Introduction

Rousseau is one of the most important moral and political philosophers of the modern era. He is, at the same time, a leading figure in the canons of literature. A great deal of secondary material has been produced on both sides of the divide, some of which helps us to have a finely nuanced and sophisticated approach to Rousseau's work. This book is located in the tradition which attempts to work in both of those fields simultaneously in the belief that disciplinary segregation can lead to political readings which seem naively inattentive to the rhetorical structures of the text or to literary readings which seem to ignore the very questions which the text prioritises, those issues of justice, freedom and virtue which Rousseau considered to be of primary importance. I wish to analyse certain moral (and hence political) questions in Rousseau by using the techniques of reading which are currently associated with literary criticism or theory. The specific questions which will be addressed are those of the functioning of *bienfaisance* (beneficence) and of *pudeur* (pudicity), also of the relationship between the social codes which govern each of these practices, and of the extent to which that relationship casts light on each of the codes individually.

The code of beneficence, which regulates the giving, receiving and repaying of benefits, used to be a central topic of moral philosophy and of applied ethics, but has been afforded little close critical scrutiny in recent times. This is partly due to the fragmentation of disciplines; topics which impinge on a number of distinct fields – anthropology, sociology, political science, economics, moral philosophy, literature – often seem to be

treated in a partial and limited manner and may even fall in between stools. It is also partly due to a confident assumption (unfounded in my view) that the question of beneficence is now largely a historical one, thanks to a more egalitarian society, to the advent of the Welfare State, and to a breaking down of certain traditional, stable relations between individuals, as capitalism has become ever more advanced. And yet, the present fragility of Welfare States apart, beneficence is still an issue in many people's lives, and a feature of many interpersonal relationships: parent–child, child–aged parent, teacher–pupil, spouses, neighbours, to name but a few.[1]

One way of questioning the continuing relevance of the study of beneficence has been via the argument that all human relations are economic – and have always been economic – in the sense that they are all governed by the same criterion as *market* transactions, that is to say, rational profit maximisation on the part of the individuals concerned.[2] Some traditions have sought to counter that argument by identifying a sphere of activity which is governed by a different kind of economy, locating this sphere in societies which are distant from us in time or space, often 'primitive' societies – the very name suggesting some of the dangers associated with that kind of thinking.[3] In *Economie libidinale*, Jean-François Lyotard suggests that any such opposition between capitalism and some other primitive libidinal economy should be deconstructed.[4] However, the attempt to identify a kind of relationship which is not governed by rational profit maximisation and located not in some other time or place, but accessible alongside the market seems to me to be particularly valuable. In the final analysis any such attempt may be shown to be doomed to failure or irremediably metaphysical if not both. However, the path to that final point may be a very useful one, and holding the possibility of a non-market relationship in suspense is at the least a device which works against a cynical acceptance of the inevitability of profit maximisation in all relationships.

I would argue that this question cannot progress beyond a certain level without paying attention to sexual difference, and that the Rousseau texts bring that point home. The relation of

women to exchange has historically been quite different to that of men, and that difference is an important one in the context of a discussion about (disinterested) gift exchange as defined against market exchange. Furthermore, in any purportedly egalitarian moral or political theory, the issue of women raises in an acute form the question of equality's relationship to difference.

The question of codes, such as pudicity, which are intended to structure feminine identity, is incontrovertibly alive and a burning topic of debate thanks to the efforts of those feminists not yet ready to agree that postfeminism is the order of the day. However, where Rousseau's pronouncements on the subject of women seem particularly offensive today, analysis can give way to ritual condemnation of a kind prone to charges of anachronism. Indignation had its historical place as a strategy, and many denunciations were also enlightening about the assumptions and effects of certain normative texts. However, this reading response should not be reiterated *ad infinitum* lest it blind us to useful lessons which can be drawn from the case. Consequently this book will be less concerned to dwell disapprovingly on Rousseau's inegalitarian assertions regarding the best conduct for women as opposed to that for men, than to analyse the gaps and contradictions produced where sexual difference is at stake. These gaps and contradictions sometimes arise from a 'femininity' which cannot be contained in the way that Rousseau prescribes, and which persists in my reading of seemingly universal ('man') questions.

This book in no sense attempts to be exhaustive nor even to summarise a history of ideas or practices of gift exchange or of pudicity. Instead I wish to focus my analysis on a certain pressure point, located in the works of Rousseau: the intersection of beneficence with sexual politics. In Chapter 1 I introduce the problematic relationship between beneficence and pudicity which is the subject of the book. In Chapter 2 I elaborate the intricacies of the code of beneficence at greater length and set it in the context of the classical tradition of writing about beneficence, which had an enormous influence on eighteenth-century thinking. The very use of the term 'code',

with its legislative implications, becomes more self-evident through study of a text such as Seneca's *de Beneficiis*, which is composed of a series of prescriptions. Chapter 3 examines more particularly Rousseau's analyses of the functioning or malfunctioning of beneficence. Chapter 4 is devoted to an examination of Rousseau's explicit theory of human nature and of interpersonal relationships, presenting the argument that there is a clear contradiction between his theory about men (in general) and his theory about men and women. Chapters 5 and 6 provide close textual analysis to show the way in which sexual difference disrupts Rousseau's writing. The last chapter draws particularly from non-canonical texts which present situations (transgressions of pudicity) related to those of the major texts, but which are more unusual or extreme. By their very excessive nature they furnish new insights into the gaps in Rousseau's thinking about non-equals.

Rousseau is the writer who above all straddles the divide between ancient and modern, a writer who engages formidably with most moral and political issues, and a writer whose acute sensitivity made him the first truly introspective autobiographer. It is because of their Enlightenment rationality and yet almost pathological and obsessive sensibilities that his writings are a highly suitable scene in which to expect an enactment of the conflictual play between the two moral codes. The pits into which Rousseau falls are by no means peculiar to him. Indeed his work would be a useful starting point for a more general analysis of the inevitable failings of any moral or political thinking which does not pay sufficient attention to difference.

CHAPTER I

The problem: the intersection of beneficence and pudicity

This book seeks to draw together two apparently separate areas of interest in the works of Rousseau: beneficence and pudicity. These two social codes are points of reference for Rousseau in this analyses of relations between unequals, respectively relations between men and relations between men and women. The thorny question of inequality is one to which Rousseau constantly returns in all his works. In *Du contrat social* he seeks to define the principles which would underpin a just state – a state in which inequality between men would be reduced to a minimal level, getting as close as possible to the vestigial inequality of the hypothetical state of nature which Rousseau imagines in *Le Discours sur l'inégalité*. In most of Rousseau's other works inequality is a fact of social existence, and he devotes considerable energy both to analysing the evils of extremes of inequality and to suggesting how inequality could be attenuated in interpersonal relations.

In this book I argue that Rousseau's thinking on inequality is to a large degree unified, but breaks down on one point, that of sexual difference. The consistent thrust of Rousseau's work is to reduce inequality because it is the root of moral and political evil – that is to say, both bad relations between individuals and bad relations between individuals and the state. However, he insists that there should be a rigid demarcation between men's and women's roles of a kind which has traditionally implied a hierarchy. Inequality is, I shall suggest, the fruit of such oppositions, and the worst kind of inequality is that which is produced by an apparently fixed and unchanging difference.[1] Rousseau's proposals for moral or political improvements on

the status quo which he himself experienced all involve artifice: the *construction* of a rational social self in harmony with natural emotion or intuition. However, sexual difference and amorous passion disrupt this project and Rousseau's writings about such projects. In this book I focus on Rousseau's theories concerning the possibility of good social relations between individuals, and suggest how these theories are problematised if attention is paid to the question of sexual difference.

In his desire to find a model for relations between individuals which works towards the reduction of inequality Rousseau draws on the code of *beneficence*.[2] That code may appear to impinge primarily on the economic domain, but cannot be confined to that domain due to the variousness of acts of beneficence (including, for example, education) as well as the interpenetration of the economic with other spheres. In Rousseau's fictional history, social inequality is first of all economic (possessing more or fewer goods, notably land), and then becomes political. In the modern (eighteenth-century) state the economic and the political had largely become mutually dependent and appeared inextricable – although with the benefit of hindsight the modern reader can see class divisions relating to certain strains in that union. Rousseau is sometimes assumed to represent in some way one of the key classes in the forthcoming struggle.[3] And yet, in his references to beneficence, on the one hand, he rejects Aristotelian aristocratic magnanimity, which I shall refer to as *false beneficence*; on the other hand, he also rejects what was to become the dominant ideology of the western world – *the law of the market*. False beneficence maintains and relishes hierarchies; the law of the market assumes homogeneity (if only for the sake of the argument), that is it assumes that hierarchies do not exist and so permits them to grow silently and unchecked. Beneficence, on the other hand, is a dynamic relationship which accepts *difference* and a real hierarchy in the short term; the benefactor and the beneficiary are different in that the one has something which the other lacks, whereas market agents are assumed uniform – exchanging commodities of equal value. Beneficence works to minimise the hierarchy both by a kind of emotional fiction in the short

term and by real change in the long term: the benefactor's supreme gift to the beneficiary is that the latter is enabled eventually to become a benefactor.

However, Rousseau's moral and political sources, such as Seneca or Cicero, and his own writing, concern themselves with *man* in all the ambiguity of the term. In the case of some source texts it seems clear that women are excluded from the discussion, and this is not surprising given the societies in which the code was formulated.[4] On a metaphorical level, where thinkers, such as Aristotle, tend towards a more aristocratic conception of beneficence beneficiaries tend to be feminised – as innately weaker, inferior, passive recipients. Where beneficiaries are perceived as potential benefactors they are (metaphorically and sometimes literally) boys who will become men. Rousseau explicitly values classical notions of virtue because they are (he argues) *manly* unlike some versions of Christianity and unlike contemporary Parisian mores. In Rousseau's own writing 'man' and its avatars sometimes appear to refer to all human individuals – a kind of sexual homogeneity which can mask real inequality, a strategy of which Rousseau is only too aware when men are assumed to be homogeneous for the purpose of masking, say, economic inequality. The strategy is to some extent made plain when, as in *Emile*, women as a distinct category enter the scene belatedly (Book v) and Rousseau's outline of the code of pudicity, which he wants to structure feminine identity, disrupts the fine moral scheme laid down. Adherence to inegalitarian theories concerning women has long been perceived as a major flaw in Rousseau's otherwise coherent proposals for more just and equal relations between men.[5] I want to suggest that as well as a clear contradiction on the level of theory, which has unsurprisingly often been seen in a very negative light by feminists, there is a kind of feminine textual disruption that reoccurs in Rousseau's writing which may in fact be viewed in a more positive light.

BENEFICENCE

If relationships could function according to the code of beneficence then it would be possible to live a just and virtuous life within society, a possibility which Rousseau does not take as given. Although Rousseau's work includes a powerful and poetic image of man in a solitary state, it is the question of life within society and its potential superiority as well as inevitable degeneration with respect to a hypothetical state of nature which interests him. Social relations, unlike encounters in the state of nature, are to be judged according to the standards of justice and morality. *Du contrat social* presents a set of principles against which a state can be judged to see to what extent it fulfils the criteria of liberty and equality. Similarly, on the scale of the individual, moral codes provide a standard against which an individual's behaviour can be measured to see if it meets their criteria. The behaviour of an individual within any society becomes of paramount importance when, as Emile discovers to be the case, no contemporary state can be found which adheres to the principles of political justice drawn up. Emile has to be content with moral liberty, with his own self-mastery, which will not be safeguarded by that particular political liberty described in *Du contrat social*, although the very fact that he is a member of a community at all means that he is, in Rousseau's view, obliged to live as virtuously as possible within it. Beneficence – the possibility of virtuous action and of mitigating inequality – is all the more important in a society of non-equals, founded on an unjust social pact, even though it is inevitably more difficult to do good in such a society.

As regards both political and moral philosophy Rousseau's conclusion is the same: market relations are pernicious. In this he stands out from the more optimistic Enlightenment *philosophes* with whom he often shares common cause when it comes to attacking hide-bound royal, aristocratic or ecclesiastical privileges. The law of the market, and the general outcome of a multitude of particular transactions dictated by rational self-interest, are becoming of increasing interest in the eighteenth century; the appearance of *The Wealth of Nations* is the best

example of this growing interest.[6] Rousseau is convinced that the doctrine of the virtue of self-interest is dangerous as is any practice founded upon it, whereas many of the 'new men' of the time were convinced that the free market could liberate everyone from the static hierarchy of the *ancien régime* and furthermore that free competition is essentially egalitarian in character. Rousseau proposes a different dynamic model which would allow men of good character to evade the fixed relationship of master and underling. This is beneficence, a disinterested exchange of gifts which demands emotion and reason whereas market exchange is presumed to require reason alone.

The code of beneficence is, for Rousseau, the best possible way of regulating relations between unequals – not only unequals in the economic sense, but also in a moral sense, such as teacher and pupil, legislator and subjects, writer and reader. Beneficence is a vital factor in the attempt to be successful at living within society 'toutes les vertus sociales se rapportant à la bienfaisance' (*Lettre à d'Alembert*, p. 49); it is a cohesive force working to bind people together, both emotionally and materially. The code, which Rousseau inherits from classical antiquity and which is a point of reference for many eighteenth-century writers, is outlined in Chapter 2 of this book.

THEORETICAL CONTRADICTIONS

According to Rousseau, social existence is inevitably a condition of interdependence which may be so finely balanced that an individual can enjoy a measure of moral, and even political, liberty, or may, on the other hand, involve such a struggle to dominate that no one can be free. Relations between the sexes follow this general rule; and, indeed, they are a significant factor in influencing the modalities of social and political existence. However, Rousseau does not treat relations between the sexes as merely a prime example of a more general tendency of human relationships to fall into a 'master–slave' cycle. He finds a special solution to the problem of dominance in relations between the sexes, which is completely at odds with his general

solution to the problems of interpersonal relationships. This special solution is women's adherence to the code of *pudeur*, a code of strict moral reserve; the code structures feminine identity in Rousseau's theoretical and fictional writings, providing a standard by which to measure feminine virtue.

Relations between the sexes are, for Rousseau, inaugurated with amorous passion and unthinkable without amorous passion. Only a shield (pudicity) can prevent the dire consequences of passion unleashed, amongst which perhaps the worst consequence is the death of passion and hence of sexual relations. Pudicity seeks to repeat, with regard to men and women, the original dispersion of humans: it keeps men and women apart. But it allows sociability amongst men (such as Emile and his tutor), and amongst women within their families. It does not entail the complete isolation of each individual as in nature; the danger that 'the other man' might represent (which lends him the figure of a giant) in the state of nature becomes the danger which the other sex really represents for Rousseau. One could say that Rousseau figures the impudic woman as a giantess – a devourer of men.

Rousseau discusses *pudeur* at some length in *Emile* (pp. 694–5), challenging those devious philosophers who simply brand it as unnatural:

> Si les femelles des animaux n'ont pas la même honte, que s'ensuit-il? Ont-elles comme les femmes les désirs illimités auxquels cette honte sert de frein? Le désir ne vient pour elles qu'avec le besoin; le besoin satisfait, le désir cesse... l'instinct les pousse et l'instinct les arrête; où sera le supplément de cet instinct négatif dans les femmes quand vous leur aurez ôté la pudeur? Attendre qu'elles ne se soucient plus des hommes, c'est attendre qu'ils ne soient plus bons à rien.

It is in the nature of women to have unlimited desires. However, in the solitary state of nature, female desire could not have the pernicious consequences that it would have in society if it were unchecked. Female animals are governed by a 'negative instinct' which prevents them from being in a constant state of desire in which they could exhaust male animals to the point of death. Animals have no choice in the matter, for they do not have free will, whereas humanity is defined in the *Discours sur*