 215–19.

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which make it impossible for men to accept society long after they have become unfit for nature.

Negatively, both models show up the painful consequences of our actual failure to choose: war between men, conflict within each soul.[1] Above all, because they are incompatible, the attempt to pursue both enhances the strain under which men actually labor. That is why it is so intensely demoralizing. For there is no compromise that can be worked out between self-repression and self-expression. Each has its rewards and penalties, but the two cannot be reconciled. That is why one *ought* to choose, even if no one has, or is likely to do so.

The possibility of making this choice is not impaired, any more than is its rightness, by the fact that it has never been and is not going to be made. Rousseau was, to be sure, simply not interested in the past as such and he looked to the future with fear and trembling. He was always ready to 'put the facts aside'.[2] The Golden Age is not an early stage of man's development. It is a condition which he has never known and never will enjoy.[3] However, it is necessary to know both it and the state of pure nature, if one is to have a clear vision of man's present life, and if one is to judge the latter properly.[4] To abandon the Golden Age, to say that it is a mere chimera is, above all, to renounce forever the belief in human virtue.[5] The Golden Age of domestic happiness is both a moral necessity and a possibility. Rousseau had seen intimations of it in rural Switzerland. And even if he had never known a happy family or true friendship, he found it so easy to picture them in his imagination, and felt so profound a longing for them that he could never doubt that psychologically they were feasible. Historically they were never achieved. However, history itself is for the wise man but 'a tissue of fables whose morals are well adapted to the human heart.'[6] He did not really believe that Lycurgus' Sparta or men as virtuous as Brutus and Cato had actually existed. He did, however,

[1] *Emile*, 6–10; Vaughan, I, 305 (*L'état de guerre*); II, 128–9 (*Contrat Social*).
[2] Vaughan, I, 141 (*Discours sur l'Origine et les Fondements de l'Inégalité Parmis les Hommes*, hereafter cited as *Inégalité*).
[3] *Ibid.* I, 448–9 (*Première Version du Contrat Social*).
[4] *Ibid.* I, 136 (*Inégalité*).
[5] *Réponse à M. Bordes* (*Œuvres Complètes*, Hachette, Paris, 1905, hereafter cited as Hachette), I, 54; *Emile*, 438.
[6] *Emile*, 120–1.

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think that the ancient historians had known men sufficiently like these heroes to make their portraits seem at least plausible.[1] Again, he found it so easy in his imagination to identify himself, a citizen also, after all, with these types, that their psychological possibility could not be denied.

To revile his contemporaries it was not necessary to prove more than the mere possibility of ancient virtue. What would the Parisian scribblers not give for that fatal Sparta never to have existed? For the most virtuous of Greek cities had no philosophers![2] As long as such civic virtue was a possibility, they stood condemned. As long as those Swiss peasants seemed content in their vegetative life, how could Voltaire, or any other champion of civilization, compensate the victims of urban complexity for their lost bliss?[3] As instruments of condemnation the models were more than adequate. Rousseau never meant them to be anything more. 'I intend to attack error rather than to establish new truths.'[4] 'I am an observer, not a moralist. I am the botanist who describes the plant. It is for the physician to order its use.'[5] Let the states of Europe run to their ruin, Rousseau was convinced that reform was useless and impossible.[6] Even Geneva, in the days when he still cared for it, was not a place in which he expected to see Sparta resurrected.[7] Rousseau went well beyond disdaining the very idea of historical progress.[8] He made passivity his central principle, and a necessary one. For nothing less was compatible with the total condemnation of his age. To make his rejection complete and to justify his sustained attack, he had only to show that the ills of actuality were as irreparable as they were unnecessary. They were too immense to be altered, yet

[1] Vaughan, I, 320 (*Fragment*).
[2] *Réponse à M. Bordes*, 55–6.
[3] 'Lettre à M. Voltaire', 18 août 1756, *C.G.*, II, 303–24 (hereafter referred to as *Lettre à Voltaire*).
[4] Vaughan, I, 342 (*Fragment*).
[5] *Mon Portrait*, III, *O.C.*, I, 1120; *Réponse à M. Bordes*, 65.
[6] 'Je vois tous les Etats de l'Europe courir à leur ruine.' Vaughan, I, 425–6 (*Considérations sur le Gouvernement de Pologne*, hereafter cited as *Poland*). As for the futility of reform, it was a constant theme; see, for example, Vaughan, I, 489–91 (*Première Version*).
[7] *Politics and the Arts: Letter to M. d'Alembert on the Theatre*, trans. by Allan Bloom (Glencoe, 1960. Hereafter cited as *Letter to d'Alembert*), 67. '*Préface*' *à Narcisse*, *O.C.*, II, 971–2.
[8] *Rousseau Juge de Jean-Jacques*, II, 805–6; 'Lettres Morales', *C.G.*, III, 351–3; 'Lettre à M. de Mirabeau', 26 juillet 1767, *C.G.*, XVII, 155–9. This denial was, moreover, the essence of both of the two *Discourses* and the attending correspondence.

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not so inevitable as to make outrage seem foolish. Utopias were genuine portraits of the human heart, but they were not photographs of actual people.

Rousseau did not apply the word utopia to his own work. He associated utopia too much with futile dreams of perfect cities to recognize its critical functions.[1] The *Social Contract* was, perhaps, too abstract to seem obviously a part of the utopian tradition. Rousseau thought of this work as grounded in actuality because it was meant to warn the citizens of Geneva against the despotic designs of their magistrates. If Rome was his model, Geneva, though far from perfect, was still worth saving from ultimate corruption.[2] In fact, of course, Plato and More had not been oblivious to the injustice that prevailed around them and their assaults upon their fellow citizens were no less powerful than Rousseau's. If he and they believed that good laws might make good men, the sickening sight of the wicked men created by worthless government was the immediate and common inspiration of all. Utopia is the present political order reversed. That hardly requires a sense of hope for the future. A recognition of the fragility of even the best of republican institutions is far from incompatible with utopia as a device for condemnation. Neither Rousseau nor anyone else has much to add to Plato's ample account of the psychology of moral and political degeneration.[3] Indeed Rousseau's pervasive sense of the inevitable decline of both Sparta and the Golden Age only illustrates his affinity for the philosophers, poets and historians of classical antiquity. It is not difficult to see why he wanted to translate Tacitus, nor why his experiences in Venice and Geneva gave rise to that wish.[4] These two republics, both in a state of degeneration, formed a single image in his mind. Both demonstrated the end to which all republics must sooner or later come. To warn them against further corruption was a duty, really to alter their downward path, impossible.[5] As for the Golden Age it had never been anything but the expression of nostalgia. It is, as it were, defined by its irretrievable joys. Rousseau had been reminded of it in rural Switzerland. To remember it was to

[1] *Lettres Ecrites de la Montagne*, Hachette, III, IV, 204–5.
[2] *Confessions*, IX, 404–5.
[3] *Republic*, 545–80.
[4] *Confessions*, VIII, 394.
[5] Vaughan, II, 75, 89, 107–8, 117, 119 (*Contrat Social*); *Confessions*, IX, 404–5.

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long for it. Again personal experience and classical literature were at one in moving his imagination.

There is, however, an intellectual chasm that does separate Rousseau from Plato and More and one that certainly marks their respective utopias. What Rousseau chose to regard as their unfounded dreams of perfection was nothing less than the metaphysical structure of their thought. Human nature and the city that might be are grounded in the noumenal realm. Both have contours that reason can recognize. Perfection is not in history, but that does not render it, for Plato or More, unreal. Utopia is not here and now, but it is to be found in the rational cosmos which it reproduces. Man as a rational being is more than the sum of his reactions. Thus, both human nature and society must first be recognized as conceptual realities, which set goals, no less than they describe the patterns of which both are merely reflections. Both would remain unintelligible without a prior grasp of utopia which is primarily the *true* model of man and polity. All this Rousseau rejected utterly and completely. His sense of disaster was correspondingly total. Degeneration was the law of life. Utopia was an imaginative interruption of that process and a painful awareness of it. That was all.

For Rousseau had left the theory of a stable human nature behind him with the rest of the Platonic tradition. As a book on public education the *Republic* was admirable.[1] The philosophy which it expressed he entirely rejected. The cave is where we must always remain, he noted explicitly, and it was 'puerile' of Plato to think that man could ever have the knowledge needed to leave it. No such knowledge was even conceivable. Plato was a mere dreamer, however pleasant. In fact, however, we can know nothing and can see nothing.'We run after shadows which escape us. Some fleeting spectre, some vain phantasm flits before our eyes and we think we see the eternal chain of being.' All that we can possibly grasp, in fact, is a sense of our own selfhood and we must end where Descartes began, with 'I think therefore I am.'[2] Introspective psychology therefore necessarily replaces every other possible way of describing men, and its revelations are far from comforting.

First of all, the notion of a structured human nature was dispelled

[1] *Emile*, 8.

[2] 'Lettres Morales', 358–9.

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by the variety of psychological possibilities. To Rousseau that meant that men were doomed to be displaced persons, moving without a compass from one unsatisfactory situation to another. Since everything is possible, nothing is right or suitable. The state of nature is man's original condition, but not one in which he could remain or in which he is truly a man. On the contrary he is a 'stupid and limited' creature, scarcely different from the animals.[1] He does not suffer, but neither does he really live as a human being. His freedom, which separates him in his potentialities from the animals, must lead him out of nature to manhood. His 'perfectibility', that is his human faculties, imagination and memory, are bound to develop.[2] And freedom, in this context, means that there are no set limits to what he can do with and to himself. What he does is to abuse his powers and to make himself miserable. The growth of his faculties, responding to an infinity of stimulants, takes any number of directions, and none of them brings him the felicity he seeks. Association with other men breeds artificial emotional needs, dependence, weakness, vanity, competitiveness, inequality and an unlimited number of other ills. For men can imagine anything at all, and their fantasies multiply until the cave is a veritable museum of the absurd. As for God, what has He done for man? If He exists, He says, do not blame me. 'I have made you too weak to leave the abyss, because I made you strong enough not to fall into it.'[3] Nothing could express the divine indifference more perfectly.

Men cannot return to nature. Nature is a state that in Rousseau's account is explicitly a starting-point that men, as their own creators, must leave in order to become men at all.[4] It is not their home. And indeed there is no resting place anywhere for men. There is not even a moment in their lives when they can say, 'I wish this instant might last forever'.[5] Flux is our only constant experience.

Fantasy-ridden, torn by inner conflict, at odds with each other, distracted by memory and hope men err from misery to misery. The worst of these are created cooperatively. Inequality, the expression of *amour-propre* and competition, is at the very core of every social organization except the immediate family. Both of

[1] Vaughan, II, 36 (*Contrat Social*).
[2] *Ibid.* I, 147–52 (*Inégalité*).
[3] *Confessions*, II, 64.
[4] Vaughan, I, 207 (*Inégalité*).
[5] *Rêveries*, V, 1046.

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