

PATRICK RILEY

# 1 Introduction: Life and Works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778)

There is no need to recommend the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau: the greatest of all critics of inequality, the purest social contract theorist of the eighteenth century (and simultaneously the deepest critic of contractarianism after Hume), the greatest writer on civic education after Plato, the most perceptive understander of mastery and slavery after Aristotle and before Hegel, the finest critic of Hobbes, the most important predecessor of Kant, the most accomplished didactic novelist between Richardson and Tolstoy, the greatest confessor since Augustine, the author of paradoxes (“the general will is always right” but “not enlightened”) that continue to fascinate or infuriate.

Rousseau’s extensive range and intensive depth have been best brought out by Judith Shklar, in the Postscript to her celebrated *Men and Citizens*:

What did his contemporaries recognize as great in him, even those who reviled him as a charlatan and a *poseur*? He lived among the most intelligent and competent literary judges. Why did they think that he was so remarkable? His eloquence was universally recognized. Admirers and bitter enemies alike agreed that Rousseau was the most eloquent man of his age. His style is overwhelming. Rousseau, Diderot eventually said, was what one says of the poor draftsman among painters: a great colorist. Rousseau’s literary powers were indeed phenomenal and to understand him fully one must give more than a passing thought to how he wrote. There is, however, another quality that his contemporaries did not recognize, partly because they shared it. That is the scope of Rousseau’s intellectual competence. Even among his versatile contemporaries he was extraordinary: composer, musicologist, playwright, drama critic, novelist, botanist, pedagogue, political philosopher, psychologist. That is not unimpressive. There is nevertheless even more

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in Rousseau's intellectual scope that seems notable now, though it did not strike his fellow intellectuals. They tended only to marvel at his suspect novelties and "paradoxes." We can marvel at the catholicity of Rousseau's social philosophy.

The range of his social thought, much more than his specific admiration for them and for antiquity in general, makes Rousseau an heir of Plato and Aristotle, and a part of the intellectual world they created. That is what one means when one speaks of Rousseau's writings as an aspect of European high culture. It is also what makes him a major, rather than a minor, figure in the history of political theory. The battle between the ancients and the moderns was not really decided in favor of the latter until after the French Revolution. Until then pagan antiquity was admired and known in all its details even by those who adopted a decidedly modern philosophic and scientific outlook. In Rousseau's time the attraction of an un- and pre-Christian world was particularly great. Everyone who was educated at all, and by whatever means, was familiar with classical literature. It defined intellectuality, set its limits and its style. The standard of relevance raised by ancient philosophy still prevailed, even when its content no longer did. Eager to out-do the ancients, Rousseau and his fellows nevertheless emulated them all the more intensely, because all the topics that Plato and Aristotle had touched upon had to be reconsidered. Rousseau was no slavish imitator of either one, but he accepted their example, their vision of what was involved in social theory, without a question. The importance which psychological, pedagogic, artistic, ethical and religious ideas play in his philosophical ensemble and their inseparability from politics, all demonstrate an adherence to a literary and philosophic culture which had its roots in antiquity and of which Rousseau was one of the last representatives. The scope of his theory, therefore, demands that all its aspects be studied without allowing later categories of thought to cut out what was essential for him. There is, moreover, a judgment here also. For surely Rousseau is so penetrating and convincing because his was so comprehensive a structure of ideas about man and society.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was born in the Calvinist stronghold of Geneva on June 28, 1712, the second son of the watchmaker Isaac Rousseau and his wife Susan; both parents were "citizens" of Geneva, and Rousseau styled himself *citoyen de Genève* until his final renunciation of citizenship in 1764. Rousseau's mother died ten days after his birth, leaving him initially in the care of his father – with whom the child read (and then perpetually cherished) Plutarch's *Lives* of the greatest Greeks and Romans; later he was brought up by a puritanical aunt who (he admitted in the *Confessions*) did much to warp

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his sexuality. In 1722 Isaac Rousseau fled Geneva after a quarrel, and the ill-educated Jean-Jacques had to be apprenticed – first to a notary, then to an engraver.

In March, 1728, Rousseau missed the Genevan city curfew, found himself locked outside the gates, and wandered on foot to Annecy in Savoy – where he was taken in by Mme. de Warens, Rousseau's protector and then (1733–40) lover. In the provincial salon of Mme. de Warens ("*Les Charmettes*"), Rousseau acquired the education he had lacked in Geneva (Plutarch apart); one gets some sense of his autodidactic passion from his poem, *Le Verger des Charmettes*:

Tantot avec Leibniz, Malebranche et Newton,  
Je monte ma raison sur un sublime ton,  
J'examine les lois des corps et des pensées,  
Avec Locke je fais l'histoire des idées.

Mme. de Warens, who specialized in finding Catholic converts, sent the young Rousseau to Turin, where he renounced his inherited Calvinism and converted to the Roman church; he even briefly attended a seminary for priests, until a Catholic ecclesiastic attempted to seduce him (as we again learn in the *Confessions*). Returning to Les Charmettes, he lived with *maman*, completed his education, and undertook his earliest writings – including the remarkable *Chronologie universelle* (ca. 1737), with its eloquent praise of Fénelon's charitable moral universalism.

Beginning in 1740, the now superbly educated Rousseau began to serve as a tutor, moving north to Lyon and living in the house of M. de Mably, whose children he instructed. However, in Lyon, above all, he met M. de Mably's two elder brothers – Étienne Bonnot (later the Abbé de Condillac, with Voltaire the greatest "Lockean" in post-Regency France) and the Abbé de Mably. This was the beginning of Rousseau's connection to the Paris *philosophes*, with whom he would later (and permanently) have a love-hate relationship. At this same time Rousseau became a considerable composer, music theorist, and music copyist; in later years he would represent himself as a simple Swiss republican who earned a living as a musical craftsman.

In 1742 Rousseau moved definitively northward to Paris, carrying with him a new system of musical notation, a comedy, an opera, and a collection of poems. (Even at this comparatively early date his

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sheer range was in evidence: If he eventually came to be known as a psychologist, group psychologist, and eloquently accusing *moraliste*, he was one of the last and latest “Renaissance men.”) In Paris Rousseau eked out a precarious living by tutoring, writing, and copying music; for a brief period (1743–44) he served, not very happily, as Secretary to the French ambassador in Venice – an interlude that he mordantly described in his later *Lettres écrites de la montagne* (1764). Most importantly for his career as a man of letters, he met and befriended Denis Diderot, soon-to-be editor of the great *Encyclopédie* (who would ultimately commission Rousseau’s first great writing on civic “general will,” the *Économie politique* of 1755).

It was while visiting Diderot in prison (for alleged impiety) in 1749 that Rousseau *became* Rousseau (as we now know him) by deciding to write an essay for a prize competition sponsored by the Académie de Dijon – dealing with the question whether morals had been harmed or advanced by the rebirth (*renaissance*) of the arts and sciences. Rousseau won the prize with the so-called *First Discourse*, in which he defended Spartan–Roman civic *généralité* against the Athenian literary “tyranny” of poets and orators; the *Discourse* made a European reputation, even attracting the criticism of the King of Poland, and from this period forward Rousseau was a leading citizen, however reluctantly, of the *République des lettres* (as Voltaire maliciously reminded him).

In 1752 his opera, “*Le devin du village*” (“The Village Soothsayer”) was performed at the court of Louis XV at Versailles; at roughly the same time his black comedy, “Narcissus, the Lover of Himself” was given in Paris at the Theatre Français. As a good *citoyen de Genève*, Rousseau refused a royal pension, continuing his republican self-support as a musician by publishing his *Letter on French Music* in 1753; the *Lettre*, with its strong defense of Italian simplicity against French elaborateness, led to a collision with Rameau, the greatest French composer of the day.

Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality among Men*, the so-called *Second Discourse*, was completed in May, 1754; it is his most radical work and urges that existing government is a kind of confidence trick on the part of the rich, who persuade the poor that it is universally and equally advantageous to be subjected to law and to political order. (For the French Revolution this was the “true” Rousseau.) In June, 1754, Rousseau left Paris for a visit to his

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native Geneva, where he reconverted to Calvinism and had his civic rights restored; the year 1755 saw the publication of *Inégalité* and the *Économie Politique* (the *Third Discourse*). In 1756 Rousseau moved to the countryside, taking up residence at l'Hermitage, the country seat of Mme. d'Épinay; this inspired Diderot's sarcastic epigram, "a fine citizen a hermit is," and marked the start of the weakening of Rousseau's ties to the *philosophes* – a process accelerated by his 1758 "*Lettre to M. d'Alembert*," which opposed the latter's scheme to found a theater in Geneva. (Plato-like, Rousseau urged that such a theater would be inimical to civic virtue and good morals and that Molière's "*Misanthrope*" would have a deleterious effect.)

To the year 1758 can also be assigned the magnificent, uncompleted fragment called *L'état de Guerre* (*The State of War*), Rousseau's most brilliant and scathing critique of Hobbes and Hobbism. Taking over observations first made by Descartes and Leibniz (*Theodécie*, 1710), Rousseau insists that Hobbes has simply mistaken badly socialized, ill-educated Englishmen for "natural" men, leading to Hobbesian unquestionable "sovereignty" as the only antidote to rapacious appetitiveness: Looking out his London window, Hobbes "thinks that he has seen the natural man," but he has really only viewed "a bourgeois of London or Paris." Hobbes, for Rousseau, has simply inverted cause and effect; he has mistaken a bad effect for "natural" depravity.

In the late 1750s Rousseau labored on (but never published) the superb *Lettres morales* (for Sophie d'Houdetot) and then produced his vast epistolary novel, *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* (published 1761), with its celebrated account of a small ideal society, Clarens, superintended by the godlike, all-seeing M. de Wolmar. The novel was a runaway best-seller, the greatest literary success since Fénelon's *Telemachus, Son of Ulysses* in 1699.

In May, 1762, Rousseau brought out two of his greatest but most ill-fated works: *The Social Contract* and *Émile*. Both were condemned and publicly burned in Paris, at the behest of Archbishop Christophe de Beaumont (and with the acquiescence of the *Parlement* of Paris); Rousseau, under order of arrest, fled to Geneva (only to find the same works condemned and burned there). Against charges of impiety leveled by the Genevan public prosecutor – alleging the dangerousness of Rousseau's "natural" theology in *Émile*'s "Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar" – Rousseau composed and published

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his trenchant *Letters Written from the Mountain*, in which he defended ancient “civic” religion, and insisted that Christianity produces good men whose other-worldliness makes them “bad citizens.” (This of course only increased the furor against him, and he took refuge in the Prussian enclave of Neuchâtel.) Renouncing his Genevan citizenship definitively, Rousseau occupied himself by writing a *Constitution* for recently liberated Corsica; increasingly threatened, his paranoia aggravated by genuine danger, Rousseau accepted the offer of British refuge from David Hume, although he soon came to see the benevolent Scot as part of the “league of malignant enemies” bent on his destruction. After an unhappy period in England – which nonetheless yielded the great Ramsay portrait now in the National Gallery at Edinburgh – Rousseau returned incognito to France, living under the assumed name of Renou. (While living under this assumed name, Rousseau finally married his longtime companion, Thérèse Levasseur, by whom he had fathered – if the *Confessions* are to be believed – five children, all supposedly abandoned in a foundling hospital.)

The *Confessions* themselves increasingly occupied Rousseau’s time, and he often read substantial fragments of this work-in-progress in sympathetic aristocratic *salons*. In 1772 he produced the remarkable *Gouvernement de Pologne* as part of an effort to avert partition by Prussia, Austria, and Russia; the book combines intelligent constitutional reforms with Rousseau’s most glowing account of Spartan and Roman-republican civic virtue. And in the same year he wrote (without publishing) the brilliantly innovative *Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques*, in which he bifurcated himself and had one half comment on the other half – schizophrenia turned into a literary genre.

In 1777 Rousseau wrote his last great confessional work, *The Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, which begins with the celebrated words, “Here I am, then, alone on the earth, no longer having any brother, or neighbor, or friend, or society except myself.” A year later, while in refuge on an aristocratic estate at Erménonville (north of Paris) and while engaging in his beloved botanical studies, Rousseau died quite suddenly on July 2, 1778; he was originally buried in a quasi-Roman sarcophagus on the Isle of Poplars at Erménonville, but at the height of the French Revolution his ashes were translated, in a dramatic torchlight procession, to the Pantheon and placed next to the remains of his nemesis Voltaire (1794).

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“Given the range of his erudition, the depth of his reflection, and the variety of his interests,” writes the eminent Rousseau scholar Roger D. Masters, “it is hardly surprising that Rousseau’s influence has changed markedly over time.”

In the eighteenth century, he was the *enfant terrible* of the Enlightenment, denying the legitimacy of the status quo while challenging the concept of progress. In the nineteenth century, he was more often viewed either as the apostle of the French Revolution or as the founder of the romantic movement. For twentieth-century critics, he is often praised as the founder of the western democratic tradition or vilified as a forerunner of totalitarianism. This very range of interpretation suggests that his thought cannot be reduced to a single stereotype or category: Rousseau – like Plato, Hobbes, or Marx – deserves to be considered as one of the most profound and complex political thinkers in the history of the West.

What the twenty-first century will make of the *citoyen de Genève* remains, of course, to be seen. But no imaginable transmogrification, however it may reshape Rousseau, will succeed in diminishing his stature as one of the half-dozen supreme political–moral theorists of the last two and a half millennia.



GEORGE ARMSTRONG KELLY

## 2 A General Overview

### THE UNREDEEMED FUTURE AND THE POLEMIC AGAINST KNOWLEDGE

In tracing the genesis of the modern historical consciousness, Rousseau must be understood both as a point of departure and as a deliberate foil. He is neither an idealist – insofar as we can ascribe any consistent philosophical position to him – nor a metaphysician of the historical process. Yet it is with him that this discussion must begin. Because our focus is on political theory, only Rousseau can clarify our procedures; Leibniz or Hume might serve if our attention were elsewhere. There is no pretense, however, of making a full critical survey of Rousseau's unique and complex contributions to moral and political thought in this brief treatment.

For Rousseau, nature is a wise guide, man is an open question, and history is a tale of horror. These three elements form, at the outset, a chemistry of ambiguous potential. As man is free because he commands his own will, exclusive of his intelligence or station in life and because each child born into the world or each act must be regarded as a perpetual beginning,<sup>1</sup> the possibility of salvation – in the act, in the individual, or in the community – cannot be cosmically foreclosed. If history is woeful, it is not authoritative. “Man,” exhorts the Savoyard vicar, “look no further for the author of evil; that author is you. No evil exists but that which you make or suffer; both are your works.”<sup>2</sup> “By new associations,” urges the first draft of the *Social Contract*, “let us correct, if we can, the shortcomings of the general association.” The *Social Contract* carries us still more pressingly it would seem, away from defeatism: “. . . while a people is forced to obey and obeys, it does well; once it can shake off the yoke,



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and shakes it off, it does still better."<sup>3</sup> Rousseau is, in this sense, a philosopher of hope, a prophet of action. As such he contributed his share to the ideals of the French Revolution, to the optimism of the Romantic movement, and to a whole school of interpretation, which can be summarized in the following words of Gustave Lanson: "The idea of progress, the great idea of the century, inspires all the work of Jean-Jacques: He seems to deny its reality only so as to announce its possibility more loudly, its necessity more demandingly."<sup>4</sup>

Yet, setting aside all anticipations, Rousseau is much more a philosopher of despair: "Nature has made everything in the best way possible; but we want to do better still, and we spoil everything." Precisely for the same reasons that hope remains, salvation is most unlikely: "... the vices that make our social institutions necessary are the same that make their abuses inevitable." Moreover, man hastens the deterioration of everything he sets his mark on, except in the rarest of cases. Rousseau is fundamentally the philosopher of the note in the bottle thrown out to sea. "I like to flatter myself," he jotted among his papers, "that some day there will be a statesman who is [also] a citizen. . . that by some lucky chance he will cast his eyes on this book [i.e., the *Social Contract*], that my loose ideas will inspire in him more useful ones, that he will devote himself to making men better or happier . . . My writing has been guided by this fantasy. . . ."<sup>5</sup> The citizen of Geneva knew the odds. But better, as he wrote in *Emile*, his "land of chimeras" than the "land of prejudices" of his readers. Rousseau conceived models. There is a huge gap between a model and a method. Whatever redemption Rousseau held out for the individual, the domestic unit, or the society of sovereign equality he hemmed in with insuperable provisos or felt atavistically compelled to dynamite.<sup>6</sup>

It is indeed possible to regard Rousseau's writings as a fundamental attack on man as a history-making animal. The poignant truth of the matter is that "man is good and men are wicked." History is a dangerous striving to be avoided. You may not shine among the annals of the nations, he told the Corsicans, but you will win a greater prize: You will be happy. And yet man *is* that history-making animal, willing himself above and beyond nature, the coherent universal order in which "everything is renewed and nothing degenerates."<sup>7</sup> Man's fate is partly a result of his mortality, but in the species (contrary to Kant) it is due to his corruption. Rousseau, passionately concerned

with the puzzle of man, viewed his perplexity against the background of time, the moral and physical destroyer. In this regard (inspired by his reading and experience), Rousseau has a deeply classical and anti-Christian time sense. Nature is complete and does not aspire toward a vindication. Like most of the intellectual tradition in which he worked and unlike the later Germans whom he partly inspired, he is profoundly antiteleological. "I judge the order of the world," the Savoyard vicar says, "although I am ignorant of its end."<sup>8</sup> If the image of the clock and the master clockmaker appealed to this *horloger apprenti*, it is the ordered competence of the machine and not its ability to tick away the time of life toward a more perfect future that he appreciated. For Rousseau, the human clock, the clock of peoples, the universal clock all run down; we service them for better or worse. The main thing is to obey the inner clock of nature and to discard our modern European timepieces. In a score of passages he seconded the sentiment of Montaigne: "We are never at home; we are always beyond it. Fear, desire or hope drive us toward the future and deprive us of the feeling and contemplation of what it is."<sup>9</sup>

Rousseau undertakes the puzzle of history from the most antitheoretical of angles: moral self-certainty.<sup>10</sup> Thus he inaugurates a new tendency to moralize history, not merely as a thesaurus of examples – though the Plutarchian strain is prominent – but also as a sequence of states of the human system of faculties, depicted as a kind of challenge – response pattern between sense and sensibility over time. Much of Rousseau's historical equipment is derivative; however, his combinations and emphases have much to do with his peculiar social and existential position, of whose "uniqueness" he was so intolerably well aware. It is scarcely too much to say that Rousseau attempted the first methodical liaison between the sense of world process and individual psychological tensions, a sort of "phenomenology." This is not to link him explicitly with Hegel, whose own *Phenomenology* analyzed a consciousness that achieves concrete social content and passes beyond society in order to judge it, or with the modern neo-Freudians, whose concern with civilization and its neuroses is etched with the data of the industrial epoch and a different picture of man. Nevertheless, these and others can be regarded as Rousseau's successors. His own effort may be viewed as the despairing quest for unity by a man who accepted neither the