CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-01828-0 - The Challenge of Rousseau
Edited by Eve Grace and Christopher Kelly
Excerpt
More information

Introduction

Eve Grace and Christopher Kelly

In the novel *The Year Two Thousand Four Hundred and Forty: A Dream If There Ever Was One* by Louis-Sébastien Mercier, published in 1770, the protagonist dreams that he awakens at the age of 760 years in the year 2440. Among his investigations of the "New Paris" of that year is a visit to the King's Library. He is surprised to discover how few volumes the library contains and is told that the rational society of the future has destroyed all frivolous, useless, or dangerous books. This stimulates his desire to see which books written during his life before his long sleep had been preserved. He finds several authors, such as Montesquieu and Helvétius, each of whom has a single book in the library. He is surprised to find that at least half of Voltaire's voluminous writings have been destroyed (the ones that were judged to be excessively ridiculous or repetitive). Finally, he is delighted, although somewhat surprised, to find that Rousseau's complete works hold a place of honor in the library. The librarian approves of his delight and takes his surprise as validation of the pettiness and stupidity that existed in the eighteenth century, when there was dispute over the merit of this writer and thinker. Rousseau's merit, in the librarian's opinion, should be obvious to all intelligent beings and should require no justification.

Today, 300 years after Rousseau's birth and 250 years after the publication of *Emile* and the *Social Contract*, the unity of judgment that Mercier sees as prevalent more than four centuries in our future remains a dream. Therefore justification is needed for attributing to him high rank as a thinker. One constant in the judgments made about Rousseau by his contemporaries and those made today is a radical division over the depth and consistency of his thought. On the one hand, in 1765, thirteen years before Rousseau's death, Kant proclaimed that Rousseau was the first to perceive and explain the order underlying apparently chaotic human moral experience and compared this achievement to Newton's revolution in understanding the

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-01828-0 - The Challenge of Rousseau
Edited by Eve Grace and Christopher Kelly
Excerpt
More information

physical world.[1] On the other hand, the next year, Voltaire wrote concerning Rousseau, "I find no genius in him; his detestable Novel, *Héloïse* is absolutely deprived of it, likewise *Emile*, and all his other works are those of an empty haranguer."[2] Comparably, the past eighty years have seen numerous scholarly attempts to show the systematic unity of Rousseau's thought.[3] The same period, however, has also seen books that insist that Rousseau was a man of feelings that overwhelmed his rational capacity. The most influential and valuable of these is the interpretation given by Jean Starobinski, who says of Rousseau,

> The will to unity is not served by a perfect conceptual clarity: it is a confused thrust of Rousseau's whole being rather than an intellectual method … It took Kant to "*think Rousseau's thoughts*," as Eric Weil has written (and I would add: it took Freud to "think" Rousseau's feelings).[4]

The essays in this volume are written by scholars who are divided by academic discipline, intellectual orientation, and sometimes by disagreements over interpretation of Rousseau's thought. They are united, however, in agreeing that Rousseau was quite capable of thinking his own thoughts (and thinking about his feelings as well) even without assistance from Kant or Freud. The goal of this collection is to demonstrate Rousseau's rank as a thinker by attending to his treatment of important philosophic issues and by exploring his engagement with the ideas of other major thinkers. Accordingly, it is more concerned with the substance of his thought than with his influence upon later thinkers.

[1] For an excellent discussion of this passage and Kant's engagement with Rousseau in general, see Susan Meld Shell, *The Embodiment of Reason: Kant on Spirit, Generation, and Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 81–7.

[2] Letter to Bordes, November 29, 1766, quoted by Henri Gouhier, *Rousseau et Voltaire: Portraits dans deux miroirs* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1983), 11.

[3] These attempts received their first impetus from Ernst Cassirer, "Das Problem Jean-Jacques Rousseau," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, B.41, 1932. Among the most important of them are Paul Audi, *De la véritable philosophie: Rousseau au commencement* (Paris: Le Nouveau Commerce, 1994); Robert Derathé, *Le rationalisme de J.-J. Rousseau* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948); Victor Goldschmidt, *Anthropologie et politique: Les principes du système de Rousseau*, 2d ed. (Paris: Vrin, 1983); Roger D. Masters, *The Political Philosophy of Rousseau* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968); and Arthur M. Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man: On the System of Rousseau's Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

[4] Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 115; emphasis in original. The extreme of this tendency to deny Rousseau's status as a thinker is found in J. H. Huizinga's question, "How could a character so feeble, a thinker so incoherent, a *littérateur* whose prose is so patchy, have earned world-wide recognition as a figure of great historical importance?" *The Making of a Saint: The Tragi-Comedy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1976), 268. Huizinga's answer to his question is that Rousseau had no importance or influence, for good or for bad, as a thinker or writer and that his reputation comes from a sort of public relations campaign.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-01828-0 - The Challenge of Rousseau
Edited by Eve Grace and Christopher Kelly
Excerpt
More information

There are, of course, reasons why it has been easy for some readers not to regard Rousseau as a philosopher. The first of these is that he himself occasionally took pride in denying that he was one. For example, when the Archbishop of Paris called him "a man full of the language of philosophy without being a true philosopher," Rousseau responded by denying that he used such language but agreed with the rest of the Archbishop's statement. He declared, "I have never aspired to that title, to which I acknowledge I have no right; and I am surely not renouncing it through modesty" (*Letter to Beaumont*, CW 9: 81). That Rousseau was a critic of philosophy, particularly in the form that it appeared among his contemporaries, is clear. The fact that he renounced the title of philosopher does not mean, however, that he renounced philosophy simply. From early in his career he referred approvingly to genuine philosophy, implying that there is much phony philosophy that passes under the name (*First Discourse*, CW 2: 5, 22). Rather than use the much abused title of philosopher, he consistently called himself a "friend of the truth." For example, in his famous "Letter to Voltaire" of August 18, 1756, he says that his letter is that "of a friend of the truth who speaks to a Philosopher" (CW 3: 109). Moreover, on numerous occasions he explicitly says that most of his works were written for a philosophic rather than a popular audience ("Preface to a Second Letter to Bordes," CW 2: 184–5; *Letter to d'Alembert*, CW 10: 255, 325; and *Letters Written from the Mountain*, CW 9: 212).

Another reason why it has been easy not to regard Rousseau as a philosopher is that his fame came in large part from works such as his opera *The Village Soothsayer*, and his novel *Julie*. One does not usually think of philosophers as writing immensely popular music and best-selling novels and, conversely, composers and novelists are not often thinkers of the highest rank. Furthermore, Rousseau's portrayal of the intimate details of his life in the *Confessions* draws attention to his experiences and his feelings much more than to his thought. In his draft of a preface he gives the work the subtitle, "Containing the detailed account of the events of his life, and of his secret feelings in all the situations in which he found himself" (CW 5: 585). Even when he discusses his most serious engagement with intellectual matters, Rousseau sometimes distracts us from the rational character of this engagement. He has a talent that is almost unsurpassed (although it is rivaled by Montaigne) for presenting the most profound issues in intimately personal terms. Nevertheless, even or precisely where he is exploring feelings and experiences open to all humans, Rousseau insists that his book "will always be a precious book for philosophers" (CW 5: 589). In sum, in spite of Rousseau's protestations, his claims about the philosophic importance of his works allow one to conclude that Rousseau is a philosopher (or friend of the truth) who subjects philosophy to a rigorous critique and who provides rational arguments to insist upon the importance of the non-philosophic elements of his experience, even while appealing to that experience to illustrate his rational arguments in compelling concrete form.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-01828-0 - The Challenge of Rousseau
Edited by Eve Grace and Christopher Kelly
Excerpt
More information

There is an additional reason why it has been easy not to regard Rousseau as a philosopher. Rousseau scholars tend to follow Rousseau's own example by dividing his life into two very distinct halves. The decisive moment that distinguishes these two halves is the famous "illumination" on the road to Vincennes in 1749. Rousseau's most complete description of this moment, in the second of the "Letters to Malesherbes" written in 1762, gives a particularly vivid account of a rupture from the past. Rousseau compares the illumination to a "sudden inspiration" accompanied by "a thousand lights," "inexpressible perturbation," "dizziness similar to drunkenness," and "violent palpitation" ("Letters to Malesherbes," CW 5: 575). This language suggests something like a revelation out of the blue rather than the result of serious reflection. From such an illumination one might expect power of expression rather than sustained argument.

Rousseau's decision to write works based on the insights acquired so suddenly turned him from a little known secretary into a famous writer, a result that surprised many who knew him best. In little more than a decade Rousseau published the *First* and *Second Discourses*, *The Village Soothsayer*, the *Letter to d'Alembert on the Theater*, *Julie*, *Emile*, and the *Social Contract*, to mention only his most notable works. Among authors, only Voltaire, whose string of successes had begun decades earlier, rivaled his fame throughout Europe. Given the suddenness and durability of this change in Rousseau's life, it hardly seems to be an exaggeration for him to describe it by saying, "I saw another universe and became another man" (*Confessions*, CW 5: 294).

Rousseau's own emphasis on this moment has led to a fairly uniform view of his career even among scholars who evaluate his work in very different ways. It is customary to refer to his early writings as the ones that were published in the years immediately following the illumination as if he had written nothing before and, indeed, even as if he had thought nothing before.[5] This does not mean, however, that Rousseau's life before the illumination receives little attention. Indeed there are few major thinkers whose childhood experiences and feelings have been subject to so much scholarly attention, in large part because Rousseau said so much about them. The unprecedented candor of the account of these experiences and feelings given in the *Confessions* has been a strong stimulus for psychologically oriented accounts of Rousseau's life. Those who direct their attention to Rousseau's life before the illumination tend to diminish the profundity of his mature thought by seeing it as the ultimate expression of deep-seated conflicts rooted in his childhood experience, while

[5] This can be seen even in a work like Mario Einaudi's *The Early Rousseau* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967) which is explicitly devoted to the years 1737–56. Einaudi devotes only a dozen pages to what Rousseau wrote before the illumination and neglects numerous works. Given how late Rousseau's literary career began, the division is more justifiable in Victor Gourevitch's two volumes of translations: *The Discourses and Other Early Writings*, which contains only one short work written before the illumination, and *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings* (DPW and SCPW).

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-01828-0 - The Challenge of Rousseau
Edited by Eve Grace and Christopher Kelly
Excerpt
More information

those who attempt to demonstrate the depth of his thought avoid considering what he did before the "illumination." In short, the division of Rousseau's life into two halves encourages a view that the first half was one of intense feeling and variety of experiences accompanied by little thought, and that the second was one of deep thought that either did or did not free itself from youthful feelings.

Rousseau's own authorization of any of these consequences of his division of his life is by no means clear, however. His more nuanced view of the matter becomes apparent if one looks at some of his writings close to the period of the illumination. For example, in the "Final Reply" written in 1752 in response to one of the many attacks on the *First Discourse*, Rousseau complains about the superficiality of those writers who hastened to oppose him, saying, "Before explaining myself, I meditated on my subject at length and deeply, and I tried to consider all aspects of it. I doubt that any of my adversaries can say as much" (CW 2: 110). It is quite unlikely that the term "at length" applies to the period of months it took him to write the *Discourse*. Indeed, a few years later, in reviewing the controversies in which he had been involved, he elaborates on this, saying,

> I wondered how anyone could write with so little discretion and no reflection about matters that I had meditated about almost my whole life without having been able to clarify them adequately, and I was always surprised not to find in my adversaries' writings a single objection that I had not seen and rejected in advance as unworthy of attention. ("Biographical Fragment," CW 12: 30)

In these passages Rousseau indicates that he had struggled for a long time prior to the illumination with precisely the issues that he addressed in the *Discourse* and subsequent writings. This evidence does not contradict that later account of the illumination. It does indicate that its result was not the sudden awareness of these important issues, but rather the sudden solution to questions that had plagued Rousseau for a long time.

In fact, Rousseau provides substantial evidence that this was the case. For example, in the *Confessions* he says that he had conceived the first idea for his *Political Institutions* – the unfinished work from which the *Social Contract* was extracted – when he was in Venice in 1743–4, years prior to the illumination. As early as 1740 he had been working on "a plan of education" that was "opposed to both received ideas and established customs" ("Memorandum Presented to M. de Mably on the Education of M. His Son," CW 12: 96). To this can be added Rousseau's statement in a letter that he wrote to his father, most likely in late 1735 when he was twenty-three years old. Replying to his father's expression of concern over his apparent lack of preparation for any career, he concluded his account of several possible professions open to him:

> Besides, I do not claim to find from that a decent pretext for living in laziness and in idleness; it is true that the void in my daily occupations is great, but I have entirely dedicated it to study … It is not to be feared that my taste will change; study has a charm

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-01828-0 - The Challenge of Rousseau
Edited by Eve Grace and Christopher Kelly
Excerpt
More information

that makes it so that once one has tasted it once, one can no longer turn one's back on it, and on the other hand its object is so beautiful that there is no one who can blame those who are fortunate enough to find some taste for it and to occupy themselves with it. (Leigh I, 32–3)

Rousseau's astonishing and unceasing productivity once he began to write shows that he never did lose this taste.

There is ample evidence of the seriousness of Rousseau's study during this period. In a letter to a Genevan bookseller from the same period as the one written to his father, he ordered copies of books on mathematics (including Newton's *Arithmetica*), on biblical chronology, on philology, and Bayle's *Historical and Critical Dictionary* (Leigh, I, 37–8). A few years later he published a poem in which he listed his studies of Montaigne, La Bruyère, Plato, astronomy, philosophy, and natural history, as well as novels and poetry ("The Orchard of Madame the Baronne de Warens," CW 12: 4–9). In addition to this contemporary evidence, there is his account in the *Confessions* written years later about how he spent his time during this period. This account emphasizes the uniformity of his existence which was spent largely in studying. Rousseau says that he spent several hours each morning studying works of philosophy, such as the *Logic* of Port Royal, Locke's *Essay*, Malebranche, Leibnitz, Descartes, and so on" (*Confessions*, CW 5: 199). After this he turned to mathematics and Latin. After dining he returned to his books, in particular attempting to reconcile biblical chronology to the evidence provided by astronomy. In short, during his twenties Rousseau educated himself through a very demanding course of self-imposed study.

During his thirties Rousseau continued this education when he was employed by the Dupin family as a sort of secretary/researcher in various projects covering chemistry, history, and economy. Thousands of pages of notes and manuscripts from this period bear witness to the extent of his intellectual activity. The fact that this was done for pay and directed by the interests of his employers should not detract from the amount he learned during this period. In particular, as Christopher Kelly argues in his essay, during this period of his life leading up to the "illumination" Rousseau made an in-depth study of Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*. All of this confirms Rousseau's claim quoted previously that, at the time he wrote the *First Discourse*, he had finally succeeded in reaching clarity after a very long period of sustained meditation.

To argue, however convincingly, that Rousseau had spent the decades before he launched his literary career studying and thinking does not in itself prove that he was a profound thinker. Demonstration of this requires close attention to what he wrote once he did begin to publish. In order to begin to consider this question, Kelly bids us read Rousseau's *First Discourse* in light of Montesquieu's inquiry into republicanism and commerce in *Spirit of the Laws*. Doing so clarifies why Rousseau held that Montesquieu was one of his most formidable adversaries, one whose writings made the last pieces of a complex puzzle – Rousseau's system – finally fall into place. Moreover, Kelly argues,

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-01828-0 - The Challenge of Rousseau
Edited by Eve Grace and Christopher Kelly
Excerpt
More information

such a comparison between Rousseau and Montesquieu shows why Rousseau thought that he had succeeded in seeing further than his illustrious opponent. While Rousseau agrees with Montesquieu that, when the laws of commerce rule society, they will perfect morals to the very degree that they slacken or corrupt them, he rejects the apparently self-evident superiority of gentleness, prosperity, and peace to the heart-stirring barbaric grandeur of ancient republican virtue. He utterly rejects as unproven and naïve folly the claim that a liberated and enlightened self-interest is all that is needed to endow virtue; he insists that the laws of commerce will lead to even more insidious forms of subjection and servility than have already been seen to exist. In sum, Kelly argues, the *First Discourse* is Rousseau's first statement of his assessment that his modern contemporaries have gravely miscalculated the foundation of moderation in both individuals and governments.

Kelly's essay calls into question the common opinion – propagated by Constant and Burke, among others – according to which Rousseau is a kind of zealot whose prescriptions are as impractical as they are careless of individual liberty.[6] Ryan Hanley performs a similar service in his examination of one of Rousseau's lesser known works, the *Third Discourse* or *Discourse on Political Economy*. In this work Rousseau – who declared both in the *Second Discourse* and the *Social Contract* that property, as well as life and liberty, are "constituent elements" of our being – does not discuss economic policy as we now often see it discussed. Rather, his chief concern is how political institutions and economic policies can affect the possibilities for freedom. Rousseau is skeptical that the aim of pursuing economic growth, rather than that of fostering stability, best accords with a more fundamental liberal aim of protecting individual property and liberty, and dignity. Because Rousseau seeks a synthesis between two positions which are often now understood to be deeply divided – the inviolability of property rights, on the one hand, and the demands of compassion for the unfortunate, on the other – his discourse on political economy, Hanley argues, constitutes a crucial contribution to contemporary debate. Likewise, more careful consideration of this discourse helps us to appreciate the pragmatic and liberal aspects of Rousseau's discussion of the general will in the *Social Contract*, and thus to see Rousseau's defense of freedom, and his attacks on commerce, in a far more nuanced light.

Perhaps even more common than the view that Rousseau is entirely inattentive to, or unversed in, economic matters is the view that he attacks the sciences while being himself, at best, little more than a scientific dilettante. On the basis of their research on Rousseau's unpublished scientific writings, Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent and Bruno Bernardi show that this view is in fact entirely erroneous. Rousseau had an enduring interest in science, and an

[6] Benjamin Constant, "The Liberty of the Ancients Compared to that of the Moderns," in Benjamin Constant, *Political Writings*, ed. Biancamara Fontana (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 318–20.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-01828-0 - The Challenge of Rousseau
Edited by Eve Grace and Christopher Kelly
Excerpt
More information

impressive breadth as well as depth of scientific knowledge: he not only wrote extensively on music (which was then considered a branch of mathematics), but also did extensive independent research in the natural sciences (particularly in chemistry and botany), and was, in addition, a competent geometer and mathematician. He was not only a member in good standing of the scientific community of his day, but clearly developed his own theories on current scientific issues and, of even more moment, reasoned systematically on scientific method. Strikingly, in his *Institutions chymiques* Rousseau sounds rather more like Francis Bacon than he does like his Savoyard Vicar, for he here contends that it is only by resolving mixed bodies into their constituent parts, and then by mimicking the operations of nature through the creation of new combinations not found in nature, that we can begin to make progress in understanding these operations. In other words, Rousseau shows a mastery of a scientific approach that he is later to call into question; he therefore cannot be said to dismiss it out of ignorance and without due consideration.

Just as Rousseau is often mistakenly supposed not to have reflected deeply on natural science, since he did not – unlike many other major thinkers – publish a work on epistemology, he is also supposed not to have reflected on the nature and status of reason. Terence Marshall's essay, weaving together Rousseau's statements on this critical subject from various writings including the "Profession of Faith," provides an equally rare and detailed examination of Rousseau's epistemological teaching. Starting from a thoroughgoing critique of materialist theories of the mind or soul, Rousseau argues that we are compelled to grant that human judgment or will is indeterminate, and thereby defends a domain of human freedom or of independence against necessity. In so doing, Marshall argues, Rousseau's account of reason, pointing toward a kind of idealism, is not only distinct from that of his modern philosophical predecessors, but also from that of ancient philosophers. In Rousseau's account, unlike Plato's, will or judgment are the instruments of a more fundamental cause that lies outside the judgment or will, in the nonrational part of the soul. This is the source of the "sentiment" that according to Rousseau is the charioteer of the human soul.

That Rousseau's philosophic system is forged in the heat of contention with ancient philosophers, as well as with his modern predecessors and contemporaries, is a central claim of Leo Strauss's germinal essay, an essay whose publication played a critical role in prompting reconsideration of Rousseau's stature as a philosopher. In this essay, Strauss seeks to lay bare the fundamental principles that Rousseau repeatedly claims unified his writings, as they appear in the *First Discourse*. According to Strauss, Rousseau thought that the "modern venture was a radical error," and he therefore set out to restore both the classical understanding of the ancient city and its understanding of philosophy.[7] He saw that the requirements of healthy politics are diametrically opposed to the

[7] Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 252.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-01828-0 - The Challenge of Rousseau
Edited by Eve Grace and Christopher Kelly
Excerpt
More information

requirements of science or philosophy. Rousseau is not, however, simply taking the side of duty or decency over and against that of reason. The *First Discourse* begins with an ode not only to the beauty of knowledge, but also to its absolute necessity since – as he says repeatedly – the question whether we have duties at all and can justly be held to them is a central question not only for political philosophy, but for philosophy simply (*First Discourse*, CW 2: 4). Hence, Rousseau attacks the Enlightenment in the interest of philosophy or science as well, for he believes that the general diffusion of scientific knowledge will have even less of a salutary effect on philosophy, which needs intransigent independence of mind, than it will have on morals.

Nevertheless – Strauss argues – Rousseau agreed with the suppositions of modern natural science. His project of restoration therefore not only failed, but failed spectacularly, for he took significant steps on a path that was ultimately to lead to modern nihilism. Rousseau precipitated the self-destruction of modern rationalism; after Rousseau, philosophy became unable to defend a clear doctrine of right, to defend the intelligibility of the modern scientific project, or even coherently to justify its own existence. In Strauss's presentation, the crisis of philosophy seems to be coeval with Rousseau's decidedly nonclassical defense of radical democracy, for both are rooted in the same cause: the argument according to which Rousseau convinced those who followed him that reason is the servant of nonrational drives that it does not control and that it cannot even adequately know.

In his essay, Victor Gourevitch seeks to rebut Strauss's presentation of Rousseau, particularly as it appears in the section devoted to Rousseau in his later book, *Natural Right and History*. While Strauss's earlier article may have been an important moment in the history of Rousseau scholarship, neither treatment did Rousseau a service since, according to Gourevitch, Strauss distorts his thought by subsuming it to Strauss's own philosophical aims. Strauss uses Rousseau to illustrate the unfolding storyline of modernity as Strauss saw it, rather than seeking – insofar as that is possible – to understand Rousseau as he understood himself. As Gourevitch attempts to demonstrate, Strauss's interpretation of Rousseau is possible only on the basis of an unwarranted reading of Rousseau's central arguments in his fundamental work, the *Second Discourse*; and that misreading – intentional or not – is required to attain the peripety of the story Strauss tells in *Natural Right and History*. According to this story, Rousseau precipitated the crisis of modern philosophy by attempting to find a neutral metaphysical position – comparable to the one Strauss sees in modern natural science – that would enable him to escape the conflict between Epicureanism and Platonism, or between materialism and anti-materialism. Rousseau should have seen, however, that such a neutral position is simply impossible. Strauss then levels the related charges that Rousseau perhaps unwittingly contributed to the demotion of philosophy to a branch of "culture," and to a form of "reverie" ultimately hostile to thought or even careful observation. Gourevitch's detailed examination of

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-01828-0 - The Challenge of Rousseau
Edited by Eve Grace and Christopher Kelly
Excerpt
More information

these charges denies their gravamen. He concludes that Strauss's treatment of Rousseau obscures the "amazingly lucid vision" that Strauss himself had acknowledged in him in his early essay.

Rousseau himself does provide ample ammunition for the criticism that he fosters a kind of easygoing sentimentalism. He is, after all, famous for declaring that all we need do in order to know that our nature is governed by conscience is to listen, in the silence of the passions, to what we really believe in the sincerity of our hearts. Statements such as these also seem to show that Rousseau did not conceive self-knowledge as a very difficult problem (e.g., OC 1: 1788/1024 n3). As Eve Grace argues in her essay, however, Rousseau directly contradicts this view in the *Second Discourse*, the work he points to as the clearest and most radical statement of his principles. That work, in fact, not only flatly denies that full self-knowledge is possible, but also treats the existence of a natural law, and by extension the conscience, as critical problems requiring careful reflection rather than as matters of subjective feeling.

So according to Grace, Rousseau's understanding of natural law is rather more sophisticated than the one with which he is usually credited. We can more fully clarify that understanding by considering Rousseau's principle of perfectibility, which was the key to his approach to the question of nature in the *Second Discourse* – an approach distinct from that taken by modern natural science – and the key to his search for the "genuine end" of his own life (*Reveries*, CW 8: 18–19). Rousseau's examination of nature in light of this principle leads to the conclusion that there is no foundation in nature, either in moral sentiment or in reason itself, for a moral duty to do unto others as we would have done unto us. Philosophy's attempt to establish natural law leads to an impasse, leaving us with no middle ground between the view of biblical revelation (that justice is commanded of us by an authoritative Lawgiver) and the view that we are radically free (of any law that would prevent us from seeking to do above all as self-love directs). Far from seeking in the *Second Discourse* a "neutral position" beyond metaphysical and moral presuppositions, Grace argues, Rousseau explores the *aporias* into which philosophy leads in its attempt to understand the relation between reason and nature.

Matthew Maguire presents Rousseau as a philosopher whose originality lies in part in questioning the coherence and goodness of a philosophical life. According to Maguire, Rousseau increasingly wondered whether the proud philosopher is in full or even partial accord with nature and with truth, and whether the pursuit of truth can in the end harmonize with a life of charity. We can follow Rousseau's internal debate about how to understand and to judge his own activity by tracing the lineaments of two strikingly different, even contradictory, portraits of philosophers that we find in Rousseau's writings: one of these portraits shows a cold and self-contained – and inhumane – being, while the other shows a being moved by a mysterious and uncontrollable enthusiasm for beauty, truth, and justice, a being whose greatest ambition is to be a charitable benefactor. Rousseau's intensifying ambivalence about philosophy,

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org