

# The Ambiguities of Rousseau's Conception of Happiness

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Boston College

The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

Department of Political Science

THE AMBIGUITIES OF ROUSSEAU'S CONCEPTION OF HAPPINESS

a dissertation

by

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Dissertation abstract

*The Ambiguities of Rousseau's Conception of Happiness*

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Supervised by Christopher Kelly

This dissertation is a discussion of the many ambiguities surrounding Rousseau's conception of happiness. In the first chapter, I expose Rousseau's various conceptions of happiness in *Émile*. His main conception is offered at the beginning of Book II. Rousseau defines happiness as the equilibrium between desires and faculties. I show how this definition fits with his conception of human nature as it is developed in the *Second Discours*. Then I turn to a brief exposition of the alternative ideas of happiness that are exposed in the remaining of *Émile*. I also discuss various recent interpretations of Rousseau's understanding of happiness.

I turn to Rousseau's autobiographical writings for the remaining chapters. The second chapter discusses Rousseau's self-understanding of what made him miserable during his life. I focus on two episodes of his life: his break with the Parisian life and his crisis during the publication of *Émile*. I show how Rousseau often blames the circumstances or others for his unhappiness rather than his opinions or his heart.

The last two chapters attempt to define what the happiness was that Rousseau experienced. The third chapter tries to understand what sort of solitude makes Rousseau happy, and if indeed he is happy in this situation. I explore why society is unsatisfying for him and whether his desire to be alone is coherent. The final chapter discusses the nature of Rousseau's blissful *rêveries*. I show how melancholia appears

to be at the center of his ecstasies in the second letter to Malesherbes. In the Fifth Walk of the *Rêveries*, however, Rousseau seems to settle for a quasi-lethargic experience. The minimal sentiment of his own existence he defines as happiness is compared to other blissful experiences described in the book. Finally, I discuss whether Rousseau needed to know the truth or to philosophize in order to be happy. In particular, I discuss his claim in the Third Walk to be in need of the doctrine of the *Profession de foi du Vicaire savoyard* to be happy. Rousseau's sincerity is ambiguous. Its analysis unveils a few problems about his claims to be selfless and to have dedicated his life to the truth.

*Le sort de ce mortel heureux et□malheureux à la fois, eut été ce me semble un étrange□problème.*

Rousseau, *Émile*

*Le tems qu'on employe à savoir ce que d'autres ont pensé étant perdu pour apprendre à penser soi-même, on a plus de lumières acquises et moins de vigueur d'esprit.*

Rousseau, *Émile*

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## Abbreviations of texts cited

*E = Émile*

*C = Les Confessions*

*D = Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques (Dialogues)*

*R = Les Rêveries du Promeneur Solitaire*

*Beaumont = Lettre à Christophe de Beaumont*

*PD = Discours sur les sciences et les arts (Premier Discours)*

*SD = Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes (Second Discours)*

*LAD = Lettre à d'Alembert sur les spectacles*

*LAM = Quatre lettres à M. le Président de Malesherbes*

*LM = Lettres morales*

*J = Julie ou la Nouvelle-Héloïse*

# Introduction

Writing a dissertation on Jean-Jacques Rousseau's conception of happiness can only be a mistake. True happiness cannot be described: "Le vrai bonheur ne se décrit pas, il se sent" (C, OC I, p. 236). It cannot be described because it is a sentiment that has no object but itself: "Si [le bonheur] consistoit en faits, en actions, en paroles, je pourrois le décrire et le rendre, en quelque façon: mais comment dire ce qui n'étoit ni dit, ni fait ni pensé même, mais goûté, mais senti, sans que je puisse énoncer d'autre objet de mon bonheur que ce sentiment même" (C, OC I, p. 225). Happiness is the sentiment of happiness. What more is there to say?

Yet in the same passage of the *Confessions* from which the quotations above are drawn, Rousseau goes on at length to depict the happiness he experienced during his time at the *Charmettes*. Obviously, Rousseau did not think he could not say anything about happiness. In fact, Rousseau talked of happiness at greater length than perhaps any other philosopher. His first discourse examined whether the arts and sciences can contribute to man's happiness. His second discourse opens with a letter in which Rousseau paints a happy society, and argues in the rest of the work in favor of the happiness found in the state of nature and against the misery of civilized life. His *Émile* is the attempt to make a man happy at all stages of his life. His *Julie* marks the heart of its readers with its extraordinary depiction of the felicity of love. As Bernard Gagnebin remarks: "On peut

dire que l'œuvre de Rousseau n'est, sous un certain angle, qu'une longue méditation sur le bonheur."<sup>1</sup>

While there exist works dedicated to Rousseau's conception of religion, of liberty, of goodness, of the state of nature, of women, of knowledge, there exists no work dedicated to his understanding of happiness. The few articles that focus on the issue are unanimous in noting the difficulty in understanding Rousseau's final position. They all depict differently Rousseau's conception of happiness. Bernard Gagnebin's article piles up the conditions of happiness without organizing them in a hierarchy or solving the apparent contradictions between a few of them.<sup>2</sup> Stephen G. Salkever says that Rousseau has "a very complex understanding of the nature of happiness" but that he at least clearly points out "the central importance of moderation or a moderate life for [...] the sentiment of happiness."<sup>3</sup> Ronald Grimsley believes that Rousseau thought that the highest form of happiness was achieved through an act of will and through morality, in the exercise of freedom and in the participation in the spiritual order governing the universe as a whole. However, his personal experience compelled him to look anew at his understanding of happiness. His failure to be happy here below leads him to conclude that it is impossible to present "a fixed reflective account of perfect happiness."<sup>4</sup> Robert Dérathé warns his reader about the difficulty in understanding Rousseau's conception of happiness: "Il y a

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1. Bernard Gagnebin, "Les conditions du bonheur chez Jean-Jacques Rousseau" in *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses*, Vol. 55 (1975), p. 71.

2. Bernard Gagnebin, "Les conditions du bonheur chez Jean-Jacques Rousseau," p. 82.

3. Stephen G. Salkever, "Rousseau and the Concept of Happiness" in *Polity*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Autumn 1978), p. 40. Victor Gourevitch shares the same opinion: "The Religious Thought" in *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau*, Patrick Riley, ed. (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 214.

4. Ronald Grimsley, "Rousseau and the Problem of Happiness" in *Hobbes and Rousseau: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Maurice Cranston, Richard S. Peters, eds. (New York : Anchor Books, 1972), p. 443-444 and 461.

chez Rousseau une philosophie du bonheur très nuancée et singulièrement complexe qui prend par instants l'allure d'une véritable dialectique."<sup>5</sup> This dialectic is between the natural simplicity of earlier times and the development of consciousness brought by civilization. Derathé thinks that this dialectic culminates in the recovery of the feeling of one's own existence, a feeling that was available to the savage but that becomes authentic only to civilized men.

The lack of consensus among commentators on the question and the intrinsic difficulty of defining Rousseau's final understanding of happiness are enough to warrant a dissertation on the topic. But the most important motivation for choosing this question is the central importance of happiness for our lives. Although happiness is for most of us the goal of all of our actions, we usually do not give considerable thought to what it is. We devote more time thinking of the means to achieve happiness than to happiness itself, as if its nature is evident. Only in times of crisis do we stop to think about what would truly make us happy. But these difficult times are not often the best times to think coolly about this most important matter. While this dissertation is more a probing into the intricacies and difficulties of Rousseau's texts than a philosophical discussion of happiness, and is addressed to the Rousseauist scholar rather than to the general reader, I thought that it would be useful and wise to dedicate an important part of my academic life to a question that goes beyond historical and philological interests. Considering the care Rousseau gave to the question, I also thought that even an imperfect understanding of his thought may throw light on this fundamental issue. Finally, considering the influence that

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5. Robert Derathé, "La dialectique du bonheur chez Jean-Jacques Rousseau" in *Revue de théologie et de philosophie* (Lausanne, 1952), p. 81. See also p. 89.

Rousseau has had on our conception of happiness, I thought that understanding his ideas may help me and my reader understand who we are.

This dissertation will be limited to the question of the happiness of the individual rather than of society. One reason for this choice is my opinion that Rousseau has had more influence on us on moral issues than on political issues. The main body of this dissertation will be dedicated to Rousseau's so-called autobiographical works.<sup>6</sup> I am more interested in knowing what is the happiness Rousseau experienced himself, because I presume that Rousseau's own experience was to his own eyes the highest form of happiness possible. Rousseau confirms this hypothesis in many instances when he claims that his experience was a human peak. By focusing on his experience of happiness and its various descriptions in his autobiographical writings, we are more likely to avoid the mistake of confusing lower forms of happiness for Rousseau with his genuine understanding of happiness.

A thorough analysis of Rousseau's autobiographical works would be a daunting task. For this reason, I will concentrate on his letters to Malesherbes and on the *Rêveries du Promeneur Solitaire*. It is not, however, a simple question of limits that draws my attention towards the letters and the *Rêveries*. Rousseau's four letters to Malesherbes sent at the beginning of 1762 have Rousseau's happiness as a central theme. They are an

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6. By « autobiographical works », I simply mean the *Confessions*, the *Dialogues*, the *Rêveries* and arguably some of Rousseau's letters (at least his *Letters to Malesherbes*). I will contrast these writings to his "theoretical writings", by which I mean his major works published during his life. I do not imply that Rousseau's autobiographical writings do not contain Rousseau's theory or have no universal value, or that Rousseau's theoretical writings do not contain an autobiographical part or teach nothing about Rousseau himself. I just use the distinction for its simplicity and because I am interested in Rousseau's self-account. Of course, a more faithful division of Rousseau's works would use a division made by Rousseau himself. For instance, Rousseau divides his body of work in the First Walk between the "*monumens de mon innocence*" (by which he seems to mean the *Confessions* and the *Dialogues*) and his "*vrais écrits*" (by which he seems to mean all the rest) (*R*, OC I, p. 1001).

answer to a letter from Malesherbes in which he said he believed Rousseau to be unhappy. The third letter is particularly relevant to my topic, since Rousseau describes in it a typical happy day. It is famous for its depiction of happiness as the result of an ecstatic *rêverie* in the solitude of nature.

It would be a mistake to discard these letters as irrelevant to Rousseau's self-understanding because they are private letters rather than a major work. Rousseau's intention with these letters was to make up for the memoirs he thought he would never write because he was about to die. Rousseau intended to publish the letters even after he finally wrote these memoirs (the *Confessions*).<sup>7</sup> The letters provide a good outlook of certain ideas Rousseau will develop in his future autobiographical writings. We find in these latter works some passages that are directly related to what Rousseau said in the four letters, if they are not at times a copy of what Rousseau said.

What is also interesting in these four letters is that they provide a picture of Rousseau, so to speak, *au naturel*. They were written at a time when Rousseau did not believe in a plot orchestrated to make him miserable. His analysis of the causes of his misery aims more directly at the nature of things than at an incredible accident. The *Rêveries*, on the other hand, were written at the height of Rousseau's belief to be the victim of a conspiracy. But they explain how Rousseau found a way to be happy despite his persecutors. Their relevance for my topic primarily comes from the Fifth Walk, which is Rousseau's most famous description of his happiness. But the whole book is filled with reflections on the nature and conditions of Rousseau's happiness.

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7. See C, OC I, p. 569.



Another advantage of focusing on these two works is that they are the alpha and omega of Rousseau's autobiographical work. They show Rousseau's original and final understanding of the essence of his happiness. By grasping both ends of his autobiographical work, I hope to set the stage for a foray towards its core.

Before giving a sketch of how this dissertation will be structured, I will give a brief account of the method I will use and of the hermeneutical alternatives to which the autobiographical writings have lent themselves.

### *The Psychological and the Esoteric Interpretations*

Rousseau is famously known for his paradoxes. This is true of the two meanings of the term. Rousseau loved to question what were deemed to be certitudes. His motto *Vitam impendere vero* – to dedicate oneself to the truth – announced his intention to criticize the dogmas of his time even if the price was unpopularity. His love of paradoxes was apparent in his first major piece, his *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*, in which he attacked the defining philosophical movement of his century. His treaty on education, *Émile*, is also full of pieces of advice opposed to what common opinions and traditions dictated. Rousseau's thought is also paradoxical in the sense that it is contradictory. His writings seem to offer different notions of freedom, of nature, of love, or of happiness for that matter, that are apparently irreconcilable. Rousseau provides contradictory opinions on the same issue within his various works, if not within the same work, so much that many have described his philosophy as irresolute, or worse, as incoherent.

Rousseau's autobiographical writings also defend opinions that run counter to common sense and say different things at different places; but they take the challenge of reconciling Rousseau to himself on a new level. We see Rousseau often act in direct contradiction to his professed principles. The contradictions between his behavior and his principles make the interpreter wonder if Rousseau did not personally hold different principles from those he professes in his theoretical writings – and whether he was aware of it or not. It would not be that problematic if Rousseau always acknowledged in these cases his failure to live up to his principles. But Rousseau does not always provide the impression that he disapproves of what he has done; sometimes he even vindicates his contradictory behavior without providing an explanation for his apparent change of opinion. Moreover, the interpreter has to deal with his personality; he or she has to decide what to make of his eccentric behavior and his patently excessive sensitivity, and most notably with his belief to be the victim of a universal conspiracy. The fact that Rousseau's reputation is at stake in these writings may also distort his account. Is he telling the truth or is he attempting to appear better than he is to fend off the attacks of his accusers? Because of their historical character, the autobiographical writings also offer a set of contradictions that are mostly absent from his theoretical writings. Rousseau's account of events or people is often found flawed or confused in light of independent sources. Even his own correspondence provides alternative accounts of the same events and people. Much speculation has accordingly been made on Rousseau's interest to hide or distort the historical truth.

These paradoxes and contradictions have generally invited two diametrically opposed interpretations. The first explains Rousseau's contradictions as the result of hidden psychological impulses. The second explains these contradictions as the deliberate effect of Rousseau's hidden intention. In short, the psychological approach is convinced that Rousseau's self-understanding is flawed because he is driven by impulses of which he is unaware. To resolve a paradox or a contradiction, the psychological interpretation sometimes uses an explanation that is never provided by Rousseau himself, or it points to a dimension of Rousseau's character that Rousseau unveils somewhere in his book, but that he himself does not use to explain what is at stake. It tends therefore to say more or say less than what Rousseau says himself at the surface of the text. The esoteric interpretation solves the paradoxes and contradiction by distinguishing two discourses. The exoteric discourse is the surface and does not represent Rousseau's true thought. The esoteric discourse is unveiled by a misquotation, or a subtle allusion, or a plain contradiction. If the interpreter correctly understands the edifying intention of Rousseau, then he is able to separate the exoteric discourse from the esoteric one. As a result, the surface of the text is dismissed as superficial. It does not reveal who Rousseau truly was or what he genuinely thought.

Two articles on the *Rêveries* nicely exemplify each kind of interpretation. Dominique Froidefond's article "Jean-Jacques Rousseau: le trop-plein et le non-dit dans la 'Première Promenade'" correctly remarks that Rousseau's claims to have achieved tranquility of mind in the *Rêveries* are contradicted by other statements in the same book where he appears anxious. She chides commentators who have taken his tranquility for

granted. Yet she takes the opposite claim for granted. Her conviction is that Rousseau is anxious. For instance, the fact that Rousseau repeats how tranquil he has become betrays his anxiety of thinking of himself as happy. The repetition is an attempt to hypnotize himself with words and to become persuaded that he is indeed happy.<sup>8</sup> Because she is persuaded that Rousseau is fundamentally unhappy, she does not offer a satisfying analysis of the alternative, which is on the surface equally credible. Accordingly, she must claim to know more about Rousseau's mental state than what Rousseau's discourses say at the surface. She may be right, but since it is not Rousseau who says so, it is more speculation than analysis. To enter into such speculation, one must first demonstrate why the other main possibility offered at the surface of the text is not Rousseau's genuine stance.

Heinrich Meier's article: "Rousseau: über das philosophischen Leben" departs from the surface of the text for a different reason.<sup>9</sup> Like Froidefond, Meier correctly notes how Rousseau's claims to have achieved peace of mind are contradicted by other statements. He agrees with Froidefond in suggesting that Rousseau's peacefulness is a smokescreen. But, according to Meier, this illusion is not created to hide his anxiety. If Rousseau depicts himself as a man who finds happiness in tranquility and daydreaming, it is because he wants his non-philosophical reader to believe that philosophy is an innocent and inoffensive activity. The happy few, however, should be able to detect behind this

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8. "Cette réitération traduit ou plutôt trahit l'angoisse de Rousseau qui voudrait croire en une possibilité de repos et qui cherche à se persuader par les mots" (Dominique Froidefond, "Jean-Jacques Rousseau: le trop-plein et le non-dit dans la 'Première Promenade'" in *Annales de la société Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, Vol. 41 (1997), p. 113. See also p. 121-123).

9. Heinrich Meier, *Rousseau: über das philosophischen Leben*, Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung, München, 2005.

smokescreen a defense of philosophy as classical philosophers understood it. However, Meier does not show why interpreting Rousseau's happiness as *farniente* is absurd. The surface of the text supports both the idea that Rousseau finds happiness in a passive state and that he finds it in the meditation on fundamental questions. Moreover, Rousseau does not give any explicit indication that he wrote the *Rêveries* with the intention to hide his happiness from the non-philosophical reader. Meier speculates on Rousseau's intention like Froidefond speculates on his anxiety. They both make claims that are unsupported by the surface of the text.

I do not use any of these two types of interpretation, because they neglect the surface of the text. I do not mean that they *willfully* neglect the surface of the text or that they are careless about it. The interpreter may very well have carefully studied the surface to conclude that it did not deliver what was most useful to understand the text. What I mean is that the outcome of these interpretations – their commentaries – do not begin with the elaboration of the problems present at the surface of the text. The presence of contradictions at the surface does not automatically prove that the text is the product of unconscious passions or of a hidden intention. One cannot start with assumptions on Rousseau's psychological state or on his intention. One must first demonstrate why a simple or naïve reading is unsatisfying. Both interpretations require exposing the surface of the text as it is, without hiding or exaggerating the contradictions, and then weigh the alternatives, before adopting the idea that Rousseau is secretly driven by his passions or is hiding his intention.

Accordingly, I do not claim that previous interpretations have not reached the true meaning of Rousseau's autobiographical writings, but that, more often than not, the interpretation does not sufficiently state why its set of assumptions is necessary to interpret the text or why its conclusions are more solid than what is explicit and apparent on the surface. The assumptions already guide the interpretation of the surface towards the conclusion it means to reach. Here one is forced to flatly deny that some statements Rousseau makes are true. Again, it is possible that Rousseau did not believe what he said (either because of his passions or of his intention), but I do not want to begin with this assumption. It seems to me necessary to start with the exposition of the problems at the surface in order to arrive at solid conclusions.

This method means not reading Rousseau's autobiographical writings in light of a theory – be it Freudian or Platonic. Once again, I do not claim that these interpretations are false. But if the goal of the interpreter is to understand Rousseau as he understood himself, the preliminary step is to extract what Rousseau meant himself. It is to use Rousseau's own concepts rather than foreign ones. Even a reading of his autobiographical texts in light of Rousseau's philosophical theory appears to go a step too far to me. These texts may unveil a different understanding on the same issues that Rousseau had discussed in his earlier works. By reading these texts in light of his theory, one assumes that Rousseau wants to expound the same truths in both works. One also assumes that Rousseau would like his autobiographies to be read in light of his theory. But Rousseau has very little recourse to his theory when he tells his life story. He does not make a systematic use of his system, so to speak, in order to make us understand his

personality. Thus, unless Rousseau makes an explicit reference to one of his works – for instance, when he claims in a letter to Moulton to follow the advice of Milord Édouard on suicide –, I do not solve the issues raised by his statements with the help of his other works. It seems preferable to me to read each text as if I knew nothing about Rousseau's philosophy.

However, once these issues are exposed, I do not refrain from using Rousseau's theory to discuss possible solutions. I also use his theory to raise questions about some of his claims in the autobiographical writings. What I have tried to avoid is to decide what Rousseau means to say by referring to what I deem to be Rousseau's philosophical principles. I do not assume that the contradictions of his autobiographical accounts could only be solved by resorting to his theory. On the contrary, it is possible that Rousseau's autobiographical writings throw a new light on his theory. This is certainly one of the interesting dimensions of these writings and an additional motivation for this dissertation. The question of natural goodness in opposition to virtue is particularly deepened by Rousseau's autobiographical writings.

In short, my primary aim is to describe the surface of the text. I begin by assuming that what is at the surface of the text is what Rousseau means. If Rousseau makes a categorical statement, the interpreter must not transform it into a hypothetical statement; if he makes an absolute statement, it must not become for the commentator a conditional statement; if he makes a statement that is excessive, the commentator must not water it down. My intention is to state what is obviously there in the text. If there is an excess to which this sort of interpretation is liable, it is to take the author's statements too literally.

I do not, however, limit myself to the exposition of the surface of the text. In some instances, I analyze a passage with the help of a question that is not directly raised by Rousseau in the context. In other circumstances, I speculate on the various answers or on an interesting answer to the contradictions offered by the surface of the text. In these sections, I do not refrain from making assumptions about Rousseau's passions or about his intention. But I have tried to separate my speculations from the exposition of the surface of the text and show what objections and difficulties they are facing.

My method could be said to be heuristic: its aim is to demonstrate the various possible answers to Rousseau's most important paradoxes with the help of provisional hypothesis and conclusions. The result is that many issues I raise in this dissertation are left without a true answer. I do not come with a solution that explains what happiness is for Rousseau or a theory that unifies all of his claims in a coherent whole. In the end, there are too many irresolvable contradictions and obscurities for me to decide what Rousseau truly means. My awareness of the problems remains greater (and in fact, increased from what it was at the outset) than the credibility of the possible solutions. In the final analysis, I am convinced that it is necessary to go beyond the surface of the text to provide a coherent interpretation of Rousseau's conception of happiness. But it is necessary for this interpretation to be based on the thorough exploration of the various alternatives offered by the surface of the text. This dissertation establishes what lies at the surface of the text as well as a few possible answers to its difficulties. It will end where another could begin.



### *The Plan of the Dissertation*

This dissertation is divided in four chapters. In the first chapter, I expose Rousseau's various conceptions of happiness in *Émile*. His main conception is offered at the beginning of Book II. Rousseau defines happiness as the equilibrium between desires and faculties. I show how this definition fits with his conception of human nature as it is developed in the *Second Discours*. Then I turn to a brief exposition of the alternative ideas of happiness that are exposed in the remaining of *Émile*. I also discuss various recent interpretations of Rousseau's understanding of happiness.

I turn to Rousseau's autobiographical writings for the remaining chapters. The second chapter discusses Rousseau's self-understanding of what made him miserable during his life. I focus on two episodes of his life: his break with the Parisian life and his crisis during the publication of *Émile*. I show how Rousseau often blames the circumstances or others for his unhappiness rather than his opinions or his heart.

The last two chapters attempt to define what the happiness was that Rousseau experienced. I limit myself to the experiences that are related in his four letters to Malesherbes and to *Les rêveries du Promeneur Solitaire* for reasons explained earlier. The third chapter tries to understand what sort of solitude makes Rousseau happy, and if indeed he is happy in this situation. I explore why society is unsatisfying for him and whether his desire to be alone is coherent.

The final chapter discusses the nature of Rousseau's blissful *rêveries*. I show how melancholia appears to be at the center of his ecstasies in the second letter to

Malesherbes. In the Fifth Walk of the *Rêveries*, however, Rousseau seems to settle for a quasi-lethargic experience. The minimal sentiment of his own existence he defines as happiness is compared to other blissful experiences described in the book. Finally, I discuss whether Rousseau needed to know the truth or to philosophize in order to be happy. In particular, I discuss his claim in the Third Walk to be in need of the doctrine of the *Profession de foi du Vicaire savoyard* to be happy. Rousseau's sincerity is ambiguous. Its analysis unveils a few problems about his claims to be selfless and to have dedicated his life to the truth.

# Chapter One

## *Happiness as Equilibrium*

To begin my inquiry into Rousseau's conception of happiness, I will examine his definition of happiness as equilibrium of the desires and the faculties as it is presented at the beginning of Book II of *Émile*. This definition stands above the others because it appears to be a corollary of Rousseau's system and because it offers the fundamental principle of Émile's education. I will then turn to a discussion of the validity of this definition for Rousseau. My goal in this chapter is to delimit the possible interpretations of Rousseau's understanding of happiness in *Émile*. His idea of happiness is rich and complex, and the unity of his thought is not evident. In harmony with the heuristic goal of my dissertation, this chapter identifies four possible conceptions of happiness for Rousseau. The possibilities raised in this chapter will also be used as points of comparison when I will turn in the next two chapters to Rousseau's understanding of his own happiness.

## *1 – The Theory of Equilibrium*

### *1.1 – A Summary of the Theory*

The theory of equilibrium appears at the outset of Book II of *Émile*. Its core is presented at page 304 of the fourth volume of the Pléiade edition. It is followed by a lengthy discussion of its implications, before Rousseau resumes his description of Émile's education at page 311. The theory is premised on the idea that misery comes from desiring:

Tout sentiment de peine est inséparable du desir de s'en délivrer; toute idée de plaisir est inséparable du desir d'en jouir; tout desir suppose privation, et toutes les privations qu'on sent sont pénibles; c'est donc dans la disproportion de nos desirs et de nos facultés que consiste nôtre misère (*E*, OC IV, p. 304-305).

If misery is the result of a disproportion between our desires and our faculties, then happiness is an equilibrium between them:

En quoi donc consiste la sagesse humaine ou la route du vrai bonheur? Ce n'est pas précisément à diminuer nos desirs; car s'ils étoient au dessous de nôtre puissance, une partie de nos facultés resteroit oisive, et nous ne jouirions pas de tout nôtre être. Ce n'est pas non plus à étendre nos facultés, car si nos desirs s'étendoient à la fois en plus grand rapport, nous n'en deviendrions que plus misérables: mais c'est à diminuer l'excès des desirs sur les facultés, et à mettre en égalité parfaite la puissance et la volonté. C'est alors seulement que toutes les forces étant en action l'ame cependant restera paisible, et que l'homme se trouvera bien ordonné (*E*, OC IV, p. 304).

Rousseau sums up his idea in the next paragraph by talking of “l’équilibre du pouvoir et du désir.” I shall therefore use the term “equilibrium” to refer to this conception of happiness.

The road to happiness lies mainly in decreasing our desires. However, they must not be decreased to the point where our faculties will be left idle. One must strike a perfect balance between desire and capacity. This means that the success of our endeavors must be fully within our own powers. “I will what I can achieve” could be the motto of the theory of equilibrium.

Rousseau does not seem at first to care about what sorts of desires and faculties a man must develop to be happy. As long as both are in equilibrium, a man will be happy. Yet a few paragraphs later, Rousseau says that it is only certain desires that allow for equilibrium of the soul. Force<sup>1</sup>, health and self-esteem are the only real goods. They should be the sole objects of our desires. However, the first two goods are not solely within our power to obtain. In a sense, we will remain dependent on Fortune and others. But if we want to be happy, we need to reduce this dependence to its minimum. Sicknesses, getting old and dying are not sources of misery to those whose desires are not inflated by their imagination.<sup>2</sup> Poverty is not a problem when we are independent with respect to our means of subsistence. As for self-esteem, it is entirely within our power to increase and conserve.

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1. By force, Rousseau seems to mean “physical strength.”

2. Rousseau seems to consider health as a good that mainly depends on nature and education, rather than Fortune: *E*, OC IV, p. 536. He says, however, that this is a “rash” understanding of the causes that produce health. See also p. 678.

All other goods are imaginary. This means that wealth, honor, friendship, leisure and wisdom, among other goods, should not be the object of our desires. They do not bring satisfaction because one never has enough of them. Wisdom, for instance, cannot satisfy us because we will always desire more wisdom than what we possess. We count for nothing the wisdom we have acquired in comparison to the wisdom we consider possible to obtain. The main culprit for our dissatisfaction with these other goods is the faculty of imagination. It is our imagination that extends our desires infinitely and makes them impossible to satisfy. Thus imagination is the faculty that must be kept under our control if we want to be happy. In his theory of equilibrium, Rousseau does not have anything positive to say about this faculty. It is the source of our misery, but not of our happiness, since health, strength and self-esteem presumably do not need a developed imagination to be enjoyed.

Imagination can however corrupt these goods by making us desire them beyond our powers. This is why Rousseau reduces the source of all our miseries to “foreseeing.” To achieve equilibrium and happiness, we must live in the present rather than in the past or in the future. We must contract our existence to our direct sphere of influence to be happy. Contracting our being means considering ourselves mainly as physical beings. We will have therefore few and limited needs that are easy to satisfy. We are also moral beings; but our moral being only requires us to avoid committing crimes.<sup>3</sup> There is no need to be concerned to do good to others. Contracting our being, in other words, means caring only for our being.

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3. “Telle est la foiblesse humaine qu’on doit mettre au nombre des bonnes actions l’abstinence du mal qu’on est tenté de commettre” (*C*, OC I, p. 260).

Because of these minimal conditions, Rousseau holds happiness to be entirely within our power: “Tout homme qui ne voudroit que vivre vivroit heureux” (*E*, OC IV, p. 306). We cannot blame Fortune or men if we are unhappy. We only need to contract our being, care about our health, avoid committing crimes and enjoy our existence. Rousseau illustrates this idea at the end of the section on equilibrium with a fictional example:

Je vois un homme frais, gai, vigoureux, bien portant, sa présence inspire la joye, ses yeux annoncent le contentement, le bien-être, il porte avec lui l'image du bonheur. Vient une lettre de la poste; l'homme heureux la regarde; elle est à son adresse; il l'ouvre, il la lit. À l'instant son air change; il pâlit, il tombe en défaillance. Revenu à lui, il pleure, il s'agite, il gémit, il s'arrache les cheveux, il fait retentir l'air de ses cris, il semble attaqué d'affreuses convulsions. Insensé, quel mal t'a donc fait ce papier? Quel membre t'a-t-il ôté? Quel crime t'a-t-il fait commettre? Enfin qu'a-t-il changé dans toi-même pour te mettre dans l'état où je te vois? Que la lettre se fut égarée, qu'une main charitable l'eut jettée au feu, le sort de ce mortel heureux et malheureux à la fois, eut été ce me semble un étrange problème. Son malheur, direz-vous, étoit réel. Fort bien, mais il ne le sentoit pas: où étoit-il donc? Son bonheur étoit imaginaire. J'entends, la santé, la gaité, le bien-être, le contentement d'esprit ne sont plus que des visions (*E*, OC IV, p. 307-308).

The man who receives the letter becomes unhappy because he had extended his being beyond his powers. He should have been satisfied with being healthy and having a clean conscience. Nevertheless, Rousseau thinks he was genuinely happy before he received the letter. What matters is what we perceive to be ourselves, and not what we actually are. This is why the road to happiness is not in increasing our powers, since it is not weakness as such that makes us miserable, but *feeling* our weakness. A weak man who never feels he is lacking anything will be happy or as close to happiness as a human can

be. Rousseau's theory of equilibrium opens up the possibility that ignorance and illusion as such are not obstacles to happiness.

Rousseau also says that to be happy is to enjoy being free (*E*, OC IV, p. 310-311). By "freedom", Rousseau means "independence." By "independence," Rousseau means "independence from other human beings." We are free when we do not need the help of anybody. Depending on other human beings, according to Rousseau's argument, is an inescapable source of misery because it means depending on their good will. One can never be confident that someone else will help him because man will always prefer to help himself before helping others. To enslave the will of others through their domination is not a solution. Rousseau appears at first to argue that domination is doomed to fail because it relies on the opinion of what men deem to be good and bad. Most men hold their wealth, their health and their survival to be more important goods than freedom or justice. To secure the good will of others usually means to secure those goods for them or to threaten those goods if they disobey. But these goods are enslaving only insofar as men believe them to be goods. Since opinion is a fleeting thing, the slaves of a ruler always have the possibility to become free. Accordingly, domination cannot make the master happy, because his rule will never be absolute, yet he will desire this absolute grip on his subjects. He will live in permanent fear and frustration. His soul will never be in equilibrium. But this classical argument against tyranny is not Rousseau's argument.<sup>4</sup> He

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4. See Arthur M. Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man: On the System of Rousseau's Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 74, note 8. Melzer says that Rousseau radicalizes the classical argument against domination. I would add that the radicalization makes it a different argument. According to Rousseau's argument here, what makes a master miserable is not perpetual fear and unsatisfied desires, but the fact that he never does what he wants to do. As Melzer points out, Rousseau's critique reaches



rather argues that the master is always the toy of his subjects. Since domination rests on what the subjects deem to be good and bad, Rousseau concludes that the master has to adopt the opinion of his subjects to dominate them. Therefore he never does what he wants, but what others want him to do. To dominate others is to please others, and to please others is to be miserable because one does not do what one wants to do. The master's power and his will are in disequilibrium, because he is the servant of his subjects.

Rousseau also argues that dependence on men is the source of all our vices. On the other hand, dependence on things does not cause any prejudice to human freedom and generates no vice. This is because our desire for things (in comparison to our desire for controlling other's will) have a natural limit in our appetite and can be satisfied. This is a surprising statement from Rousseau since it is a common opinion that dependence on material goods (or the pleasure they bring) is a source of vices and misery. Rousseau's position seems to be that vices related to our desires for things stem from our dependence on opinion. It is when we start giving a value to others' esteem that material goods become infinitely desirable, because we can never get enough of them to impress others. Cupidity and miserliness, for instance, are not caused by our desire for wealth, but by our desire for recognition, since our underlying desire is to be considered powerful through our riches or to demonstrate how happy we are.<sup>5</sup>

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farther because it makes any sort of obedience and mastery a source of misery. A moderate master and a moderate servant who control their fear and have no extravagant desires are still doing the will of others.

5. See *D*, OC I, p. 807-808. Gluttony, however, would seem to be an exception: no one wants to be esteemed because he or she can eat without limit. Rousseau does not deny that it is a vice that stems from a physical dependence, but he thinks that it is innocuous (*E*, OC IV, p. 410).

## 1.2 – Equilibrium and System

Before entering into the details and the problems of Rousseau's theory, we should determine how the notion of equilibrium is related to Rousseau's system. Rousseau, indeed, has always claimed to offer a system to his readers.<sup>6</sup> By "system", Rousseau means a chain of arguments where the premises and the conclusions are closely tied. His theory is a whole where all the parts are linked together. These parts are structured by one principle: man is naturally good. To understand Rousseau's philosophy, therefore, means to elucidate the meaning of this principle.

What does Rousseau mean when he claims that man is naturally good? Because of its numerous meanings, the term "good" is misleading. For instance, Rousseau could mean that man is naturally "well-ordered." Although Rousseau would not disagree with this interpretation – as I will explain later – the word "good" should primarily be understood in a moral sense. By saying that man is naturally good, Rousseau means that man is good with respect to human relationships. His use of "*bon*" is related to "*bonté*", which has only a moral sense in modern French. This is at least how Rousseau originally presented his principle in the *Second Discours*.<sup>7</sup> Even when its primary moral character is elucidated, the term "good" remains misleading. The term "good" could lead one to think that man naturally wants the good of others. However, Rousseau paints his natural

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6. He claims this status for his philosophy from his early writings (e.g. *Préface d'une seconde lettre à Bordes*, OC III, p. 106) to his late writings (e.g. *D*, OC I, p. 934-935).

7. See *SD*, OC III, p. 153, 156, 170 and 202. For more ambiguous statements, see *Beaumont*, OC IV, p. 935 and 945.

man as a solitary being who is solely concerned with himself. Accordingly, the moral character of his goodness is difficult to grasp.

To understand the meaning of man's natural goodness, one must understand man's natural passions. Man is good because he is motivated by only two passions: *l'amour de soi* and *la pitié*. *L'amour de soi* "nous intéresse ardemment à nôtre bien-être et à la conservation de nous mêmes" (*SD*, OC III, p. 126). *L'amour de soi* is selfish, but Rousseau takes pain to explain that this selfishness does not lead to any vice or to any evil, because the conditions in which his selfishness exercises itself do not allow vicious habits and evil doings. For example, his desire to feed himself never leads him to do evil to another sensitive being. Most of the time, there is no need to fight for food, since it is abundant in the state of nature. Moreover, the natural man was probably omnivorous or frugivorous, which means that he could easily satisfy his need for food. But even in the few cases when he had to fight for his food, Rousseau maintains that the natural man could not commit any evil deed:

S'agit-il quelquefois de disputer son repas? il n'en vient jamais aux coups sans avoir auparavant comparé la difficulté de vaincre avec celle de trouver ailleurs sa subsistance; & comme l'orgueil ne se mêle pas du combat, il se termine par quelques coups de poing; le vainqueur mange, le vaincu va chercher fortune, & tout est pacifié (*SD*, OC III, p. 144).

The natural man might hurt another man, but he will not hurt him beyond what is necessary to get his meal. His *amour de soi* is easy to satisfy and it is the sole passion that he seeks to satisfy. The lack of social passions (like pride, vanity, contempt) in his heart

and the absence of any idea of justice in his mind make his selfishness harmless. If another being hurts him, he will not seek revenge because he lacks the capacity to feel insulted.

Furthermore, his *amour de soi* is checked by another passion: *la pitié*. For example, even if the natural man is in a position to steal a meal from a weak being, he will refrain to do so if he can get another meal easily elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> He naturally feels a repugnance to see other sensitive beings suffering. He can relate to their pain even if his own interests are not concerned, and he can even sacrifice his own good if the sacrifice is small and the identification with the weak being is strong.

It is in the light of this natural compassion that the natural man will appear “good” in a moral sense to the reader. But he is primarily *good* because he is *not evil*; he is *good* because he is indifferent to others. The term “good” is in some sense an overstatement. Perhaps a more accurate term would have been to say that man is naturally *innocent*. The natural man is unable to premeditate a crime, because he has no foresight, no imagination, and no reason. He has no desire to harm anybody, no intention to injure anyone. Hurting another man is no different for him than kicking a rock; and being hurt by another man is no different than being hurt by a rock. Every event in his life is a natural event, a physical event that lacks morality because it lacks intention. Thus it is more exact to say that man is naturally amoral or innocent rather than naturally good: “[II] restoit toujours enfant” (*SD*, OC III, p. 160). Like a child or an animal, he does not

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8. “C’est [la pitié] qui détournera tout sauvage robuste d’enlever à un foible enfant, ou à un vieillard infirme, sa subsistance acquise avec peine, si lui-même espère pouvoir trouver la sienne ailleurs” (*SD*, OC III, p. 156).

know morality, because he is unaware of the desires, the sensitivity, the rights of other men: “Les hommes dans cet état n’ayant entre eux aucune sorte de relation morale, ni de devoirs connus, ne pouvoient être ni bons ni méchants, et n’avoient ni vices ni vertus” (SD, OC III, p. 152). Man’s natural goodness has no genuine moral content, because it bears no relation to moral beings. If he is *virtuous*, Rousseau says, it can only be in the sense that he does not resist the inclinations of nature.<sup>9</sup> His only “maxim” is: “Fais ton bien [principle of *amour de soi*] avec le moindre mal d’autrui qu’il est possible [principle of *pitié*]” (SD, OC III, p. 156). The term “maxim” is as misleading here as the terms “good” and “virtue”, since this maxim is not a rule of conduct that he is free to follow. On the contrary, the natural man is never tempted to disobey this rule. It is a law as compelling for him as the law of gravitation.

Man is naturally good because he has no need to harm others and because he lacks the capacity to intentionally harm others. This is the essence of Rousseau’s argument in favor of natural goodness in the *Second Discours*. To support this argument, Rousseau argues that man was naturally solitary. Indeed, it is hard to imagine how this man could live in a society without developing the faculties that allows wickedness. His lack of imagination, reason, memory and foresight – which explains why he can’t intentionally

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9. “Il paroît d’abord que les hommes dans cet état n’ayant entre eux aucune sorte de relation morale, ni de devoirs connus, ne pouvoient être ni bons ni méchants, et n’avoient ni vices ni vertus, à moins que, prenant ces mots dans un sens physique, on n’appelle vices dans l’individu, les qualités qui peuvent nuire à sa propre conservation, et vertus celles qui peuvent y contribuer; auquel cas il faudroit appeller le plus vertueux, celui qui résisteroit le moins aux simples impulsions de la nature” (SD, OC III, p. 152). This definition of virtue is meant to be tongue-in-cheek; yet it is also serious. There is an excellence to be able not to resist to the most simple impulsions of nature: see *D*, OC I, p. 669, and *R*, OC I, p. 1060. If this definition of virtue makes sense for someone who can choose how to behave (i.e. a socialized man), it is difficult to understand in relation to a natural man, who *cannot* resist the impulsions of nature. It is true that there are men in the natural state who are better endowed than others regarding qualities that help them satisfy their *amour de soi* (cf. SD, OC III, p. 160-161). But all natural men, weak or strong, follow their strong or weak impulsions without resistance.

harm others – requires him to live a solitary life. His loneliness also explains why he has no need to harm others: he is self-sufficient and therefore mostly indifferent to their fate. The natural man's needs are basic and few: “Ses desirs ne passent pas ses besoins physiques; les seuls biens qu'il connoisse dans l'univers, sont la nourriture, une femelle, et le repos; les seuls maux qu'il craigne, sont la douleur, et la faim” (*SD*, OC III, p. 143). His search for food and shelter does not compel him to create an association with other humans. As I have mentioned, food could have been abundant enough to make it easy for the natural man to feed himself. Nor does his need to reproduce himself compel him to form a family: “Le besoin satisfait, les deux sexes ne se reconnoissoient plus, et l'enfant même n'étoit plus rien à la mère sitôt qu'il pouvoit se passer d'elle” (*SD*, OC III, p. 164). Rousseau argues that the natural man and the natural woman lack the necessary faculties to love one another and desire to stay together after consuming the act. They are unable to make comparisons and therefore they are unable to have any preferences for one individual over another. The relation between the child and the mother is no more conducive to the development of language, reason and community. Their relationship ends as soon as the child is able to live by himself. If they ever developed some sort of language between them, it would die as soon as they parted, since they did not have the memory to teach it to other humans.

In sum, man is naturally good because he is only concerned with himself and because his solitary life makes his selfishness harmless. These last considerations allow us to go back to the definition of happiness at the beginning of Book II of *Émile*. As

Rousseau points out himself, defining happiness as an equilibrium is particularly fitting to describe the life of the man in the state of nature:

C'est ainsi que la nature qui fait tout pour le mieux l'a d'abord institué. Elle ne lui donne immédiatement que les desirs nécessaires à sa conservation, et les facultés suffisantes pour les satisfaire. Elle a mis toutes les autres comme en reserve au fond de son ame pour s'y développer au besoin. Ce n'est que dans cet état primitif que l'équilibre du pouvoir et du desir se rencontre et que l'homme n'est pas malheureux (*E*, OC IV, p. 304).<sup>10</sup>

The idea that happiness is in equilibrium is tied to Rousseau's system. It is because the natural man only desires what he can achieve and only has the power to achieve what he desires that he is natural. This equilibrium allows him to live off by himself, to be self-sufficient and to be satisfied with living in the state of nature. Thus the thesis that man is naturally good is tantamount to the thesis that man naturally leads an equilibrated and well-ordered life:

En le considerant, en un mot, tel qu'il a dû sortir des mains de la nature, je vois un animal moins fort que les uns, moins agile que les autres, mais à tout prendre, organisé le plus avantageusement de tous: je le vois se rassasiant sous un chesne, se désalterant au premier ruisseau, trouvant son lit au pied du même arbre qui lui a fourni son repas, et voilà ses besoins satisfaits (*SD*, OC III, p. 134-135).

The link between equilibrium and natural goodness can also be shown by looking at the corollary of Rousseau's fundamental principle: "[C'est] la société [qui] déprave et

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10. Compare to the following statement from the *Second Discours*: "Ce fut par une providence très sage, que les facultés qu'il avoit en puissance ne devoient se développer qu'avec les occasions de les exercer, afin qu'elles ne lui fussent ni superflues et à charge avant le tems, ni tardives, et inutiles au besoin. Il avoit dans le seul instinct tout ce qu'il lui falloit pour vivre dans l'état de nature, il n'a dans une raison cultivée que ce qu'il lui faut pour vivre en société" (*SD*, OC III, p. 152).

pervertit les hommes.”<sup>11</sup> Man is naturally good because he is naturally solitary and self-sufficient; thus it is when he loses his self-sufficiency and becomes social that he becomes wicked. The *unofficial* exit of the state of nature happens “dès l’instant qu’un homme eut□besoin du secours d’un autre; dès qu’on s’aperçut□qu’il étoit utile à un seul d’avoir des provisions□pour deux.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, it happens with the introduction of the division of labor. Let us consider the most basic form of commerce that comes to being with the division of labor: barter. I need a good that you have and you need one of mine. Once we agree that they are equivalent, we exchange them and everyone is satisfied. Where is the wickedness? Rousseau’s claim is that this satisfaction is an illusion. First, the trade that both parties secretly wish would happen is to receive the good of the other without giving’s one good. By losing their self-sufficiency, while keeping their self-love, men who depend on one another can never be satisfied with their “fair share”. Their self-love necessarily drives them to wish to enslave the other party in order to have him working to satisfy his needs.<sup>13</sup> They are thinking: “It would be useful for me to have both my good and the other’s good: it would save me time and work and it would give me extra resources for the future or for trading.” Second, both parties cannot

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11. *E*, OC IV, p. 525.

12. *SD*, OC III, p. 171. Man is already out of the pure state of nature when Rousseau makes this statement in the *Second Discours*. But even if he has a family and he is living in a tribe, Rousseau says he lives a solitary life (*SD*, OC III, p. 168). Rousseau will also often claim to be alone while he is living with other human beings.

13. “Si l’on me répond que la société est tellement constituée que chaque homme gagne à servir les autres, je répliquerai que cela seroit fort bien, s’il ne gaignoit encore plus à leur nuire. Il n’y a point de profit si légitime qui ne soit surpassé par celui qu’on peut faire illégitimement, & le tort fait au prochain est toujours plus lucratif que les services. Il ne s’agit donc plus que de trouver les moyens de s’assurer l’impunité, & c’est à quoi les puissans emploient toutes leurs forces, & les foibles toutes leurs ruses” (*SD*, OC III, p. 203). Rousseau says that barter would not lead to social miseries if the natural talents were equal (*SD*, OC III, p. 174). Thus the ultimate cause of social wickedness seems to be the natural inequality of talents between men.



but feel miserable that the satisfaction of their needs depends on someone else's will. They become aware that their satisfaction depends on something that is fickle. They cannot help but start to desire to control this will like they control theirs.

This is why Rousseau says that the secret pretension of every civilized man is to become the sole master of the universe (*SD*, OC III, p. 203). Nothing less will satisfy the self-love of the socialized man. But as we can guess, this desire cannot be fulfilled. Society, therefore, makes man unhappy. As we attempt to increase our power, we develop new needs and new desires that make us seek more power, and again create new needs and desires. This is a vicious circle that fatally makes us miserable. This vicious circle is perfectly illustrated by the *Second Discours*, which starts with the state of nature and ends with a return to the state of nature. It ends with a return to the state of nature because Rousseau wants to illustrate what it is that the system of society really wants to achieve. The pure society is a society of men wanting to dominate all other men and where the only rule is the rule of the stronger. This pure society is as hypothetical as the pure state of nature. While the latter is meant to illustrate the true nature of man, the former is meant to illustrate the true nature of society. This pure society shows that our true goal is to return to the state of nature, i.e. return to a state where we are self-sufficient and independent.

The link between Rousseau's thesis that "it is society that makes men wicked" and his definition of happiness as equilibrium is now clear. By definition, society makes us dependent and servile. This dependence makes us weak because it creates desires that cannot be fulfilled. It puts our souls into a permanent state of disequilibrium between our

faculties and our desires. This disequilibrium or this weakness, in turn, makes us wicked.<sup>14</sup> Unable to fulfill these imaginary desires, yet believing that we can, we seek new means to satisfy them, and this endless quest for happiness makes us frustrated and unhappy.

Society makes all men unhappy, whether they are rich or poor, oppressor or oppressed, strong or weak. They are all unhappy because they all aspire to this impossible and contradictory absolute mastery of others. This desire also makes them wicked. They are unable to desire justice and fairness; they are incapable of loving others for what they are. Their self-love makes them wish to serve their interests at the expense of others without scruples about the means: “Il ne s’agit donc plus que de trouver les moyens de s’assurer l’impunité, et c’est à quoi les puissans emploient toutes leurs forces, et les foibles toutes leurs ruses” (*SD*, OC III, p. 203). In other words, the social system is a contradiction: we get into a state of dependence to try to achieve a better self-sufficiency than when we lived alone; yet the more that we attempt to achieve this self-sufficiency in society, the more we increase our dependence, and the more we get farther from our original end. Society, by definition, is servitude, and servitude is the source of wickedness. “Je hais la servitude comme la source de tous les maux du genre humain” (*Beaumont*, OC IV, p. 1019). By attacking servitude, Rousseau is not attacking a possible bad consequence of life in society, but society itself. Society means requiring the help of

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14. “Toute méchanceté vient de faiblesse” (*E*, OC IV, p. 288); “Celui dont les besoins passent la force, fut-il un éléphant, un Lion, fut-il un conquérant, un héros, fut-il un Dieu, c’est un être foible” (*E*, OC IV, p. 305); “Jamais l’homme ne devient méchant que lorsqu’il est malheureux” (*E*, OC IV, p. 815). Although wickedness can cause unhappiness, it is not wickedness that is the original cause of unhappiness, but unhappiness that is the original cause of wickedness. It is because our *amour de soi* is frustrated in its quest for well-being that we become wicked.

someone else to satisfy our needs. This is the worst evil that can happen to man: “Dans les relations d’homme à homme, le pis qui puisse arriver à l’un [est] de se voir à la discretion de l’autre” (*Second Discours*, OC III, p. 181). Consequently, “le premier de tous les biens [est] la liberté” (*E*, OC IV, p. 309). By liberty, Rousseau means independence. One is truly free if one is not tied to any other will or to any desire that he cannot satisfy alone. This is Rousseau’s fundamental maxim. He is perfectly aware that it is destructive of any society.<sup>15</sup> It is nonetheless the most immediate consequence of his discovery of the contradiction of the social system.

If society makes men wicked and unhappy, must one wish to go back to the solitude of the state of nature? But this return is impossible. The corruption of society is deeply impregnated in us. Trying to go back to the state of nature while carrying with us our civilized vices would only make us more miserable.<sup>16</sup> Are we then condemned to be unhappy? Perhaps not. If society is in itself evil, it does not mean that we cannot find a remedy in evil:

Mais quoiqu’il n’y ait point de société naturelle et generale entre les hommes, quoiqu’ils deviennent méchants et malheureux en devenant sociables, quoique les loix de la justice et de l’égalité ne soient rien pour ceux qui vivent à la fois dans l’indépendance de l’Etat de nature et soumis aux besoins de l’Etat social, loin de penser qu’il n’y ait plus ni vertu ni bonheur pour nous et que le ciel nous ait abandonnez sans ressource à la depravation de l’espèce; efforçons nous de tirer du mal même le remede qui doit le guerir; par de nouvelles associations reparons le vice interne de l’association generale (*Fragments Politiques*, OC III, p. 479).

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15. “Il se trouve naturellement soumis à ce grand precepte de morale mais destructif de tout l’ordre social de ne se mettre jamais en situation à pouvoir trouver son avantage dans le mal d’autrui” (*D*, OC I, p. 824).

16. Rousseau, however, is open to the possibility that some individuals may be able to quit civilization altogether (*SD*, OC III, p. 207).

Society makes us wicked; but it is we who created society. Our evils are our own creation, because they are caused by needs that we gave to ourselves. Rousseau shows how it is possible to imagine a society in agreement with our nature – even if society is, strictly speaking, unnatural. Our artificial creations have depraved us, but it is possible to think of an art that would restore the original equilibrium in our soul.

It could be argued that Rousseau's solutions to our civilized misery are a return to the state of nature, because he seems to take it as a standard to correct the vices of society. On the political level, the principle that can solve all the contradictions of society is to avoid putting men in a situation of dependence of one another by making them dependent on the law. If every man believes that the political law is as inflexible and necessary as a natural law, and yet if every man believes that the political law is the effect of his own will, then "on réuniroit dans la République tous les avantages de l'état naturel à ceux de l'état civil, on joindroit à la liberté qui maintient l'homme exempt de vices la moralité qui l'élève à la vertu" (*E*, OC IV, p. 311).

Rousseau's moral philosophy is just as well based on his conception of the state of nature. Its goal is apparently to recreate the equilibrium of faculties and desires that was given to us in the state of nature. The principle at the basis of any sound education is to train humans to will only what they can achieve; and they can only achieve what depends strictly on them and on no one else (*E*, OC IV, p. 309). Here again, the state of nature serves as a standard: "Quiconque fait ce qu'il veut est heureux s'il se suffit à lui-même; c'est le cas de l'homme dans l'état de nature" (*E*, OC IV, p. 310).

Accordingly, as Victor Gourevitch sums it up, the equilibrium experienced in the state of nature provides the principles by which our moral and political arts take their bearings:

The pure state of nature to which he for all intents and purposes devotes Part I of the *Discourse* may be looked upon as his statement of his principles: self-sufficiency or natural freedom, and hence moral or political equality, by virtue of the natural balance of needs and powers and of the concept of self-preservation and pity, in short ‘natural goodness’: and the natural capacity for artifice and convention, and in particular for restoring a balance between needs and powers when it has been upset, in short ‘perfectibility.’<sup>17</sup>

## *2 – Is Equilibrium a Sufficient Condition of Happiness?*

The last section sketched Rousseau’s solution to our civilized misery. But with Rousseau, the devil is in the details. The first major obstacle to the understanding of his thought comes from the multiplicity of his solutions to our civilized woes. They do not always appear to be coherent. My purpose in this chapter is not to try to settle the lengthy debate of the unity of Rousseau’s thought. I simply want to discuss the possibility that the theory of equilibrium serves as a standard for all of Rousseau’s solution. Is it true, as Victor Gourevitch says, that Rousseau aims at an artificial restoration of the equilibrium found in the state of nature?

The first problem is whether equilibrium is the *sufficient* condition of happiness for Rousseau. Is not an element missing from equilibrium to make it a satisfying

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17. Victor Gourevitch, “Rousseau’s Pure State of Nature” in *Interpretation* Vol. XVI, No. 1 (1988), p. 59; see also p. 37-38.

definition of happiness? This problem arises mainly from the fact that the man in the state of nature is said by Rousseau to have a soul in equilibrium, but yet to be only “not unhappy.” The second problem is whether equilibrium is the *necessary* condition of happiness. There are some aspects of Rousseau’s philosophy that appear to praise a soul in a state of disequilibrium. A virtuous soul and a soul in love both appear to provide felicity, yet they do not seem to be souls in a state of equilibrium.

I will limit myself in the remaining of this chapter to a discussion of *Émile*. This is more relevant to the rest of my dissertation since it will focus on the happiness of an individual (and not a happy state). My goal is not to analyse in detail the whole book, but to raise the problems related to defining happiness as an equilibrium – problems that are either raised by Rousseau himself or that arise after reflection on the text. I will also briefly discuss some interpretations of the commentators that are relevant to each section. In the next section, I will consider the idea that equilibrium is the sufficient condition of happiness. In the following section, I will assume that it is not and I will look for the missing element that could complete Rousseau’s theory of equilibrium. Finally, I will discuss the possibility that equilibrium is not a necessary condition for happiness.

### *2.1 – Equilibrium as a Sufficient Condition of Happiness*

Let us begin with the first puzzle. Rousseau presents the equilibrium between desires and faculties as the sufficient condition of happiness: “Un être sensible dont les facultés égaleroient les desirs seroit un être absolument heureux” (*E*, OC IV, p. 304).

God is the only being able to achieve such an absolute equilibrium.<sup>18</sup> But Rousseau also gives in example the man in the state of nature.<sup>19</sup> Compared to God, his self-sufficiency appears of course imperfect. But one should not think he is unhappy simply because he has desires, or that sometimes he might be frustrated when he is looking for food or shelter, or because he is a sensitive being who can suffer, or because he is mortal. Rousseau's definition does not imply that happiness is an absence of desire, or a complete success in any endeavor we undertake, or invulnerability to pain, or even immortality.<sup>20</sup> Rousseau's definition does not imply that we don't have any weaknesses, but just that we do not *feel* our weaknesses: "La misère ne consiste pas dans la privation des choses, mais dans le besoin qui s'en fait sentir" (*E*, OC IV, p. 304).<sup>21</sup> In this sense, the natural man's soul is a good approximation of the perfect equilibrium. If he has a desire, it does not torment his imagination because he can easily satisfy it. He is no more unhappy when he is hungry than we are when we have a refrigerator close to us that contains what we are craving for. If the natural man is hurt, it does not make him unhappy because he does not start to fancy that his body would be invulnerable. He might feel angry towards the cause of his pain, but this anger leaves no mark on his soul.<sup>22</sup>

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18. Surprisingly, God appears to be an sensitive being for Rousseau: "Dieu lui-même est sensible puisqu'il agit" (*Dialogues*, OC I, p. 805).

19. Rousseau twice draws the similarity in the *Second Discours* between the man in the state of nature and a god: see *SD*, OC III, p. 122 and 211. See also *E*, OC IV, p. 503 and *R*, OC I, p. 1047. See also Marc F. Plattner, *Rousseau's State of Nature* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1979), p. 40.

20. "Si nous étions immortels nous serions des êtres très-misérables. Il est dur de mourir, sans doute; mais il est doux d'espérer qu'on ne vivra pas toujours, et qu'une meilleure vie finira les peines de celle-ci. Si l'on nous offroit l'immortalité sur la terre, qu'est-ce qui voudroit accepter ce triste présent? Quelle ressource, quel espoir, quelle consolation nous resteroit-il contre les rigueurs du sort et contre les injustices des hommes?" (*E*, OC IV, p. 306).

21. "Toutes les privations *qu'on sent* sont pénibles" (*E*, OC IV, p. 303 – my emphasis).

22. "[Les hommes naturels] ne songeoient pas même à la vengeance, si ce n'est peut-être machinalement et sur le champ, comme le chien qui mord la pierre qu'on lui jette" (*SD*, OC III, p. 157).

His mortality is no less a source of unhappiness for him: “Naturellement□l’homme ne s’inquiète pour se conserver qu’autant que□les moyens en sont en son pouvoir; sitôt que ces□moyens lui échappent, il se tranquillise et meurt sans□se tourmenter inutilement” (*E*, OC IV, p. 307).<sup>23</sup> Thus the natural man’s imperfection does not mean that he is unhappy. He only desires what his faculties can easily provide him, and he does not feel deprived of the goods that are beyond his powers. This is why Rousseau makes him a model of equilibrium. If we follow his example, “nous n’aurons point à nous plaindre de nôtre foiblesse; car nous ne la sentirons jamais” (*E*, OC IV, p. 305).<sup>24</sup>

*Insensitivity* appears to be the idea conducting Rousseau’s definition of happiness as an equilibrium:

Nous ne savons ce que c’est que bonheur ou malheur□absolu. Tout est mêlé dans cette vie, on n’y goûte□aucun sentiment pur, on n’y reste pas deux momens dans□le même état. Les affections de nos ames, ainsi que les□modifications de nos corps, sont dans un flux□continuel. Le bien et le mal nous sont communs à tous,□mais en différentes mesures. Le plus heureux est celui□qui souffre le moins de peines; le plus misérable est□celui qui sent le moins de plaisirs. Toujours plus de□souffrances que de jouïssances; voila la différence□commune à tous. *La félicité de l’homme ici-bas n’est□donc qu’un état négatif, on doit la mesurer par la□moindre quantité des maux qu’il souffre* (*E*, OC IV, p. 303 – my emphasis).

Equilibrium of the soul is good because man in this state does not suffer. It is a negative state. It is the happiness of the man in the pure state of nature. He has no real joy, no real pleasure: “Son imagination ne lui peint□rien; son coeur ne lui demande rien” (*SD*, OC

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23. “Les seuls□maux qu’il craigne, sont la douleur, et la faim;□je dis la douleur, et non la mort; car jamais□l’animal ne saura ce que c’est que mourir, et□la connoissance de la mort, et de ses terreurs,□est une des premières acquisitions que l’homme□ait faites, en s’éloignant de la condition□animale” (*SD*, OC III, p. 143).

24. See *E*, OC IV, p. 290: the child is educated following this model of insensitivity.



III, p. 144). His life is like a long sleep: “Seul, oisif, et toujours voisin du danger, l’homme□sauvage doit aimer à dormir, et avoir le sommeil□léger comme les animaux, qui pensant peu, dorment,□pour ainsi dire, tout le temps qu’ils ne pensent□point” (*SD*, OC III, p. 140).

The natural’s man happiness recalls the ideal of ataraxia of the Stoics – with the difference that the equilibrium of his soul is greater than the one they can achieve: “L’homme□sauvage et l’homme policé différent tellement par le□fond du coeur et des inclinations, que ce qui fait□le bonheur suprême de l’un, réduiroit l’autre□au désespoir. Le premier ne respire que le repos□et la liberté, il ne veut que vivre et rester□oisif, et l’ataraxie même du stoïcien n’approche□pas de sa profonde indifférence pour tout autre□objet” (*SD*, OC III, p. 192). Another difference between the two conceptions of happiness is that whereas the Stoics want to reduce our desires to the minimum, Rousseau’s definition of happiness states that this is not the road to a true satisfaction: “En quoi donc consiste la sagesse humaine ou la route□du vrai bonheur? Ce n’est pas précisément à□diminuer nos desirs; car s’ils étoient au dessous de□notre puissance, une partie de nos facultés resteroit□oisive, et nous ne jouirions pas de tout notre être” (*E*, OC IV, p. 304). Yet in the discussion that follows his definition of happiness as equilibrium, Rousseau mostly prescribes to diminish our desires rather than to extend our faculties.

A parallel can also be drawn between Rousseau’s equilibrium and the understanding of happiness of some modern philosophers. Hobbes, for example, defines happiness negatively. Happiness is in the absence of evil rather than the positive enjoyment of a good. According to him, “there is no such *Finis ultimus*, (utmost ayme,)

nor *Summum Bonum*, (greatest Good,) as is spoken of in the Books of the old Morall Philosophers.”<sup>25</sup> There is no greatest good, but there is however a supreme evil: fear of violent death. Thus the spring of our actions is not the attraction of the good, but the repulsion of the evil. We move because we want to avoid or to lose an evil, and not because we want to achieve or to obtain a good. Commentators usually think that Rousseau shares the modern insight that there is no *summum bonum* or no natural end to our actions. Indeed, we get out of the state of nature not because we are seeking a higher good, but by accident. The search for the good seems to be defined negatively in his philosophy. Our options of action are often to try to find a remedy in our evils or a compensation for them. Happiness would be the agreeable feeling resulting from us releasing ourselves from evils. The state of equilibrium achieved by the soul, when it releases itself from the grip of amour-propre and gains its freedom, although it is a negative state, gives a feeling of satisfaction. Life would be essentially unhappy, but there would be blessed islands of time in which we enjoy for a moment our being free from what made us unhappy. This is why Rousseau’s autobiographical writings leave the impression that happiness is “du chagrin qui se repose”, to use Leo Ferré’s expression. To give only one example, Rousseau’s love of solitude seems to be pleasurable because it frees him from an evil:

Je loge au milieu de Paris. En sortant de chez moi je soupire après la campagne et la solitude mais il faut l’aller chercher si loin qu’avant de pouvoir respirer à mon aise je trouve en mon chemin mille objets qui me serrent le cœur, et la moitié de la journée se passe en angoisses avant que je j’aye atteint l’asyle que je vais chercher. Heureux du moins quand on

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25. Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1996), chapter XI, p. 70.

me laisse achever ma route. Le moment où j'échape au cortège des méchants est délicieux et sitôt que je me vois sous les arbres au milieu de la verdure je crois me voir dans le paradis terrestre et je goute un plaisir interne aussi vif que si j'étois le plus heureux des mortels (*R*, OC I, p. 1082-1083).

Happiness in this sense becomes synonymous with freedom. The highest goal of human life is to be free from suffering. According to Montesquieu, the spring of English freedom – and of his own model of freedom – is this desire: “La servitude commence toujours par le sommeil. Mais un peuple qui n’a de repos dans aucune situation, qui se tâte sans cesse, et trouve tous les endroits douloureux, ne pourroit guère s’endormir.”<sup>26</sup> Rousseau’s love of freedom is also motivated negatively: “Je n’ai jamais cru que la liberté de l’homme consistat à faire ce qu’il veut, mais bien à ne jamais faire ce qu’il ne veut pas” (*R*, OC I, p. 1059).<sup>27</sup> Freedom for Rousseau means first and foremost “freedom from” and not “freedom for”. It is as stormy and turbulent as the freedom of the English according to Montesquieu,<sup>28</sup> and devoid of any purpose as that other Englishman, Hobbes, suggests it is.

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26. Montesquieu, *De l'Esprit des Lois* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1951), tome II, livre XIV, chapitre 13, p. 487). Pierre Manent comments: “La liberté moderne est mue, non par l’attraction du bien et du meilleur, mais par une *vis a tergo*: la crainte du mal, réel ou imaginaire, le ‘sentiment des maux’” (*La Cité de l’homme* (Paris: Flammarion, 1997, p. 69)).

27. “L’espece de bonheur qu’il me faut, m’est pas tant de faire ce que je veux, que de ne pas faire ce que je ne veux pas” (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1807). Rousseau, however, says at the end of the section on equilibrium that freedom consists in doing what we want: “Avant que les préjugés et les institutions humaines aient altéré nos penchans naturels le bonheur des enfans ainsi que des hommes consiste dans l’usage de leur liberté; mais cette liberté dans les premiers est bornée par leur foiblesse. Quiconque fait ce qu’il veut est heureux s’il se suffit à lui-même; c’est le cas de l’homme vivant dans l’état de nature” (*E*, OC IV, p. 310). In the Tenth Walk of the *Rêveries*, he says that doing what we want to do is “better than freedom.”

28. “Comme un coursier indompté hérissé ses crins, frappe la terre du pied et se débat impétueusement à la seule approche du mors, tandis qu’un cheval dressé souffre patiemment la verge et l’éperon, l’homme barbare ne plie point sa tête au joug que l’homme civilisé porte sans murmure, et il préfère la plus orageuse liberté à un assujettissement tranquille” (*SD*, OC III, p. 181).

There is also another state of the soul that Rousseau describes as satisfactory although it is defined negatively: compassion. The feeling of compassion appears painful, since we identify with the pain of the sufferer. But this is being fooled by appearances.<sup>29</sup>

In fact, the sentiment of compassion can yield happiness:

Si le premier spectacle qui le frappe est un objet de tristesse, le premier retour sur lui-même est un sentiment de plaisir. En voyant de combien de maux il est exempt, il se sent plus heureux qu'il ne pensoit l'être. Il partage les peines de ses semblables; mais ce partage est volontaire et doux. *Il jouit à la fois de la pitié qu'il a pour leurs maux, et du bonheur qui l'en exempte* (E, OC IV, p. 514 –my emphasis).

The happiness of feeling compassionate is negative, since it comes from the feeling of being exempted from suffering. It is a happiness that requires a contemplator to feel vulnerable to the same misfortune as the sufferer he is contemplating, yet who is exalted to be exempted from these sufferings. What is the relationship between this happiness and equilibrium? The answer seems to be that the soul of the compassionate man is in equilibrium. Since his faculties meet his desires, he is able to turn his sensitivity towards the misery of others. Were the contemplator himself in a state of suffering, he would be too occupied with his own pain to be able to feel compassion for someone else: “Pour plaindre le mal d'autrui, sans doute il faut le connaître, mais il ne faut pas le sentir. Quand on a souffert, ou qu'on craint de souffrir, on plaint ceux qui souffrent; mais tandis qu'on souffre, on ne plaint que soi.” (E, OC IV, p. 514).

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29. “Des malheureux, des mourans, des spectacles de douleur et de misere! Quel bonheur! [...] Voilà ce qu'on dira: Que m'importe? j'ai promis de le rendre heureux, non de faire qu'il parût l'être. Est-ce ma faute si, toujours dupes de l'apparence, vous la prenez pour la réalité?” (E, OC IV, p. 512).

But is happiness merely a negative state for Rousseau ? The preceding argument is inaccurate. The parallel with the modern philosophers is the most obvious case. How can the Promeneur Solitaire, who likes to be sunk in his reveries, be compared with an Englishman who can never find sleep? How can a philosopher who never stops declaiming against inquietude and restlessness be associated with one who defines happiness as “a continuall progresse of the desire from one object to another”?<sup>30</sup> Rousseau’s definition of happiness as equilibrium is the contrary of Hobbes’s. For the latter, happiness is in the pursuit of happiness. Since our fundamental condition is one of wretchedness, we should not hope to reach a state where our evils have disappeared. We try to maximize our pleasures, but we are never satisfied, for they make us crave for more pleasure at the very moment we feel them. Our quest for happiness shall remain a quest.

Rousseau criticizes philosophers like Hobbes for having misunderstood one fundamental characteristic of human life: that it is good in itself. These philosophers, “dans la comparaison des biens et des maux, oublient toujours le doux sentiment de l’existence, indépendamment de toute autre sensation.”<sup>31</sup> Rousseau agrees that evils surpass goods in our lives, but this is not our natural condition. This is the civilized life, the modern life, a life that is artificial. By nature, life is satisfactory. Our imagination, which makes us forget who we are, and our foresight, which throws us into the future, alienates us from the simple and fundamental pleasure of existing, a pleasure which,

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30. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 70.

31. *Lettre à Voltaire*, OC IV, p. 1063. See also note IX of the *Second Discours*. One could say that this fact is implied in the liberal’s understanding of happiness, because if they really believed that evils surpassed goods in this life (and if they do not believe in an afterlife), then why do they still bother living? In other words, the liberal “joyless quest for joy”, as Leo Strauss puts it, implies that however joyless it is, it is better than nothing.

according to Rousseau, is fulfilling and puts our soul to rest. As Arthur Melzer puts it: “Man’s deepest self is absolute and self-sufficient, and thus his deepest experience, the ‘first movement of nature’, is neither restless desire nor frustrated longing but contentment, peace, and a grateful love of existence.”<sup>32</sup>

It is true that the natural man’s life is one of “profound indifference” in which his imagination “paints him nothing [and] his heart asks him nothing.” Yet this state is not one of complete insensitivity: “Son ame, que rien n’agite, se livre□au seul sentiment de son existence actuelle” (*SD*, OC III, p. 144).<sup>33</sup> This seemingly insignificant sentiment apparently plays an important role in Rousseau’s understanding of happiness. One can tell its importance by the end of the *Second Discourse*, where Rousseau, after comparing the happiness of the savage and the unhappiness of the civilized man, concludes that the difference lies in the fact that “le□sauvage vit en lui-même; l’homme sociable toujours□hors de lui ne sait vivre que dans l’opinion des□autres, et c’est, pour ainsi dire, de leur seul□jugement qu’il tire le sentiment de sa propre□existence” (*SD*, OC III, p. 193). Thus the sentiment of one’s own existence seems to be what we civilized men are precisely lacking to be happy:

Je voudrois bien qu’on m’expliquât□quel peut être le genre de misère d’un être libre,□dont le coeur est en paix, et le corps en santé.□Je demande laquelle, de la vie civile ou naturelle,□est la plus sujette à devenir insupportable à ceux□qui en jouissent? Nous ne voyons presque autour□de nous que des gens qui se plaignent de leur□existence; plusieurs mêmes qui s’en privent□autant qu’il est en eux, et la réunion des loix□divine et humaine suffit à peine pour arrêter ce□desordre: je

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32. Arthur Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man*, p. 34.

33. “Le premier sentiment de l’homme fut celui de son□existence, son premier soin celui de sa□conservation” (*SD*, OC III, p. 164).

demande si jamais on a ouï dire qu'un sauvage en liberté ait seulement songé à se plaindre de la vie et à se donner la mort? Qu'on juge donc avec moins d'orgueil de quel côté est la véritable misère (*SD*, OC III, p. 152).

The road to happiness is a return to this primary love of existence. Rousseau's final statement about happiness, the Fifth Walk of the *Rêveries*, makes it the core of human felicity.

The civilized man does not enjoy his existence because he cannot live in himself. He sees himself only through others' judgment about himself. He lives in and for an image of himself. The natural man, whose imagination is undeveloped, has a direct access to his own being. He does not care about others' judgment. He can therefore enjoy his existence because he has a direct and real access to himself. Rousseau's theory of equilibrium appears as an attempt to recover this direct access to our own being – which, according to the end of the *Second Discours* and as we have just mentioned, is the source of all the differences between the “supreme happiness” of the natural man and the miserable “happiness” of the civilized man. Following his definition of happiness as equilibrium, Rousseau attacks imagination as the faculty that destroys the natural man's equilibrium between desires and faculties. Imagination is the faculty that extends our natural desires into the future and stretches them beyond their natural satisfaction. It makes the equilibrium between power and will impossible. Rousseau wants us to desire the only goods that are real: strength, health and good witness of oneself. He demonstrates the misery of those who try to become more than what they are and encourages us to be resigned with our lot. He criticizes foresight because it makes us live

outside of ourselves. In short, all the discussion that follows Rousseau's definition of happiness as equilibrium aims at this idea:

Ô homme! *Resserre ton existence au dedans de toi, et tu ne seras plus misérable.* Reste à la place que la nature t'assigne dans la chaîne des êtres, rien ne t'en pourra faire sortir: ne regimbe point contre la dure loi de la nécessité, *et n'épuise pas à vouloir lui résister des forces que le ciel ne t'a point données pour étendre ou prolonger ton existence,* mais seulement pour la conserver comme il lui plaît et autant qu'il lui plaît. Ta liberté, ton pouvoir ne s'étendent qu'aussi loin que tes forces naturelles et pas au delà; tout le reste n'est qu'esclavage, illusion, prestige (*E*, OC IV, p. 308 –my emphasis).<sup>34</sup>

What equilibrium provides is a contraction of our existence into ourselves. Our faculties are limited to serve the natural desires that do not depend on imagination and opinion, i.e. that do not depend on other people's judgment. Equilibrium yields a positive feeling of contentment, an enjoyment of existence, of our being, of what we are – or more precisely of who we are, since Rousseau always connects the sentiment of one's own existence with the self.<sup>35</sup>

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34. The introduction to Rousseau's definition of happiness as equilibrium is substantially similar: "Malheureuse prévoyance, qui rend un être actuellement misérable sur l'espoir bien ou mal fondé de le rendre heureux un jour! Que si ces raisonneurs vulgaires confondent la licence avec la liberté, et l'enfant qu'on rend heureux avec l'enfant qu'on gâte, aprenons leur à les distinguer. Pour ne point courir après des chimères n'oublions pas ce qui convient à notre condition. L'humanité a sa place dans l'ordre des choses; l'enfance a la sienne dans l'ordre de la vie humaine; il faut considérer l'homme dans l'homme, et l'enfant dans l'enfant. Assigner à chacun sa place et l'y fixer, ordonner les passions humaines selon la constitution de l'homme est tout ce que nous pouvons faire pour son bien-être. Le reste dépend de causes étrangères qui ne sont point en notre pouvoir" (*E*, OC IV, p. 303).

35. Speaking of his hypothetical automaton in *Émile*, Rousseau writes: "Il n'auroit qu'une seule idée, savoir celle du *moi* à laquelle il rapporteroit toutes ses sensations, et cette idée ou plutôt ce sentiment seroit la seule chose qu'il auroit de plus qu'un enfant ordinaire" (*E*, OC IV, p. 280). We know that this sentiment is the sentiment of his own existence, since Rousseau says in the precedent paragraph that the sentiment that the child does not know is the sentiment of one's own existence. Moreover, this hypothetical automaton is said to represent the primitive state of man; and we know that in the primitive state, the natural man has the sentiment of his own existence. See also *R*, OC I, p. 1047.



## 2.2 – *Equilibrium as an Unsuccessful Condition of Happiness*

In his excellent attempt to reconstruct Rousseau's system, Arthur Melzer puts equilibrium and the sentiment of one's own existence side by side without connecting them causally.<sup>36</sup> However, he demonstrates how what he calls "unity of soul" produces the sentiment of one's own existence. Melzer's discussion of the "unity of soul" as a condition of happiness comes from Rousseau's statements that a divided soul generates misery and a unified soul generates happiness.<sup>37</sup> Melzer equates Rousseau's praise of unity with the idea that the soul needs to be in equilibrium to be happy. This is debatable, since the former is about inclinations and duties and the latter is about inclinations (desires) and faculties. Yet let us assume for the moment with Melzer that unity and equilibrium are identical. Melzer demonstrates how unity of soul can produce the sentiment of our own existence:

Unity is natural to man, but almost everything that happens to him in society works to destroy it. The protection or restoration of unity is therefore crucial to maintaining or increasing our existence. In order to

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36. "Man is naturally good for himself, meaning well-ordered and self-sufficient, hence happy. None of his natural inclinations are bad, that is, harmful, illusory, impossible, or contradictory. His desires are all proportioned to his needs and his faculties to his desires, And on a still deeper level, prior to all desire, he has within himself a fundamental source of contentment, a joy in mere existence" (Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man*, p. 16).

37. "Ce qui fait la misère humaine est la contradiction qui se trouve entre notre état et nos desirs, entre nos devoirs et nos penchans, entre la nature et les institutions sociales, entre l'homme et le citoyen; rendez l'homme un vous le rendrez heureux autant qu'il peut l'être" (*Fragments Politiques*, OC III, p. 510); "De ces contradictions naît celle que nous éprouvons sans cesse en nous mêmes. Entraînés par la nature et par les hommes dans des routes contraires, forcés de nous partager entre ces diverses impulsions, nous en suivons une composée qui ne nous mène ni à l'un ni à l'autre but. Ainsi combatus et flotans durant tout le cours de nôtre vie, nous la terminons sans avoir pu nous accorder avec nous, et sans avoir été bons ni pour nous ni pour les autres. Reste enfin l'éducation domestique ou celle de la nature. Mais que deviendra pour les autres un homme uniquement élevé pour lui? Si peut-être le double objet qu'on se propose pouvoit se réunir en un seul, en ôtant les contradictions de l'homme on ôteroit un grand obstacle à son bonheur" (*E*, OC IV, p. 251).

feel our whole existence, our existence must be whole. Every moment and aspect of our existence must be gathered, harmonized, united, so that, one with ourselves, we exist fully, undiminished by division or conflict, with nothing held back and nothing left out.<sup>38</sup>

Melzer identifies two distinct components to unity of soul: unity over time and unity of intention. Unity over time means that the self, “no longer alienated to the past or future, is complete and wholly present in every moment.”<sup>39</sup> The effect on the soul of such a unity is that “one exists or ‘feels’ life more – not because one has filled it with extraneous pleasures and excitement, but because life’s own native power has been gathered up and unified. The full reality of one’s own existence is allowed to shine through undiminished. One feels life whole.”<sup>40</sup> Unity of inclination means that “our basic desires must be harmonious and noncontradictory, so that we have the same goal and the same person in every part of our self.”<sup>41</sup> By having a single goal or many goals that are non-contradictory, we gather all our forces on the same point; and by having our whole being gathered in one point, we can wholly feel ourselves.

These last remarks suggest how equilibrium (unity of soul) can produce the sentiment of one’s own existence. In this perspective, then, equilibrium can still be considered the sufficient condition for happiness, as Rousseau claims explicitly. However, according to Melzer, equilibrium is not the sufficient condition of happiness. Happiness does not only require unity (or equilibrium) but also “extent.” By “extent,”

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38. Arthur Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man*, p. 45.

39. Arthur Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man*, p. 66.

40. Idem.

41. Arthur Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man*, p. 67. “Pour être quelque chose, pour être soi-même et toujours un, il faut agir comme on parle; il faut être toujours décidé sur le parti qu’on doit prendre, le prendre hautement et le suivre toujours” (*E*, OC IV, p. 250). In opposition to Melzer, I think that it is not clear if the self or the soul has parts for Rousseau.

Melzer means that true happiness requires for Rousseau the development of our “expansive” faculties (memory, foresight, imagination, reason). These faculties are called “expansive” by Rousseau because they allow us to expand our own being over foreign beings.<sup>42</sup> By feeling ourselves into other beings, we develop our sentiment of existence and make it more intense and pleasurable. Were we to constrict our self-love to our single being and refuse to use our expansive faculties, we would feel frustrated, because there is a need in man to expand over other beings.

This need for “extent” explains why the natural man is said by Rousseau to be simply “not unhappy.”<sup>43</sup> Since his expansive faculties are latent, he cannot experience true bliss. Happiness requires the birth of our moral being, for instance the coming to being of a faculty like memory (*E*, OC IV, p. 301). Accordingly, the state that Rousseau describes as the happiest in the *Second Discours* is not the pure state of nature, but, so to speak, the “impure” state of nature; that is, the stage of human development in which men live in a tribe with their family.<sup>44</sup> Men in this state have developed their distinctive human faculties and are now able to know passions like vanity, shame, anger, but also paternal and conjugal love. To sum up in one term what these men are now able to do, we would say, following Rousseau, that they now can “expand their existence”. Rousseau calls this state “the happiest and the most durable epoch” and “the best for man.” Melzer says why:

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42. See, for example, *D*, OC I, p. 805.

43. “Ce n’est que dans cet état primitif que l’équilibre du pouvoir et du désir se rencontre et que l’homme n’est pas malheureux. [...] plus l’homme est resté près de sa condition naturelle, plus la différence de ses facultés à ses desirs est petite, et moins par conséquent il est éloigné d’être heureux” (*E*, OC IV, p. 304).

44. See *SD*, OC III, p. 170-171.

Men had now become somewhat vengeful and cruel toward enemies and had slightly compromised their perfect, animal-like unity of inclination, but these evils were more than compensated for by the greater of their faculties, the elevation of their sentiments, and their rudimentary social contacts based on pure affection or identification (as distinguished from mutual need).<sup>45</sup>

In comparison, the “happiness” of the natural man in the state of pure nature is too passive to be called happiness. To feel our existence, we must be active, as a passage in *Émile* shows clearly: “Vivre, ce n’est pas respirer, c’est agir; c’est faire usage de nos organes, de nos sens, de nos facultés, de toutes les parties de nous-mêmes qui nous donnent le sentiment de notre existence” (*E*, OC IV, p. 253). Rousseau, therefore, is not unhappy about man’s exit of the pure state of nature and about the development of our faculties, since it allows for a greater happiness.

Building on Melzer’s analysis, Laurence Cooper offers a comprehensive definition of what is happiness for Rousseau: “Rousseau’s ideal is the full development of man’s distinctive faculties and capacities, but development that accords with original nature – that is, development that proceeds in such a way that psychic unity and the balance between desires and faculties are not too much compromised.”<sup>46</sup> Equilibrium is only the first step towards happiness: it contracts our being unto ourselves and protects us from misery. But unity over time and unity of inclination are not sufficient: we must also learn how to expand the feeling of our own existence. Equilibrium is always the fundamental requirement for being happy, but as Rousseau says himself, it is “the road to

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45. Arthur Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man*, p. 70; see also p. 34. See also Laurence Cooper, *Rousseau, Nature and the Problem of the Good Life* (University Park: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1999), p. 31.

46. Laurence Cooper, *Rousseau, Nature and the Problem of the Good Life*, p. 29.

true happiness”, not the end of the road. To achieve genuine happiness, one needs also to extend his faculties to their maximum limits while maintaining the equilibrium of one’s soul. “Extent” is even implied in Rousseau’s definition of equilibrium, since it calls us to put all the powers of our soul in action. If some of our faculties would remain idle, we would not enjoy “all of our being.”<sup>47</sup>

There are a few difficulties, however, with Melzer and Cooper’s praise of “extent.” First, they do not provide an explanation why Rousseau presents equilibrium as the sole and sufficient condition for happiness if he does not believe this to be the case. Neither do they explain why Rousseau categorically states that happiness is a negative state consisting only of the absence of suffering. Rousseau offers straightforward statements on both questions: “La félicité de l’homme ici-bas n’est donc qu’un état négatif, on doit la mesurer par la moindre quantité des maux qu’il souffre” (*E*, OC IV, p. 303);<sup>48</sup> “Un être sensible dont les facultés égaleroient les desirs seroit un être absolument heureux” (*E*, OC IV, p. 304). It could be argued that Rousseau’s claims are to be taken conditionally rather than absolutely because of their context. Rousseau only highlights a part of his whole conception of happiness, namely equilibrium, because we are at the stage in the book where the young Émile only needs to have his soul in equilibrium to be happy. He is too young to deal with the dangers of expansion; thus

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47. “[Si] une partie de nos facultés resteroit oisive, [...] nous ne jouirions pas de tout nôtre être” (*E*, OC IV, p. 304).

48. This idea could find support in Rousseau’s other writings. For instance: “Car désirer que quelqu’un ne souffre point, qu’est-ce qu’autre chose, que désirer qu’il soit heureux?” (*SD*, OC III, p. 155); “*Rêverie*. D’où j’ai conclu que cet état m’étoit agréable plutôt comme une suspension des peines de la vie que comme une jouissance positive” (*Ébauches des Rêveries*, OC I, p. 1169).

Rousseau does not need to discuss this other part of happiness.<sup>49</sup> However, Rousseau is not focusing on Émile's happiness in the section. He discusses equilibrium as if it is the only thing needful for all men. He presents his idea of happiness as universally valid for all times and places. In fact, the section takes the form of an exhortation. Rousseau obviously wants his reader to be moved by this idea of happiness. Yet there are also statements in the context of Book II which indicate that Rousseau does not think that equilibrium is the sufficient condition of happiness or that happiness is a negative condition.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, more evidence would be needed before transforming Rousseau's categorical statements into conditional statements.

Second, Melzer and Cooper present equilibrium as a preliminary step towards good expansion.<sup>51</sup> This presupposes that the natural equilibrium of the natural man was

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49. According to Jonathan Marks, Rousseau exaggerates the fact that our life is mostly suffering because he knows that our tendency is to undertake projects that we will not be able to achieve. We tend to live outside of ourselves and to be unaware of our limits. Accordingly, the governor wants to teach the child Émile that life is above all suffering because that teaching keeps Émile in his place and restrains his tendency toward excessive and dangerous activity" (Jonathan Marks, "Rousseau's Discriminating Defense of Compassion" in *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 101, No. 4 (November 2007), p. 733).

50. For instance: "Le plus heureux est celui qui souffre le moins de peines; le plus misérable est celui qui sent le moins de plaisirs" (*E*, OC IV, p. 303). The first part of this sentence fits with the conclusion of the paragraph that happiness is a negative state; but the second part, which is *not* identical to the first part of the sentence, does not fit with the conclusion of the paragraph (namely, that happiness is a negative state measured by the quantity of evils we avoid).

51. "The primary means for maintaining or heightening one's existence, according to Rousseau, is unity" (Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man*, p. 65). Cooper argues that equilibrium and extent "are interdependent and mutually reinforcing" (*Rousseau, Nature and the Problem of the Good Life*, p. 30; see also p. 33). However, at the end of his book, equilibrium has primacy over extent (p. 181). And indeed, if equilibrium and extent were mutually reinforcing, it could only be true for men outside the state of nature, since the natural man does not have his expansive faculties in action. Cooper tends to disagree with this last statement: "Perhaps one could say that [the primitive man's self-love] is latently expansive. [...] the apparently *nonexpansive* self-love of the savage [...] The extent of the savage's expansiveness was his repugnance at seeing sensible beings perish or suffer, a phenomenon that does denote a kind of extensive impulse but one whose smallness Rousseau underscores by attributing it to horses as well as to men." (Laurence Cooper, "Between Eros and Will to Power" in *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 91, No. 1 (February 2004), p. 110-111). See also *Rousseau, Nature and the Problem of the Good Life*, p. 189; and Jonathan Marks, *Perfection and Disharmony in the Thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 165, note 22.

in itself insufficient and that the exit of the state of nature was natural or necessary for Rousseau. This presupposes in turn that “we naturally incline not only to delight in our existence, and not only to preserve it, but also to *increase* it.”<sup>52</sup> But, according to the *Second Discours*, our soul is *not* naturally seeking expansion. The pure state of nature was self-sufficient; it could have lasted eternally were it not for some “funestes hasards.” As Eve Grace remarks:

[Rousseau makes] the startling claim that even the human animal in the state of nature already enjoys his whole being, prior to the development of the faculties which would seem to constitute it. No matter how developed or undeveloped ‘the parts of ourselves’ through which we feel our existence, ‘*all* of our being’ is felt whenever an equilibrium exists in us between power and will, faculties and desire.<sup>53</sup>

Rousseau’s claim is startling considering his remarks that equilibrium cannot happen if any of our faculties remain “idle”. Yet we can assume that because the man in the state of nature has never used his expansive faculties, he does not feel them as “idle.” Even without any expansion, then, the natural man lives a good life. Perhaps he is even happy? Indeed, if Rousseau refrains from calling the natural man “happy” in many instances, there are others in which he calls him happy. For example, a few pages later in *Émile* after Rousseau has defined happiness as an equilibrium, he writes: “Quiconque fait ce qu’il veut est heureux s’il se suffit à lui-même; c’est le cas de l’homme vivant dans l’état de nature.”<sup>54</sup> Rousseau also writes that “tout homme qui ne voudroit que vivre

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52. Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man*, p. 44.

53. Eve Grace, “The Restlessness of ‘Being’: Rousseau’s Protean Sentiment of Existence” in *History of European Ideas*, Vol. 27 (2001), p. 142.

54. Rousseau could arguably be talking about the tribal stage of human development. Yet he writes elsewhere: “Que la nature a fait l’homme heureux et bon” (*D*, OC I, p. 934); and: “Le pur état de nature est

vivroit heureux” (*Émile*, OC IV, p. 306). This means that “extent” is not necessary for one to be happy. Moreover, in one of his letters to Voltaire, Rousseau claims that the “sweet sentiment of existence” is enough to make life good; that existing as such is good, and that an automaton who would perpetually vegetate in the same state would be happier than in Paradise (OC IV, p. 1063). All this suggests that equilibrium of the soul *is* the sufficient condition to reach perfect happiness; and that even if the natural man or the Valais peasant feel their existence, their happiness is essentially an absence of suffering.

Nonetheless, let us assume the following explanation about the happiness of the natural man. If the man in the state of nature is *subjectively* happy, since he feels his whole being, he is not *objectively* happy or the happiest human being, since he does not use his distinctive human faculties (in the pure state of nature), or since he cannot expand his existence as far as a civilized man can (in the “impure” state of nature, the tribal stage of humanity). But what do we make of the Solitary Walker? In the Fifth Walk of the *Rêveries*, Rousseau claims to have reached full happiness by giving himself to his sweet sentiment of existence:

Mais s’il est un état où l’ame trouve une assiette assez solide pour s’y reposer tout entière et rassembler là tout son être, sans avoir besoin de rappeler le passé ni d’enjamber sur l’avenir; où le tems ne soit rien pour elle, où le présent dure toujours sans néanmoins marquer sa durée et sans aucune trace de succession, sans aucun autre sentiment de privation ni de jouissance, de plaisir ni de peine, de desir ni de crainte que celui seul de notre existence, et que ce sentiment seul puisse la remplir tout entière; tant que cet état dure celui qui s’y trouve peut s’appeller heureux (*R*, OC I, p. 1046).

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celui de tous où les hommes seraient le moins méchants, le plus heureux, et en plus grand nombre sur la terre” (*Fragments politiques*, OC III, p. 475).



The sentiment of one's existence here appears "sufficient" to make a man happy. But we know that the man in the pure state of nature has access to this sentiment. Should not we think therefore that he is perfectly happy? He would be even happier than the Solitary Walker, because the latter can only feel this sentiment for short periods of time, whereas it is the constant state of mind of the natural man.

Let us assume with Leo Strauss, however, that "the feeling of existence as Rousseau experienced and described it has a rich articulation which must have been lacking in the feeling of existence as it was experienced by man in the state of nature."<sup>55</sup> This explanation does not fit Rousseau's description of what happened in his soul while he was happy on the island of Saint-Pierre. However, it fits what Rousseau says at the end of the Fifth Walk: by dreaming of himself dreaming on the island of Saint-Pierre, he achieves a greater happiness than when he was there, because "à l'attrait d'une reverie monotone je joins des images charmantes qui la vivifient." (R, OC I, p. 1049). The "rich articulation" of Rousseau's sentiment of existence would be provided by the power of his imagination, which the natural man is of course lacking. It would also be provided by his ability to use his memory, which allows him to unify his existence; whereas the natural man, although he has an idea of his self, arguably lacks this type of memory. Yet Rousseau's happiness at the end of the Fifth Walk has nothing to do with his theory of equilibrium. What he describes is a creative nostalgia. It presupposes a longing for a time that cannot come back, i.e. a desire that cannot be fulfilled by our faculties.<sup>56</sup> Rousseau's

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55. Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1953), p. 292-293.

56. Unless one says that the faculty of imagination is fulfilling the desire to live in the past... This would fit the letter of Rousseau's description of happiness as equilibrium, but not its spirit, since Rousseau wants us

power and will are unequal, but he nonetheless finds the greatest happiness in his recollection of past happiness.

I would finally remark that the account of happiness in the Fifth Walk does not fit with the theory of equilibrium, since when Rousseau gives himself entirely to his sentiment of existence, his human faculties are all put to sleep or are “idle.” Indeed, his soul has no internal movement of its own. Rousseau is not thinking, not fancying anything; he is completely passive. Thus, in the entire Fifth Walk, equilibrium between desires and faculties is not the condition of happiness.

These last observations lead us to the question: what if equilibrium was not a necessary condition of happiness?

### *3 – Is Equilibrium the Necessary Condition of Happiness?*

The theory of happiness as equilibrium is developed in book II of *Émile*. It consists in the absence of suffering, in resigning ourselves to our limits, in living in the present and in contracting our being into ourselves. The best example of this happiness is the man living in the state of nature. In Book III of *Émile*, however, Rousseau opens up the possibility of another kind of happiness:

Tout homme veut être heureux, mais pour parvenir à l'être il faudroit commencer par savoir ce que c'est que le bonheur. Le bonheur de l'homme naturel est aussi simple que sa vie ; il consiste à ne pas souffrir: la santé, la liberté, le nécessaire le constituent. Le bonheur de l'homme

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to live for the real goods of force, health and self-esteem rather than for imaginary goods; since he calls us to live in the present rather than in the past or the future.

moral est autre chose ; mais ce n'est pas de celui-là qu'il est ici question  
(*E*, OC IV, p. 444).<sup>57</sup>

The “happiness of the natural man” here is almost identical to the theory of happiness as equilibrium.<sup>58</sup> Happiness as equilibrium appears therefore as one specific type of happiness. There is another sort of happiness that belongs to the moral man. But what is it?

The birth of our moral being means the development of our “expansive sensitivity” (*E*, OC IV, p. 501). Is this “expansive sensitivity” reconcilable with equilibrium? Could the happy development of this “expansive sensitivity” require something else than equilibrium of desires and faculties? Or perhaps more tragically, could this “expansive sensitivity” need equilibrium to develop happily (as Melzer and Cooper want it), yet be intrinsically rebellious to it? Everything that is interesting and controversial in Rousseau’s philosophy is related to his conception of “the moral.” What does Rousseau mean by this term? What is the importance of our moral being? How is this being related to our physical being? Is “the moral” natural? My purpose here is not to solve these questions. I want only to show how *Émile* offers conceptions of happiness which differ from equilibrium. I will start by presenting the interpretation of a recent commentator of Rousseau who minimizes the importance of equilibrium in Rousseau’s project to make men happy. Then I will show how happiness could be the result either of an excess of strength or of an excess of desire. The birth of our moral being allows the

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57. Compare to *Contrat Social (Première version)*, OC III, p. 289

58. The main difference is that good witness of oneself has disappeared from the list of goods enumerated here.

possibility of morality and love. The former requires an excess of strength while the latter requires an excess of desires. Both seem therefore to be in rupture with the theory of equilibrium.

### 3.1 – *Equilibrium or Effervescence?*

Fiona Miller's dissertation on Rousseau and Nietzsche raises interesting objections about the necessity of putting our souls in equilibrium to achieve happiness, or more generally, about wholeness as a standard for Rousseau's moral and political thought.<sup>59</sup> She first argues that if the wholeness of the state of nature is to be a standard for us, "one [...] must provide an argument for why Rousseau's natural standard can be an ethical standard for social human beings."<sup>60</sup> Since Rousseau argues in the *Second Discours* that "le genre-humain d'un âge, n'étant pas le genre-humain d'un autre âge", it is difficult to see how the original man can serve as a model for the civilized man.<sup>61</sup> Miller argues for her part that Rousseau's use of the term "nature" in our civilized

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59. "We must be wholly where we are, but also wholly *what* we are" (Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man*, p. 67); "What Rousseau seeks to achieve, most of all, is the restoration of human wholeness – that is, the restoration of the savage's goodness or harmony, both internally and with respect to others" (Cooper, *Rousseau, Nature and the Problem of the Good Life*, p. 186). Miller, like Melzer and Cooper, does not make a strong distinction between "unity", "wholeness", and "equilibrium".

60. Fiona Miller, *Modern Heartbreak and New Exemplars: Rousseau, Nietzsche and the Politics of the Modern Soul*, unpublished dissertation, University of Toronto, 1994, p. 38.

61. Cf. "If the state of nature is subhuman, it is absurd to go back to the state of nature in order to find in it the norm for man" (Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 274). Arthur Melzer answers that the state of nature only offers a formal standard. Yet it is clear afterwards that he gives also a substantive meaning to nature: see *The Natural Goodness of Man*, p. 70, 93, and 113. Laurence Cooper devotes an important part of his book to the resolution of this "paradox" (*Rousseau, Nature and the Problem of the Good Life*, p. 24-25, 64, 178, 180 and 184). He concludes that nature is a formal standard only for the citizen (p. 186). For *Émile* and for Jean-Jacques, nature is a substantive standard (p. 190) which however entails that the man in the pure state of nature was already human (p. 189).

situation is but a metaphor “designed to work on his readers not by echoing their inner simplicity and wholeness, for that was long gone, but by appealing to their curiosity, to those traits of the divided soul, reason and imagination, and to that divisive love, *amour-propre*.” In other words, Rousseau believes that nature is lost forever. His multiple appeals to nature as a standard are due to the fact that nature still attracts our modern hearts. Rousseau wants to excite the *amour-propre* of his readers and make nature a worthy goal that each and everyone would be proud to “regain.”<sup>62</sup> Fiona Miller is accordingly able to provide an explanation about why Rousseau sustains categorically that equilibrium is happiness: “It is the target at which Rousseau would have bourgeois souls aim, but it is not a description of how he thinks the soul of his readers, or any souls at all, actually are, could be or should be structured.”<sup>63</sup>

What are, then, Rousseau’s qualms against happiness as equilibrium? Miller first focuses on Rousseau’s proviso that none of our faculties must remain idle if we are to enjoy our whole being. She notes that “because of the way human faculties develop, because of the functioning of human perfectibility, any being besides one limited by nature, on the low or high side, threatens to upset his own psychic equilibrium in his attempt to use his faculties to the full. [Equilibrium is a formula] to encourage psychic unrest.”<sup>64</sup> Rousseau remarkably denies that we can know the limits of our faculties, either as a species or as an individual. Yet he asks us to resign ourselves to our lot;<sup>65</sup> how can

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62. Miller, *Modern Heartbreak and New Exemplars*, p. 48.

63. Miller, *Modern Heartbreak and New Exemplars*, p. 73. This thesis is not without its difficulty, not only because it presupposes the knowledge of Rousseau’s intention, but also because Rousseau is paradoxically upholding wholeness to reach a goal that contradicts it (“effervescence” according to Miller).

64. Miller, *Modern Heartbreak and New Exemplars*, p. 51-52.

65. See *E*, OC IV, p. 281.

we ever reach, therefore, the equilibrium of desires and faculties with our faculties exercised at their fullest, if we do not know their limits? Rousseau seems even to deny the existence of any natural limit to our faculties. Shortly after defining happiness as equilibrium, Rousseau mentions that we are the only animal that has “superfluous faculties,” i.e. faculties that do not answer any natural desire.<sup>66</sup> If it is possible for the natural man to exercise his faculties to their fullest and reach genuine equilibrium, it is because he has no expansive ones. But for civilized men, the proviso to use our faculties to their fullest to be happy invites them in the final analysis to psychic unbalance and effervescence. According to Miller, Rousseau’s ultimate goal is precisely to foster this effervescence in his reader’s soul. Contrary to what he seems to claim in his discussion of the meaning of equilibrium, Rousseau does not want to restrict our imagination, since this would mean restricting one of our faculties and therefore “barring ourselves from the experience of our whole being.”<sup>67</sup>

Our expansive faculties are naturally open-ended. Now, of course, Rousseau is not proposing to give them free rein, since this is the surest road to the miseries of *amour-propre*. But since these faculties have no natural limit or standard, they can only be put to rest arbitrarily by human art, which means by force or by persuasion.<sup>68</sup> Let us assume

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66. *E*, OC IV, p. 305. Rousseau also says that the desire that animates all our faculties cannot be fully satisfied (See *E*, OC IV, p. 429). The whole notion of happiness as equilibrium stands or falls on the idea that there is a necessity constraining our desires, which is recognizable and to which we can bend. To take the example of *Émile* at the end of Book III, he is happy because he thinks that all events of his life are necessary. But his belief in necessity is an illusion: for example, he thinks that it is necessary that someone refuses to gratify his wishes (*E*, OC IV, p. 422).

67. Miller, *Modern Heartbreak and New Exemplars*, p. 52.

68. This would be why Rousseau says that man must be completely denaturalized to be fonctionnal in society: “Les bonnes institutions sociales sont celles qui savent le mieux dénaturer l’homme, lui ôter son existence absolue pour lui en donner une relative, et transporter le *moi* dans l’unité commune; en sorte que chaque particulier ne se croie plus un, mais partie de l’unité, et ne soit plus sensible que dans le

that this art uses equilibrium as a standard to put these faculties at rest. Miller wonders in this case if an order that comes from the outside, i.e. that is externally imposed on the human soul, necessarily means that this soul will be in equilibrium. To use a metaphor, the contents of a saucepan will not stop boiling if you put a lid on it. According to Miller, Rousseau, by persuading his reader to attempt to achieve equilibrium, presupposes nonetheless that their souls will be in effervescence, since they are trying to emulate him or emulate his characters (Émile, Sophie, Julie, Saint-Preux, etc.): “Rousseau depends upon effervescence, even if only to counter its own imperialism.”<sup>69</sup> Any solution at the civilized level presupposes the use of *amour-propre* or of our expansive faculties, even when the aim is to control precisely these expansive faculties. According to this objection, the “ideal” of equilibrium is but another phantasm that does not cure the disequilibrium of our souls, but only palliates it.<sup>70</sup>

### 3.2 – Two Alternatives to Equilibrium

The theory of equilibrium is appealing because it supports our opinion that happiness is identical to satisfaction; and how else can we be satisfied, but by having our

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tout” (*E*, OC IV, p. 249). Although Rousseau seems to talk only of politics or of the solution of the *Contrat Social*, his statement fits just as well the solution of *Émile*. As he reminds his reader, morality (*Émile*) and politics (*Contrat Social*) are inseparable (*E*, OC IV, p. 524). Thus when Émile develops morality, Rousseau writes “nous travaillons de concert avec la nature, et tandis qu’elle forme l’homme physique nous tâchons de former l’homme moral” (*E*, OC IV, p. 636 ; see also p. 500).

69. Miller, *Modern Heartbreak and New Exemplars*, p. 65.

70. Miller is uncomfortable with the case of the Solitary Walker, since he seems to impose equilibrium to his soul “from within.” I would argue that he is in need of external forces to achieve happiness. For example, as Miller herself points out, the Solitary Walker is capping his expansive faculties because of his old age and his sad situation: “mon imagination tarie et mes idées éteintes ne fournissent plus d’alimens à mon cœur” (*R*, OC I, p. 1075; see also p. 1002, 1004, 1049 and *E*, OC IV, p. 288-289).

desires fulfilled? Yet we do also have another opinion of happiness, or more precisely a different conception of what it means to be “satisfied.” If, on the one hand, we think that happiness is having one’s desires fulfilled, on the other hand, we think that a man who has no great desires is unhappy. This is the critique that has been made of the bourgeois: “a little pleasure in the morning, a little pleasure at night” and he is satisfied. In comparison, a man with a great passion is said to be happier. His passion may never be entirely fulfilled, but the simple fact of longing is often thought to be at the source of man’s greatest delights.

We also tend to think that someone who is aiming at a goal that he can never reach can nonetheless be happy. Let us take the example of a sport: cycling. Part of the happiness of the racer is to beat his adversaries; another part is to try to complete a perfect race. Beating adversaries is a goal that is never fully achieved, since another race will come in the future in which the champion will have to prove that he is still the best. The perfect race is also a goal that can never be achieved, for the simple fact that perfection is not of this world. Yet the activities of trying to achieve perfection and to be the best seem to make many men happy. Were they to achieve something close to a perfect career, they usually tend to be unhappy when they retire, because they are not striving anymore for perfection. Thus it does not matter if their desire for perfection is never fulfilled, because it is the race towards perfection that genuinely makes them happy.

Another example of an activity that seems good in itself – even if its goal is unreachable – is philosophy. The philosopher wants to understand the whole; but this



desire, according to many philosophers, cannot be fulfilled. Nonetheless, the activity of seeking wisdom brings a happiness that cannot be surpassed – or so they claim.

I suggest that these possibilities – or something similar to them – are also present in Rousseau's work. Perhaps equilibrium is not a necessary condition for happiness. Happiness could reside in an excess of force or else in an excess of desire. I will briefly examine each of these possibilities.

### *3.2.1 – Happiness as Excess of Force*

At the beginning of Book III of *Émile*, Rousseau discusses again the idea of equilibrium of desires and faculties. Émile has reached a point where his faculties surpass his desires or his needs. Although Émile is weak in comparison to an adult, he is strong in comparison to himself. Since his needs are few, undeveloped and undemanding, his actual forces are more than enough to satisfy them. The need that creates a multitude of other needs, the sexual need, has not yet appeared. The faculty that creates a multitude of desires, imagination, is still unlit. He considers all the events of his life as necessary and therefore he can easily resign to what happens to him. Opinion has no grip on his soul, because Émile “se considère sans égard aux autres et trouve bon que les autres ne pensent point à lui” (*E*, OC IV, p. 488). He has no moral relationships because he is unaware that there are sensitive beings like him. He thinks he is alone in human society and counts only on himself.

Émile enjoys many benefits that Rousseau said come with having a soul in equilibrium: easy resignation to necessity, no desire to be more than what we are, and an inactive imagination. His desires do not go farther than his arms; he does not therefore need any other man and is truly free. He wants only what he can have and does only what pleases him. The goods he enjoys are only the natural goods: health, freedom and necessity. His happiness is the same as the one brought by equilibrium: it consists in an absence of suffering.

However, Émile's soul is not simply in equilibrium: "Ses besoins n'étant pas tous développés, ses forces actuelles sont plus que suffisantes pour pourvoir à ceux qu'il a. [...]. Non seulement il peut se suffire à lui-même, il a de la force au delà de ce qu'il lui en faut" (*E*, OC IV, p. 426). According to the theory of equilibrium, Émile should be unhappy. Since a part of his being remaining "idle," he cannot "enjoy his whole being." This in turn would bring the evil consequence that he would become wicked.<sup>71</sup> But this is clearly not the effect of his excess of power. Rousseau says at the end of Book III that Émile is content, happy and free as much as nature allowed him to be. Rather, the effect of his excess of strength is to allow his expansive *amour de soi* to leap ahead of him: "Dans l'état de foiblesse et d'insuffisance□le soin de nous conserver nous concentre au dedans□de nous; dans l'état de puissance et de force□le desir d'étendre nôtre être nous porte au delà,□et nous fait élaner aussi loin qu'il nous est□possible" (*E*, OC IV, p.

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71. Cf. *E*, OC IV, p. 815: "Jamais l'homme ne devient méchant que lorsqu'il est malheureux." Compare to what Rousseau says in Book I: "Toute méchanceté vient de foiblesse" (p. 288). Unhappiness and weakness appear identical, while in fact they are not, as I explain in the following section.

430).<sup>72</sup> In the case of Émile, the governor will use this new possibility to educate his expansive faculties, so that Émile can gather and stock forces for the future when he might need them.<sup>73</sup> It appears that this new desire brought by his situation of strength does not in turn put Émile in a situation of weakness. Indeed, his desire to extend his being is limited by his ideas: “[Sa] pensée ne va pas plus loin que [ses] yeux” (*E*, OC IV, p. 430). The governor can therefore control his expansive desires by controlling his ideas.

The Émile of Book III is interesting because he seems to reunite the benefits of equilibrium and of expansion. However, these two states are presented as mutually exclusive by Rousseau. In truth, expansion is only possible when there is an excess of force: “Dans l’état de puissance et de force□le desir d’étendre nôtre être nous porte au delà,□et nous fait élaner aussi loin qu’il nous est□possible” (*E*, OC IV, p. 430). We need a “surabondance de nos forces sur nos besoins, pour nous porter hors de nous” (*E*, OC IV, p. 466). As Fiona Miller points out, “it is a feeling of strength, a feeling that our capacities exceed our desires, that spurs our desire to expand.”<sup>74</sup> A soul that is in equilibrium *cannot* expand.

What would be a happiness that resides in an excess of force or that is simply in expansion? Eve Grace provides an comprehensive account of this possibility. She starts by posing a problem I have already mentioned in this chapter: the problem that there

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72. It is not a *factual* state of strength that spurs the desire to extend our being, but a *perceived* state of strength. This qualification is necessary to explain why factually weak beings seek nonetheless to extend their being.

73. “Que fera-t-il donc de cet excédent de facultés et de□forces qu’il a de trop à présent, et qui lui□manquera dans un autre âge? Il tâchera de□l’employer à des soins qui lui puissent profiter au□besoin. Il jettera pour ainsi dire dans l’avenir□le superflu de son être actuel: l’enfant robuste□fera des provisions pour l’homme foible: mais il□n’établira ses magasins ni dans des coffres qu’on□peut lui voler, ni dans des granges qui lui sont□étrangères; pour s’approprier véritablement son□acquis c’est dans ses bras, dans sa tête, c’est□dans lui qu’il le logera” (*E*, OC IV, p. 427).

74. Miller, *Modern Heartbreak and New Exemplars*, p. 66.

seems to be two exclusive accounts of the sentiment of existence. She notes that there is an account of the sentiment of existence that is attached to Rousseau's definition of happiness as equilibrium and in which the sentiment of existence is presented as the result of a passive state of satisfaction. However, there is an alternative account which seems "to point to the view that a being with excess strength or faculties, or minimal desires in comparison to his power, would be in the best condition for a human being."<sup>75</sup> The first account portrays the sentiment of existence as a sort of "unalloyed communion with being in all its purity and immediacy through our own unmediated presence to ourselves."<sup>76</sup> This is the sentiment of existence of the man in the state of nature and of the Solitary Walker in the Fifth Walk, two accounts which "stresses passivity and minimal human development as sufficient" for the enjoyment of this sentiment.<sup>77</sup> On the other hand, there is an account of the sentiment of existence that stresses activity and maximum human development, and is based on the a statement from Book I of *Émile* that I have already quoted: "Vivre, ce n'est pas respirer, c'est agir; c'est□faire usage de nos organes, de nos sens, de nos□facultés, de toutes les parties de nous-mêmes qui□nous donnent le sentiment de notre existence.□L'homme qui a le plus vécu n'est pas celui qui a□compté le plus d'années; mais celui qui a le plus□senti la vie" (*E*, OC IV, p. 253). These two separate accounts appear to be rooted in Rousseau's dual account of human sensitivity in the *Dialogues*: "Il y a une sensibilité purement physique et organique, qui, purement passive, paroît n'avoir pour fin que la conservation de notre corps et celle de

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75. Grace, "The Restlessness of 'Being'," p. 141.

76. Grace, "The Restlessness of 'Being'," p. 133.

77. *Idem*.

notre espèce par les directions du plaisir et de la douleur. Il y a une autre sensibilité que j'appelle active et morale qui n'est autre chose que la faculté d'attacher nos affections à des êtres qui nous sont étrangers" (*D*, OC I, p. 805).<sup>78</sup>

Grace focuses on the second account (activity). She asks: what is the content of this "sentiment of existence" and what are the conditions under which we can experience it? We have already seen the conditions to experience this sentiment of existence: one must have all his faculties in action, and one must feel himself in a state of strength, i.e. having a desire to leap outside oneself and extend one's being not from a specific need, but from the feeling that we have a general excess of power to spend. But what is the content of this sentiment of existence? Basing herself on Rousseau's discussion of childhood in Book I of *Émile*, Grace demonstrates that what we feel when we "feel existence" under these conditions is "energy constantly seeking to discharge itself" or the "flow of energy that we feel as 'being'".<sup>79</sup>

According to this account, happiness would be produced when we have the sentiment that our powers are used to their maximum capacity: "The plenitude of life

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78. These two accounts are also present in the famous fragment 21 devoted to the sentiment of existence (OC II, p. 1324-1325). Commentators interested in understanding the sentiment of existence rely heavily on this fragment. But many statements of the fragment are either obscure or problematic. For example, Rousseau mentions two different principles at the source of our passions: the sentiment of existence and the "désir d'exister." Many commentators do not make a distinction between these two accounts (see, for example, Eve Grace, "The Restlessness of 'Being'," p. 137). Yet one is passive, the other active; one is physical, the other one is moral. The second cannot be known by man in the state of nature, although it is latent (if it is identical to perfectibilité).

79. Grace, "The Restlessness of 'Being'," p. 140 and 143. The term "energy" is Grace's own. Rousseau uses "energy" four times in *Émile*: three times in connection to language and one time in connection to virtue. But he never uses it in connection with "existence." Grace also says that the sentiment of existence is the feeling of our "desire to exist" or of "life" (p. 140). I prefer the formulation: "feeling the discharge of energy" or even "the feeling of superabundant force" (since Rousseau speaks of "force surabondante" or "sensibilité surabondante" but never of "énergie surabondante"). Saying that this sentiment of existence is a "feeling of our desire to exist" appears to contradict the fact that we feel this sentiment when we are in a state of force, i.e. we don't feel any need or desire.

would seem to be felt when, like a race horse running at top speed, we stretch our every power, our very faculty, to its utmost.”<sup>80</sup> To repeat, this is not the result of having our faculties and our desires in equilibrium, but rather the feeling that we have superabundant strength, that we have power beyond our needs. This superabundance of power makes us feel alive, and this feeling is identical to being happy. Misery, on the other hand, is feeling that our powers are insufficient to satisfy our needs. Since civilized life stimulates our *amour-propre*, and since *amour-propre* (in one of Rousseau’s account) is a passion that cannot be satisfied, civilized life leads to misery. The *amour-propre* of the civilized men makes him crazily active, and entices him to use all of his faculties, but this is not enough to make him happy, because his true condition is one of want. While he thinks that he is in a situation of superabundance of strength, he believes himself to be happy; but sooner or later life brings him back to reality and to his true misery.

There are some problems, however, with this account of happiness. First, it is arguable that the content of the sentiment of existence is “energy.” What Rousseau explicitly says in the Fifth Walk is that its content is the “self.”<sup>81</sup> Is the “self” identical to “energy”? Second, what kind of life in Rousseau’s work matches this description? Following Grace’s suggestion, I will assume that the man who most obviously feels a superabundance of force is the virtuous one.<sup>82</sup> But Rousseau offers two distinct accounts of virtue. The first one is that virtue is a constant struggle against our inclinations. The virtuous man is virtuous because he is able to impose his will on his physical urges. This

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80. Grace, “The Restlessness of ‘Being,’” p. 140.

81. “De quoi jouit-on dans une pareille situation? De rien d’extérieur à soi, de rien sinon de soi-même et de sa propre existence” (*R*, OC I, p. 1047). See pages 138-139 of Grace’s article to evaluate her justification to ascribe “energy” to the content of the sentiment of existence.

82. See Grace, “The Restlessness of ‘Being,’” p. 134.

virtue generates in turn moral freedom or autonomy, i.e. obeying the law that one prescribed to oneself. This is the type of freedom Émile acquires at the end of the book. His governor tells him that he cannot be happy without controlling his inclinations: “Mon enfant, il n’y a point de bonheur sans courage□ni de vertu sans combat. Le mot de *vertu* vient□de *force* ; la force est la base de toute vertu” (*E*, OC IV, p. 817 ; see also *J*, OC II, p. 682). It is not clear, however, that Rousseau believes that this sort of virtue brings happiness. In the *Réveries*, for example, Rousseau says that his happiness consists in following’s one inclinations without any restraint. Duties, obligations, constraints are enemies of his felicity.<sup>83</sup> Another problem with virtue is that Rousseau sometimes argues that it brings by itself happiness ; but sometimes says that its rewards only comes in the afterlife.<sup>84</sup>

Yet Rousseau offers another account of virtue. Rather than having us struggling against our inclinations, virtue, in this account, is in offering the least resistance to natural inclinations.<sup>85</sup> The virtuous man would then be the one who is able to do good to others out of inclination. Doing good to others, like in being generous or grateful, can make one happy, because it feeds our self-esteem.<sup>86</sup> Being happy and virtuous become

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83. See, for example, the Sixth and Seventh Walks, as well as *D*, OC I, p. 823-824. “Rousseau lui-même n’aime pas la vertu qu’il célèbre. Ou alors il ne fait que l’aimer, mais est incapable, en raison de sa bonté naturelle, de pratiquer cette vertu contre nature. Non! Il ne l’aime pas, puisqu’il lui impute ce qui est à ses yeux, ou plutôt à son cœur, le plus impardonnable défaut: elle est cruelle” (Pierre Manent, *La Cité de l’homme* (Paris: Flammarion, 1997), p. 45).

84. For example, compare *E*, OC IV, p. 595 with p. 602-603. Whether virtue brings happiness according to Rousseau’s theory is a difficult question. To get an outline of the issue, compare Cooper, *Nature and the Problem of the Good Life*, p. 27 to Clifford Orwin, “Rousseau on the Source of Ethics” in *Instilling Ethics*, Norma Thompson, ed. (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), p. 76-78.

85. Cf. *SD*, OC I, p. 152.

86. “S’il passait près de nous□quelque paysan retournant au travail ses outils sur□l’épaule, je lui réjouïrois le coeur par quelques bons□propos, par quelques coups de bon vin qui lui feroient□porter plus gaiment sa

synonymous: “Mais de quoi jamais □ Émile peut-il être pressé? D’une seule chose, de □ jouir de la vie. Ajoûterai-je, et de faire du bien □ quand il le peut? Non, car cela même est jouir de la □ vie” (E, OC IV, p. 771).

But it is also questionable how this virtue is really the source of happiness for Rousseau. Apparently, the passion fueling this virtue (since virtue, like all action according to Rousseau, is motivated by passion) is compassion (*pitié*). As already mentioned, feeling compassion for other sensitive beings is a source of happiness for Rousseau:

Si le premier spectacle qui le frappe est un objet □ de tristesse, le premier retour sur lui-même est un □ sentiment de plaisir. *En voyant de combien de maux □ il est exempt, il se sent plus heureux qu’il ne □ pensait l’être.* Il partage les peines de ses □ semblables; mais ce partage est volontaire et doux. □ *Il jouit à la fois de la pitié qu’il a pour □ leurs maux, et du bonheur qui l’en exempte; il □ se sent dans cet état de force qui nous étend □ au-delà de nous, et nous fait porter ailleurs □ l’activité superflue à notre bien-être.* Pour □ plaindre le mal d’autrui, sans doute il faut le □ connaître, mais il ne faut pas le sentir. Quand on a □ souffert, ou qu’on craint de souffrir, on plaint □ ceux qui souffrent; mais tandis qu’on souffre, on ne □ plaint que soi. Or si, tous étant assujettis aux □ miseres de la vie, nul n’accorde aux autres que la □ sensibilité dont il n’a pas actuellement besoin □ pour lui-même, il s’ensuit que la commiseration □ doit être un sentiment très-doux, puisqu’elle dépose □ en notre faveur, et qu’au contraire un homme dur est □ toujours malheureux, puisque l’état de son coeur □ ne lui laisse □ aucune sensibilité surabondante, qu’il puisse □ accorder aux peines d’autrui (E, OC IV, p. 514-515 – my emphasis). □

This last quotation shows very well the connection between feeling *pitié* and happiness.

But it also points to the problem usually associated with *pitié* in Rousseau’s philosophy.

It shows how we can be satisfied by feeling compassion for people who are more

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misère; et moi j’aurois aussi □ le plaisir de me sentir émouvoir un peu les □ entrailles, et de me dire en secret: je suis encore □ homme” (E, OC IV, p. 508).



miserable than us without requiring us to actually help them getting out of their misery. But can we be satisfied or happy of having good feelings for others, without doing anything to help them? Isn't this attitude an effect of *amour-propre* (since we are happy in part because we compare ourselves to others and judge that we are better than they are?)

Let us assume however that this superabundant sensitivity leads us to help others. Having more than we need, we give to others. Yet this generosity requires that we have an excess of force or sensitivity or that helping others costs us nothing;<sup>87</sup> and, second, that we do not feel obligated to act this way. These two conditions are more difficult to fulfill than it appears for Rousseau. First, Rousseau claims in the Sixth Walk of the *Rêveries* that any act of generosity or gratitude entails obligations; and that the simple fact of feeling obligated makes these actions a burden. Second, Rousseau claims that the only time in life in which a man can be in a situation of excess of strength is when he is between 12 and 15 years old.<sup>88</sup> In other words, it is only at the time of life when he has no relationship to other human beings that a man would be in a condition to be virtuous in this manner.

What should we think, therefore, of the status of this virtue-generosity in Rousseau's thought? In the final analysis, Rousseau seems to think that the birth of our social or moral being condemns us to a situation of fundamental weakness. It would seem, therefore, that any happiness coming from an excess of force – whether it is arising

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87. "Non seulement nous voulons être heureux, nous voulons aussi le bonheur d'autrui ; et quand ce bonheur ne coûte rien au nôtre, il l'augmente" (*E*, OC IV, p. 597). See also what is the "true principle of generosity" (*E*, OC IV, p. 395).

88. See *E*, OC IV, p. 426-427.

from the struggle against our inclinations, or from our superabundant sensitivity – is problematic. At least, Rousseau seems to think that man is happier when he lives according to nature than when he is moral (*E*, OC IV, p. 858).

### 3.2.2 – *Happiness as an Excess of Desire*

The coming to being of our social and moral being appears to condemn us to a state of weakness. Nonetheless, could this new state be the condition of our happiness – of a “frêle bonheur”?<sup>89</sup> In the case of *Émile*, the apparition of his sexual desire at the beginning of Book IV is a “second birth.” Up to now, he was merely “existing”; now he is starting to “live.”<sup>90</sup> His heart is full of an “overflowing sentiment” and wants to open itself to others. *Émile* begins to compare himself; his nascent *amour-propre* makes him feel for the first time the distinctive human passions. He becomes aware that he depends on others; he is no longer whole and he feels weaker.

Should *Émile* regret the time when he had an excess of strength? When he was free of any human dependence? When his imagination was still unlit? When he easily resigned to necessity? At the end of Book III, *Émile* is “heureux et libre autant que la nature l’a permis.” But is this true human happiness? Is the peak of human experience? It

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89. “C’est la foiblesse de l’homme qui le rend sociable: ce sont nos misères communes qui portent nos cœurs à l’humanit, nous ne lui devrions rien si nous n’étions pas hommes. Tout attachement est un signe d’insuffisance: si chacun de nous n’avait nul besoin des autres il ne songeroit guères à s’unir à eux. Ainsi de notre infirmité même nait nôtre frêle bonheur.” (*E*, OC IV, p. 503)

90. “Nous naissons, pour ainsi dire, en deux fois: l’une pour exister, et l’autre pour vivre (*E*, OC IV, p. 489; see also p. 490). This statement goes hand in hand with the idea that there are two sorts of happiness for Rousseau. Moreover, here “existence” and “life” do not have the same meaning (see *E*, OC IV, p. 431 and 468). Thus the sentiment of existence and “feeling alive” could be two different feelings, as I have argued during my discussion of Eve Grace’s article.

appears that it is not. Émile's happiness in Book III is negative: "Il consiste à ne pas souffrir" (*E*, OC IV, p. 444). Even his intellectual discoveries do not bring him a great joy. His heart remains cold because it is utility that motivates his discoveries. Would the governor try to instill enthusiasm in his intellectual examinations, he would fail, since Émile has no taste, no true passion or sentiment.<sup>91</sup> If Émile is ever going to be happy after the birth of his moral being, it will be a different kind of happiness than the one he has felt up to now. As I have mentioned: "Le bonheur de l'homme naturel est aussi simple que sa vie; il consiste à ne pas souffrir: la santé, la liberté, le nécessaire le constituent. Le bonheur de l'homme moral est autre chose" (*Émile*, OC IV, p. 444).

So far, I have examined the possibility that happiness consists of an equilibrium between our faculties and desires. I have also considered whether happiness could be the result of an excess of strength over our needs. Could happiness consist of an excess of desires? At first glance, this possibility seems rather absurd. How could a being whose desires are far greater than his power to satisfy them could be happy? How can suffering be connected to happiness?

Rousseau ruled out this possibility when he argued that happiness is an equilibrium of desires and faculties:

Tout sentiment de peine est inséparable du désir de s'en délivrer; toute idée de plaisir est inséparable du désir d'en jouir; tout désir suppose privation, et toutes les privations qu'on sent sont pénibles; c'est donc dans la disproportion de nos desirs et de nos facultés que consiste notre misère. (*E*, OC IV, p. 304-305)

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91. See *E*, OC IV, p. 431-432.

But is this line of reasoning solid? A major part of Rousseau's works prove that it is not. Rousseau is aware as we all are that desiring is not always painful. Indeed, in book IV of *Émile*, Rousseau says that Émile has a pleasure to desire:

Je n'ai point élevé mon Émile pour désirer ni pour attendre, mais pour jouir, et quand il porte ses desirs au delà du présent, ce n'est point avec une ardeur assés impétueuse pour être importuné de la lenteur du tems. *Il ne jouïra pas seulement du plaisir de désirer*, mais de celui d'aller à l'objet qu'il desire et ses passions sont tellement modérées qu'il est toujours plus où il est qu'où il sera (*E*, OC IV, p. 771 – my emphasis).

Rousseau, in this context, is talking of the pleasures of travelling. Most men are unable to enjoy the interval between their point of departure and their point of arrival. They are always living in the future, thinking of their destination instead of enjoying the trip. This pascalian *divertissement* is not Émile's defining characteristic, since he has learned from childhood to live in the present and to love it as it is. Rousseau, therefore, maintains that Émile's happiness is tied to his ability to live in the present, but he adds that he enjoys desiring itself – as if loving to desire is a way of living in the present, since we are not hurrying towards the object of desire and we are not frustrated by its absence.

Here Émile is said to have moderate passions because he is not hurrying towards the object of his desire (in occurrence, Sophie). But the cause of Émile's moderation is not an ability to restrain his inclinations. Émile is “moderate” because his governor thinks that desiring Sophie makes him happier than possessing her. Hence he delays as long as he can their sexual union, because happiness *is* desiring. It is when Émile desires Sophie with all his force that he reaches the peak of happiness:

Que peut-il manquer au [bonheur d'Émile]? Voyez, cherchez, imaginez ce qu'il lui faut encore et qu'on puisse accorder avec ce qu'il a. Il réunit tous les biens qu'on peut obtenir à la fois; on n'y en peut ajouter aucun qu'aux dépens d'un autre; il est heureux autant qu'un homme peut l'être. Irai-je en ce moment abrégé un destin si doux? Irai-je troubler une volupté si pure? Ah tout le prix de la vie est dans la félicité qu'il goûte! Que pourrais-je lui rendre qui valut ce que je lui aurois ôté? Même en mettant le comble à son bonheur, j'en détruirois le plus grand charme: ce bonheur suprême est cent fois plus doux à espérer qu'à obtenir; on en jouit mieux quand on l'attend que quand on le goûte. Ô bon Émile, aime et sois aimé! Jouis longtemps avant que de posséder; jouis à la fois de l'amour et de l'innocence; fais ton paradis sur la terre en attendant l'autre: je n'abrègerai point cet heureux tems de ta vie. J'en filerai pour toi l'enchantement; je le prolongerai le plus qu'il sera possible (*E*, OC IV, p. 792).

And indeed, he uses all his art to prevent Émile and Sophie to satisfy their desires.

Although they are frustrated in their love, it only adds up to their happiness:

Dans des transports qu'il faut vaincre ils versent quelquefois ensemble des larmes plus pures que la rosée du ciel, et ces douces larmes font l'enchantement de leur vie; ils sont dans le plus charmant délire qu'aient jamais éprouvé des ames humaines. Les privations mêmes ajoutent à leur bonheur et les honorent à leurs propres yeux de leurs sacrifices (*E*, OC IV, p. 792).

The reader can legitimately wonder if the two-year trip that the governor impose to Émile and Sophie is not meant, despite the governor's professed reasons, to extend their happy frustration. Rousseau's idea of love is that its consumation can only destroy it. Reality is never as satisfying than the joys of imagination. Thus the return of Émile to Sophie is the end of their love (*E*, OC IV, p. 860), since "quelque précaution qu'on puisse prendre la jouissance use les plaisirs et l'amour avant tous les autres" (*E*, OC IV, p. 866). Émile and Sophie settle for the happiness of marriage, apparently because this is a more durable

happiness; but it nonetheless appears that true happiness (if happiness is a peak) has gone forever.

Rousseau depicts therefore a sort of happiness that has little to do with his theory of equilibrium. Rather than presenting every feeling of pain as inseparable from the desire to be delivered from it and every privation as painful, Rousseau's theory of love elevates sadness, melancholy and impossible desires as the true source of bliss. What has come to be called "romantic love" after Rousseau cultivates the obstacle between its desire and its realization because love brings its greatest delights when it is impossible to be consumed. Accordingly, the condition of possibility of happiness is dissatisfaction; it is a condition of want, a tension towards a state that escapes us.

Rousseau's novel and autobiographic works are full of beautiful descriptions of this essential truth. For example, one of the most famous passages of the *Nouvelle-Héloïse* shows that Julie has learned in the end that happiness is in desire:

Malheur à qui n'a plus rien à désirer! Il perd pour ainsi dire tout ce qu'il possède. On jouit moins de ce qu'on obtient que de ce qu'on espere, et l'on n'est heureux qu'avant d'être heureux. En effet, l'homme avide et borné, fait pour tout vouloir et peu obtenir, a reçu du ciel une force consolante qui rapproche de lui tout ce qu'il desire, qui le soumet à son imagination, qui le lui rend présent et sensible, qui le lui livre en quelque sorte, et pour lui rendre cette imaginaire propriété plus douce, le modifie au gré de sa passion. Mais tout ce prestige dispaeroit devant l'objet même; rien n'embellit plus cet objet aux yeux du possesseur; on ne se figure point ce qu'on voit; l'imagination ne pare plus rien de ce qu'on possède, l'illusion cesse où commence la jouissance. Le pays des chimeres est en ce monde le seul digne d'être habité, et tel est le néant des choses humaines, qu'hors l'Etre existant par lui-même, il n'y a rien de beau que ce qui n'est pas (*J*, OC II, p. 693).

The theory of equilibrium scolded imagination as the source of our miseries. But here, imagination and its chimera is the source of our greatest delights. Julie is well aware that she is desiring an illusion, but she claims nonetheless that nothing makes her happier.<sup>92</sup>

Rousseau's praise of romantic love suggests that happiness could consist of an excess of desire. Yet like all the other possibilities of happiness that I have analyzed in this chapter, romantic love also appears to fall short of true happiness. At least, in *Émile*, the governor wants to cure Émile from his intoxicating passion for Sophie:

Croyez-vous, cher Émile, qu'un homme en quelque situation qu'il se trouve puisse être plus heureux que vous l'êtes depuis trois mois? Si vous le croyez, détrompez-vous. Avant de goûter les plaisirs de la vie vous en avez épuisé le bonheur. Il n'y a rien au delà de ce que vous avez senti. La félicité des sens est passagère. L'état habituel du coeur y perd toujours. Vous avez plus jouï par l'espérance que vous ne jouïrez jamais en réalité. L'imagination qui pare ce qu'on desire l'abandonne dans la possession. Hors le seul être existant par lui même il n'y a rien de beau que ce qui n'est pas. Si cet état eut pu durer toujours vous auriez trouvé le bonheur suprême. Mais tout ce qui tient à l'homme se sent de sa caducité; tout est fini, tout est passager dans la vie humaine, et quand l'état qui nous rend heureux dureroit sans cesse, l'habitude d'en jouïr nous en ôteroit le goût. Si rien ne change au dehors, le coeur change; le bonheur nous quite ou nous le quitons (*E*, OC IV, p. 821).

The governor describes happiness in the same terms as Julie, but he comes to the conclusion that this happiness is not durable enough to be Émile's ideal. The fact that it is based on an illusion seem to be the reason behind the governor's final project to transform Émile into a wise and virtuous husband. He now must learn how to fight his inclinations and restrain his desires.

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92. At the end of the novel, Julie hopes that she will be reunited to Saint-Preux in the afterlife. Is this again the happiness of desiring that manifests itself on her deathbed?

This speech marks the return of the theory of equilibrium in *Émile*. It uses the same terms and the same ideas that are developed during the discussion of equilibrium in Book II: “Sois homme; retire ton cœur dans les bornes de ta condition. Etudie et connois ces bornes; quelque étroites qu’elles soient, on n’est point malheureux tant qu’on s’y renferme; one ne l’est que quand on veut les passer: on l’est quand dans ses desirs insensés on met au rang des possibles ce qui ne l’est pas” (*Émile*, OC IV, p. 819; compare to p. 305 and 308). Like Rousseau’s discussion of equilibrium, the gist of the governor’s speech is to attack the pleasures that require imagination to be felt. The guiding idea of his speech relatively to happiness is the same as the guiding idea of the theory of equilibrium: happiness is in the avoidance of suffering (OC IV, p. 820). To make Émile aware of the overreaching expansion of his being, the governor uses the same pedagogical device found at the end of the theory of equilibrium. He comes to him with a letter and asks him what he would do if he learned that Sophie had died. This trick recalls the story Rousseau used in his discussion of equilibrium to illustrate the power of our imagination on our happiness, when he talks of a man who receives a letter containing bad news (*Émile*, OC IV, p. 814 and 308).

However, the happiness that the governor now wants to settle for Émile is not identical to Rousseau’s definition of equilibrium. The virtue that the governor wants to inculcate in Émile presupposes a repression of his desires. But equilibrium is achieved when the faculties are *satisfying* the desires, not when they are struggling against them. If Émile’s soul is struggling with itself, then it does not match Rousseau’s description of



equilibrium, which produces a peaceful soul (*Émile*, OC IV, p. 304).<sup>93</sup> The final triumph of virtue over love in *Émile* is also problematic on another level. The governor argues in favor of virtue because it is a more solid happiness than love. Yet in the sequel to *Émile*, called *Émile et Sophie, ou les Solitaires*, Émile's marital happiness remains frail. After the departure of the governor, Sophie's parents and daughter die. If Émile, thanks perhaps to his education, remains unaffected by the death of his daughter, Sophie cannot stand this blow of fate. They move to Paris to help Sophie to forget her pain. There Sophie soothes her affliction with the temptations and vices of the city. She cheats on Émile and becomes pregnant with her lover's child. Despite his virtue, Émile's happiness is destroyed. His governor wanted him to become virtuous because he would not be sensitive to Sophie's fate. Perhaps Émile did not become as virtuous what his governor wanted him to become. But perhaps the lesson is that even the virtuous man's happiness remains frail. At least, the outcome of their marital experience shows that it was not as solid as the governor promised it would be.

When one compares the governor's reasoning with other statements from Rousseau, one starts to doubt if he is right to condemn love as too unstable. For example, Rousseau praises in the *Dialogues* the happiness of desiring or the happiness given by imaginary beings as more solid than any other sort of happiness:

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93. It must be noted, however, that Rousseau does not think of equilibrium only as a state where our faculties meet our desires. In the course of his definition, he replaces "faculties" and "desires" with "power" and "will": "En quoi donc consiste la sagesse humaine ou la route du vrai bonheur? [...] C'est à diminuer l'excès des desirs sur les facultés, et à mettre en égalité parfaite la puissance et la volonté" (*E*, OC IV, p. 304). This is the equilibrium achieved by Émile. However, it is not identical to an equilibrium between desires and faculties.

Dépouillé par des mains cruelles de tous les biens de cette vie, l'espérance l'en dédomage dans l'avenir, l'imagination les lui rend dans l'instant même: d'heureuses fictions lui tiennent lieu d'un bonheur réel; et que dis-je? Lui seul est solidement heureux, puisque les biens terrestres peuvent à chaque instant échapper en mille manières à celui qui croit les tenir: mais rien ne peut ôter ceux de l'imagination à quiconque sait en jouir. Il les possède sans risque et sans crainte; la fortune et les hommes ne sauroient l'en dépouiller (*D*, OC I, p. 814).

Furthermore, the governor's attempt to persuade Émile that his happiness is frail because Sophie could die at any moment would not convince Saint-Preux. Contrary to what Émile's governor predicts, the death of the woman he loves makes his love and his happiness even more durable, since he can now think of her only as Julie and not as Madame de Wolmar, and especially since death will prevent forever the reunion of the two lovers, and, therefore, the necessary decline of their love.

#### *4 – Conclusion*

Rousseau's definition of happiness as an equilibrium between our desires and our faculties is central to his thought, because it appears to be logically deducted from his understanding of human nature. Its standard bearer is the natural man, the one who lives in the pure state of nature. His power and his will are in perfect equilibrium because his imagination is inactive and his situation is one of self-sufficiency. His only need is self-preservation and his faculties are perfectly apt to fulfill this need. If he has faculties that are idle, he does not feel their idleness; thus he feels his being as one and entire.

If Rousseau's theory of equilibrium seems identical to insensitivity, its aim would be in fact something else. Happiness is not simply the absence of painful feelings. It produces the sentiment of one's own existence, a sentiment so fulfilling that it appears to constitute happiness. So why does he discuss happiness in terms of pain and pleasure if this is not the correct standard for evaluating if a man is happy or not? Although the context does not give any indication of such a thing, one can surmise that Rousseau is aiming at being understood by an ordinary human being. Now humans usually think of happiness in terms of pain and pleasure. Moreover, according to his letter to Voltaire, Rousseau knows that the philosophers of his time also conceive of happiness in terms of pleasure and pain.<sup>94</sup> Thus Rousseau may hide the idea of the sentiment of existence in his discussion of happiness to be more easily understood by the majority of his readers. Yet this does not explain why Rousseau presents happiness as a negative state of as an absence of suffering. Perhaps the prospects for happiness in political society are so greatly circumscribed that the minimization of suffering may be the best that most people can do. Rousseau would therefore underscore this facet of happiness to be more useful to common men.

At the end of this chapter, we see that there are many difficulties with Rousseau's definition of happiness as equilibrium. One of the remaining problem is that the sentiment of existence is double: there is a version that is purely physical and passive and which belongs to the man in the pure state of nature and presumably to the Solitary Walker of the Fifth Walk; there is another version that is moral and active and which

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94. *Lettre à Voltaire*, OC IV, p. 1063.

belongs to men living in society who are using their expansive faculties. These two versions of the sentiment appear incommensurable. There is not a difference of degree between them, but a difference of kind: “Le bonheur de l’homme naturel est aussi simple que sa vie; il consiste à ne pas souffrir: la santé, la liberté, le nécessaire le constituent. Le bonheur de l’homme moral est autre chose” (*E*, OC IV, p. 444).

Another problem is that equilibrium seems impossible to achieve for any civilized being, for our expansive faculties have no natural limit. It goes the same way for our desires. If *amour de soi*, once socialized, becomes a desire to expand our being which never can be naturally satisfied, then only an artificial limit could constrain this desire. It does not matter whether this limit is offered by external circumstances or by our will, by force or by persuasion: the key point is that this limit will only be a palliative or an illusory and temporary satisfaction of our desire. Would a temporary satisfaction of our expansive faculties be considered human happiness for Rousseau? In a more simple fashion, the problem with equilibrium is that it seems to be possible only for a being whose desires and faculties are simply physical.<sup>95</sup> “The happiness of the moral man is something else,” says Rousseau. If men outside the fiction of the pure state of nature and of a novel are irremediably moral, is equilibrium meant for them?

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95. I recall that in the manuscrit Favre, Rousseau developed his theory of happiness with simple physical objectives: “Otez la force et la santé, tous les biens de cette vie sont dans l’opinion, otez les douleurs du corps, tous nos maux sont imaginaires” (*Émile* (manuscrit Favre), OC IV, p. 84).

## Chapter Two

### *Unhappiness and Opinion*

Independence, contraction of one's being, keeping one's imagination under control, living in the present, seeking only to be healthy and physically strong and avoid committing crimes, bending to necessity... Is this the happiness that Rousseau describes in his autobiographies? Many readers of Rousseau's autobiographical writings would answer in the negative. Whether it was Madame de Warens, Madame Dupin, Madame d'Épinay, the Duc de Luxembourg or others, Rousseau lived most of his life depending on the generosity of others. Whether it was imagining the life of the man in the pure state of nature, Julie or an ideal society of friends, Rousseau enjoyed flying on the wings of his imagination. The most moving pages of the *Confessions* are those where Rousseau describes his childhood. He tells us and shows indeed how much he takes pleasure in recollecting his past. Rousseau sought glory and visibly enjoyed the prestige he acquired from his writings. His behavior in many instances reveals a man desiring impossible things and struggling against necessity.

One could reply that if Rousseau never lived up to his idea of happiness, he tried all his life to achieve something that was close to it. Equilibrium of the soul was the goal of Rousseau's actions. It is only because he was weak that he did not achieve it. The key sections of his autobiographical writings where Rousseau describes himself as happy

show indeed that he was living according to his philosophical principles. Rousseau did not acquire these principles before the Illumination de Vincennes. He could not therefore willingly put them into practice before this event. And afterwards, he tells how he carried out a reform of his life to put it in line with his principles. Accordingly, the truth of Rousseau's system is not contradicted by his life. Just like a physician can prescribe healthy habits without practicing them perfectly, Rousseau can teach the road to happiness in *Émile* without following it during his life. Depending on whether we hold the author of the *Confessions* to be aware or not of the discrepancy between his life and his theory, his autobiographical works can be interpreted as a spectacular example of incontinence;<sup>1</sup> or as offering his life as a counter-model, as an example of what not to do if one wants to be happy.<sup>2</sup>

Another possible explanation of the discrepancy between Rousseau's theory and practice is that the theory of equilibrium may not be Rousseau's final understanding of what happiness is. This would explain why Rousseau searched for his own happiness in a different state than the equilibrium of the soul. We shall see how his third letter to Malesherbes describes happiness as the sentiment of desires that cannot be fulfilled. Rousseau's happiness is melancholic rather than based on a psychic balance of desires and faculties. The *Rêveries*, on the other hand, offers something like a return to the theory of equilibrium. Rousseau claims that he is bending to necessity and satisfied with a

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1. See Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: La Transparence et l'obstacle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971).

2. See Christopher Kelly, *Rousseau's Exemplary Life: The "Confessions" as Political Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

minimal sentiment of his existence. Yet I shall demonstrate how this return is problematic in itself and in comparison with the other ideas of happiness exposed in the work.

### *1 – Two Unhappy Episodes of Rousseau's Life*

Before examining what makes Rousseau happy in the next chapters, I will analyze two unhappy periods of Rousseau's life. It is of course relevant to a study of Rousseau's conception of his own happiness to see how he explains his unhappiness. The first episode of unhappiness I will examine is the period preceding Rousseau's departure for l'Hermitage. Rousseau had become unhappy with his life in Paris. His unhappiness led to an attempt at reforming his life. According to his account, his reform was not altogether a success. But Rousseau at least was able to quit Paris for his solitude in the countryside. I choose this episode from the *Confessions* over many others for a few reasons, because it is the period where Rousseau claims to have attempted to become independent of opinion. Since his dependence on opinion seems to be a genuine source of misery when we read his autobiographical writings, the analysis of his episode is relevant to understand his idea of happiness. I also find it more appropriate to inquire into Rousseau's misery in a period when he was in possession of his system. It is not that Rousseau's life before the Illumination of Vincennes is irrelevant to understand his unhappiness. Rousseau himself points to facts from his early life to find explanations for the miseries of the rest of it. These explanations are of course relevant and should be addressed in a complete interpretation of the *Confessions*. But in the limited frame of this

dissertation, I find it more interesting to examine a period of his life after the Illumination because Rousseau cannot blame his ignorance of human nature for his misery. The comparison between his account in the *Confessions* and his theory becomes more relevant. We can see what his discovery of his principles lead him to change about his life. The account of Rousseau's reform and of his departure from Paris in the *Confessions* is also relevant to my dissertation because Rousseau will discuss the same period in the Third Walk of the *Rêveries*, and yet will provide a different account.

The second episode I will examine is the crisis Rousseau experienced during the publishing of *Émile*. The crisis I am referring to is not the well-known event of the condemnation of his book and of his fleeing from France. It is rather an event that happened months earlier, when Rousseau had sent his proofs to his publisher. Rousseau began to fear that his manuscript would be seized by his enemies and published in a corrupted form so as to hurt his name. His panic led him to say unpleasant things to his friends and to make them do actions that were dangerous for their own reputation. Rousseau recovered from this crisis and attempted to explain his behavior in a few documents. I will look at his explanation of his miserable state during these months in some of his private letters as well as in the *Confessions*. I choose to look at this episode primarily because it is the context that led to Rousseau's writing of his four letters to Malesherbes. The episode is also the first occurrence in Rousseau's life of his belief in a plot to make him miserable. What makes it interesting is that Rousseau recovered from this belief at the time. The explanations he offers in his letters written just after his crisis do not therefore blame the plotters for his misery. It makes his explanations in a sense



more interesting, because it gives an idea of how Rousseau could otherwise explain his misery than by blaming a conspiracy. As for the explanation offered in the *Confessions* – at a time when Rousseau’s belief in the plot was unshakable – it does not blame the plot either, because there was of course no harm done to his manuscript. His new explanation of his erratic behavior leads to an interesting problem with respect to a passage of *Émile*.

Besides the exposition of Rousseau’s self-understanding of his misery, my objectives in this chapter are to highlight the discrepancies between Rousseau’s explanations of his misery as well as the difficulties raised by Rousseau’s claim that he wants to be independent and alone. These are major obstacles that the interpreter faces when he tries to understand Rousseau. They raise a set of problems that will become commonplace in this dissertation: to which explanation should the interpreter give more weight? Are these contradictions the result of Rousseau’s faulty self-understanding? Of his passions leading him to contradictory statements? Or are they the sign of an art of writing?

## *1.1 – Becoming Independent of Opinion: Rousseau’s Reform in the Confessions*

### *1.1.1 – One of the Few Privileged Souls?*

In his theory of equilibrium, Rousseau distinguishes the real goods (strength, health and good witness of oneself) from the other goods which he says reside in “*opinion*” (*E*, OC IV, p. 305-306). He implies that the goods that depend on *opinion* are

illusions, and that human misery comes from being concerned with goods that do not exist and are therefore outside of our reach.

Examining Rousseau's relationship to opinion is thus a sensible manner to evaluate if he follows the theory of equilibrium. Rousseau's own concern with opinion is also important because he often claims it has a bearing on the truth of his system. The philosophers under the spell of *amour-propre* do not care for the truth so much as for the prestige they can gain from their science or their art. Rousseau, on the other hand, claims he can handle the dangerous effects of practicing the sciences and the arts. He seems to believe that glory and public contempt cannot fundamentally affect his soul. He even gives his sincerity in the quest for truth as the ultimate evidence of the veracity of his system.

Rousseau's career as a writer started with the *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*. In the preface, Rousseau presents himself as a man sensitive to glory: although he is not seeking the approval of the public of his time, he desires to "live beyond his century." In the introduction, however, Rousseau adopts a more independent position: "Quel que soit mon succès, il est un prix qui ne peut me manquer: je le trouverai dans le fond de mon cœur" (*PD*, OC III, p. 5). One of the objections addressed subsequently to Rousseau was that his life and his career were in contradiction with his violent diatribe against the sciences and the arts. In his *Préface au Narcisse*, Rousseau meets this objection by claiming that if the sciences and the arts corrupt men in general, there are exceptional men who are able to resist to the corrupting effects of the sciences and the arts. They remain insensitive to the vanity and envy that are widespread in the republic of

letters and can therefore practice letters without danger to others or to them. If Rousseau is one of those privileged souls, there is no contradiction between Rousseau's life as a man of letters and Rousseau's speech against letters. As the frontispiece of the *First Discourse* tells, Rousseau is like the god who warns men of the danger of sciences and arts while he is himself immune to their danger.<sup>3</sup>

Rousseau's complete position on the dangers of arts and sciences is therefore the following: "Science is bad, not absolutely, but only for the people or for society; it is good, and even necessary, for the few among whom Rousseau counts himself."<sup>4</sup> At the end of the *Discours*, however, Rousseau surprisingly says that the great minds are not insensitive to glory and that the opportunity to influence their community is necessary to stimulate their virtue. What Rousseau seems to mean is that these great minds, even if sensitive to glory, do not practice the sciences and the arts in the prospect of getting applauded. The evidence is that they would study nature even if they would be alone (*PD*, OC III, p. 29).<sup>5</sup> If they need the stimulus of glory, it is to become interested in making other men happy. Nevertheless, they must be sure that their love for glory will not corrupt their pure desire for the truth, or that it will make them miserable because they cannot deal with it. It implies therefore that glory is secondary to them.

Rousseau's argument in the *Discours* presupposes that he is immune to the pernicious effects of the practice of letters. Yet Rousseau does not always provide this assurance. In fact, he gives in general an ambivalent portrait of his capacity and his desire

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3. See *Lettre à Lezat*, OC III, p. 102.

4. Leo Strauss, "On the Intention of Rousseau", *Social Research*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (Winter 1947) p. 465.

5. Rousseau claims the same thing for himself: *R*, OC I, p. 1013.

to practice letters. His reply to King Stanislaus is one among many instances in which Rousseau states his intention to abandon studying.<sup>6</sup> If it is not his studies, it is at least the profession of author that Rousseau constantly claims he wants to abandon – and yet continues to practice.<sup>7</sup> Are these attempts from Rousseau to give a repulsive image of the practice of letters so that the men among his readers who are unfit for this career be turned to happier pursuits? Or was it Rousseau's true sentiment that he was himself unhappy with his life as a writer – and perhaps even as a philosopher?

The ambiguity is obvious in his *Préface au Narcisse*, particularly in its conclusion. There Rousseau claims that only he can decide if he is among the small number of men whose heart can remain insensitive to the corrupting charms of letters. He seems to base this claim on the premise that no one can read inside the heart of someone else besides the person to whom this heart belongs.

Rousseau then shares the result of his self-examination: “[J’ai senti le danger des excercices littéraires plus d’une fois]; plus d’une fois je les ai abandonnés dans le dessein de ne les plus reprendre, et renonçant à leur charme séducteur, j’ai sacrifié à la paix de mon cœur les seuls plaisirs qui pouvoient encore le flatter” (*Préface au Narcisse*, OC II, p. 973). Here, then, Rousseau claims that he is not meant for the practice of letters. It is difficult to see, however, what he exactly means by *exercices littéraires*. He seems to mean the activity of publishing books, and not simply studying and reading.

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6. Cf. *Observations*, OC III, p. 38.

7. Cf. *C*, OC I, p. 514-515; *LAM*, OC I, p. 1137. Rousseau often laments his foolish attempt to achieve fame: “Douce obscurité qui fis trente ans mon bonheur, il faudrait avoir toujours su t’aimer” (*Lettre à d’Alembert*, OC V, p. 5).

We also see Rousseau claiming his project to put an end to his career as an author (assuming this is what he means by *exercices littéraires*). But why then is Rousseau publishing his play *Narcisse*? Rousseau suggests that he is about to die. The publication of his play is an exceptional derogation to his will to abandon letters. He wants to soothe his pain with the pleasure publishing (or more logically here, writing?) gives him. And in any case, it cannot stimulate Rousseau's vanity, because it is a play for which he feels no more attachment than a father would feel for an illegitimate child.<sup>8</sup> He wrote it when he was eighteen and did not publish it while he cared for his reputation as an author. Now that Rousseau does not care anymore about the quality of his literary outputs, he takes no pride in its publishing. The primary purpose of the play is to be a *divertissement* for the corrupt people of his century. It will be useful to the public if it diverts them from committing crimes for the time they are at the theater.

Since Rousseau's argument implies so far that he is sensitive to opinion and glory, it is a surprise to see him claim in the next paragraph that his heart is impervious to vanity. Rousseau says he got the ultimate evidence after the failure of the *Narcisse*. Far from being saddened by it, Rousseau left the theater pleased with himself, for he was not affected by the public's contempt. The success of the *Premier Discours* had proven to Rousseau that he was insensitive to success; but Rousseau needed to experience failure to fully know himself. The failure of *Narcisse* was this test and confirmed that his heart is impervious to public success and contempt.

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8. This claim is contradicted in the *Confessions*, where Rousseau says that he was "surprised and moved" by the indulgence of the public (C, OC I, p. 387).

Yet his evidence in the *Narcisse* for proving that his heart is impervious to vanity is hardly conclusive. In the *Confessions*, Rousseau relates in greater detail his reaction to the failure of his play. Unable to stay until the end at the first night because he found his play boring, Rousseau left for the café Procope. There he told everyone that he was the author of the play and admitted publicly that it was bad. Rousseau relates the scene:

Cet aveu public de l'Auteur d'une mauvaise Pièce qui tombe fut fort admiré et me parut très peu pénible. J'y trouvai même un dédomagement d'amour-propre dans le courage avec lequel il fut fait, et je crois qu'il y eut en cette occasion plus d'orgueil à parler qu'il n'y auroit eu de sote honte à se taire (C, OC I, p. 388).

As Rousseau admits here, there is some vanity in someone who is proud to show everyone that he is impervious to vanity. Could Rousseau's sincerity be a disguise taken by his *amour-propre*?<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, Rousseau calls his self-incrimination an act of courage, as if it was an act of humility rather than vanity, and even if it did not require strength to achieve this feat (*cet aveu public [...] me parut très peu pénible*).

Rousseau ends the *Préface* with a few paradoxes. In flat contradiction with his previous claim that he is the sole judge of the quality of his heart, he concludes the *Préface* by telling his adversaries that if they ever see him behaving like a vain man, they

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9. Claude Habib describes this psychological insight as the *angle mort* of Rousseau's autobiographical writings: "Un homme qui ferait tenir son amour-propre dans le fait de n'en avoir pas, un homme qui placerait son amour-propre dans l'affirmation de l'amour de soi – l'homme qui se fait fort de s'aimer lui-même." "Heureux en dépit d'eux", <http://rousseustudies.free.fr/ArticlesConfDialogues.htm>. Cf. "Car comme dit Cicero, ceux mesmes qui combattent [la gloire], encores veulent-ils, que les livres, qu'ils en escrivent, portent au front leur nom, et se veulent rendre glorieux de ce qu'ils ont méprisé la gloire." (Montaigne, *Essais*, Pierre Villey, ed. (Paris: PUF, 1988) Tome I, chapter XLI, p. 255) Elsewhere Rousseau denies that unveiling one's weaknesses can be an act of vanity: "Ils prétendent que c'est par vanité qu'on parle de soi. He bien, si ce sentiment est en moi pourquoi le cacherois-je? Est-ce par vanité qu'on montre sa vanité?" (*Mon portrait*, OC I, p. 1122).

should publicly warn him of his misbehavior. If caught, he promises to burn all his writings and concede that he is mistaken about everything they would like to think he is.<sup>10</sup> Until then, he intends to write books, make poetry and music if he has the talent, the time, the force and the will to do so – another statement in flat contradiction with his earlier statement that his practice of letters was but almost at an end.

### *1.1.2 – The Motivations of the Reform*

The ambiguity of Rousseau's self-evaluation with respect to his sensitivity to opinion can also be found in the *Confessions*. It is perhaps never more ambiguous than in the episode where Rousseau describes his project to reform his life after the success of the *Premier Discours*. As I said, Rousseau's reform had two goals: to become independent of fortune and to become independent of the opinion of men in general:

Déterminé à passer dans l'indépendance et la pauvreté le peu de tems qui me restoit à vivre, j'appliquai toutes les forces de mon ame à briser les fers de l'opinion, et à faire avec courage tout ce qui me paroissoit bien, sans m'embarrasser aucunement du jugement des hommes (C, OC I, p. 362).

Rousseau felt miserable because he was not living an independent life. In particular, he judged that he was too sensitive to public opinion for his own good. He was so sensitive

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10. Rousseau's contradictory statements on the possibility to judge the purity of his heart through his behavior is in itself an important problem. It is linked to an important question in Rousseau's work: whether there is a link between the behavior of a man and his ideas. For instance, in the *Préface*, Rousseau makes the reasonable argument that the veracity of his principles does not depend on his behavior (OC III, p. 962); but he also typically attacks his "adversaries" with *ad hominem* arguments; and claims that it matters for the truth to prove that he does not defend it by whim or by vanity (OC III, p. 959).

to public opinion that what initially prevented him from putting his reform into action was his fear of becoming a laughing stock:

Quoique la mauvaise honte et la crainte des sifflets m'empêchassent de me conduire d'abord sur ces principes et de rompre brusquement en visière aux maximes de mon siècle, j'en eus dès lors la volonté décidée, et je ne tardai à l'exécuter qu'autant de temps qu'il en falloit aux contradictions pour l'irriter et la rendre triomphante (C, OC I, p. 356).

This admission is surprising since it means that Rousseau was not impervious to public opinion when he wrote the *Premier Discours*. He could therefore hardly count himself among one of those privileged souls able to philosophize without danger to himself and others.<sup>11</sup>

Rousseau's account of the events that led to his reform begins with a surprising statement. He says that he had all forgotten about his *Premier Discours* and the ideas that he had developed after sending it to the Academy – as if the *Premier Discours* was a rhetorical exercise rather than the exposition of ideas that mattered to Rousseau. However, the success of the discourse revived his interest for his ideas:

Cette nouvelle réveilla toutes les idées qui me l'avoient dicté, les anima d'une nouvelle force et acheva de mettre en fermentation dans mon coeur ce premier levain d'heroïsme et de vertu que mon Pere et ma patrie et Plutarque y avoient mis dans mon enfance. Je ne trouvai plus rien de grand et de beau que d'être libre et vertueux, au dessus de la fortune et de l'opinion, et de se suffire à soi-même (C, OC I, p. 356).

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11. The fact that he attacked the prejudices of his time in the *First Discourse* does not prove that he was insensitive to opinion. On the contrary, it could have been the desire to distinguish himself that made him attack the prejudices of his time, just as the other philosophers were doing at the time according to Rousseau.



The quotation unveils how public success was the catalyst of Rousseau's reform. His father, his fatherland and his reading of Plutarch had planted his love of virtue in his young age. The Illumination of Vincennes was also a cause of his reform, but Rousseau needed to win the prize of the Academy and become a public figure to want to become virtuous. Paradoxically, then, he needed public success to become independent of the pressure of opinion.

Public success gave him the will to reform his life. But Rousseau needed another reason to take action.<sup>12</sup> He says that he heard from his doctor that he would be dead within six months. Rousseau, at the time, was the Caissier of the Receveur général. The doctor's speech made him realize how silly it would be to devote the few remaining days of his life to a job he disliked. His first motivation had therefore nothing to do with his principles. Rousseau changed his job because of an obvious reasoning about how to maximize his pleasure until his death. (One wonders if he really believed he was about to die; then why not live off the capital he accumulated)? We also see the reappearance of the vicious circle that I have just described: "D'ailleurs comment accorder les sévères principes que je venois d'adopter avec un état qui s'y rapportoit si peu, et n'aurois-je pas bonne grace, Caissier d'un Receveur général des finances à prêcher le desintéressement et la pauvreté?" (*C*, OC I, p. 362). Rousseau thought it would be more appropriate to become a music copyist. It would be a job more to his taste, in agreement with his principles and in harmony with his talent, but also more appropriate to his public image.

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12. Rousseau says he needs adversity rather than success to become virtuous: see *C*, OC, I, p. 264.

The first step of his reform was to change his job. The second step was to change his appearance: Rousseau abandoned white stockings and beautiful wigs, gave up his sword and sold his watch. We could be keen to assume that the third step in Rousseau's reform was his famous move out of Paris. But Rousseau says that his reform was "completed" after the second step (C, OC I, p. 364). This means that the most important change he would soon carry out – leaving Paris for the countryside – was not a part of his reform. In fact, Rousseau says that his objective had always been to live in the country. Living in the city was merely a means to become independent of fortune so as to be able to live in the countryside:

Depuis que je m'étois malgré moi jetté dans le monde je n'avois cessé de regretter mes chères Charmettes et la douce vie que j'y avois menée. Je me sentois fait pour la retraite et la campagne; il m'étoit impossible de vivre heureux ailleurs. [...] Tous les travaux auxquels j'avois pu m'assujettir, tous les projets d'ambition qui par accès avoient animé mon zèle, n'avoient d'autre but que d'arriver un jour à ces bienheureux loisirs champêtres auxquels en ce moment je me flattois de toucher (C, OC I, p. 401).

The success of his opera *Le Devin du village* now provided a sufficient amount of money for a comfortable living in the country. Rousseau also planned to sell different works in the near future. Leaving Paris therefore became a viable option for him.

A discussion of Rousseau's means of subsistence may appear trivial and irrelevant for my inquiry. But it is the other dimension of Rousseau's reform. Rousseau himself does not treat the question lightly in the *Confessions*. He attempts to prove that at the time he left Paris, his means of subsistence made him an independent man. His

revenues from his books were enough to sustain his lifestyle. More importantly, it was a source of income that carried no pernicious obligations. And had his revenues from publishing dried up, he knew he could have fallen back on his trade as a music copyist.

It is a good question, however, if Rousseau's means of subsistence really made him independent. Didn't he need to obtain public success with his writings to sustain his way of life? Rousseau denies it. Although he still planned to be a writer and sell books while living in the country, he did not expect to live off his writing. He was mentally free to write what he wanted and not what would bring him money and success because he could always fall back on his trade (*C*, OC I, p. 402). The awareness that he could always fall back on his trade was, as Rousseau says, the cause of the popularity of his writings, because Rousseau was free to say what he wanted and write the books he wanted without fearing that he might displease his readers and lose his means of living. Rousseau claims he was never able to write by command or to write in order to gain money. His inspiration always came from his heart. The prospect of a financial gain and the concomitant concern for pleasing the readers would have in the long run stifled his genius.<sup>13</sup>

Such is Rousseau's description of his motivations to reform his life. (Rousseau does provide other accounts, as we will see in the next section; but this is, so to speak, the main account of his reform). It raises, however, a few questions about the coherence of Rousseau's project to become independent.

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13. Some works of Rousseau were made in the prospect of a financial gain: see *C*, OC I, p. 516 and 560.

First of all, how it could be possible for Rousseau to be truly independent from opinion if he was aware that public success with his books could make his life much easier? Rousseau's argument appears to be that he remained mentally free from the need of selling his works and flattering the needs of his readers, because he knew he could fall back on his trade. In other words, he was morally certain that he could live as a poor man if necessity required it. But then, his independence was not, so to speak, *factual*. It was imaginary. Wouldn't the hope to remain in this comfortable situation corrupt the haughty independence he was aiming at? His reliance on music copying must have become more and more wishful thinking, since Rousseau soon discovered that his life in the countryside was costly (C, OC I, p. 516). Had he needed to fall back on his trade, the income, in his own admission, would not have been sufficient. Hence what is presented as superfluous (the revenues from publishing) must have become necessary. Perhaps, then, it is not a surprise to read later in the book that Rousseau's goal was to never need again to do any kind of work. He planned to create a life annuity with the money he would receive from his future works (C, OC I, p. 516). How, with this goal, could he not therefore be aiming at public success with his writings? In short, I wonder if Rousseau does not belittle the dependence his career as a writer entailed from the financial point of view.

Another problem with his claim to be independent thanks to music copying is that, to his own admission, the income it provided was appreciable because he was a celebrity. Rousseau had contracts mainly because people wanted the famous Rousseau to be at their service (C, OC I, p. 363). Could Rousseau have stayed financially independent without

public success? At the very least, and again to his own admission, he would not have been able to sustain his lifestyle only with his trade. What we also know is that Rousseau would never have had enough contracts had he stayed out of Paris. I draw this conclusion from his situation later in his life, when Rousseau returned to Paris. He then had stopped publishing. His revenue came solely from his trade (it seems that he also accepted once in a while to be helped by benefactors) and he was obviously poor. It is a surprise to find Rousseau living in Paris at this period of his life, since he constantly claims to desire solitude and says that the simple sight of his persecutors is enough to make him unhappy. The only reason I have found for him staying in Paris at the time is not directly provided by Rousseau (as far as I know, he never vindicates his choice of living in Paris in the *Dialogues* and the *Rêveries*), but by Bernardin de Saint-Pierre. He says that Rousseau told him that it was necessary for him to live in Paris for his trade to be sufficient to make his family living.<sup>14</sup> But this shows the *angle mort* of Rousseau's reasoning in the *Confessions*: he could never have been financially independent from his trade *and* live away from Paris.

Rousseau's project to reform his life displays another important *angle mort*. His account unveils how much his reform to become independent of opinion was motivated by a concern for opinion. The public success of his *Discours* was one of the motivations to reform his life – as if the truths he had discovered did not suffice. And his motivation to change his job and become an artisan was in part motivated by the image it would give

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14. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, "Rousseau vu par Bernardin de Saint-Pierre" in *Les Rêveries du Promeneur Solitaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), p. 234. See also *C*, OC I, p. 516. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's account provides a string of other reasons, notably that Rousseau was bothered by visitors in the countryside like he was in Paris. Moving back to the capital did not make a difference on this question.

of him: a poor man who lives in harmony with his principles of austerity. Rousseau seems with his reform to have entered the same vicious circle he condemns in his theoretical works. The means that are supposed to help him correct himself rather exacerbate the problem.

We do not have to surmise here Rousseau's concern with opinion during his reform since his own account admits it. The question, however, is if Rousseau was aware at the time of this vicious circle, and more importantly, if Rousseau, when he writes his account, realizes with hindsight that he was too much concerned with public esteem at the time. Christopher Kelly, who develops with more accuracy than I did the vicious circles I have described, claims that the author of the *Confessions* is aware of the absurdity of his past actions. He knows that his effort to return to naturalness was doomed to fail because such a thing is not possible – at least not by one's own efforts.<sup>15</sup> For my part, I do not see any indication that Rousseau the author sees the contradiction between his attempt to become independent of opinion and his remaining concern with opinion. He exposes the contradiction, but Rousseau does not say that his behavior was absurd. On the contrary, here as elsewhere, he seems to want to admit his concern for opinion, but without wanting to say that it really mattered to him. Had he been aware of the contradictory motivations of his reform, he would have used them to explain its failure. But Rousseau rather provides three other explanations, to which I now turn.

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15. See Christopher Kelly, *Rousseau's Exemplary Life*, chapter 6.

### 1.1.3 – Other Accounts of Rousseau's Reform

If Rousseau's reform consisted in changing his job and his clothes, then it was a success. But his fundamental objective was apparently to become independent of opinion: "[Je travaillois] à déraciner de mon coeur tout ce qui tenoit encore au jugement des hommes, tout ce qui pouvoit me détourner par la crainte de blâme de ce qui étoit bon et raisonnable en soi" (C, OC I, p. 364). At the beginning of Book IX, Rousseau apparently claims that his project failed. His move out of Paris allowed him to discover that the independent attitude he exhibited in Paris was not the effect of a fundamental change in him. Once in the countryside, Rousseau realized that he had remained the same person he was before his reform: fearful, accommodating and shy (C, OC I, p. 417). His reform did not change his heart.

Rousseau thereby provides a new explanation of what motivated his reform. His project to reform his life was the result of an "intoxication" (*ivresse*). Rousseau is not talking about the intoxication of public success previously mentioned. He says that he was intoxicated with virtue (C, OC I, p. 417). How did he get intoxicated? Rousseau says that the intoxication "began in his head" and proceeded to pass in "his heart." His formulation implies that the intoxication was first purely theoretical, like a man fascinated by a complex mathematical problem. He was fascinated by his idea of virtue. As we have seen, Rousseau had forgotten all about the ideas exposed in the *Premier Discours* until he won the prize. He gives the impression that he considered this discourse to be a theoretical problem of no concern for his own life. He also says that the

contemplation of the vices of the Parisians fueled his indignation and enthusiasm for virtue. His intoxication was therefore created by his discovery of his new ideas as well as by the indecent display of vices of the Parisians.

The choosing of the term “*ivresse*” to describe his project of becoming virtuous underscores Rousseau’s final judgment that it was not really his will to become virtuous. Like a man who is drunk, Rousseau was not in control of himself – he was not himself – during this period. To prove that he was not himself, Rousseau claims that his nature is to be timid and shameful. Yet during his reform, Rousseau became rash and proud:

J’étais vraiment transformé; mes amis, mes connoissances ne me reconnoissoient plus. Je n’étois plus cet homme timide et plutôt honteux que modeste, qui n’osoit ni se présenter ni parler; qu’un mot badin déconcertoit, qu’un regard de femme faisoit rougir. Audacieux, fier, intrépide, je portois par tout une assurance d’autant plus ferme qu’elle étoit plus simple et résidoit dans mon ame plus que dans mon maintien. Le mépris que mes profondes méditations m’avoient inspiré pour les mœurs, les maximes et les préjugés de mon siècle me rendoit insensible aux railleries de ceux qui les avoient, et j’écrasois leurs petits bons-mots avec mes sentences, comme j’écraserois un insecte entre mes doigts. Quel changement! [...] Qu’on cherche l’état du monde le plus contraire à mon naturel; on trouvera celui-là (C, OC I, p. 416-417).

Rousseau was so much not in control of himself during this period that he thinks he would never have stopped to act bravely by himself. His behavior was so passive that it would “perhaps” have continued indefinitely “sans les circonstances particulières qui le firent cesser.” (C, OC I, p. 417) What put a term to his virtuous attitude was his move out of Paris (C, OC I, p. 417). Rousseau stopped being concerned about behaving virtuously



because nothing fuelled anymore his indignation. And it seems that the effervescence generated by his new ideas also extinguished itself with his move.

We also find two other accounts of the failure of Rousseau's reform. In Book VIII (p. 365-367), Rousseau provides in fact a string of reasons for why his reform failed. First, his congenital problem with his bladder made him fear growing pains until his death. This fear, added to his actual pain, slowed down his music copying. If he added the cost of medicine, Rousseau started to fear that his job would put him in a state of unsustainable poverty. The shenanigans of Madame Levasseur who was unhappy with Rousseau's apparent wish to be poor distracted him from his trade. The controversy around the *Premier Discours* was also a major source of distraction. But the more important obstacle to the reform was apparently the constant flow of visitors who wanted to see the famous writer. Rousseau could not be this poor man who copies music sheets and is careless about the judgment of men. The flow of visitors required him to be accommodating to their caprices; it also prevented him from exercising his trade.

Rousseau gives a third account of the cause of his failure to become virtuous. His friends became envious of his celebrity and even more of his attempt to give an example of virtue through his conduct. Their envy led them to persuade Rousseau and his public that his reform was ridiculous. Rousseau concludes that without their malicious action, his reform would have been a success: "Si j'avois aussi bien secoué le joug de l'amitié que celui de l'opinion je venois à bout de mon dessein" (C, OC I, p. 362). This last explanation would however require a clarification. If their envy led them to make him appear ridiculous and later to defame him, why should it have affected Rousseau's

attempt to become independent of opinion?<sup>16</sup> On the contrary, it should have helped Rousseau become insensitive to public esteem, as he will acknowledge in the *Rêveries*. Moreover, as the last quotation implies, Rousseau could have broken his ties with such bad friends. For instance, Rousseau tells us how Diderot attempted to persuade him to take the pension of the king after the success of the *Devin du village* at Fontainebleau. According to Rousseau, Diderot wanted him to betray his published principles of independence from rulers.<sup>17</sup> But Rousseau successfully resisted Diderot's request.

However, in book IX, we learn that the bad influence of his friends is only the proximate cause of his failure. Rousseau traces back the influence his friends had on him to the fact that his most important need was to find an intimate relationship: "Le premier de mes besoins, le plus grand, le plus fort, le plus inextinguible, étoit tout entier dans mon cœur: c'étoit le besoin d'une société intime et aussi intime qu'elle pouvoit l'être" (C, OC I, p. 414). Rousseau desired such an intimate relationship that he says his desire was to become two separate souls in the same body. But when he realized that he was unable to find this perfect companion in Thérèse, Rousseau became attached to these friends to fill the void in his heart:

Ne pouvant goûter dans sa plénitude cette intime société dont je sentois le besoin, j'y cherchois des suppléments qui n'en remplissoient pas le vide mais qui me laissoient moins sentir. Faute d'un ami qui fut à moi tout entier, il me falloit des amis dont l'impulsion surmontât mon inertie: c'est ainsi que je cultivai, que je resserrai mes liaisons avec Diderot, avec l'Abbé de Condillac, que j'en fis avec Grimm une nouvelle plus étroite encore, et qu'enfin je me trouvai par ce malheureux discours dont j'ai raconté

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16. "Tout en paroissant s'occuper beaucoup à me rendre heureux, [ils] ne s'occupoient en effet qu'à me rendre ridicule, et commencèrent par travailler à m'avilir pour parvenir dans la suite à me diffamer" (C, OC I, p. 362).

17. Rousseau's principles in C, OC I, p. 380 appear in contradiction with PD, OC III, p. 29-30.

l'histoire, rejeté sans y songer dans la littérature dont je me croyois sorti pour toujours (C, OC I, p. 416).

Rousseau (the author of the *Confessions*) could appear to blame himself for his unwise decision to become friends with the *philosophes*. The cause of the failure of his reform, and perhaps of his misery in general, resides in this impossible desire to find an intimate friend.<sup>18</sup> Yet Rousseau says nothing negative about this desire in this context. On the contrary, he seems to argue that his heart was immensely generous and naturally made for the greatest friendship, but that no one here below was on par with him. Indeed, after explaining how his greatest and inextinguishable desire has always been to possess an intimate friend, Rousseau says that he tried to find this friend in Thérèse. Despite Thérèse's apparent incapacity to become such a friend, Rousseau does not say that his choice was a mistake. No less does he say that his desire was impossible to fulfill in principle. Quite surprisingly, he claims that he could find this intimate relationship with Thérèse, had she only been able to give herself to Rousseau like he was ready to give himself to her:

Cette jeune personne, aimable par mille excellentes qualités, et même alors par la figure, sans ombre d'art ni de coqueterie, *eut borné dans elle seule mon existence, si j'avois pu borner la sienne en moi comme je l'avoir espéré* (C, OC I, p. 414-415 – my emphasis).

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18. Christopher Kelly argues that Rousseau believes this need to be artificial, because he says that it was “entirely in his heart” and that “heart” is a synonym of imagination for him. He concludes: “Thus, when Rousseau calls this the first of his needs and says that it is inextinguishable, he is showing the depth of his departure from nature and not his persistent attachment to natural wholeness” (*Rousseau's Exemplary Life*, p. 204).

Thérèse, however, is not to be blamed for not entirely giving herself to Rousseau, for it was Madame Levasseur that continuously worked at weakening her affection for him. Far from blaming his choice of Thérèse as the possible intimate companion of his life, or his impossible and unnatural desire, Rousseau blames in the end Madame Levasseur. In fact, he says she is the first cause of all his misery (*C*, OC I, p. 415). Indeed, if Madame Levasseur's influence on Thérèse caused the emptiness in Rousseau's heart, and if Rousseau turned afterwards to his bad friends, entered the literary career, tried to become a model of virtue, became the object of envy of his friends, failed to become virtuous, fled to the country and later became persecuted by these same friends, then Madame Levasseur is at the origin of Rousseau's unhappiness.

#### *1.1.4 – Rousseau's Responsibility in Failing to Become Independent*

The various accounts of Rousseau's motivations to reform his life and of its failure are in themselves a problem. To which of his accounts should we give the most weight? We can see at least a few noticeable differences between the various accounts. On the question of his motivation to reform his life, one account shows Rousseau actively seeking to change his life. The other – the account based on the idea that Rousseau was “intoxicated with virtue” – stresses his passivity. This leads us to the question whether Rousseau showed strength during his reform or not. The account based on intoxication shows Rousseau being passively carried away by his enthusiasm. His virtuous stance does not seem to have cost him an effort. Rousseau says that he became “insensitive” to

the scoffing of his adversaries (*C*, OC I, p. 417). Like a drunken man, he was too intoxicated to feel the injuries he sustained. The other account shows Rousseau making an effort of will to become independent of opinion. It presents his reform as a feat: “Les obstacles que j’eus à combattre et les efforts que je fis pour en triompher sont incroyables” (*C*, OC I, p. 362).

The question whether Rousseau made an effort to reform his life is not vain. What is at stake is Rousseau’s merit and Rousseau’s responsibility for his actions. Rousseau himself thinks that there is no virtue and therefore no merit in following one’s inclination. The virtue and the merit are in an action that requires a struggle against our inclinations, and which implies sacrifices.<sup>19</sup> The account based on the idea that he was intoxicated implies no such effort. Even the other account does not appear to have required so much sacrifice. The idea that his death was imminent provided the sufficient impulse to change his job. It was a matter of maximizing pleasure rather than acting in conformity with his principle. As for his change of clothes, his taste for luxury was not developed. The question is not to accuse Rousseau of duplicity, but to understand if it is his inclinations or his will that drives him. The question is of course linked to Rousseau’s conception of goodness. The man who is simply good is passive and has no will. He is the toy of his passions. The general problem with Rousseau is that we often see him praising himself for actions that have cost him nothing, as if he is seeking the merit of virtue while he was simply driven by his impulses.<sup>20</sup>

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19. Cf. *E*, OC IV, p. 817-818; *R*, OC I, p. 1052-1053.

20. I will return to this question in the next chapter, when Rousseau praises his own generosity in the Fourth Walk of the *Rêveries*.

On the question of the failure of his reform, however, Rousseau's accounts all stress his passivity, and hence his irresponsibility. Rousseau blames the circus created by his success, or his sickness; he blames the conspiracy of his friends, and in the end Madame Levasseur; or he blames moving out of Paris, to explain the end of his reform. All these accounts suggest that Rousseau's failure to become virtuous was not his fault. As he says himself when he blames his popularity: "Je sentis alors qu'il n'est pas toujours aussi aisé qu'on se l'imagine d'être pauvre et indépendant. Je voulois vivre de mon métier; *le public ne le vouloit pas*." (C, OC I, p. 367 – my emphasis); or when he blames his friends: "Jugeant que pour me faire écouter, il falloit mettre ma conduite d'accord avec mes principes je pris l'allure singulière *qu'on ne m'a pas permis de suivre*" (C, OC I, p. 416 – my emphasis). These statements contribute to the sentiment of the reader that Rousseau thinks of himself in the final analysis not responsible for his unhappiness.

The account of the failure of his reform based on intoxication with virtue above all stresses his lack of responsibility. During his attempt to reform his life, Rousseau was "another man". The merit and the guilt for what he has done – and why he failed to achieve his reform – belongs therefore to "another man". This account offers a few advantages to Rousseau. First, it levels the charge that the whole reform was pure hypocrisy, as his friends accused Rousseau.<sup>21</sup> Rousseau claims that although he acted like he was someone else, he played his *role* with sincerity.<sup>22</sup> This account also allows Rousseau to avoid pointing out the simplest reason for the failure of his reform: that his

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21. See the importance for Rousseau of claiming that he did not fake his virtuous stance: C, OC I, p. 1484; and page 437, note 1; *Dialogues*, OC I, p. 701-702.

22. "Je ne jouai rien; je devins en effet tel que je parus" (C, OC I, p. 416).

heart remained dependent on opinion. Why not use this explanation, since he himself admitted that he was sensitive to opinion before entering the period of his reform?

What is surprising in Rousseau's explanation based on intoxication is that he denies that falling into a state of drunkenness and becoming "another man" was in harmony with his nature. The intoxication lasted four to six years. How could it last so long if there was nothing natural in him that could sustain such intoxication? How could it be against his nature if his nature failed to put his effervescence to rest during such a long period? Even so, Rousseau reminds his reader that he has given many examples of him "becoming another man" in the *Confessions*. He mentioned a few pages before that most men are often dissimilar in the course of their life because of the changing circumstances in which they live (C, OC I, p. 407-408).<sup>23</sup> He even concludes his analysis of the failure of his reform by stating that the remaining part of his life will never bring him back to his nature: "Dès lors mon ame en branle n'a plus fait que passer par la ligne de repos, et ses oscillations toujours renouvelées ne lui ont jamais permis d'y rester" (C, OC I, p. 417). Jean Starobinski naturally wonders if this "*ligne de repos*" should be identified to his nature:

On se demande alors si la notion de nature garde un sens. Ce mouvement oscillatoire ne permet pas le repos, le retour stable à l'état naturel. Y a-t-il même un état naturel? Ce sera, tout au plus, un lieu virtuel, à mi-distance des extrêmes [...] *moi-même*, ce n'est pas ce repos que je ne peux jamais atteindre, *je suis* au contraire l'inquiétude qui m'interdit le repos. [...] Dès lors tous mes gestes, toutes mes erreurs, toutes mes fictions, tous mes

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23. "Je crois avoir déjà remarqué qu'il y a des tems où je suis si peu semblable à moi-même qu'on me prendroit pour un autre homme de caractère tout opposé." (C, OC I, p. 128); "[Madame de Larnage] m'avait donné cette confiance dont le défaut m'a presque toujours empêché d'être moi" (C, OC I, p. 252).

mensonges annoncent *ma* nature: je suis authentiquement cette infidélité à un équilibre qui me sollicite toujours et qui se refuse toujours.<sup>24</sup>

### 1.1.5 – *Alternative Explanations*

Rousseau's accounts of the motivation for his reform and of its failure are problematic. Here as elsewhere, his incoherence opens the door to a variety of hypotheses. I offer two explanations which are not those offered by Rousseau. One could explain Rousseau's incoherencies on the basis of his character (as he describes it himself). The other could explain Rousseau's incoherencies on the basis of his pedagogical intention as a philosopher.

In his account based on intoxication, Rousseau says that his nature – which he ascribes to being fearful, accommodating and timid – disappeared during the period of his reform. But the text does not vindicate this claim.<sup>25</sup> Not only his nature seemed active during this period (as one would think would be natural), but we can also find the cause of his reform. Indeed, Rousseau says that he was shy in society because of his awkwardness in executing what politeness required at the time. He decided to look down on politeness to avoid to be required to behave correctly. Paradoxically, then, Rousseau scorned the habits of his time because of his esteem for public approval: “Je me fis

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24. Jean Starobinski, *La transparence et l'obstacle*, p. 76.

25. See, for example, the episode at Fontainebleau (C, OC I, p. 377-380).



cynique et caustique par honte; j’affectai de mépriser la politesse que je ne savais pas pratiquer” (C, OC I, p. 368).<sup>26</sup>

In other words, Rousseau would have pretended to be independent of opinion because he wanted to appear better than he was to the eyes of high society. As I noted when he said that his reform was also stimulated by the success of the *Premier Discours*, Rousseau paradoxically wanted to become independent of opinion for the sake of being better judged by opinion.

The explanation based on timidity or bad shame leads to a few objections. First, just as with his explanation based on intoxication, it implies that Rousseau’s motivation when he tried to become independent was obscure to him at the time. It means that Rousseau, despite his philosophic greatness, was not able to understand what drove his heart during this period. A greater problem is that it also implies that the author of the *Confessions* is still unaware of the true motivations of his heart. Indeed, while it is Rousseau who describes the link between his timidity and his independent stance, he does not highlight it as the true motivation behind his will to reform his life. But how could Rousseau provide this explanation in passing, and yet not realize with hindsight how his shyness was the true motivation behind his reform? Why claim afterwards in Book IX that his natural shyness had disappeared during the period? Why give this alternate explanation of “intoxication” with virtue? We can guess that the latter explanation is a

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26. Rousseau analyzes a previous attempt at virtue in the same fashion: “Après les principes si purs que j’avois adoptés il y avoit peu de tems; après les règles de sagesse et de vertu que je m’étois faites et que je m’étois senti si fier de suivre; la honte d’être si peu consequent à moi-même, de démentir si tôt et si haut mes propres maximes l’emporta sur la volupté: l’orgueil eut peut-être autant de part à ma resolution que la vertu; mais si cet orgueil n’est pas la vertu meme il y a des effets si semblables qu’il est pardonnable de s’y tromper” (C, OC I, p. 260).

more flattering one. Rousseau would appear a resentful man if he admitted in the final analysis that his virtuous stance and his preaching were caused by his inability to shine in *salons*. But this is not an explanation provided by Rousseau, of course.

The explanation that Rousseau was intoxicated – either with virtue or with his timidity – also implies blindness in Rousseau’s mind about the nature of virtue and about his own nature when he wrote the *Premier Discours*. This would even be true for all his writings up to his move to l’Hermitage. Rousseau does not say that the intoxication with virtue stopped when he wrote or that it was only activated when the public eye was on him. This explanation would lead to a revision of the interpretation of Rousseau’s two discourses, to see, for instance, if statements made by Rousseau are not signs of an intoxication with virtue or effects of his bad shame. One cannot dismiss easily Rousseau’s account of being intoxicated when he writes. Rousseau consistently provides this account when he explains his art of writing. He depicts his soul as being in a state of enthusiasm, as if a force external to him was driving his words and his actions. While Rousseau never discredited the two discourses as exposing a false idea of virtue, his self-description in the *Confessions* invites to an interpretation of his work based on the idea that Rousseau was more enthusiastic than calculative when he wrote.

A more flattering explanation of Rousseau’s reform – more flattering in the sense that it surmises that Rousseau was in full control of his behavior and his ideas – is to say that Rousseau entirely faked his reform. Indeed, in his final account of his virtuous period in Book IX, Rousseau says that he attempted to put his principles into practice because he felt that no one would otherwise listen to him: “Jugeant que pour me faire écouter, il

falloit mettre ma conduite d'accord avec mes principes [...]” (C, OC I, p. 416). If he had succeeded in his reform, he would have become “respectable” to the eye of the public and his principles would have obtained a greater influence. This statement opens the door to the idea that Rousseau’s reform was purely a matter of appearance. If Rousseau completely forgot his *Premier Discours* and his new principles, and if he was unmoved by the discrepancy between his life and his principles until he won the prize, it was simply because he did not judge that he had to reform his habits. If the consecration of his discourse led him to change his life, it was only to conform his appearance to the principles of the discourse in order to be considered seriously. Rousseau’s goal with his reform was not to change himself, but to change the world. How else can we explain a statement like the following: “Si j’avois aussi bien secoué le joug de l’amitié que celui de l’opinion *je venois à bout de mon dessein, le plus grand peut-être ou du moins le plus utile à la vertu que mortel ait jamais conçu*” (C, OC I, p. 362). Why would Rousseau’s reform of his own life have been useful to virtue as such, unless it was aimed at gaining influence and making a revolution among men? If his concern with his reform had centered on himself (becoming happier for the rest of his life), it would be hard to understand why he would make this statement.

A few objections can also be raised against this explanation. This interpretation must directly contradict statements made by Rousseau. For instance, Rousseau is explicit about the sincerity of his behavior during his reform: “Je ne jouai rien; je devins en effet

tel que je parus” (C, OC I, p. 416).<sup>27</sup> This interpretation would also need to show how the other various explanations of Rousseau are coherent when one surmises a pedagogical intention in him. Some of these explanations are not exactly flattering to Rousseau’s image; they would not necessarily augment his credibility towards his non-philosophical public. It is also hard to see how these false explanations would be useful by providing a moral lesson to this public.

Perhaps the best argument against Rousseau dissembling about reforming his life is that Rousseau already had an excuse to continue to behave as he had always done. As we have seen, Rousseau claims (in part) in the *Préface au Narcisse* that he possesses an exceptional soul impervious to public opinion. He is among the few gifted men who can practice letters without being corrupted by them. There was thus no need for him to sell his watch and change his job. He could have pursued the same lifestyle while claiming that being wealthy and serving an aristocrat was in line with his principles, because it would not alter his independent spirit. He could continue to practice letters and frequent intellectuals because he was insensitive to the dangers of *amour-propre*. One could reply that Rousseau believed that he had to control to appearances: it was better for him to appear as a simple man if we wanted his voice to be heard by the crowd. But then why did Rousseau take care to vindicate his own pursuit of science and his publication of artistic and philosophical works after becoming a public figure? He must have hoped that

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27. Rousseau makes this statement just after he mentioned his desire to be taken seriously by his public in becoming virtuous. If his true intention was only to appear virtuous, then this statement is not a clever way to hide it. In any case, the intoxication with the idea of virtue can be compatible with the intention to be useful to humanity, although it implies a loss of control on the means to be useful.

public opinion would understand his reason to continue to practice letters while attacking them.

### *1.1.6 – Conclusion: Does Rousseau Think He Is Sensitive to Opinion?*

The goal of this section was to examine Rousseau's perception of his sensitivity to opinion. We have seen how his argument in the *Préface au Narcisse* argues (in part) that he has this exceptional soul impervious to public opinion. The account of his reform in the *Confessions* presupposes that the claim in the *Préface au Narcisse* is an exaggeration, since Rousseau said he needed to become independent of opinion. Rousseau's account – particularly the account based on intoxication – seems to claim that his reform was a failure. He did not succeed in becoming independent of opinion. Yet there are a few statements made by Rousseau about his reform that claim or suggest that his reform was a success. In Book VIII, Rousseau writes about his reform: “Je reussis autant qu’il étoit possible [à briser les fers de l’opinion], et plus que je n’avois espéré moi-même. Si j’avois aussi bien secoué le joug de l’amitié que celui de l’opinion je venois à bout de mon dessein” (C, OC I, p. 362). While this statement does not say that the reform was a complete success, it does not say that it was a total failure. Later in Book X, a long time after his move to the countryside and the alleged failure of his reform, Rousseau writes:

Avec un nom déjà célèbre et connu dans toute l’Europe, j’avois conservé la simplicité de mes premiers gouts. Ma mortelle aversion pour tout ce qui s’appelloit parti, faction, cabale, m’avoit maintenu libre, indépendant, sans autre chaîne que les attachemens de mon cœur. Seul, étranger, isolé, sans

appui, sans famille, ne tenant qu'à mes principes et mes devoirs, je suivais avec intrépidité les routes de la droiture, ne flattant, ne ménageant jamais personne aux dépens de la justice et de la vérité (C, OC I, p. 492).

This is not exactly the description of a man who has failed to become independent of opinion.

We are therefore back to the fundamental question: did Rousseau think he needed to become independent of opinion? Perhaps the clearest mark of Rousseau's ambiguity on the question of his sensitivity to opinion is found just after his description of his change of job and clothes:

*Ayant ainsi complété ma réforme, je ne songeai plus qu'à la rendre solide et durable, en travaillant à déraciner de mon cœur tout ce qui tenoit encore au jugement des hommes, tout ce qui pouvoit me détourner par la crainte du blâme de ce qui étoit bon et raisonnable en soi (C, OC I, p. 364 – my emphasis).*

The fact that Rousseau says that his reform was “completed” after his change of job and clothes proves that what was essential for him to reform was external to himself. (It also proves, as I said, that Rousseau thought he did not have to live alone in the countryside to be happy. It goes along with his account of the failure of his reform, where he never blames the fact that remained sensitive to opinion because he had not reformed his heart). Taken in this sense, his reform was a success because what was essential (changing his job and his clothes) had been achieved with success. However, even if his reform was “completed,” Rousseau adds that he needed to make it solid and permanent by reforming

his heart. Thus Rousseau *also* acknowledges his need to go beyond the mere reform of his occupation and clothes.

A lengthier analysis of the *Confessions* could perhaps demonstrate that Rousseau never seems to have thought of himself as being badly handicapped by vanity or sensitivity to opinion: “Je crois que jamais individu de notre espèce n’eut naturellement moins de vanité que moi” (C, OC, I, p. 14).<sup>28</sup> It would confirm the implied argument of his *Préface au Narcisse*: Rousseau thought that he had an exceptional soul. It would also explain his claim that his attempt at reform failed. His later account in the *Confessions* and the *Dialogues* shows him as someone who is impervious to opinion. It will not be until the *Histoire du précédent écrit* that Rousseau will (somehow) acknowledge his vulnerability.

A lengthier analysis of the *Confessions* could also demonstrate how Rousseau does not consider his timidity and his bad shame as signs of a concern with opinion, and accordingly why he tends to ignore or water down their vicious character.<sup>29</sup> Rousseau’s timidity and bad shame are Rousseau’s usual excuses for everything he did that was bad during his life.<sup>30</sup> But while Rousseau often calls his shame “bad” (*ma mauvaise honte*), it seems to be a benign vice to him because it leads him to commit “sins” of *omission* rather

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28. “L’ambition ni l’intérêt ne me tentent pas: je suis peu vain, peu craintif; je puis résister à tout, sauf aux caresses” (C, OC I, p. 533).

29. “[Le François]: Cet embarras d’abord et cette timidité que vous lui attribuez sont reconnus maintenant dans el monde pour être les plus sûres enseignes de l’amour-propre et de l’orgueil. [Rousseau]: D’où il suit que nos petits pâtres et nos pauvres villageoises regorgent d’amour-propre, et que nos brillans academiciens, nos jeunes abbés et nos dames du grand air sont des prodiges de modestie et d’humilité?” (D, OC I, p. 802).

30. “Le seul qui l’eut pu mener au mal est la mauvaise honte, contre laquelle il a lutté toute sa vie avec des efforts aussi grands qu’inutiles, parce qu’elle tient à son humeur timide qui présente un obstacle invincible aux ardents desirs de son cœur, et le force à leur donner le change en mille façons souvent blâmables. Voilà l’unique source de tout le mal qu’il a pu faire” (D, OC I, p. 897).

than *commission*. Shame and timidity are also benign because they are blessings in disguise. His bad shame prevents him from doing immoral actions (*C*, OC I, p. 88). His fear of disappointing others prevents him from being ambitious and from caring for the goods offered by this world: “J’aimerois la société comme un autre, si je n’étois sûr de m’y montrer non seulement à mon désavantage, mais tout autre que je ne suis” (*C*, OC I, p. 116). His timidity compels him to contract his being into his imagination, where he could enjoy his being without fear of failure; hence it strengthens Rousseau’s independence and capacity to live within himself. Rather than being vices derived from an excessive concern to opinion, Rousseau presents his timidity and shame as providential obstacles to a corruptive life among society. This could explain why he does not think himself to be too sensitive to opinion for his own good.

## 2 – The 1761 Crisis

At the end of 1761, a piece of the catheter that Rousseau had to wear in order to urinate broke in his urethra. This accident made urinating even more difficult, and Rousseau feared that he would permanently suffer from stones. To this pain and this fear was added the fear that *Émile* would never be published as it was meant to be published. Rousseau had sent his only manuscript of *Émile* to his publisher Duchesne in return for a considerable advance. But Duchesne delayed his printing of *Émile*, and Rousseau started to brood on the cause of the delay. He became persuaded that the Jesuits had taken hold of the manuscript and, knowing that he was sick, were waiting for his death to change its



content for their wicked purpose. Rousseau spent a part of the fall of 1761 sending letters accusing his friends and collaborators of betrayal.

Rousseau's friends went to see Duchesne to get an explanation for the delay. It turned out that it was caused by the publisher's decision to print *Émile* in France instead of Holland, but also by Rousseau's corrections and alterations on the proofs.<sup>31</sup> After hearing this explanation, and upon receiving eight new proof sheets of *Émile*, Rousseau acknowledged his mistake and wrote letters to Duchesne apologizing for his suspicions and calumnies. Rousseau's panic had compromised M. de Malesherbes and the Maréchale du Luxembourg by compelling them to publicly acknowledge their involvement in the publication of a polemical book. He wrote to each of them a letter excusing his behavior.

This is what I call "the 1761 crisis." I now want to point out the different explanations Rousseau provides for a time where he was clearly unhappy.

### *2.1 – The 1761 Crisis in the Letter to Moulton*

After the crisis, at the time when his fear should have been assuaged, Rousseau wrote a letter to Paul Moulton, his friend and later his editor, in which he announced his imminent suicide:

C'en est fait, cher Moulton, nous ne nous reverrons plus que dans le séjour des justes. Mon sort est décidé par les suites de l'accident dont je vous ai

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31. See Maurice Cranston, *The Noble Savage: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1754-1762* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 319-320.

parlé ci-devant; et quand il en sera temps, je pourrai, sans scrupule, prendre chez milord Edouard les conseils de la vertu même.<sup>32</sup>

Rousseau first blames the “accident” he mentioned in a previous letter for his decision to kill himself. The “accident” Rousseau is referring to is the broken catheter in his urethra. But why is this accident a sufficient reason to kill himself? Rousseau refers Moulton to a letter from Milord Édouard in *Julie*. In this letter, the Englishman argues against Saint-Preux that the only valid reason to take one’s life is incurable physical pain. Édouard’s premise is that a man’s moral or active life, which resides in exercising his will, is what gives value to life. All moral evil that befall on us is our responsibility, because it depends on our will to avoid it; thus to want to kill oneself because of a moral evil is absurd: “Puisque c’est dans la mauvaise disposition de ton ame qu’est tout le mal, corrige tes affections déréglées, et ne brule pas ta maison pour n’avoir pas la peine de la ranger” (*J*, OC II, p. 389). Édouard’s reasoning is in line with Rousseau’s theory of equilibrium and with Rousseau’s moral philosophy in general: men are responsible for their moral evils; they should not whine when they are unhappy because of them. There is a solution to these evils because they are either imaginary (and thus an illusion about which we need to become aware) or they are under our power to control.<sup>33</sup>

Édouard is arguing against Saint-Preux’s claim that he is justified in his intention to kill himself because he cannot live without Julie. Since Saint-Preux’s suffering is purely moral (he can’t live without Julie), he has no reason to commit suicide. But

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32. *Au ministre Paul-Claude Moulton*, 23 décembre 1761 in *Correspondance complète de Jean Jacques Rousseau*, R. A. Leigh, ed. (Genève: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1968), Lettre 1602, Tome IX, p. 341. Rousseau never sent this letter.

33. *E*, OC IV, p. 306; *Lettre à Voltaire*, OC IV, p. 1061-1062.

Rousseau, who suffers from his urethra, is in a different situation. According to Édouard's argument, physical pain can vindicate suicide, not because of the physical pain as such, but because of its effect on our moral being:

Puisque la plupart de nos maux physiques ne font qu'augmenter sans cesse, de violentes douleurs du corps, quand elles sont incurables, peuvent autoriser un homme à disposer de lui: car toutes ses facultés étant aliénées par la douleur, et le mal étant sans remède, il n'a plus l'usage ni de sa volonté ni de sa raison; il cesse d'être homme avant de mourir, et ne fait en s'ôtant la vie qu'achever de quitter un corps qui l'embarrasse et où son ame n'est déjà plus (*Julie*, OC II, p. 389).

*If* the pain is incurable and *if* it alienates our will and our reason, then we are allowed to kill ourselves. The essence of our being is in will and reason, and when these faculties are alienated from us by physical pain, it is as if we are already dead.

According to the letter to Moulto, if Rousseau wants to commit suicide, it is not because of the physical pain, but because this pain has made him lose his will and his reason. This is what he explains in the next paragraph of his letter to Moulto:

Ce qui m'humilie et m'afflige est une fin si peu digne, j'ose dire, de ma vie, et du moins de mes sentiments. Il y a six semaines que je ne fais que des iniquités, et n'imagine que des calomnies contre deux honnêtes libraires, dont l'un n'a de tort que quelques retards involontaires, et l'autre un zèle plein de générosité et de désintéressement, que j'ai payé, pour toute reconnaissance, d'une accusation de fourberie. Je ne sais quel aveuglement, quelle sombre humeur, inspirée dans la solitude par un mal affreux, m'a fait inventer, pour en noircir ma vie et l'honneur d'autrui, ce tissu d'horreurs, dont le soupçon, changé dans mon esprit prévenu presque en certitude, n'a pas mieux été déguisé à d'autres qu'à vous. *Je sens pourtant que la source de cette folie ne fut jamais dans mon cœur. Le*

*délire de la douleur m'a fait perdre la raison avant la vie; en faisant des actions de méchant, je n'étois qu'un insensé.*<sup>34</sup>

Rousseau blames his sickness for his actual unhappiness rather than his character. Contrary to Saint-Preux, the fault does not lie in his heart, but in his body.

As the last quotation shows, Rousseau was ashamed of his behavior during the past six weeks. Could it then be possible that Rousseau wanted to put an end to his days because he could not bear his guilt? Let us recall that in the section on happiness as equilibrium in *Émile*, Rousseau writes: “Otez la force, la santé, le bon témoignage de soi, tous les biens de cette vie sont dans l’opinion; ôtez les douleurs du corps et les remords de la conscience, tous nos maux sont imaginaires” (*E*, OC IV, p. 305). During the final stage of the publication of *Émile*, Rousseau would have been overwhelmed with the two only true evils of human life and would have been utterly miserable. But Rousseau does not point out his guilt as responsible for his unhappiness. As he said to Moulton, his action was the result of a temporary loss of good sense rather than the effect of a wicked heart. A letter dated from the same day but addressed to Malesherbes confirms this explanation. Rousseau, after apologizing for his behavior, writes:

J’ouvre en frémissant les yeux sur moi, et je me vois tout aussi méprisable que je le suis devenu. Devenu! Non; l’homme qui porta cinquante ans le cœur que je sens renaître en moi n’est point celui qui peut s’oublier au point que je viens de faire: on ne demande point pardon à mon âge, parce qu’on n’en mérite plus; mais, monsieur, je ne prends aucun intérêt à celui qui vient d’usurper et déshonorer mon nom. Je l’abandonne à votre juste

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34. *Au ministre Paul-Claude Moulton*, 23 décembre 1761 in *Correspondance complète de Jean Jacques Rousseau*, Lettre 1602, Tome IX, p. 341 – my emphasis.

indignation, mais il est mort pour ne plus renaître: daignez rendre votre estime à celui qui vous écrit maintenant; il ne sauroit s'en passer, et ne méritera jamais de la perdre. Il en a pour garant non sa raison, mais son état qui le met désormais à l'abri des grandes passions.<sup>35</sup>

Rousseau does not feel responsible for the embarrassment “he” has caused. The guilt belongs to another man, a man now dead. Rousseau does not think therefore that what caused his panic attack remains in his heart.<sup>36</sup>

From his self-perspective, then, his heart is fundamentally healthy. His crisis was not caused by a vice in his heart or by a pernicious passion that permanently resides in it. Of course, his letters allow for a different interpretation of his miserable state than his own interpretation. For instance, in a letter sent to Madame la Maréchale during this period, Rousseau admits it was unbearable for him to think that the best offspring of his thought (*Émile*) would be falsified: “Cette perte, la plus sensible que j’aie jamais faite, a mis le comble à mes maux, et me coûtera la vie.”<sup>37</sup> In a previous letter to Moulton, Rousseau acknowledges that the thought of posterity believing him to be a different man than who he truly is was in fact what drove him mad with respect to the Jesuit plot: “Cher Moulton, il faut tout mon espoir dans celui qui protège l’innocence pour me faire endurer l’idée qu’on n’attend que de me voir les yeux fermés pour déshonorer ma mémoire par un

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35. À Chrétien-Guillaume de Lamoignon de Malesherbes, 23 décembre 1761 in *Correspondance complète de Jean Jacques Rousseau*, Lettre 1605, Tome IX p. 347-348.

36. This letter, on the other hand, offers a stark contrast to Rousseau’s pessimism in the letter to Moulton. Rousseau feels that his old heart is coming back to life and claims that his odd behaviour will never return because of his situation, which prevents the rise of dangerous passions. The sudden change of his intention suggests that Rousseau’s ambition to kill himself was not a mature decision, if it ever was a serious plan.

37. À Madeleine-Angélique de Neufville-Villeroy, duchesse de Luxembourg, 13 décembre 1761 in *Correspondance complète de Jean Jacques Rousseau*, Lettre 1587, Tome IX, p. 319.

livre pernicieux.”<sup>38</sup> We see the same claim being made about this episode in the *Confessions*:

Je me sentois mourant; j’ai peine à comprendre comment cette extravagance ne m’acheva pas: *tant l’idée de ma mémoire deshonorée après moi dans mon plus digne et meilleur livre m’étoit effroyable*. Jamais je n’ai tant craint de mourir, et je crois que si j’étois mort dans ces circonstances, je serois mort désespéré (C, OC I, p. 568 – my emphasis).

In these passages, Rousseau does not mourn for humanity the loss of a useful book; he mourns the mutilation of his memory. *Émile* is not a detached product of his mind. His most intimate being is in this book. Losing the book or having it falsified is tantamount to losing oneself. Contrary to his own explanation, the source of misery is moral rather than physical.

If we look at Rousseau’s misery through the lens of the theory of equilibrium, we see that Rousseau wants to control something that is beyond his powers: his personal glory. He foresees how his memory will be received by posterity and would like to be sure that it will be well received. According to the theory, this is a mistake: “La prévoyance! La prévoyance qui nous porte sans cesse au delà de nous et souvent nous place où nous n’arriverons point; voila la véritable source de toutes nos misères” (E, OC IV, p. 307). Rousseau fears how he will appear in the future. He lives in the imagination of others. He has extended his being farther than he should have. His well-being hinges

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38. *Au ministre Paul-Claude Moulton*, 12 décembre 1761 in *Correspondance complète de Jean Jacques Rousseau*, Lettre 1583, Tome IX, p. 313. In this letter, written eleven days before his *lettre d’adieu*, Rousseau spends one ninth of the letter on the accident and his pain. The rest of the letter is dedicated to the Jesuit plot.

upon a book. Like the man whose happiness is destroyed by a simple letter, Rousseau forgot where his true being is.

## 2.2 – The 1761 Crisis in the Confessions

Rousseau offers a different explanation of the crisis in the *Confessions*:

Jamais un malheur quel qu'il soit ne me trouble et ne m'abat pourvu que je sache en quoi il consiste; mais mon penchant naturel est d'avoir peur des tenebres, je redoute et je hais leur air noir, le mystère m'inquiète toujours, il est par trop antipathique avec mon naturel ouvert jusqu'à l'imprudence. L'aspect du monstre le plus hideux m'effrayeroit peu, ce me semble, mais si j'entrevois de nuit une figure sous un drap blanc, j'aurai peur. Voilà donc mon imagination qu'allumoit ce long silence occupée à me tracer des fantômes. Plus j'avois à cœur la publication de mon dernier et meilleur ouvrage, plus je me tourmentoais à chercher ce qui pouvoit l'accrocher, et toujours portant tout à l'extrême, dans la suspension de l'impression du Livre j'en croyois voir la suppression (C, OC I, p. 566).

If Rousseau started to fear being the victim of a plot, it was because of his natural fear of darkness and his natural love of openness. The cause of his misery is now transferred to his heart.

Rousseau does not say here what he thinks of this fear of darkness and this love of openness in general. He only says that his fear of darkness is a *penchant naturel*. In *Émile*, Rousseau claims that the fear of darkness is a natural fear to man.<sup>39</sup> It would be artificial if it found its source in men's creations (e.g. in scary tales). But Rousseau claims it is natural since it has a natural cause: ignorance. According to the account in *Émile*,

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39. See *Émile*, OC IV, p. 383ss.

then, the cause of Rousseau's unhappiness is not unnatural. But what is curious is to see Rousseau reducing his fear to have his book disfigured to a physical fear. In fact, Rousseau fears a darkness that threatens his moral being, and not his physical one. His fear implies a developed and active imagination, a strong desire to foresee one's fate and an obvious concern for the esteem of others. Rousseau does not say that his fear of darkness is artificial and vicious. When he says that it is a *penchant naturel*, I suppose that he must mean that it is natural to him, not natural to man. Nevertheless, the reduction of his moral fear to a physical fear makes it appear as if Rousseau wants to say that his paranoia is the natural reaction of a natural human heart.

In any case, Rousseau does not claim in *Émile* that one should submit to this fear. One should rather educate oneself to get rid of it. The required education is not to reason with oneself, for it is inefficient. The fear of darkness can only be cured by habit. One should get accustomed to live and move in darkness so as to become confident in this situation. If we go back to Rousseau's situation with respect to publishing a book, he explains that his fear of a conspiracy is the natural effect of his natural fear of darkness. The cure would be to get used to the idea that his publishers and the people who touch his manuscript cannot keep Rousseau constantly informed about their actions. Rousseau has to develop a trust in them. Why did Rousseau never develop this trust with time?



### 2.3 – *The 1761 Crisis in the Four Letters to Malesherbes*

Rousseau yet provides another account of the cause of the 1761 crisis in his four letters to Malesherbes. Rousseau was prompted to write these four letters after Malesherbes sent him a letter in which he said he believed Rousseau to be unhappy. Malesherbes' letter is itself a reply to the letter from Rousseau that I have quoted, which begs Malesherbes to preserve his esteem for Rousseau because his bad actions were those of another man. Malesherbes replies that he never lost his esteem for Rousseau; in fact, his mad behavior has raised his esteem for Rousseau, for it has disclosed to Malesherbes that Rousseau was not responsible for his foolish actions. Malesherbes, however, is not claiming the broken catheter for Rousseau's misery. He rather thinks that Rousseau is afflicted by melancholy. According to him, this sickness makes him see everything dark. It increases his sensitivity, his *amour-propre* as an author, the dreadfulness of his solitary situation and the pain produced by his urinary retention. Since Malesherbes, in harmony with the belief of his time, considered melancholy to be the result of an excess of black bile in the body, he cannot blame him for his behavior. Moreover, he sees that Rousseau's disposition to melancholy is counterbalanced by an equal, if not greater disposition to see the truth and to admit his injustices when they are presented to him. For these reasons, Malesherbes believes Rousseau to be sick and unhappy, but innocent and blameless.<sup>40</sup>

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40. *Chrétien-Guillaume de Lamoignon de Malesherbes à Rousseau*, 25 décembre 1761 in *Correspondance complète de Jean Jacques Rousseau*, Lettre 1610, Tome IX, p. 354-356.

Rousseau's fourfold reply accordingly includes an explanation of his 1761 crisis. This explanation is not straightforward, because Rousseau seems to blame his faculties in one letter and exonerate them in another. At stake again is his responsibility for his unhappiness and the healthiness of his life. I will expose the problems raised by his account.

### *2.3.1 – Unruly Imagination*

In his first letter, Rousseau denies that he is unhappy and melancholic, as Malesherbes believes he is. He rather blames one of his faculties and one of his passions for his unhappy state during the previous months:

Il est facile à voir que cette agitation n'a point son principe dans ma situation actuelle mais dans une imagination dereglee, prête à s'effaroucher sur tout et à porter tout à l'extreme. Des succès continus m'ont rendu sensible à la gloire, et il n'y a point d'homme ayant quelque hauteur d'ame, et quelque vertu qui put penser sans le plus mortel desespoir qu'apres sa mort on subsituterait sous son nom à un ouvrage utile, un ouvrage pernicieux, capable de deshoner sa memoire et de faire beaucoup de mal (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1131).

Here the main culprit is not his physical sickness or his fear of darkness, but his unruly imagination and his love of glory.

Let us start with Rousseau's unruly imagination. Rousseau blames what presumably constitutes a fundamental part of his character for his misery. This allows him in turn to exempt himself from any responsibility his solitary situation at

Montmorency (“*Il est facile à voir que cette agitation n’a point son principe dans ma situation actuelle*”) and to contradict the opinions of his former friend that he is miserable there.

But Rousseau’s attribution of the cause of his misery to his unruly imagination remains ambiguous. He could still think that his unruly imagination was caused by his physical sickness, as he says in his letter to Moulton, without saying it explicitly at the outset of his answer to Moulton. The question is therefore: was Rousseau’s crisis caused by a temporary derailment of his imagination (due to his physical sickness or another temporary cause)? Or does Rousseau believe his unruly imagination to be a permanent feature of his character? The editors of la Pléiade adopt the latter view: “Rousseau reconnaît donc que son agitation a une cause permanente, qui réside dans le ‘dérèglement’ de son imagination.” (OC I, p. 1847). Yet, before concluding so, we must determine if he himself believes that it is a permanent characteristic of his personality.

Rousseau presents what is fundamental about himself in the second letter. He claims that he is fundamentally lazy and passionate. He cannot explain how these two characteristics can be joined in the same soul, but that the contradiction does not deny the fact. If he can’t explain the contradiction, he can trace the history of its development. As he will do with more detail in the *Confessions*, Rousseau goes back to his early childhood to explain the origins of this contradiction.<sup>41</sup> Already as a child, Rousseau was bored with

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41. Rousseau is obviously more interested in the development of his extreme sensitivity than of his laziness. Perhaps it is because he tends to conceive the former as the cause of the latter (see *C*, OC I, p. 41 and *D*, OC I, p. 669-670). Rousseau usually describes his laziness as natural to himself and to man; his extreme sensitivity and his agitated soul, on the other hand, could appear to be the result of his *amour-propre*: see *SD*, OC III, p. 171. But if Rousseau’s “laziness” comes from his too ardent desires, then it tells a different story about his apparent moderation and the virtue of his solitude. Rousseau refrains from

everything that existed. This boredom originated from the intense activity of his soul, although it is not clear how. His “*ennui de tout*” led him to live in his books. Rousseau especially loved Plutarch and novels. These books made him shed “buckets of tears.” Rousseau was overwhelmed by his readings because, as we guess, he possessed a passionate heart. His intense reading led him to develop a heroic and romantic taste that has continuously increased during his life. This taste did not correct his distaste of everything that existed before he started to read. It increased it beyond recovery: “De là se forma dans [mon coeur] ce goût héroïque et romanesque qui n’a fait qu’augmenter jusqu’à présent, et qui acheva de me degouter de tout, hors ce qui ressembloit à mes folies” (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1134).

It would seem at this point that we have found the cause of Rousseau’s unruly imagination (as well as the origin of his love of solitude). His life experience and his education increased his passionate character and gave him a taste for creatures of his imagination. He appears therefore to think that his unruly imagination is a permanent feature of his character.

By calling his heroic and romantic notions “*folies*” and by calling himself “*fou*” when he sought to realize these notions in this world, Rousseau obviously appears to condemn himself. However, Rousseau provides a positive assessment of this feature of his character. Rather than being a source of misery, his unruly imagination and his love of *folies* is a source of happiness:

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actively seeking the goods of his life (what he would call “laziness”) simply because they cannot satisfy his desires. He prefers the products of his imagination because he is too passionate. His ideals are the result of his desire for “*pures jouissances*”; they allow him to escape the temptations of this world.

En devenant plus expérimenté j'ai perdu peu à peu le zèle de [chercher ce qui n'est point dans ce monde], et par conséquent de le chercher. Aigri par les injustices que j'avois éprouvées, par celles dont j'avois été le témoin, souvent affligé du desordre où l'exemple et la force des choses m'avoient entraîné moi même, j'ai pris en mepris mon siecle et mes contemporains et sentant que je ne trouverois point au milieu d'eux une situation qui put contenter mon cœur, je l'ai peu à peu detaché de la société des hommes, et je m'en suis fait une autre dans mon imagination laquelle m'a d'autant plus charmé que je la pouvois cultiver sans peine, sans risque et la trouver toujours sure et telle qu'il me la falloit (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1134-1135).

Rousseau does not disapprove his love of follies.<sup>42</sup> They are rather a wise and sound attitude in response to a reality that does not meet the desires of his heart. The mistake he made when he was young was to attempt to find the same persons he had met in Plutarch and in the novels in the real world. What time taught him was not that he had to correct his ideas of perfect friends and a perfect society in light of his experience, but rather that he should stop seeking these beings in this world. He had to cut his ties with the society of men and learn to be satisfied with his imaginary society of perfect individuals. The fault lies in the world, not in Rousseau's desires and imagination.

In the next paragraphs, Rousseau relates his famous illumination on the road to Vincennes. He says that before the illumination, despite having sufficient reasons to hate men, he still felt a tendency to love them. His heart was wiser than his reason, since on the road to Vincennes, Rousseau discovered that men are unjust, unruly and despicable not because of themselves, but because of "institutions." His reason now could explain what his heart always felt: man is by nature good (and lovable), but depraved by society.

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42. "Vous savez [...] que les solitaires ont tous l'esprit romanesque [...] Pourquoi chercherois-je à guérir d'une si douce folie, puisqu'elle contribue à me rendre heureux?" (*À Charles-François-Frédéric de Montmorency-Luxembourg, maréchal duc de Luxembourg*, 27 mai 1759 in *Correspondance complète de Jean Jacques Rousseau*, Lettre 821, Tome VI, p. 107).

Nevertheless, this discovery did not make him quit his chimeras. Men of his days remain evil and unlovable. Rousseau has only understood that it is not their fault, but the fault of their situation. This situation might be changed to make them better; but until then, they remain unlovable. This is why Rousseau said earlier that his taste for extravagances has continuously increased since he was young up to the time he is writing his letter to Malesherbes. Rousseau's personal revolutions, starting with his illumination on the road to Vincennes, never decreased his taste for extravagances by making him wiser. It suggests that Rousseau approves of his heroic and romantic notions – corrected by his understanding of the source of evil in humanity – and his isolation from the society of men. It means that his reading of Plutarch and novels did not artificially induce his distaste for everything that exists. That distaste was already present in his heart as a child. His readings only increased Rousseau's original dissatisfaction with reality.

I think therefore that Rousseau is not blaming himself (or a fundamental part of his character) for his recent crisis when he blames his unruly imagination. Although he seems to think that a fundamental part of his character is to have an unruly imagination, the description he makes of his imagination in the second letter is rather praiseworthy. Rousseau does not say that his imagination needs to be educated to become a source of happiness. More exactly, Rousseau says that his unruly imagination led him to be used by others during his young days; but his imagination is only nefarious when Rousseau lives among men. It was a source of misery when he was fooled by sly persons during his young age because of his naïveté; it was a source of anger when Rousseau lived in Paris because of the perpetual spectacle of injustice he had to see every day. But Rousseau

does not propose to put a leash on his imagination; he does not want to control his sensitivity and his passionate temperament so much as to change his situation. He can let his imagination and his sensitivity go when he is alone because they offer no danger and are not a source of anger.

The problem with this explanation is that the 1761 crisis happened while Rousseau was in a situation of (relative) loneliness. Shouldn't he conclude that he needs to exert a control on his imagination even in his solitary situation? In any case, if Rousseau thought that his unruly imagination was the true source of his misery, it would be difficult to explain why he would later in his life firmly believe to be the victim of a plot. His 1761 experience should have taught him that he had a tendency to exaggerate and to presuppose evil motivations among his friends when he had no evidence for such things.

While Rousseau presents his unruly imagination as a permanent feature of his character in the second letter, he is apparently not blaming himself when he indicts his unruly imagination in the first letter. Indeed, in the third letter, Rousseau will lay the blame on his physical sickness like he did in his letter to Moulton. But before turning to this explanation, I will examine the second source of misery according to the first letter: Rousseau's love of glory.

### 2.3.2 – *Love of Glory*

In the first letter, Rousseau blames his love of glory to explain why the possible mutilation of *Émile* affected him so much. Yet the rest of the letter does not argue that love of glory is a nefarious passion. It is an appropriate desire for men who possess great souls and are virtuous. Rousseau never says that his mistake was to live outside of himself in the eyes of posterity. He rather intends to pursue his attempt of publishing his final work before quitting his *métier d'Auteur* (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1137). If love of glory was a cause of his crisis, it is not condoned as bad in itself; it is even a good excuse for becoming miserable, because a great man cannot be blamed for caring about posterity.

Rousseau himself presents his love of glory as a puzzle in his first letter. How can he claim his desire to be glorious while at the same time pretend to be fundamentally lazy? Rousseau promises to answer this puzzle in his next letter. The answer seems to come with the description of his character as lazy *and* passionate and the description of the Illumination of Vincennes. The contradiction between desiring glory and being lazy is similar to the contradiction he tries to explain between being passionate and being lazy. As I said, Rousseau says that the odd combination of his passionate and lazy character led him to cherish the creatures of his imagination. While he may appear lazy to an external observer, because he is always daydreaming, Rousseau is boiling inside, because he is in love with his chimeras.



We do not yet understand how Rousseau came to actively seek glory in the real world. The answer apparently comes when describes the effect of the Illumination of Vincennes:

Tout ce que j'ai pu retenir de ces foules de grandes vérités qui dans un quart d'heure m'illuminèrent sous cet arbre, a été bien foiblement epars dans les trois principaux de mes ecrits, savoir ce premier discours, celui sur l'inegalité, et le traité de l'éducation, lesquels trois ouvrages sont inseparables et forment ensemble un meme tout. Tout le reste a été perdu, et il n'y eu d'ecrit sur le lieu meme que la prosopopée de Fabricius. *Voilà comment lorsque j'y pensois le moins je devins auteur presque malgré moi.* Il est aisé de concevoir comment l'attrait d'un premier succès et les critiques des barbouilleurs me jetterent tout de bont dans la carrière (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1136 – my emphasis).

The text admittedly would require a lengthier analysis to lead to an exact interpretation. What is clear is that Rousseau presents his literary activity – and I assume his love of glory – as something that sprung from his illumination without him really wanting it. Rousseau says that he became a writer “almost in spite of himself.” He suggests that his illumination was so powerful and that he was so intoxicated with the great truths he saw that he spontaneously wanted to share these truths. But is love of glory the motivation behind this generous outburst?

Perhaps Rousseau means something along the following lines. He has just described himself as fundamentally passionate and lazy. We can think that the passionate part of his character took possession of him after his discovery. His laziness did not prevented him from writing books because Rousseau is not lazy in the usual sense of

“loving to do nothing.”<sup>43</sup> Thus when Rousseau says that he became a writer “almost despite himself,” he means perhaps that his passionate character played a role (hence the “almost”) but that it was not a conscious decision. Love of glory was not his initial motivation. It became a motivation after his public success and the need to answer his first critics. I make this distinction because the end of the paragraph invites it:

Une vive persuasion m’a toujours tenu lieu d’éloquence, et j’ai toujours écrit lâchement et mal quand je n’ai pas été fortement persuadé. Ainsi c’est peut-être un retour caché d’amour-propre qui m’a fait choisir et mériter ma devise, et m’a si passionnement attaché à la vérité, ou à tout ce que j’ai pris pour elle. Si je n’avois écrit que pour écrire, je suis convaincu qu’on ne m’auroit jamais lû (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1136).

Rousseau says that he writes out of passion (“persuasion”) for his topic. But he is open to the possibility that his dedication to the truth is in fact motivated by his *amour-propre*. If love of glory were a sort of *amour-propre*, then Rousseau would mean that it is possible that love of glory dictates his literary career more than he thinks. Yet, of course, Rousseau implies that he is not in fact motivated by his *amour-propre*. The admission appears to be a rhetorical concession.

Accordingly, Rousseau does not seem to think that love of glory is a strong passion in him. His motivation to write here is obscure, but it seems to lie elsewhere. It is presented as the extension of the Illumination of Vincennes. Writing appears to be an activity that Rousseau did not really choose. He passively entered the career, and it is afterwards that he apparently became enamored with glory. What is clear is that he does

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43. “Ma paresse étoit moins celle d’un faineant, que celle d’un homme indépendant qui n’aime à travailler qu’à son heure” (*C*, OC I, p. 402).

not present his literary activity as primarily a desire for glory. It is either this passive outburst to share the truths he discovered, or a hope to change the men and the institutions of his time.<sup>44</sup>

However, the best evidence that Rousseau does not consider himself to be really concerned with glory comes in the third letter. Rousseau describes what is a happy day for him. When he walks alone in the countryside and falls into his *rêveries*, he seldom thinks of his desire for glory: “Ô si dans ces momens quelque idée de Paris, de mon siecle et de ma petite gloriole d’auteur venoit troubler mes reveries, avec quel dedain je la chassois à l’instant pour me livrer sans distraction aux sentimens exquis dont mon ame etoit pleine!” (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1140).

Not only is Rousseau able to take a distance from his passion for recognition, but he seems to think that his concern for glory is not dangerous. To use the theory of equilibrium, the danger of glory is that one desires something that is not in his natural power to obtain. But Rousseau says that he only desires the glory coming from posterity: “La seule gloire qui ait jamais touché mon coeur, l’honneur que j’attends de la postérité et qu’elle me rendra parce qu’il m’est dû, et que la posterité est toujours juste” (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1145). Since, as he claims, posterity is always “just,” and since Rousseau deserves glory, Rousseau must have been sure that he would obtain what he sought.

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44. Again, it is not clear that this is Rousseau’s understanding of the reason he writes. Rousseau does not say it in the second letter, but he says it in the fourth one: OC I, p. 1143; see also *Confessions*, OC I, p. 416.

### 3 – Conclusion: What Is the Source of Rousseau's Misery?

We have seen how Rousseau provides different explanations for his 1761 crisis. Rousseau blames his blocked urethra, his fear of darkness (and love of openness), his unruly imagination and his love of glory. The two last items are not altogether a source of misery for him. They are not even clearly the cause of his misery according to Rousseau. Indeed, Rousseau comes back to the explanation he provided in his letter to Moulou in his third letter to Malesherbes: “Mes maux sont l’ouvrage de la nature mais mon bonheur est le mien” (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1138). As the context clearly implies, Rousseau means by “nature” his sickly body.<sup>45</sup> Contrary to what appeared to be the case, a permanent unruly imagination in need of education, a love of glory in need of being uprooted, are not to be blamed. Rousseau’s sickness, not his sensitivity to opinion, is what has inflamed his imagination. In fact, Rousseau has done everything he can to be happy and is so well-ordered that he highly esteems himself: “De tous les hommes que j’ai connus en ma vie, aucun ne fut meilleur que moi.” (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1133); “Un homme qui se sent bien ordonné, et qui ayant eu le courage de faire ce qu’il falloit pour l’être, croit pouvoir s’en imputer le mérite. [...] Aussi je ne vous déguiserai point, que malgré le sentiment de mes vices, j’ai pour moi une haute estime.” (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1142-1143); “C’est quelque chose que de donner l’exemple aux hommes de la vie qu’ils devroient tous mener” (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1143). With such statements, it is difficult to think how Rousseau could consider the

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45. See also the attached footnote to the sentence, as well as pages 1137 and 1142.

1761 crisis to be something else than an extraordinary outburst of delirium owing next to nothing to his character.

In the third letter to Malesherbes, Rousseau sums up what the Illumination taught him about the cause of human misery and of his own misery:

Après avoir decouvert ou crû decouvrir dans les fausses opinions des hommes la source de leurs miseres et de leur mechanceté, je sentis qu'il n'y avoit que ces *memes opinions* qui m'eussent rendu malheureux moi meme, *et que mes maux et mes vices me venoient bien plus de ma situation que de moi meme* (LAM, OC I, p. 1136 – my emphasis).

Here is, in a nutshell, a fundamental question of Rousseau's philosophy, as well as of his self-understanding. How far is a man responsible for his misery? The last sentence, in particular, captures the issue. On the one hand, Rousseau points out his opinions as the source of his misery. Rousseau says he was miserable because of his beliefs. On the other hand, the source of his misery does not lie in himself, but *mostly* in the situation he lives in.<sup>46</sup> The passage implies that opinions come from situations, and that by changing one's situation, one changes his opinions. It implies that one is not carrying with him the opinions that made one miserable.<sup>47</sup>

If the fault is not mainly within oneself, if our misery depends mainly or entirely on our situation, if our false opinions do not inhabit us intimately, then by changing one's situation, one should become happier. Accordingly, Rousseau tells Malesherbes that he

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46. In his description of the Illumination, Rousseau does not make any qualification: "L'homme est bon naturellement et [...] c'est par ces institutions *seules* que les hommes deviennent méchants" (LAM, OC I, p. 1136 – my emphasis).

47. "On disoit à Socrates que quelqu'un ne s'estoit aucunement amendé en son voyage: Je croy bien, dit-il, il s'estoit emporté avecques soy" (Montaigne, *Essais*, Tome I, chapter XXXIX, p. 239).

decided to reform his life after the Illumination and to become independent of “opinion”. As I have shown in my analysis of the reform described in the *Confessions*, Rousseau’s reform was mostly external; it suggests that Rousseau did not think that the cause of his pandering to opinion lay within himself. He provides the same self-understanding in his letters to Malesherbes. The main condition for being happy is to live in a situation that fosters happiness. This is indicated in the long passage I have quoted in the precedent paragraph by the use of the past tense: “*mes maux et mes vices me venoient bien plus de ma situation que de moi meme.*” Rousseau uses the past tense because he means that his woes and his vices came from his old situation in Paris (and perhaps also from his situation at *L’Hermitage*). Since Rousseau lives in Montmorency, he is no longer miserable. Now that he lives alone, he is no more obsessed by the false opinions that made him unhappy: “Il est desormais démontré pour moi par l’experience, que l’etat où je me suis mis est le seul où l’homme puisse vivre bon et heureux, puisqu’il est le plus independent de tous, et le seul où on ne se trouve jamais pour son propre avantage dans la necessité de nuire à autrui” (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1137).

Since Rousseau praises his solitary situation for having delivered him of his misery and making him happy, it is necessary to examine in details what he finds praiseworthy in solitude. This is the topic of the next chapter.

## Chapter Three

### *Happiness and Solitude*

Rousseau is famously known for praising solitude as a state of bliss. But to understand why he loves solitude is a daunting task. The first challenge comes from his conception of “being alone.” Rousseau sometimes mean to be retired in the countryside; at other times, he means to be entirely isolated from others, for instance during walks in nature. His conception of solitude is sometimes simply moral: it means to be unconcerned with the esteem of others and without need of their help. Solitude then becomes synonymous with independence.

A second challenge comes from Rousseau’s persistent desire for love, friendship and glory even when he claims to have no need of others. We find Rousseau both complaining about his solitude and claiming to be happy alone. As Marcel Raymond remarks: “La solitude est pour lui tantôt le souverain bien, tantôt le malheur de l’exil, de la proscription.”<sup>1</sup> Rousseau is sad because his sociable inclinations are frustrated by his enemies, but he also let us know that he is happy with himself and cannot find pleasure living with others.

Rousseau’s vindication of his solitude also raises many problems with respect to his philosophy. Rousseau makes statements that seem to contradict his understanding of natural goodness or that imply a belief in a conception of the human heart that he denies

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1. *R*, OC I, p. 1763 (note 1).

elsewhere. Another complication results from the fact that his image is at stake. His former friends said that his loneliness was the effect of his selfishness and misanthropy. Rousseau's vindication is therefore not purely theoretical. The reader can believe that his wounded ego may have caused him to alter the truth in his favor.

Rather than tackling these issues directly, I will follow Rousseau's presentation of his argument in favor of solitude. This chapter will be divided in three sections. First, I will show how Rousseau defends solitude in his letters to Malesherbes. Rousseau praises his solitude because it suits his laziness and his taste for chimerical relations over real relations, but also because it makes him independent and innocent. But his laziness and his taste for chimerical relations do not seem to foster his independence and his innocence. Rousseau makes claims that are difficult to understand since they lead us to important contradictions with other claims made in the letters or with his philosophy.

The letters to Malesherbes vindicate solitude as choice worthy in itself. We get a different portrait of solitude in the *Rêveries*. Solitude has been imposed to Rousseau. His defense of solitude takes therefore the form of arguing the goodness of bending to this necessity. The second section will examine Rousseau's reasons for bending to his destiny in the *Rêveries*. The variety of reasons Rousseau provides makes it difficult for the interpreter to discern Rousseau's true argument. Rousseau sometimes seems to be bending to the will of his enemies; sometimes he rather seems to be bending to the necessity of nature, which wants us to live within ourselves to be happy. Rousseau also says that he submits to necessity because it is God's will, only to say later his fate is the result of blind chance.



These variations suggest that Rousseau's submission to necessity and his withdrawal from society are not as firm as he sometimes claims. Moreover, Rousseau claims in the Sixth Walk that doing good to others is a natural inclination and is the true source of happiness. There would be therefore a natural inclination in Rousseau that would be in conflict with his resolution to loneliness. The last section discusses the reasons why beneficence is a source of happiness and why Rousseau cannot satisfy this natural inclination.

### *1 – Solitude in the Letters to Malesherbes*

One must always be careful while reading Rousseau's autobiographical works to distinguish the idiosyncratic from the natural and the circumstantial from the essential. The letters to Malesherbes make this task easier. Rousseau does not present his solitary situation as an accidental choice, or as a choice suiting his idiosyncratic needs. He argues that his lonely situation is the only one in which man can be good and live happily (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1137). While he knows that he gives the appearance of an unhappy misanthrope, Rousseau wants to prove to Malesherbes that he is happier in this situation than any human being: "Non jamais les plus voluptueux n'ont connu de pareilles delices" (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1139). The letters are Rousseau's apology in its highest sense. He is to serve as a model to humanity.

The letters are also an apology in the sense of a defense against an attack. In his letter that prompted Rousseau's fourfold reply, Malesherbes mentioned that many men

believed that Rousseau chose to live away from Paris because of his vanity. By ostentatiously quitting Paris, Rousseau wanted people to talk about him. Rousseau feels that he has to defend himself against this charge. He denies that his decision to move to the country was an attempt to attract public attention on him. His decision was motivated by multiple factors, but above all by his natural love of solitude.

The four letters to Malesherbes are therefore a defense and a eulogy of Rousseau's solitary situation. In the next section, I will explain what motivated Rousseau's decision to live alone. I will then turn to Rousseau's justification of solitude and discuss the problems it raises. While Rousseau's motivations are inseparable from his justification, I separate the two for the sake of clarity.

### *1.1 – Rousseau's Natural Love of Solitude*

Let us begin with Rousseau's answer to the charge that he left Paris to attract public attention. Rousseau answers that he loves too much his pleasure and his independence to have the spotlights fixed on him. But Rousseau must go beyond his sentiments and point to actions if he wants to prove that he is not a vain man. Uncharacteristically, he points to his sociability to give a proof that he is not sensitive to vanity: "Celui pour qui la fortune et l'espoir de parvenir ne balanço jamais un rendez-vous ou un souper agreable ne doit pas naturellement sacrifier son bonheur au desir de faire parler de lui" (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1131). Rousseau also says that he waited until he was 40 years old to unveil his genius to the world. Both behaviors prove that vanity is not a

powerful passion in him and that the charge that he left Paris to become fodder for gossip is a mistake.<sup>2</sup>

Malesherbes, contrary to gossip, believed that it was Rousseau's extreme sensitivity and melancholy that compelled him to flee society. Like Heraclites, Rousseau could not stand men's injustices and wickedness. Rousseau claims that Malesherbes is not far from the truth. Indeed, Rousseau's sensitivity to injustice and wickedness makes him shun society. But Rousseau underlines that he is not a misanthrope: "C'est parce que [j'aime les hommes] que je les fuis, je souffre moins de leurs maux quand je ne les vois pas" (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1144). As we have seen, the illumination taught him that men were originally good and that they are not responsible for their wickedness. Rousseau continues to love them despite their corruption because of this original goodness he sees in them. Would he be contemptuous of them or indifferent towards their happiness, he could sustain the spectacle of their crimes. His flight is the sign that he remains sensitive to their fate.

But Rousseau says his hatred for the wickedness of men is not the true reason for his solitude. He would stay among society despite his hatred if it were not for another passion that enticed him to be alone. If Rousseau is retired from society, it is simply because he was born with a love of solitude: "Je suis né avec un amour naturel pour la solitude qui n'a fait qu'augmenter à mesure que j'ai mieux connu les hommes" (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1131). Rousseau claims that he loves solitude as such. His love is not merely

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2. On this last point, the *Confessions* will demonstrate Rousseau's ambition during his youth. Rousseau did not wait to unveil his genius to the world until he was 40 years old; he rather was unaware that he was brilliant before that age (*C*, OC I, p. 363).

negative, i.e. a reaction from his hatred of society. He implies that he would retire from society even if every man around him were humane and good. His natural love of solitude increased with his discovery that men were wicked, but it is not founded on this discovery.

What is really at the source of Rousseau's natural love of solitude? We have seen in the precedent chapter Rousseau claiming that his fundamental character is to be lazy and passionate. He will explain how his natural love of solitude springs from these two passions.

It took some time for Rousseau to understand how his laziness determined his love of solitude. He used to believe that his love of solitude was only a reaction to his inability to shine in society. But when public success came, Rousseau had the occasion to verify his conception. His star was now brilliantly shining in public: "J'étois bien sur meme en disant des sotises, de n'être pas pris pour un sot" (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1132). Would he love society now that he was sure to be loved by it? On the contrary, Rousseau noticed that his distaste for society increased. He concluded that his distaste stemmed from another source than his inability to shine in public.<sup>3</sup>

Rousseau came to the realization that he loves solitude because he hates the duties and obligations of society. He hates the obligations of politeness: "Un mot à dire, une

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3. Later in his life, however, Rousseau will explain his distaste for society as an effect of his clumsiness and shyness: "J'aimerois la société comme un autre, si je n'étois sur de m'y montrer non seulement à mon desavantage, mais tout autre que je ne suis" (*C*, OC, I, p. 116). His reasoning here in the letter to Malesherbes is not rigorous, since he was loved and celebrated for his writings, and not for his pleasant and clever commerce. Indeed, to his own dismay, Rousseau remained clumsy and shy after he became famous. It could still have motivated him to flee society, especially since he was bound to disappoint the expectations of his admirers. For his reasoning to work out, Rousseau would have needed to become a skilled *homme de salon* and still find in his heart distaste for society.

lettre à écrire, une visite à faire, des qu'il le faut, sont pour moi des suplices" (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1132). He also hates to be the target of other's generosity: "Voilà encore pourquoi j'ai toujours tant redouté les bienfaits. Car tout bienfait exige reconnaissance; et je me sens le coeur ingrat par cela seul que la reconnaissance est un devoir" (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1132). This is why his love of solitude increased after he became famous: his celebrity multiplied his obligations and made society less attractive than it ever was.

What is so unbearable to Rousseau about obligations? Rousseau's explanation is ambiguous. He first refers to his "*indomptable esprit de liberté*" to explain why he can't stand to be among men: "Qu'elle est donc cette cause? Elle n'est autre que cet indomptable esprit de liberté que rien n'a pû vaincre, et devant lequel les honneurs, la fortune et la reputation meme ne me sont rien" (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1132). This explanation provides an aura of nobility and a demanding nature to Rousseau's hatred for obligations. But Rousseau immediately corrects his claim. His main concern in these letters is to avoid appearing better than he is (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1132) without obfuscating the fact that he is the best man he has ever known in his life (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1133). Accordingly, Rousseau admits that his love of freedom and his concomitant hatred for obligations are not as noble as they seem: "Cet esprit de liberté me vient moins d'orgueil que de paresse. [...] La vie active n'a rien qui me tente, je consentirois cent fois plutot à ne jamais rien faire qu'à faire ce que je ne veux pas" (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1132). Rousseau's love of solitude is more exactly defined as a love of laziness. If obligations are unbearable to him, it is not because they constrain his freedom of action, but because he does not want to act in the first place.

This nuance makes a world of a difference for Rousseau, because it points to the difference between two sorts of happiness: “L’espece de bonheur qu’il me faut, n’est pas tant de faire ce que je veux, que de ne pas faire ce que je ne veux pas” (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1132). This subtle distinction would be meaningless if Rousseau meant that he does not want to be prevented from doing what he wants to do. But Rousseau must mean that he can accept not doing what he wanted to do in the first place. He can resign himself when he wants to do something but is prevented from doing it – for instance, transmitting his work to posterity but being blocked in his will by the plot. What he cannot stand is to be constrained to do what he does not want to do – for instance, being polite. To say it differently: although Rousseau prefers full freedom, he can be constrained to do nothing and be satisfied. Accordingly, Rousseau could be a prisoner at La Bastille and “not be too unhappy.”<sup>4</sup>

If the indomitable Rousseau could be a content prisoner, then his indomitable spirit of freedom is different from the spirit of the horse and the barbarian praised in the *Second Discours*.<sup>5</sup> The freedom he needs to be happy is negative: it is *freedom from* constraints rather than *freedom for* reaching a goal or doing an activity. The distinction between the two types of freedom is equivalent to the distinction between being good and

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4. Émile, for the same reason, becomes a happy slave: see *Les Solitaires*, OC IV, p. 916-917. However, the *Réveries* will show that Rousseau would do what he wants to do (albeit perhaps not as perfectly as if he was fully free) if he were imprisoned: he would fall into his *rêveries* (*R*, OC I, p. 1048). He could also write a great book on freedom: *C*, OC I, p. 172.

5. “Comme un Coursier indompté hérissé ses crins, frappe la terre du pied et se débat impétueusement à la seule approche du mors, tandis qu’un cheval dressé souffre patiemment la verge et l’éperon, l’homme barbare ne plie point sa tête au joug que l’homme civilisé porte sans murmure, et il préfère la plus orageuse liberté à un assujettissement tranquille. [...] Quand je vois les autres sacrifier les plaisirs, le repos, la richesse, la puissance, et la vie même à la conservation de ce seul bien si dédaigné de ceux qui l’ont perdu; quand je vois des Animaux nés libres et abhorrant la captivité, se briser la tête contre les barreaux de leur prison [...] je sens que ce n’est pas à des Esclaves qu’il appartient de raisonner de liberté” (*Second Discours*, OC III, p. 181-182).

being virtuous. The virtuous man does what he wants to do despite the obstacles; he will continue the struggle against the obstacle until he wins. The good man can be content even if the obstacle prevents him from doing anything.<sup>6</sup>

As I will discuss later, Rousseau's use of laziness to explain his love of solitude raises many problems. One problem it raises is that it leaves his love of solitude to be negative: it is to avoid obligations that Rousseau wants to be alone. However, the second element of his natural love of solitude, his passionate character, appears to provide a reason to embrace solitude as such. We have seen in the preceding chapter the link between Rousseau's passionate character and his love of solitude. Rousseau's passionate character led him to develop a taste for heroic and *romanesque* characters. All his life, he sought that kind of men, but always ended up being disappointed by the wickedness of real men. Faced with the meanness of his contemporaries, Rousseau chose to embrace the ideal creature of his imagination, for it is more satisfying:

Je trouve mieux mon compte avec les etres chimeriques que je rassemble autour de moi qu'avec ceux que je vois dans le monde, et la société dont mon imagination fait les frais dans ma retraite achève de me degouter de toutes celles que j'ai quittées (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1131).

In short, Rousseau loves to be alone because he gets more satisfaction from chimerical beings than from real ones.

In the third letter, Rousseau unveils the nature of his chimerical society:

Mon imagination ne laissoit pas longtems deserte la terre ainsi parée. Je la peuplois bientôt d'etres selon mon cœur, et chassant bien loin l'opinion,

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6. Cf. The cannonball analogy: *D*, OC I, p. 669.

les préjugés, toutes les passions factices, je transportois dans les asiles de la nature des hommes dignes de les habiter. Je m'en formois une société charmante dont je ne me sentois pas indigne. Je me faisois un siècle d'or à ma fantaisie et remplissant ces beaux jours de toutes les scènes de ma vie qui m'avoient laissé de doux souvenirs, et de toutes celles que mon cœur pouvoit désirer encore, je m'attendrissois jusqu'aux larmes sur les vrais plaisirs de l'humanité, plaisirs si délicieux, si purs et qui sont désormais si loin des hommes (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1140).

Rousseau puts his chimerical society in a natural setting, far away from cities and all of their corrupt and corrupting elements. The framework, so to speak, of his society is made of either the sweetest scenes of his life or of whatever his heart could fancy. The result of his commerce with his imaginary friends is sentimental: Rousseau's heart becomes filled with tenderness for all the true and pure pleasures he is able to experience with them. Rousseau later says that the only thing he needs from a friend is to know that he is loved. This is apparently the ultimate pleasure he gets from his imaginary friends (and which his real friends deprive him of).

Besides his distaste for obligations and his love of chimera, Rousseau refers to the inconveniences of being famous and to bad friends who wanted to control his life to explain his retreat to the countryside (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1133). However, these reasons, like his hatred from wickedness, are not fundamental. Rousseau uses them as pretexts to justify his retreat: "Quand les maux sont venus ils m'ont fourni un beau prétexte pour me livrer à ma passion dominante" (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1133). The true reason for Rousseau's isolation is his natural love of solitude, which stems from his lazy and passionate nature. If we have to make a hierarchy between these two distinct motives, it seems that his passionate character is more important. Not only because it provides a positive reason to



love solitude, but also because Rousseau mentions this motive just after he claims to have a natural love for solitude (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1131).

### *1.2 – Rousseau's Vindication of Solitude*

Rousseau is not content to explain his love of solitude. He also wants to vindicate it. However exceptional Rousseau's distaste for obligations and love for chimerical beings may appear, he wants to prove that his reasons for loving solitude are universally valid. This is made clear by the following statement:

Il est desormais démontré pour moi par l'expérience, que l'état où je me suis mis est le seul où l'homme puisse vivre bon et heureux, puisqu'il est le plus indépendant de tous, et le seul où on ne se trouve jamais pour son propre avantage dans la nécessité de nuire à autrui (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1137).

As we can see, Rousseau vindicates his solitary situation because it makes man both good and happy. Its goodness and its happiness are predicated on the independence and the innocence his solitude allows. It is because he lives in an independent situation and because he has no need to harm others that his state makes him good and happy. Independence appears more important than innocence, for it is because he depends on no one that he has no need to harm others. And if goodness means nothing else than "not harming others," then Rousseau's goodness can be reduced to the fact that he is independent.

If we add the fact that Rousseau thinks that his love of solitude is natural,<sup>7</sup> Rousseau would have five arguments in favor of his solitude – independence appearing as the key argument. I propose in the following sections to examine the elements of his defense of solitude in the light of what I have uncovered in the precedent section: Rousseau’s laziness and his love of chimerical beings. Since they are the source of his love of solitude, we can ask about each of these elements: are they natural impulses? Do they make Rousseau happy? Do they make him independent? Do they make him innocent? (We could also ask if they make him a good person, but I take “goodness” to be identical in meaning to innocence, as I argued in my first chapter). We can thereby verify if Rousseau’s vindication of his position is credible. Since his justification of solitude in the letters to Malesherbes is short on certain questions, I will use other passages from his work to supplement my discussion. For instance, I will assume that his theory of natural goodness is relevant to understand his vindication of his situation in terms of independence and innocence.

### *1.2.1 – The only and most Independent State?*

Before considering the content of his defense, we need to consider its formulation. Rousseau claims that his state is the *only* one where a man can be both good and happy, and also the *most independent* of all states: “Il est desormais démontré pour moi par

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7. “Je suis né avec un amour naturel pour la solitude. Je trouve mieux mon compte avec les etres chimeriques que je rassemble autour de moi qu’avec ceux que je vois dans la monde” (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1131). Rousseau cannot mean “*naturel*” as simply “*naturel à ma personne*” for it would be a pleonasm with “*je suis né*”.

l'expérience, que l'état où je me suis mis est le *seul* où l'homme puisse vivre bon et heureux, puisqu'il est *le plus indépendant de tous*" (my emphasis).

These claims appear to be exaggerated. First, we know from Rousseau's other writings that there are other states where man can be simply good. The man in the pure state of nature and Émile during his youth are simply good. However, these are fictions or hypotheses. Can Rousseau mean that his situation is the only *real* one where a man can be good? The uniqueness of Rousseau's situation may also come from the fact that while other situations allow men to be good, they do not allow them to be happy. As I have discussed the matter in my first chapter, it is unclear if the man in the pure state of nature and the young Émile can be said to be happy. It could be argued that happiness requires a mental development that is foreign to these two beings. Rousseau, however, would have the privilege to reunite goodness and happiness. His situation is truly unique. According to his theory of natural goodness, men who are simply good cannot be happy in a civilized context. They need to become virtuous. Rousseau, however, does not need to be virtuous to be happy. He somehow can benefit from the mental developments of civilization without corrupting his goodness. This is perhaps the great novelty of Rousseau's autobiographical writings: the demonstration of the possibility to be both good and happy in a civilized context.

Rousseau also makes the extraordinary claim that his state is "the most independent of all states." His claim is surprising above all because it is possible to imagine more independent states than his. First, I have already questioned his independence with respect to his means of subsistence. In contrast with the *Confessions*,

Rousseau acknowledges in his letters to Malesherbes that living off the income of his trade is easier because he is famous. His independence as a music copyist is far from perfect. A farmer could arguably be more independent with respect to his means of subsistence than a music copyist, since he does not need anyone to buy his products to sustain himself and his family.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, a hermit would certainly be the kind of man who would be the most independent in the sense that Rousseau understands this term. He absolutely needs no one to live. With all his praise of loneliness, Rousseau seems to have never seriously considered becoming a hermit. We have to surmise that Rousseau needs to live among civilized men to be happy. He would not know how to live alone in nature or even in a tribe.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, it was certainly a possibility for an European at the time to go back to a real solitude where one could live as a hermit – or if this is too radical, to live with a native tribe.<sup>10</sup> Thus a more independent state was possible in his time. Even Rousseau will describe himself as more independent than he ever was in the *Rêveries*.

His occupation as a writer is another source of dependence. Rousseau admits so much: “Libre! Non je ne le suis point encore. Mes derniers écrits ne sont point encore imprimés” (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1137). The loss of freedom that writing entails leads Rousseau to take a complaining tone and to speak of happiness as a state he will perhaps achieve in the future: “Mais si contre mon attente je puis aller jusque-là et prendre une fois congé du public, croyez Monsieur qu’alors je serai libre ou que jamais homme ne l’aura été. Ô utinam! ô jour trois fois heureux! Non il ne me sera pas donné de le voir” (*LAM*, OC I,

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8. Rousseau defends the opposite thesis in *Émile*, OC IV, p. 470. An artisan is more independent because he can quit the country he lives in if the government threatens him; whereas a farmer depends on his land. Someone can always deprive him of his means of subsistence, whereas the artisan carries it with him.

9. See *Second Discours*, OC III, p. 207.

10. See *Second Discours*, OC III, p. 220.

p. 1137). The dependence of Rousseau towards the public is obvious here. It makes his great claims about independence unbelievable. Why does he describe himself as someone who lives in the present and within himself (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1133 and 1138) when he also says that he needs glory and admits to being pained by the fact that the public believes him to be unhappy (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1131 and 1138)?

Rousseau seems to underestimate his dependence with respect to his means of subsistence and to opinion. His statement that his situation is “the most dependent of all” is obviously an exaggeration. Why Rousseau exaggerates is a delicate question. Perhaps the answer lies in his character. As Rousseau admits, he has a passionate character “*sensible à l’excès à tout ce qui l’affecte.*” Why wouldn’t his passionate character be reflected in the manner that he writes? Rousseau would make an exaggerated claim about his independence because he feels that his solitary situation is attacked by his ex-friends, or because Why else would he willingly write in two consecutive statements: “Je ne suis vraiment libre que depuis ce tems-là. [Next paragraph:] Libre! non je ne le suis point encore” (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1137). This passage suggests that Rousseau’s contradictions may be an effect of his passionate character. When he writes, his aim is not so much to be coherent as to make his reader feel that he is sincere and that he directly puts on the page the sentiments he feels. His contradictions and exaggerations would be the effect of his passionate heart.

### 1.2.2 – The Nature of Rousseau's Laziness

Before examining if Rousseau's laziness makes him independent, innocent and happy, and if it is natural, it is necessary to define what he means by it. For his understanding of his own laziness is far from straightforward.

In the second letter, Rousseau talks of his laziness in the following terms: "Une ame paresseuse qui s'effraye de tout soin" (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1134). Let us define his laziness more precisely as a reluctance (or a lack of energy?) for anything that requires labor. This is the most common understanding of the term. For the sake of clarity, I will call it "indolence."

If we go back to the first letter, we see Rousseau claiming that it is laziness that prevents him from enjoying society, because it makes him hate obligations. But Rousseau's self-description raises an objection. He says that he would fulfill his duties if they were not imposed on him: "Voilà pourquoi, quoique le commerce ordinaire des hommes me soit odieux, l'intime amitié m'est si chère, parce qu'il n'y a plus de devoirs pour elle. On suit son coeur et tout est fait" (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1132). The beauty of friendship is that its obligations are not felt as such.<sup>11</sup> Rousseau would fill his obligations towards his friends because he would not feel them as obligations. Clearly Rousseau has

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11. I hold Rousseau to follow the traditional idea that duties between friends are not felt as such (cf. Montaigne, *Essais*, Tome I, Chapter 28, p. 190-191. Rousseau says that he was never reluctant to attend an appointment (which is an obligation) when it was agreeable: "Celui pour qui la fortune et l'espoir de parvenir ne balançoit jamais un rendez-vous ou un souper agréable" (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1131). He seems also sensitive to claims of justice from his friends: "[Monsieur et Madame de Luxembourg] m'ont rendu la vie, il est juste que je l'emploie à les aimer" (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1144). But Rousseau could also mean that he would not fulfill his duties even with his friends: he would only do what pleases him. In any case, it proves that Rousseau does not lack the energy to act in favor of others.

some energy for a certain type of society. He hates obligations, but it is not because he has no energy to fulfill them.

The difficulty of calling Rousseau lazy is underscored by Rousseau himself, who after having described himself as such, writes to Malesherbes: “Vous me direz Monsieur que cette indolence supposée s’accorde mal avec les écrits que j’ai composés depuis 10 ans, et avec ce desir de gloire qui a du m’exciter à les publier” (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1133). Rousseau’s frenetic writings during the past 10 years can hardly be reconciled with his claim that he is lazy. Rousseau attempts to reconcile the two by explaining that his efforts to publish great books were irregular or bumpy, “comme ceux d’un paresseux” (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1133). His passionate character can trump his laziness and launch him into a frantic activity for a certain time. Accordingly, another solution to the contradiction Rousseau puts forward at the beginning of the second letter (being both lazy and passionate) is that Rousseau’s laziness is not merely a lack of energy or a reluctance for work, but a lack of energy or a reluctance for anything that does not inspire his passionate character. In other words, Rousseau has the energy for labor, but the labor must be so agreeable so as not to be felt as labor. His laziness is a reluctance to everything that costs him (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1133). It becomes a synonym of natural goodness and an antonym of virtue.

But even this last definition is not satisfying. I refer myself to a passage of the *Confessions*, where Rousseau makes a distinction between two sorts of laziness while he describes the intensity with which he worked as a music copyist: “Outre cela, quoique paresseux, j’étois laborieux, cependant, quand je voulois l’être, et ma paresse étoit moins

celle d'un faineant, que celle d'un homme indépendant qui n'aime à travailler qu'à son heure" (C, OC I, p. 401). The quotation shows how Rousseau's understanding of his laziness is uncharacteristic. He links his laziness to his love of independence rather than to a lack of energy. This brings us back to the distinctions Rousseau makes in the first letter to Malesherbes, when he first explains his hatred for duties and obligations as the effect of his "*indomptable esprit de liberté*," and then claims that this spirit of freedom is more an effect of his laziness than from his pride.

Besides linking laziness to a love of independence, the first letter also links laziness to a desire for immediate joys: "Quand les maux sont venus ils m'ont fourni un beau pretexte pour me livrer à ma passion dominante [cf. his laziness]. Trouvant que c'étoit une folie de me tourmenter pour un age auquel je ne parviendrois pas, j'ai tout planté là, et je me suis depeché de jouir" (R, OC I, p. 1133). Rousseau's hatred for obligations find their explanation not in the lack of freedom they entail, but in the fact that Rousseau contracted these duties and obligations for the sake of a future benefice. His sufferings made him realize the absurdity of his sacrifices and his desire to enjoy life immediately.

We have therefore many different understandings of Rousseau's laziness at hand. The manner in which we define it is not without consequences for Rousseau's vindication of his solitary situation. First, is his laziness natural (and hence his love of solitude natural)? According to his theory, laziness is natural: "D'ailleurs, on sait que la plupart des animaux, sans en excepter l'homme, sont naturellement paresseux, et qu'ils se refusent à toutes sortes de soins qui ne sont pas d'une absolue nécessité" (SD, OC III,



p. 156-157).<sup>12</sup> But this is the common understanding of laziness (lack of energy or reluctance for labor); it is not Rousseau's own laziness. Writing books is not of an absolute necessity, as well as botanizing and other activities practiced by the "lazy" Rousseau. His other conceptions of his laziness may lead us to the idea that his laziness is natural, but it would be a mistake to associate it with this specific understanding.

Rousseau also claims that his solitary situation is good because it is one of independence and innocence. This claim depends on the claim that his laziness makes him independent. If we understand laziness as indolence, this claim appears absurd. A man who is lazy is on the contrary most likely to be dependent. He will depend on others for all the goods that tempt him, because he does not have the strength to acquire them by himself. Because of this dependence, the temptation becomes great to do evil deeds when necessity requires it; for instance, to steal the goods of others when hunger becomes pressing. Laziness fosters dependence, which in turn fosters desires to harm others. These are the reasons (among others) why laziness is called the "mother of all vices". Yet, if laziness means « love of independence », the claim does not seem absurd. Hence the importance of defining what Rousseau means when he praises his laziness.

Let us look at "Rousseau"'s praise of laziness in terms of independence in the *Dialogues*:

Notre homme ne sera donc pas vertueux, parce qu'il n'aur[a] pas besoin de l'être, et par la même raison il ne sera ni vicieux ni méchant. Car l'indolence et l'oisiveté, qui dans la société sont un si grand vice n'en sont plus un dans quiconque a su renoncer à ses avantages pour n'en pas

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12. See also *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, OC V, p. 401, footnote.

supporter les travaux. Le méchant n'est méchant qu'à cause du besoin qu'il a des autres, que ceux-ci ne le favorisent pas assez, que ceux-là lui font obstacle, et qu'il ne peut ni les employer ni les écarter à son gré. Le solitaire n'a besoin que de sa subsistance qu'il aime mieux se procurer par son travail dans la retraite que par ses intrigues dans le monde, qui seroient un bien plus grand travail pour lui (*D*, OC I, p. 824).

“Rousseau” admits that laziness is a vice for the man who lives in society. He does give the reasons, but the context suggests two possibilities. The first reason is the one I presented in the precedent paragraph. A lazy man will be dependent on others, and will become evil because of his dependence. The second is presented in *Émile*:

Hors de la société, l'homme isolé ne devant rien à personne, a droit de vivre comme il lui plaît; mais dans la société, où il vit nécessairement aux dépens des autres, il leur doit en travail le prix de son entretien; cela est sans exception. Travailler est donc un devoir indispensable à l'homme social. Riche ou pauvre, puissant ou foible, tout citoyen oisif est un fripon (*E*, OC IV, p. 470).

Laziness is a vice for the social man because it entails that he benefits from society without giving in return. But in any case, laziness is no more a vice for the man who is a solitary, because he does not depend on others and has no need of others. His self-sufficiency makes his indolence innocuous.

According to “Rousseau,” laziness is not a vice anymore for the man who has renounced to the advantages of society because he could not bear its labors. Laziness is not a vice to the man who has become solitary. However, as the quotation from the *Dialogues* makes clear, the solitary man is not lazy: “Le solitaire n'a besoin que de sa subsistance qu'il aime mieux se procurer *par son travail dans la retraite* que par ses

intrigues dans le monde, qui seroient un bien plus grand travail pour lui” (my emphasis). The solitary man must not be lazy, otherwise his solitude would be vicious. To take Rousseau’s case, he must work hard to gain his subsistence. If anything, indolence would make him more dependent on his friend’s wealth. It would make him self-serving and ungrateful.

Accordingly, “Rousseau” confuses two meanings of laziness when he argues in favor of it. He says that laziness is a vice in society, but a virtue (or at least not a vice) in solitude. But he is thinking of two different types of laziness. The laziness that is a vice in society is indolence. The laziness that is not a vice in solitude is *not* indolence. “Rousseau” confuses two meanings of indolence. His argument seems to require it, because he wants to imply that it is because the solitary man is lazy (indolent) that he has renounced to the advantages of society: “[il] a su renoncer à ses avantages *pour n’en pas supporter les travaux*” (my emphasis). Laziness understood as indolence is a good thing because it makes this man unable to be ambitious and to crave for the goods that require the collaboration of others. But the confusion should make us wonder if indolence is the true reason for this man’s leaving society.

This takes us back to Rousseau’s presentation of his laziness in the first letter to Malesherbes. What laziness seems to encompass for Rousseau is a hatred for obligation as such, or a lack of ambition. It is not because he is indolent that he hates obligations; it is not because he cannot give an effort that he is independent. It seems to be because he hates obligation as such, or society as such. But why does Rousseau makes this confusion? Perhaps because laziness (in the sense of indolence) is nice way to say that he

wants to be left alone. Rather than say: “I do not want to join your party because I do not enjoy your presence”, Rousseau is saying: “It would take me too much effort to leave the comfort of my own house to attend your party.” Rousseau is perhaps more polite than he appears. Yet Rousseau also says that he does not enjoy the society of men as such (because they are wicked).

I am not claiming that Rousseau is not indolent (or that he does not think that he is indolent). I merely emphasize the ambiguity of his argument, for it has a bearing on Rousseau’s defense of solitude. Perhaps the confusion stems from Rousseau’s objective in the first letter to prove how insensitive he is to vanity and ambition. To explain why he has fled society is a secondary matter. He first needs to answer his critics who say that his move to the countryside is to show off. Laziness is the best piece of evidence to demonstrate that one has no ambition.

In short, this section asks: what sort of laziness is at the source of Rousseau’s love of solitude? While Rousseau loved to daydream and, some would say, vegetate, it was not his only inclination. He did work to earn his living and was frenetically active when he wrote to the point of losing sleep. His time of leisure was filled with reading books and studying, or later in his life with botanizing, which cannot be described as “doing nothing.” If the laziness he praises is indolence, then it can hardly support his claim that his love of solitude fosters his independence and his innocence. It does not either explain why he hates obligations. And as a matter of fact, Rousseau will altogether drop this explanation in the Sixth Walk of the *Rêveries* when he takes up again the problem of his hatred for obligations.

If Rousseau's laziness means "lack of ambition" or "love of independence" or "desire to be spontaneous" or "desire for immediate pleasures," it would appear to still be a natural passion, in the sense that it would correspond to the inclinations of the natural man in the pure state of nature. However, it would not obviously support his claim that his laziness fosters his independence and his innocence. A desire for immediate pleasures or a lack of ambition could make him dependent on other men – but it would presuppose that he lives with other men and is in a situation where he might develop a need for them. Thus Rousseau's vindication of his solitude, of his laziness (however understood) and of his love of chimerical beings heavily depends on the claim that he is self-sufficient. As I said in the previous section, this claim that is far from being obvious. I will continue to discuss this claim in the rest of this chapter. I leave the question of whether Rousseau's laziness makes him happy for the next chapter, where I will discuss what makes Rousseau happy during his idle days at Montmorency.

### *1.2.3 – Does the Love of Chimerical Beings Make Rousseau Independent and Happy?*

Love and friendship, "the two idols" of Rousseau's heart, are crucial elements of Rousseau's happiness. They could offer the substance of a whole dissertation by themselves. I will analyze his understanding of them mainly through what he says in his letters to Malesherbes, which does not discuss love, but only friendship. Again I ask the same questions: is Rousseau's desire for friendship (if there is one) natural? Does it make him independent? Does it make him innocent? Does it make him happy? The letters are

arguably insufficient to answer these questions, but they provide a good basis for a solid answer.

As we have seen, Rousseau's solitude is also motivated by his passionate character, which led him early to be disgusted with real men and to prefer the ideal creatures of his imagination. Contrary to indolence, the naturalness of Rousseau's love for chimerical being is more difficult to establish. It requires a use of the imagination and a development of our moral being that is not immediately natural according to Rousseau's theory. Christopher Kelly argues that Rousseau's love of chimerical beings increases his flight away from nature, because these beings are unable to satisfy his desire for wholeness.<sup>13</sup> Éleine Larochelle thinks on the contrary that Rousseau's love for chimerical beings is the supreme completion of human's nature, because it is the best means that *amour de soi* finds to increase its love of oneself: "Chérir les chimères de son imagination, ce n'est toujours que s'aimer soi-même, c'est aimer les projections de son propre cœur. On en est toujours au point de départ: l'amour de soi."<sup>14</sup> What is certain is that Rousseau has nothing negative to say about his love for chimerical beings in the letters to Malesherbes. He does not say that his love for chimerical beings is a sickness or an artificial means to be happy. He presents his love of solitude as natural and reasonable. Another difficult (and related) question is whether Rousseau's love for chimerical beings makes him happy – in the sense of "satisfied". Rousseau usually gives two accounts of this love. In the *Dialogues*, just after his praise of laziness quoted in the last section,

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13. Christopher Kelly, *Rousseau's Exemplary Life*, p. 207 and 210.

14. Éleine Larochelle, *Le rôle de l'imagination dans l'œuvre de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, unpublished dissertation (Université de Paris-Sorbonne (Paris IV), 1999), p. 341. See also *D*, OC I, p. 814.

“Rousseau” says: “Du reste, il n’a besoin d’autrui que parce que son cœur a besoin d’attachement, il se donne des amis imaginaires pour n’en avoir pu trouver de réels; il ne fuit les hommes qu’après avoir vainement cherché parmi eux ce qu’il doit aimer” (*D*, OC I, p. 824). Rousseau’s attachment to chimerical beings is presented as a supplement to the lack of real relationships. It is a *pis-aller*. Rousseau would prefer to have real friends, but since this is impossible, he compensates with his chimerical friends. But Rousseau also provides another account in which his love for chimerical beings is more satisfying than any possible human relationship. It is not simply that he has not found a friend that could feel the needs of his heart, but that any possible real friend would be inferior to his imaginary friendships.

Such is the account Rousseau provides in the letters. His imaginary relationships are simply better than real ones: “*Je trouve mieux mon compte avec les etres chimeriques que je rassemble autour de moi qu’avec ceux que je vois dans le monde, et la société don’t mon imagination fait les frais dans ma retraite achève de me defouter de toutes ceclles que j’ai quittées*” (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1131). This is why Rousseau denies Malesherbes’s opinion that he is melancholic and unhappy. He is not longing for real friends.

A chimerical society offers many advantages over real ones: “[Elle] m’a d’autant plus charmé que je pouvois la cultiver sans peine, sans risque et la trouver toujours sure et telle qu’il me la falloit” (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1135). First, it can be cultivated without pain. For instance, Rousseau has no obligation towards his chimerical society. Second, it is without risk. Rousseau can never be betrayed by his imaginary relations. They are “des

amis surs, des maitresses fidelles, de tendres et solides amies” (*D*, OC I, p. 814). Rousseau can make them act and react as he wants, and this is why they cannot disappoint him. In short, Rousseau seems to genuinely prefer imaginary beings because he prefers effortless and indestructible relationships that are fully under control. Real friendships are too fragile to be satisfying. There is more to lose if they fail than to gain if they work out (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1144).

These advantages indicate how Rousseau’s ability to nurture imaginary relationships can foster his independence. It allows him to deflect his desires for others towards himself. Because he is attached to the product of his own imagination, he becomes insensitive to the need of loving other real men and being loved in return by them. His imagination makes him impervious to the injustices and disorderliness of this world because he is able to live within himself with his celestial creatures. As “Rousseau” will say in the *Dialogues*, these imaginary relationships are more solid than any real one because fortune and men cannot sever their ties (*D*, OC I, p. 814). Thus Rousseau does not depend on nothing to preserve these relationships. We see by the same token how his chimerical society preserves his innocence. Rousseau has no need to harm others because he is satisfied with his own imaginary productions. This is true on the sentimental level: he will not be harsh or mean or unjust towards real persons, because he is unconcerned with them.

Yet this is not the whole picture. Rousseau’s solitude is not as complete as to prevent him from having real attachments. In the fourth letter, Rousseau discusses his attachments to men in general and to his real friends in particular. These real attachments



appear to offer a breach into Rousseau's account of perfect self-sufficiency. At least, they prove that his imaginary society is not the only society that furnishes his imagination.

On his attachment to humans, Rousseau writes:

J'ai un cœur tres aimant, mais qui peut se suffire à lui meme. J'aime trop les hommes pour avoir besoin de choix parmi eux; je les aime tous, et c'est parce que je les aime que je hais l'injustice; c'est parce que je les aime que je les fuis, je souffre moins de leurs maux quand je ne les vois pas. Cet intérêt pour l'espece suffit pour nourrir mon cœur (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1144).

Rousseau loves men. But he does not see his attachment to humans as threatening his self-sufficiency. He admits that he is afflicted by their evils, but since he flees their presence, he can diminish the pain he feels for them. In fact, Rousseau's account shows how his love for humanity is but a variation of his love for chimerical beings. He loves men at a distance, without living with them, without seeing them. His love is for a "pure humanity"<sup>15</sup> to whom he relates more through his imagination than through his senses. As I have also argued, Rousseau's love for men is for their original goodness. The actual men of his century are corrupted and wicked. When he says that he loves them, he loves this potential in them rather than what they have become. Another difficulty of Rousseau's account is that he does not mention that he needs to be loved in return. But he has claimed previously in his letters that he was seeking glory. As I have tried to show, he belittles this need. But it is nonetheless inaccurate to say that Rousseau has a one-sided relationship with humanity.

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15. Cf. *R*, OC I, p. 1097.

Rousseau concludes that his “interest for the species” or for humankind (added to his imaginary attachments, we have to presume) is enough to satisfy his heart. This means that he does not need real friends: “Je n’ai pas besoin d’amis particuliers” (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1144). Nonetheless, Rousseau has had friends and still has friends at the time. Why does he have friends if he does not need them? He does not say here. In the *Dialogues*, “Rousseau” claims that he bonds with particular human beings by coincidence.<sup>16</sup> Let us assume this is the right explanation. The trouble with these particular friendships is that although Rousseau does not need them to be happy at the outset, he needs them to be happy after the bond has been created: “Je n’ai pas besoin d’amis particuliers mais quand j’en ai, j’ai grand besoin de ne les pas perdre, car quand ils se detachent, ils me dechirent” (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1144). Because of Rousseau’s incapacity to be attached half-heartily (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1145), what originally were superfluous attachments become chains able to crush his heart. Rousseau seems the most surprised since he requires a minimal care from his friends: “En cela d’autant plus coupables que je ne leur demande que de l’amitié, et que pourvû qu’ils m’aiment, et que je le sache, je n’ai pas meme besoin de les voir” (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1144-1145).<sup>17</sup> Rousseau claims to be as independent as possible even with particular friends, for he does not need to frequent them. Rousseau’s relation with his real friends is therefore essentially imaginary (and protects his independence for that reason). But he needs to know that he is loved; this dependence he cannot escape.

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16. “Une rencontre fortuite, l’occasion, le besoin du moment, l’habitude trop rapidement prise, ont déterminé tous ses attachemens et par eux toute sa destinée” (*D*, OC I, p. 847).

17. A lesson that Madame d’Epinay quickly learned, according to Maurice Cranston: “She [concluded] that there was only one way to deal with Rousseau, and that is to pretend to leave him alone entirely but actually to be fussing over him all the time” (*The Noble Savage*, p. 24).

Can Rousseau recover his original independence once his heart has been broken? It seems not. When he discovered that his Parisian friends did not love him, Rousseau did not return to his chimerical society or to his abstract love for humanity. He befriended the Luxembourgs. Far from being a superfluous attachment, Rousseau describes their friendship as what saved him from his rupture with his friends: “J’étois mourant; sans eux je serois infailliblement mort de tristesse, ils m’ont rendu la vie, il est bien juste que je l’employe à les aimer” (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1144). This begs the question of how much Rousseau can be independent of any real relationship once he has tasted it. The superfluous appears to become an indispensable need once it has been tasted. It becomes a spiral of compensation after compensation because Rousseau continues to desire pure joys and unlimited bonds from men who cannot provide these things. Again, his “all or nothing” attitude in these matters seems to be the source of his predicament.

This becomes apparent in Rousseau’s description of his relationship with the Luxembourgs. Rousseau says that he has given himself to them without restriction, while he says in the same breath that he knows how this friendship is doomed to be unhappy. The main problem is the difference of social status between them. The inequality of status would prevent the delicious intimacy required for a real friendship. Rousseau has therefore chosen to remain at a distance from them without breaking their relation. Why not accept the disagreements that come with their different social status to live in a closer bond with his friends? Rousseau prefers his mix of solitude and friendship because it keeps the desire for friendship alive: “Il vaut cent fois mieux etre éloigné des personnes qu’on aime, et desirer d’etre auprès d’elles, que de s’exposer à faire un souhait opposé”

(*LAM*, OC I, p. 1146). The actualization of the relation tends to ruin the relation. Rousseau's friendship is therefore frustrating, since his desire to be fully intimate with his friends and to give himself entirely to them cannot be satisfied. He ends his letter with a dream in which Monsieur de Luxembourg would be a simple gentleman and he would not be a genius.<sup>18</sup> Were they different persons, then a satisfying friendship would be possible between them.

Rousseau's relationship with the Luxembourgs is as solitary and imaginary as his relationship was with his Parisian friends. However, it is not as self-sufficient as are his purely imaginary relationships. It entails a dependence on the esteem of his friends. Since Rousseau does not live in a perfect solitude and is therefore presented with continual occasions of particular friendships, since he cannot attach himself half-heartily, since these particular friendships will not satisfy his heart, and since he seems to need them nevertheless, Rousseau will remain dependent and miserable.

Rousseau does not conclude in this manner. It is as if his desire to claim both that he is self-sufficient and that his heart has a capacity for love beyond comparison blinds him to the inherent tension between these two claims. Rousseau appears therefore both happy and unhappy with respect to his human relationships at the end of the letters. They leave us with the following question: does Rousseau think it is possible to love men without needing them? "Je ne conçois pas que celui qui n'a besoin de rien puisse aimer

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18. Rousseau will also end the Sixth Walk with a fiction describing his ideal society.

quelque chose,” he writes in *Émile* (OC IV, p. 503)<sup>19</sup>; “J’ai un coeur tres aimant, mais qui peut se suffire à lui meme,” he writes to Malesherbes. Where is the truth?

### *1.3 – Conclusion: Critical Reflections on the Goodness of Solitude in Rousseau’s System and in his Life*

Rousseau’s understanding and vindication of his solitary position is so complex and problematic that it is difficult to conclude what Rousseau really thought about it. One point, however, that stands out in the letters to Malesherbes – as well as in his account of natural goodness – is that his solitude is good because it is a situation of self-sufficiency. As I have argued, it is also the ultimate justification for its innocence. It is because Rousseau is independent that he has no need to arm others. Indeed, “le méchant n’est méchant qu’à cause du besoin qu’il a des autres” (*D*, OC I, p. 824). If you remove the need for others, you remove the source of wickedness.<sup>20</sup>

According to Rousseau’s theory, we enter society because of accidents that have made us depend on one another. As soon as we enter society, we are in a position to enjoy the harm of someone else: “Dans l’état social le bien de l’un fait nécessairement le

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19. There is already a contradiction in this passage from *Émile*, since God is said by Rousseau to be absolutely independent, or without needs of others, or solitary, and yet happy. Then he ends the paragraph with the following statement: “Je ne conçois pas que celui qui n’a besoin de rien puisse aimer quelque chose: je ne conçois pas que celui qui n’aime rien puisse être heureux” (*E*, OC IV, p. 503). God cannot love since he does not need anybody; and if he does not love, he cannot be happy. Yet perhaps the ending of the paragraph is meant by Rousseau to apply only to imperfect beings that cannot be absolutely self-sufficient. But then, Rousseau often talks of his independence as absolute or without qualifications; he does not integrate to his thought the part of his being that obviously depends on others.

20. One may have no need of others and nonetheless harm them. One could be careless about their good. But since Rousseau holds that wickedness comes from weakness, and that the strong man is alone (even the strong criminal is weak because he has social needs: needs for what is superfluous and needs of consideration), he does not consider this possibility.

mal de l'autre. Ce rapport est dans l'essence de la chose et rien ne sauroit le changer" (*E*, OC IV, p. 340). According to Rousseau, the simple fact of being in a position to harm others naturally makes us *wish* to harm them.<sup>21</sup> Our *amour de soi*, our only natural passion, is the reason of this necessity. Although we pretend to be just and fair in our relationships, we can only secretly wish that we would benefit from others without having to serve them in return. Even if society is constituted so as to insure that everyone benefits from helping others, it will always remain more profitable to simulate beneficence and justice and secretly receive more than we give to society and to others. We wish the harm of others because our *amour de soi* becomes insatiable in society. It is transformed into a will to infinitely increase our means and powers. We become obsessed by the ways in which we can deceive others and have them at our service. If we could put civilized men in an abstract world where there would be no way they could be punished for their unjust actions, each one of them – besides Rousseau, as we shall see – would end up killing everybody and become the lone master of the Universe.<sup>22</sup> This is why man is not naturally sociable: his natural tendency once he enters society is to destroy it in order to go back to his original loneliness.

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21. "Qu'on admire tant qu'on voudra la société humaine, il n'en sera pas moins vrai qu'elle porte nécessairement les hommes à s'entre-haïr à proportion que leurs intérêts se croisent, à se rendre mutuellement des services apparens & à se faire en effet tous les maux imaginables. Que peut-on penser d'un commerce où la raison de chaque particulier lui dicte des maximes directement contraires à celles que la raison publique prêche au corps de la société, & où chacun trouve son compte dans le malheur d'autrui? Il n'y a peut-être pas un homme aisé à qui des héritiers avides et souvent ses propres enfans ne souhaitent la mort en secret; pas un Vaisseau en Mer dont le naufrage ne fût une bonne nouvelle pour quelque Négociant; pas une maison qu'un débiteur de mauvaise foi ne voulût voir bruler avec tous les papiers qu'elle contient; pas un Peuple qui ne se réjouisse des desastres de ses voisins" (*Second Discours*, OC III, p. 202).

22. See note IX of the *Second Discours*.

Rousseau proposes two solutions to what Arthur Melzer has called “the system of dependence.” The first is to leave society altogether and rediscover the “antique and primary innocence” of human nature and of natural goodness. The second is to remain in society and to become virtuous. Both solutions aim at making men independent of one another, because their dependence is the source of their misery.

Yet Rousseau’s autobiographical writings appear to develop a third way. Rousseau claims that he can be remain good despite being civilized; or if one prefers, that he can be happy without being virtuous and yet without returning to the state of nature. If for a period of his life that I have described earlier, he seemed to have thought that he needed to be virtuous to be happy and to live among men, he later discovered that being good rather than virtuous was enough to be happy and could be vindicated with respect to the demands of society.

There is however an important condition for goodness to be without harm to others. Rousseau has to be alone. Indeed, the strength of natural goodness – and the good side of being “weak” and without virtue – comes from his situation rather than from himself. The fact that his lack of virtue is not pernicious is that he is alone. When a man is alone, he has of course no need to hurt and manipulate others, and therefore no temptation to do so: “Je le dis à regret; l’homme de bien est celui qui n’a besoin de tromper personne” (*Préface au Narcisse*, OC II, p. 970).

Accordingly, the rule of conduct of the good man is never to put himself in a situation in which he could harm others. This is because he does not have the virtue to

resist the temptation to harm others.<sup>23</sup> But this attitude is not without consequence. The character “Rousseau” does not hide the fact that this attitude means the destruction of society (*D*, OC I, p. 824), because in avoiding any situation in which he could harm others, the good man must not need any man. Accordingly, it is only possible to follow this rule of conduct if one is entirely independent from others, i.e. if one has retired from society: “Celui qui veut suivre ce precepte à la rigueur n’a point d’autre moyen pour cela que de se retirer *tout à fait* de la société, et celui qui en vit séparé suit par cela seul ce precepte sans avoir besoin d’y songer” (*D*, OC I, p. 824 – my emphasis). This *perfect* or *absolute* solitude is the categorical requirement of this rule of conduct. It is required both for the sake of society (which otherwise would be harmed by this man who only follows his natural inclinations because he has no need of others) and for the sake of the good man (who must be absolutely alone if he must not wish to harm others and become wicked and unhappy).

The problem of this line of conduct with respect to Rousseau’s self-defense becomes obvious: Rousseau does not live in a perfect solitude. At the time he writes to Malesherbes, he is merely retired from Paris. So how can Rousseau adopt this line of conduct if he is not *entirely* independent from others?

To solve this problem, one can make the following distinction: we need others to serve our physical needs and we need others to serve our moral needs; or we need others for our subsistence and we need others to love and be loved. Indeed, in the *Dialogues*,

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23. I emphasize that this maxim of natural goodness, which Rousseau makes his own, is not identical (although it may coincide with) to the maxim of natural goodness in the *Second Discours*: “Fais ton bien avec le moindre mal d’autrui qu’il est possible” (*SD*, OC I, p. 156). The former line of conduct is more austere: one *cannot* do any harm to others (rather than doing the less harm possible). The latter line of conduct suits rather well the doctrine of *l’intérêt bien compris* of the Enlightenment.



“Rousseau” says that the rule of conduct is valid if the good man does not need others for his *subsistence*; he does not deny that the good man needs others to fulfill his need for “attachments” (*D*, OC I, p. 824). But even if we grant to Rousseau that his job as an artisan is the most independent of all jobs, it does not alter the fact that he lives *within* society; that he benefits from all sorts of goods that were not provided for by his own efforts, but by the efforts of others; and therefore, that he has a debt and a duty towards society according to his argument:

Hors de la société, l’homme isolé ne devant rien à personne, a droit de vivre comme il lui plaît; mais dans la société, où il vit nécessairement aux dépens des autres, il leur doit en travail le prix de son entretien; cela est sans exception. Riche ou pauvre, puissant ou foible, tout citoyen oisif est un fripon (*E*, OC IV, p. 470).<sup>24</sup>

This seems to be acknowledged by Rousseau. In the fourth letter, he answers the charge that a solitary man like himself is useless to everyone and does not fulfill his duties to society. He does not answer the charge by defending the idea that it is enough for him not to harm anyone.<sup>25</sup> He rather claims that he has been useful to others and has fulfilled his duties to society. He judges that his writings were so useful and that he has given more to society than he has received, that he has no more obligations towards his community.<sup>26</sup> He has acquired a right to be concerned only with himself, but not because

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24. See also *Second Discours*: “Tous les membres de l’Etat lui doivent des services proportionnés à leurs talens et à leurs forces” (*SD*, OC III, p. 222).

25. Like he does in *Émile*, for instance: “Ô quel bien fait nécessairement à ses semblables celui d’entre eux, s’il en est un, qui ne leur fait jamais de mal!” (OC IV, p. 340).

26. Let us recall, however, that Rousseau says that he never wrote out of duty. Fulfilling an inclination by writing does not prevent him from fulfilling his civic duty at the same time. But duty was not his motivation.

doing nothing or laziness is justified in itself, but because he has paid more than what he owed.

Perhaps it is possible to modify Rousseau's absolute statements into relative statements and argue that the rule of conduct of natural goodness is valid even if its condition (perfect solitude) is not entirely realized. The good man could try *as much as possible* to avoid situations in which he would have the power to harm others. He could refrain from acting positively as much as he could; the rule would be beneficent to him and society as much as he succeeds in applying it. Rousseau seems to argue as such in *Émile* when he writes: "Le precepte de ne jamais nuire à autrui emporte celui de tenir à la société humaine *le moins qu'il est possible*" (E, OC IV, p. 340). In the *Confessions*, Rousseau thought that it was a valid line of conduct even while living within society:

J'en ai tiré cette grande maxime de morale, *la seule peut-être d'usage dans la pratique*, d'éviter les situations qui mettent nos devoirs en opposition avec nos intérêts, et qui nous montrent nôtre bien dans le mal d'autrui: sûr que dans de telles situations, quelque sincère amour de la vertu qu'on y porte, on foiblit tôt ou tard sans s'en apercevoir, et l'on devient injuste et méchant dans le fait, sans avoir cessé d'être juste et bon dans l'âme. [...] Je me dérobois *de toute ma force* à des situations qui me donnassent un intérêt contraire à l'intérêt d'un autre homme, et par conséquent un desir secret quoiqu'involontaire du mal de cet homme-là (C, OC I, p. 56 – my emphasis).

Rousseau gives as an example his refusal to be put on Marshall Keith's will, for (as his theory of human nature states) he would have necessarily desired his death because he had an interest in it. But Rousseau's example highlights the difficulty – or the impossibility? – of simply being good and avoids the situations in which one could

benefit from the misfortunes of others while staying among men and having relationships with them. What if Keith had nonetheless decided to put Rousseau on his will? Rousseau would have desired his death despite his own will. The effect would have been the same as if he had accepted to be put on the will. Moreover, according to the editors of the *Pléiade*, Rousseau was ready to put Thérèse on Keith's will. Rousseau would have indirectly benefited from Keith's death, but he would nonetheless have had his interest in it.

It is also surprising that Rousseau calls this line of conduct “la seule peut-être d'usage dans la pratique” since it rather appears inapplicable. It requires a solitude as hypothetical as the pure state of nature. It is surely not practical for a man who lives in Montmorency or on the rue Plâtrière in Paris. He will sometimes be in a situation of harming others; he surely will be in a situation in which he could wish harm to others. But let us suppose again that this rule of conduct can be valid even if it is impossible to apply it perfectly if one lives among men. Would it work out well most of the time? It is meant for a good and innocent man like Rousseau, who has no strength, no will, who cannot resist temptations, who is artless, and who cannot foresee the consequences of his actions. To avoid those situations in which one could harm others or wish their harm while living among men – those situations that *directly* involve a man in the good or bad fortune of others (since society indirectly involves a man in the good or bad fortune of his fellow citizens) – one needs the strength to flee them when they present themselves (“Je me dérobois *de toutes mes forces* à des situations qui me donnassent un intérêt contraire à l'intérêt d'un autre homme” – my emphasis). One also needs to foresee the

consequences of one's actions. These are things that are not easy to achieve to a man who follows his inclinations, lives in the present and cannot resist flattery. Moreover, these situations often present themselves without one having sought them. What will the good but weak man do when stuck in such a situation despite himself? Furthermore, Rousseau wants to avoid doing harm to others, but also avoid *wishing* their harm. But wishes of harm come easily when one lives among men. *Schadenfreude*, for instance, may be inevitable to any man who compares himself to others. To desire to have one's soul as empty as possible of wishes of misfortunes for others, one must really have the fewest and lightest human relationships possible. Otherwise the line of conduct of Rousseau becomes very difficult to apply:

Ainsi ce qui rend l'homme essentiellement bon est d'avoir peu de besoins et de peu se comparer aux autres; ce qui le rend essentiellement méchant est d'avoir beaucoup de besoins et de tenir beaucoup à l'opinion. [...] Il est vrai que ne pouvant vivre toujours seuls, ils vivront difficilement toujours bons: cette difficulté même augmentera nécessairement avec leurs relations, et c'est en ceci surtout que les dangers de la société nous rendent l'art et les soins plus indispensables pour prévenir dans le coeur humain la dépravation qui naît de ses nouveaux besoins (*E*, OC IV, p. 493).

The need for strength or virtue for Rousseau is apparent in the letters to Malesherbes. It is not so much that Rousseau acknowledges this need rather than he wants to have the merit of virtue attributed to him. Thus in the second letter, he reveals how the decision to move out of Paris – or to escape a state of dependence and wickedness – and to stay away from the city required courage:

Je pris brusquement mon parti avec assés de courage, et je l'ai assés bien soutenu jusqu'ici avec une fermeté dont moi seul peux sentir le prix, parce qu'il n'y a que moi seul qui sache quels obstacles j'ai eus et j'ai encore tous les jours à combattre pour me maintenir sans cesse contre le courant (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1136).<sup>27</sup>

Rousseau deserves to be praised for putting himself in a situation in which he can be “bon à moi meme et nullement mechant aux hommes;” for if he cannot change his lazy and dreamy character, he can choose the situation in which his character may thrive (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1142). This may give him credit, but it puts him in contradiction with his earlier account of his solitude in the first letter. In this letter, Rousseau fears to be praised more than he deserves for living alone in the country. He insists that his retreat from Paris and his relative independence are not due to a virtuous behavior, but to his laziness (or his distaste for obligations) and his love of chimerical beings. He claims that he would not hold dear to his solitude if it cost him something or if it required him to struggle against his natural inclinations.<sup>28</sup> There is thus no great merit in being independent, since it requires no efforts for Rousseau.

This tension between an effortless and unshakable goodness that nonetheless needs to struggle everyday to remain good shows the fundamental difficulty of

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27. Rousseau then says that his effort has somehow decreased during the past ten years, but that he would be able to give a second effort (*secousse*) if he was sure that his life was about to end: “Mais si j'estimois seulement en avoir encore 4 à vivre, on me verroit donner une deuxieme *secousse* et remonter tout au moins à mon premier niveau pour n'en plus gueres redescendre” (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1137 – my emphasis). However, he claimed in the precedent letter that these kinds of short efforts are of no avail to him: “Mais ces efforts n'ont jamais eu pour but que la retraite et le repos dans ma vieillesse, et comme ils n'ont été que *par secousse* comme ceux d'un paresseux, ils n'ont jamais eu le moindre succès” (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1133 – my emphasis).

28. “Voilà Monsieur, je vous le jure, la veritable cause de cette retraite à laquelle nos gens de lettres ont été chercher des motifs d'ostentation qui supposent une constance, ou plutot une obstination à tenir à ce qui me coûte, directement contraire à mon caractère naturel” (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1133).

Rousseau's self-vindication. It makes the reader wonder if Rousseau is aware of the tension or at least believes himself to be stronger than he really is.

## 2 – *Solitude in the Rêveries du Promeneur Solitaire*

*“Me voici donc seul sur la terre, n’ayant plus de frere, de prochain, d’ami, de société que moi-même.”* Thus famously begin the *Rêveries*. This utter solitude is the result of a most extraordinary plot. Rousseau's enemies wanted him to be miserable and they almost succeeded. After ten years of struggle and delirium, Rousseau has recovered tranquility. His *Rêveries* will describe how he has learned to be happy despite others.

The *Rêveries* could be described as Rousseau's rediscovery of the theory of equilibrium. Rousseau repeats in the First Walk what he claims in the theory of equilibrium about the source of our misery. Our greatest evils come from our imagination: to anticipate a blow is usually worse than to actually feel it. To hope for a better situation prevents us to enjoy our actual situation and usually lead us to disappointment and dissatisfaction. Happiness hinges on being free from hope and fear.<sup>29</sup> By delivering him from the grip of his imagination, Rousseau's persecutors have made him happier.

Adversity has taught him to do what he preached in the theory of equilibrium: to contract his being to his immediate self. Rousseau at last desires only what he can obtain, because he has learn to submit to necessity:

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29. “La prévoyance! La prévoyance qui nous porte sans cesse au delà de nous et souvent nous place où nous n’arriverons point; voilà la véritable source de toutes nos misères” (*E*, OC IV, p. 307).

D'où vient cette différence? d'une seule chose. *C'est que j'ai appris à porter le joug de la nécessité sans murmure.* C'est que je m'efforçois de tenir encore à mille choses et que toutes ces prises m'ayant successivement échappé réduit à moi seul j'ai repris enfin mon assiette. Pressé de tous coté[s] *je demeure en équilibre parce que ne m'attachant plus à rien je ne m'appuie que sur moi* (R, OC I, p. 1077 – my emphasis).

Learning to bend to necessity means that Rousseau's happiness depends on himself: "J'appris ainsi par ma propre expérience que la source du vrai bonheur est en nous, et qu'il ne dépend pas des hommes de rendre vraiment misérable celui qui sait vouloir être heureux" (R, OC I, p. 1003). Rousseau simply needs to will his situation, so to speak, to be happy. Happiness depends only on willing to be happy, which is the lesson of Rousseau's theory of equilibrium: "Tout homme qui ne voudroit que vivre vivroit heureux" (E, OC IV, p. 305-306).

But in fact, the story of the *Rêveries* is more complicated. It is not clear that Rousseau has rediscovered happiness. His claims to have learned to bend to necessity are contradicted by a multitude of other claims. First, it is not clear that Rousseau has completely withdrawn into himself. His solitude seems to be a creation of his imagination rather than his true state. Second, Rousseau's incoherent reasons for bending to necessity suggest that his bending is not as voluntary as he claims. The presence of expansive inclinations in him also suggest that he is not satisfied in living within himself and in harmony with the principles of equilibrium.

This section will be divided in two parts. First, I will analyze his claim that he has rediscovered tranquility by learning how to bend to "necessity." I will dissect Rousseau's argument in the *Histoire du précédent écrit* and in the First, Second and Eight Walk.

Then I will turn to Rousseau's contradictory claim that happiness resides in beneficence. In the Sixth and Eight Walk, Rousseau seems to need others to be satisfied. Before turning to these two topics, I will show how Rousseau's understanding of his solitude and of the plot is difficult to interpret.

### *2.1 – What Does Rousseau Mean by “me voici donc seul sur la terre”?*

Rousseau has always had his own particular understanding of solitude. For example, he defines as “solitary” his life with Thérèse, the *receveur*, his family, the servants and the workers on the island of Saint-Pierre.<sup>30</sup> His life was also “solitary” at l'Ermitage, although he lived with Thérèse and her mother, was close to Madame d'Épinay's house, received regular visits from friends and philosophes, and resided only four leagues away from Paris (C, OC I, p. 403 and 413). At the time Rousseau wrote his four letters to Malesherbes, he lived with Thérèse, got along with the inhabitants of Montmorency and befriended the Luxembourgs; yet he describes his situation as one of loneliness.

Despite his particular use of the term, what Rousseau means by “*solitaire*” in these contexts seems obvious. Rousseau describes himself as alone because he was away from Paris, or from the crowd, or from urban life. He is lonely insofar as he has abandoned his ambitions and left Paris; he is alone because he is not “*engagé dans le monde*” (LAM, OC I, p. 1144). “Solitaire” means “to be retired.”

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30. “Tout concouroit également à me rendre chère la vie recueillie et solitaire que je menois dans ce beau séjour” (R, OC I, p. 1048).



It is not as simple in the *Rêveries*. “*Me voici donc seul sur la terre, n’ayant plus de frere, de prochain, d’ami, de société que moi-même.*” How can a man claim to be “alone on earth,” without any friend and society other than himself? The opening of the *Rêveries* evokes Rousseau’s other famous openings in *Émile*, *Le Contrat social* and *Les Confessions*. All these openings start with a paradox: “Tout est bien, sortant des mains de l’auteur des choses: tout dégénère entre les mains de l’homme;” “L’homme est né libre, et par-tout il est dans les fers;” “Je forme une entreprise qui n’eut jamais d’exemple, et dont l’exécution n’aura point d’imitateur.” Here, the paradox is to find Rousseau “dans la plus étrange position où se puisse jamais trouver un mortel.” The opening statement is a paradox in the original meaning of the term: an opinion that runs counter to the opinion generally admitted: there is no man who can be as lonely as Rousseau describes himself.<sup>31</sup>

What does Rousseau exactly mean when he describes himself as being “alone on Earth”? At the time Rousseau declared himself to be “alone on earth”, he lived in the middle of Paris, not on an island or in the countryside. It is obvious that Rousseau does not mean to be physically lonely. Rousseau knows that he lives among other human beings on the same planet. But he is like a Moon-Dweller among Earthmen: “Je suis sur la terre comme dans une planette étrangère où je serois tombé de celle que j’habitois” (OC I, p. 999). He does not deny the physical presence of others. Men are strangers to him not because he never sees them, but because he has no moral relationship to them.

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31. As the character Rousseau says in the *Dialogues*: “Je l’ai vu dans une position unique et presque incroyable, plus seul au milieu de Paris que Robinson dans son Ile, et sequestré du commerce des hommes par la foule même empressée à l’entourer pour empêcher qu’il ne se lie avec personne” (*D*, OC I, p. 826).

Men have become to him like members of another species, strangers whose common humanity has withered away. Their objects of concern are entirely different from his and he does not recognize himself in their behavior. He cannot count on them to help him: “Seul pour le reste de ma vie, puisque je ne trouve qu’en moi la consolation, l’espérance et la paix;” (R, OC I, p. 999) “Il n’y a plus ni commerce, ni secours reciproque, ni correspondance entre eux et moi. Seul au milieu d’eux je n’ai que moi seul pour ressource” (R, OC I, p. 1080). His solitude recalls that of the natural man in the pure state of nature. He is not physically isolated since he sometimes meets members of his species. But this physical contact does not develop in any way whatsoever into a moral relationship. He does not care for them; he does not recognize himself in their concerns; he does not count on them to live his life.

This distinction between physical solitude and moral solitude is only useful up to a certain point. It leaves the paradox intact. Even if we understand that Rousseau is *morally* “alone on earth,” we remain struck by the sheer exaggeration of this statement, if not its impossibility. Can Rousseau really stroll around in Paris in 1776 without having any moral relationships? His loneliness appears as fictional as the solitude of the pure state of nature. Is it possible for him to be in a state where he has nothing in common with the human beings that surround him?<sup>32</sup> His extraordinary opening statement would mean that the people who love him and care for him in appearance (Thérèse, Moulto, du

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32. Rousseau’s statement that he is on Earth like a foreign planet is proven to be an overstatement in the following statement: “Si je reconnois autour de moi quelque chose ce ne sont que des objets affligeans et déchirans pour mon cœur, et je ne peux jeter les yeux sur ce qui me touche et m’entoure sans y trouver toujours quelque sujet de dédain qui m’indigne ou de douleur qui m’afflige” (R, OC I, p. 999). Rousseau accordingly recognizes the world in which he lives, but what he sees hurts his heart so much that he prefers to ignore it: “Ecartons donc de mon esprit tous les pénibles objets dont je m’occuperois aussi douloureusement qu’inutilement” (*idem*).

Peyrou, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, le Marquis de Girardin, to name a few) are meaningless to him. This is hard to believe when we know he was corresponding with them, walking with them and counting on their friendship.

The *Rêveries* in themselves show how his absolute moral loneliness is an exaggeration. Rousseau distinguishes his *Rêveries* from Montaigne's *Essais* by saying that while Montaigne wrote them for others, he writes his *Rêveries* only for himself. His writing project is in line with his resolution to self-sufficiency and loneliness. If Rousseau means what he says, his *Rêveries* should logically be a sort of private journal. But the *Rêveries* are neither a journal and are neither private. First, they are not meant to be private: Rousseau says in the First Walk that he neither shows his *Rêveries* nor hides them. They are neither a daily collection of scrambling and wandering thoughts, contrary to what Rousseau announces in his First Walk. Each Walk displays a coherent argument about one question or one theme. Although the link between the ten Walks are a matter of debate, no one would say that they are not linked at all. We also know that Rousseau worked intensively on the writing of his *Rêveries*. He left the first seven Walks as if ready for publication, which suggests an intention to be read by someone else than himself. No one would put so much energy on rewriting a private journal if it was not meant to be published.

Rousseau's awareness of a potential reader is also visible in the text itself. To take one example, he ends his recollection of the accident of Ménilmontant with the following remarks: "Voilà très fidèlement l'histoire de mon accident" (*R*, OC I, p. 1006). Why would Rousseau need to confirm that he has told the exact story of his accident if he

would be writing only to himself? The whole *Rêveries* demonstrate that Rousseau is still preoccupied by the judgment of other men. His concern for the plot transpires from almost all of the chapters of his last book. It is hard to believe, therefore, that men are nothing to Rousseau.

So what should we make of his statement that he is “alone on Earth”? In a sense, the whole interpretation of the *Rêveries* can be decided in the manner one interprets the opening statement. One can see in it, of course, a manifestation of Rousseau’s paranoia. His belief to be absolutely alone is the consequence of his belief that he is the victim of a universal plot. One could also think that with his excessive statements about his independence, Rousseau wants to tell his enemies that he is indifferent to their opinions and actions, yet by his very action betrays a concern for their esteem. As mentioned in the previous section, Rousseau’s exaggeration could be an effect of his passionate character. Rousseau himself says that he is an oversensitive man who tends to inflate his sentiments. His taste for hyperboles is patent in his works.<sup>33</sup> A passage from the *Confessions*, in which Rousseau relates how Thérèse replaced Maman, may explain why Rousseau overstates his solitude:

Il falloit, pour tout dire, un successeur à Maman. [...] Quand j’étois absolument seul mon cœur étoit vide, mais il n’en falloit qu’un pour le remplir. Le sort m’avoit ôté, m’avoit aliéné du moins en partie, celui pour lequel la nature m’avoit fait. *Dès lors j’étois seul, car il n’y eut jamais pour moi d’intermédiaire entre tout et rien.* Je trouvois dans Therese le supplement dont j’avois besoin; par elle je vécus heureux autant que je pouvois l’être selon le cours des événemens (C, OC I, p. 331-332 – my emphasis).

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33. Cf. *Julie*, OC II, p. 26.

It can be expected from Rousseau to say that he is “alone on Earth” as soon as he believes that he has no relationship that entirely fills the needs of his heart. Thérèse and all the “friends” that surrounds him are nothing else than supplements to a real relationship that does not exist for him anymore. They are meaningless, and therefore Rousseau can think of himself as lonely. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, it would leave intact the paradox of claiming a complete moral isolation while continuing to deal morally with humans.

On the other side of the spectrum of possible interpretations, one can interpret Rousseau’s statement as the manifestation of an esoteric art of writing. Rousseau exaggerates his solitude, but there is a conscious intention behind this exaggeration. For instance, his extreme solitude could be intended to serve as a moral fable to teach a philosophical lesson; a sort of thought experiment to make it easier to highlight certain features of the human soul. It could also be the result of a conscious intention to reach the heart of his reader. Rousseau says that the natural way to connect between human beings is through compassion. By describing his situation as extremely miserable, Rousseau may want to arouse compassion in his reader. The compassion could be for his miserable situation, but also for his exaggeration in describing his misery: it is a sign of distress that also calls for compassion.

The reason for Rousseau’s overstatement is a matter of speculation. What is certain is that Rousseau exaggerates.

## 2.2 – *What Are We to Make of Rousseau's Belief in a Plot?*

The problematic aspect of Rousseau's solitary situation goes beyond the extent of his solitude. It also stems from its cause:

Le plus sociable et le plus aimant des humains en a été proscrit par un accord unanime. Ils ont cherché dans les raffinemens de leur haine quel tourment pouvoit être le plus cruel à mon ame sensible, et ils ont brisé violemment tous les liens qui m'attachoient à eux. J'aurois aimé les hommes en dépit d'eux-mêmes. Ils n'ont pu qu'en cessant de l'être se dérober à mon affection (*R*, OC I, p. 996).

If Rousseau is “alone on earth,” it is because men, by a unanimous agreement, have decided that he should be so. Men have meditated how to hurt Rousseau the most. Having realized that he was the most sociable and the most loving of them, they then determined that the most cruel manner to hurt him was by banishing him from society and ensuring that this banishment was universal.

Rousseau's loneliness is the result of the most incomprehensible injustice that has ever been committed. Mankind has ceased to be human, since no one can recognize humanity in such a unanimous agreement:

Pouvois-je dans mon bon sens supposer [...] que je deviendrois l'horreur de la race humaine, le jouet de la canaille, que toute la salutation que me feroient les passans seroit de cracher sur moi, qu'une generation toute entière s'amuseroit d'un accord unanime à m'enterrer tout vivant? (*R*, OC I, p. 995-996 – my emphasis)

Rousseau himself also appears to have escaped from the limits of humanity, because no man should be able to survive to such a terrible injustice.

Rousseau's description of the alleged plot against him is utterly unbelievable. The degree of organization, purposefulness and sheer wickedness it presupposes is incredible. This is not to deny that Rousseau was the victim of despicable acts and was kept under watch by his enemies and by the state. It is to deny the accuracy of Rousseau's description of what he suffered. His exaggeration has a basis in reality, but it remains an exaggeration.

The reasons for Rousseau's exposition of his belief in a plot are also a matter of speculation. The same reasons used to explain his utter solitude could be used to explain this belief. But even if Rousseau's belief in the plot is a genuine delusion, I do not think that it should automatically lead the reader to conclude that the *Rêveries* are worthless. The *Rêveries* are not altogether incoherent. We are far from reading the delirium of a lunatic. It should not lead the reader to conclude that this writing offers no interest. Even if Rousseau exaggerates the extent to which he was a victim, the lessons he draws from his situation can be useful to us. Indeed, we can relate to Rousseau's situation insofar as we have the experience of being the victim of an injustice or being rejected from a group. Moreover, the *Rêveries* extend beyond the theme of the plot; they offer challenging thoughts on the nature of happiness and unhappiness; they contain a revision of some of Rousseau's philosophical positions. This should be enough to establish their value.

Moreover, Rousseau's belief in a plot should not deter the reader from a rational analysis of the *Rêveries* because Rousseau will offer a rational explanation of his

loneliness. It is true that he begins his book by denying being able to understand the cause of his loneliness: “Plus je pense à ma situation présente et moins je puis comprendre où je suis” (*R*, OC I, p. 995). If he literally meant this, his inquiry would stop there. But Rousseau will thereafter provide a rational explanation – or a set of explanations that are more or less rational – to explain his predicament. The multiplicity of explanations may lead us to return to the initial impression that Rousseau’s solitude is not altogether intelligible. But our conclusion will not be identical to our initial impression, for the initial problem will have gain in clarity. In any case, I put these two problems in parenthesis and turn to his account of how he learned to bend to necessity.

### 2.3 – *Bending to Necessity*

The *Rêveries* begin with Rousseau’s utter loneliness. His ties to humanity have been brutally severed. His reputation and his work are lost forever. Yet instead of falling into despair, Rousseau claims that he has recovered “serenity, tranquility, peace, even happiness.” The surprising and beneficial effect of the plot is that it has helped Rousseau to stop struggling against necessity: “Sentant enfin tous mes efforts inutiles et me tourmentant à pure perte j’ai pris le seul parti qui me restait à prendre, celui de me soumettre à ma destinée sans plus regimber contre la nécessité” (*R*, OC I, p. 996). Thanks to the plot, Rousseau has learned to live within himself, to feed his heart without the help of external attachments, or if one prefers, to live entirely in *amour de soi*.



As I have mentioned, Rousseau's resignation recalls the gist of his theory of equilibrium:

Reste à la place que la nature t'assigne dans la chaîne des êtres, rien ne t'en pourra faire sortir: ne regimbe point contre la dure loi de la nécessité, et n'épuise pas à vouloir lui résister des forces que le ciel ne t'a point données pour étendre ou prolonger ton existence, mais seulement pour la conserver comme il lui plait et autant qu'il lui plait. Ta liberté, ton pouvoir ne s'étendent qu'aussi loin que tes forces naturelles et pas au delà; tout le reste n'est qu'esclavage, illusion, prestige (*E*, OC IV, p. 308).<sup>34</sup>

Yet Rousseau's account of his submission is plagued with a few problems. First, we do not know for sure to what kind of necessity Rousseau is bending. Is it to the *fact* that the plot is unshakable and has destroyed his reputation forever? Or is it to a nature that commands to live within oneself to be happy? Or to a God that wants him to suffer? The second problem is related to the first: Rousseau claims that he willingly bends to necessity; but he also claims that it has been imposed upon him. Is Rousseau resisting to necessity or not? If he is resisting, what is the cause of this resistance? Is Rousseau incontinent or is he incoherent?

To understand Rousseau's attitude vis-à-vis necessity in the *Rêveries*, one must make a step back and have a look at the writing that precedes it. The *Histoire du précédent écrit* tells Rousseau's successive attempts to save the manuscript of the *Dialogues* from the hands of his enemies. It ends with Rousseau's deliberation about what to do now that he is resigned to have his manuscript disfigured. This is one of the

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34. By "*étendre ou prolonger ton existence*", Rousseau could appear to mean "trying to stay alive as long as possible". Although the context certainly implies this meaning, it also implies the idea of extending one's being in others' imagination. See *LM*, OC IV, p. 1113 for an occurrence of "*étendre son existence*" that is strictly moral.

most difficult texts of Rousseau to understand. The incoherence of Rousseau's arguments and the utter lunacy of his actions make his discourse irrational. Its ending is the most pathetic, with Rousseau hoping for the existence of a single just man who will be fair to him while persuading himself at the same time that this man will never exist. Rousseau gives the impression that he is not addressing himself to a reader, but writing to comfort himself.

The *Histoire* shows perhaps better than any other writing the contradiction between Rousseau's will to be independent and the sad effects of his concern to be loved. I want to show how Rousseau's resolution to bend to necessity in this work already raises the issues that are present in the *Rêveries*. Rousseau claims in the *Rêveries* to have made progress with respect to his resignation, but it is not clear that he has solved the issues that were present at the height of his crisis (of which the *Histoire* testifies). On a secondary level, I want to show the obvious contradictory attitude of Rousseau with respect to Providence. I will later show how this contradictory behavior is also present in the *Rêveries*.

### 2.3.1 – *The Return of the Theory of Equilibrium*

The *Histoire* is the story of Rousseau's attempt to find sure hands for the manuscript of the *Dialogues*. Since his so-called "friends" appeared to him to be untrustworthy for this task, and since the plot was universal, Rousseau felt that he had no choice but to turn towards Providence. On 24 February 1776, he went to the Notre Dame

cathedral with the intention to leave his manuscript on the altar. His objective was to create a stir and draw the attention of the king, who, contrary to all the rest of humanity, it seems, could be entrusted with the manuscript. But Rousseau found the gates of the choir to be closed. Since he had never seen the choir closed in the thirty-six years that he had lived in Paris, he saw in this unexpected event a sign that the Heavens were actively helping the *Monsieurs*. After roaming for the rest of the day in Paris until his suffering had consumed all his energy, Rousseau gradually calmed down and came to the conclusion that this event was rather a godsend. Leaving his manuscript on the altar would not have prevented his enemies from eliminating it or disfiguring it. Since the king would never have fetched the manuscript by himself, it would have necessarily passed through the hands of his enemies before reaching him. And wasn't it ridiculous to think that the king would take the time to read this thick manuscript?

Rousseau's actions demonstrate such foolishness that the reader wonders how he could have toyed with these ideas. Rousseau says that he admitted as much to himself in the aftermath of his failure: "Cette idée [...] étoit si folle que je m'étonnois moi-même d'avoir pu m'en bercer un moment" (*Histoire*, OC I, p. 981). Rousseau then changed his mind about the meaning of the unexpected closing of the gate. He still thought that it was the result of Providence's intervention, but that God's purpose was to prevent Rousseau from committing this silly action with his manuscript and turn him towards the true path of the salvation of his reputation. The sudden return of Condillac to Paris appeared to Rousseau to be this true path: "Je regardai la nouvelle de son retour comme une direction de la providence, qui m'indiquoit le vrai dépositaire de mon Manuscrit" (*Histoire*, OC I,

p. 981). Rousseau confided his precious work to the French philosopher. However, Condillac's reaction to his reading of manuscript disappointed Rousseau. Condillac saw the *Dialogues* as a mere work of literature. He was not moved by his reading and remained unconcerned about its author. Rousseau concluded that Condillac was too full of *amour-propre* to see the truth and too weak to defend Rousseau's just cause.

Rousseau blamed himself to this second failure to save his manuscript: "C'est donc ma faute si j'ai mal réussi; mon succès ne dépend que d'un meilleur choix" (*Histoire*, OC I, p. 983). But it was Providence which had supposedly pointed out Condillac as the best recipient. The role of Providence in Rousseau's choice of Condillac has now somehow disappeared of Rousseau's account. His formulation makes us believe that he was the one responsible for the choice, and that the criteria for judging who is the best recipient are established by his judgment rather than by a sign of Providence.

After the Condillac episode, Rousseau made another copy of his manuscript while thinking about who could make a better depositary. He found a young Englishman stopping in Paris on his way back to England to be the best possible choice. Rousseau says that he thought this was again Providence giving him a positive sign. But the Englishman, like Condillac, disappointed Rousseau. Rousseau has begun to doubt his trustworthiness because of his manner and his tone when he left with the manuscript: Rousseau did not feel enough gratitude coming from him for having been chosen to be the recipient of his trust. Moreover, it was silly from him to confide his manuscript to an Englishman while knowing the hatred the English nation felt for him.

Rousseau tells us that his final attempt to save his manuscript was to hand out a leaflet to any passerby. The “billet circulaire” is a failure like the other attempts. But unlike the previous attempts, the “billet circulaire” puts a stop to Rousseau’s quest for justice: “Ce dernier mauvais succès, qui devoit mettre le comble à mon desespoir, ne m’affecta point comme les précédens. *En m’apprenant que mon sort étoit sans ressources il m’apprit à ne plus lutter contre la nécessité*” (*Histoire*, OC I, p. 985 – my emphasis). This marks an important reversal in Rousseau’s understanding of his unhappiness and of his attitude towards the plotters. Rousseau claims to have understood that there is nothing he can do that can help his case.

As I said, the whole question is to what sort of necessity Rousseau is submitting himself. The last quotation shows that what he judges necessary is that every means he may use to try to save his reputation will necessarily fail. Rousseau infers from the repeated failures of his attempts the necessary failure of every future attempt. Yet immediately after the last quotation, Rousseau writes:

Un passage de l’*Emile* que je me rappelai me fit rentrer en moi-même et m’y fit trouver ce que j’avois cherché vainement au dehors. Quel mal t’a fait ce complot? Que t’a-t-il ôté de toi? Quel membre t’a-t-il mutilé? Quel crime t’a-t-il fait commettre? Tant que les hommes n’arracheront pas de ma poitrine le cœur qu’elle enferme pour y substituer, moi vivant, celui d’un malhonnête homme, en quoi pourront-ils altérer, changer, détériorer mon être? Ils auront beau faire un J. J. à leur mode, Rousseau restera toujours le même en dépit d’eux (*Histoire*, OC I, p. 985).

We now see Rousseau claiming that he learned to bend to a different type of necessity: he is not bending to the necessity that his reputation will be forever disfigured, but to the necessity of living within oneself if he wants to be happy.

Although the editor of the *Histoire* in the Pléiade is puzzled about the reference, it is clear that Rousseau is referring to the theory of happiness as equilibrium, when Rousseau gives the example of the man who receives a letter telling bad news. Just like the theory of equilibrium states, the only evils are those pertaining to physical integrity (strength, pain, health) and those who diminishes the good witness of oneself: “Otez la force, la santé, le bon témoignage de soi, tous les biens de cette vie sont dans l’opinion; ôtez les douleurs du corps et les remords de la conscience, tous nos maux sont imaginaires” (*E*, OC IV, p. 305). The *Confessions* and the *Dialogues*, insofar as they are seeking to justify Rousseau’s being in the opinion of others, were pursuing an imaginary goal. Without acknowledging the immense *amour-propre* that must have been required by him to care for so long and with such intensity about his reputation, Rousseau at least remembers that his behavior is what he censured as a philosopher in his major work.

The rediscovery of the wisdom of *Émile* should suffice to deflate Rousseau’s concern to save his reputation and annihilate the grip that the plot has on him. As he immediately writes:

N’ai-je donc connu la vanité de l’opinion que pour me remettre sous son joug aux dépends de la paix de mon ame et du repos de mon cœur? *Si les hommes veulent me voir autre que je ne suis, que m’importe? L’essence de mon être est-elle dans leurs regards? S’ils abusent et trompent sur mon compte les générations suivantes, que m’importe encore?* Je n’y serai plus pour être victime de leur erreur. S’ils empoisonnent et tournent à mal tout ce que le desir de leur bonheur m’a fait dire et faire d’utile, c’est à leur dam et non pas au mien (*Histoire*, OC I, p. 985 – my emphasis).

It does not matter at all if the plot is irreversible or if it is necessary. Rousseau should not be concerned in the first place about the fate of his name and his writings in this world.

However, the very next sentence unveils a crack in this wall of wisdom and independence Rousseau has just erected: “Emportant avec moi le témoignage de ma conscience je trouverai en dépit d’eux le dédomagement de toutes leurs indignités” (*Histoire*, OC I, p. 985). *Despite them*, Rousseau will be happy; he will find a compensation for their *indignities*. Rousseau’s wording betrays his lingering concern with their esteem. Despite what he just said, he still sees their action as hurting him. In contradiction to what he just has claimed to have learned, Rousseau moves on in the remaining of the paragraph to an explanation of why the plotters will never admit their wickedness. He claims that they will never forgive him if he proves that they are unjust, because the aspect of their own injustice will only raise their hatred towards their victim. This argument would have been superfluous if Rousseau really believed, as he just claimed, that his being was not in his reputation. But the fact that he returns to his reasonings about the invincibility of the plot suggests that he is not as resigned as he claims to be.

Rousseau’s lingering concern with his reputation is not just visible in this paragraph. In the conclusion, he toys with the possibility to find one just person who could understand him and save his work. While maintaining that he has lost faith in any possibility of success, Rousseau claims that he must nonetheless continue to save his reputation out of duty: “L’espérance éteinte étouffe bien le desir, mais elle n’aneantit pas le devoir, et je veux jusqu’à la fin remplir le mien dans ma conduite avec les hommes”

(OC I, p. 987). He must fulfill his duty and give a chance to men to come back from their mistake although he knows that he has no chance to succeed:

Tous, je n'en doute pas, resteront sourds à mes raisons, insensibles à ma destinée, aussi cachés et faux qu'auparavant. C'est un parti pris universellement et sans retour, surtout par ceux qui m'approchent. Je sais tout cela d'avance, et je ne m'en tiens pas moins à cette dernière résolution, parce qu'elle est le seul moyen qui reste en mon pouvoir de concourir à l'œuvre de la providence, et d'y mettre la possibilité qui dépend de moi (OC I, p. 987).

Reading that he must act out of duty is a surprise considering how Rousseau has never been able to act out of obligation for the sake of others. Could Rousseau's *duty* hide his continuing interest in saving the image of himself? Is it even possible to act out of pure duty, without hoping that our action be successful? Rousseau's paradoxical belief: "Nul ne m'écouterà, l'expérience m'en avertit, mais il n'est pas impossible qu'il s'en trouve un qui m'écoute" (OC I, p. 987) seems to be aiming at two irreconcilable goals: to be detached from justice and to seek its fulfillment.

#### 2.3.1.1 – Discussion: Why Would Rousseau Resist to a Return to the Theory of Equilibrium?

Rousseau claims in the *Histoire* to have recovered his teaching on happiness in *Émile*. The plot did not hurt him, because his being is not in his books or in his reputation or in the glance of others. Rousseau preached against vanity all his life only to become himself the slave of opinion. Accordingly, he has decided that he will not hope anymore



that justice will be done in his name. This decision sets him free from his persecutors, because they no longer have a grip on his soul:

J'ai donc pris enfin mon parti tout à fait; détaché de tout ce qui tient à la terre et des insensés jugemens des hommes, je me résigne à être à jamais défiguré parmi eux, sans en moins compter sur le prix de mon innocence et de ma souffrance. Ma félicité doit être d'un autre ordre; ce n'est plus chez eux que je dois la chercher, et il n'est pas plus en leur pouvoir de l'empêcher que de la connoître. [...] Détaché de toute affection terrestre et délivré même de l'inquietude de l'espérance ici-bas, je ne vois plus de prise par laquelle ils puissent encor troubler le repos de mon cœur (*Histoire*, OC I, p. 986).

I underline the radical nature of Rousseau's position, which is identical to what is said in the theory of equilibrium: *any* concern for the esteem of others is bad. Moral isolation – the solitude of the *Rêveries* – must be absolute if Rousseau is to be happy.

Rousseau's new position with respect to the plot raises a set of questions. If Rousseau judges that his previous behavior was faulty, he implicitly admits that his previous apologetic writings conveyed a concern for the esteem of others and a concomitant idea of happiness that were faulty. In other words, Rousseau's claims to be independent in the letters to Malesherbes, in the *Confessions* and in the *Dialogues* would need to be revised in the light of this new admission.

It is also startling to see that it took all this time and this suffering for Rousseau to remember a fundamental part of his philosophy. If Rousseau's wisdom about human nature is that we mostly are physical beings and that our care for other's opinion is a false need, then it is hard to understand how he could have devoted so much time and energy

to save his reputation from the attacks of his enemies. Can his incontinent behavior simply explained by a lapse of memory?

It could be argued that Rousseau's theory predicts Rousseau's faulty behavior, because Rousseau claims that reason has little power over our life. We may know, for instance, that love is an illusion, and nonetheless fall into its trap. Thus a man who acquires wisdom will not necessarily behave wisely. Against this interpretation, I would say that it is not clear that Rousseau teaches that reason is too feeble to keep our passions under control.<sup>35</sup> If this would be Rousseau's thought, why would he try to change the life of his readers by writing books? One could reply that Rousseau does not address himself to the reason of his readers, but to their hearts. However, this would not solve the problem of the discrepancy between Rousseau's actions and his principles, for it is not only Rousseau's reason, according to his own account, that has been touched by the discovery of his principles, but also his heart.

But there is no need to point to Rousseau's theory to vindicate, so to speak, his incontinence. It is a most common human experience. However, I do not think that incontinence is a satisfying explanation for every case where Rousseau reveals himself to be in contradiction with his principles. It would be a convincing explanation if we would see Rousseau use it himself in every case. But we often note that Rousseau's behavior seems at odd with his principles without seeing Rousseau mentioning it. To take only the cases seen in the precedent chapter, Rousseau does not say that his failure to live up to his principles (his reform) or his crisis over the publication of *Émile* was the result of his

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35. See, for instance, *Émile*, OC IV, p. 322.

temporarily forgetting his principles. In the former case, Rousseau blames others or external circumstances for his failure rather than the grip that false opinions had on him. When he uses the explanation of incontinence (intoxication), it is not to explain why he strayed away from his principles, but why he sticks to them! As for the crisis of 1761, when Rousseau does not blame his physical sickness or his fear of darkness for his excessive concern with opinion, he vindicates his concern for glory.

The problem seems more profound than simple incontinence because Rousseau, *at the moment he writes*, often seems to approve of his incontinent behavior – or to ignore its existence. To take the case at hand, Rousseau does not seem to see the discrepancy between his resolution to be careless about his reputation and his continuing to argue the implacability of the plot as if it still mattered to him. The *Histoire* does not show that Rousseau has recovered lucidity about himself, but that his lack of lucidity is ongoing. It is the narrator who continues to fuss about his reputation, not his former self.

Even if Rousseau would acknowledge his incontinence and claim that the way he behaved was in contradiction with his principles, it would be a legitimate question to ask what led him astray. A good student of Socrates would say that every incontinent act presupposes an opinion of the good. What is this opinion of the good that was in contradiction with Rousseau's professed principles and drove him to incontinence? This question is even more legitimate if Rousseau fails to acknowledge the discrepancy between his claims and his principles. Why does Rousseau hold certain principles and then make claims that contradicts his principles?

A simple explanation for Rousseau's inconsistency is that he does not believe that happiness resides in a contraction of his being unto himself. Such is Claude Habib's analysis of the reference in the *Histoire* to the man who receives a letter in *Émile*:

Malgré l'allure décisive du propos, Rousseau ne condamne pas toute extension de l'homme en dehors des limites du corps propre. Il existe une sorte de lettres susceptibles de ravager la vie [d']un homme, aussi totalement, aussi instantanément que l'annonce de la chute d'un cours à la bourse, sans que la semonce d'*Émile* ait lieu de s'appliquer. L'auteur de *La Nouvelle Héloïse* est le mieux placé pour savoir qu'une lettre peut à bon droit détruire en un instant le bonheur apparent: "Je relis votre terrible lettre et je frissonne à chaque ligne." (I, XVI) "Il n'y a pas une ligne dans votre lettre qui ne me fasse glacer le sang..." (I, LI) Telle lettre qui exige l'éloignement de l'amant, telle autre qui exprime la honte de l'amante ne supporterait pas une attelle de stoïcisme. La souffrance qu'elles entraînent veut une autre compréhension. Les départs, les adieux, et par dessus tout la mort de l'aimée appellent d'autres consolations, s'il en existe, mais d'abord l'aveu qu'il y a de justes raisons de souffrir car le bonheur de l'homme est suspendu à l'ordre passionnel. Cela, Rousseau le dit jusqu'au bout. Il le maintient dans les *Dialogues*, alors qu'il n'a aucun intérêt à l'admettre, lui qui s'y exhorte à la solitude. Et pourtant il affirme: "Notre plus douce existence est relative et collective, et notre vrai *moi* n'est pas tout entier en nous."<sup>36</sup>

In this perspective, Rousseau's incoherence is the result of him wanting two incompatible goods. He wants the invulnerability provided by a lack of concern for men, but he also wants the joy of being admired and loved by them. This is reflected in Rousseau's immediate comment to his sudden remembrance of the wisdom of *Émile*. Contraction or withdrawal, carelessness for other's esteem is not fully satisfying: "Emportant avec moi le témoignage de ma conscience je trouverai en dépit d'eux le *dédomagement* de toutes leurs indignités" (OC I, p. 985 – my emphasis). Self-esteem is a

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36. Claude Habib, *Heureux en dépit d'eux*.

compensation for the esteem of others. It presupposes that the esteem of others has still a value for him. It is still a good. But Rousseau's return to the wisdom of *Émile* precisely denied that.

Rousseau will claim in the *Rêveries* to have made a progress towards a genuine resignation. It is therefore necessary to move to this text to see if his discourse on resignation solves the issues raised by the *Histoire*.

### 2.3.2 – *Bending to Necessity in the First Walk*

The *Histoire* ends with the hope of finding one sensible man who will save Rousseau's reputation coupled with the chorus of Rousseau's indifference to the fate of his writing and to the esteem of others. Rousseau has not achieved peace of soul. He still hopes to find a way to save his work and his reputation. We do not have to surmise this lingering hope: Rousseau acknowledges it in the *Rêveries*.

In the fourth paragraph of the First Walk, Rousseau picks up the thread of the *Histoire du précédent écrit*. Once again, he concludes that his fate is sealed and that he must resign to it:

Sentant enfin tous mes efforts inutiles et me tourmentant à pure perte j'ai pris le seul parti qui me restoit à prendre, celui de me soumettre à ma destinée sans plus regimber contre la nécessité. J'ai trouvé dans cette résignation le dédomagement de tous mes maux par la tranquillité qu'elle me procure et qui ne pouvoit s'allier avec le travail continuel d'une résistance aussi pénible qu'infructueuse (*R*, OC I, p. 996).

Rousseau is singing the same tune as in the *Histoire*. Why should we believe him this time? Rousseau answers that his state of soul has genuinely changed. He admits that he was not entirely hopeless at the time of the *Histoire*: “Je comptois encor sur l’avenir, et j’espérois qu’une generation meilleure, examinant mieux et les jugemens portés par celle-ci sur mon compte et sa conduite avec moi, démêleroit aisement l’artifice de ceux qui la dirigent et me verroit enfin tel que je suis” (*R*, OC I, p. 998). This last hope was the reason he was not entirely resigned.

The First Walk discloses a few problems about the manner in which Rousseau understands “bending to necessity.” The first problem is the necessity to which Rousseau is submitting. While the *Histoire* oscillated between submitting to the necessity of human nature (one is happy only if one lives within oneself) and the necessity of the plot (his reputation is lost forever), Rousseau is now submitting only to the inescapable plot. His discourse is altogether centered on the fact that he has realized that the plot was indestructible. What was faulty in Rousseau’s attitude was not to care about his reputation and his glory, but to struggle against invincible enemies. The tranquility he found in stopping his struggle is presented as a compensation – which implies that he has lost a valuable good to the hands of the plotters. We can wonder if the *Rêveries* mark a progression or a regression in comparison to the *Histoire*.

A second problem is that Rousseau not only wants to submit to necessity, but also needs the submission itself to be necessary. This is at least how his resignation is presented: “Sentant enfin tous mes efforts inutiles et me tourmentant à pure perte j’ai pris le seul parti qui me restoit à prendre, celui de me soumettre à ma destinée sans plus

regimber contre la nécessité” (*R*, OC I, p. 996). Rousseau says that he had no other choice but to resign himself. The repeated failures of his attempt to save his reputation *necessarily* led to his resignation: it was the “*seul parti à prendre*.” But hopelessness does not automatically entail resignation. It can entail greater frustration and misery; it can lead to suicide.<sup>37</sup> Or it can lead to continue the struggle despite the hopelessness of the cause, because to do what is right is always imperative – as Rousseau claimed at the end of the *Histoire*. Accordingly, Rousseau’s resignation can not simply be attributed to his discovery that the fate of his reputation was sealed. It logically implies a change in his opinion about the value of his reputation. Like he stated in the *Histoire*, it implies the discovery that the essence of his being is not in the glance of others. It also implies the discovery of other goods to make his life worth living. Rousseau acknowledges at least the latter in the First Walk: “J’ai trouvé dans cette résignation le dédomagement de tous mes maux par la tranquillité qu’elle me procure et qui ne pouvoit s’allier avec le travail continuel d’une résistance aussi pénible qu’infructueuse” (*R*, OC I, p. 996). Rousseau discovered how sweet it was to be released from the anxiety of hope and the frustration of a useless struggle. The tranquility that took place in his heart was not without value. It leads him to discover the pleasure he could have in his self-company.<sup>38</sup>

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37. According to the *Dialogues*, Rousseau’s suicide is the goal of the plot: OC I, p. 912 and 943. If his enemies knew that by making him hopeless, they would have necessarily made him tranquil and therefore avoided this mistake.

38. “Ainsi pour me contempler moi-même avant mon déclin, il faut que je remonte au moins de quelques années au tems où perdant tout espoir ici bas et ne trouvant plus d’aliment pour mon coeur sur la terre, je m’accoutumais peu à peu à le nourrir de sa propre substance et à chercher toute sa pâture au dedans de moi. Cette ressource, dont je m’avisai trop tard devint si féconde qu’elle suffit bientôt pour me dédomager de tout. L’habitude de rentrer en moi-même me fit perdre enfin le sentiment et presque le souvenir de mes maux” (*R*, OC I, p. 1002-1003).

Rousseau's resignation implies these changes of opinion; but the First Walk does not give a sufficient account of it. Rousseau says in passing that he has found compensation in his misery, but he does not explain his new position to be the result of a reflection on the value of goods in this life. His tranquility is entirely due to his discovery that the plot is indestructible.

What is at stake here are issues that have been raised in the course of this dissertation: Rousseau does not seem to think that he has to change his opinions about what is good for him; he does not seem to think that he needs to make an effort of will to be happy. We have seen the first problem with his reform: Rousseau seems at one point to think that the reform of his accoutrement and job was sufficient. It was also a problem in his letters to Malesherbes, where Rousseau both describes his *virtuous* loneliness as effortless and as the result of a constant struggle. The problem is that Rousseau tends to negate the necessity of a conversion of his heart and to hinge his happiness on his sole situation. Although he says that he has "learned" to bend to necessity, the learning is not active, but passive. In short, Rousseau presents his tranquility in the First Walk as necessary, as if it did not imply a choice from his part and the will to sustain his choice. (But this is not altogether true, as I will show below. There are sentences that imply this choice and this effort. Nothing is straightforward in the *Rêveries*).

A third problem is that Rousseau needs to believe that his fate is *absolutely* hopeless. Rousseau insists that resignation would have been impossible without the belief that his case was hopeless. Any little glimmer of hope left in his heart would have been sufficient to make him the plaything of his persecutors:



Dans tous les raffinemens de leur haine mes persecuteurs en ont omis un que leur animosité leur a fait oublier; c'étoit d'en graduer si bien les effets qu'ils pussent entretenir et renouveler mes douleurs sans cesse en me portant toujours quelque nouvelle atteinte. *S'ils avoient eu l'adresse de me laisser quelque lueur d'espérance ils me tiendroient encor par là.* Ils pourroient faire encor de moi leur jouet par quelque faux leurre, et me navrer ensuite d'un tourment toujours nouveau par mon attente déçue (*R*, OC I, p. 996 – my emphasis).

We find in this admission the same problem as in the *Histoire* about the nature of Rousseau's incontinence. Rousseau admits that he can't control himself. But should we draw the conclusion that Rousseau believes that his hope for justice and glory is worthless? Or that he judges them to be genuinely desirable? In other words: is Rousseau's lingering desire for justice and glory against his better judgment? Or does he approve of this desire? As I said, the First Walk does not argue against the vanity of opinion and glory. The intractability of the plot is not the occasional cause of Rousseau's resignation – helping him by accident to rediscover the necessity of nature. It is the sufficient cause of Rousseau's resignation. The fact that Rousseau takes a plaintive tone and says that his tranquility is a compensation (*dédommagement*) makes me conclude that he judges that he has lost genuine goods because of the plot.

Rousseau's lingering concern with justice and glory appears so profound that it seems to affect his account. Rousseau claims that his resignation is absolute and definitive. Marcel Raymond accepts Rousseau's claim: "Alors, abandonnant la lutte, il se résigne enfin. Seul, vraiment seul sur terre, jouet de force inhumaines, il accepte de ne

plus vivre qu'avec lui-même.”<sup>39</sup> But according to Dominique Froidefond, his account does not exactly support his claim: “Quoi qu’il dise, de quoi qu’il veuille se persuader, Rousseau ne continue pas moins [...] de s’insurger contre sa destinée.”<sup>40</sup>

Both commentators can find support for their interpretation in the text, for Rousseau’s description of the situation of his soul is remarkably contradictory. On the one hand, Rousseau claims that his tranquility is unassailable: “L’inquietude et l’effroi sont des maux dont ils m’ont *pour jamais* délivré [...] Ils se sont otés sur moi *tout* empire, et je puis désormais me moquer d’eux” (R, OC I, p. 997 – my emphasis). His heart lives in a “*plein calme*” (R, OC I, p. 997) because he has become “*résigné sans réserve*” (R, OC I, p. 997) to his fate and insensitive to any harm men can inflict: “Qu’ils me fassent désormais du bien ou du mal *tout m’est indifférent* de leur part, et quoiqu’ils fassent, mes contemporains *ne seront jamais rien pour moi*” (OC I, p. 998 – my emphasis). He has reached a state of “*pleine quiétude et de repos absolu*” (R, OC I, p. 998) and concludes: “*Tout est fini pour moi sur la terre. On ne peut plus m’y faire ni bien ni mal. Il ne me reste plus rien à espérer ni à craindre en ce monde, et m’y voila tranquille au fond de l’abyme, pauvre mortel infortuné, mais impassible comme Dieu même*” (R, OC I, p. 999 – my emphasis).

Against these formulations proving that Rousseau thinks of himself in a state of unshakable tranquility, we find others leading to the opposite conclusion. First, Rousseau

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39. Marcel Raymond, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: La Quête de soi et la rêverie* (Paris, Corti, 1966) p. 127 – cité par Dominique Froidefond, “Jean-Jacques Rousseau: le trop-plein et le non-dit dans la ‘Première promenade’”, p. 110.

40. Dominique Froidefond, “Jean-Jacques Rousseau: le trop-plein et le non-dit dans la ‘Première promenade’”, p. 116. Jean Starobinski shares this opinion: see *La Transparence et l’obstacle*, p. 427. Froidefond shows the diversity of opinions between major commentators p. 110, note 2.

presents his resignation as a project rather than his actual state of soul: “Dans cet état, affranchi de toute nouvelle crainte et délivré de l’inquiétude de l’espérance, la seule habitude *suffira* pour me rendre de jour en jour *plus supportable* une situation que rien ne peut empirer” (R, OC I, p. 997 – my emphasis). Rousseau has therefore not reached a state of “*pleine quiétude*.” His tranquility could be firmer than it is. Rousseau’s strong talk about his independence from men and fortune and about absolute tranquility of his soul must be evaluated in the light of what continues to threaten it, that is to say his powerful imagination and his extreme sensibility. He still struggles to keep his imagination from tormenting him. He has kept the tendency to magnify the evils that he foresees befalling him:

Les maux réels ont sur moi peu de prise; je prends aisément mon parti sur ceux que j’éprouve, mais non pas sur ceux que je crains. Mon imagination effarouchée les combine, les retourne, les étend et les augmente. Leur attente me tourmente cent fois plus que leur présence, et la menace m’est plus terrible que le coup (R, OC I, p. 997).

His sensibility remains also difficult to control: “Si je reconnois autour de moi quelque chose ce ne sont que des objets affligeans et déchirans pour mon coeur, et je ne peux jeter les yeux sur ce qui me touche et m’entoure sans y trouver toujours quelque sujet de dédain qui m’indigne ou de douleur qui m’afflige” (R, OC I, p. 999). Signs of hostility or friendship easily affect Rousseau. With a strong imagination and a delicate sensibility, it is possible to consider Rousseau’s tranquility as unshakeable?

Rousseau’s fragile resignation is also made evident by a quantity of formulations that contradict his claims of invulnerability. I have said that his solitude is overstated.

While he says that men have become “strangers, unknown, in short, non-entities,” others are omnipresent in his *Rêveries*. The plaintive tone of the *Rêveries* betrays a continual concern about his fate – and perhaps an appeal to the reader to help Rousseau change his fate by seeing Rousseau as he truly is.<sup>41</sup> Rousseau also insists on the fact that his solitude has been forced upon him, as if he did not reconcile himself with his fate. And above all, rather than being resigned, Rousseau seems to be looking for compensations or consolations that will anesthetize a pain he still feels. For instance, he writes: “J’oublierai mes malheurs, mes persécuteurs, mes opprobres, en songeant au prix qu’avoit mérité mon coeur” (*R*, OC I, p. 999-1000). Isn’t it evident that while dreaming about the prize he should have received, Rousseau will again think of his situation as unjust?

Given that Rousseau does not hide his vulnerability, why does he also insist on his invulnerability? Is it a pathetic attempt of vengeance against his enemies by telling them that they cannot hurt him anymore?<sup>42</sup> Is it Rousseau’s taste for hyperboles and drama? Could his resignation be the temporary effect of exhaustion from struggling against his enemies, as Ronald Grimsley suggests?<sup>43</sup> Are his repeated statements of

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41. “Before giving serious attention to its central passages, the reader must first overcome the barrier to his taste that is posed by the self-pitying lamentation of the first two promenades” (Terence Marshall, “Rousseau Translations: A Review Essay” in *Political Theory*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (February 1982), p. 117). I disagree with Marshall. Not every reader finds lamentations distasteful. It is possible that Rousseau wants to move the reader’s heart through his self-directed compassion.

42. “C’est me venger de mes persecuteurs à ma manière, je ne saurois les punir plus cruellement que d’être heureux malgré eux” (*R*, OC I, p. 1061)

43. “This ‘resignation’ revealed no genuinely rational attempt to face the reality of his situation, for it was the result of emotional exhaustion and a natural reaction to a period of intense agitation and anxiety” (Ronald Grimsley, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: A Study in Self-Awareness* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1969), p. 268). Grimsley is commenting the *Histoire du précédent écrit*, but it could be possible to extend this claim to the *Rêveries*. If not the result of exhaustion, Rousseau’s tranquility according to Grimsley is the negative outcome of the complete victory of his paranoia over his mind (p. 272).

tranquility the sign of a suppressed anxiety, as Dominique Froidefond claims?<sup>44</sup> – Or is his plaintive tone the indication of a subtle art of writing, as Terence Marshall believes?<sup>45</sup>

This fourth problem offered by the First Walk is perhaps the result of the basis of Rousseau's resignation. According to Rousseau, what has made him lose all hopes for posthumous justice is "an event as sad as it was unforeseen." He does not disclose what this event was. (And why would he? Since he is writing to himself, he knows what this event was). The main point is that this event showed him how his fate was "forever and irreversibly fastened here-below." But we can guess that this event does not offer the proof Rousseau is seeking for – an *absolute proof* that his fate is sealed. Just as in the *Histoire*, where Rousseau drew the same conclusion after the failure of the *billet circulaire*,<sup>46</sup> Rousseau wants to see in a single event (or the accumulation of events) the proof that necessity is at work. But the events he points out do not demonstrate that his situation will never change in the future. For this he would need to read the future or to explain why the plot is of such a nature that nothing will change the opinion of humanity on him.

Accordingly, it is not a surprise to see that the basis of Rousseau's resignation will change throughout the *Rêveries*. I turn to the Second Walk and the Eight Walk to show further problems with Rousseau's bending to necessity.

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44. "Mais si Rousseau a trouvé le repos, quel besoin a-t-il de répéter quatre fois la description de son nouvel état d'âme? [...] Cette répétition traduit ou plutôt trahit l'angoisse de Rousseau qui voudrait croire en une possibilité de repos et qui cherche à se persuader par les mots" ("Jean-Jacques Rousseau: le trop-plein et le non-dit dans la 'Première promenade'", p. 113).

45. "But should one recall the theory of pity outlined in the *Emile*, and the conflict between justice and truthfulness indicated in the Fourth Promenade, one may observe that Rousseau's self-pity not only serves to separate responsibly the reader from him, but it also serves to separate him from himself" (Terence Marshall, "Rousseau Translations: A Review Essay", p. 117).

46. He even draws this conclusion in the *Dialogues* before the failure of the *billet circulaire*: OC I, p. 952.

### 2.3.3 – *Bending to Necessity in the Second Walk*

The Second Walk is a beautiful description of the capacities of Rousseau's expansive soul. It is built on a contrast between the delightful expansion of his being in nature and the miserable expansion of his being in society. What ties the two expansions together is an accident. While coming back from a walk in the surroundings of Paris, Rousseau was hurt by a Great Dane. He lost consciousness for a few hours; when he recovered it, he felt his being merging with nature to the point where he lost the perception of his individuality. The sensation was incomparably pleasurable. In the next few months, however, Rousseau noticed that the story of his accident was distorted and that people who offered him their help or demonstrated their goodwill seemed to hide something from him. The event that most troubled his tranquility was hearing the news that he had died. This bizarre incident gave to Rousseau the occasion to witness what would happen when he would really die. Some people who believed Rousseau to be dead started a subscription to print his unpublished manuscripts. Rousseau surmised that his enemies kept a collection of fabricated writings and were waiting for his death to publish them under his name. He concluded that there was no way he could prevent the future generations from receiving a distorted image of him and falsified copies of his work.

Is the false news of his death the undisclosed event mentioned in the First Walk? It would appear logical, since this event also teaches to Rousseau that his image will be forever distorted. Yet Robert Ricatte and Marcel Raymond provide good reasons to doubt

that this is the same event.<sup>47</sup> Rousseau himself marks the difference between the two events when he says that the reaction upon the news of his death made him go “further” in his understanding of his situation. The conclusion he draws is also different from the First Walk: he claims that it is God who wants him to suffer:

*Mais cette fois j’allai plus loin. [...] Cet accord universel est trop extraordinaire pour être purement fortuit. [...] Toutes les volontés, toutes les fatalités, la fortune et toutes les révolutions ont affermi l’œuvre des hommes, et un concours si frappant qui tient du prodige ne peut me laisser douter que son plein succès ne soit écrit dans les decrets éternels. Des foules d’observations particulières soit dans le passé soit dans le présent me confirment tellement dans cette opinion que je ne puis m’empêcher de regarder désormais comme un de ces secrets du Ciel impénétrables à la raison humaine la même œuvre que je n’envisageois jusqu’ici que comme un fruit de la méchanceté des hommes. Cette idée, loin de m’être cruelle et déchirante me console, me tranquillise, et m’aide à me résigner. [...] Dieu est juste; il veut que je souffre; et il sait que je suis innocent (R, OC I, p. 1009-1010 – my emphasis).*

Facing the absurdity of his belief in a universal conspiracy towards him, Rousseau concludes that it is a prodigy rather than an illusion of his mind. The only way he can account for this reunion of apparently fortuitous circumstances concurring in making him miserable is that it is God’s decree. Rousseau is not terrified by the idea that God wants him to suffer, because he knows that God is not punishing him. God knows that he is innocent. Rousseau does not leave it to God to decide if he is innocent or guilty of some crime. He can therefore rest assured that he does not deserve to suffer. His self-esteem or

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47. Robert Ricatte, *Réflexions sur les “Rêveries”* (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1965), p. 11-33; Marcel Raymond, “Introductions”, OC I, p. LXXXIII-LXXXV.

his conviction in his innocence must therefore be said to play a role in the soothing effect of his belief to be the object of particular Providence.

Compared to the First Walk, the Second Walk provides a new explanation for Rousseau's resignation. Rousseau still believes that his case is hopeless and that justice will never be done to him in this world, but he now claims that this is God's intention. This new explanation contradicts the explanation of the First Walk because the latter was presented as sufficient. Moreover, it has important implications, for Rousseau's belief is not based on a revelation, but on an accumulation of evidence and from his own certitude that he is innocent and that God is just. How can Rousseau be certain of that? And what is the nature of his faith?

In any case, the marked change between the two first Walks is troubling. The fact that he needs another event to prove to himself the inevitability of his destiny suggests that his certainty is weak. And his account in the Eight Walk will come to make things even more confusing.

#### *2.3.4 – Bending to Necessity in the Eighth Walk*

Rousseau provides a third and more complex account of his bending to necessity in the Eight Walk. His account is divided in two parts. The first part is the discovery that he is a passive being embedded in a mechanical world. The second part is an account of what in him resists to his discovery and the manner in which he succeeded in submitting



to his discovery. I will divide the section in two and discuss the difficulties raised by each step.

#### *2.3.4.1 – Materialism and the Disappearance of Intention*

The Eight Walk is a long discussion of how Rousseau came to resign himself to his fate. Rousseau wonders how he could have come to resign himself and become happy given the immensity of his suffering and the awful character of the plot. According to his account, it is only when he saw how nobody would be reasonable and fair toward him and that his quest for a just man was vain that he came to his resignation. However, contrary to the account of the First Walk, it is not really hopelessness that led Rousseau to resignation. It was rather the discovery that the plot could only be explained by the fact that he lived in a mechanical world deprived of intention:

Je commençai à me voir seul sur la terre et je compris que mes contemporains n'étoient par rapport à moi que des êtres mécaniques qui n'agissoient que par impulsion et dont je ne pouvois calculer l'action que par les loix du mouvement. Quelque intention, quelque passion que j'eusse supposer dans leurs ames, elles n'auroient jamais expliqué leur conduite à mon égard d'une façon que je puisse entendre. C'est ainsi [que] leurs dispositions intérieures cessèrent d'être quelque chose pour moi. Je ne vis plus en eux que des masses différemment mues, depourvues à mon égard de toute moralité. [...] Ma raison ne me montrant qu'absurdités dans toutes les explications que je cherchois à donner à ce qui m'arrive, je compris que les causes, les instrumens, les moyens de tout cela m'étant inconnus et inexplicables devoient être nuls pour moi. Que je devois regarder tous les détails de ma destinée comme autant d'actes d'une pure fatalité où je ne devois supposer ni direction, ni intention, ni cause morale, qu'il falloit m'y soumettre sans raisonner et sans regimber parce que cela seroit inutile, que tout ce que j'avois à faire encore sur la terre étant de

m'y regarder comme un être purement passif je ne devois point user à résister inutilement à ma destinée la force qui me restoit pour la supporter (*R*, OC I, p. 1077-1078).

Rousseau discovered that he is a purely passive being imbedded in a mechanical world. It is a world in which freedom is absent. Human actions that appear to be the effect of free will are in fact determined by passions; passions are determined by material causes and the laws of movement can calculate their effect.

Rousseau, however, does not argue that he can calculate the actions of men. We can presume that it is because there are too many variables into play for him to predict the outcome of the material causes. The vantage point given by his materialist position is rather that it is their passions that dictate to men the judgments they make. They are not in control of what they think. For example, Rousseau says that he discovered how the public is fair because of its passions rather than out of a free deliberation: “Je voyois que souvent les jugemens du public sont équitables mais je ne voyois pas que cette équité même étoit l’effet du hazard, que les règles sur lesquelles ils fondent leurs opinions ne sont tirées que de leurs passions ou de leurs préjugés qui en sont l’ouvrage” (*R*, OC I, p. 1077). The last statement offers however an ambiguity: Rousseau says that their judgment is the effect of chance. I assume that what Rousseau means is that their judgment is not the effect of chance (because they are determined by their passions, which in turn are determined by mechanical causes), but since Rousseau cannot identify these causes, their judgment appears to be the result of chance.

The main benefit Rousseau derived from his discovery is that it annihilates human intention. Indeed, if the judgments made by men are the result of chance (or the result of

predetermined cause), they cannot be held responsible for the judgments they make. This discovery was an immense relief to Rousseau, since our pain is increased by the perception of an ill will:

Dans tous les maux qui nous arrivent, nous regardons plus à l'intention qu'à l'effet. Une tuile qui tombe d'un toit peut nous blesser davantage mais ne nous navre pas tant qu'une pierre lancée à dessein par une main malveillante. Le coup porte à faux quelquefois mais l'intention ne manque jamais son atteinte. La douleur matérielle est ce qu'on sent le moins dans les atteintes de la fortune, et quand les infortunés ne savent à qui s'en prendre de leur malheurs ils s'en prennent à la destinée qu'ils personnifient et à laquelle il prêtent des yeux et une intelligence pour les tourmenter (*R*, OC I, p. 1078).

In other words, his materialist position reduced the power of the plot over him, for his enemies mostly hurt him morally by attacking his reputation (*R*, OC I, p. 996). The hatred he perceived from his persecutors suddenly vanished. His misery lost its moral character and was reduced to his physical ills. If his materialist position does not dissolve the pain coming from poverty and sickness (*R*, OC I, p. 1080), this pain is bearable in comparison with being the object of an unjust hatred. Rousseau may die alone in his bed from sickness or poverty, but he will not cry because his friends have neglected him.

The benefit Rousseau draws from the disappearance of human intention is clear. What is less clear is if Rousseau really believes that humans are deprived of morality and intention. The most obvious objection that could be raised is that Rousseau provided two different accounts of his submission to necessity. The account of the Second Walk is particularly contradictory, since it claimed that it was God who intentionally created the plot. What are we to make of this incoherence?

It could be argued that the *Rêveries* should be read as an account of Rousseau's progress towards the truth. Rousseau did not possess the right explanation for his submission to necessity until the time he wrote the Eight Walk. The accounts found at the beginning of the *Rêveries* are thus superseded by what we find later in the book. Another alternative interpretation is that Rousseau's early accounts are deliberately misleading. Rousseau wrote the *Rêveries* with a pedagogical intention. We can see a sign of this intention in the Fourth Walk, in which we are given to believe that Rousseau's previous professions of belief in God are noble lies. His account in the Eight Walk should be interpreted as his genuine position.<sup>48</sup>

I see a major obstacle to the first interpretation, which is that Rousseau continues to argue as a non-materialist *after* the Eight Walk. Let me first recall what Rousseau reminds the young Franquière, namely that materialism entails the destruction of all moral categories: "Il n'y a par conséquent ni vertus ni vices, ni mérite ni démerite, ni moralité dans les actions humaines et [...] ces mots d'honnête homme ou de scelerat doivent être pour vous totalement vides de sens."<sup>49</sup> If Rousseau becomes a materialist in

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48. This is Eve Noiroi's position. She claims that the Eight Walk unveils Rousseau's true conception of the world and humanity, and the *Rêveries* overall to prove that "the ideas of free will or moral intention are internally incoherent or contradictory; they are the products of imagination and have no foundation in nature" (*Nature and the Problem of Morality in the Rêveries of the Solitary Walker*, unpublished dissertation (University of Toronto, 1996), p. 181). According to Noiroi, Rousseau hid his materialism from the majority of his readers in his previous works because of the pernicious effects this belief can have on moral and political life. He covers his materialism with the doctrine of the Profession of Faith. This doctrine is the one used by Rousseau in the Second Walk when Rousseau professes his belief in God's justice. This is one of Rousseau's useful lies as he vindicates them in the Fourth Walk. But in fact, Rousseau holds the same ideas as the *philosophes* of his century. Both are materialists, with the difference that Rousseau thinks that this truth should remain concealed.

49. *Lettre à M. de Franquière*, OC IV, p. 1145. Rousseau tells Franquière to listen to his "sentiment intérieur" to find the truth on this question. Is it because reason cannot refute materialism? Or because Rousseau thinks that materialism is true, but wants to hide it to delicate hearts and weak minds like Franquière's? I will take up this challenge in the next chapter.

the Eight Walk, he should stop making moral distinctions. So why does he say a couple of paragraphs later that he still thinks about the happiness he deserves?<sup>50</sup> If Rousseau believes in a doctrine that entails no merit and demerit, why is he so full of self-esteem? After stating his belief in materialism, Rousseau draws the logical conclusion that his desire to receive a fair judgment from humanity was an impertinent movement of pride. Yet he adds: “L’estime de soi-même est le plus grand mobile des ames fières” (R, OC I, p. 1079). Moreover, if his enemies are deprived of intention, why does the Ninth Walk begins with Rousseau’s reflections on d’Alembert’s intention to hurt him?<sup>51</sup> Why later in the same Walk is he offended by signs of malignity and pleased by signs of innocence? At the end of the chapter, Rousseau said he cried because of an old man who was moved by Rousseau’s good intention. He concludes the Walk with a lesson about how natural good will (*bienveillance naturelle*) should not be degraded by material considerations, and how it is more important to satisfy the heart than the body. These are hardly materialist statements. The Tenth Walk does not appear to be written by a materialist either. Rousseau denounces his former passivity and praises his capacity to give the form he wants to his soul. Rousseau does not portrait Madame de Warens as a being strictly moved by mechanical impulsions. He speaks of love, while he thought love should be an illusion for a man who considers himself and others to be machines.

As for interpreting the Eight Walk as the expression of Rousseau’s genuine metaphysical position – a position he wants to hide to the common man – a few

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50. “Je passe les trois quarts de ma vie [...] avec moi seul content de moi même et déjà plein du bonheur que je sens m’être du” (R, OC I, p. 1081). The next sentence let us know that this feeling is not a product of *amour-propre*: “En tout ceci l’amour de moi-même fait toute l’œuvre, l’amour-propre n’y entre pour rien”.

51. “En allant je rêvois sur la visite de la veille et sur l’écrit de M. d’Alembert où je pensois bien que ce plaquage épisodique n’avoit pas été mis sans dessein” (R, OC I, p. 1086).

objections could be raised against it. The most notable objection is that it implies that Rousseau did not believe himself to be the victim of a plot. Otherwise he would not deal so *lightly* with the manner in which he found a solution to the pain it inflicts him. One can claim like Noirot that the conspiracy performs the same function as Gyges' ring does in the *Republic*: it is a thought-experiment that allows one to see what passions really lie at the bottom of one's heart.<sup>52</sup> But if Plato did not believe in the existence of Gyges' ring, did Rousseau believe in the existence of the plot? Was it merely a fictional device? If not, then what are we to think about it? Noirot leaves this question open, as if it is meaningless for the purpose of understanding the *Rêveries*.

Another important problem for both interpretations is that it requires to being able to prove that Rousseau was *qua* philosopher a materialist. Rousseau cultivates a creative ambiguity on this matter – if we judge by the quantity of commentaries that have been written on the question. If we restrict the question of materialism to the question of the existence of choice or intention, Rousseau is famous for declaring in the *Second Discours* that what distinguishes man from other animals is “his capacity to will or rather to choose,”<sup>53</sup> a capacity that cannot be explained by the laws of mechanics. Yet in the next

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52. Eve (née Noirot) Grace, “Justice in the soul: the *Rêveries* as Rousseau's reply to Plato's Glaucon” in *Pensée Libre*, No. 8 (2001), p. 122-123. Cf. “The necessity of excising the individual from society in order to distinguish nature from culture is the effective, if not the only, meaning of Rousseau's claim that a ‘conspiracy’ exists against him.” (Eve Noirot, *Nature and the Problem of Morality in the Rêveries of the Solitary Walker*, p. 62). If we believe in moral intention, it is because our *amour-propre* wants us to be the most important being in the universe. We refuse to believe that we are entirely determined by necessity because it is humiliating. According to Noirot, the conspiracy is a fiction created by Rousseau to demonstrate in the clearest manner (because it is the most absurd manner) how our desire for justice is an illusion of our *amour-propre*. A man with an extraordinary *amour-propre*, and who is extremely unhappy, will be led to believe that not only society, but God himself is committed to a conspiracy of injustice against him. His *amour-propre* directs him to blame others for his unhappiness rather than face the fact that no one is responsible for his unhappiness.

53. *SD*, OC I, p. 142.

paragraph, Rousseau downgrades his position and claims that perfectibility is humanity's specific difference. Contrary to his previous claim, perfectibility can be explained by a materialistic position.<sup>54</sup> Is Rousseau disguising his materialism? It remains a question which one of those two positions is Rousseau's own. If perfectibility was his genuine position, why doesn't he use the term afterwards in *Émile*? If the existence of a capacity to choose is his genuine position, why dilute it because of the possible objections philosophers could make against it?

If we turn to *Émile*, Rousseau leaves it to the Vicar to declare that man possesses free will. But this claim, which ends up being the Vicar's third article of faith, is based on a sentiment.<sup>55</sup> When he speaks in his own name, Rousseau rather defends Socrates' position that no one harms others for the sake of harming them.<sup>56</sup> Although Socrates' position does not negate the existence of an intention, it does not attribute to man the capacity to choose between good and evil, since we always do what we deem to be good. Or to use Rousseau's language, we are not free to obey our conscience, and in this sense we do not possess free will. What is Rousseau's genuine position?

Despite the varying positions of Rousseau, I am not aware of any passages besides those of the Eight Walk in which Rousseau explicitly says that human intention is an illusion and that we are mechanical beings. This is surprising in one sense, for

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54. For a materialistic reading of the *Second Discours*, see Marc F. Plattner, *Rousseau's State of Nature* – especially p. 38-44.

55. *E*, OC IV, p. 585-587.

56. "Ce ne sont point les philosophes qui connoissent le mieux les hommes; ils ne les voyent qu'à travers les préjugés de la philosophie, et je ne sache aucun état où l'on en ait tant. Un sauvage nous juge plus sainement que ne fait un philosophe. Celui-ci sent ses vices, s'indigne des nôtres, et dit en lui-même: nous sommes tous méchants; l'autre nous regarde sans s'émouvoir, et dit: vous êtes des foux. Il a raison, car nul ne fait le mal pour le mal" (*E*, OC IV, p. 535).

Rousseau's idea of natural goodness is easily compatible to modern materialism. Rousseau repeats that we are only driven by one passion: *amour de soi*. This implies that any other motivation we may have is derived from our passions. Our ideas, our opinions and our conscience are all products of our passions. The description of human nature through the ideal world in the *Dialogues* is a good demonstration of the compatibility of natural goodness and materialism. Rousseau compares man to a cannonball moved by its initial impulse, i.e. his *amour de soi*. All his passions aim at "his conservation and his happiness." In this sense, they are good because they are not aiming at hurting others. It is only when his passions hit an obstacle that a man becomes wicked, because he forgets his initial goal of self-preservation and well-being to become obsessed with what stops him. The healthy human being, however, possesses a strong enough *amour de soi* to overcome the obstacle and remain good. If the obstacle cannot be overcome by nature, then he possesses this ability to abandon his initial goal and to submit to the obstacle – or, if one prefers, to necessity. Like the weak Rousseau, he looks for compensation for his inability to attain his initial goal rather than continuing the struggle against the invincible obstacle. Rousseau's description of human nature makes man a passive being that appears entirely controlled by his impulses. If a man becomes wicked, it is not because he has a bad will, but because his initial passion is too weak to overcome obstacles, yet too strong to bend to it. In other words, the only difference between men is the strength of their *amour de soi*. Those who become wicked cannot be blamed for their wickedness. Their *amour de soi* is flawed at their birth. If the initial impulse would have been stronger or weaker, they would never have become wicked. Or else, if they had lived in a world



empty of obstacles to their natural impulses, like the pure state of nature, they would never have become wicked. Goodness, therefore, depends on the strength of one's fundamental passion, and not on one's intention.<sup>57</sup>

As I have shown in my first chapter, to say that man is naturally good is tantamount to say that he has no intention to hurt others. This is the key of Rousseau's demonstration of man's natural goodness in the *Second Discours*. The man in the pure state of nature is good because he has no intention of inflicting harm to others.<sup>58</sup> Men become denatured and evil when they recognize an intention in other beings and become interested in binding this intention into perpetual good will towards them.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, the key to preserving the young Émile's goodness is to keep him in the belief that he is only surrounded by non-intentional beings. He is kept from differentiating people and things in order to preserve his natural goodness. He does not have any demands for human beings around him and does not possess any sense of justice or of entitlement, because he does not know that other human beings have a will.<sup>60</sup> He cannot love others or hate them, because to love and to hate requires the awareness that others have the intention to serve us or harm us.<sup>61</sup>

Accordingly, it should not be a surprise that a man like the Solitary Walker, who wants to be good rather than virtuous, and who constantly claims his innocence and his

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57. *D*, OC I, p. 668-669. In fact, Rousseau both claims in a short interval that man is only moved by his passions and that he is *mainly* moved by his passions: "Les passions y sont comme ici le mobile de *toute* action" versus "L'erreur du jugement, la force des préjugés aident beaucoup à nous faire prendre ainsi le change; mais cet effet vient *principalement* de la foiblesse de l'ame qui, suivant mollement l'impulsion de la nature, etc".

58. *SD*, OC III, p. 157.

59. *SD*, OC III, p. 170.

60. *E*, OC IV, p. 290-291.

61. *E*, OC IV, p. 492.

incapacity to hate, comes up with the belief that human beings have no intention. But the question left by Rousseau's theory is the following: is it arguing that human intention is an illusion? Or is it arguin that it is *good* for humanity (within certain conditions) to be unaware of the existence of intention – which does not mean that intention does not exist at all? Indeed, the natural man in the pure state of nature, thanks to his condition, is unaware that others and himself have a will because his moral faculties are not developed. Thanks to his preceptor, the young Émile is unaware that other beings that look like him have a will. Rousseau does not claim in these works – at least not explicitly – that men have no will or intention by nature. His main focus is to demonstrate the good effects that this ignorance can produce. Without the constant intervention of an omniscient preceptor, a child would discover the existence of intentional beings very quickly; so quickly that Rousseau concludes that the sentiment of justice is innate.<sup>62</sup> The discovery is not presented as a creation of the child's imagination, but as a genuine discovery. In this sense, the *Émile* demonstrates how intention is not an illusion, for it takes all the preceptor's wit and art to veil this *fact* to Émile.

A great part of Rousseau's self-defense in his autobiographical writings hinges on the existence of intention. Rousseau constantly claims in his autobiographical writings that he has never intended to hurt anybody. In the *Rêveries*, he goes as far as claiming that he has never in his entire life had the intention to harm anybody: “Pour du mal, il n'en est entré dans ma volonté de ma vie” (*R*, OC I, p. 1059). This statement loses its eccentricity if intention does not exist for Rousseau or if he agrees with Socrates.

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62. *E*, OC IV, p. 286-287.

However, Rousseau never appears to make this statement from this philosophical point of view. The context never suggests that Rousseau has never wanted to harm anybody because such a thing is possible. Rousseau rather seems proud of the purity of his intention, as if he implied that it could have been otherwise. Even if his good intentions are not carried out, Rousseau is proud to prove that the love of virtue always found a place in his heart.<sup>63</sup> Having a good intention would be enough for him to be proud of himself since, in some instances, he reduces morality to intention.<sup>64</sup> Even if he has done few good deeds during his life, Rousseau can have a good self-esteem, because it has not been his fault if he was so useless to other men (cf. *R*, OC I, p. 1004). He can behave as a misanthrope and feel remorseless because his genuine intention was not to behave like one.<sup>65</sup>

Moreover, if Rousseau did not believe in the existence of intention, how could he have been persuaded for so long and with such intense conviction that he was the victim of the bad faith of his enemies? In a moment of pain, in his daily life, he could have forgotten that they had no intention to harm him. But Rousseau denounces the bad intention of his “enemies” in all his works, while his head is presumably cooled down. He even claims in his *Histoire du précédent écrit* the exact opposite of what the sauvage

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63. “[...] avec un battement de cœur qui fut peut-être le plus digne hommage qu’un mortel ait pu rendre à la vertu” (*Histoire du précédent écrit*, OC I, p. 981). “Si nous sommes petits par nos lumières, nous sommes grands par nos sentimens” (*LM*, OC IV, p. 1101).

64. “Toute la moralité de la vie humaine est dans l’intention de l’homme” (*LM*, OC IV, p. 1106). This statement is problematic with respect to Rousseau’s discussion of religion, where he rather holds that it is the deed that matters. Compare *Confessions*, OC I, p. 47 to p. 51 and 56, where Rousseau clearly uses a double standard.

65. Cf. *Confessions*, OC I, p. 428.

in *Émile* and Socrates claim: his enemies want to hurt him for the sake of hurting him.<sup>66</sup> How could he believe this if he thought that intention does not exist? If Rousseau did not believe in the existence of a good and a bad intention, his renowned expressions of indignation in his books are either contradictory or faked. Rousseau should see all wickedness as nothing more than weakness or blindness. His numerous reproaches against those he deemed to be wicked are as senseless as criticizing a man who was born lame for his limping gait. Finally, his materialist belief would mean that his own judgment about others is just as dictated by his passions than theirs about him. It would be a result of chance rather than a good analysis of reality. Rousseau could never know if he judged others impartially.

A sophisticated interpretation of Rousseau's whole body of works would therefore be necessary to prove that Rousseau is a genuine materialist. The interpreter who turns to Rousseau's theoretical works to discover his true and consistent position on this question finds an abyss.<sup>67</sup> And his autobiographical works do not display at the surface the actions and beliefs of a materialist.

#### 2.3.4.2 – *Bending to the Senses*

Rousseau's belief that he and others are purely passive beings moved by mechanical causation is only the first step on his way to tranquility: "C'est beaucoup que d'en être venu là mais ce n'est pas tout si l'on s'arrête" (*R*, OC I, p. 1078). Indeed, it is

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66. OC I, p. 986.

67. Cf. *CS*, OC III, p. 296.

one thing to acknowledge the power of necessity on us and another thing to assent to it. This is the distinction that I argued is lacking in the First Walk. However, I will argue that Rousseau's account in the Eight Walk offers the same paradox than in the First Walk with respect to his responsibility in resigning himself.

After his discovery that he was living in a mechanical world, Rousseau says that his reason and a *part* of his heart told him that he was the victim of blind fate; that he was a purely passive being and that to resist to his fate was useless. His reason and a part of his heart acknowledged his fate and assented to it. Yet another part of his heart murmured against this conclusion: "D'où venoit ce murmure; je le cherchai, je le trouvai, il venoit de l'amour-propre qui après s'être indigné contre les hommes se soulevoit encor contre la raison" (*R*, OC I, p. 1079).

Rousseau's indictment of his *amour-propre* must be underscored. We have seen in the second chapter how Rousseau often blames his situation or others for his misery rather than himself. But now, other's bad faith cannot be blamed for his unhappiness, for it is a metaphysical impossibility (they are mechanical beings). His situation cannot either be blamed, for there is nothing he can do to change it. Moreover, Rousseau has discovered how it is possible to be happy within this situation. Accordingly, if he is unhappy, he can only blame the not-so-passive Rousseau who resists necessity.

How did his *amour-propre* make him miserable? Rousseau says that it made him confuse his petty self-pride with a disinterested love of justice: "Un innocent persecuté prend longtems pour un pur amour de la justice l'orgueil de son petit individu" (*R*, OC I, p. 1079). While Rousseau was calling for justice to be done to him, he did not realize that

this was a movement of pride. Rousseau does not mean that the pride was in considering himself the target of a universal plot. He does not say that the pride was in believing that he did not deserve any blame. He does not say that the pride was in believing himself to be “*le meilleur des hommes*.” The pride was in refusing to consider himself and others purely passive and mechanical beings. Because of his *amour-propre*, Rousseau thought that he deserved to be praised for his actions; he thought that others were to blame if they did not acknowledge his greatness:

Quand je m’élevois avec tant d’ardeur contre l’opinion je portois encor son joug sans que je m’en apperçusse. On veut être estimé des gens qu’on estime et tant que je pus juger avantageusement des hommes ou du moins de quelques hommes, les jugemens qu’ils portoient de moi ne pouvoient m’être indifférens (*R*, OC I, p. 1077).

As my analysis of the *Confessions* showed, Rousseau had not uprooted at the time his concern for opinion despite his belief. Now he realizes that seeking to be esteemed is a mistake. It is not a mistake because others will never prefer you to themselves, as Rousseau has claimed before. It is a mistake because others are mechanical beings unable to be fair and to genuinely esteem others. As we have seen, their judgment is the product of chance: “Je voyois que souvent les jugemens du public sont équitables mais je ne voyois pas que cette équité même étoit l’effet du hazard” (*R*, OC I, p. 1077). It is therefore a mistake to seek the esteem of men, whether of the people or of the few great minds.

Rousseau goes farther in the *Eight Walk* than perhaps ever before in admitting how he used to be sensitive to *amour-propre*: “Je n’eus jamais beaucoup de pente à

l'amour propre, mais cette passion factice s'étoit exaltée en moi dans le monde et surtout quand je fus auteur; j'en avois peut être encore moins qu'un autre mais j'en avois prodigieusement" (*R*, OC I, p. 1079).<sup>68</sup> In contrast to his self-portrait in the *Confessions* and the *Dialogues*, Rousseau now seems to admit that his heart was not as pure as he thought. His self-evaluation seems to have lowered. He apparently does not put himself anymore in the category of the "few privileged souls" who can deal with the arts and sciences because they can manage their *amour-propre*. On the contrary, he acknowledges that he cannot contain his *amour-propre* when it is stimulated. Indeed, his reason is helpless when it comes to control his actions. It may teach him that he is a purely passive being imbedded in a mechanical world; it may show him what would be the wise attitude towards the plot: "L'homme sage qui ne voit dans tous les malheurs qui lui arrive[nt] que les coups de l'aveugle nécessité [...] ne sent du mal dont il est la proie que l'atteinte materielle et les coups qu'il reçoit ont beau blesser sa personne pas un n'arrive jusqu'à son coeur" (*R*, OC I, p. 1078). But Rousseau tells us that he is not this wise man. It is not enough for him to *know* that men are deprived of intention. Although he knows that other men have no intention to hurt him, he cannot help but to react with indignation every time he perceives a sign of hostility towards him:

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68. Even in the *Dialogues*, Rousseau denies it: "Rien [de l'amour-propre] d'Auteur et d'homme de lettres ne se fait sentir en lui" (*D*, OC I, p. 810). What hasn't changed, however, is that Rousseau confesses a weakness but lets us know in the same breath that it is not as bad as it appears (*Je n'eus jamais beaucoup de pente à l'amour-propre; j'en avois peut-être encore moins qu'un autre*). The watering down of his confession may be explained by his lack of confidence that it will be received with good faith: "Autrefois [...] je faisais l'aveu de mes fautes avec plus de franchise que de honte, parceque je ne doutois pas qu'on ne vit ce qui les rachetoit et que je sentois au dedans de moi" (*R*, OC I, p. 1035).

[Durant les tristes moments où je vis parmi les hommes], de quelque façon que je m'y sois pu prendre l'amour propre alors fait son jeu. La haine et l'animosité que je vois dans leurs cœurs à travers cette grossière enveloppe déchirent le mien de douleur et l'idée d'être ainsi sottement pris pour dupe ajoute encore à cette douleur un dépit très puérile, fruit d'un sot amour-propre dont je sens toute la bêtise mais que je ne puis subjuguer (*R*, OC I, p. 1081-1082).

Rousseau is incontinent. It is not because he knows that intention is an illusion that he can stop believing in it. He says that he has tried to become insensitive to “insulting and mocking looks” by frequenting public places, but he never got used to being an object of hate.

Rousseau explains his incontinence by the fact that he is dominated by his senses: “Dominé par mes sens quoique je puisse faire, je n’ai jamais su résister à leur impressions, et tant que l’objet agit sur eux mon cœur ne cesse d’en être affecté” (*R*, OC I, p. 1082). Because he is the slave of his senses, Rousseau cannot control himself. Yet this slavery to his senses is also the key to his freedom:

Dominé par mes sens quoique je puisse faire, je n’ai jamais su résister à leurs impressions, et tant que l’objet agit sur eux mon cœur ne cesse d’en être affecté; *mais ces affections passagères ne durent qu’autant que la sensation qui les cause*. La présence de l’homme haineux m’affecte violemment mais sitôt qu’il disparaît l’impression cesse; à l’instant que je ne le vois plus je n’y pense plus. J’ai beau savoir qu’il va s’occuper de moi je ne saurois m’occuper de lui. Le mal que je ne sens point actuellement ne m’affecte en aucune sorte, le persecuteur que je ne vois point est nul pour moi (*R*, OC I, p. 1082 – my emphasis).

Rousseau finds compensation for his dependence on his senses. When he senses no signs of hatred, his *amour-propre* ceases to affect him. If Rousseau cannot uproot the cause of



his misery, he can manage it by avoiding situations that stimulate his *amour-propre* as much as possible. Accordingly, Rousseau's incontinence is solved by fleeing situations where his *amour-propre* could be stimulated by his senses: "Tout ce que je puis en pareil cas est d'oublier bien vite et de fuir" (*R*, OC I, p. 1082). This is what Rousseau tries to do every day by leaving Paris for the solitude of the countryside. There he forgets everything about his enemies, and finds the mental freedom to delve into his blissful *rêveries*.

The end of the Eight Walk provides a possible answer to one of the questions raised by the First Walk. Rousseau described himself as having achieved tranquility but also as remaining sensitive to moral pain – so much that tranquility was a goal to achieve rather than his actual state. The paradox is solved if Rousseau considers himself to be *mostly* insensitive to others so as to describe his tranquility as a permanent state – while he knows how incontinent he remains when his senses affect his heart. Indeed, Rousseau is physically alone three quarters of the time (*R*, OC I, p. 1081). There are only a few moments in which his soul is torn apart by indignation or by a desire for friendship.<sup>69</sup> Despite his slavery to his senses and his dependence on men when he is in their presence, Rousseau concludes that he is mostly independent from them:

Je suis ce qu'il plait aux h[ommes] tant qu'ils peuvent agir sur mes sens; mais au premier instant de relache je redeviens ce que la nature a voulu, c'est là qu'on qu'on puisse faire *mon état le plus constant* et celui pour lequel en dépit de la destinée je goute un bonheur pour lequel je me sens constitué (*R*, OC I, p. 1084 – my emphasis)

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69. Rousseau only gives examples of people who display signs of hatred, but what he says must apply to signs of friendship or sympathy. They must also tempt him to renew his relationships to men, but Rousseau has the duty to resist to this temptation by fleeing those who seem to love him.

However, Rousseau's account of his incontinence in the Eight Walk raises a new set of problems, as well as a problem that we have seen before. The central element of his happiness is his claim that his heart is *only* affected by his senses. This is a most surprising claim with respect to Rousseau's nature. We know how Rousseau is proud elsewhere of his extraordinary moral sensitivity.<sup>70</sup> While he claimed to be very sensitive with respect to his physical senses, this sensitivity was nothing in comparison to the sensitivity of his heart.<sup>71</sup> In fact, Rousseau's self-portrait in his other books demonstrates how Rousseau's physical sensations only truly affect him when his heart is moved. As with any other human being, but to a greater degree, his heart is mostly active despite his senses, and it remains affected by his sensations long after the sensations are gone.<sup>72</sup> Rousseau provides multiple examples in his autobiographical writings of how his imagination goes overboard when his physical senses are not affected. We only need to go back to the First Walk to read:

Les maux réels ont sur moi peu de prise; je prends aisément mon parti sur ceux que j'éprouve, mais non pas sur ceux que je crains. Mon imagination effarouchée les combine, les retourne, les étend et les augmente. Leur attente me tourmente cent fois plus que leur présence, et la menace m'est plus terrible que le coup (*R*, OC I, p. 997).

Rousseau's submission to his senses is also problematic with respect to human nature. It makes him the equivalent of a baby: "Dans le commencement de la vie où la mémoire et

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70. For example, see *C*, OC I, p. 62; 351; 356-357; 416.

71. *D*, OC I, p. 807.

72. Cf. *C*, OC I, p. 174 and 226. Rousseau says in the *Rêveries* that his memory only remembers the happy event of his life (*R*, OC I, p. 1062). It could explain why Rousseau is not affected by the hatred against him when the sensation has disappeared, but it is not the same explanation as the one he provides in the Eight Walk.

l'imagination sont encore inactives, l'enfant n'est attentif qu'à ce qui affecte actuellement ses sens."<sup>73</sup> Rousseau would be in the happy state of the child who forgets the presence of an object as soon as he stops perceiving it: "Quand je ne les vois plus, ils sont pour moi comme s'ils n'existoient point" (*R*, OC I, p. 1057). This is not to suggest that Rousseau's ability to forget what pains him is impossible. We all have the experience of being affected by an object when it is present and forget it when it has disappeared from our sight. We all know how we can be diverted from our misery through different pleasant stimulations. Yet our general experience of incontinence is that we remain affected by the object of our desires and repulsions even if it is not present to our senses. The pie in the refrigerator can tempt me although I do not smell it or see it or taste it; my coworker can irritate me even when I am in bed and I do not see his contemptuous smile.

Rousseau himself testifies to this experience of incontinence in the Eight Walk.

His *amour-propre* has not always been activated only by the stimulation of his senses:

Je me souviens parfaitement que durant mes courtes prospérités ces mêmes promenades solitaires qui me sont aujourd'hui si délicieuses, m'étoient insipides et ennuyeuses. Quand j'étois chez quelqu'un à la campagne, le besoin de faire de l'exercice et de respirer le grand air me faisoit souvent sortir seul et m'échapant comme un voleur je m'allois promener dans le parc ou dans la campagne; mais loin d'y trouver le calme heureux que j'y goûte aujourd'hui j'y portois l'agitation des vaines idées qui m'avoient occupé dans le salon; le souvenir de la compagnie que j'y avois laissée m'y suivoit dans la solitude, les vapeurs de l'amour-propre et le tumulte du monde ternissoient à mes yeux la fraîcheur des bosquets et troubloient la paix de la retraite. J'avois beau fuir au fond des bois, une foule importune me suivoit partout et voiloit pour moi toute la nature (*R*, OC I, p. 1083).

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73. *E*, OC IV, p. 284.

But how did Rousseau become able to restrain the effect of *amour-propre* to physical stimulation? Rousseau answers: “Ce n’est qu’après m’être détaché des passions sociales et de leur triste cortège que [j’ai retrouvé la nature] avec tous ses charmes” (*R*, OC I, p. 1083). But again, how did he become detached from social passions?

We find in the *Eight Walk* two different answers that reflect the fundamental problem of his accounts of moral reform. On the one hand, Rousseau claims that it was his reason that severed the ties he had to social passions:

Ma raison ne me montrant qu’absurdités dans toutes les explications que je cherchois à donner à ce qui m’arrive, je compris que les causes, les instrumens, les moyens de toute cela m’étant inconnus et inexplicables devoient être nuls pour moi. Que je devois regarder tous les détails de ma destinée comme autant d’actes d’une pure fatalité où je ne devois supposer ni direction, ni intention, ni cause morale [etc.] (*R*, OC I, p. 1079).

Rousseau became detached from social passions because his reason showed him that he and others were purely physical beings. It is his reason that comforts his heart and tames its passions:

Quand [l’amour-propre] se tait et que la raison parle elle nous console enfin de tous les maux qu’il n’a pas dépendu de nous d’éviter. Elle les aneantit même autant qu’ils n’agissent pas immédiatement sur nous car on est sur alors d’éviter leurs plus poignantes atteintes en cessant de s’en occuper. Ils ne sont rien pour celui qui n’y pense pas. Les offenses, les vengeances, les passedroits, les outrages, les injustices, ne sont rien pour celui qui ne voit dans les maux qu’il endure que le mal même et non pas l’intention, pour celui dont la place ne dépend pas dans sa propre estime de celle qui plait aux autres de lui accorder (*R*, OC I, p. 1080).

Submitting to necessity means to make oneself see reason. As *Émile* teaches, reason should be the guide of *amour-propre* because only reason can purge man of pernicious passions.<sup>74</sup>

On the other hand, Rousseau also presents his capacity to resist *amour-propre* in line with his theory of goodness. Indeed, the active participation of his soul in his tranquility – the need for self-control – is watered down at the end of the Eight Walk:

Cessant d'employer ma force en vaine resistance j'attends le moment de vaincre en laissant agir ma raison, car elle ne me parle que quand elle peut se faire écouter. Et que dis-je hélas! *Ma raison? J'aurois grand tort encor de lui faire honneur de ce triomphe car elle n'y a guères de part. Tout vient également d'un tempérament versatile qu'un vent impetueux agite mais qui rentre dans le calme à l'instant que le vent ne souffle plus. C'est mon naturel ardent qui m'agite, c'est mon naturel indolent qui m'appaise* (R, OC I, p. 1084 – my emphasis).

We are back to a familiar territory. Rousseau's misery comes from the situation; removal from the situation suffices to make him happy, because his indolence has the power of virtue. It is enough to extinguish the flames of *amour-propre*, as if Rousseau simply lacks the energy to be concerned with the esteem of others. From this perspective, no effort is required to bend to necessity and be happy. The passage from misery to happiness is easy: "Comment s'est fait ce passage? Naturellement, insensiblement et sans peine" (R, OC I, p. 1076). Rousseau only needs to flee the society of men when they traumatize him and everything shall be back into order within his soul. Fleeing men implies no strength of soul because Rousseau presents society as repulsive and claims

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74. *E*, OC IV, p. 322. See also *LAD*, OC V, p. 20.

that he is strongly inclined to be alone. There is no need for a conversion of his soul or of his opinion about the good and the just. His *amour-propre* will wither away naturally, so to speak, when the physical sensation has disappeared, because it is not *amour-propre* that plagues him, but his hypersensitive nature.

Thus Rousseau's account offers an important ambiguity about his capacity to bend to necessity, and ultimately to live happily alone. Rousseau admits of the necessity of a moral effort or a conversion of his soul when he writes: "[La racine du mal] n'est pas dans les êtres qui nous sont étrangers, elle est en nous mêmes et c'est là qu'il faut travailler pour l'arracher tout à fait" (*R*, OC I, p. 1078). But Rousseau says he cannot uproot his *amour-propre*. He settles for fleeing the situations where his *amour-propre* could be inflamed. In the end, the numerous statements where he claims the need of a moral effort to bend to necessity are denied: his indolence and his submission to his senses makes him bend effortlessly to his destiny.

#### *2.3.4.3 – Discussion: What Is the Status of Rousseau's Claim to Have Learned how to Bend to Necessity?*

The contradictions and difficulties offered by Rousseau's description of how he became able to bend to necessity cannot be ignored. The *Histoire* and the *Rêveries* provide different accounts that are not easily reconcilable. They open the door to speculation. Is his tranquility staged for rhetorical reasons or for psychological reasons? Is it to make a philosophical point that he displays this man who oscillates between

different doctrines and who desires contradictory goods? Or is it a hidden effect of his *amour-propre* that commands him to appear more serene than he truly is so as to hurt his enemies? Or simply the effect of a desperate man trying to find a way to cope with his misery? Is Rousseau creating an illusion for his reader or is he self-delusional?

Rousseau is not submitting to the same kind of necessity in these different accounts. But he constantly claims that he believes he lives in a world of necessity and to have no other choice but to behave like he does. His theory of natural goodness may help us understand his belief. Indeed, Rousseau's defense of his own goodness requires the belief in a world of pure necessity. His theory demonstrates that acting out of pure inclination is only right if the context is one of pure necessity. We see this theory in the *Second Discours*. The natural man in the pure state of nature is good because he cannot act differently than how he acts. The rule that guides his action: "*Fais ton bien avec le moindre mal d'autrui qu'il est possible*" (*SD*, OC III, p. 156) is a rule he cannot disobey. As I said in the first chapter, it is a law as compelling for him as the law of gravitation.<sup>75</sup> He can only will what he can achieve, not because he has reflected about the limits of his being, or because he is able to constrain his will, but because he has no choice other than to do what he is inclined to do.

Rousseau claims that he has no choice but to follow his inclinations in the *Rêveries*:

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75. *SD*, OC III, p. 156. See also *E*, OC IV, p. 523 and 311: "Si les loix des nations pouvoient avoir comme celles de la nature une inflexibilité que jamais aucune force humaine ne put vaincre, la dépendance des hommes redeviendrait alors celle des choses." Cf. "Si j'étois sans passions, je serois, dans mon état d'homme indépendant comme Dieu même, puisque ne voulant que ce qui est, je n'aurois jamais à lutter contre la destinée" (*E*, OC IV, p. 857). "L'homme vraiment libre *ne veut que ce qu'il peut* et fait ce qu'il lui plait. Voilà ma maxime fondamentale" (*E*, OC IV, p. 309 – my emphasis).

Dans la situation où me voilà, je n'ai plus d'autre règle de conduite que de suivre en tout mon penchant sans contrainte. Je ne peux rien à mon sort, je n'ai que des inclinations innocentes, et tous les jugemens des hommes étant désormais nuls pour moi, la sagesse même veut qu'en ce qui reste à ma portée je fasse tout ce qui me flate, soit en public soit à-part-moi, sans autre règle que ma fantaisie, et sans autre mesure que le peu de force qui m'est resté. [...] la raison me permet, me prescrit même de me livrer à tout penchant qui m'attire (*R*, OC I, p. 1060-1061).

The plot has liberated Rousseau from his moral obligations towards men. Since this plot is necessary, Rousseau can follow his inclinations without remorse, because he cannot do anything else. The plot plays the role of the preceptor in *Émile* and of the pure state of nature in the *Second Discours* in the sense that it frees Rousseau from men and makes his freedom innocent.<sup>76</sup> By believing that humanity is entirely foreign to him, Rousseau becomes independent of them – if not in effect, at least in his mind.

Of course, the crucial difference between the man in the pure state of nature and Rousseau is that the latter has developed his moral faculties, has an intention (or believes that he has one) and does not spontaneously see himself as submitted to pure necessity. He is too wise for his sake. Because of the impossibility to recover the blissful ignorance of the pure state of nature, or to recover the world of ignorance and necessity created by the Preceptor for the young *Émile*, Rousseau, *if* he is to be simply good, has to believe that he lives in a world of necessity. He has to believe that he has no choice but to be who he is and that others have no choice but to act in the manner they act towards him.

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76. I do not claim that the plot is a literary fiction invented by Rousseau. I merely underline how Rousseau was in need of such a belief to be a naturally good man who can legitimately escape the yoke of duty and virtue.



The happiness of goodness requires that one believe oneself to be living in a world of pure necessity. We may therefore wonder if Rousseau's claim to believe in necessity is the product of his desire to be happy rather than a rational conviction on the nature of the world he inhabits. If we take the account of the Eight Walk, Rousseau makes claims about the nature of the world and of man. But what is the nature of these claims? There is an important ambiguity in the manner Rousseau reasons. On the one hand, his materialism appears as a conclusion of his reason. But if we look at the formulation he uses, his reason also seems to be superseded (or identified) to his will; or more plainly, he seems to adopt his materialist position only for its usefulness:

*Je commençai à me voir seul sur la terre et je compris que mes contemporains n'étoient par rapport à moi que des êtres mécaniques qui n'agissoient que par impulsion et dont je ne pouvois calculer l'action que par les loix du mouvement. [...] Ma raison ne me montrant qu'absurdités dans toutes les explications que je cherchois à donner à ce qui m'arrive, je compris que les causes, les instrumens, les moyens de toute cela m'étant inconnus et inexplicables *devoient être* nuls pour moi. *Que je devois* regarder tous les détails de ma destinée comme autant d'actes d'une pure fatalité où je ne devois supposer ni direction, ni intention, ni cause morale, qu'il falloit m'y soumettre sans raisonner et sans regimber *parce que cela seroit inutile*, que tout ce que j'avois à faire encore sur la terre étant de m'y regarder comme *un être purement passif* je ne devois point user à résister *inutilement* à ma destinée *la force qui me restoit pour la supporter* (R, OC I, p. 1077-1078 – my emphasis).*

The fact that his materialist doctrine does not appear to state what reality is may be explained from the fact that it is derived from Rousseau's incomprehension of the world he lives in:

Cependant, j'espérois toujours, je me disois, un aveuglement si stupide, une si absurde prevention, ne sauroit gagner tout le genre humain. Il y a des hommes de sens qui ne partagent pas ce delire [...]. J'ai cherché vainement, je ne [les] ai point trouvé[s]. La ligue est universelle, sans exception, sans retour, et je suis sur d'achever mes jours dans cette affreuse proscription *sans jamais en penetrer le mistère* (R, OC I, p. 1077).

The direct conclusion of his investigations is that his predicament cannot be rationally explained. Thus when Rousseau comes to the conclusion that other men have no intention, it is not because it is the logical conclusion of his investigations, but because his absurd situation calls for an absurd conclusion:

Mais quand *après* de longues et vaines recherches *je les vis tous encore sans exception dans le plus inique et absurde système* qu'un esprit infernal put inventer [...] alors je commençai à me voir seul sur la terre [...]. Quelque intention, quelque passion que j'eusse supposer dans leurs ames, elles n'auroient jamais expliqué leur conduite à mon égard d'une façon que je pusse entendre (R, OC I, p. 1078 – my emphasis).

In the most curious and interesting fashion, Rousseau draws a certainty from absurdity:

*Ma raison ne me montrant qu'absurdités dans toutes les explications que je cherchois à donner à ce qui m'arrive, je compris que les causes, les instrumens, les moyens de toute cela m'étant inconnus et inexplicables devoient être nuls pour moi.* Que je devois regarder tous les détails de ma destinée etc. (R, OC I, p. 1079 – my emphasis).

How reasonable can be Rousseau's materialist conclusion given its premises? It is true that Rousseau immediately adds: "Voilà ce que je me disois, ma raison, mon coeur y acquiesçoient" (R, OC I, p. 1079). But this is the same reason that has just concluded that

he is the victim of a universal and unbreakable plot. Rousseau's reduction of humanity to automatons appears as far-fetched as the problem it is meant to solve (the conspiracy).<sup>77</sup>

I suggest that Rousseau's materialism is a moral doctrine rather than an ontological doctrine. More precisely, it appears to be a moral doctrine without an ontological basis. His materialism in the *Eight Walk* is similar to his *Matérialisme du sage* outlined in the *Confessions*. This doctrine does not rule on the fundamental nature of the human soul and of the world. Its only tenet is that man's varying states *mostly* depend on the earlier impressions of external objects or that our sensations have a great influence on what we become. Its only purpose is to help man resist temptations more easily. *Le matérialisme du sage* leaves open the question whether we are made of matter or of a soul and whether we are mechanically determined or not. Rousseau calls it *la morale sensitive* because it is a moral doctrine that is aiming at being useful rather than a metaphysical statement on reality.

We see Rousseau using terms denoting his need to believe in necessity despite his incapacity to understand his world in the *Second Walk*:

Mais cette fois j'allai plus loin. [...] Cet accord universel est trop extraordinaire pour être purement fortuit. [...] Toutes les volontés, toutes les fatalités, la fortune et toutes les révolutions ont affermi l'œuvre des hommes, et un concours si frappant qui tient du prodige ne peut me laisser douter que son plein succès ne soit écrit dans les decrets éternels. Des foules d'observations particulières soit dans le passé soit dans le présent me confirment tellement dans cette opinion que je ne puis m'empêcher de regarder désormais comme *un de ces secrets du Ciel impénétrables à la raison humaine* la même œuvre que je n'envisageois jusqu'ici que comme un fruit de la méchanceté des hommes. *Cette idée, loin de m'être cruelle et*

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77. Cf. *Dialogues*, OC I, p. 972: "L'insensibilité morale est tout aussi peu naturelle que la folie".

*déchirante me console, me tranquillise, et m'aide à me résigner.* [...] Dieu est juste; il veut que je souffre; et il sait que je suis innocent (*R*, OC I, p. 1009-1010 – my emphasis).

Rousseau says at the same time that his conclusion that God wants him to suffer is based on “swarms of individual observations” but is also “one of those secrets of Heaven impenetrable to human reason.” His reasons for bending to necessity are not simply drawn from his reason. The quotation, moreover, shows how the idea that God directs his fate is consoling. Rousseau’s materialism and fatalism appears to be what Kant will call “regulating ideas”: they are uncertain but necessary conceptions which make life possible (however, Rousseau, contrary to Kant, uses these ideas to be happy rather than moral). Whether it is the idea that there is no more justice to hope for (First Walk), or that God wants him to suffer (Second Walk), or that men are mechanical beings (Eight Walk), they are all ideas that are either false or uncertain. But they help Rousseau to be released from his pain.

If what is at stake for Rousseau is not truth but utility, why does he change his mind in the *Rêveries* over the kind of necessity he should submit to? There may be various reasons. Of course, the credibility of his belief or its apparent truth is a component of its efficiency. The solution of the First Walk was the more rational in the sense that it was strictly based on observations and reasoning. However, as I have argued, the undisclosed event was unlikely to prove that his case was hopeless, because experience never offers the certitude Rousseau is looking for. Moreover, the universal and unshakable agreement required between men to make Rousseau’s fate hopeless is simply too prodigious to be explained by mere reason (*R*, OC I, p. 1010). Rousseau may

therefore have felt the need to “go farther,” as he says in the Second Walk, because he realized that his previous explanation called for a suprarational explanation.

Another possible explanation is that his perspective in the First Walk preserves the idea that men have the intention to hurt him. The solution of the Second Walk annihilates the intention of all men because they are the puppets of God’s will. However, one being remains who wants Rousseau to suffer: God. And this may explain Rousseau’s new perspective in the Eight Walk. He may be referring to his former belief in Providence when he writes:

Quand les infortunés ne savent à qui s’en prendre de leurs malheurs ils s’en prennent à la destinée qu’ils personnifient et à laquelle ils prêtent des yeux et une intelligence pour les tourmenter à dessein. C’est ainsi qu’un joueur dépité par ses pertes se met en fureur sans savoir contre qui. Il imagine un sort qui s’acharne à dessein sur lui pour le tourmenter et trouvant un aliment à sa colère il s’anime et s’enflamme contre l’ennemi qu’il s’est créé (R, OC I, p. 1078).<sup>78</sup>

Rousseau’s attitude in the Second Walk is not identical to this fictional man, since he claims that his belief in a just God made him serene. Maybe this excerpt from the Eight Walk suggests that it rather left anger in his heart.

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78. Rousseau should have seen this idea in Montaigne’s essay: “Comment l’ame décharge ses passions sur des objets faux quand les vrais lui défont” (*Essais*, Tome I, Chapter 4). He also mentions this idea in the *Histoire du précédent écrit*, OC I, p. 983. This means that Rousseau was theoretically aware of the possibility that his belief in Providence was an illusion created by his heart to feed his indignation. The question as usual is whether Rousseau thought that the idea applied to his own case in the Second Walk (as well as in the *Histoire du précédent écrit*). – It must be underlined that this passage from the Eighth Walk contradicts the idea he is attempting to prove in the same paragraph. The point he set out to make is that we suffer more from an evil intention than from the pain this intention inflicts on our body. Yet he cites as an example a man who creates an intention in order to alleviate their pain. His example could prove the opposite of what Rousseau wants to demonstrate, i.e. we suffer more from meaningless blows of destiny than from blows that have a purpose – even a purpose that seems absurd or wicked. Perhaps it is because to feel we are the victims of a destiny or of God’s flatters our *amour-propre*?

But overall, I surmise that Rousseau's solutions to his moral pain are inconsistent and changing because they are more imaginary than reasonable. This is not the only problematic aspect of this explanation. The claim that Rousseau deliberately creates these fantastic explanations to soothe his moral pain surmises that Rousseau voluntarily (or half-voluntarily) blinds himself in order to be happy. Paradoxically, Rousseau must give a rule to himself and then forget that it is himself who has forged the necessity he is submitting to. Of course, Rousseau never says that he gives a belief to himself – he rather believes that his moral solitude is imposed on him – but it is a question whether Rousseau does not create his solitude and amoral being in order to be happy. The extraordinary oscillations in the *Rêveries* between his claims to be constrained to be alone and his happiness in being alone demonstrate exactly how things are for Rousseau: moral solitude, i.e. moral independence and the abolition of intentional relationships between Rousseau and others, cannot be self-imposed (for its illusoriness would be obvious) but it cannot be imposed by others (for it is an illusion). Necessity is never as necessary as it should be, but the natural man necessarily needs it to be happy.

This possibility of *intentional self-blinding* is a major feature of Rousseau's philosophy. I will discuss it in my next chapter when I will examine Rousseau's relationship to truth vis-à-vis his need to be happy. While it faces many obstacles, I believe that it is a more satisfying explanation for the inconsistencies of the text than the use of esoteric speech.

### 2.3.5 – Conclusion

The contradictions and difficulties of Rousseau's account make it difficult to provide a satisfying interpretation of his solitude. Rousseau is not only morally incontinent, but appears theoretically incoherent. For instance, his materialistic stance in the Eight Walk should make him look at all human beings as passive and deprived of any moral character. Yet Rousseau looks at them as moral beings before the Eight Walk. If we assume a decision to leave as they were the walks he had already written, we nonetheless see him looking at men from a moral point of view in the Ninth and Tenth Walks – himself included. His incoherence would be understandable if he continued to look at human beings as intentional beings in his day to day life. The illusion of intention is so strong that it cannot easily be overhauled.<sup>79</sup> But why would Rousseau be the prey of this illusion when he writes?

On the other hand, we can see the consistence of the problems raised by Rousseau's self-account. His claim to simply need a change of location to be happy is one of them. Rather than changing the passion of his heart, Rousseau wants to make no effort. While he claims to be bending to necessity, there is no "bending" of his inclinations going on. It presupposes the fundamental healthiness of his heart. But it leads him perhaps to a delusion about the true source of his misery and his happiness. This would be a more accurate judgment, however, if Rousseau had not identified *amour-*

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79. "On est fataliste, et à chaque instant on pense, on parle, on écrit comme si l'on persévérât dans le préjugé de la liberté, préjugé dont on a été bercé, qui a institué la langue vulgaire qu'on a balbutiée et dont on continue de se servir, sans s'apercevoir qu'elle ne convient plus à nos opinions. On est devenu philosophe dans ses systèmes et l'on reste peuple dans son propos" (Denis Diderot, "Réfutation d'Helvétius" in *Oeuvres philosophiques* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 1998), p. 619).

*propre* as the source of his misery and did not claim the need to uproot this passion from his heart to be happy.

To say the same thing from a different perspective, Rousseau indicts his *amour-propre*, but the means he uses to solve his problem with this passion reflects the ambiguity of his judgment about the nature of the passions that drive his heart. Rousseau thinks his laziness is enough to untangle him from the bad effects of his *amour-propre*. This would perhaps be true if his laziness was *indolence*, or the opposite passion of hypersensitivity. But if his laziness is a strong inclination to follow his inclinations without constraints,<sup>80</sup> Rousseau's alchemy of passions would be bound to failure. The passion Rousseau uses to divert his offended heart is rather a part of the problem. The *Dialogues* were perhaps more accurate than the *Rêveries* when Rousseau thanked his laziness for making him unconcerned by "indifferent objects."<sup>81</sup> When the object is one of great concern to Rousseau, i.e. himself, his laziness is of no help. In other words, Rousseau's materialist stance in the Eight Walk seems to lead him to a false diagnosis of his misery. He considers his problem with his *amour-propre* to be a physical problem, like a cough or a cancer: "Les yeux étincellans, le feu du visage, le tremblement des membres, les suffocantes palpitations, *tout cela tient au seul physique et le raisonnement n'y peut rien*" (*R*, OC I, p. 1083 – my emphasis). Thereby Rousseau would lose sight of the true nature – the moral nature – of his misery. Instead of blaming his slavery on his senses, he should have accused his heart; instead of counting on his laziness, he should have acknowledged his need for self-control.

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80. Cf. *LAM*, OC I, p. 1132-1134; *C*, OC I, p. 641.

81. *D*, OC I, p. 809.



Overall, the delicate part of a good interpretation of the *Rêveries* is to discover what lies at the bottom of this resistance. Is it because Rousseau is incontinent? From this perspective, Rousseau has rediscovered how to be wise and happy, but finds it difficult in his everyday life to practice what he preaches. What he deems to be happiness is clear for him, but he lacks the force to behave wisely. Or is it because Rousseau continues to hold an idea of wisdom and happiness that contradicts the theory of equilibrium? Of course, incontinent behavior implies a conflict between different ideas of the good. But the incontinent man can acknowledge the conflict of opinion that guides his action, without defending it in principle. Rousseau's discussion of his person and his actions in his autobiographical writings, however, seem to defend contradicting principles. Even when Rousseau says that he was weak and did not do what he should have done, he vindicates his weakness.

To describe the problem in another manner, it is not clear to which necessity Rousseau is bending in the *Rêveries*. In some sense, he claims that he is bending to the necessity of human nature as he described it in his theoretical works. But when he says that he has learned to bend to necessity, Rousseau seems to primarily mean submitting to the will of his persecutors. He is bending to the "fact" that he cannot do anything to save his reputation and his work. His happiness is not simply a matter of will: it rests on the belief that something usually accidental rather than natural, normally deliberate rather than necessary, i.e. the bad will of others, constrains him. In other words, when Rousseau says that he has learned to submit to necessity, he does not mean first and foremost submitting to the natural limits imposed by nature on men. Rousseau is not independent

because he thinks that the essence of his being is not in the esteem of others. He is not happy because he has realized that he has lost nothing essential in being persecuted. Rousseau could free his soul from the chains of opinion without being persecuted by the plot. He would only need to adopt the wisdom he teaches in his work.

If the plot was destroyed, would Rousseau continue to behave as he does in the *Rêveries*? To repeat, Rousseau both claims to be happy and miserable in the *Rêveries*. He both claims that he would be who he is without being constrained by the conspiracy and that he would *willingly* be someone else if he was released from it.

The *Rêveries* also accounts for a desire to relate to others. I turn to this account before concluding this chapter.

#### 2.4 – *Doing Good to Others*

The problematic aspect of Rousseau's relationship to others does not stop with his account of his submission to necessity. Rousseau also claims in the Sixth Walk that doing good to others is a genuine source of happiness: "Je sais et je sens que faire du bien est le plus vrai bonheur que le coeur humain puisse goûter" (*R*, OC I, p. 1051). This definition of happiness is in a sense the most surprising. Most of the *Rêveries* argue that happiness is found in being entirely contracted in oneself. This is the understanding of happiness that is usually remembered as significant in the *Rêveries*. In another sense, this definition of happiness is not surprising coming from Rousseau, since his desire to achieve glory

and be useful to humanity was patent during his life.<sup>82</sup> This definition has therefore some validity, especially since Rousseau continues to show his desire to be helpful to others in the *Rêveries*, and claims at the outset of the book to be “the most loving and sociable of all human beings.”

We are therefore stuck with two different and apparently incompatible understandings of happiness in the *Rêveries*. Before attempting to solve this problem, it is necessary to understand why Rousseau says that beneficence makes him happy. The first part of this section will examine Rousseau’s analysis of the pleasure he takes in beneficence as it is presented in the Ninth Walk. In the second part, I will detail Rousseau’s reasons for claiming that this happiness is impossible to him. Rousseau blames the plot from preventing him to be beneficent, but he also points to the nature of beneficence itself which is at odds with his own nature. Each of these arguments has important implications. If Rousseau is prevented from doing good because of the plot, and if happiness requires to doing good to others, then his claim to be happy in the *Rêveries* is false. The plot is a genuine source of misery that Rousseau cannot shake off. His submission to necessity and his withdrawal into himself are a *dédommagement* rather than true happiness. It is even worse for Rousseau if it is true that his nature is at odds with the requirements of beneficence. Rousseau would naturally be a miserable being.

Yet these implications presuppose that Rousseau seriously means that doing good to others is the truest happiness a human heart can savor. Given the fact that this claim is

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82. “Si j’étois assés malheureux pour être coupable de quelque transport indiscret dans cette vive effusion de mon coeur, je vous supplie de le pardonner à la tendre affection d’un vrai patriote, et au zèle ardent et légitime d’un homme qui n’envisage point de plus grand bonheur pour lui-même que celui de vous voir tous heureux” (*SD*, OC III, p. 120-121).

in contradiction with his other claim to have found happiness in solitude, it is difficult to take it at face value (just as it is difficult to accept his claim that happiness is in solitude). But I will assume in this section for the sake of the argument that Rousseau does indeed identify happiness with beneficence. After examining in the next chapter the nature of Rousseau's happiness in his solitude, I will come back in the conclusion of the dissertation about the problematic relationship of these two understandings of happiness.

#### *2.4.1 – Why Does Doing Good Make Rousseau Happy?*

Rousseau's defense of his solitude must be understood in the light of the attacks made against it by his former friends. We have seen in the letters to Malesherbes how they thought Rousseau with his withdrawal from society wanted to make people talk about him. Another common attack from them was that Rousseau chooses to be solitary because he was selfish and misanthropic. Rousseau was deeply hurt when he read in Diderot's *Le Fils naturel*: "*Il n'y a que le méchant qui soit seul.*" Rousseau's reply to this attack is not to prove that it is legitimate to be unconcerned with the fate of others, like the Ancients argued. He rather claims that his solitude is not the sign of a selfish heart. If he would not be compelled to live alone, Rousseau would be the most generous man ever known. When he looks at the bottom of his heart, Rousseau sees that his inclination to do good is powerful: "*Je me dois l'honorable témoignage que chaque fois que j'ai pu goûter ce plaisir je l'ai trouvé plus doux qu'aucun autre. Ce penchant fut vif, vrai, pur et rien dans mon plus secret intérieur ne l'a jamais démenti*" (R, OC I, p. 1051). Rousseau says

that this inclination is not only natural to him, but natural in itself (*R*, OC I, p. 1052). Accordingly, it could be said that the first reason why beneficence makes Rousseau happy is that it fulfills a natural need. But Rousseau does not elaborate this position in the *Walk*.

Rousseau may claim the existence of this strong inclination, but how do we know that what he says about himself is true? In the letters to Malesherbes, Rousseau proved his inclination to beneficence with his authorial activity. At the time of the *Rêveries*, however, Rousseau was not publishing anymore. He may refer to his past generosity, but how can he prove that his solitude has not made him selfish and misanthropic? Rousseau is compelled to simply assert that his generous inclination exists. Rather than using visible actions of beneficence to prove his claim, Rousseau uses a fictional situation. If he wore the ring of Gyges, and if he was omnipotent like God, his only desire would be to see “all the hearts content” (*R*, OC I, p. 1058). The fictional situation reveals his true nature more than his actual situation.

The fictional situation also shows how his motivations to be beneficent differ from those of other men. They do good to others because of their amour-propre and because they are compelled by the laws (*R*, OC I, p. 1057). Rousseau, on the other hand, shows in his fiction that he does not need laws to be generous. Neither does he need to be rewarded with honors. His fiction proves that his motivation for generosity is not an interest to gain something in return. Contrary to his century and its philosophy of *intérêt bien compris*, Rousseau shows that his happiness of beneficence is not a covert satisfaction of interest through an apparent free action. His invisibility in the fiction

proves that he does not need to be acknowledged by his beneficiaries as a generous man to be generous.

The fiction proves that it is not duty and external rewards that make Rousseau happy when he is generous. It suggests that his happiness comes from the action itself. But it does not reveal the exact source of his happiness. We have to move to the Ninth Walk to get an explanation. There, in a long digression inserted among examples of his beneficent actions, Rousseau analyses what he finds pleasurable in doing good deeds:

De mon coté quand j'ai bien réfléchi sur l'espèce de volupté que je gutois dans ces sortes d'occasions j'ai trouvé qu'elle consistoit *moins dans un sentiment de bienfaisance que dans le plaisir de voir des visages contents*. Cet aspect a pour moi un charme qui bien qu'il penetre jusqu'à mon cœur *semble être uniquement de sensation*. Si je ne vois la satisfaction que je cause quand même j'en serois sûr je n'en jouirois qu'à demi. C'est même pour moi *un plaisir désintéressé* qui ne dépend pas de la part que j'y puis avoir. Car dans les fêtes du peuple celui de voir des visages gais m'a toujours vivement attiré. [...] Pour jouir moi même de ces aimables fêtes je n'ai pas besoin d'en être, il me suffit de les voir; *en les voyant je les partage*; et parmi tant de visages gais, je suis bien sur qu'il n'y a pas un cœur plus gai que le mien (R, OC I, p. 1093 – my emphasis).

Rousseau's pleasure is double. He likes the "*sentiment de bienfaisance*" he feels and he likes to see contented faces. Since the second pleasure is more important than the first, let us start with it.

The first remarkable aspect of Rousseau's pleasure is that what he likes to watch are "contented *faces*." His claim here differs from the claim made in the fiction that ends the Sixth Walk, where Rousseau was happy to see "contented *hearts*." There are two possible reasons for this discrepancy. The first comes from the introduction of the Ninth

Walk. Rousseau distinguishes between happiness and contentment. Happiness is a permanent state that appears impossible because everything fluctuates on this earth.<sup>83</sup> Contentment is intense and quickly gone, but it is at least possible. Rousseau therefore proposes to seek contentment rather than happiness. It is an easier goal to achieve, not only because it does not imply a struggle against the necessary fluctuations of this world, but also because it communicates itself easily. Contrary to happiness, contentment is easily perceived: “Le bonheur n’a point d’enseigne extérieure; pour le connoître il faudroit lire dans le coeur de l’homme heureux; mais le contentement se lit dans les yeux, dans le maintien, dans l’accent, dans la démarche, et semble se communiquer à celui qui l’apperçoit” (*R*, OC I, p. 1085). Because it is easily perceived, it can rapidly spread from the contented person to the person who perceives it.

Happiness, on the other hand, remains imperceptible to the senses – unless one considers the existence of a sixth sense able to understand someone else’s heart.<sup>84</sup> Thus Rousseau apparently claims that only contentment can be perceived. Yet Rousseau still talks of having seen “contented hearts” at the outset of the Ninth Walk. He makes this claim just before claiming that happiness is difficult to perceive because we would need to read inside someone else’s heart. Why, then, would it be easier to perceive a contented heart? It is not clear if the distinction between a “contented face” and a “contented heart” is meaningful.

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83. However, the very end of the Eight Walk claims that Rousseau’s happiness is a permanent state. And in the same paragraph, Rousseau continues to speak of happiness as if it is possible to achieve.

84. Cf. *C*, OC I, p. 547.

A second reason that can be given for the discrepancy is that Rousseau is interested in proving that his pleasure is strictly physical. What causes his pleasure is the contented (and physically visible) face rather than the contented (and metaphorical) heart.

Rousseau provides two arguments in favor of this thesis that his pleasure is strictly physical. First, his pleasure is diminished by half if he does not see the effect of his beneficent action. There is therefore a part of his pleasure that comes from seeing the beneficent effect of his action. Simply doing a good deed and enjoying the awareness of being good is not fulfilling.<sup>85</sup> His second argument is that seeing contented faces is a purely physical pleasure because Rousseau tastes it even when he is not the source of the contentment. Rousseau provides as evidence his attendance to public fairs. He remembers that he was happy to stand back and watch even when he was not the source of the contentment or affected by what contented others. Rousseau concludes that the pleasure he takes has nothing to do with him being the cause of the pleasure. His pleasure in doing good is like the warmth of the sun on one's skin or the taste of honey in one's mouth. There is no *amour-propre* at play in such pleasures, for his person has nothing to do with it. Doing good is a purely disinterested pleasure.

Rousseau's arguments, however, does not support his claim that his pleasure is purely physical. His first argument, which stands in stark contrast with Rousseau's claims to enjoy the feeling of his good intention even when it does not carry him to act generously, is insufficient to prove his point. The fact that Rousseau needs to see the

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85. "Je sais que quel que soit l'effet de l'oeuvre je n'en aurai pas moins le mérite de ma bonne intention. Oui, ce mérite y est toujours sans doute, mais le charme intérieur n'y est plus, et sitôt que ce stimulant me manque, je ne sens qu'indifférence et glace au dedans de moi" (*R*, OC I, p. 1055).



effect of his generous action could rather indicate that what Rousseau loves is receiving the gratitude of others.

His second argument appears more conclusive. But it also suggests that his pleasure is not altogether physical. First, Rousseau appears to say that he *identifies* with the contented faces. This aspect of his experience is clearer when Rousseau describes the opposite experience of seeing a contented face. When Rousseau sees an upset face, he is pained because he identifies with the suffering being: “L’imagination renforçant la sensation m’identifie avec l’être souffrant et me donne souvent plus d’angoisses qu’il n’en sent lui-même” (*R*, OC I, p. 1094). His pleasure at seeing contented faces or his pain at seeing upset faces implies the use of his imagination; therefore, it would not be entirely physical. It would have a “moral” component, “moral” being understood in its broad sense of “not physical” or as the equivalent of “related to the soul” (as it was used at the time).

Moreover, Rousseau dilutes his purely physical account in the next paragraph:

Quoique ce ne soit là qu’un plaisir de sensation il a certainement une cause morale et la preuve en est que ce même aspect au lieu de me flater, de me plaire peut me déchirer de douleur et d’indignation quand je sais que ces signes de plaisir et de joye sur les visages des méchants ne sont que des marques que leur malignité est satisfaite. La joye innocente est la seule dont les signes flatent mon cœur. Ceux de la cruelle et moqueuse joye le navrent et l’affligent quoiqu’elle n’ait nul raport à moi (*R*, OC I, p. 1094).

The first sentence is hardly understandable: how can a pleasure be purely sensual if it has a moral cause? It can only make sense if “the moral” is purely physical – but then why make the distinction? Rousseau’s point thereafter is that his pleasure cannot be purely

sensual since two contented faces with similar physical signs of contentment do not provide the same pleasure to Rousseau. The moral quality of the contentment matters to him. There is therefore a moral judgment that comes into play in Rousseau's pleasure – "moral" now being used in the narrower sense of "what pertains to morality." It is in this sense that a coherent distinction between a contented face and a contented heart would make sense. What Rousseau wants to perceive is not contented *faces*, but contented *hearts*. But to "see" a contented heart, one needs to carry out a moral judgment. When Rousseau dislikes the contented faces of wicked men, it is because he believes their contentment is stemming from their "satisfied malice." In other words, he *sees* – or rather feels – the wicked intention behind the contentment. It is this wicked intention that hurts him and arouses his indignation.

Rousseau's account also raises problems with respect to his behavior. For instance, if Rousseau's pleasure in beneficence is mainly seeing contented faces, his motivation for writing books would not be generosity (contrary to his claim in the fourth letter to Malesherbes) since Rousseau, of course, does not see the contented faces of his reader when they read his books. It also raises problems with his theory of knowledge. For instance, in *Émile* and the *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, Rousseau holds that the only sense that is purely physical is taste.<sup>86</sup> Sight, on the other hand, is the less *physical* sense: "Comme la vüe est de tous les sens celui dont on peut le moins séparer les jugemens de l'esprit [...]" (*Émile*, OC IV, p. 396). Yet Rousseau in the Ninth Walk attributes to the sense of sight the possibility of being empty of judgment or sentiment.

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86. *Émile*, OC IV, p. 409-410; *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, OC V, p. 418.

In any case, Rousseau's account does not clearly and distinctively reduce the pleasure of generosity to a physical pleasure. Rousseau says that *it seems* to be purely physical; and he adds that there is *certainly* a moral cause. His bizarre account apparently serves the purpose of proving that his pleasure in being beneficent is altogether selfless. Yet his pleasure also involves a "*sentiment de bienfaisance*" that seems to involve his self. As I said, Rousseau divides the pleasure he takes in two: "De mon coté quand j'ai bien réfléchi sur l'espèce de volupté que je goutois dans ces sortes d'occasions j'ai trouvé qu'elle consistoit moins dans *un sentiment de bienfaisance* que dans le plaisir de voir des visages contents" (R, OC I, p. 1093 – my emphasis). What is the nature of the "*sentiment de bienfaisance*"? Rousseau does not say. However, two paragraphs earlier, Rousseau described the pleasure he took in doing good to others in the following terms: "Moi qui partageois à si bon marché cette joye, j'avois de plus celle de sentir qu'elle étoit mon ouvrage" (R, OC I, p. 1093). Being the source of others' joy appears to be the nature of the pleasurable "*sentiment de bienfaisance*."

Rousseau says nothing more about the nature of this pleasure in the *Rêveries*. As I said, he considers the pleasure of seeing contented faces to be the one that matters. On the basis of what he says in his other works, we can suppose that the pleasure to see contented faces, if it is not merely physical, stems from the fact that Rousseau identifies with others. The sentiment of community produced by joy is pleasurable in itself, and would motivate his generosity. Rousseau does not say this in the *Rêveries* presumably because he has claimed that there is no more community between him and men. He is

however eager to prove that he is interested in partaking in the simple joys of children, of the people and of the elderly.

The sentiment of beneficence, on the other hand, could be pleasurable because it is a sign of one's strength. As Rousseau says in the *Lettres morales*:

L'exercice de la bienfaisance flatte naturellement l'amour propre par une idée de supériorité on s'en rappelle tous les actes comme autant de témoignages qu'au de là de ses propres besoins on a de la force encore pour soulager ceux d'autrui. Cet air de puissance fait qu'on prend plus de plaisir à exister et qu'on habite plus volontiers avec soi (*LM*, OC IV, p. 1116).

Rousseau, however, in the Ninth Walk, does not mention a pleasure of feeling his strength. He says that he finds pleasure in being the source of the joy of others. It seems that it is the awareness that he can affect the life of others that makes him generous.

To be precise, Rousseau has perhaps changed in the Ninth Walk his claim from the Sixth Walk that beneficence makes him happy. He says that seeing happy hearts makes him content (rather than happy): "J'ai peu vu d'hommes heureux, peut-être point; mais j'ai souvent vu des coeurs contents, et de tous les objets qui m'ont frappé c'est celui qui m'a le plus contenté moi-même" (*R*, OC I, p. 1085). Rousseau could have watered down his claim that beneficence makes him happy after the Sixth Walk because he argued in this Walk that this happiness was impossible to him. He seems to have settled for episodic acts of beneficence, which are not enough to put him in a permanent state of satisfaction. It is however necessary to understand why he cannot be permanently generous.

#### 2.4.2 – *Why Is Rousseau Unable to Do Good to Others (and therefore to Be Happy)?*

If the Ninth Walk provides an unsatisfying account of how generosity can produce happiness, the Sixth Walk is a marvelous analysis of why generosity is impossible for Rousseau. He begins by retelling the story of his brief relationship with a lame boy. One day during a walk, Rousseau noticed how he mechanically made a detour from a place called *la barrière d'enfer*. He realized that he made this detour because he wanted to avoid a lame boy. This boy begged him for money every time Rousseau passed near him during his walks. In the beginnings, Rousseau gave him money “*de très bon coeur*.” However, his pleasure progressively withered away:

Ce plaisir devenu par degrés habitude se trouva je ne sais comment transformé dans une espèce de devoir dont je sentis bientôt la gêne; surtout à cause de la harangue préliminaire qu’il falloit écouter et dans laquelle il ne manquoit jamais de m’appeller souvent M. Rousseau pour montrer qu’il me connoissoit bien, ce qui m’apprenoit assez au contraire qu’il ne me connoissoit pas plus que ceux qui l’avoient instruit (*R*, OC I, p. 1050-1051).

The pleasure of doing good withered away because Rousseau started to feel that his gift was a duty rather than a free action and because he sensed that the lame boy was under the control of the *Messieurs*. I will analyze each obstacle separately.

#### 2.4.2.1 – *The Natural Obstacle*

Rousseau's meditation on why his pleasure withered away recalled a multitude of other observations he made in the past about the "primary and true motives" of his actions. He used to be deluded about the pleasure he took in being beneficent. He thought that he took an unconditional pleasure in doing good. However, unpleasant experiences of benefaction revealed that an important condition was required: "J'ai vû que pour bien faire avec plaisir, il falloit que j'agisse librement, sans contrainte et que pour m'ôter toute la douceur d'une bonne oeuvre il suffisoit qu'elle devint un devoir pour moi" (*R*, OC I, p. 1052). This observation revealed to Rousseau that he was deluded about his own merit. He thought that his generosity was an effect of his virtue. But he was merely following a natural inclination to do good to others. He was generous only when he desired to be generous. His action had nothing to do with virtue, since virtue consists in conquering one's inclinations when duty commands it (*R*, OC I, p. 1053).

Rousseau acquired this self-knowledge after a multitude of painful experiences of beneficence. He used to give freely when he was young until he discovered that those who benefited from him wanted their benefactor to be indefinitely generous:

Mes premiers services n'étoient aux yeux de ceux qui les recevoient que les erres [the deposits] de ceux qui les devoient suivre; et dès que quelque infortuné avoit jetté sur moi le grapin d'un bienfait reçu, c'en étoit fait désormais, et ce premier bienfait libre et volontaire devenoit un *droit indéfini* à tous ceux dont il pouvoit avoir besoin dans la suite, sans que l'impuissance même suffit pour m'en affranchir (*R*, OC I, p. 1051-1052 – my emphasis).

The problem with being good to others is that others start to expect that the good action will be repeated at every possible occasion. Their expectation becomes more than an expectation: it becomes a right to be indefinitely served by the benefactor. Rousseau felt he contracted an obligation to do good despite his initial intention. He did not foresee the burden that was attached to his spontaneous goodness.

Rousseau's inclination to do good appears therefore bound to being frustrated. If doing good to others comes with the obligation to do them good indefinitely, and if Rousseau needs to feel free to do good, then his desire to do good will never be satisfying. What is the solution for Rousseau? Should he become virtuous and learn to act out of duty? Or should he refrain from doing good altogether?

Rousseau's answer is intricate. On the one hand, Rousseau admits that the chains of obligation were not very heavy when he was unknown. He could do good to others despite being obliged to perpetuate his beneficence. His celebrity made the chains of obligation heavier, but Rousseau continued to be beneficent. The lesson he drew from his experience was one of moderation:

C'est alors que j'eus lieu de connoître que tous les penchans de la nature sans excepter la bienfaisance elle-même portés ou suivis dans la société *sans prudence et sans choix changent de nature* et deviennent souvent aussi nuisibles qu'ils étoient utiles dans leur première direction. Tant de cruelles expériences changèrent peu à peu mes premières dispositions, ou plustot *les renfermant enfin dans leurs véritables bornes*, elles m'apprirent à suivre *moins aveuglément* mon penchant à bien faire, lorsqu'il ne servoit qu'à favoriser la méchanceté d'autrui (R, OC I, p. 1052 – my emphasis).

Instead of concluding from his distaste for obligations that he should refrain from doing good to others, Rousseau says that he learned to act in a more clear-sighted manner. The weight of obligation is not an unbearable burden, but a painful consequence of goodness that must be dealt with. His youthful enthusiasm in helping others, once guided by moderation and prudence, allowed him to be more useful to himself and to others. Instead of letting his heart do good profusely, Rousseau learned to foresee the consequences of his actions. He did good only when he could foresee that the chains of obligations would not be too painful:

Après tant de tristes expériences, j'ai *appris* à prévoir de loin les conséquences de mes premiers mouvements suivis, et je me suis *souvent* abstenu d'une bonne œuvre que j'avais le desir et le pouvoir de faire, effrayé de l'assujettissement auquel dans la suite je m'allois soumettre si je m'y livrais *inconsidérément* (R, OC I, p. 1054 – my emphasis).

This reasonable and moderate line of conduct is not, however, the only conclusion Rousseau draws from his effusive time when he was beneficent without limits. Rousseau also says that he concluded from his incapacity to act out of obligation that he should do nothing:

Dès que mon devoir et mon cœur étoient en contradiction le premier eut rarement la victoire, à moins qu'il ne fallut seulement que m'abstenir; alors j'étois fort le plus souvent, *mais agir contre mon penchant me fut toujours impossible*. Que ce soient les hommes, le devoir *ou même la nécessité* qui commande quand mon cœur se tait, ma volonté reste sourde, et je ne saurois obeit. Je vois le mal qui me menace et je le laisse arriver plustot que de m'agiter pour le prevenir. Je commence quelquefois avec effort, mais cet effort me lasse et m'épuise bien vite; je ne saurois



continuer. *En toute chose imaginable, ce que je ne fais pas avec plaisir m'est bientôt impossible à faire* (R, OC I, p. 1053).

His statement that it is *impossible* for him to act against his inclination must be a hyperbole, for he says that he is able to do it in some instances. But we see him at least categorically denying that he is able to act against his inclination for a long period.

We appear to have the reason behind Rousseau's hatred for obligations. Rousseau cannot act out of duty because he must take pleasure in his actions: "En toute chose imaginable, *ce que je ne fais pas avec plaisir* m'est bientôt impossible à faire." If this were Rousseau's true motive, then he could be accused of being depraved. His dependence on pleasure prevents him from doing is good for himself and others. But this would be unfair. Rousseau is not a slave of pleasure. The first evidence is that when duty contradicts his inclination, Rousseau does not always choose to follow his inclination. If duty commands to do something that Rousseau has no inclination to do, he will disobey. But if duty commands him to do nothing or to refrain his inclination, then he might obey. His *sins* are all of omission, seldom of commission: "Lorsqu'il faut faire le contraire de ma volonté, je ne le fais point, quoi qu'il arrive; je ne fais pas non plus ma volonté même, parce que je suis foible. Je m'abstiens d'agir: car toute ma force est négative, et tous mes péchés sont d'omission, rarement de commission" (R, OC I, p. 1059).

His independence from pleasure is even more evident when he is obliged to do something in which he takes pleasure: "La contrainte d'accord avec mon desir suffit pour l'anéantir, et le changer en répugnance, en aversion même, pour peu qu'elle agisse trop fortement" (R, OC I, p. 1053). For example, Rousseau's pleasure in making love to his

wife would be annihilated if he was compelled to sleep with her: “Le poids de l’obligation me fait un fardeau des plus douces jouissances [...] j’eusse été chez les Turcs un mauvais mari à l’heure où le cri public les appelle à remplir les devoirs de leur état” (*R*, OC I, p. 1052). Rousseau’s distaste for obligation is stronger than his love of pleasure. The fundamental reason why he hates obligations and hence doing good to others appears to be beyond a question of pleasure or pain.

We come to the heart of a fundamental question. What lies at the bottom of Rousseau’s distaste for obligations? Rousseau says nothing that could lead us to believe that he is concerned with his dignity as a free agent. Nor does Rousseau mention his laziness. The example of being a bad husband among the Turks proves that it is not laziness that is the heart of the problem. This example is, I believe, revealing of what lies at the bottom of Rousseau’s heart. He has a strong desire to be *spontaneous*. This is what is behind the mask of his “independent nature” or “lazy nature”, as the *Confessions* reveal:

L’oisiveté que j’aime n’est pas celle d’un faineant qui reste là les bras croisés dans une inaction totale et ne pense pas plus qu’il n’agit. C’est à la fois celle d’un enfant qui est sans cesse en mouvement pour ne rien faire, et celle d’un radoteur qui bat la campagne tandis que ses bras sont en repos. J’aime à m’occuper à faire des riens, à commencer cent choses et n’en achever aucune, à aller et venir comme la tête me chante, à changer à chaque instant de projet, à suivre une mouche dans toutes ses allures, à vouloir déraciner un rocher pour voir ce qui est dessous, à entreprendre avec ardeur un travail de dix ans, et à l’abandonner sans regret au bout de dix minutes, à muser enfin toute la journée sans ordre et sans suite, et à ne suivre en toute chose que le caprice du moment (*C*, OC I, p. 641).

In other words, Rousseau wants to be driven solely by his inclinations. Being spontaneous means *not wanting to want*, so to speak: “Lorsqu’il faut faire le contraire de ma volonté, je ne le fais point, quoi qu’il arrive; je ne fais pas non plus ma volonté même, parce que je suis foible” (*R*, OC I, p. 1059 – my emphasis). He hates to have to make a choice between his inclinations, to follow one and refrain from another.

Rousseau’s hatred for obligations is so strong that it is not simply those that come from men or society. It is a hatred for *all* obligations – even natural necessity understood as a moral obligation: “Que ce soient les hommes, le devoir *ou même la nécessité* qui commande quand mon coeur se tait, ma volonté reste sourde, et je ne saurois obéir” (*R*, OC I, p. 1053 – my emphasis). “Tant que j’agis librement je suis bon et je ne fais que du bien; mais sitôt que je sens le joug, *soit de la nécessité* soit des hommes je deviens rebelle ou plustot rétif, alors je suis nul” (*R*, OC I, p. 1059 – my emphasis). If nature or necessity commands him to do something for his own good, Rousseau becomes reluctant to act: “Je vois le mal qui me menace et je le laisse arriver plustot que de m’agiter pour le prevenir” (*R*, OC I, p. 1053). What is interesting is to see how spontaneity for Rousseau trumps not only duty, but pleasure and the good. In other words, the highest good for Rousseau is to being allowed to act spontaneously.

#### 2.4.2.2 – *The Vindication of the Natural Obstacle*

It is one thing for Rousseau to describe why he hates obligations. It is another thing to vindicate his hatred. As we have seen, the Sixth Walk offers two different rules

of conduct with respect to beneficence and obligations: one moderate, the other radical.

At the end of the Walk, Rousseau underlines the radical one:

Le résultat que je puis tirer de toutes ces reflexions est que je n'ai jamais été propre à la société civile où tout est gêne, obligation, devoir, et que mon naturel indépendant me rendit toujours incapable des assujettissements nécessaires à qui veut vivre avec les hommes. Tant que j'agis librement je suis bon et je ne fais que du bien; mais sitôt que je sens le joug, soit de la nécessité soit des hommes je deviens rebelle ou plutôt rétif, alors je suis nul (*R*, OC I, p. 1059).

But the last statement only proves that Rousseau is unsuited for civil society. It is a description, not a justification. Does Rousseau also think that he is right to escape his civic duties? Is his hatred for obligations reasonable? Is the fact that it is impossible for him to act out of duty sufficient to vindicate his policy of abstention? Should he not make an effort and fulfill his obligations despite his “incapacity” to do so? Even if it is less harmful than the sin of commission, the sin of omission is still a sin.

Despite Rousseau's apparent self-incrimination when he talks about his *sin* of omission, his conscience does not reprimand him for omitting to be beneficent. Quite the contrary, his conscience reprimands him when he acts against his inclination: “Ce que je fais alors [lorsque je fais du bien à quelqu'un qui m'oblige à lui en faire] est foiblesse et mauvaise honte, mais la bonne volonté n'y est plus, et loin que je m'en applaudisse en moi-même, je me reproche en ma conscience de bien faire à contrecoeur” (*R*, OC I, p. 1053). Acting against one's heart (*à contrecoeur*) is the true sin.

Are there circumstances in which one can do good freely and spontaneously? Rousseau goes at great length to demonstrate that there are none. Every act of goodness

towards someone entails the creation of an obligation for the benefactor to repeat his act of kindness:

Je sais qu'il y a une espèce de contrat et même le plus saint de tous entre le bienfaiteur et l'obligé. C'est une sorte de société qu'ils forment l'un avec l'autre, plus étroite que celle qui unit les hommes en général, et si l'obligé s'engage tacitement à la reconnaissance, le bienfaiteur s'engage de même à conserver à l'autre, tant qu'il ne s'en rendra pas indigne, la même bonne volonté qu'il vient de lui témoigner, et à lui en renouveler les actes toutes les fois qu'il le pourra et qu'il en sera requis. Ce ne sont pas là des conditions expresses, mais ce sont des effets *naturels* de la relation qui vient de s'établir entre eux (*R*, OC I, p. 1054 – my emphasis).

Rousseau calls this obligation between the benefactor and the beneficiary the “holiest of contract.” Not only is it holy, but the obligation to renew the act of beneficence every time it is possible is *natural*. Rousseau therefore claims that the beneficiary’s expectation to be helped indefinitely by his benefactor is both natural and legitimate. He will expect indefinite beneficence and he has a right to expect it.

Both claims are however questionable. First, why would not the beneficiary be moderate about his claim? Don’t we call men who expect indefinite goodness towards them “leeches” or “freeloader”? Why would it not be natural for the beneficiary to feel gratitude rather than a permanent desire to be served by his benefactor? In *Émile*, for instance, Rousseau claims that gratitude is natural.<sup>87</sup> In the Sixth Walk, however,

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87. “On aime ce qui nous fait du bien; c’est un sentiment si naturel! L’ingratitude n’est pas dans le coeur de l’homme [...] Voit-on jamais qu’un homme oublié par son bienfaiteur l’oublie? Au contraire, il en parle toujours avec plaisir, il n’y songe point sans attendrissement: s’il trouve occasion de lui montrer par quelque service inattendu qu’il se ressouvient des siens, avec quel contentement interieur il satisfait alors sa gratitude! Avec quelle douce joie il se fait reconnaître! Avec quel transport il lui dit: mon tour est venu! Voilà vraiment la voix de la nature; jamais un vrai bienfait ne fit d’ingrat” (*E*, OC IV, p. 521-522).

gratitude is a “tacit obligation;” it is not a natural sentiment because fulfilling an obligation requires virtue (*R*, OC I, p. 1054).

It is also questionable that the beneficiary has a right to claim perpetual beneficence from his benefactor.<sup>88</sup> The problem was obvious when Rousseau described his early experience of the chains of beneficence: his beneficiaries claimed an “indefinite right” to all the good deeds they would need in the future – even when Rousseau did not have the power to help them (*R*, OC I, p. 1052). Yet when Rousseau later explains the contract between the benefactor and the beneficiary, he says that the beneficiary must remain worthy of being helped out and the benefactor must have the power to help him for the contract to be valid. Rousseau’s early beneficiaries were therefore wrong in claiming a right to be helped by Rousseau when he was unable to provide this help.

Rousseau’s description of the contract is ambiguous on the question of the source of its legitimacy. Two answers appear possible. The first is that the legitimacy comes from the consent of the parties involved. The consent must however remain tacit to be legitimate. The benefactor must preserve the appearance that what he gives is free, because if he openly claims the implicit right to gratitude he obtains with the contract, he will destroy the contract: “[Le bénéficiaire] se dira, qu’en feignant de l’obliger gratuitement, vous avez prétendu le charger d’une dette, et le lier par un contrat auquel il n’a point consenti” (*E*, OC IV, p. 521). The beneficiary will not consent to the contract if his obligation to gratitude is explicit. Conversely, the beneficiary must remain silent

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88. Rousseau appears more hesitant on this question in an earlier work: “Demander un bienfait c’est y acquérir une espèce de droit, l’accorder est presque un devoir” (*Émile et Sophie ou Les Solitaires*, OC IV, p. 914).

about his right to perpetual beneficence; otherwise the benefactor will declare the contract null and void.

Rousseau's analysis marvelously reveals the hidden expectations of men when they do good deeds and when they receive them. But does he prove that these expectations are right? The fact that making these expectations explicit would suddenly make them unjust suggests that they are illegitimate. What Rousseau demonstrates is that there is hypocrisy between the parties of the contract: the benefactor pretends to give freely; the beneficiary pretends to have no obligation to gratitude. They do not explicitly consent to the establishment of a contract between them because to do so would be consenting to a fraud. On this account, the contract is not as binding as Rousseau describes it. If it is the "holiest of contract," it is because it is a ghost of a contract.

The second possibility is that the legitimacy comes from nature: "Ce ne sont pas là des conditions expresses, mais ce sont des effets *naturels* de la relation qui vient de s'établir entre eux." The expectation from the beneficiary to be the object of perpetual beneficence is natural; the expectation of the benefactor to receive perpetual gratitude is natural. Since these expectations cannot be avoided and stem from nature, they are legitimate. This appears to be Rousseau's real reasoning in the Sixth Walk. But it flatly contradicts his account of his own actions of beneficence. While Rousseau notes that his beneficiaries tacitly claimed an indefinite right to his generosity, he never mentioned that he himself expected perpetual gratitude from his beneficiaries. On the contrary, his reward is in the act of beneficence itself, as we have seen in the last section. Rousseau was supposed to do good to others because he enjoys seeing contented faces and to be the

source of the contentment.<sup>89</sup> Moreover, as said earlier, it is not because men naturally expect something that their expectation is legitimate. An unlimited expectation is unfair if it is unrealistic. Yet it is as if Rousseau denies that. If an expectation spontaneously arises in the heart of a man, it is natural, even if it is unrealistic and has no limits.

Rousseau's analysis of beneficence is in line with his claim in his theoretical writings that we are naturally interested in enslaving the will of others in our dealings with them. It leaves two options: to opt out of society (and avoid the problem of obligations) or to become virtuous (and be generous out of duty). Rousseau, however, seems to want to have it both ways. He wants to prove that he is the most "sociable and loving of all men." He gives for evidence his spontaneous impulse to love others and to help them. But Rousseau must also vindicate his abstinence or his solitude. Why if he is the most sociable and loving of all men does he abstain from doing good to others? Rousseau answers that his good intentions have to remain frustrated because of the actual social system. The obstacle to his goodness is natural. There is nothing that can be done about it. Every act of beneficence entails an obligation to repeat the beneficent act when the occasion presents itself again. The obligation stems from the action itself – provided some conditions are fulfilled – and is natural. A benefactor who would deny this implicit obligation would be unjust: "[il] frustre une espérance qu'il l'a autorisé à concevoir; il trompe et dément une attente qu'il a fait naître" (*R*, OC I, p. 1054). However, his injustice can be excused: "[Son refus de rendre service] n'en est pas moins l'effet d'une

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89. Rousseau does not discuss his own expectations when he is a beneficiary. Because of his independent stance, he would presumably deny that he expects an indefinite generosity from his benefactors. According to Grimm, Rousseau's understanding of society was monstrous because it gave the right to a beneficiary to be ungrateful towards his benefactors: see OC I, p. 362 note 1 and p. 1508, note 2. The problem of Rousseau was accepting gifts while vindicating ungratefulness in the name of asocial nature.



indépendance que le coeur aime et à laquelle il ne renonce pas sans effort” (*R*, OC I, p. 1054).

Rousseau can therefore claim that he loves to be beneficent even if he never does good deeds. His reluctance – his incapacity – to be beneficent cannot be simply blamed; the fault lies in the nature of the act, which necessarily entails an obligation. Rousseau’s desire to do good is pure and undeniable, but its realization in this world necessarily entails the creation of a bond that corrupts the purity of the initial intention. There is no way our good deed can be realized without destroying its goodness, since there is no such thing as giving freely. When Rousseau writes: “Un bienfait purement gratuit est certainement une oeuvre que j’aime à faire” (*R*, OC I, p. 1053), he means in his imagination, because such a thing does not exist in the real world. It is only possible in the fiction he builds at the end of the Walk.

Accordingly, Rousseau’s distaste for obligations is susceptible to affect many areas of his life: “*En toute chose imaginable*, ce que je ne fais pas avec plaisir m’est bientôt impossible à faire” (*R*, OC I, p. 1053 – my emphasis). For instance, it entails that he is not made for citizenry, for civil society is based on duties and obligations. (*R*, OC I, p. 1053-1054 and 1059). His distaste questions his ability to be just. Fortunately for him, he illustrates his distaste for obligations only with circumstances in which his own good is affected. But what about a situation where an evil threatens someone else? Rather than

feeling obliged to help, Rousseau would presumably be as passive as when an evil threatens his own good.<sup>90</sup>

It is also a question if Rousseau would be suited to relations of love and friendship. At the end of the Sixth Walk, when Rousseau summarizes his *rêverie* on beneficence, he restricts his distaste for obligations to those of “civil society.” But Rousseau does not make any proviso for friendship in the Sixth Walk about his hatred for obligations. He makes it clear when he imagines himself wearing Gyges’ ring that he would have no friends.<sup>91</sup> Indeed, friendship generates expectations of goodwill from our friends, and these expectations generate an obligation (according to Rousseau’s argument). Would the obligation to fulfill these expectations be unbearable to Rousseau? In his letters to Malesherbes, Rousseau suggested that friendship did not entail any duty and allowed friends to follow the pure inclinations of their heart (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1132).<sup>92</sup> According to his argument in the Sixth Walk, it is difficult to see why love and friendship would remain an exception. Again, his hatred for obligations would not contradict the fact that his heart is able to feel sentiments of love and friendship. It would just prove that he has to settle for imaginary relations.

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90. “Presumably, then, Rousseau could never bring himself to tell one friend that he was being cheated by another friend, but he could resist helping the second friend cheat the first. Rousseau could not act in such a manner as to end the cheating, but he could keep from ministering to it” (Charles Butterworth, “Interpretative Essay” in *The Rêveries of the Solitary Walker* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992), p. 202),

91. “J’exercerois sur eux une bienveillance universelle et parfaitement désintéressée: *mais sans former jamais d’attachement particulier, et sans porter le joug d’aucun devoir [...]*” (*R*, OC I, p. 1057 – my emphasis).

92. This is also said by Rousseau in his fiction about being rich in *Émile*: “L’indépendance et l’égalité laisseroient à mes liaisons toute la candeur de la bienveillance, et où le devoir ni l’intérêt n’entreroient pour rien, le plaisir et l’amitié feroient seuls la loi” (*E*, OC IV, p. 683).

Rousseau may conclude that he is ill suited for civil society because of his “independent nature.” But he has not proven why he should be exempted of his civil duties. No less has he proven why his refusal to do good to others is legitimate. The problem of his reasoning, it seems, is that he jumps from “what is” to “what ought to be.” Moreover, Rousseau has shown how he was able to do good in a moderate way in the past. Why not continue to behave in this manner?

#### *2.4.2.3 – The Accidental Obstacle*

As if tacitly acknowledging that the natural obstacle is insufficient to vindicate his behavior, Rousseau uses another excuse to justify his policy of abstention. It is not the incompatibility between his nature and the nature of society that vindicates his behavior, but the fact that his nature has been transformed by an accident. Born the “most trusting of men,” Rousseau’s trust had never been betrayed during the first forty years of his life. But when he became a celebrity, his friends and his relations, who were formerly honest and trustworthy, turned their back on him. It took twenty years for Rousseau to discover that he was the target of a plot aiming at destroying his reputation and at making him miserable. This accident transformed his natural propensity to do good to others:

Convaincu par vingt ans d’experience que tout ce que la nature a mis d’heureuses dispositions dans mon coeur est tourné par ma destinée, et par ceux qui en disposent au préjudice de moi-même ou d’autrui, je ne puis plus regarder une bonne oeuvre qu’on me presente à faire que comme un piège qu’on me tend et sous lequel est caché quelque mal (*R*, OC I, p. 1055).

Rousseau feels that he is justified in abstaining from doing any good to others, because any occasion that is offered to him to do good is a trap designed to further incriminate him as a monster. Rousseau's natural trust in men, a condition for him to be interested in doing good to them, has been transformed into a universal distrust: "Car quand on est une fois sorti de son naturel, il n'y a plus de bornes qui nous retiennent" (*R*, OC I, p. 1056).<sup>93</sup>

Is Rousseau's universal distrust justified according to him? He wonders if he has not changed too much over time; and he "undoubtedly" goes too far when he avoids good deeds when all the appearances indicate that his persecutors will not fool him. Yet these qualifications do not induce Rousseau to change his policy of abstention, for he is "certain" that the plotters do not let him see things as they are. Since he is sure that every good motive to do a good deed is a deception, he is justified in his abstention.

But why not do good to others even if his enemies fool him? Would he not have the merit of his good intention? Rousseau admits that he would have the merit; but he denies that it is a sufficient motivation to act. The indignation of being fooled, added to the fact that his good action is useless, destroys the charm of the good action. Despite calling his indignation a reaction of his "amour-propre," Rousseau does not seem to disapprove of his policy of abstention. Moreover, his concern for being useful shows that Rousseau is not solely concerned by his own pleasure when he does a good action.<sup>94</sup>

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93. Compare with the lesson Rousseau draws earlier in the Walk: "C'est alors que j'eus lieu de connoître que tous les penchans de la nature sans excepter la bienfaisance elle-même portés ou suivis dans la société sans prudence et sans choix changent de nature et deviennent souvent aussi nuisibles qu'ils étoient utiles dans leur première direction. Tant de cruelles expériences changèrent peu à peu mes premières dispositions, ou plustot les renfermant enfin dans leurs véritables bornes, elles m'apprirent à suivre moins aveuglément mon penchant à bien faire, lorsqu'il ne servoit qu'à favoriser la méchanceté d'autrui" (*R*, OC I, p. 1052).

94. Again, Rousseau is nonetheless proud to have a heart that is sensitive to generous sentiments and full of good intentions: "J'étois fait pour vivre, et je meurs sans avoir vécu. Au moins ce n'a pas été ma faute, et je

The universal plot against Rousseau therefore provides sufficient justification for Rousseau's abstention. Not only is Rousseau right to refuse to do good to others, he is also right to refuse to fulfill his civic duties, since he has been proscribed of society by a unanimous agreement: "*Hors d'état de bien faire et pour moi-même et pour autrui, je m'abstiens d'agir; et cet état qui n'est innocent que parce qu'il est forcé, me fait trouver une sorte de douceur à me livrer pleinement sans reproche à mon penchant naturel*" (R, OC I, p. 1056 – my emphasis). The almighty and universal conspiracy against Rousseau makes his state of solitude innocent; without the plot, apparently, Rousseau would be guilty.

But Rousseau has defended his solitude without the help of the plot in the past. He admitted in the letters to Malesherbes that his disputes with the philosophes and his celebrity were only a pretext to live alone. His vindication of his solitude was in the goodness and happiness that it allows. And if someone asked him about his duties toward society, Rousseau replied that the help he has provided to peasants and the books he has written fulfilled his duties. From this perspective, the excuse provided by the plot appears superfluous.

#### 2.4.3 – *Is Rousseau's Selfishness Legitimate?*

Rousseau is deprived of the "truest happiness a human can savor" because of the plot. As a consequence, Rousseau should be unhappy. Yet as so many unfortunate events

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porterai à l'auteur de mon être, sinon l'offrande des bonnes œuvres qu'on ne m'a pas laissé faire, du moins un tribut de bonnes intentions frustrées, de sentimens sains mais rendus sans effet" (R, OC I, p. 1004).

of human life, the plot offers no small compensation for losing the happiness of doing good: it offers to Rousseau a good conscience. Rousseau can let himself go to his natural inclination – perhaps his laziness, more probably his propensity to circumscribe himself for savoring his *rêveries* (*R*, OC I, p. 1040) – without remorse. Accordingly, the accident of the plot is providential, since it allows Rousseau to reunite duty and inclination. As Rousseau puts it at the beginning of the Seventh Walk – which sums up the lesson of the Sixth Walk:

Dans la situation où me voilà, je n'ai plus d'autre règle de conduite que de suivre en tout mon penchant sans contrainte. Je ne peux rien à mon sort, je n'ai que des inclinations innocentes, et tous les jugemens des hommes étant désormais nuls pour moi, la sagesse même veut qu'en ce qui reste à ma portée je fasse tout ce qui me flatte, soit en public soit à-part-moi, sans autre règle que ma fantaisie, et sans autre mesure que le peu de force qui m'est resté. [...] Oui, sans doute, la raison me permet, me prescrit même de me livrer à tout penchant qui m'attire et que rien ne m'empêche de suivre (*R*, OC I, p. 1060-1061).

In what should have been the conclusion of the *Rêveries*, we learn that the plot has given amazing freedom to Rousseau. He can do whatever he desires to do without shame and without blame, even in public, because his obligation to society has been severed by the conspiracy against him.

Rousseau's project appears in contradiction with what he has denounced all his life. For instance, the secret doctrine of the philosophers so often condemned by Rousseau holds that "the sole duty of man is to follow the inclinations of his heart in

everything” (C, OC I, p. 468).<sup>95</sup> Rousseau now maintains this doctrine. His complacent selfishness could be expected from a philosopher like him, for he describes philosophers as prideful men who remain insensitive to the cry of help of weak men. The famous bit about the philosopher who is only interested by the problems of society in general, and who refrains from helping a fellow human being who is getting strangled under his window with a few reasonings, may have come from Diderot;<sup>96</sup> but Rousseau repeated this critique of the self-satisfied philosopher in his other works. For instance, in the *Préface au Narcisse*, Rousseau writes:

Le goût de la philosophie relâche tous les liens d’estime et de bienveillance qui attachent les hommes à la société, et c’est peut-être le plus dangereux des maux qu’elle engendre. [...] À force de réfléchir sur l’humanité, à force d’observer les hommes, le Philosophe apprend à les apprécier selon leur valeur, et il est difficile d’avoir de l’affection pour ce qu’on méprise. [...] La famille, la patrie deviennent pour lui des mots vuides de sens: il n’est ni parent, ni citoyen, ni homme; il est philosophe (*Préface au Narcisse*, OC II, p. 967).

The Solitary Walker, who no longer has any ties to the rest of humanity, who has abandoned his children and who has renounced his citizenship, strangely looks like this self-centered philosopher. He claims, however, that despite his isolation from men, words like “family” and “fatherland” are not empty; he insists that he sincerely loves morality and virtue:

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95. “In a letter to Tronchin, Rousseau declared: ‘There is not a single man in the world who in doing everything his heart proposed to him would not soon become the worst of scoundrels’ (Maurice Cranston, *The Noble Savage*, p. 46).

96. Cf. *Second Discours*, OC III, p. 156 and note 2.

Ils ne me sont même indifferens qu'en ce qui se rapporte à moi; car dans leurs rapports entre eux, ils peuvent encor m'interessier et m'émouvoir comme les personnages d'un Drame que je verrois représenter. Il faudroit que mon être moral fût anéanti pour que la justice me devint indifférente. Le spectacle de l'injustice et de la méchanceté me fait encor bouillir le sang de colère; les actes de vertu où je ne vois ni forfanterie ni ostentation me font toujours tressaillir de joye et m'arrachent encor de douces larmes (*R*, OC I, p. 1057).<sup>97</sup>

Rousseau remains sensitive to justice and morality, but is this enough to distinguish him from his critique of the self-centered philosopher? Isn't he guilty of feeling "*cette pitié stérile et cruelle qui se contente de plaindre les maux qu'elle peut guérir*" (*E*, OC IV, p. 545)? Why take pride in this feeling? According to his argument in his *Lettre à d'Alembert sur les spectacles*, there is no merit in taking the side of justice when one's interests are not involved in the issue.<sup>98</sup> From his own admission, Rousseau is interested in humanity's troubles as if here were viewing some drama from his seat at the theatre. This puts him in the same position as those tyrants he condemned in the *Second Discours* and the *Lettre à D'Alembert* for their "sterile compassion." Sylla and Alexandre of Pheres were cruel and insensitive tyrants who cried at the theater when they witnessed men suffering injustices. Rousseau attacks this effect of the theater because it makes men think that they are just because they feel disgusted at the sight of injustices. Men believe that they have fulfilled the duties of humanity because of the tears they have

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97. The Solitary Walker is like the ideal misanthrope he describes in his letter to d'Alembert: "Qu'il s'empporte sur tous les desordres dont il n'est que le témoin; ce sont toujours de nouveaux traits au tableau; mais qu'il soit froid sur celui qui s'adresse directement à lui: car, ayant déclaré la guerre aux méchants, il s'attend bien qu'ils la lui feront à leur tour" (*LAD*, OC V, p. 37).

98. "Le cœur de l'homme est toujours droit sur tout ce qui ne se rapporte pas personnellement à lui. Dans les querelles dont nous sommes purement Spectateurs, nous prenons à l'instant le parti de la justice, et il n'y a point d'acte de méchanceté qui ne nous donne une vive indignation, tant que nous n'en tirons aucun profit" (*LAD*, OC V, p. 22).



shed. They do not feel the necessity to imitate the virtue they love so much because it would cost them too much. Rousseau in the *Lettre à d'Alembert* is sarcastic:

Au fond, quand un homme est allé admirer de belles actions dans des fables, et pleurer des malheurs imaginaires, qu'a-t-on encore à exiger de lui? N'est-il pas content de lui-même? Ne s'applaudit-il pas de sa belle ame? Ne s'est-il pas acquitté de tout ce qu'il doit à la vertu par l'hommage qu'il vient de lui rendre? Que voudroit-on qu'il fit de plus? Qu'il la pratiquât lui-même? (*LAD*, OC V, p. 23-24)

How does the Solitary Walker differ from the complacent philosopher? How does he differ from the compassionate tyrant?

The answer is the same as before. Rousseau is compelled to adopt the secret doctrine. He is constrained to be selfish. Thus he cannot be charged of his own accusation against the *philosophes*, namely that they pay lip service to virtue while secretly teaching a policy of selfishness to their public.<sup>99</sup> Yet Rousseau makes goodness very attractive in his writings, especially in his autobiographical writings. Not only does he make it attractive, but he tries to make it legitimate in a civilized context. The Sixth Walk, for example, does not vindicate Rousseau's selfishness only on the basis of the plot, but also on the basis of nature. Being constrained to live alone and follow one's inclination is not such a bad outcome. Rousseau's declamations that he would prefer to be virtuous, and that his selfish behavior should be blamed, are weak and seldom found. We rather see an attempt to prove that it is his duty to be selfish.

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99. See Christopher Kelly, *Rousseau As Author* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 148-155.

The figure of the good and weak man – the Solitary Walker – had more influence among Rousseau’s reader than the figure of the virtuous man or woman, perhaps because Rousseau could not condemn himself in the name of his principles. He preferred to adapt his principles to his behavior after he felt he was despised by humanity. This is apparent in the ending of the Sixth Walk. In what appears to be a deliberate modification of one of his political tenets, Rousseau writes: “[Le tort des hommes] n’a donc pas été de m’écarter de la société comme un membre inutile, mais de m’en proscrire comme un membre pernicieux” (*R*, OC I, p. 1059).<sup>100</sup> Rousseau held that a useless member of society is also a pernicious member of society. Now his incapacity to discharge his duties and to help others is not pernicious.<sup>101</sup>

Rousseau is not pernicious to society because he is useless or “*nul*.” He is also not pernicious because he has no pernicious passion in his heart: “Je n’ai dans le cœur le germe d’aucune passion nuisible” (*R*, OC I, p. 1057). The fiction of Gyges’ ring is meant to illustrate this point. If Rousseau were almighty, if he escaped the obstacle of obligations and the obstacle of the conspiracy, his sole inclination would be to do good to others. Yet the fiction abruptly ends with Rousseau’s admission that he would commit criminal acts if he had the ability to penetrate everywhere without being noticed. Rousseau obviously means that he would not control his erotic longings if he wore Gyges’ ring: “Ce seroit bien mal connoître la nature et moi-même que de me flater que ces facilités ne m’auroient point séduit, ou que la raison m’auroit arrêté dans cette fatale

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100. Compare to *PD*, OC III, 18; and *E*, OC IV, p. 470. The manuscript shows that Rousseau had written “dangereux” before changing to “pernicieux”. It suggests a deliberate reference to his older position.

101. Rousseau’s formulation implies that men were right to proscribe him because he is useless. But if his uselessness is not pernicious, why should he be proscribed? His presence in society is a matter of indifference.

pente. Sûr de moi sur tout autre article, j'étois perdu par celui-là seul" (R, OC I, p. 1058). This contradicts his precedent claim that he would be entirely good if he could be almighty and invisible. But it proves his usual claim that to be content to be naturally good in a civilized context is pernicious. Rousseau's *eros* needs to be checked by the laws of the city if it is not to harm other human beings. The real society, the one in which Rousseau finds it difficult to live, has a decisive advantage over the ideal society of the fiction, for it alone can check Rousseau's erotic impulses. Rousseau cannot put himself above the society of men for he would become the inferior of men.<sup>102</sup> Rousseau needs to be constrained by others to be happy and good. The fiction finally proves that Rousseau cannot remain good to other men and to himself if he only followed his natural inclinations. What appeared to be the ideal society for the good man is finally impossible. Is there any society in which Rousseau could be happy? Neither his fictional society nor the real society allows him to fulfill his inclinations and to be what he wants to be.

#### 2.4.4 – Conclusion: Can a Spontaneous Heart Bend to Necessity?

Rousseau claims his right and his ability to follow his inclinations without restraint while he lives in the middle of Paris. But he is restraining at least two natural inclinations. First, as it is unveiled in the fiction of the Sixth Walk, he cannot unleash his sexual inclination. Surely his old age limits the frustration he experiences with respect to

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102. "Celui que sa puissance met au dessus de l'homme doit être au dessus des foiblesses de l'humanité, sans quoi cet excès de force ne servira qu'à le mettre en effet au dessous des autres et de ce qu'il eut été lui-même s'il fut resté leur égal" (R, OC I, p. 1058 – my emphasis). Rousseau judges that the unlimited ability to satisfy his erotic longings would harm him (and not just others).

this constraint, but, at some level, Rousseau must be bearing the burden of obligation. Second, Rousseau must restrain his desire to do good to others. Accordingly, while Rousseau's soul is not divided, since (thanks to the plot) there is no division between his inclinations and his duties, it is not in equilibrium, since there is a disproportion between his desires and his faculties. According to the theory, then, Rousseau is unhappy.

This may show up in the Ninth Walk when Rousseau appears to settle for contentment rather than happiness. His actual situation does not allow him to satisfy his inclination to beneficence. Rousseau is content, therefore, to do good once in a while, here and there when he can. Nonetheless, it is a bit surprising to see him doing good deeds when he has explained how the chains of obligation and the plot makes it impossible for him. Rousseau not only pays pastries to young girls at the Bois de Boulogne, but he tells us that he went back the next week hoping that he could renew his good deed (*R*, OC I, p. 1092). How can he not foresee the unbearable chains of obligation coming at him?

We have seen how Rousseau finds it difficult to bend to any sorts of obligation, even natural necessity. Nonetheless, he claims that he is able to bend to an obligation when it commands abstinence: “Dès que mon devoir et mon coeur étoient en contradiction le premier eut rarement la victoire, à moins qu’il ne fallut seulement que m’abstenir; alors j’étois fort le plus souvent” (*R*, OC I, p. 1053 – my emphasis). But isn't it difficult for a simply good man to show strength? Rousseau here concedes that he bends to his duty “most of the time.” His outbursts of generosity in the Ninth Walk, as well as his generosity towards the lame boy, may be the result of his weakness.

But Rousseau's text makes it questionable that he is even able to abstain himself thanks to his strength. "Toute ma force est négative, et tous mes péchés sont d'omission, rarement de commission," concludes Rousseau (*R*, OC I, p. 1059). What is a negative force? If it means the force of restraining his inclinations when one has to, then Rousseau would be capable of self-control. He would be virtuous. He would have a will. But the previous sentence implies the opposite: "Lorsqu'il faut faire le contraire de ma volonté, je ne le fais point, quoi qu'il arrive; *je ne fais pas non plus ma volonté même*, parce que je suis foible" (*R*, OC I, p. 1059 – my emphasis).

In any case, it is possible to make the following hypothesis. Rousseau finds it difficult to bend to necessity because of his spontaneity. Not only is it difficult to bend to the duties imposed by others, it is also difficult to bend to nature understood as a standard for action. It is even difficult for Rousseau to obey the laws he prescribes to himself. For instance, Rousseau concludes that every act of beneficence entails an obligation that is hardly bearable. He does not desire to become the slave of his beneficiaries. He mandates to himself the rule of either doing good only moderately or of avoiding doing good deeds altogether. In either case, it is difficult to follow his own rule of conduct because of his desire to act spontaneously: "La contrainte d'accord avec mon desir suffit pour l'anéantir, et le changer en répugnance, en aversion même, pour peu qu'elle agisse trop fortement" (*R*, OC I, p. 1053). If abstention is a duty, then it may be difficult for Rousseau to constrain himself. This is the price to pay if one wants to be merely good rather than virtuous in a civilized context.

# Chapter Four

## *Happiness and Rêveries*

Rousseau's relationship to society is a puzzle. His desire to live among men sometimes appears to be sincere, at others, insincere. His desire for friendship and glory are obvious, and yet he sometimes denies them. Rousseau praises solitude as the only possible state of happiness, but his solitude is not as solitary as he claims it is. We have seen why Rousseau praises solitude for the independence and goodness it allows. But what does Rousseau do when he is alone? What makes him positively happy? Rousseau's happiness in his solitude revolves around his *rêveries*. This chapter will explore the apparent meaning and the obstacles to the understanding of this activity or state of mind.

We tend to think of a *rêverie* as a frivolous thought. Yet, according to the *Petit Robert*, the term “*rêverie*” was originally a synonym of “*pensée*” or “*méditation*.” It could be used to describe a philosophical reflection or scientific speculations. It could also be used to describe a moral deliberation. For instance, in *Manon Lescaut*, Tiberge calls a *rêverie* his deliberation about whether he should help financially le chevalier des Grieux.<sup>1</sup>

But the term could also mean the opposite. It could denote the product of a mind that follows the lead of its thought rather than imposing an order to them. In this sense, a *rêverie* was indeed a frivolous thought. For instance, Rousseau talks of the “dangereuses

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1. L'Abbé Prévost, *Manon Lescaut* (Paris: Boking International, 1994), p. 65.

reveries des Hobbes et des Spinosas”<sup>2</sup> in the *Premier Discours*, or says that his reader may think that his *Émile* is “les rêveries d’un visionnaire sur l’éducation.”<sup>3</sup>

In the *Rêveries*, Rousseau uses the term in the sense of *vagabondage de la pensée*.<sup>4</sup> However, his book entitled *Les rêveries du Promeneur Solitaire* is not simply a collection of wandering thoughts. The order of the first Seven Walks may be a topic of debate, but most commentators acknowledge the existence of an order (the three last Walks were in the form of a draft and their relation to the rest of the work is more obscure). Each Walk in itself is hardly incoherent in its form. Rousseau does not jump from a topic to another. They contain repetitions and contradictions, but their topic and its progression are not chaotic. In truth, Rousseau’s depiction of his book as a “*informe journal de mes rêveries*” (*R*, OC I, p. 1000) is a great puzzle, second only to the puzzle of why he titled every chapter of the book a “*Promenade*” rather than a “*Rêverie*,” especially since during the course of the book he never refers to the chapters as “*Promenades*.”<sup>5</sup>

In any case, Rousseau used the term to describe a literary output, perhaps with the intention of creating a new genre of literature. A *rêverie* is the fruit of Rousseau’s solitary meditations (*R*, OC I, p. 1001). It describes the output of his meditation rather than the meditation itself. In fact, Rousseau rarely assimilates the word “*rêverie*” to “meditating.”

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2. *PD*, OC III, p. 28.

3. *E*, OC IV, p. 242.

4. “[Ces] rêveries qui [remplissent mes promenades] quand je laisse ma tête entièrement libre, et mes idées suivre leur pente sans gêne” (*R*, OC I, p. 1002).

5. The only connection between the two terms is found in Rousseau’s preparatory notes to the *Rêveries*: “Pour bien remplir le titre de ce recueil je l’aurois du commencer il y a soixante ans: car ma vie entière n’a guère été qu’une longue rêverie divisée en chapitres par mes promenades de chaque jour” (*Ébauche des Rêveries*, OC I, p. 1165). The *promenade* seems to be the necessary condition to launch a *rêverie*.

His *rêverie* may include a meditation, but it cannot be reduced to it. For instance, when Rousseau uses the term in the *Second Walk*, it describes a mix of nostalgia, of meditation, and of the mental preparation to write his *rêverie* on paper.<sup>6</sup> When Rousseau describes his philosophical quest for the truth in the Third Walk, he never uses the term *rêverie*, but he uses the term *méditation* five times. Furthermore, towards the end of the *Rêveries*, he explicitly separates a *rêverie* from a meditation.<sup>7</sup> What is clear is that his most common use of the term in his autobiographical writings is to describe a state of delirium, fantasy and ecstasy.

The earliest description provided by Rousseau of his happy *rêveries* is to be found in the letters to Malesherbes. There we can see that Rousseau enjoys two distinct kinds of *rêveries*. One provides a pleasurable sentiment of nostalgia; the other a pleasurable sentiment of unlimited expansion. Both seem to be grounded on Rousseau's pleasure in filling a void within his being. In his last work, however, Rousseau praises a type of *rêverie* that makes him whole and self-sufficient. This *rêverie* stands in stark contrast to those of the third letter to Malesherbes, and I will discuss the problems related to the tension between Rousseau's conceptions of happiness. Finally, I will turn to the old usage of *rêverie* by discussing the relationship between truth and happiness for Rousseau. Rousseau's philosophical activity raises fundamental riddles since his notion of happiness appears to elude entirely this activity.

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6. Cf. *R*, OC I, p. 1004.

7. Cf. *R*, OC I, p. 1062.



*I – Nostalgia, Ecstasy and Melancholia: The Third Letter to Malesherbes*

*1.1 – Independence and Goodwill*

The third letter is the most charming letter of the set. Rousseau departs from the theme of self-vindication and shares his experience of happiness with Malesherbes. Rousseau describes the peak of human joy, but his description is wrapped with melancholic considerations. He says, for instance, that this experience is a distant memory, because his sickness now makes him unable to live it again. His description is enveloped with sad considerations about his misery and forthcoming death. The contrast stimulates sharp emotions in the reader's heart and raises sympathy for Rousseau's destiny.

The letter describes Rousseau's experience of a blissful day. It begins by setting out its conditions. The first condition is to have chores that he is free to postpone: "Divers soins que je remplissois tous avec plaisir, parce que je pouvois les remettre à un autre tems" (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1139). This indicates again that Rousseau's laziness is in fact a hatred for obligations. If Rousseau had been lazy in the typical understanding of the term, these chores would have bothered him regardless of whether he was obliged to do them or not. But a happy day is first and foremost a day when no intruder disturbs him. Rousseau noticed that every time he had to suffer visitors during the day, he ended up grumbling at night: "J'étois rarement content des autres et jamais de moi" (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1141). Rousseau's bad shame, his distaste for obligations, his hypersensitivity to

wickedness and his *esprit de l'escalier* make day-to-day human relationships unsatisfying.

These conditions show that Rousseau's happiness is not independent of Fortune. Rousseau is not the stoic philosopher who remains insensitive to whatever may happen to him. His freedom and his solitude can be altered or destroyed by an unforeseen task to do or the untimely arrival of a visitor. His heart feels a genuine pleasure when he is sure that no one will bother him for the rest of the day. The deliverance from obligations is in itself pleasurable: "Avec quel battement de coeur, avec quel petillement de joye je commençois à respirer en me sentant sauvé, en me disant: Me voila maitre de moi pour le reste de ce jour!" (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1139) Rousseau is freed from a potential evil. His imagination can focus on something else than his fear of being disturbed. Being released from a potential evil produces a pleasurable sentiment of freedom. If Rousseau wants to be independent, it is without anesthetizing his sensitivity or without becoming insensitive to the good tidings of Fortune.

Once he has escaped society, Rousseau seeks a desert place in the forest. This place must have a specific quality: "Quelque lieu desert où rien ne montrant la main des hommes n'annonçat la servitude et la domination" (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1139). Rousseau writes this letter in a time when he was unaware of the plot against him. His idea of humanity is already reduced to these most displeasing facts. Any sign of human work automatically conjures up an image of servility and domination in his mind. Rousseau is so reluctant to think of humanity that he uses his imagination to remove every one of its signs: "[Je cherchois] quelque asile où je pusse croire avoir pénétré le premier et où nul

tiers importun ne vint s'interposer entre la nature et moi" (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1139-1140). Paradoxically, Rousseau's immediate contact with nature is mediated by his imagination. Rousseau does not see his desert asylum as it is.

As I have indicated in the precedent chapter, Rousseau does not present his love of solitude in the letters to Malesherbes as the result of a fundamental disdain or a hatred for humanity. Real men are tyrannical, but Rousseau loves them in the abstract: "C'est parce que je les aime que je les fuis, je souffre moins de leurs maux quand je ne les vois pas" (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1144). Once he has found his asylum in the woods, Rousseau creates a human society in harmony with the wishes of his heart: "Mon imagination ne laissoit pas longtems deserte la terre ainsi parée. Je la peuplois bientôt d'etres selon mon coeur, et chassant bien loin l'opinion, les prejugués, toutes les passions factices, je transportois dans les asiles de la nature des hommes dignes de les habiter" (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1140). At the peak of his happiness, Rousseau dreams of ideal relationships. Yet his happy days do not preclude real relationships. At the end of the day, when he returns from his walk, Rousseau draws a pleasure in his attachment to his domestic circle, namely to Thérèse and to his pets. This real attachment does not spoil his happiness because it is not based on servitude and domination, but on goodwill: "Je soupois de grand appetit dans mon petit domestique, nulle image de servitude et de dependance ne troubloit la bienveillance qui nous unissoit tous" (*R*, OC I, p. 1141). Even his relationship with his dog is not one of domination: "Mon chien lui meme etoit mon ami, non mon esclave, nous avions toujours la meme volonté mais jamais il ne m'a obéi" (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1141). One of Rousseau's visitors at Montlouis confirms that Rousseau treated his dog as a free being: "He not only

wants to be free himself; he wants everyone to be, even his dog, which he never calls to his side but only has it come to him from affection and goodness of heart.”<sup>8</sup>

We can summarize Rousseau’s ideal society in the letters to Malesherbes in the following manner. Rousseau wants relationships that entail no obligations and no dependence. The sole bond must be one of goodwill, but a goodwill that is free to stop or continue at any moment. The attachment must not be obligatory for either party, yet it must be an attachment. Since a bond that threatens to end at any moment is a loose bond, Rousseau says that he prefers chimerical friends. They never disappoint him or deceive him because they are the toys of his will. They have a will identical to his; they want his good as much as he wants his own good, and they understand this good in the same manner as he does. Their goodwill is perfect for Rousseau. The fact that they are chimeras does not matter on this score, because Rousseau does not request from his friends actions proving their goodwill: “Pourvû qu’ils m’aient, et que je le sache, je n’ai pas meme besoin de les voir” (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1145). Friendship is the sentiment of an unalterable sentiment of goodwill towards us.

Chimerical beings can provide this sentiment. Rousseau’s dog can also provide it. If Rousseau seeks a bond with real beings, then perhaps his ideal is better realized with an animal. They demand nothing from him, and their goodwill is easy to feel and to preserve.<sup>9</sup> As for Thérèse, it is likely that Rousseau mostly considered her like an animal, since he claims to be *morally* alone while he was in her constant company. His

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8. Quoted by Cranston, p. 207.

9. According to the same witness at Montlouis, Rousseau said that he found more friendship in his dog than in human beings (Maurice Cranston, *The Noble Savage*, p. 206).

autobiographical writings (and external accounts of his life) show that he considered himself to have obligations towards Thérèse – and especially towards her mother. But Thérèse always appeared disposable and negligible to Rousseau. His obligations towards her did not seem to weigh too much on him.

Rousseau's description of a happy day is deprived of discussion with friends of his intellectual stature. Rousseau does not seem to regret it. It is true that in the fourth letter, he says that he regrets his former friends. But what he principally misses is the sentiment of their good disposition towards him. Philosophical discussion is at best secondary to Rousseau's happiness.

## 1.2 – *The Rêveries*

The peak of Rousseau's happy day is his experience of his *rêveries*. It is not an easy task to categorize the different kinds of *rêveries* that Rousseau experiences. One could perhaps argue that Rousseau did not make a formal difference between them, since he never bothered to attach an adjective to them. Nowhere in his books can we find a formal definition of *rêverie*. As I mentioned in the introduction, the term is vague and can encompass a diversity of mental processes. Even when we restrain the analysis to the occurrences where it is a form of daydreaming, the exact demarcations between the various types of daydreaming always remain somehow arbitrary.

With these precautions in mind, I suggest that a *rêverie* for Rousseau usually connotes “ecstasy.” The word *ecstasy* comes from the Greek *ekstasis* and means

“standing outside oneself” or “being outside of one’s position.” It is arduous to attempt to define out of what position Rousseau considers himself to be when he daydreams. This is because it is not identical for every *rêverie*. It is not clear either that Rousseau thinks every *rêverie* to be an ecstasy. For instance, he describes his happy *rêverie* in the Fifth Walk as the enjoyment of himself. Nothing external to himself is involved in the process. The least that can be said about the universal character of a *rêverie* for Rousseau is that it happens in solitude. I am not aware of Rousseau falling into it in the presence of others – even in the sense of “meditating” or “deliberating.” It is not that Rousseau is unable to forget himself in the presence of men. For instance, Rousseau says that he was another man during the effervescent period of his reform. But the word *rêverie* is reserved for those moments when Rousseau is alone.

I identify two distinct *rêveries* in the third letter to Malesherbes. For lack of better terms, I will call the first the *definite rêverie* and the second the *indefinite rêverie*. What distinguishes them is the manner Rousseau relates to its object. In the definite *rêverie*, Rousseau’s imagination paints precise objects. In the indefinite *rêverie*, his imagination fuses with its objects. I do not claim that these two categorizations perfectly fit every occurrence where Rousseau describes a *rêverie* in his work. Rousseau’s description of his *rêveries* may sometimes intertwine these two types without explicating their difference. But what appears clear to me is that the *rêverie* is not a unique type of mental process or state for Rousseau – in this letter as elsewhere.

The pleasure Rousseau takes in these two *rêveries* is in part specific to each one of them. But they seem to have at their root a common pleasure, which is melancholia. Its

nature is beautifully described in the third letter to Malesherbes. I will attempt to further determine what Rousseau likes in being melancholic and what the connection is between melancholia and the two types of *rêveries*.

### 1.2.1 – The Definite *Rêverie* or *Nostalgia*

Let us go back to Rousseau's happy day. The ascension towards the peak of his day begins with Rousseau being able to find a solitary spot in nature. His contemplation of the most beautiful products of nature stimulates his "idle and dreamy mood." He launches into the first of his *rêveries*:

Mon imagination ne laissoit pas longtems deserte la terre ainsi parée. Je la peuplois bientôt d'etres selon mon coeur, et chassant bien loin l'opinion, les prejugsés, toutes les passions factices, je transportois dans les asiles de la nature des hommes dignes de les habiter. Je m'en formois une société charmante dont je ne me sentoís pas indigne. Je me faisois un siècle d'or à ma fantaisie et remplissant ces beaux jours de toutes les scenes de ma vie qui m'avoient laissé de doux souvenirs, et de toutes celles que mon coeur pouvoit desirer encore (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1140).

Rousseau does not want to feel absolutely alone. His imagination fills the physical desert with human beings agreeable to his heart. It also replaces the natural setting he perceives through his senses with a setting made of all the beautiful memories of his life and of events he wished he could experience. His imagination creates beings and events that he has never known; and it re-creates beings and events that he has known. His memory, a form of imagination, is at play, as well as his pure creative powers. The principle that

guides his creation is his heart. More precisely, its principle is Rousseau's desire: people and situations which Rousseau desires to exist in reality.

Rousseau then imagines himself interacting with these beings in these settings. The effect of this creation is to feed Rousseau's heart with pleasurable sentiments: "Je m'attendrissois jusqu'aux larmes sur les vrais plaisirs de l'humanité, plaisir si délicieux, si purs et qui sont désormais si loin des hommes. [Je me livrois] sans distraction aux sentimens exquis dont mon ame étoit pleine" (*R*, OC I, p. 1140). His *rêverie* provides him a variety of sentiments, which are purer than those of real life. He can fancy himself to be in love with an excellent woman and feel the sentiment of love. He can imagine faithful friends and enjoy the sentiment of friendship. He can recall the pleasurable moments of his existence and live them anew. He can fancy situations he has never experienced and feel the sentiments that they would stimulate.<sup>10</sup>

Happiness is feeling pleasurable sentiments through imagination. However, the term "pleasurable" should not be equated with "joyful." Rousseau's pleasurable sentiments also have a bitter side: "Je m'attendrissois jusqu'aux larmes sur les vrais plaisirs de l'humanité, plaisirs si délicieux, si purs et qui sont désormais si loin des hommes." Although Rousseau does not make the causal link explicit, the imagination of pure and true human passions brings tears because, as the end of the sentence suggests, it is no more a possibility for men. It recalls a remark from the *Premier Discours*: "On ne peut réfléchir sur les mœurs, qu'on ne se plaise à se rappeler l'image de la simplicité des

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10. "Dans mes continuelles extases je m'enivrais à torrens des plus délicieux sentimens qui jamais soient entrés dans un coeur d'homme. Oubliant tout à fait la race humaine, je me dis des sociétés de créatures parfaites aussi celestes par leurs vertus que par leurs beautés, d'amis sûrs, tendres, fidelles, tels que je n'en trouvai jamais ici bas" (*C*, OC I, p. 428).



premiers tems. C'est un beau rivage, paré des seules mains de la nature vers lequel on tourne incessamment les yeux, et dont on se sent éloigner à regret" (*PD*, OC III, p. 22). Rousseau's pleasure in regretting a known or an unknown past could be called nostalgia.

Rousseau's *rêverie* is not necessarily limited to events of the past. He can also fancy possible states he could experience in the future, or he wishes he could experience while knowing that it is impossible. Rousseau obviously took a strong pleasure in constructing castles in the air. He loved to fancy himself living another life than his own. These chimeras may instruct him about who he is or instruct others about their duty, but they may also attest to Rousseau's pleasure in feeling himself under someone else's skin.<sup>11</sup> Shall we call this pleasure nostalgia, even if its object is in the future or is a timeless possibility? It would be nostalgia in the sense of regretting a situation someone has never known: "Tu connais cette maladie fiévreuse qui s'empare de nous dans les froides misères, cette nostalgie du pays qu'on ignore, cette angoisse de la curiosité?"<sup>12</sup> Rousseau's pleasure in projecting himself into the future was of course stronger when he was young. As he became older, fancying his possible future, as well as creating pure fictions, became impossible to him (*C*, OC I, p. 226). His *rêveries* are reduced to the re-creation of his past life (*R*, OC I, p. 1002). He can only be happy by remembering times when he was happy.

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11. Cf. *C*, OC I, p. 43, 108, 271, 404; *R*, OC I, p. 1057-1059; *E*, OC IV, p. 678ss.

12. Charles Baudelaire, "L'invitation au voyage" in *Le Spleen de Paris* (Paris: Le livre de poche, 1967), p. 53. Baudelaire thought about calling his book "Le Promeneur Solitaire" (Cf. OC I, p. XV).

### 1.2.2 – *The Indefinite Rêverie or Confusion*

The definite *rêverie* is pleasurable. But either it is not altogether satisfying or it can't be maintained, for Rousseau soon delves into another kind of *rêverie*. Rousseau describes it step by step. There is at the outset an attempt from his part to understand the universe:

Bientôt de la surface de la terre j'élevois mes idées à tous les êtres de la nature, au système universel des choses, à l'être incompréhensible qui embrasse tout. Alors l'esprit perdu dans cette immensité, je ne pensois pas, je ne raisonnois pas, je ne philosophois pas (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1141).

Rousseau attempts to grasp the whole and the being that embraces the whole. But his attempt is a failure. The being that embraces the whole is incomprehensible and the whole is too great to be circumscribed by his mind. His attempt is a failure, but it is not a deception, for it results in a pleasurable feeling of confusion:

Je me sentois avec une sorte de volupté accablé du poids de cet univers, je me livrois avec ravissement à la confusion de ces grandes idées, j'aimois à me perdre en imagination dans l'espace, mon coeur resserré dans les bornes des etres s'y trouvoit trop à l'étroit, j'étouffois dans l'univers, j'aurois voulu m'elancer dans l'infini (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1141).

Rousseau first says that he was overwhelmed by the weight of the universe. I assume that by an overwhelming weight, Rousseau means that the universe cannot be grasped by his mind. The incomprehensibility of the universe produces in some sense the feeling of a

burden.<sup>13</sup> But Rousseau does not dwell on this unpleasant feeling. He rather feels a delight in the confusion of his mind. He likes to feel confusion, i.e. *to merge with* the unexplainable and unlimited universe. Rousseau enters into an ecstatic state in which he confuses his self and the universe. If we use the language of the theory of expansion, we can assume that what pleases him is to feel his being in, so to speak, every corner of the universe. He appears to feel the pleasure of identification that I have discussed in the previous chapter. The identification makes him forget about his narrow self. It merges the self with what it finds beautiful and wants to participate in.

It is not clear how much Rousseau continues to feel his own self in the process. At its highest point, then, Rousseau's ecstasy appears to dissolve the distinction between the idea of the self and the universe. The aim is however clear: a limitless expansion of his being – in which perhaps *his* being is no longer perceivable. The pleasure he is seeking is to lose sight of any limits, particularly his own limits. It implies that what limits any being, and particularly his being, is unpleasant. It suggests that Rousseau's pleasure is in being released from any limitations and living in an imaginary unlimited freedom. In this perspective, Rousseau's happiness is defined negatively: he wants to escape any limits rather than find a positive state for his soul. The negativity of his desire explains its unlimited character. But from another perspective, it could be said that Rousseau enjoys the expansion as such. In other words, stretching his being as far as he could is pleasurable in itself. To identify with another being allows one to feel this pleasure of expansion; but Rousseau is able to taste this pleasure in its purest form, i.e. without

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13. For a term of comparison, see the *Fiction ou morceau allégorique sur la révélation*, OC IV, p. 1046-1047.

identifying with anything in particular. His ecstasy makes him happy because Rousseau wants pure pleasures, i.e. pleasures that are not diluted by any pain and that can be enjoyed without restraint.

Rousseau's ecstatic happiness resembles the experience of philosophic *eros*. But there are notable differences between the two experiences. First, Rousseau makes it clear that his pleasure is not philosophic: "Je ne pensois pas, je ne raisonnois pas, je ne philosophois pas." Reason serves to launch the ecstatic state, but only because of its failure to grasp the whole. What Rousseau seeks is a sentiment, not the truth. As evidence, Rousseau imagines what it would be like if he was able to solve the mysteries of the universe. The result of this imaginary experimentation shows him that his heart would be less delighted by the truth than by the ecstasy he has experienced: "Je crois que si j'eusse dévoilé tous les mysteres de la nature, je me serois senti dans une situation moins delicieuse que cette etourdissante extase à laquelle mon esprit se livroit sans retenue" (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1141). Rousseau's aim is to satisfy the demands of his heart through the use of his imagination. The goal of philosophy, i.e. science, is less enticing than the goal of Rousseau, i.e. maximizing his *amour de soi*. This raises the question to which extent Rousseau desires to know the truth, which I shall discuss later.

Rousseau's rapturous state is not philosophic, and it is not erotic either. If we define *eros* as a desire for immortality, or perhaps of what is eternal, we see that this is not what Rousseau is aiming at. Rousseau's fundamental desire, i.e. his *amour de soi*, has as a target either its liberation from any limits, or the dissolution of the self into something indefinite. It is true, however, that Rousseau says that he sometimes ended up

by a sort of cry of the heart: “Ô grand etre! ô grand etre” (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1141). But the expression again stresses the unspeakable and unlimited nature of this being, rather than its eternal essence.

### *1.2.3 – Melancholia as the Core of Rousseau’s Happiness*

The two *rêveries* of the third letter to Malesherbes present notable differences. The definite *rêverie* preserves the conscience of Rousseau’s distinct self. The imaginary objects he likes to relate to also remain definite. The indefinite *rêverie* blends Rousseau with its objects. In the first *rêverie*, the imagination creates and re-creates; it is under Rousseau’s control. In the second, it merges Rousseau with the universe; it seems out of his control. The specific pleasure Rousseau takes in the definite *rêverie* is to become intoxicated with a variety of pleasurable sentiments; the specific pleasure of the indefinite *rêverie* is to be intoxicated with confusion.

However, in both cases, Rousseau seems to enjoy a similar pleasure: he loves desiring. In a part of the text that acts as a pivot between the two *rêveries*, Rousseau describes with vivid details what happened to him sometimes during his definite *rêveries*:

Cependant au milieu de tout cela je l’avouë, le néant de mes chimeres venoit quelquefois la contrister tout à coup. Quand tous mes rêves se seroient tournés en réalités ils ne m’auroient pas suffi; j’aurois imaginé, revé, désiré encore. Je trouvois en moi un vuide inexplicable que rien n’auroit pu remplir; un certain elancement du coeur vers une autre sorte de jouissance dont je n’avois pas d’idée et dont pourtant je sentois le besoin. Hé bien Monsieur cela meme étoit jouissance, puisque j’en étois pénétré

d'un sentiment tres vif et d'une tristesse attirante que je n'aurois pas voulu ne pas avoir (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1140).

The first sentence offers an ambiguity. Rousseau is saddened by the emptiness of his imaginary objects. He could mean that he is saddened by the fact that the objects of his desires are not real. But in the next sentence, Rousseau says that his chimeras could never have satisfied him. The “*néant*” or the emptiness that makes him sad seems rather to be the fact that the object of his desires cannot satisfy his desires – hence their emptiness. The third sentence strengthens the latter interpretation. Rousseau transfers the emptiness of his chimeras to his own being, as if it is there that his problem lies. This “unexplainable void” that cannot be filled saddens him. But this admission is immediately counterbalanced by the admission that Rousseau likes this feeling of emptiness. Rousseau likes it to the point that he would not want to feel it filled. The result is that Rousseau is sad but does not want to feel otherwise. He approves of his sadness as a source of joy and perhaps of his entire happiness.

Rousseau does not give a name to this “*tristesse attirante*.” It appears to be what Malesherbes thought was afflicting Rousseau, namely melancholia. Victor Hugo defined this affection of the soul in the most concise manner: “La mélancolie, c’est le bonheur d’être triste.” In the *Confessions*, Rousseau provides a multitude of examples of his melancholic nature. For instance:

Dans ce voyage de Vevai je me livrois en suivant ce beau rivage à la plus douce mélancolie. Mon coeur s’élançoit avec ardeur à mille félicités innocentes; je m’attendrissois, je soupirois et pleurois comme un enfant. Combien de fois m’arrêtant pour pleurer à mon aise, assis sur une grosse

pierre, je me suis amusé à voir tomber mes larmes dans l'eau (C, OC I, p.152).

If it is not clear to what extent Rousseau, in the *Confessions*, embraces his melancholic nature or thinks that it is his genuine nature, it is, however, to his own admission, his most constant attitude (C, OC I, p. 427).<sup>14</sup>

The mechanics of melancholia are difficult to explain. It stems from the conclusion that life here below cannot satisfy the desires of the heart. But this implies two contradictory attitudes. On the one hand, it entails a depreciation of everything that exists as vile, petty and wicked and as unworthy of affection. The melancholic man, insofar as he is caught in this sad reality, will even be self-deprecating: "Aigri par les injustices que j'avois éprouvées, par celle dont j'avois été le témoin, souvent affligé du desordre où l'exemple et la force m'avoient entraîné moi-même, j'ai pris en mépris mon siècle et mes contemporains" (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1134-1135). The experience of this world conduces to a gritty realism, a claim to be disenchanted and without illusions.<sup>15</sup> Yet the melancholic

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14. Rousseau identified as soon as 1740 this inexplicable source of sadness within him (see Marcel Raymond, *La Quête de soi et la rêverie*, p. 83). It is not an effect of the *Illumination de Vincennes* or of the discovery of his system.

15. Rousseau sometimes claims that it is his experience that disenchanted him: "Jetté dès mon enfance dans le tourbillon du monde j'appris de bonne heure par l'expérience que je n'étois pas fait pour y vivre, et que je n'y parviendrois jamais à l'état dont mon cœur sentoit le besoin" (*R*, OC I, p. 1012). But as Chateaubriand beautifully explains, the disillusion with reality is not necessarily the result of experience: "On est détrompé sans avoir joui; il reste encore des désirs, et l'on n'a plus d'illusions. L'imagination est riche, abondante et merveilleuse; l'existence pauvre, sèche et désenchantée. On habite, avec un cœur plein, un monde vide; et, sans avoir usé de rien, on est désabusé de tout" (*Le Génie du christianisme*, Tome II, Book 3, Chap. 9). The early reading of books can produce the same effect as a disheartening experience (C, OC I, p. 41). At the same time that books provide ideals and feed the heart with pure sentiments, they teach that reality will never be able to produce those ideals and sentiments. It raises the question if this realism is a prejudice produced by books, or perhaps more exactly a prejudice stemming from a sentiment of powerlessness and clumsiness and strengthened by reading – rather than a solid conclusion drawn from the examination of experience.

man is also a man who loves to delude himself. How can these two attitudes be compatible in the same soul?

Melancholia is also a paradoxical satisfaction: it is a satisfying dissatisfaction. Why is melancholic sadness a source of happiness rather than misery? Melancholia is in part the love of an ideal world, of illusions created by the heart, according to the heart and for the heart. But melancholia is in fact the pleasure of feeling that these ideals are not enough to satisfy us. Rousseau feels an “*élancement*” towards an object that is indefinable, and thus can never be satisfied. What the heart is seeking is therefore something other than his definite imaginary creations or re-creations.

Why is this dissatisfaction satisfying? The letters to Malesherbes do not say why. But if we speculate on the basis of other sources, we see that the pleasure Rousseau derives from this “*tristesse attirante*” is one of self-esteem. We see first that the anecdote from Rousseau’s trip to Vevai shows that the pleasure comes from contemplating oneself in a state of sadness: “Combien de fois m’arrêtant pour pleurer à mon aise, assis sur une grosse pierre, je me suis amusé à voir tomber mes larmes dans l’eau” (*C*, OC I, p.152). The pleasure implies a consciousness of oneself and is self-reflexive. Later in the *Confessions*, Rousseau describes how he felt again the pleasurable emptiness of his desires. What he enjoys when he contemplates his emptiness becomes clearer:

Comment se pouvoit-il qu’avec une ame naturellement expansive, pour qui vivre c’étoit aimer, je n’eusse pas trouvé jusqu’alors un ami tout à moi, un véritable ami, moi qui me sentois si bien fait pour l’être? Comment se pouvoit-il qu’avec des sens si combustibles, avec un coeur tout pétri d’amour je n’eusse pas du moins une fois brûlé de sa flamme pour un objet déterminé? Dévoré du besoin d’aimer sans jamais l’avoir pu



bien satisfaire, je me voyois atteindre aux portes de la vieillesse, et mourir sans avoir vécu.

Ces réflexions, tristes mais attendrissantes, me faisoient replier sur moi-même avec un regret qui n'étoit pas sans douceur. Il me sembloit que la destinée me devoit quelque chose qu'elle ne m'avoit pas donné. A quoi bon m'avoir fait naître avec des facultés exquisées pour les laisser jusqu'à la fin sans emploi? Le sentiment de mon prix interne en me donnant celui de cette injustice m'en dédommageoit en quelque sorte et me faisoit verser des larmes que j'aimois à laisser couler (C, OC I, p. 426).

Melancholia is pleasurable because it bolsters the “*sentiment de mon prix interne*” or self-esteem. The melancholic man feels that the emptiness of his desires is but the sign of the greatness of his heart: “Ce vide interne dont vous vous plaignez ne se fait sentir qu’aux cœurs faits pour être remplis: les cœurs étroits ne sentent jamais le vide, parce qu’ils sont toujours pleins de rien.”<sup>16</sup>

An excerpt from a letter to Henriette supports this conclusion:

Cette sensibilité qui vous rend mécontente de tout ne devoit-elle pas se replier sur elle-même? ne devoit-elle pas nourrir votre coeur d’un sentiment sublime et délicieux d’amour-propre? n’a-t-on pas toujours en lui la ressource contre l’injustice et le dédommagement de l’insensibilité? Il est si rare, dites-vous, de rencontrer une ame. Il est vrai; mais comment peut-on en avoir une et ne pas se complaire avec elle? Si l’on sent, à la sonde, les autres étroites et resserrées, on s’en rebute, on s’en détache; mais après s’être si mal trouvé chez les autres, quel plaisir n’a-t-on pas de rentrer dans sa maison! Je sais combien le besoin d’attachement rend affligeante aux coeurs sensibles l’impossibilité d’en former; je sais combien cet état est triste: mais je sais qu’il a pourtant des douceurs; il fait verser des ruisseaux de larmes; *il donne une mélancolie qui nous rend témoignage de nous-mêmes et qu’on ne voudroit pas ne pas avoir*; il fait rechercher la solitude comme le seul asile où l’on se retrouve avec tout ce qu’on a raison d’aimer. Je ne puis trop vous le redire, je ne connois ni

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16. À Louise-Rosie, comtesse de Berthier, née Rabaud de la Chaussade, 17 janvier 1770 in *Correspondance complète de Jean Jacques Rousseau*, Lettre 6652, Tome XXXVII, p. 205-206.

bonheur ni repos dans l'éloignement de soi-même: et, au contraire, je sens mieux, de jour en jour, qu'on ne peut être heureux sur la terre qu'à proportion qu'on s'éloigne des choses et qu'on se rapproche de soi. *S'il y a quelque sentiment plus doux que l'estime de soi-même, s'il y a quelque occupation plus aimable que celle d'augmenter ce sentiment, je puis avoir tort, mais voilà comme je pense.*<sup>17</sup>

Rousseau may therefore mean what he says when he states in the *Lettres morales* that we are great because of our sentiments (*LM*, OC IV, p. 1101). A man who feels a “sacred enthusiasm” for what is beautiful, just and noble can legitimately feel proud of himself – even if he does not transform his love of virtue into virtuous actions. He will be afflicted by the baseness of the world that prevents him to turn his love of virtue into action, and by his own baseness which is mostly the product of this world; but his pure love of virtue, of the “true pleasures of humanity” will redeem him. It matters little if the objects of his desires are chimeras: the sentiment is real.<sup>18</sup> Of course, for this self-esteem to be effective, the melancholic man must prove to himself (and perhaps to others) that he is compelled to solitude because, first, he has a great heart made for love, and second, that reality is not worthy of his affection. Once this is proven, he can let himself go to this melancholia without guilt.

Melancholia testifies to this superabundance of sensibility that is the mark of the great hearts. The pleasure of melancholia resembles the pleasure Rousseau attaches to compassion: “Il s’ensuit que la commiseration doit être un sentiment très-doux,

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17. À *Henriette* \*\*\*, 4 novembre 1764 in *Correspondance complète de Jean Jacques Rousseau*, Lettre 3621, Tome XXII, p. 9 – my emphasis.

18. Cf. *E*, OC IV, p. 743.

puisqu'elle dépose en notre faveur" (*E*, OC IV, p. 514). Melancholia is self-compassion, and this is why it is an attractive sadness.

Feeling self-esteem through self-compassion could appear an absurdity in light of Rousseau's understanding of compassion in *Émile*, because he argues that we only have superabundant sensibility when we do not suffer ourselves. If the compassionate man has superabundant sensibility, it is because he does not need it for himself. Since he is free from actual pain, he can direct his sensibility towards others. But melancholia shows that this superabundant sensibility can exist even if the compassionate man suffers. Compassion can be self-directed and nonetheless be a source of self-esteem if it is legitimate to complain about one's own misery. As if he thinks of this possibility, Rousseau explains in *Émile* how happiness is not expansive, but melancholic in nature:

Le vrai contentement n'est ni gai, ni folâtre; jaloux d'un sentiment si doux, en le goûtant on y pense, on le savoure, on craint de l'évaporer. Un homme vraiment heureux ne parle guere, et ne rit guere; *il resserre, pour ainsi dire, le bonheur autour de son cœur*. Les jeux bruyans, la turbulente joie voilent les dégoûts et l'ennui. Mais la mélancolie est amie de la volupté: l'attendrissement et les larmes accompagnent les plus douces jouissances, et l'excessive joie elle-même arrache plutôt des pleurs que des ris (*E*, OC I, p. 515 – my emphasis).

While compassion leads us to lose ourselves outside of ourselves, melancholia is a contraction of our being. But it is a good contraction of our being, because it is out of superabundant sensibility.<sup>19</sup>

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19. "Un penchant qui a modifié toutes mes passions, et qui, les contenant par elles-mêmes, m'a toujours rendu paresseux à faire, par trop d'ardeur à désirer" (*C*, OC I, p. 41).

Perhaps melancholia is more pleasurable than compassion. At least, it appears safer and closer to nature than compassion. Just like imaginary relationships are better than real ones, self-compassion is better because there is no danger that our attachment to ourselves will deceive us. It is the ultimate expression of an expansive *amour de soi*. It does not limit itself to the dreariness of an undeveloped and non-expansive *amour de soi*, unable to send one's heart into effervescent states. But it also avoids the pains of an expansive *amour de soi*, always in danger of losing oneself in its attachment to other beings. Melancholia is to make use of one's expansive sensibility while remaining in pure *amour de soi*. The heart feels the pleasure of expanding without taking the risk of losing its natural goodness. The problem is that this attachment to oneself is to be attached to a void. It is therefore inherently unstable.

#### 1.2.4 – *The Nostalgia of Happiness*

“Ainsi s’écouloient dans un delire continuel les journées les plus charmantes que jamais creature humaine ait passée” (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1141). Such is Rousseau's conclusion of the story of his afternoon and of the peak of his happiness. The delirium may have been continual, but it was not uniform. Although Rousseau does not make any causal connections between the different states he went through, we may speculate on its nature. Rousseau's blissful afternoon begins by fleeing human society. He detaches his heart from its real and day-to-day attachments. He contracts his affection to his self. This

movement of contraction is followed by one of expansion, where Rousseau creates and re-creates imaginary beings to which he can attach himself.

Then Rousseau (sometimes) collapses back to his own being. He discovers the emptiness of his desires. His expansive desires now have only himself as an object. Rousseau enjoys the compassion he has for himself. But since his self is an “unexplainable void,” Rousseau cannot rest in his love of self. He goes to the other extreme and expands his desires as much as he can. He gives free rein to the unquenchable “*élancement*” he has just discovered.

Rousseau’s transports of delight, his ecstasy naturally cannot last eternally. The ecstasy takes energy and leads to exhaustion. Rousseau has to quit his beloved nature and go back home. The return to earth also brings its share of happiness: “Je revenois à petit pas, la tête un peu fatiguée, mais le coeur content, je me reposois agréablement au retour, en me livrant à l’impression des objets mais sans penser, sans imaginer, sans rien faire autre chose que sentir le calme et le bonheur de ma situation” (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1141). The pleasure Rousseau takes is double. One is of sensation: he gives himself to the (pleasurable) objects that affect his senses. The second is a sentiment: he feels the happiness of his situation. This sentiment does not need the use of imagination to be felt. It is immediate and appears to fill his soul entirely.

After dining with Thérèse, Rousseau walks in his garden or plays music. He goes to bed satisfied with himself. In a final remark, Rousseau says that days like the one he described made the “true happiness” of his life. It was happiness without “bitterness, without worries, without regrets.” This is a surprising statement, insofar as his experience

is in part one of melancholia. But Rousseau has said that his sadness was pleasurable and that he was glad to feel it. Hence he must mean that his melancholia – although made of regrets – was pleasant to feel. Rousseau would not wish for himself any other state. He believes to have found here on earth a happiness close to the one experienced by angels. He would like to live these *rêveries* everyday for the rest of his life. Unfortunately, his physical sickness prevents him from giving himself over to these. This seems to underline another important condition for happiness, namely physical vigor. However, Rousseau said at the beginning of the letter that he dreams about these glorious escapades in nature when he can't sleep at night because of his sickness. Moreover, he began his letter by telling Malesherbes how difficult it is for him to describe his happiness when he is sick. Yet his letter is admirable in its description of his happy ecstasy. Should we think that Rousseau exaggerates when he complains about how his physical sickness makes him miserable? Isn't it rather stimulating his melancholia and his nostalgia?

Arguably, the whole letter could be interpreted as the description of what Rousseau dreams of when he can't sleep at night rather than the description of how he did indeed experience these *rêveries*. As we shall see, the same ambiguity is present in the Fifth Walk. It raises the question whether Rousseau's happiness is in remembering how he was happy rather than in the actual experience of happiness. Happiness would be the *rêverie* of a *rêverie*, or the nostalgia of an experience of nostalgia.

## 2 – *The Bare Sentiment of One's Own Existence: The Fifth Walk*

The Fifth Walk of the *Rêveries* is legitimately the most famous of the set. Rousseau paints a charming portrait of his solitary life on St. Peter's Island. Like in his third letter to Malesherbes, Rousseau uses wonderful images to capture his ecstatic experience. Who closes the *Rêveries* without picturing Rousseau drifting on his boat in the middle of the Lake Bienne?

After detailing the physical aspect of the island, and explaining how he came to dwell on it, Rousseau describes a typical day similar in its details to the ideal day of the third letter to Malesherbes. His description offers little variations, but the outline is similar. His morning is filled with non-obliging chores – or with botany, which I shall discuss later. After lunch, Rousseau escapes his non-binding company to go alone in nature; and after an extraordinary experience of bliss, comes back for dinner, walks or sings a song, and goes to bed satisfied with himself. However, the peak of his day differs markedly from the peak in the letter to Malesherbes. Ultimate bliss is found in the sentiment of his own existence, a sentiment that Rousseau does not mention in his letter to Malesherbes. One could argue that Rousseau's happiness in the third letter to Malesherbes is to feel with pleasure his own existence. But even if this was conceded, his experience of this sentiment remains different from what he describes in the Fifth Walk.

The following section will be devoted to the analysis of this sentiment. I will thereafter compare this experience with the others I have described in the third letter to Malesherbes. What understanding of happiness did Rousseau prefer? The Fifth Walk

appears to deliver Rousseau's unique and final conception of happiness in the *Rêveries*. But it offers three different possible interpretations of what happiness is for Rousseau. If we also take into account what Rousseau says in the third letter to Malesherbes, it is difficult to know which interpretation reflects Rousseau's conception of happiness.

### *2.1 – A Simple and Permanent State*

In the third letter to Malesherbes, Rousseau sums up his happiness in the following manner:

Mais de quoy jouissois-je enfin quand j'étois seul? De moi, de l'univers entier, de tout ce qui est, de tout ce qui peut etre, de tout ce qu'a de beau le monde sensible, et d'imaginable le monde intellectuel: je rassemblois autour de moi tout ce qui pouvoit flatter mon coeur, mes desirs etoient la mesure de mes plaisirs (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1139).

Rousseau did not literally enjoy "everything that exists," since his happiness was purely imaginary. Nonetheless, Rousseau claims that the pleasure he took in chimeras was better than the pleasure his normal reader takes in real goods: "Non jamais les plus voluptueux n'ont connu de pareilles delices, et j'ai cent fois plus joui de mes chimeres qu'ils ne font des realités" (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1139). This is because his imaginary pleasures are without trouble, without risk, without constraints, without obstacles, without limits: they are purer than the imperfect pleasures of reality. His imagination can fulfill all his desires, with the exception of the desire to see these dreams come true; but even this frustrated pleasure is enjoyable.



In the Fifth Walk, Rousseau presents his sojourn on the island of Saint-Pierre as the happiest of his life:

Je compte ces deux mois pour le tems le plus heureux de ma vie et tellement heureux qu'il m'eut suffi durant toute mon existence sans laisser naître un seul instant dans mon ame le desir d'un autre état (*R*, OC I, p. 1042).

The happiness he experienced at the Hermitage or at Montmorency has apparently been downgraded. Rousseau then asks himself the same question he asked in his third letter to Malesherbes: “Quel étoit donc ce bonheur et en quoi consistoit sa jouissance?” (*R*, OC I, p. 1042) His first answer is not as spectacular as in the third letter to Malesherbes: “Le précieux *far niente* fut la première et la principale de ces jouissances” (*R*, OC I, p. 1042). His second answer to the same question later in the text restricts happiness to the first item of the list of his joys in the third letter to Malesherbes: “De quoi jouit-on dans une pareille situation? De rien d'extérieur à soi, de rien sinon de soi-même et de sa propre existence” (*R*, OC I, p. 1047). Rather than enjoying “the whole universe, everything that exists, everything that could be,” Rousseau now limits his joy to feeling himself.

After giving a glimpse of what he has lived, Rousseau reflects on the different experiences of joy in his life:

J'ai remarqué dans les vicissitudes d'une longue vie que les époques des plus douces jouissances et des plaisirs les plus vifs ne sont pourtant pas celles dont le souvenir m'attire et me touche le plus. Ces courts momens de délire et de passion, quelque vifs qu'ils puissent être ne sont cependant et par leur vivacité même, que des points bien clairsemés dans la ligne de la vie. Ils sont trop rares et trop rapides pour constituer un état, et le

bonheur que mon coeur regrette n'est point composé d'instans fugitifs mais un état simple et permanent, qui n'a rien de vif en lui-même, mais dont la durée accroît le charme au point d'y trouver enfin la suprême félicité (*R*, OC I, p. 1046).

Rousseau seeks through his memories what experience of joy has pleased him the most. He observes what experience his heart regrets the most. It teaches him that true happiness was those states that were permanent and simple rather than short and lively. Rousseau is then able to provide reasons for this preference.

What is at stake for Rousseau in defining genuine happiness is to choose permanent and simple states over short and lively ones. Rousseau does not discuss the fact that happiness is a state, as if it was not a question for him. Nonetheless, there is a cause for debate. Rousseau's definition is in sharp contrast with the definition of the philosopher who discussed happiness most extensively before him: "All human happiness or misery takes the form of an action [*praxis*]; the end for which we live is a certain kind of activity, not a manner of being [*poiotes*]." <sup>20</sup> For Aristotle, happiness is found in the practice of the highest activity of human nature, namely the contemplative activity of reason. <sup>21</sup> He refuses to ascribe happiness to a state (or an acquired state like a disposition) for the following reasons: "[Happiness] is not a disposition [*hexis*]; for if it were it might belong to some one who was asleep throughout his life, living the life of a plant, or, again, to some one who was suffering the greatest misfortunes." <sup>22</sup> The Solitary

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20. Aristotle, *Poetics* in *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), p. 1461 (1450a17-19) –I have altered the translation.

21. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1095a15-18; 1177a10-18.

22. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, p. 1102 (1176a33-35).

Walker, who finds happiness in daydreaming, and who claims to be utterly miserable, appears to be a living refutation of Aristotle's argument.

The disagreement between the two philosophers is obvious in the Fifth Walk. Rousseau's happiness requires minimal activity from his soul. It consists in being rocked by the continual movement of an object "*sans aucun concours actif de mon ame*" (R, OC I, p. 1045). Rousseau dismisses every reflection on the order and disorder of the world that may spring to mind. He wants it to be wholly dedicated to a sentiment. The happiness he describes in the letters to Malesherbes involves more activity from his soul. However, his *rêveries* are hardly the actualization of his capacities. The definite *rêverie* is dreaming about what he could live; the indefinite *rêverie* is to dream about himself being limitless. One could say that Rousseau is happy by feeling his being *en puissance* rather than *en acte*.

Rousseau's distance from Aristotle's conception is also evident in his description in the *Confessions* of his happiness at the Charmettes:

Je me levois avec le soleil et j'étois heureux; je me promenois et j'étois heureux, je voyois maman et j'étois heureux; je la quittois et j'étois heureux, je parcourois les bois, les coteaux, j'errois dans les vallons, je lisois, j'étois oisif, je travaillois au jardin, je cueillois les fruits, j'aidois au ménage, et le bonheur me suivoit par tout; il n'étoit dans aucune chose assignable, il étoit tout en moi-même, il ne pouvoit me quitter un seul instant (C, OC I, p. 225-226).

Rousseau's happiness is for the most part indifferent to the activities he practices. One could argue that happiness for Rousseau is like Aristotle's virtue, for it is a disposition. In this sense, it never quits Rousseau, like virtue never quits its possessor. However,

happiness is not a *habitus* that allows Rousseau to perform an action well. His disposition is a sentiment: “Encore un coup le vrai bonheur ne se décrit pas, il se sent, et se sent d’autant mieux qu’il peut le moins se décrire, parce qu’il ne résulte pas d’un recueil de faits, mais qu’il est un état permanent” (*C*, OC I, p. 236). What matters is less what you do than what you feel when you act.

The specific differences of the state of happiness from other states are that it is *permanent* and *simple*. Much is at stake in determining what Rousseau means with these two qualifications. For instance, Rousseau appears to be arguing against what he claimed was happiness in the letter to Malesherbes. Rousseau contrasts a simple and permanent state with those that are short and lively. He obviously thinks that these two characteristics go together. A state that is lively is short because of its liveliness; a state that is permanent is simple because its simplicity allows it to continue over a long period. Rousseau thinks that short moments of lively bliss cannot be called “states” because they are too short. It is their shortness, and not their liveliness, that makes them undeserving of the title of true happiness.

Rousseau adds another qualification to his definition. Happiness cannot be based on attachment to external things, because everything fluctuates here below. We can never be sure of finding the object of our affection in the same state as when we first became attached to it. We are never attached to external things as they are in the present. We are always attached to them as they were in the past or as they could be in the future. We never enjoy them as they are, but as we imagine them to be. These attachments cannot be

solid and cannot therefore provide a permanent state of bliss. Happiness must be a pure joy. But pleasure here below is never pure of pain and deception.

The litmus test to know if we are happy is to ask ourselves if we can wish the state we are experiencing to last forever:

A peine est-il dans nos plus vives jouissances un instant où le coeur puisse véritablement nous dire: *Je voudrais que cet instant durât toujours*; et comment peut-on appeller bonheur un état fugitif qui nous laisse encor le coeur inquiet et vuide, qui nous fait regretter quelque chose avant, ou desirer encor quelque chose après? (R, OC I, p. 1046)

George Poulet argues that making this test would be enough to prove that the state does not fulfill Rousseau's criteria for happiness. Indeed, it would mean that we are longing for this state to be permanent – proving by the same token that it is not: “Quand ce moment arrive, le souhait seul, le souhait faustien ou lamartinien que le temps suspende son vol, indique déjà que ce moment n'est plus, qu'on est au delà, qu'il est devenu du passé.”<sup>23</sup> Poulet's argument is based on a literal reading of the text. Perhaps we should think that Rousseau's formulation is misleading. Rousseau logically cannot mean that we should make this wish while we are experiencing our blissful state. It is afterwards that we should ask ourselves if we could have wished this state to last eternally. If we answer “yes”, it would prove that it was genuine happiness.

But Poulet is right to say that to ask this question in the middle of our joy would prove that something is missing from our joy. A happy state is a timeless state:

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23. Georges Poulet, *Études sur le temps humain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1949), p. 204.

Mais s'il est un état où l'âme trouve une assiette assez solide pour s'y reposer tout entière et rassembler là tout son être, sans avoir besoin de rappeler le passé ni d'enjambrer sur l'avenir; où le tems ne soit rien pour elle, où le présent dure toujours sans néanmoins marquer sa durée et sans aucune trace de succession, sans aucun autre sentiment de privation ni de jouissance, de plaisir ni de peine, de desir ni de crainte que celui seul de notre existence, et que ce sentiment seul puisse la remplir tout entier[e]; tant que cet état dure celui qui s'y trouve peut s'appeller heureux, non d'un bonheur imparfait, pauvre et relatif tel que celui qu'on trouve dans les plaisirs de la vie mais d'un bonheur suffisant, parfait et plein, qui ne laisse dans l'âme aucun vuide qu'elle sente le besoin de remplir (*R*, OC I, p. 1046).

Happiness is to have one's soul entirely present to oneself, and entirely living in the present. But the present must not be felt as one of the three parts of time. A state of bliss is oblivious of time altogether. It feels nothing but the sentiment of its own existence. It forgets everything else, even the necessary ending of the very own existence it feels to be solid.

It also appears to be a state unaware of itself. Rousseau describes this state as entirely non-reflexive. His consciousness is not observing itself; it is not describing what is happening within its soul or judging it. It is not comparing this state with other states. It is fully immersed in a sentiment. This sentiment is speechless; it is not experienced through words. When Rousseau claims that happiness is indescribable, he means "while you are experiencing it." We see him describing afterwards what he has felt. But the fact remains that a happy man does not know in the strong sense of the word that he is happy.

Rousseau is immersed in his sentiment of his own existence. What is exactly this sentiment? Rousseau gives us an idea through a description of how he reached this state:

Quand le soir approchoit je descendois des cimes de l'Isle et j'allois volontiers m'asseoir au bord du lac sur la grève dans quelque azyle caché; là le bruit des vagues et l'agitation de l'eau fixant mes sens et chassant de mon ame toute autre agitation la plongeioient dans une rêverie delicieuse où la nuit me surprenoit souvent sans que je m'en fusse apperceu. Le flux et le reflux de cette eau, son bruit continu mais renflé par intervalles frappant sans relache mon oreille et mes yeux suppléioient aux mouvemens internes que la rêverie éteignoit en moi et suffisoient pour me faire sentir avec plaisir mon existence, sans prendre la peine de penser (*R*, OC I, p. 1045).

Getting to feel one's own existence begins with one's senses, in particular the sense of sight. Rousseau needs an object that can "fix" them. This object must meet specific criteria. A motionless object will not do: "Sans mouvement la vie n'est qu'une letargie" (*R*, OC I, p. 1047). Absolute rest brings the image of death; it can hardly be a source of happiness. However, an uneven and strong movement will wake him up:

Si le mouvement est inégal ou trop fort il réveille; en nous rappelant aux objets environnans, il détruit le charme de la rêverie, et nous arrache d'au dedans de nous pour nous remettre à l'instant sous le joug de la fortune et des hommes et nous rendre au sentiment de nos malheurs (*R*, OC I, p. 1047).

His goal is not to sense the object, but to use it as a means to launch his *rêverie*. If the object is too lively, it brings Rousseau back to the sentiment of his misfortunes. Rousseau's goal is not to sense the object as it is. As he said, to be attached to external objects is unsatisfying because "everything is in a continual flux on this Earth." When

Rousseau becomes overly aware of his sensation, he is reminded of this fact.<sup>24</sup> What he wants from it is a stupefying effect that will distract his soul from its sad concerns.

The movement of the water is the ideal object of sensation: it “extinguishes” all internal movements by replacing them with its constant flux and reflux. The movement hypnotizes Rousseau. Again, Rousseau is barely aware of this flux and reflux. I assume he rather fixes on the *continuity* of the flux and reflux, on its perpetual swaying, and forgets the change that happens continually. This sensation is not the direct cause of his happy state. A sensation is unable to directly produce a state.<sup>25</sup> What this sensation produces is the sentiment of one’s own existence. This feeling is not the syllogism of the third letter to Sophie: “Je pense, donc j’existe” (*LM*, OC IV, p. 1099). It is not even the thought: “J’existe.” Rousseau says that he did not think at all. He is pure sentiment of himself: “De quoi jouit-on dans une pareille situation? De rien d’extérieur à soi, de rien sinon de soi-même et de sa propre existence” (*R*, OC I, p. 1047). Through this sentiment, Rousseau claims to have achieved a perfect and self-sufficient happiness: “Tant que cet état dure on se suffit à soi-même comme Dieu” (*R*, OC I, p. 1047).

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24. “De tems à autre naissoit quelque foible et courte reflexion sur l’instabilité des choses de ce monde dont la surface des eaux m’offroit l’image” (*R*, OC I, p. 1045). In his description in the *Confessions* of his experience on St. Peter’s Island, Rousseau is rather pleased with the flux and the reflux of the water, because it was a perfect image of his situation, and I shall add of his happiness as melancholia: “Je sentois un plaisir singulier à voir les flots se briser à mes pieds. Je m’en faisois l’image du tumulte du monde et de la paix de mon habitation, et je m’attendrissois quelquefois à cette douce idée jusqu’à sentir des larmes couler de mes yeux” (*C*, OC I, p. 645).

25. “Il me semble qu’il faudroit distinguer les impressions purement organiques et locales des impressions universelles qui affectent tout l’individu. Les premières ne sont que de simples sensations, les autres sont des sentimens” (*Notes sur “De l’Esprit” d’Helvétius*, OC IV, p. 1121).



## 2.2 – What Is Happiness for Rousseau?

Rousseau's *rêverie* in the Fifth Walk – I will call it the *hypnotic rêverie* – differs from the two *rêveries* that we have seen so far. Rousseau's imagination depicts nothing for him. He senses a definite object, but it is soon blurred in his mind. Rousseau does not fuse with nature; he has no *élan* towards it. The hypnotic *rêverie* is deprived of all of the liveliness of the definite and indefinite *rêveries*. Above all, the heart does not feel any void. The specific pleasure Rousseau derives is from feeling his existence. This sentiment brings “contentment and peace” rather than ecstatic rapture.

The argument of the Fifth Walk raises major questions. Has Rousseau revised his understanding of happiness at the time of the *Rêveries*? What are we to make of his happy melancholic states? And how are we to articulate his ecstasies with his definition of happiness as doing good to others? What shall we think of his other thoughts and his actions that demonstrate that he sought happiness in other activities – for instance, in being an author, a friend or a lover? And what about his philosophical activity? Did it not contribute to his happiness? Perhaps all these questions depend on the answer given to the following one: can the quasi-lethargic state described in the Fifth Walk really be the peak of human experience for Rousseau?

Rousseau is as positive in this Walk as he is in *Émile* when he says that equilibrium of desires and faculties produces an “absolute” happiness. Yet there are contradictions that prevent one from taking hypnotic *reverie* to be true happiness for Rousseau, just as there are contradictions that prevent one from taking equilibrium to be

Rousseau's theoretical understanding of happiness. Again, I will primarily concern myself with presenting the obstacles to this concept of true happiness without attempting to draw any conclusions about what R really believed. I believe that a truly « satisfactory » conclusion would require making conjectures about Rousseau's intention or his psychological state beyond or in contrast to the accounts the surface provides. I will limit myself to demonstrating how Rousseau undermines this idea that happiness is the bare sentiment of one's existence. Rousseau contradicts this account within the Fifth Walk, but also in the rest of the *Rêveries*. In conclusion, I will speculate on the reason of this incoherence based on what we have seen of his character.

Rousseau praises his hypnotic *rêverie* for being a permanent and simple state. While no one will dispute that it is a simple state, it may be argued with reason that it is not permanent. Rousseau achieves this ecstatic state only during a part of his day; and then not everyday: “Tel est l'état où je me suis trouvé *souvent* à l'Isle de St-Pierre” (*R*, OC I, p. 1046 – my emphasis). Is “*souvent*” equivalent to “*de manière permanente*”? Rousseau had first written “*quelquefois*” rather than “*souvent*”, which arguably would have been closer to the truth. There is no surprise that Rousseau could not be permanently in this state; for how is it possible to be stripped of desire and fear and pleasure and pain, as well as to be forgetful of time, over a long period? In fact, Rousseau's state appears fragile, for if he claims that his imagination and his memory remain inactive, he admits that he is continually distracted by his sensations: “Les impressions sensuelles et terrestres [...] viennent sans cesse nous en distraire et en troubler ici bas la douceur” (*R*, OC I, p. 1047). Were there a sudden change in the rhythm of the water, Rousseau would

be put out of his state: “Si le mouvement est inégal ou trop fort il réveille” (*R*, OC I, p. 1047).

Rousseau’s argument against the “*courts momens de délire et de passion*” in the Fifth Walk could seem to be aiming at what he describes in the third letter to Malesherbes. It could signal that he changed his mind about his former claim to have experienced happiness. Yet he describes his state in the third letter to Malesherbes as a “*délire continuel*” (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1141). His happiness in this letter does not appear to be less permanent than the hypnotic *rêverie*. It passes the litmus test: “Oui Monsieur que de pareils jours remplissent pour moi l’éternité, je n’en demande point d’autres” (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1142). What Rousseau rather criticizes in the Fifth Walk are the “*plaisirs de la vie*” (*R*, OC I, p. 1044), those that are created by the tumult of social life (*R*, OC I, p. 1048). He does not give examples, but he may be thinking of sexual pleasure or of the pleasure of being applauded – pleasures that are punctual indeed and that suppose a relation with other men. In his correspondence, Rousseau contrasts a permanent state with the attitude of “stacking pleasures.”<sup>26</sup> Clearly this is not the experience he describes in his third letter to Malesherbes. We may therefore consider Rousseau’s account in the letter to Malesherbes to be still a possible understanding of happiness for him in the *Rêveries*, at least according to the criteria he provides to identify happiness. If it is true that his definite and indefinite *rêveries* were as continuous and stable as his hypnotic *rêverie*,

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26. See OC I, p. 1799, note 1.

they would be better than the latter, since they were livelier. As I underlined, Rousseau only argues in favor of a simple state because it allows it to be permanent.<sup>27</sup>

Rousseau elevates the bare sentiment to the rank of genuine happiness in the middle of the Fifth Walk. But we find his opinion to differ at the beginning and at the end of the Walk. Let us first consider the beginning of his description of his life on St. Peter's Island. Rousseau says that he was happy during his whole sojourn on the island: "Je compte ces deux mois de ma vie pour le tems le plus heureux de ma vie et tellement heureux qu'il m'eut suffi durant toute mon existence sans laisser naître un instant dans mon ame le desir d'un autre état" (*R*, OC I, p. 1042). Rousseau does not say his happiness was the result of a particular experience during his stay. It recalls what he said of his happiness at the Charmettes, which was present in every activity Rousseau did and at every time of the day: "[Le bonheur] ne pouvoit me quitter un seul instant" (*C*, OC I, p. 226). It would be like Rousseau's experience at the Hermitage and Montmorency, where it is the days as a whole that he wants to live again and again (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1142). This should be considered as another possible definition of happiness for Rousseau. Happiness is not a specific experience during the day rather than his experience of the whole day or even of the whole period of his solitary retreat.

The beginning of the Walk differs from its center on the question of happiness. The end also offers an alternative. Rousseau summarizes the kind of *rêverie* he experienced on the island:

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27. When Rousseau repeats his definition of happiness in the first sentence of the Ninth Walk, he omits the word "simple": "Le bonheur est un état permanent qui ne semble pas fait ici bas pour l'homme" (*R*, OC I, p. 1085). This suggests that for Rousseau, what makes a state genuinely happy is its permanence.

L'occasion sans doute étoit belle pour un rêveur qui sachant se nourrir d'agréables chimères au milieu des objets les plus déplaisans, pouvoit s'en rassasier à son aise en y faisant concourir tout ce qui frappoit rellement ses sens. En sortant d'une longue et douce rêverie, en me voyant entouré de verdure, de fleurs, d'oiseaux et laissant errer mes yeux au loin sur les romanesques rivages qui bordoient une vaste étendue d'eau claire et cristalline, j'assimilois à mes fictions tous ces aimables objets et me trouvent enfin ramené par degrés à moi-même et à ce qui m'entouroit, je ne pouvois marquer le point de séparation des fictions aux réalités; tant tout concouroit également à me rendre chère la vie recueillie et solitaire que je menois en ce beau séjour (*R*, OC I, p. 1048).

We find in this summary nothing that resembles the hypnotic *rêverie*, but rather a mix of the definite and indefinite *rêveries*. Rousseau first dreams of “*chimères*”; the use of the substantive lets us believe that these chimerae are definite. Rousseau must not, at this point, have blended with the objects of his *rêverie* since that is said to occur only after he emerges from the first *rêverie*. The second *rêverie* fuses Rousseau's chimera with what he perceives, although Rousseau also says that he was “brought back by degrees to himself” at the deepest moment of confusion. If it is not clear that Rousseau is living the same ecstatic experiences than in the third letter to Malesherbes, what he remembers at the end of the Walk is not the hypnotic *rêverie*.

Rousseau then tells of how he is nostalgic about the time he spent on the island. He wishes he could return on the island, because the physical isolation would allow him to forget his persecutors. But they did not allow him to stay on this island, and will never allow him to be out of their reach. In the final analysis, it does not matter to Rousseau: “Ils ne m'empêcheront pas du moins de m'y transporter chaque jour sur les ailes de l'imagination, et d'y goûter durant quelques heures le même plaisir que si je l'habitois encor” (*R*, OC I, p. 1049). We now have a *rêverie* that appears superior to the hypnotic

one, because it is independent from Fortune and men. Rousseau's nostalgic *rêverie* is arguably no longer than the hypnotic one ("*durant quelques heures*"), and it brings the same sentiment, but it is fully within his own power to produce. This would be a reason to prefer it to the actual experience, for Rousseau argues in the *Rêveries* that the absence of fear is a condition of happiness. Yet while he was on the Island, Rousseau was not entirely without fear: he feared that his persecutors would not let him live there (*R*, OC I, p. 1041). One is forced to draw the conclusion that his blissful state should have been tainted by this fear. His memories are however beyond the grasp of his persecutors.

But Rousseau argues in favor of nostalgia from another perspective. He ends the Fifth Walk by claiming that dreaming of his hypnotic *rêverie* on St. Peter's Island would be more pleasurable than actually experiencing it:

En rêvant que j'y suis ne fais-je pas la même chose? *Je fais même plus*; à l'attrait d'une rêverie abstraite et monotone je joins des images charmantes qui la vivifient. Leurs objets échappoient souvent à mes sens dans mes extases, et maintenant plus ma rêverie est profonde plus elle me les peint vivement. *Je suis plus souvent au milieu d'eux et plus agréablement encore que quand j'y étois réellement* (*R*, OC I, p. 1049 – my emphasis).

The Fifth Walk ends with the presentation of a new peak. Rousseau's hypnotic *rêverie*, while still attractive, can be supplemented by lively images. Nostalgia provides a richer experience than the "abstract and monotonous" *rêverie*. Rousseau says that he does *more* by remembering his hypnotic *rêverie*, but it would perhaps be more appropriate to say that he does something different. His hypnotic *rêverie* was founded on the forgetfulness of the objects that allowed him to plunge into his quasi-lethargic state. Now Rousseau

wants to remember them, but to do so would have to prevent him from plunging into his hypnotic state.

Genuine happiness ends up being the *rêverie* of a *rêverie*. More precisely, happiness is the reminiscence of past happiness. This notion of happiness comes as no surprise, for it is at the origin of the writing of the *Rêveries*. Rousseau wants to write down his *rêveries* because it will allow him to double his existence: “Leur lecture me rappellera la douceur que je goute à les écrire, et faisant renaitre ainsi pour moi le tems passé doublera pour ainsi dire mon existence” (*R*, OC I, p. 1001). Not only remembering the writing of his *Rêveries*, but the writing itself doubles Rousseau’s existence: “En voulant me rappeler tant de douces rêveries, au lieu de les décrire j’y retombois” (*R*, OC I, p. 1003). As Terence Marshall notes, Rousseau’s ultimate happiness recalls Aristotle’s description of God’s happiness: “Written as a memoir by which he may ‘double his existence,’ the *Rêveries* call to mind the reflexive circularity of the Aristotelian God.”<sup>28</sup> However, while the Aristotelian God thinks about his own thought, Rousseau feels his former feeling of existence. The happiness of nostalgia can be resumed in this formula: “En me disant, j’ai jouï, je jouïs encore.”<sup>29</sup>

In his argument leading up to his praise of the hypnotic *rêverie*, Rousseau argues that any pleasure that comes with the regret of the past cannot make a man genuinely happy. At the end of the Walk, he praises nostalgia. What troubles him is not its intrinsically fugitive dimension, but the fact that his imagination has weakened with his old age. Despite his complaint, we see Rousseau describing his former *rêveries* with a

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28. Terence Marshall, “Rousseau Translations: A Review Essay”, p. 117.

29. *Art de jouir*, OC I, p. 1174.

great deal of beautiful images. His imagination does not seem to have dried up. Moreover, the whole book is filled with memories of Rousseau's past. At the beginning of the Second Walk, Rousseau claims that reminiscence does not require too much vitality. The reverse even appears to be true: the more Rousseau ages, the more he exists through his memories (*R*, OC I, p. 1002). In what would have been the conclusion to the book if it had ended with the Seventh Walk, Rousseau says that his happiness during his old age consists in remembering the peaceful places and the good people he has known, as well as his youth and his innocent pleasures (*R*, OC I, p. 1073). Nostalgia remains the only possible happiness for him.

If the Solitary Walker still has the capacity for nostalgic *rêveries*, he may have lost his capacity for the indefinite *rêverie*. A possibility of happiness that seems to have altogether disappeared for the old Rousseau is the *rêverie* in which he fuses with the universe:

Je ne puis plus comme autrefois me jeter tête baissée dans ce vaste océan de la nature, parce que mes facultés affoiblies et relâchées ne trouvent plus d'objets assez déterminés, assez fixes, assez à ma portée pour s'y attacher fortement et que je ne me sens plus assez de vigueur pour nager dans le cahos de mes anciennes extases (*R*, OC I, p. 1066).

But Rousseau does not reject the indefinite *rêverie* as a false means to achieve happiness. On the contrary, he speaks highly of it in the Seventh Walk. As long as he could experience this kind of *rêverie*, Rousseau loved to be idle. These ecstasies dried up any desire for fortune and glory and made him "the happiest of mortals" (*R*, OC I, p. 1062).



A closer look to the Fifth Walk shows that Rousseau did enjoy this type of *rêverie* on St. Peter's Island. This is arguably the most memorable passage of the whole book:

Pendant qu'on étoit encore à table je m'esquivois et j'allois me jeter seul dans un batteau que je conduisois au milieu du lac quand l'eau étoit calme, et là, m'étendant tout de mon long dans le bateau les yeux tournés vers le ciel, je me laissois aller et dériver lentement au gré de l'eau quelquefois pendant plusieurs heures, plongé dans mille reveries *confuses* mais délicieuses, *et qui sans avoir aucun objet bien déterminé ni constant* ne laissoient pas d'être à mon gré *cent fois préférables à tout ce tout ce que j'avois trouvé de plus doux dans ce qu'on appelle les plaisirs de la vie* (R, OC I, p. 1044 – my emphasis).

We see from the description that this *rêverie* is not a hypnotic *rêverie*, since there is no fixed and constant object. Rousseau praises this confusing *rêverie* with the same terms he used to praise the hypnotic *rêverie*: it is better than what one calls the “sweetest pleasures of life.” What remains to be explained is why this confusing *rêverie* in a boat should not be elevated to the rank of happiness like the hypnotic *rêverie* experienced on the shore of the lake.

The Solitary Walker claims to have lost the strength or the vitality to experience the indefinite *rêveries*. Yet this is not the whole story. Rousseau also says that he does not want to experience this kind of *rêverie* because he fears that he will lose control of his imagination and be overwhelmed by his moral suffering (R, OC I, p. 1062 and 1066). But there seems to be a contradiction in Rousseau's twin explanations. On the one hand, he does not want to unbridle his imagination for fear of thinking of his misery; this presupposes that his imagination is strong enough to overwhelm him. Yet he also claims to lack the vitality to experience his old ecstasies. In any case, the sublime wanderings of

his imagination are not his goal anymore. Nostalgia, on the other hand, seems less dangerous because Rousseau does not lose nearly as much control over himself. A solitary surrounding helps him to focus his memory only on pleasurable objects (*R*, OC I, 1070).

Rousseau also ranks the hypnotic *rêverie* below the definite and indefinite *rêveries* in other texts. In his third letter to Malesherbes, Rousseau speaks of a state similar to the hypnotic *rêverie* of the Fifth Walk. But he is far from judging it to be the peak of his day. It is merely what he does when he needs to rest from his nostalgic and ecstatic *rêveries*: “Je revenois à petit pas, la tête un peu fatiguée, mais le coeur content, je me reposois agréablement au retour, en me livrant à l’impression des objets mais sans penser, sans imaginer, sans rien faire autre chose que sentir le calme et le bonheur de ma situation” (*R*, OC I, p. 1141). Rousseau gives himself to his senses because his imagination is exhausted, and not because it is the kind of *rêverie* that specifically makes him happy. The *Dialogues* say the same thing:

La rêverie [i.e. the definite and indefinite *rêverie*], quelque douce qu’elle soit épuise et fatigue à la longue, elle a besoin de delassement. On le trouve en laissant reposer sa tête et livrant uniquement ses sens à l’impression des objets extérieurs. Le plus indifférent spectacle a sa douceur par le relâche qu’il nous procure, et pour peu que l’impression ne soit pas tout à fait nulle, le mouvement léger dont elle nous agite suffit pour nous préserver d’un engourdissement léthargique et nourrir en nous le plaisir d’exister sans donner de l’exercice à nos facultés (*D*, OC I, p. 816).

It is therefore a surprise to see what was formerly considered a distraction promoted to the rank of genuine happiness in the *Rêveries*. The end of the Fifth Walk, the remainder of

the book, as well as other parts of his autobiographical writings, show that this state of hypnosis looks less attractive than other forms of *rêveries*.

Rousseau's varying accounts of the happiness he experienced could lead us to think that he never really experienced it. If happiness is a permanent state, where can we find a permanent experience of happiness in Rousseau's life? This is what Rousseau apparently concludes in the Ninth Walk:

Le bonheur est un état permanent qui ne semble pas fait ici bas pour l'homme. Tout est sur la terre dans un flux continuel qui ne permet à rien d'y prendre une forme constante. Tout change autour de nous. Nous changeons nous-mêmes et nul ne peut s'assurer qu'il aimera demain ce qu'il aime aujourd'hui. Ainsi tous nos projets de félicité pour cette vie sont des chimères (*R*, OC I, p. 1085).

In this context, Rousseau seems to be applying this general truth about the human condition to his own experience. Yet Rousseau writes this statement just after mentioning that he has experienced a constant state of happiness:

Je suis ce qu'il plaît aux h[ommes] tant qu'ils peuvent agir sur mes sens; mais au premier instant de relache je redeviens ce que la nature a voulu, c'est là quoi qu'on puisse faire mon état le plus constant et celui par lequel en dépit de la destinée je goûte un bonheur pour lequel je me sens constitué. J'ai décrit cet état dans une de mes rêveries (*R*, OC I, p. 1084).

Rousseau does not tell us to which chapter of his book he is referring to. He most probably refers to the Fifth Walk. However, as discussed above, this happiness can hardly be called permanent. Furthermore, nowhere in the *Rêveries* does Rousseau tell us that he still experiences this state in his old age. On the contrary, the happiness he experienced

on the island of Saint-Pierre is said to be a thing of the past. We are left wondering what is the nature of this state that Rousseau said was the most constant for him.

Despite the variety amongst the contents of the forms of happiness experienced by Rousseau, they all find a common denominator in their being imaginary. Indeed, if there is a state Rousseau constantly experienced throughout his life, it is living in his imagination. As he says himself in the *Confessions*: “Hélas! Mon plus constant bonheur fut en songe” (*C*, OC I, p. 108). Rousseau sometimes was nostalgic; at other times, he loved to build castles in the air; in other circumstances, he preferred giving himself over to the chaos of his imagination. Even when he describes the bliss he experienced with real people, Rousseau says he enjoyed his relationships better when he was alone and dreaming about them. In all cases, his happiness was the product of his imagination. Only the hypnotic *rêverie* can be said to have brought him happiness without the use of his imagination. But if this general conclusion is right, then Rousseau’s claim about the impossibility of experiencing a constant state here below should not be interpreted as the impossibility of happiness simply. While it is impossible to be happy in reality because of our fleeting nature and of the fleeting nature of the world, the world of imagination allow us to escape the impermanence of our passions. It is impossible to be happy here below, but it is possible to be happy if one dwells in the land of chimeras. It is a land to which one can have a permanent access, and which can therefore keep one in a permanent state of bliss. This seems to have been Rousseau’s most constant state: “Ma vie entière n’a guère été qu’une longue rêverie” (*Ébauche des Rêveries*, OC I, p. 1165; cf. *R*, OC I, p. 1081).

### 2.3 – Conclusion: Equilibrium or Disequilibrium?

Rousseau's understanding of his happiness evolves from the letters to Malesherbes to the *Rêveries*. Even if we want to consider the *Rêveries* as his final judgment on what is happiness for him, we find the book providing contradictory statements on this question. In addition to the problems I have mentioned, Rousseau claims in the unfinished Tenth Walk that it was during his stay at the Charmettes that he experienced a "full and pure happiness."<sup>30</sup> If these contradictions are not the result of my misunderstanding, then how are we to choose among those experiences the one that reflects Rousseau's true understanding?

The discrepancies between the account in the letter to Malesherbes and the Fifth Walk reflect the problems I discussed in my first chapter about Rousseau's theory of happiness in *Émile*. Why does Rousseau formally state that equilibrium is absolute happiness when he describes later imbalanced states as true happiness? The hypnotic *rêverie* appears to aim at the happiness of equilibrium. Rousseau does not mention the concept in the Fifth Walk; nor does he explicitly underscore the fact that his desires are in equilibrium with his faculties when he delves into the hypnotic *rêverie*. Nevertheless, the happiness he experiences during this *rêverie* matches the content of the theory of equilibrium. Rousseau defends equilibrium on the premise that happiness is the absence

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30. Cf. *R*, OC I, p. 1099. Rousseau compares himself to the praetorian prefect who said that he only had truly lived for seven years during his whole life. Rousseau uses the same anecdote in the letters to Malesherbes to qualify in the same manner his time at l'Hermitage and Montmorency (rather than his time at the Charmettes). Which experience between the Charmettes, the Hermitage and Montmorency, or St. Peter's Island, was truly blissful? The Tenth Walk states that his happiness at the Charmettes was unique; no other time of his life can be compared to the happiness he experienced with Maman.

of suffering and that desiring is always painful. This is also Rousseau's appreciation of the hypnotic *rêverie*. It allows him to forget all his sorrows (*R*, OC I, p. 1048); its charm resides in the fact that it delivers him from "the yoke of Fortune and men and [...] of the sentiment of his misery" (*R*, OC I, p. 1047). As Eve Grace puts it: "Reverie is, above all, good because of what it is not. [...] Reverie is a condition without passions, without needs, without thought: it is repose from the pains of encroaching death and irremediable injustice."<sup>31</sup> Rousseau's happiness would appear entirely negative (i.e. an absence of suffering), the same as for equilibrium, were it not for the presence of the sentiment of his own existence: "Le sentiment de l'existence depouillé de toute autre affection est par lui-même un sentiment précieux de contentement et de paix" (*R*, OC I, p. 1047).<sup>32</sup> Feelings of self-sufficiency and peacefulness are enjoyable in themselves, and not because he is the object of persecution.

The hypnotic *rêverie* lulls Rousseau's expansive sensibility to sleep. It contracts his affection unto himself, just like the theory of equilibrium recommends. Rousseau's imagination is inactive and cannot therefore distort his desires. Rousseau feels his being "*sans prendre la peine de penser [...] sans le concours actif de mon âme*" (*R*, OC I, p. 1045). When he is immersed into this *rêverie*, Rousseau's existence appears similar – if not identical – to the existence of the model of the theory of equilibrium, namely the natural man in the pure state of nature, who also feels the sentiment of his own existence.

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31. Eve Grace, "The Restlessness of 'Being': Rousseau's Protean Sentiment of Existence", p. 149-150.

32. Happiness as equilibrium is also aiming at peacefulness: "C'est alors seulement que toutes les forces étant en action l'ame cependant restera paisible" (*E*, OC IV, p. 304).

Rousseau's experience would fit with the theory of equilibrium were it not for the obvious fact that he leaves his highly developed faculties idle. According to his theory, there is a part of himself that remains unsatisfied. How could his happiness be "sufficient, perfect and full"? Perhaps Rousseau would argue that since he does not feel any part of his being to be idle, it is as if it is non-existent for him. What exists for us is what we feel to exist.

On the other hand, Rousseau's happiness in the third letter to Malesherbes is not the happiness of equilibrium. Rather than aiming at equilibrium between his desires and his faculties, Rousseau gives free rein to his desires: "Mes desirs etoient la mesure de mes plaisirs" (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1139). Since desires are by nature seeking their fulfillment, Rousseau's happiness should be described as a tension between his desires and their impossible fulfillment. It is even a double tension, since Rousseau wants to remain in a state of desire, as a man who would try to remain in a state of starvation. Happiness is strengthening that void, feeding it, never wanting to realize it, never wanting to satisfy it, never wanting to lose it. His "*tristesse attirante*" is the tension to be explained. Were it fully satisfying, it would not cause sadness. Were it fully dissatisfying, it would not attract him.

We could say that his happiness is an equilibrium only by twisting the meaning of the theory and claiming that Rousseau feels an equilibrium between his desires and his imagination. The faculty accused of disrupting equilibrium is in fact the best way to attain it for the Rousseau of the letters to Malesherbes. But even his imagination is surpassed by his desires. At the peak of his ecstasy, it is unable to meet the demand of his

desire for unlimited expansion. It would therefore be more proper to identify Rousseau's happiness to the third figure of happiness identified in my first chapter. Rousseau's happiness is to have desire beyond his powers. It is pure desiring. Rousseau's unlimited desires do not lead to frustration because they do not seek to be materialized. Accordingly, Rousseau does not need to be virtuous to be happy. He can remain in this state of tension because there is no danger for him to see it destroyed. His imagination makes him self-sufficient.<sup>33</sup>

These incompatible understandings of Rousseau's happiness call for an interpretation that goes beyond the explicit letter of the text. Are Rousseau's contradictions due to his character or to his philosophical intention in writing the book? Rousseau, after describing the hypnotic *rêverie* as the supreme state of bliss, says it is a *dédommagement* to human felicities (*R*, OC I, p. 1047). Is Rousseau exaggerating the felicity of this quasi-lethargic state simply because he can't be happy among men? Is he defending this *rêverie* over others because he lacks the strength to experience the livelier ones, yet is reluctant to admit that he is unhappy because it would make his persecutors rejoice? Or is he trying to teach a moral lesson to his non-philosophical reader who will not pick up the contradictions?

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33. Émile experiences the bliss of ecstatic desiring when he loves Sophie. But because his desire seeks a real object, his happiness is fragile. Sophie has to remain worthy of his ideal for him to continue to love her. But even if Sophie remained virtuous and attractive all her life, she could die at any moment. This is the reason why the preceptor attacks this kind of happiness at the end of the book.



### 3 – Happiness and Truth

Another important problematic aspect to Rousseau's happiness is its relationship to philosophy. The ecstatic *rêveries* of the letters to Malesherbes and the Fifth Walk, which Rousseau says made him happy, are hardly philosophical in nature. In the third letter to Malesherbes, Rousseau is happy in remembering the most beautiful days of his life and in imagining situations that flatter his heart. His happiness is not found through self-examination, but in feeling pleasurable sentiments. As for the *rêverie* that culminates in an ecstatic contemplation of the "great being," Rousseau is formal: "Alors l'esprit perdu dans cette immensité, je ne pensois pas, je ne raisonnois pas, je ne philosophois pas" (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1141). The same can be said about the hypnotic *rêverie* of the Fifth Walk: it has nothing in common with philosophy.

The question of the relationship between knowledge and happiness was the central theme of the *First Discourse* and remained as important a question in Rousseau's later works. Rousseau's answer to the question may be summarized by the following prayer from the *First Discourse*: "Dieu tout-puissant, toi qui tiens dans tes mains les esprits, delivre-nous des lumières et des funestes arts de nos pères, et rends-nous l'ignorance, l'innocence et la pauvreté, les seuls biens qui puissent faire notre bonheur et qui soient précieux devant toi" (*PD*, OC III, p. 28). Knowledge is deleterious to happiness. However, Rousseau puts this prayer in the heart of sensible men of the future who will have understood the corrupting effects of arts and sciences. This prayer is not meant for the corrupted people of Rousseau's time. They need arts and sciences like a

gimp needs crutches. Nonetheless, raising their awareness of the noxiousness of arts and sciences may transform them into healthier human beings with time – human beings able to utter the prayer sincerely. The prayer is not meant either for those few privileged souls who can bear the practice of arts and sciences. Not only are they immunized against their deleterious effects, but also we can also guess that they need them to be happy.

Did Rousseau count himself among those privileged souls? The logic of Rousseau's argument in the *First Discourse* and the high esteem we have for Rousseau's genius would require it. If Rousseau sometimes declares himself to be one of those privileged souls, we have seen him in the second chapter also declaring himself unfit for its practice. In the *Rêveries*, he writes: "J'ai pensé quelquefois assez profondément; mais rarement avec plaisir, presque toujours contre mon gré et comme par force: la rêverie me delasse et m'amuse, la reflexion me fatigue et m'attriste; penser fut toujours pour moi une occupation pénible et sans charme" (R, OC I, p. 1061-1062). Yet this latter remark from Rousseau seems utterly unbelievable in the face of his life-long pursuit of knowledge. Rousseau was a philosopher who dedicated his life to the truth. He read the most important scientific treatises of his time, and even wrote a treaty on chemistry. Late in his life he began to have an interest in botany that was more than amateurish, despite what Rousseau says about this "pastime" in the *Rêveries*. His interest for the arts was also obvious. With all this time spent studying, reading and writing, how could Rousseau think that arts and sciences made him miserable?

The problem is immense and would deserve a whole dissertation. I will limit myself to Rousseau's final discussion of the problem in the Third and Fourth Walk of the

*Rêveries*. In the former, he claims to be in need of a particular doctrine to live happily. In the latter, he engages in a discussion of the capacity of the truth to make men happy. As I will show, the main issue for the interpreter is to understand the meaning of Rousseau's sincerity or dedication to the truth. The question is to know whether his sincerity is rhetorical or not, and whether Rousseau cares for the truth as much as he claims. After briefly exposing the argument of the Third Walk, I will discuss two different possible interpretations of Rousseau's singular defense of his doctrine and his action. This in turn could throw some light on the apparent absence of philosophy in Rousseau's descriptions of his happiness.

### *3.1 – Truth, Sincerity and Utility*

The Third Walk is Rousseau's *Discours de la Méthode*. Rousseau tells of his ambitions when he was young. The knowledge of the philosophers of his time left him unsatisfied. He felt the need to review the solidity of that knowledge from top to bottom. He executed this “great review” of his opinions later in his life, while he was in “absolute seclusion.” His goal was to fix his opinions once and for all. Although he was at first lost in a labyrinth of difficulties and objections, he persisted and found a satisfying philosophic doctrine.

In opposition to Descartes, however, Rousseau's philosophical journey did not produce a system of certitudes. In the *Lettres morales*, Rousseau says that one must stop

where Descartes started: the only certitude I possess is that I exist.<sup>34</sup> He does not even go that far in the Third Walk. In fact, he barely mentions what was the result of his intellectual reform. We understand that the topic of his meditations was the true nature of his being and its destination in this world (*R*, OC I, p. 1012-1013), as well as the origin and the finality of the Author of this world (*R*, OC I, p. 1014). Like Pascal, Rousseau was particularly concerned with the question of the afterlife. He did not want to be a fool and sacrifice the goods of this world for an illusion; but neither did he want to jeopardize his immortal life for earthly goods that he at any rate never really prized (*R*, OC I, p. 1017). The result of his reflections is also vague. Rousseau only mentions the conclusion that he possesses an immortal nature congruent with the physical order of this world. Rousseau drew a moral doctrine out of his metaphysical conclusions, but does not mention what it consists in (*R*, OC I, p. 1018-1019). He refers his reader to his *Profession de foi du Vicaire Savoyard* to know the result of his seeking – with the qualification that what he concluded is “almost” (“*a peu près*”) what the Profession of Faith claims to be true (*R*, OC I, p. 1018). Rousseau is just as careless on the intellectual defense of his doctrine. He constantly underlines the fragility of his philosophical doctrine. He admits that it faces important objections. His doubts about its veracity were never erased.

Rather than deploying the branches of a clear and distinct system and demonstrating the certainty of its basis, Rousseau does not appear interested in defending the principles of his doctrine. More precisely, Rousseau obviously believes that an intellectual defense of his doctrine is irrelevant. It is fraught with difficulties and

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34. *LM*, OC IV, p. 1095 and 1099. As for whether this “I” is a thinking substance, Rousseau doubts it.

obscurities. Yet Rousseau is proud of his doctrine. He hopes that it will one day make a revolution among men (*R*, OC I, p. 1018). He deems it necessary to his own happiness (*R*, OC I, p. 1019).

Rousseau does not seriously discuss his doctrine. He seems careless about proving that it is actually true. Yet he does defend his doctrine. I assume that the absence of argumentation in the Third Walk is due to the fact that Rousseau believes that this is not the basis on which its defense should rest. The argument Rousseau seriously does develop in favor of his doctrine is two-sided. Rousseau thinks that his doctrine is the best because of its utility and because of its sincerity. The difficulty lies in evaluating the relative weight of these two arguments and in determining their relative consequences with respect to Rousseau's stated need to believe in the doctrine in order to be happy. Since Rousseau's two arguments are developed in contradistinction to the position of the philosophers of his time, I will begin by a summary of Rousseau's critique of their position.

### 3.1.1 – *The Philosophers' amour-propre*

An important part of the Third Walk consists of a critique of the Enlightenment philosophers. Rousseau is eager to differentiate himself from the *philosophes* and from modern philosophy in general. He does not say much about the *philosophes'* doctrine just as he does not say much about his own. He only mentions that they are “ardent missionaries of atheism” (*R*, OC I, p. 1016). Rousseau does not attack their atheism as

false. As he repeats, any metaphysical position faces “insurmountable difficulties” and “irresoluble objections.” What Rousseau criticizes is the *philosophes*’ belief that they have discovered the truth on these matters: “Car ardens missionnaires d’athéisme et très impérieux dogmatiques ils n’enduroient point sans colere que sur quelque point que ce put être on osât penser autrement qu’eux” (*R*, OC I, p. 1016). Their mistake is that they think they know what they ignore.

Rousseau also ignores the truth on these questions, but at least he knows that he does not know. But he does not underscore his simple ignorance as the decisive proof of the superiority of his philosophical position. Rousseau is apparently not satisfied with the Socratic conclusion. As I have said, he omits any serious discussion of the veracity of metaphysical principles and of the moral doctrines that could be derived from them. He focuses on two other aspects: the utility of these positions and the motivation behind adopting one or another. The bulk of Rousseau’s critique of the *philosophes* is to show how their doctrine is useless – even dangerous – because it stimulates pernicious passions. He also shows how their doctrine is the product of pernicious passions. As we just have seen, Rousseau does not cite the falseness of the atheism of the *philosophes*, but their anger towards anyone who dares contradict them. His critique in the Third Walk is mostly *ad hominem*: the mistake of the *philosophes* is less intellectual than moral.

The doctrine of the *philosophes* is useless because it fails to make men happy. Rousseau is not really more loquacious on that score than he was on their metaphysical doctrine. He is content to say that they hold two different moral doctrines. The first is useless: “[Une morale] sans racine et sans fruit qu’ils étalent pompeusement dans des

livres ou dans quelque action d'éclat sur le théâtre sans qu'il en penetre jamais rien dans le coeur ni dans la raison" (*R*, OC I, p. 1022). It is useless because its moral lessons do not reach men's reason and heart. But it is not altogether useless. It hides another wicked one: "Cette autre morale secrète et cruelle, doctrine intérieure de tous leurs initiés à laquelle l'autre ne sert que de masque, qu'ils suivent seule dans leur conduite et qu'ils ont si habilement pratiquée à mon égard" (*R*, OC I, p. 1022). Rousseau does not mention here what are the principles guiding this morality. Based on the *Dialogues* and what we have seen in the previous chapter, this morality teaches that freedom and virtue are illusions and that one should follow his inclinations without remorse. Contrary to the first morality, this one is efficient. However, according to Rousseau, it is only efficient for attacking other men. He rejects it because it is useless to him:

De quoi me serviroit-elle dans l'état où ils m'ont réduit? Ma seule innocence me soutient dans les malheurs et combien me rendrois-je plus malheureux encore, si m'ôtant cette unique mais puissante ressource j'y substituois la méchanceté? Les atteindrois-je dans l'art de nuire, et quand j'y réussirois, de quel mal me soulageroit celui que je leur pourrois faire? Je perdrois ma propre estime et je ne gagnerois rien à la place (*R*, OC I, p. 1022).

Rousseau rejects this morality because of his actual situation. But would it be a morality he would adopt in a different situation? I have discussed in the preceding chapter how Rousseau adopts a similar morality in the *Rêveries*. His miserable predicament would appear to change nothing. Rousseau argues that he would gain nothing if he could attack efficiently his enemies. He may mean that even if his attack succeeded, it would not be enough to save his work and his reputation for posterity. The only goal he could achieve,

for instance, by revealing the hidden vices and private thoughts of his enemies, would be to bring them down into infamy with him. It would not be enough to save his work and his reputation.

By attacking them unjustly, Rousseau would also lose his innocence or his self-esteem. The quotation demonstrates the puzzling value of innocence or self-esteem in the eyes of Rousseau. On the one hand, it appears that it cannot be traded off (*“ma seule innocence me soutient dans les malheurs”*). It is a *sine qua non* condition of Rousseau’s happiness. On the other hand, the movement of his thinking shows that it is a good that can be compared to others and exchanged for them. In this perspective, “innocence” or “self-esteem” is not an absolute good. Insofar as it is tantamount to a good conscience, it would mean that Rousseau could act against his conscience if required. It would prove that a good conscience is good only if it makes one happy, rather than the other way around.

But the bulk of Rousseau’s critique of the *philosophes* is *ad hominem*. It is already present in the critique on the utility of their morality. The first moral doctrine is “pompously” displayed in books or at the theater; and it serves to hide another “secret and cruel” doctrine. In other words, Rousseau tells his reader that these philosophers are vain and cruel hypocrites. But why are they like that? The answer appears to lie in what motivates their intellectual activity. Rousseau says that they study the world out of a “pure curiosity,” as if this world had nothing to do with their own happiness. They look at the world as if it were “some machine.” Rousseau may imply that these philosophers can easily be materialists because they fail to see how their conception of the world has an



impact on human happiness. They fail to see themselves imbedded in this “machine” they are so curious to describe. Similarly, they study human nature without connecting their study to their own life. Their life is not at stake when they study. Theory has no bearing on the way they conduct their life.

Rousseau’s critique, however, is not aimed at their pure curiosity. Rousseau seems to think that the carelessness and the detachment of the *philosophes*’ intellectual activity is an epiphenomenon. What lies below pure curiosity is the desire to appear more knowledgeable than others:

Ils étudioient la nature humaine pour en pouvoir parler sagement, mais non pas pour se connoître. Plusieurs d’entreux ne vouloient que faire un livre, n’importoit quel, pourvu qu’il fut accueilli. Quand le leur étoit fait et publié, son contenu ne les intéressoit plus en aucune sorte, si ce n’est pour le faire adopter aux autres et pour le défendre au cas qu’il fût attaqué, mais du reste sans en rien tirer pour leur propre usage, sans s’embarrasser même que ce contenu fut faux ou vrai pourvu qu’il ne fut pas réfuté (*R*, OC I, p. 1013).

What motivates these philosophers in their quest for knowledge is their *amour-propre*. They use philosophy to appear wiser than others. Once they have obtained the status of wise men, they use their knowledge to preserve it. This appears to be the reason behind their adoption of their double doctrine. The public doctrine teaches pompous lessons of virtue for the sake of the crowd. It makes their books and their plays popular. The secret doctrine is the one they follow. It helps them to knock down their opponents and fraudulently gain public esteem without feeling remorse. Accordingly, it is because of their *amour-propre* that the *philosophes* adopt a useless doctrine and an immoral

doctrine. It is their vanity that makes them dogmatic thinkers unwilling to discuss their own position. The key to understanding their philosophical position is to understand the passion that drives their life. This is why Rousseau does not criticize their theory but rather their behavior and personality, and at great length. The debate between Rousseau and the *philosophes* has to be personal because it is on the personal level that the value of their theories can be judged.

Rousseau himself did not reject their doctrines because of their theoretical flaws. What determined his rejection was his evaluation of their motivation for holding these doctrines:

Ils ne m'avoient pas persuadé mais ils m'avoient inquieté. Leurs argumens m'avoient ébranlé sans m'avoir jamais convaincu; je n'y trouvois point de bonne réponse mais je sentoie qu'il y en devoit avoir. Je m'accusois moins d'erreur que d'ineptie, et mon coeur leur répondoit mieux que ma raison. *Je me dis enfin*: me laisserai-je éternellement balloter par les sophismes des mieux disans, dont je ne suis pas même sûr que les opinions qu'ils prêchent et qu'ils ont tant d'ardeur à faire adopter aux autres soient bien les leurs à eux-mêmes? *Leurs passions, qui gouvernent leurs doctrines*, leurs intérêts de faire croire ceci ou cela, rendent impossible à pénétrer ce qu'ils croient eux-mêmes. Peut-on chercher de la bonne foi dans des chefs de parti? (*R*, OC I, p. 1016 – my emphasis).

When Rousseau thinks about their arguments, he remains skeptical. What moves the balance of his judgment against their doctrines is that their standard bearers are hypocrites; they are men of bad faith who are not disinterested in their quest of knowledge. What they claim to be true is rather what they think is in their interest to make believe. Rousseau does not have the need to be celebrated like them. Their

philosophy is therefore useless to him: “Leur philosophie est pour les autres; il m’en faudroit une pour moi” (R, OC I, p. 1016).

### 3.1.2 – Rousseau’s Sincerity

Contrary to the *philosophes*, Rousseau searched his philosophical doctrine for his own purpose. The first reason Rousseau stresses to prove the validity of his doctrine is the sincerity he puts in his endeavor. Rousseau explains the method he followed in determining his doctrine:

Résolu de me décider enfin sur des matières où l’intelligence humaine a si peu de prise et trouvant de toutes parts des mystères impénétrables et des objections insolubles<sup>35</sup>, j’adoptai dans chaque question le sentiment qui me parut le mieux établi directement, le plus croyable en lui-même sans m’arrêter aux objections que je ne pouvois résoudre mais qui se rétorquoient par d’autres objections non moins fortes dans le système opposé. Le ton dogmatique sur ces matières ne convient qu’à des charlatans; mais il importe d’avoir un sentiment pour soi, et de le choisir avec toute la maturité de jugement qu’on y peut mettre. *Si malgré cela nous tombons dans l’erreur, nous n’en saurions porter la peine en bonne justice puisque nous n’en aurons point la culpé. Voilà le principe inébranlable qui sert de base à ma sécurité* (R, OC I, p. 1018 – my emphasis).

Why is sincerity such a decisive factor? First, certainty in these matters is impossible. An insincere man will deny it and be dogmatic because he does not have the moral strength to admit his own ignorance. Thanks to his sincerity, Rousseau admits the weaknesses of

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35. Rousseau here claims the absolute impossibility of knowing the truth. He says the same later: “Je savois en méditant sur ces matières que l’entendement humain circonscrit par les sens ne les pouvoit embrasser dans toute leur étendue” (R, OC I, p. 1022). But he qualifies this claim later: “[...] des difficultés qui passaient ma portée et peut-être celle de l’esprit humain” (R, OC I, p. 1022).

his doctrine. Sincerity is the antidote of *amour-propre*; it is a virtue necessary to the quest for the truth. Second, it strengthens Rousseau's confidence in his doctrine. He knows that his doctrine is not the result of his interested passions. He is aware of the danger to let his passions determine the outcome of his quest. His sincere desire to know the truth makes him careful to not be fooled by them (*R*, OC I, p. 1017). He trusts his doctrine because he knows that he has been the most sincere man in searching the truth:

Après les recherches les plus ardentes et les plus sincères qui jamais peut-être aient été faites par aucun mortel, je me décidai pour toute ma vie sur tous les sentimens qu'il m'importoit d'avoir, et si j'ai pu me tromper dans mes résultats, je suis sûr au moins que mon erreur ne peut m'être imputée à crime, car j'ai fait tous mes efforts pour m'en garantir (*R*, OC I, p. 1017).

Rousseau *moralizes*, so to speak, metaphysical questions. Mistakes on these questions are the result of bad faith rather than ignorance. There is no need, therefore, for him to discuss again the rational ground of his doctrine. What matters is that he knows he has been the sincerest he could during his search – and possibly the sincerest man who has sought the truth on these questions. He knows his doctrine to be the best for him – and possibly the best ever given to humanity – because of his extraordinary sincerity.

Rousseau has satisfied himself that he has been sincere as a philosopher. But how can his readers know? They do not have a direct access to his heart. Rousseau vindicates his claim in the Third Walk (and in the whole book) with a history of his life. His sincerity – or if one prefers, his disinterestedness – is the result of a passion deeply entrenched in his heart:

Jetté dès mon enfance dans *le tourbillon du monde* j'appris de bonne heure par l'expérience que je n'étois pas fait pour y vivre, et que je n'y parviendrois jamais à l'état dont mon coeur sentoit le besoin. Cessant donc de chercher parmi les hommes le bonheur que je sentois n'y pouvoir trouver, mon ardente imagination sautoit déjà par dessus l'espace de ma vie, à peine commencée, comme sur un terrain qui m'étoit étranger, pour se reposer sur une assiette tranquille où je pusse me fixer. *Ce sentiment, nourri par l'éducation dès mon enfance et renforcé durant toute ma vie par ce long tissu de misères et d'infortunes qui l'a remplie m'a fait chercher dans tous les tems à connoître la nature et la destination de mon être avec plus d'intérêt et de soin que je n'en ai trouvé dans aucun autre homme* (R, OC I, p. 1012 – my emphasis).

Rousseau has felt from his very youth that the goods of this world were unsatisfying. His heart has always been detached from earthly temptations. In other words, it is Rousseau's uncommon love of solitude<sup>36</sup> that made possible his uncommonly sincere philosophy. Rousseau nods to his education as a boy and his miseries to explain his love of solitude. Later in the book, he explains how this love became truly pleasurable thanks to the influence of Madame de Warens and to the happiness he experienced at the Charmettes (R, OC I, p. 1013 and 1099). When he was drawn despite himself to live among men, his sentiment of dissatisfaction and his love of solitude armored him against complete corruption. Even in his moments of prosperity in society, Rousseau had the lingering feeling that this was not true happiness: "Je sentis dans des lueurs mêmes de prospérité que quand j'aurois obtenu tout ce que je croyois chercher je n'y aurois point trouvé ce bonheur dont mon coeur étoit avide sans en savoir démêler l'objet" (R, OC I, p. 1014). Rousseau's break with society when he reformed his life was made easy because of this sentiment. It allowed Rousseau to restore himself to a natural life of solitude. It is in this

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36. R, OC I, p. 1040. When Rousseau says that he was not made to live within the "*tourbillon du monde*," he means "society." See the attached footnote in the Pléiade edition.

recovered solitude that Rousseau discovered his doctrine. His heart was therefore sound before his discovery. His doctrine only strengthened convictions which were already deeply seated.<sup>37</sup>

That he continued to keep his distance from society from that point proves that his love of solitude is genuine. It supports his claim that he philosophized for himself rather than for others. His only motivation was to find out the truth about what would make *him* happy: “Je sentois vivement que le repos du reste de mes jours et mon sort total en dependoient” (*R*, OC I, p. 1016). Would he have been living among men at that time, his claim would have less credibility. Thus, like in the letters to Malesherbes, Rousseau proves that his heart (and therefore his doctrine) is free from *amour-propre* because of his dissatisfaction with society and his preference for a retired life.

In short, Rousseau does not think he is more knowledgeable than other philosophers. But his sincerity supplements the absence of intellectual certainty he possesses. His sincerity is his *cogito*; it is the bedrock on which his doctrine lies. In moments of doubt, he remembers his sincerity and recovers his confidence: “Les soins, l’attention, la sincérité de cœur que j’ai mise à [adopter ma doctrine] reviennent alors à mon souvenir et me rendent toute ma confiance” (*R*, OC I, p. 1023). The fact that other philosophers were never as disinterested as Rousseau; the fact that they were all visibly enjoying the goods of society, reinforces Rousseau’s belief that his position is the best.

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37. This is but one interpretation of the *Rêveries*. There are other statements that claim Rousseau’s genuine desire to live among men and to have been compelled to solitude. For instance: “Tant que les hommes furent mes frères, je me faisois des projets de félicité terrestre; ces projets étant toujours relatifs au tout, je ne pouvois être heureux que de la félicité publique, et jamais l’idée d’un bonheur particulier n’a touché mon cœur que quand j’ai vu mes frères ne chercher le leur que dans ma misère” (*R*, OC I, p. 1066).

### 3.2 – Is Rousseau’s Philosophy for Others?

The most striking argument of the Third Walk in favor of Rousseau’s doctrine is his sincerity. Yet, Rousseau does not praise his doctrine solely on this ground. In contrast to the uselessness of the *philosophes’* doctrine, Rousseau claims his doctrine to be the only one able to make him happy: “Dans tout autre système je vivrois sans ressource et je mourrois sans espoir. Je serois la plus malheureuse des créatures. Tenons-nous-en donc à celui qui seul suffit pour me rendre heureux en depit de la fortune et des hommes” (*R*, OC I, p. 1019). Rousseau does not detail the content of his doctrine, and neither does he detail how his doctrine makes him happy. He only suggests that the belief in the harmony between his immortal nature and the physical order of the world helps him to support the miseries of his life. If we turn to the *Profession de foi* for an explanation, we see that it *proves* that the soul is immortal and that will be rewarded in the afterlife if it has been virtuous and just in this one.<sup>38</sup> The utility of his doctrine is that it promises happiness to those who want to be just.

Rousseau says that his doctrine is perfectly suited to his “reason, to his heart, to his whole being.” Since Rousseau’s main argument in the Walk is that he has sought the truth for his own utility, he makes it appear that his doctrine is only suited to him. Yet he also thinks that it is suited to human nature as such. This is why Rousseau thinks it could make a “revolution” among men if they would only come back to common sense and to good faith. His doctrine can also be useful to humanity. This raises the question whether

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38. See Yves Vargas, *Introduction à l’Émile de Rousseau* (Paris, PUF, 1995), p. 174.

Rousseau is sincere when he only thought of his own happiness during his philosophical quest. The truth could be the exact opposite: Rousseau thought only of the happiness of others when he established his doctrine. It is for the sake of humanity, not for Rousseau's sake.

Indeed, Rousseau claims that he has sincerely adopted this doctrine, but he makes it hard for his attentive reader to believe him. He may protest that he is the only one who can know what he believes. If it is true that no one can read into Rousseau's heart, there are external signs that should be present if he is sincere. We should be able to see the presence of his doctrine when he describes his experience of happiness. We should see him telling us how the hope of immortality guided him in his conduct, or how he failed to follow what his principles dictated. Is it the case?

In the letters to Malesherbes, Rousseau claims to be confident that the "Supreme God" will judge him the best of men despite his defaults and vices (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1132). But when Rousseau gives an example of what is a happy day for him, he shows no concern about his soul being saved. His existence here below appears entirely satisfying. It is true that at the peak of his happiness, Rousseau is knocked over by the infinity and the incomprehensibility of the mysteries of the universe: "[Cette extase] qui dans l'agitation de mes transports me faisoit écrier quelquefois: Ô grand etre! ô grand etre, sans pouvoir dire ni penser rien de plus" (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1141). But his God is not a judge and a savior. His only characteristic is to be beyond understanding. Rousseau's relationship to his God is not one of hope, but of admiration. The text also suggests that



Rousseau did not think of God every time he experienced these blissful ecstasies. The knowledge or thought of God appears unnecessary to experience happiness.

The letters to Malesherbes, however, are not totally exempt of ambiguities concerning Rousseau's faith. The first letter ends with Rousseau mentioning that he will die full of hope in God (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1133). Rousseau mentions this hope as evidence of his high self-esteem. Despite his flaws, he believes himself to be the best of men. God will acknowledge this fact. However, Rousseau does not explicitly connect his faith in God to his capacity to be happy. The reward of immortality is not mentioned as a motivation to act in this world. In the fourth letter, Rousseau describes his acts of justice and generosity in this world without any mention of a hope for a divine reward (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1143-1144). He repeats the high esteem he has for himself without mentioning his hope in God.

The *Rêveries* are similarly ambiguous about Rousseau's need for a religious doctrine in order to be happy. At the end of the Second Walk, Rousseau mentions his hope that God will reward him. The Third Walk ends with Rousseau's claim that he wants to acquire virtues that can be useful to him in the afterlife. Excepting the end of the Second Walk and the Third Walk, however, Rousseau has no use for immortality. In the First Walk, Rousseau clearly explains that he does not care about justice being done to him. He has no need for God to compensate the injustice he suffers as a man. As I have argued, Rousseau has not become entirely insensitive to justice as such. He is concerned about vindicating his position and preserving his self-esteem. But his behavior is one of self-sufficiency: it is enough for him to know that he is innocent in order to enjoy his

innocence. There is no need to be rewarded in the afterlife. Rousseau shows as well how doing good to others offers its own reward to the generous man. He never says that he did good to others out of a thought that God would compensate him. When he lived on St. Peter's island, Rousseau was entirely satisfied with his life in this world. At its peak, he was sufficient unto himself, like God (*R*, OC I, p. 1047). Now that the happiness he experienced on St. Peter's island is impossible, Rousseau does not need to compensate for the void of his existence with the belief in immortality. In the end, Rousseau qualifies his botanical activity as being the ideal compensation for making him happy.<sup>39</sup>

Above all, his adoption of materialism in the Eighth Walk comes as a serious objection to the seriousness of his profession of faith. There he describes the belief in God coming as the result of a frustration with being unlucky in this world. Believing that God wants one to suffer helps one to support one's fate because it gives it a meaning. The randomness and absurdity of misery from a materialist perspective is unbearable for most men. Rousseau does not explicitly connect his doctrine to this attitude. He does not say that his own belief in God was an illusion produced by his frustration and his need for meaning. But the text implies that this is what he thinks. He also says that his desire to receive justice was the product of his *amour-propre*. He does not make in this context a distinction between the desire to obtain justice from men and the desire to obtain justice from God. But nothing prevents the reader to think that his religious doctrine exists to soothe the ego of the persecuted of this world. Moreover, Rousseau ends his discussion by stating that he should have been satisfied with preserving his self-esteem. The

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39. "Elle me rappelle et mon jeune age et mes innocens plaisirs, elle m'en fait jouir derechef, et me rend heureux bien souvent encore au milieu du plus triste sort qu'ait subi jamais un mortel" (*R*, OC I, p. 1073).

approval of God is unnecessary. The contemplation of his innocence is in itself a reward. The hope to be rewarded in the afterlife has suddenly disappeared.

The *Rêveries* as a whole are incoherent on Rousseau's need to believe himself to be immortal in order to be happy. The Solitary Walker sometimes appears in need of a religious doctrine to be happy; but he also appears at times to be satisfied with the evidence provided by his reason. It is as if the *Rêveries* blur the distinction between his philosophical doctrine of natural goodness and his religious doctrine detailed in the *Profession de foi*. This is manifest in the Third Walk. Rousseau seamlessly blends the illumination on the road to Vincennes to the genesis of the *Profession de foi*. He provides an altogether different account of his illumination and of his moral reform than in the second letter to Malesherbes and in the *Confessions*. In the latter accounts, Rousseau's most important intellectual discovery was a sudden illumination. His subsequent reform, although required by his intellectual revelation, was mostly triggered by the sudden success of the *Premier Discours* and the belief that he was about to die. In the Third Walk, on the other hand, Rousseau distinguishes between the "*grande revue*" of his opinions and the reform of his life. The major difference with the previous accounts of the same events is that his reform and his review are principally the products of his will:

Dès ma jeunesse j'avois fixé cette époque de quarante ans comme le terme de mes efforts pour parvenir et celui de mes prétentions en tout genre. Bien résolu, dès cet âge atteint et dans quelque situation que je fusse, de ne plus me débattre pour en sortir et de passer le reste de mes jours à vivre au jour la journée sans plus m'occuper de l'avenir. Le moment venu, j'exécutai ce projet sans peine et quoiqu'alors ma fortune semblât vouloir prendre une assiette plus fixe j'y renoncai non seulement sans regret mais avec un plaisir véritable (*R*, OC I, p. 1014).

Rousseau's reform is not a project specifically created by the discovery of his system.

The illumination on the road to Vincennes is but one element that triggered his reform:

*Une grande révolution qui venoit de se faire en moi, un autre monde moral qui se dévoiloit à mes regards, les insensés jugemens des hommes dont sans prévoir encor combien j'en serois la victime je commençois à sentir l'absurdité, le besoin toujours croissant d'un autre bien que la gloriole littéraire dont à peine la vapeur m'avoit atteint que j'en étois déjà dégoûté, le desir enfin de tracer pour le reste de ma carrière une route moins incertaine que celle dans laquelle j'en venois de passer la plus belle moitié, tout m'obligeoit à cette grande revue dont je sentoits depuis longtems le besoin (R, OC I, p. 1015 – my emphasis).*

Rousseau barely alludes to the illumination (if we suppose that the “*grande révolution*” refers to the illumination). His genesis of his philosophical activity does not hide the illumination, but diminishes its importance. It gives more weight to the need that he always felt to find his happiness outside of society. This explains why the reform and the review were already fixed from the time of his youth. Moreover, we see that the reform *precedes* the intellectual review. His reform did not aim to put his behavior and his opinions in harmony with his new principles, but aimed at discovering these principles.<sup>40</sup>

Rousseau remains vague on the principles to which he committed himself. This begins with the sentiment that motivated his adoption of his doctrine. This sentiment told him early on about how he would never be happy in the “whirlwind of the world.” He never was attracted to “the goods of this world;” his whole experience contributed to

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40. The account of the Third Walk suggests that the Illumination did not provide Rousseau with all the principles of his system. According to Jeff Black, what is absent from the *Premier Discours* is Rousseau's fundamental principle, namely the natural goodness of man (Jeff Black, *Rousseau's Critique of Science: A Commentary on Rousseau's Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, unpublished dissertation (Boston College, 1995), p. 389-390). Nevertheless, Rousseau's second letter to Malesherbes says that the Illumination disclosed this principle to him (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1136).

detach him from the “affections of this world.” This may induce the religious-oriented reader to believe that Rousseau means he would never be happy “here below.” But as mentioned earlier, Rousseau may simply mean that he felt he would never be happy *in society*. His wording does not preclude that he could be happy *alone* here below. Rousseau appears more explicit when he writes: “Le bonheur est un état permanent qui ne semble pas fait ici bas pour l’homme” (*R*, OC I, p. 1085). But as mentioned above, Rousseau could mean that happiness is not possible to those men who try to be happy in reality. The land of chimeras, which is not a land found here below, is the land Rousseau inhabited all his life, and where he often claims to have found happiness.

Rousseau also remains vague when he exposes the benefit he acquired from his doctrine:

Ce ne fut qu’après des années d’agitations que reprenant enfin mes esprits et commençant de rentrer en moi-même, je sentis le prix des ressources que je m’étois ménagées pour l’adversité. Décidé sur toutes les choses dont il m’importoit de juger, je vis, en comparant mes maximes à ma situation que je donnois aux insensés jugemens des hommes et aux petits événemens de cette courte vie beaucoup plus d’importance qu’ils n’en avoient. Que cette vie n’étant qu’un état d’épreuves, il importoit peu que ces epreuves fussent de telle ou telle sorte pourvu qu’il en resultat l’effet auquel elles étoient destinées, et que par consequent plus les épreuves étoient grandes, fortes, multipliées, plus il étoit avantageux de les savoir soutenir. Toutes les plus vives peines perdent leur force pour quiconque en voit le dedomagement grand et sûr; et la certitude de ce dedomagement étoit le principal fruit que j’avois retiré de mes meditations précédentes (*R*, OC I, p. 1019-1020).

Rousseau is vague on the crucial point: what is the effect to which the ordeals of this life are destined for? Why not explicitly say that this effect is the reward of living in Paradise

in the afterlife? What is this compensation he is expecting? Rousseau suggests that without the hope for divine justice, he would not find any compensation for the pains he suffers.<sup>41</sup> But when one looks at the rest of the *Rêveries*, one sees that the compensation Rousseau has found for his pains is not the hope of divine reward. He has found this compensation within himself, through his sentiment of existence or his botanical activities. This is made explicit at the outset of the Second Walk:

Ainsi pour me contempler moi-même avant mon déclin, il faut que je remonte au moins de quelques années au tems où perdant tout espoir ici bas et ne trouvant plus d'aliment pour mon coeur sur la terre, je m'accoutumais peu à peu à le nourrir de sa propre substance et à chercher toute sa pâture au dedans de moi. *Cette ressource, dont je m'avisai trop tard devint si féconde qu'elle suffit bientôt pour me dédomager de tout* (R, OC I, p. 1002 – my emphasis).

If Rousseau has found a stable position, it is because he has learned how to bend to necessity and to be attached to nothing but himself. There is no need for the *Profession de foi* to achieve this state. Rousseau's system of natural goodness can provide those lessons. Rousseau's conception of *amour-propre*, for instance, could have taught him why the judgment of others matters so little. His conception of the joys of feeling one's existence could also have taught him why the little events of this life should be insignificant.

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41. "Que serois-je devenu, que deviendrois-je encore, dans les angoisses affreuses qui m'attendoient et dans l'incroyable situation où je suis réduit pour le reste de ma vie si, resté sans azyle où je pusse échapper à mes implacables persecuteurs, sans dédomagement des opprobres qu'ils me font essuyer en ce monde, et sans espoir d'obtenir jamais la justice qui m'étoit due, je m'étois vu livré tout entier au plus horrible sort qu'ait éprouvé sur la terre aucun mortel?" (R, OC I, p. 1019).

If we adopt this perspective, then the *Profession de foi* is not Rousseau's most important philosophical position. His system of natural goodness, his understanding of *amour de soi* and *amour-propre* are sufficient for providing moral principles. It can demonstrate why Rousseau's enemies, the *philosophes*, are unhappy and immoral: it is because they are guided by *amour-propre*. Rousseau, on the other hand, is happy and moral because he follows the natural inclinations of the human heart. In other words, the tenets of the profession of faith, such as the separation of body and soul and the order of the universe, do not provide Rousseau with either the basis for his judgments about men, or guidance for his own life here below. In both cases, he relies instead on his knowledge on the first movements of the human heart. This knowledge is the true teaching of *Émile*. It distinguishes him from the *philosophes*: "Les premiers et vrais mouvemens de la nature auxquels tous nos savans ne connoissent rien" (*R*, OC I, p. 1088). He knows that it is not his sincerity that separates him from the *philosophes*, but his better understanding of human nature. They believe that men can live happily without religious beliefs. Rousseau thinks they are partly wrong. Most men, especially civilized men, cannot live happily without religious beliefs. But a philosopher like Rousseau can be happy without them.

From this perspective, Rousseau's sincerity is a smokescreen. Rousseau did not sincerely adopt the *Profession de foi*. Or rather he "adopts" it only because it is the religious doctrine that is best suited to make men happy and because men are in need of religious beliefs to be happy. Rousseau believes that atheism is bad for human societies as well as most individuals. He combats this atheism with a profession of faith that is the

most useful to human happiness. The utility of his doctrine is what he is proud of. It is his true argument in the Third Walk in favor of his doctrine.

Why then does he dissemble about having sincerely adopted it himself? Rousseau may have thought that a philosopher who defends a religious doctrine on a strict utility basis will not be very convincing. A religious doctrine draws its strength from the faith of its followers; and what they believe is that it is true, not just useful. This may be highlighted by a comparison between the *Profession de foi* and Descartes' provisional morality. Descartes establishes his principles of conduct without claiming to know if they are true. His provisional morality is valid only because it is useful for his scientific seeking. But his provisional morality differs from the *Profession de foi* on the grounds that it promotes rules of conduct rather than dogmas. Arguably, these rules of conduct presuppose holding that an idea of human nature as being true. It is not that Descartes claims that the question of the veracity of these rules of conduct is irrelevant. He rather claims to hold them provisionally to be true, and expects that his method will allow him to validate them. Religious doctrines, on the other hand, presuppose the immediate adherence to a fact. If the dogmas were considered to be "provisionally true," pending further verification, they would not draw many believers. Moreover, the usefulness of Descartes' provisional morality can easily be verified. The utility of the *Profession de foi*, on the other hand, is not immediately evident: it asks to sacrifice obvious and real goods in favor of what could be chimerical goods.

Accordingly, while Rousseau thinks that religion is useful to men or necessary to their happiness, he could not sell his doctrine simply by telling them: "If you adopt the



*Profession de foi*, it will make you happy.” Admittedly, such a promise can be attractive. As Rousseau says in the Third Walk: “On se défend difficilement de croire ce qu’on désire avec tant d’ardeur, et qui peut douter que l’intérêt d’admettre ou de rejeter les jugements de l’autre vie ne détermine la foi de la plupart des hommes sur leur espérance ou leur crainte?” (*R*, OC I, p. 1017) But if the consoling aspect of a doctrine can influence our belief, it cannot be enough to determine our adoption. A man who would claim to have consciously adopted a doctrine solely because it comforts his heart should be aware that he confuses his desires with reality.<sup>42</sup> The believer must therefore believe that his doctrine is true, and not merely useful. If Rousseau wants to persuade his readers to adopt his doctrine, he must show that it is true.

But as we have seen, this is precisely what Rousseau does not do. Rather than claiming that his doctrine is true, he underlines the fact that it faces irrefutable objections. If Rousseau indeed thought that his doctrine was flawed, there is in a sense no surprise to see him admit it. But if his goal was to “make a revolution among men” (cf. *R*, OC I, p. 1018), wasn’t he shooting himself in the foot?

One could answer that Rousseau may have thought his doctrine would gain more credibility through his person than through its content.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, in matters in which it is difficult to distinguish what is false from what is true, like the existence of God or of the soul, or the origins of humanity, or the finality of our existence, most men will adopt a position not because it is the closest to the truth, but because it supports their moral

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42. “A wish is not a fact. Even by proving that a certain view is indispensable for living well, one proves merely that the view in question is a salutary myth: one does not prove it to be true. Utility and truth are two entirely different things” (Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 6).

43. Cf. *D*, OC I, p. 728.

prejudices or flatters their passions. Above all, they will adopt a position because they will believe those who defend it to be sincere.<sup>44</sup> Rousseau may therefore have aimed at persuading his reader that he alone sincerely sought the truth. Contrary to the other philosophers, his interests and his *amour-propre* did not deflect his passion for the truth towards lower goals. The fact that he was persecuted for his philosophy makes his claim credible. It indicates that Rousseau did not write his books to gain glory or to become wealthy.<sup>45</sup> He shared what he had discovered because he apparently thought it was true, and that it could be useful to men to know the truth – even if it hurt their actual prejudices. To lend more credibility to his disinterestedness and his sincerity, Rousseau publicly displayed his weaknesses and his mistakes, betting that his readers would have more admiration for his sincere character than contempt for his weaknesses and mistakes. He even hid his talents and virtues in order to appear more credible (*R*, OC I, 1036). A man who only shows his good sides can only have something to hide: for we are all humans, all prone to weaknesses and mistakes, and we all have a scar that our *amour-propre* wants to conceal to others. By unveiling the errors he made in his life, Rousseau shows that he is empty of *amour-propre*.

Rousseau also gains the confidence of his reader by claiming that he has made this doctrine his own. He is not selling something he would not buy for himself. The few professions of hope in God's justice scattered in his autobiographical writings should entice his reader to believe he is sincere. But what about the fact that his actions are not

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44. "Persuasion is achieved by the speaker's personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible. [...] His character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses" (Aristotle, *Rhetorics* in *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), p. 1329 (1356a5-13).

45. Cf. *R*, OC I, p. 1025.

always in line with his professed beliefs? Since his profession of faith is mostly a question of believing in dogma, Rousseau's actions are unlikely to prove his faithlessness. It is enough for him to remain alone and convince his reader that he is innocent of the crimes his enemies attributed to him. He does not have to commit great acts of charity to persuade his reader of his tremendous faith.

In sum, it is possible that Rousseau's sincerity is a rhetorical device to gain credibility. It attracts the confidence of his reader. Because he does not hide the weaknesses of his faith and his remaining doubts, Rousseau appears more trustworthy than those dogmatic *philosophes* that never doubt anything. His aim in being sincere is perfectly described in Rousseau's own explanation of his motto *Vitam impendere vero*: "Lecteurs, je puis me tromper moi-même, mais non pas vous tromper volontairement; craignez mes erreurs et non ma mauvaise foi."<sup>46</sup> Once this rhetorical purpose is revealed, we see that Rousseau is as guilty as the *philosophes* of having produced "*une philosophie pour les autres*." He too possesses a secret metaphysical and moral doctrine. However, Rousseau's argument in the Fourth Walk is that a man can lie on these matters without being guilty of hypocrisy. According to Leo Strauss, Rousseau's complex deliberation on whether it is permitted to lie "can be reduced to the proposition that the obligation to speak the truth is founded exclusively on the utility of truth. From this it follows that one may not only suppress or disguise truths devoid of all possible utility, but may even be positively deceitful about them by asserting their contraries, without thus committing the

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46. *LAD*, OC V, p. 120. Cf. *À Louise-Rosie, comtesse de Berthier, née Rabaud de la Chaussade*, 17 janvier 1770 in *Correspondance complète de Jean Jacques Rousseau*, Lettre 6652, Tome XXXVII.

sin of lying.”<sup>47</sup> Rousseau approves of beneficent lying or noble lies. Since the Fourth Walk follows the Second and Third Walks, where Rousseau has *professed* his faith in his doctrine, it strongly suggests that this profession of faith is one example of Rousseau’s noble lies.<sup>48</sup> Nonetheless, he is sincere when he lies, because the sincere man or the true man (*l’homme vrai*) is the one who takes into account the interests of others when he talks, and who can forsake his own interest in the name of the interest of others (*R*, OC I, p. 1031). Rousseau’s sincerity is not entirely a lie insofar as his public doctrine is sincerely aiming at the good of his public, whereas the public doctrine of the *philosophes* fakes to aim public interest and truly serves their interests.

### 3.3 – Or Is it for Himself...?

The lack of coherence between Rousseau’s statements in the *Rêveries* suggests that his profession of faith is intentionally misleading. It mirrors the contradictions between his system of natural goodness and the *Profession de foi*, which lead advocates of the esoteric interpretation to consider the latter a noble lie.<sup>49</sup>

While this latter interpretation has undeniable strength, it is not altogether convincing. The Fourth Walk of the *Rêveries*, for instance, offers at least two important

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47. Leo Strauss, “On the Intention of Rousseau”, p. 470.

48. See Victor Gourevitch, “Rousseau on Lying: A Provisional Account of the Fourth *Rêverie*” in *Berkshire Review*, Vol. 15 (1980), p. 96. Some commentators think that it also suggests that the Fifth Walk is a useful fiction: Michael Davis, *The Autobiography of Philosophy* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), p. 183-187; Eve Grace, “The Restlessness of ‘Being’: Rousseau’s Protean Sentiment of Existence”, p. 150-151.

49. For example, see Roger D. Masters, *The Political Philosophy of Rousseau* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 54-58 and p. 84-89; Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 287-289; Charles Butterworth, “Interpretative Essay”, p. 176-189.

objections to this interpretation. Both Rousseau's perplexing statements about his dedication to the truth and the absence of a direct defense of the noble lie weaken its basis. After having exposed these two objections, I will discuss an alternative explanation of Rousseau's use of his doctrine. More generally, I want to illustrate how Rousseau's conception of happiness and truth is not straightforward. It is not clear if Rousseau puts himself in the category of philosophers who only consider reality through reason. Rousseau's desire for happiness may trump what reason dictates.

### *3.3.1 – The Absence of a Direct Defense of the Noble Lie in the Fourth Walk*

The esoteric interpretation looks above all for support in Rousseau's casuistic defense of lying in the Fourth Walk. But its first problem is that the Fourth Walk does not directly defend the noble lie. The first thesis presented by Rousseau in this Walk is that it is permitted to suppress or disguise useless truths. Leo Strauss interprets "useless truths" as "dangerous truths." But Rousseau's argument is concerned with merely useless truths, i.e. "[des] choses vaines dont l'existence est indifférente à tous et dont la connoissance est inutile à tout" (*R*, OC I, p. 1027). For example, it is a matter indifferent to the happiness of anybody whether the sand at the bottom of the sea is red or white. On the other hand, a dangerous truth is not indifferent to the happiness of anybody. It is often, if not always, potentially useful to make men happy. It can harm and it can help, depending on what sort of use is made of it. But this is not the sort of truth Rousseau explicitly says can be suppressed or disguised. It is an obstacle to the esoteric interpretation, since it

claims that Rousseau argues in favor of suppressing or disguising truths that are dangerous to the non-philosophers.<sup>50</sup>

In contradistinction to the useless truths, Rousseau argues that we always owe “the general and abstract truth,” the truth that teaches us “how man ought to behave” or the “moral truth.” It is never permitted to hide or disguise this truth. According to this principle, Rousseau is not allowed to hide or disguise how men ought to behave with respect to lying. Accordingly, all the principles he presents in this Walk about lying are exactly what he thinks. Yet the esoteric interpretation requires us to think that Rousseau hides or disguises his own rule of conduct with respect to lying. For example, Victor Gourevitch writes:

Regarding [the question whether there are innocent deceptions, Rousseau] does not here maintain the stern doctrine which he had defended on other occasions, that all truths that are not useful are, for that very reason, harmful. There may, of course, also be positively harmful truths. But he does not so much as allude to that possibility, and by his silence about it he indicates how he thinks it best to deal with them.<sup>51</sup>

The esoteric interpretation must here again contradict the letter of the text to vindicate its position.

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50. Leo Strauss acknowledges that he infers Rousseau’s meaning: “It is perhaps important to note that he limits himself to discussing only one kind of the truths that are devoid of all utility, namely, the merely useless truths: he does not say a word about the other kind which would have to be called dangerous truths. But we are entitled to infer from his general rule that he would considered himself obliged to conceal dangerous truths and even to assert their contraries – assuming that there are such truths” (“On the Intention of Rousseau”, p. 470-471). See also Victor Gourevitch, “Rousseau on Lying: A Provisional Account of the Fourth *Rêverie*”, p. 94.

51. Victor Gourevitch, for instance, concludes that Rousseau hides his principle of conduct with respect to positively harmful truths: *ibid.*, p. 94. See also p. 102.

In other words, the esoteric interpretation claims that moral truths that are dangerous can be disguised or suppressed. Accordingly, if Rousseau hides his own principle of conduct with respect to lying, it is because it would harm his non-philosophic reader if he adopted it for himself. We only owed what can be useful to others. And by “useful,” one must understand truths that are either harmless or necessarily useful. A truth that is potentially useful, but that may turn into a dangerous instrument, can be suppressed or disguised. But to repeat, Rousseau’s argument is that we never ought to lie about moral truths, dangerous or not. Rousseau does not contrast moral truths that are useless with moral truths that are useful. He does not argue that moral truths are only owed when they are useful to those who learn them. Even if it is only potentially useful, it is owed to others: “Pour qu’une chose soit due il faut qu’elle soit ou puisse être utile” (*R*, OC I, p. 1027).

In truth, Rousseau’s argument is not clear about what sort of truth is useless and can be suppressed or hidden. Nor is it any clearer about what sort of truth must never be suppressed. What is at stake is Rousseau’s definition of “moral truths.” Does he mean every truth pertaining to how one ought to behave? Or does he simply mean the truths that are useful to those who learn them? – Or does he even think that moral “truths” are truthful, i.e. does he think that they can be fictions?

Rousseau distinguishes “moral truths” from “factual truths.” The moral truths appear to be truths about the “moral order” and the factual truths to be truths about the “physical order.” The moral truths (or general and abstract truths) are always useful; the factual truths (or particular and individual truths) are sometimes a good, sometimes an

evil, and often are indifferent (*R*, OC I, p. 1026). As I mentioned, Rousseau seems to argue that while one never ought to lie about moral truths, one can lie about factual truths. Eve Noirod gives an example of what this might mean: “While it may be useful to know what lightning is in the ‘physical order,’ it is useless and even destructive in a ‘moral order’ in which lightning is viewed as the dispensation of divine justice. [...] Rousseau here *loudly assumes* that only what tends to support the existence of the ‘moral order’ or justice is useful to know.”<sup>52</sup> In other words, the moral truth (I will respect Zeus’ commands) depends on a factual truth (the lightning is the physical sign of Zeus’ wrath). To foster justice among non-philosophers, the philosopher can lie about a fact (the nature of lightning). If we transpose the example to the question at stake in the *Rêveries*, we see Rousseau suggesting that he has derived his moral truths from the physical truths he has discovered (*R*, OC I, p. 1018-1019). Since the soul is immortal and God exists and cares about men (the factual truth), we ought to behave with the awareness that God will judge us in the afterlife (the moral truth). In the esoteric perspective, Rousseau does not think (or does not know) that the soul is immortal, that God exists and that he is just. And he thinks that to be concerned with the fate of one’s soul in the afterlife is an imaginary concern, only made necessary to most men because of civilized corruption: they cannot be moral towards each other and happy in society if they do not fear divine judgment. However, this again does not correspond to Rousseau’s argument about moral truths and factual truths. Rousseau separates these two sorts of truths, as if they were not

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52. Eve Noirod, *Nature and the Problem of Morality in the Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, p. 100-101 – my emphasis. Like Strauss and Gourevitch, she also acknowledges that she makes an assumption.



connected.<sup>53</sup> This is why he can argue that while it is permissible to lie about facts, it is not permissible to lie about rules of conduct.

But this can add fuel to the esoteric interpretation. It opens the door to the idea that moral truths are completely disconnected from facts, i.e. that they are fictions.<sup>54</sup> In fact, the term “truth” is misapplied or misleading. Moral “truths” are not *true*; more precisely, they are true only insofar as the human heart generally needs them to be happy. The moral truths of the *Profession de foi*, as well as Rousseau’s claim to have adopted this doctrine, are moral fables necessary to corrupted men.

Rousseau discusses the possibility of innocent fictions in the Fourth Walk, but it is not clear that his argument supports the esoteric interpretation. He argues that innocent fictions exist. But he limits them to those fictions that serve to make a moral truth more palatable. The example he provides – Montesquieu pretending to be the editor of the *Temple de Gnide* – is fairly innocuous. Rousseau is not explicitly arguing in favor of lies about how one ought to behave. The fiction Rousseau admits of regards the form of an artistic production, not the truths it defends. For instance, it is permitted to pretend that the *Julie* is a true story, and for Rousseau to pass as its editor, if it makes it more enticing

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53. Cf. *R*, OC I, p. 1026-1027 and p. 1033.

54. Two other possibilities are rules of conduct that are based on desires or will (Descartes’s provisional morality) or, at the other end of the spectrum, the categorical imperative (Kant).

to the reader.<sup>55</sup> It is permissible to create a character that will expose his profession of faith.<sup>56</sup> His argument is about the literary device and not about its content.

Rousseau later clarifies what he means by a moral truth: it represents the natural affections of the human heart and it draws a useful instruction from them (*R*, OC I, p. 1033). If Rousseau does not lie about the moral truth, and if the moral truth tells what is natural to the human heart, then Rousseau never lies about the true passions of the human soul. This raises an important problem for the understanding of Rousseau's philosophy, since the *Profession de foi* postulates two natural passions to the human soul (*l'amour de l'ordre et l'amour de soi*) while Rousseau's system of natural goodness postulates only one passion (*l'amour de soi*).

All this is not to say that the esoteric interpretation is absurd, but to warn off the danger of seeing what we want to see in the Fourth Walk. Rousseau seems at times to defend any lie as long as it is useful to those who receive it, and at times to be more specific and restrictive about permissible lies. For instance, he argues that it is not permissible to distort the merit or blame that a real person deserves. This means that Rousseau could not have taken liberties with the actual persons he describes in his autobiographical writings in order to create a moral fable. To blacken Grimm and the *philosophes* in order to illustrate the deleterious effects of *amour-propre*, or to praise his

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55. However, Rousseau says in the *Confessions* that he did nothing to disabuse the ladies of high society of their belief that he had lived the love between Saint-Preux and Julie (*C*, OC I, p. 548). The lie (a lie of omission) allowed him to pass as a great lover. This is in opposition to his argument in the Fourth Walk, in which he claims that to lie to one's advantage or to appear better than one is unjust.

56. In the case of the *Profession de foi*, it would be an innocent lie strictly in the following perspective: "Lecteur, ne craignez pas de moi des précautions indignes d'un ami de la vérité: je n'oublierai jamais ma devise; mais il m'est trop permis de me défier de mes jugemens. Au lieu de vous dire ici de mon chef ce que je pense, je vous dirai ce que pensoit un homme qui valoit mieux que moi. Je garantis la vérité des faits qui vont être rapportés. Ils sont réellement arrivés à l'auteur du papier que je vais transcrire" (*E*, OC IV, p. 558).

father and Madame de Warens in order to illustrate what natural goodness is, or perhaps even to laud Genevans to illustrate what virtuous citizens are, is not permitted by his principle. This is in stark contrast to what he says elsewhere about good histories being works of fiction, and his being in favor of lying about dead people for a useful moral purpose.<sup>57</sup>

If Rousseau does defend the noble and beneficent lie in the Fourth Walk, as the esoteric interpretation would have it, it is in an oblique manner.<sup>58</sup> This is surprising, for Rousseau has openly claimed in other writings that he does use an art of writing which conceals dangerous truths, and perhaps even fashions outright lies. His method of education in *Émile* uses the beneficent lie in many instances. Why would he be less open about his use of the noble lie in a book that is supposed to be dedicated only to himself? Is it because Rousseau is in fact discussing a new conception of the truth?

### 3.3.2 – Rousseau's Capacity for Disinterestedness

The Fourth Walk is one of Rousseau's most difficult writings to interpret. Rousseau examines lying from the perspective of the consequences of the lie and from the perspective of the intention of the liar, with the relative importance of the two perspectives remaining unclear. Rousseau distinguishes moral truths from factual truths,

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57. Compare *E*, OC I, p.349-350 and p. 415 to *R*, OC I, p. 1031 and *Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne*, OC III, p. 956.

58. The most direct proofs are when Rousseau says that to give false change is not reprehensible (*R*, OC I, p. 1026); when he says that a thing is owed only if it is useful or can be useful (*R*, OC I, p. 1027); when he calls a simplification the argument that giving something that does not exist as a rule of conduct is reprehensible (*R*, OC I, p. 1028); and when he says that it is possible to deceive someone with the intention of helping this person (*R*, OC I, p. 1029).

though the nature and the relation between the two truths is problematic. He associates and dissociates truth and justice. He uses the word “truth” sometimes as meaning the object of intellectual seeking and sometimes the virtue of veracity. He tries to find out his principles of conduct, and compares them to his behavior, without clearly marking which one of the two is his standard. Above all, Rousseau makes a spectacular *volte-face* at the end of the Walk, contradicting what he has established in the body of the Walk. After arguing that it is permitted to create fictions when they respect justice, Rousseau ends up saying that he never should have lied in any case whatsoever. Is the reader supposed to interpret this *volte-face* as Rousseau’s final position? Or is it one of Rousseau’s useful lies?

Perhaps an easier way to grasp the meaning of the Walk is to leave aside its argumentation and only consider the five examples of Rousseau’s own experience of lying. If Rousseau’s reasoning is difficult to follow, his practice should be easier to understand – not only because it is concrete, but also because Rousseau claims that his conscience or his moral instinct was always able to solve difficult moral questions when he had to act (*R*, OC I, p. 1028). Yet the five examples also provide their share of ambiguity. I will demonstrate how these examples reveal Rousseau’s problematic relationship to the truth. His examples are all about telling the truth, but as I will show, it is possible to infer the existence of the same problem with respect to seeking the truth. The main problem of Rousseau’s five examples revolves around his selflessness. Rousseau claims that he acted with an outstanding selflessness, yet his examples do not support his claim. After demonstrating the existence of Rousseau’s problematic

selflessness, or of his dedication to the truth, I will return to the question of his need for the *Profession de foi*, and more generally of the truth, to be happy.

The Fourth Walk is an examination of Rousseau's motto *Vitam impendere vero*, "to consecrate one's life to the truth." When Rousseau solemnly adopts this principle of conduct in the *Lettre à d'Alembert*, he underscores his virtuous selflessness in seeking the truth *and* in telling it:

L'amour du bien public est la seule passion qui me fait parler au public, je sais alors m'oublier moi-même [...] Sainte et pure vérité à qui j'ai consacré ma vie, non jamais mes passions ne souilleront le sincère amour que j'ai pour toi, l'intérêt ni la crainte ne sauroient altérer l'hommage que j'aime à t'offrir, et ma plume ne te refusera jamais rien que ce qu'elle craint d'accorder à la vengeance! (*LAD*, OC V, p. 120)

When Rousseau examines if he was up to his motto in the Fourth Walk, he reiterates his outstanding selflessness during his life: "Je sacrifiois [à la vérité] ma sureté, mes intérêts, ma personne avec une impartialité dont je ne connois nul autre exemple parmi les humains" (*R*, OC I, p. 1025). He recalls that he has lied in his life, but he is surprised to feel no guilt:

Ce qui me surprit le plus étoit qu'en me rappelant ces choses controuvées, je n'en sentois aucun vrai repentir. Moi dont l'horreur pour la fausseté n'a rien dans mon coeur qui la balance, moi qui braverois les supplices s'ils les falloit éviter par un mensonge, par quelle bizarre inconsequence mentois-je ainsi de gaité de coeur, sans nécessité, sans profit, et par quelle inconcevable contradiction n'en sentois-je pas le moindre regret (*R*, OC I, p. 1025).

It is not difficult to understand why Rousseau does not regret some of the lies he discusses later in the Fourth Walk. Hiding or disguising totally useless facts, teaching a moral lesson through a fable, exaggerating some facts to entertain his audience, embellishing forgotten circumstances when he told his life (without lying on his character or his merit), these are all lies that hardly contradict his profession of veracity and selflessness. Rousseau could therefore conclude that he has lived up to his motto.

However, Rousseau gives other examples of lies that make his exceptional sacrifice to the truth difficult to believe. The first is the well-known story of Marion and the ribbon. Rousseau presents this story as the worst harm he has ever done to somebody. Rousseau says that he still bitterly regrets the harm he has done to Marion. Yet he insists that he never intended to harm her. His lie was the result of his bad shame. Rousseau presents bad shame as a “delirium” natural to him, but totally opposed to his selfless nature. He does not consider his bad shame as a sign of the corruption of his heart: “Je puis jurer à la face du ciel qu’à l’instant même où cette honte invincible me l’arrachait j’aurois donné tout mon sang avec joye pour en détourner l’effet sur moi seul” (*R*, OC I, p. 1025). It is as if Rousseau’s regrets are directed towards the consequences of his act rather than towards his own action. He has compassion for the pain he caused to Marion rather than guilt for his bad intention.

The Marion episode is perhaps the guiding thread of the Fourth Walk. For Rousseau, the main obstacle to being truthful is his bad shame. In the Marion episode, his bad shame overcame his spirit of sacrifice. But Rousseau says he made the most of his mistake by learning how to control his bad shame when it could harm the interest and the

reputation of others (*R*, OC I, p. 1032). Rousseau, however, never learned to control his tongue when his sole interest is at play:

L'impression profonde du souvenir de la pauvre Marion peut bien retenir toujours ceux qui pourroient être nuisibles à d'autres, mais non pas ceux qui peuvent servir à me tirer d'embarras quand il s'agit de moi seul, ce qui n'est pas moins contre ma conscience et mes principes que ceux qui peuvent influencer sur le sort d'autrui (*R*, OC I, p. 1033-1034).

Rousseau is not perfectly selfless. When it is to his advantage to lie, he often does it. This is however against his principles. Rousseau again swears to Heaven that he would wholeheartedly retract the lie that “exculpates” him and tell the truth that “indicts” him, if his bad shame did not prevent him from admitting the lie it has just created.

His bad shame prevents him from being entirely dedicated to the truth when his interest or his image is at stake. But this should not be seen as contradicting his claim to sacrificing himself to the truth like no man has ever done. Rousseau explicitly claims that his bad shame is not a sign of *amour-propre* or selfishness, much less of malice and envy. It is not a problem located in his heart or his passions. It is strictly a “delirium” of his imagination. Rousseau gives for evidence the fact that he lies even when it is against his interest. For instance, recently, during a picnic, a young lady asked him if he ever had children. She had the obvious goal to humiliate him in front of the company. Rousseau denied the fact out of shame. However, since Rousseau knew that his lie would not fool anybody (as indeed it did not), he concludes that his lying is not an effect of *amour-propre* or selfishness. The demonstration is unconvincing insofar as Rousseau’s lie could denote an invincible *amour-propre* which is nonetheless not clever enough to make its

lies credible or to lie only when it is possible to lie. Rousseau's claim to be disinterested when he lies is also weakened by the answer Rousseau thinks he should have provided to the young lady. Rather than wishing that he had told the truth, Rousseau wishes he had replied that the question was indiscreet. This reply would have been perfect because it would have given a moral lesson to the lady while preserving him the shame of admitting his past behavior. Rousseau's perfect answer would have saved both morality and his interest. This is in stark contrast with his profession to tell the truth even when it is against his interest.

But Rousseau may claim on his behalf the fact that he confessed giving up his children in the aptly named *Confessions*. He wrote this book with a sincerity and truthfulness that perhaps offers no comparison. He did not dissimulate anything that could have tarnished his reputation, at least not intentionally. He says that he even accused himself more than he deserved. Why was it easier to admit his fault in a book dedicated to humanity than to a small company during a picnic? Why did Rousseau's bad shame not operate when he wrote his *Confessions*? This is because it was in his interest to tell the truth: "Sentant que le bien surpassoit le mal j'avois mon intérêt à tout dire, et j'ai tout dit" (R, OC I, p. 1035). Writing a book allows him to explain the circumstances of his mistakes. It gives him the time to explain what really happened in his heart when he failed to behave correctly. This is impossible when answering a lady who has a malicious intention and will not hear his explanations. Thus Rousseau's extraordinary sincerity and humiliating confessions are conditioned by his conditional to his expectation that his listener will see what redeems him:



Autrefois [...] je faisois l'aveu de mes fautes avec plus de franchise que de honte, parceque je ne doutois pas qu'on ne vit ce qui les rachetoit et que je sentoie au dedans de moi; mais l'œil de la malignité me navre et me déconcerte; en devenant plus malheureux je suis devenu plus timide et jamais je n'ai menti que par timidité (*R*, OC I, p. 1035).

Rousseau is sincere when he judges that it is in his interest to be sincere and when there is no self-sacrifice involved. This is confirmed by the two final examples of the Walk. Contrary to the story of the ribbon and of the picnic, these are two lies Rousseau is proud of. They demonstrate the good nature of his heart. Both stories show how Rousseau lied about the responsibility of a young friend who harmed him. As I have explained in the previous chapter, Rousseau is proud of his lie because both stories show how his compassion for the very person who harmed him is stronger in his heart than anger and hatred. The moral truth was that his two friends did not deserve to be punished, and therefore there was no injustice in hiding the facts to their parents.

However, between the two stories, Rousseau quotes Tasso. The quote claims the existence of magnanimous lies preferable to the truth. The quotation is about a young girl named Sophronia who takes responsibility for a theft she has not committed in order to save Christians from the wrath of the Muslims. Sophronia's lie is magnanimous because she risks her life to save the lives of others. By putting this quotation between his own *exploits*, Rousseau suggests that his two lies are just as magnanimous. But the comparison is ludicrous. Contrary to Sophronia, Rousseau risked nothing with his lies, and if he ever risked to be punished, it was certainly not with his life at stake. This is why he can be compassionate and identify with his friends. This is also why he risks nothing in admitting his weaknesses in his autobiographical writings.

Here as elsewhere, Rousseau's exaggeration and extravagant comparison opens the door to speculation. Was he aware of the discrepancy between his lies and Sophronia's lie? Is he being ironic? Or is it an evidence of hypocrisy, smugness and *amour-propre*?<sup>59</sup> Rousseau ends the Fourth Walk with the regret of having professed truthfulness. He did not possess the strength to practice this virtue whenever it was required of him. However, he persists in saying that he sacrificed his "interest and his inclinations" in order to be a truthful man. What he was unable to do was to control his timidity. He should never have created fables and fictions to supply to the void of his conversation. He should never have adorned the events of his life with fictions because of the pleasure he took in remembering them. The lies Rousseau regrets having told are fairly innocuous and hurt only himself. If in a sudden *volte-face*, he rejects the defense he made in the Walk in favor of his practice of lying, it is not because his lies have harmed others. It is because his lies have done damage to his self-esteem: "Il faut être vrai pour soi, c'est un hommage que l'honnête homme doit rendre à sa propre dignité" (*R*, OC I, p. 1038). Rousseau regrets being ashamed when in fact he should be proud of himself. His timidity hurt his dignity. For he never doubts that he is the best of men. His repentance leaves intact his claim to have sacrificed his interest and his inclinations in favor of telling the truth to humanity. And it does not seriously alter the good esteem Rousseau has for himself.

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59. "Rousseau [...] avait besoin de la 'dignité morale' pour supporter son propre aspect" (Nietzsche, *Le Crépuscule des idoles* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1985), p. 167).

### 3.3.3 – *Love of Oneself and Love of the Truth*

The whole Fourth Walk reveals a contradiction between Rousseau's assertions of self-sacrifice and his obvious selfishness when he tells the truth. Rousseau claims his desire to give all his blood to save Marion, but he gives no example to have acted in such a way during his life. His concern for his own happiness never tainted his dedication to telling the truth. He claims that his lies were not made on the basis of calculating what was in his interest or because of his *amour-propre*, but because of his bad shame. He reduces his bad shame to a delirium of his imagination, i.e. as something that can't be explained. His bad shame is therefore not a sign of the corruption of his heart.

His self-vindication is difficult to swallow. It may indicate that Rousseau is ironic. He knows that he is not as selfless as he claims to be. The question then becomes what is the purpose of his irony. A possible answer is that Rousseau overstates his selflessness in order to gain public esteem and favor the adoption of his doctrine. From this perspective, for instance, Rousseau took the title of "Citizen of Geneva" to give the appearance that he was concerned with the public good and ready to sacrifice himself for it.

It is possible to defend the idea that Rousseau did not hold the opinions he openly said he held about virtue and self-sacrifice. But it is more difficult to defend the thesis that Rousseau made himself self-sacrifices for ideas he considered to be pure illusions. Whence this concern for the good of others? Why does it warrant self-sacrifices? In other words, the role of the Citizen of Geneva who sacrifices his peace and his reputation through his work cannot just be a role. It cannot be a disguise Rousseau wears and takes

off according to his will. Would the lover of virtue only be a mask that Rousseau could dispose of when he drops his pen, the duality would be possible. But the real Rousseau would be held responsible, and indeed claim his responsibility, for the actions of the Citizen of Geneva. His *role* necessarily implies practical consequences for him. Moreover, pretending to be a citizen necessarily implies self-sacrifices that the Solitary Walker loathes. How could Rousseau, the man who is merely good rather than virtuous, the man who hates obligations and responsibilities, the man who is weak, accept to sacrifice his self-interest for the greater good? How can a man who is wholly motivated by *amour de soi* dedicate his life to telling the truth? How can Rousseau have sacrificed his interest to duty or to the truths he owed to others when he tells us that he has always been unable to bend to obligations?

We can see the same problem in his dedication to *seeking* the truth. Rousseau claims to have sought the truth with more dedication and impartiality than any man he has ever seen (*R*, OC I, p. 1017 and 1025). This claim is not extravagant. Rousseau is considered to be one of the greatest philosophers of all time. Obviously, all readers of Rousseau know that he did more than seek half-truths that were comforting to the prejudices of the day. We would not read him three centuries later if he had made a half-hearted effort at discovering what is human nature. It is therefore no surprise that Rousseau claims to love the truth for itself, and to love it more than anybody else. But his self-vindication and his philosophy raise legitimate question about his love of the truth. Is Rousseau more self-interested with respect to his search for the truth than he sometimes claims? Is it possible that his concern to be happy supersedes his concern to know the

truth? This is one of the most important questions raised by the reading of the autobiographical writings. Many, if not most readers of Rousseau think that he is not entirely truthful to himself in these writings. He wants to appear better than he is. He does not admit his faults as much as he should. He is not lucid about his motivations. Rousseau was more interested in preserving his self-esteem and his public image than in revealing himself as he truly was. As a consequence, he did not know himself; the reader, who is more impartial, can have a better understanding of Rousseau than Rousseau himself.

Rousseau's philosophic system could support this interpretation. If man is wholly motivated by *amour de soi*, how can he be fully dedicated to seeking the truth? If the sole passion of man is *amour de soi*, i.e. seeking our well-being and our conservation (*SD*, OC III, p. 126; *D*, OC I, p. 668), why would truth matter to us? It would only matter insofar as it can help us achieve these two goals. In full coherence with his understanding of human nature, Rousseau claims that we only seek to know because we want to enjoy our existence more fully: "Nous ne cherchons à connoître, que parce que nous désirons de jouir" (*SD*, OC III, p. 143). A philosopher alone on an island would only seek to know what could enhance his well-being:

Supposez un philosophe rélégué dans une isle deserte avec des instrumens et des livres, sûr d'y passer seul le reste de ses jours, il ne s'embarrassera plus guères du sistême du monde, des loix de l'attraction, du calcul différenciel: il n'ouvrira peut-être de sa vie un seul livre; mais jamais il ne s'abstiendra de visiter son isle jusqu'au dernier recoin, quelque grande qu'elle puisse être (*E*, OC IV, p. 429).<sup>60</sup>

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60. Rousseau later says that the entire world is *Émile's* island, suggesting that it is natural to want to learn about the whole universe. But it does not change the fact that the principle driving this quest is the quest for well-being.

Rousseau's anthropology leads us to think that theoretical knowledge, or knowledge devoid of utility, is not naturally attractive. It is only attractive if it can make us live better.

This conception of knowledge and human nature may explain Rousseau's pride for his doctrine. Rousseau is proud of his doctrine because it is perfectly suited to human nature. Its purpose is to be useful for making men happy. It is not to develop a metaphysical system that satisfies a hypothetical need to know the truth. It may also explain Rousseau's critique of the *philosophes* in the Third Walk. If Rousseau criticizes their passion for knowledge rather than their doctrine, it is because it is what really matters when it comes to knowledge. The *philosophes* want to know the truth for the same reason as any other man: to enhance their well-being. They do think that knowledge is only good if it is useful, but it is their idea of what is useful or what is well being that is wrong. They think that knowledge serves to be admired and applauded. Their curiosity is not driven by *amour de soi*, but by *amour-propre*. They also think that knowledge is good only if it serves to satisfy our bodily desires. This is why, for example, they see nature as a drugstore (*R*, OC I, p. 1064). They do not see that happiness or well-being is more a question of satisfying the needs of the heart than the needs of the body;<sup>61</sup> and that a heart motivated by *amour-propre* cannot be happy.

In short, if Rousseau does not criticize their metaphysical and moral doctrine, it is because he seems to think that they are epiphenomena of their *amour-propre*. Their doctrine is the effect of this passion rather than the other way around. It is because they

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61. "Les petites privations s'endurent sans peine quand le coeur est mieux traité que le corps" (*R*, OC I, p. 1097).

desire to distinguish themselves and to enjoy all the goods of this world that they establish a materialist and atheist doctrine with a concomitant hedonist morality. Of course, this doctrine in turn comes to support and strengthen their *amour-propre*, but it is not because they have adopted this doctrine that they have become what they are. Even their *amour-propre* is not the result of a false opinion so much as a lack of strength. At bottom, it seems that Rousseau thinks that the problem lies within their heart rather than within their reason.<sup>62</sup> It is not their false opinion on happiness that explains their devious desire for happiness, but their *amour-propre* that explains their doctrine. Accordingly, it is vain to criticize their doctrine, for it is in fact the hypocritical product of an *amour-propre* that tries to disguise itself with sophisms. In other words, Rousseau does not think that the *philosophes* are men of good faith who truly care about the good of others. He does not think that their mistake is simply to be misguided about what the common good is. He attacks their person because it is not their ideas that are the source of their mistakes.

If these last statements are true, then Rousseau's *ad hominem* attacks against the *philosophes* expresses his genuine thought. This perspective is more in line with Rousseau's argument about truth-telling and lying in the Fourth Walk. Indeed, if his attacks against the *philosophes* were merely rhetorical, it would mean that Rousseau depicts the *philosophes* as scoundrels in order to detach humanity from their bad influence. His portrait would be unfair – it would be a lie – but the effect would be useful. Does Rousseau's argument on lying support that practice? According to one possible

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62. Cf. *D*, OC I, p. 668-669.

interpretation of the Fourth Walk, it would not be unjust: if justice is identical to what is useful, and Rousseau's attack on the *philosophes* is useful to the non-philosopher who will literally believe what he says, then Rousseau acts justly. Yet it would mean that he unjustly ascribes blame to real men, which he denies he has ever done since the Marion episode. Although his lie would not be self-serving, it would unjustly harm other men, which the Fourth Walk argues is not permitted (*R*, OC I, p. 1030).

The *philosophes* are self-interested in their philosophical endeavor. But what about Rousseau? If Rousseau's critique of the *philosophes* is to be fair, he must judge himself – and we must judge him – with the same standard he uses to judge them. If he attacks their person rather than their ideas, he must lend himself to the same critique. Rousseau seems to be aware of this. His autobiographical writings are perhaps more essential to the validity of his system than one would normally think. Rousseau thought it was necessary and just to defend his person to support his thought. To mark his difference with the philosophers, and to testify to his selfless dedication to finding the truth, Rousseau reuses the image of the philosopher alone on an island. Contrary to the *philosophes*, who study to show off, Rousseau has studied his life for his own sake: “De toutes les études que j’ai tâché de faire en ma vie au milieu des hommes il n’y en a guère que je n’eusse faite également seul dans une île déserte où j’aurois été confiné pour le reste de mes jours” (*R*, OC I, p. 1013). Rousseau also marks his difference with the hypothetical philosopher in *Émile*. The latter would never have studied the system of the world and would probably never have opened a book. Rousseau, however, would have wanted to know more than what was relevant to his immediate well-being. In a similar



situation, i.e. during his solitary period at the Charmettes, Rousseau's studying was not made with the prospect of success in this world (*C*, OC I, p. 244). Rousseau thought he was dying and consequently lived day to day. But his curiosity did not stop at what was of immediate concern to his well-being.

But this is not the whole picture of Rousseau's life. For instance, we have seen how Rousseau seemed uninterested in truth and knowledge on St. Peter's Island. He also appears less concerned with the truth and with knowledge at the time of the *Rêveries*. His miserable life does not allow him to be only concerned with the truth (*R*, OC I, p. 1021). He does not want to reexamine the philosophical questions that previously interested him. His faculties have declined with age; his persecutors trouble his head. Moreover, he wants to be happy. To reexamine the great philosophical questions would only increase his misery by putting him in a state of doubt. He now reads only a small number of books, and these books are only old ones that he has already read (*R*, OC I, p. 1024). He believes the capacity of studying to be overestimated: "Je ne cherche point à m'instruire: il est trop tard. D'ailleurs je n'ai jamais vu que tant de science contribuât au bonheur de la vie" (*R*, OC I, p. 1068). Above all, Rousseau also says that he regrets the time he has spent studying during his life (*R*, OC I, p. 1023). He concludes with hindsight that the time he has given to thinking during his life did not make him happy: "J'ai pensé quelquefois assez profondément; mais rarement avec plaisir, presque toujours contre mon gré et comme par force: la rêverie me delasse et m'amuse, la réflexion me fatigue et m'attriste; penser fut toujours pour moi une occupation pénible et sans charme" (*R*, OC I, p. 1061-1062).

But this is not the whole picture of the book either. The Solitary Walker is still interested in reading and studying. But it is only on plants. Rousseau explains the genesis of his passion for plants in the Seventh Walk. It took him a long period of time to discover the joy of studying plants. He used to contemplate nature in its mass and in its wholeness rather than in its details. This is because his relationship to nature was through his ecstasies. Their intoxicating effect erased the particularities of nature. Rousseau lost himself in its “beautiful system”; studying with care its parts seemed uninteresting in comparison with the pleasure he took. However, the beginning of his great miseries reduced his capacity to expand his affections over nature. The plot contracted his imagination and his ideas into himself. When Rousseau began to feel released from his sufferings, his heart recovered in part its capacity to expand its affections. However, Rousseau never recovered the same strength to fly on the wings of his imagination. His walks in nature did not result in the same ecstatic *rêveries*. Moreover, Rousseau did not want to give free rein to his imagination because he feared it would lead him to brood over his miseries.

This is when Rousseau discovered “the only spectacle in the world” of which our eyes and our heart never weary. Despite this flattering comment, Rousseau presents botany as a *dédommagement* to his former ecstasies.<sup>63</sup> It is not on par with his former bliss. Rousseau wants to study plants mainly because it provides an efficient distraction from his pain: “Je pris gout à cette recreation des yeux, qui dans l’infortune repose, amuse, distrait l’esprit et suspend le sentiment des peines. La nature des objets aide

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63. “Cette étude [est] pour moi une espèce de passion qui remplit le vide de toutes celles que je n’ai plus” (R, OC I, p. 1070).

beaucoup à cette diversion et la rend plus séduisante” (*R*, OC I, p. 1063). It allows him to escape sentiments of hatred (*R*, OC I, p. 1061) and to avoid brooding over his miseries (*R*, OC I, p. 1062).

Rousseau’s infatuation with botany is not caused by a scientific interest or the desire to know things as they are. His study of botany is not for his instruction, but for his amusement (*R*, OC I, p. 1068). To a heart entangled in painful sentiments, botany is an excellent diversion, since its pleasures are only pleasures of sensations (*R*, OC I, p. 1063). Plants do not make moral judgment on him: “Faut-il s’étonner si j’aime la solitude? Je ne vois qu’animosité sur les visages des hommes, et la nature me rit toujours” (*R*, OC I, p. 1095). The inability of plants to feed the *amour-propre* is one reason why they do not interest most men. If they ever study botany with care, it is because they bring an external concern for recognition to the study (*R*, OC I, p. 1069). Modern men are also insensitive to its charm because they consider nature as a drugstore and plants as various kinds of medicine. With their concern for their health, they bring to the study of plants images of sickness and infirmity. Were they able to be concerned only with their senses, rather than with their health, they would find botany appealing. Their concern for their bodily interest, but mostly their imagination, is what prevents them from seeing the beauty of nature.

There is no doubt that Rousseau studied plants with seriousness. We can see studies he made that prove that he was not a dilettante. But it is undeniable that his apology of botany in the Seventh Walk is not for the scientific character of the activity. While he wants to know plants in themselves, the interest he takes in learning appears

accidental. Besides the distraction it provides to his pain, Rousseau likes botany because the actual sight of a specific plant releases a load of sentiments and memories from his previous botanical expeditions:

Toutes mes courses de botanique, les diverses impressions du local des objets qui m'ont frappé, les idées qu'il m'a fait naître, les incidens qui s'y sont mêlés, tout cela m'a laissé des impressions qui se renouvellent par l'aspect des plantes herborisées dans ces mêmes lieux. [...] C'est la chaîne des idées accessoires qui m'attache à la botanique. Elle rassemble et rappelle à mon imagination toutes les idées qui la flatent davantage (*R*, OC I, p. 1073).

The primary purpose of his herbarium is to preserve a physical witness of the emotional state he was in when he collected them.<sup>64</sup> The happiness Rousseau draws from botany is therefore identical to the happiness described at the end of the Fifth Walk. What makes Rousseau happy is dreaming about what he experienced in the past. It is not the truth or knowledge that Rousseau is seeking, but pleasurable sensations, sentiments and memories.<sup>65</sup>

How can we explain the seriousness and the scientific character of Rousseau's activity? If pleasurable sensations, sentiments and memories are his goal, then why care about the structure of the plants and the organization of the vegetal realm? Rather than classifying plants according to their own nature, why not create a herbarium which is organized following the different times and places in which Rousseau collected the

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64. See Jean Starobinski, *La Transparence et l'obstacle*, p. 279-280.

65. A perplexing aspect of Rousseau's account in the Seventh Walk is that he claims that his being is reduced to his sensations and that he is affected only by the immediate objects that surround him (*R*, OC I, p. 1066 and 1068). But he also says that the pleasure he takes in botany comes from his imagination and his memory (*R*, OC I, p. 1071 and 1073).

plants? Did Rousseau delve into the scientific details of the field only because the more infatuated he became with them, the more he forgot his pain? In the *Confessions*, Rousseau says that botany becomes boring if we do not study it carefully. The untrained eye does not see every plant in its interesting individuality, but rather as the homogeneous part of a monotonous whole. Studying plants in depth makes the vegetable realm appear in its enchanting diversity. But botany is not only attractive to Rousseau because he desires to know things as they are. Rousseau learns about plants because of the intellectual stimulation it provides and the boredom it prevents, like a man fascinated with puzzles and games. To learn something is not the goal so much as experiencing the sensation of learning. Indeed, Rousseau is happy to forget what he has learned in order to renew the feeling he has had: “Mon défaut de mémoire me devoit tenir toujours dans cet heureux point d’en savoir assez peu pour que tout me fut nouveau et assez pour que tout me fut sensible” (*R*, OC I, p. 641-642). As Christopher Kelly comments: “The pleasure of botanizing requires a degree of knowledge but consists more in the novelty of ever-renewed discovery of particular beauties than in the contemplation of eternal principles.”<sup>66</sup>

Much the same can be said about the only other knowledge that interests Rousseau at the time of the *Rêveries*. The declared purpose of his book is to know himself better: “Mais moi, détaché d’eux et de tout, que suis-je moi-même? Voilà ce qui me reste à chercher” (*R*, OC I, p. 995). There is no doubt that through the *Rêveries*, Rousseau is presenting to his reader the result of a deep investigation about who he is.

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66. Christopher Kelly, *Rousseau as Author*, p. 179.

Rousseau wants to know why he lied so easily or why he hates obligations, or why he loves botany, because he wants to know who he is (cf. *R*, OC I, p. 1061). It appears that Rousseau is not altogether satisfied with his former investigation of himself (*R*, OC I, p. 1024).

However, this concern for a genuine knowledge of his nature is mixed with other motivations. For instance, it is paradoxical that a man who claims that he does not want to let his mind wander, because of his fear of being submerged by painful images of his miserable situation, is nonetheless writing *rêveries* that are in part an examination of his situation. The task of self-knowledge is in opposition to Rousseau's desire to be free from any unpleasant thoughts. It might be said that it is not so much for self-knowledge as for self-apologizing that Rousseau writes his *Rêveries*. The reflections of the Fourth Walk and the Ninth Walk are explicitly launched to answer an accusation from his former friends. Rousseau may however claim that he is only interested in vindicating his person to his own eyes, and that he examines himself to determine if he is indeed as innocent as he thinks he is, not to defend who he is (*R*, OC I, p. 1000). Yet if Rousseau's moral solitude is an exaggeration, and if his pretense to be writing for himself is contradicted by the text, then Rousseau still cares about the judgment of men. Accordingly, self-knowledge can be seen as a means for self-vindication, the true but hidden goal of the *Rêveries*.

It is also paradoxical that Rousseau's resolution not to reexamine the most important philosophical questions because of his declining faculties and his torments does not hinder him from a new attempt at self-knowledge. If he is really unsatisfied with

his previous attempts, he does not seem to be aiming at doing better. He claims at the outset of the book that he will not do what is required to achieve his task (*R*, OC I, p. 1000-1001). This is perhaps because Rousseau has a greater motivation than self-knowledge. His writing is motivated by the pleasure he takes in writing about himself and reading about himself: “[La lecture des *Rêveries*] me rappellera la douceur que je goute à les écrire, et faisant renaitre ainsi pour moi le tems passé doublera pour ainsi dire mon existence”(R, OC I, p. 1001). The act of writing about himself is pleasurable, and the act of reading about himself “doubles” his existence. On this basis, it is questionable whether self-knowledge is primarily an aesthetic experience for Rousseau – in both its ancient and modern sense. By creating a self-portrait, Rousseau senses his existence better. The portrait and its content are like the herbarium and the plants it contains: it is a sensitive remnant of a previous experience of enjoying himself. In telling and reading his pleasurable experiences, Rousseau renews his pleasure: “En me disant, j’ai jouï, je jotiis encore” (*Art de jouir*, OC I, p. 1174). And as the end of the Fifth Walk argues, the pleasure of dreaming about a former *rêverie* is purer than actually living it. The self-portrait arranged by art is more perfect than its sketch.

In this perspective, Rousseau’s quest for self-knowledge could therefore be said to be less an investigation into who Rousseau truly is than a confirmation of what he already believes himself to be. The autobiographical writings strengthen Rousseau’s self-esteem. Their writing and reading augment his *amour de soi*. Of course, the images of himself are more delightful if they are authentic. But if Rousseau’s goal is to feel himself rather than

to know himself, his motivation to go to the bottom of his self may be deficient. *Amour de soi* wants happiness, not lucidity.

### 3.3.4 – *Happiness and Illusions*

The previous remarks aimed at suggesting that Rousseau subordinates the truth to happiness. But they are hardly conclusive. Perhaps a better way to test the hypothesis is to ask the question in a different manner. In what way are the unreal and untrue products of his imagination preferable to reality and truth? Is self-delusion preferable to lucidity?

Rousseau says that the self-knowledge he has acquired during the past twenty years is a “sad wisdom.” What he gained in self-awareness was not enough to compensate his miseries: “L’ignorance est encor préférable” (*R*, OC I, p. 1011).<sup>67</sup> The Solitary Walker repeatedly expresses his nostalgia for the time when he was innocent and naive. For instance, he lost the “sweet illusions” of his youth with regret (*R*, OC I, p. 1010). If he were self-deluded, at least he was happier than he is now with all his wisdom.

Rousseau often expresses a strong preference for an enchanted world of his own imagining over the sad lucidity of down-to-earth wisdom. We have seen his preference for a chimerical society over existing ones. We have also seen how Rousseau praises the intoxicating states he has known throughout his life. More exactly, his account of these intoxicating states is not altogether positive, but it is not altogether negative. There is a

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67. Rousseau states the opposite in the Sixth Walk: OC I, p. 1052.



great pleasure in being intoxicated with the idea of virtue and of love. The act of writing is just as intoxicating, as Rousseau constantly describes it as a state of delirious enthusiasm. We have seen how being the source of the intoxication of others through art also sends Rousseau into raptures (cf. the episode of Fontainebleau). When Rousseau calls a state *delirious*, one must not automatically see a pejorative connotation attached to the term. Despite the part of Rousseau's philosophy that calls for an ordered and united soul, there is no doubt that he had himself a taste for chaotic experience (*R*, OC I, p. 1066). Rousseau generally seems to find his imaginary life incomparably more pleasurable than reality: "Il me semble Monsieur qu'en rêvant de cette manière je n'aurois de longtemps envie de me reveiller" (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1146).

We have seen how Rousseau praises ecstatic states as states of bliss. Besides the cases in the third letter to Malesherbes and in the Fifth Walk, Rousseau also praises his accident at Ménilmontant in the Second Walk. After being hit by a dog, Rousseau lost consciousness. When he came back to his senses, he experienced the pleasurable feeling of being at one with nature. Rousseau describes his pleasure in the following terms: "Un calme ravissant auquel chaque fois que je me le rappelle je ne trouve rien de comparable dans toute l'activité des plaisirs connus" (*R*, OC I, p. 1005).<sup>68</sup> Nothing negative is said about this state. Whether Rousseau loses contact with reality through a sentiment or through his imagination, he never underlines his lack of lucidity as a loss.

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68. Montaigne, who suffered a similar accident and *post-traumatic* experience of consciousness, and to whom Rousseau may be alluding in the Second Walk, qualifies the pleasure he took as comparable to the one we take when we let ourselves fall into sleep: *Essais*, Tome II, Chapter 6, p. 374.

All this points towards an idea of truth and happiness that was already apparent in the *First Discourse*, namely that *ignorance is bliss*. Rousseau sometimes seems to hold this true only for non-philosophic men, but it sometimes seems to be true for him:

Vous savez, M. le maréchal, que les solitaires ont tous l'esprit romanesque. Je suis plein de cet esprit; je le sens et je ne m'en afflige point. Pourquoi chercherois-je à guérir d'une si douce folie, puisqu'elle contribue à me rendre heureux? Gens du monde et de la cour, n'allez pas vous croire plus sages que moi: nous ne différons que par nos chimères.<sup>69</sup>

The difference between Rousseau and men living in the world is not that he lives in the light of the truth. The difference is the nature of the chimeras Rousseau entertains. From this perspective, Rousseau's defense of ignorance in the name of happiness seems to go farther than the classical defense of the noble lie for non-philosophic men. The lie is good not only because men do not have the capacity to know the truth, but also because it *is* preferable to the truth. This position is anti-philosophic, but it does not mean that it is not defensible. Ignorance about certain displeasing facts of life, and illusions that strengthen and expand our sentiment of existence, may be better than a depressing lucidity.

This entails that Rousseau willingly and knowingly deludes himself. How is this possible? How can Rousseau's reason tell him that a belief is an illusion and his heart nonetheless adopts this illusion? How can Rousseau know perfectly well and teach to his reader the illusions of virtue, love and religion, and nonetheless attempt to be virtuous at one point of his life, fall in love during another time, and adopt a religious belief late in

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69. À Charles-François-Frédéric de Montmorency-Luxembourg, maréchal duc de Luxembourg, 27 mai 1759 in *Correspondance complète de Jean Jacques Rousseau*, Lettre 821, Tome VI, p. 107.

his life? In other words, shouldn't Rousseau's awareness that we put beauty in what we deem to be beautiful, or that we only love ourselves when we love others, prevent him from falling into rapturous ecstasies in front of nature or to love men? As Allan Bloom writes: "The enigma of Rousseau's whole undertaking is how one can believe in what one knows to be a product of one's imagination."<sup>70</sup> Bloom does not mean that it is possible to act in disagreement with what we deem to be true or to be good to us. The experience of incontinence is fairly common (although it is a philosophical challenge to explain). What Rousseau's philosophy and life claim and demonstrate is that one can *willingly* adhere to what one knows to be an illusion. Why do so? Because one judges that the illusion is better than the truth; because the illusion brings happiness.

Self-delusion is a fairly common experience. Techniques of relaxation are an example. One willingly believes to be in a fictional situation in order to obtain the pleasurable sentiments associated with this situation. Another example is when we go to the theater to see a play. We do not look at the actors as actors and the stage as a stage. While we know that what we are contemplating is a pretense of reality, we willingly embark into believing that what we see is true. This phenomenon has been dubbed the *willing suspension of disbelief*. Accordingly, Bloom's enigma can be solved. The question is rather the following: how can we know when Rousseau deluded himself?

We find an example of willful self-delusion in the Seventh Walk. Rousseau describes how he believed himself to be alone during a plant excursion in Switzerland. He took pleasure in believing that he had found a refuge unknown to the whole universe

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70. Allan Bloom, *Love and Friendship*, p. 91.

and in which he would be protected from his persecutors. However, he soon discovered a stocking mill nearby. His belief in being utterly alone was an illusion. Rousseau explains why he would cling to such an illusion:

Il me semble que sous les ombrages d'une forest je suis oublié, libre et paisible comme si je n'avois plus d'ennemis ou que le feuillage des bois dut me garantir de leurs atteintes, comme il les éloigne de mon souvenir et je m'imagine dans ma bêtise qu'en ne pensant point à eux ils ne penseront point à moi. Je trouve une si grande douceur dans cette illusion que je m'y livrerois tout entier si ma situation, ma foiblesse et mes besoins me le permettoient (*R*, OC I, p. 1070).

Rousseau's desire is to live in some delusional manner. He would rather fancy himself to be alone than to remember that he actually lives among men and that he cares about their judgment. Here we can know that Rousseau deluded himself when he believed himself to be alone in the woods because he tells us. Since he is no more under the spell of this illusion at the moment he writes, it is possible for him to say so. But he would not tell us he is under the spell of an illusion while he is actually under its spell. Accordingly, it is impossible for the interpreter to say with certainty that Rousseau willingly deludes himself at the moment he writes. Would Rousseau admit it, the delusion would end.

Nonetheless, self-delusion seems such an important part of Rousseau's life that it is not incredible to think he deludes himself at the moment he writes. The need to flatter the passions of his heart would trump the desire to expose the truth. For instance, his claim to be absolutely alone at the outset of the *Rêverie* could be a willful self-delusion. Is Rousseau's adoption of his doctrine in the Third Walk another example of willful self-delusion? A part of Rousseau's argument in the Third Walk vindicates this interpretation.

Rousseau adopts his doctrine because it is useful to make him happy. Even if it is not true, it fulfills an important need. Of course, Rousseau says that he sincerely believes what it teaches. He does not say that it is an illusion. He only says that it might be an illusion. Yet the multiple metaphysical and moral positions Rousseau takes in the *Rêveries* suggest that what matters in the end for Rousseau is to find a doctrine that makes him happy. If Rousseau makes little use of his doctrine in the *Rêveries*, and if he changes it in the First Walk and in the Eight Walk, it could be because his passions at the time he wrote each Walk called for something else. According to Rousseau's theory, it is our passions that guide us more than our opinions. Rousseau shows how it is true for the *philosophes*. And he sometimes claims the same truth about himself. We can wonder if his passions do not take the hold over him, and if Rousseau is not caught off guard by the trap he said he avoided, namely that it is difficult to keep ourselves from believing what we so ardently desire. Rousseau wants an explanation that will stop the pain that the plot inflicts to him. As we have seen in the previous chapter, both the belief in a just God and materialism can strengthen Rousseau's belief that his fate is sealed. This is the *sine qua non* belief he says he needs to be happy. While it makes little sense how Rousseau could jump from one explanation to another, and how he could remain blind to the incoherence, his adoption of these two doctrines in these two Walks are tied to a belief that makes no more sense, namely the belief that he is the victim of a universal plot. Up to what point are we to expect coherence from Rousseau in a time where his head was not fully sound?

### 3.4 – Conclusion

The Third Walk is based on two arguments. First, Rousseau made the most sincere effort in finding a true doctrine. Second, his doctrine is the most useful to make him happy. The delicate question is to understand the meaning and the relative weight of these two arguments. In a sense, they are in conflict with each other. Being sincere with respect to the truth means to take nothing in consideration but truth itself in our seeking. The *philosophes* are insincere and therefore dogmatic because what their search is predetermined by their passion. They want to find a doctrine that will vindicate their desires. Rousseau claims to do the exact opposite. His philosophical investigation was the most sincere because the most detached from any interest. Precisely because of his sincerity, Rousseau did not try to prove what he felt was the truth. His sincerity allowed him to see how ignorant we are with respect to metaphysical questions.

Insincerity means jumping to a conclusion that flatters one's desires: "On se défend difficilement de croire ce qu'on désire avec tant d'ardeur, et qui peut douter que l'intérêt d'admettre ou rejeter les jugemens de l'autre vie ne détermine la foi de la plupart des hommes sur leur espérance ou leur crainte" (*R*, OC I, p. 1017). Rousseau says that he does not know if his interest has influenced his judgment. But he is sure his heart was pure of bad faith: "Tout cela pouvoit fasciner mon jugement j'en conviens, mais non pas altérer ma bonne foi: car je craignois de me tromper sur chaque chose" (*R*, OC I, p. 1017). Rousseau's sincerity allowed him to discover that reason cannot prove or disprove the existence of a just God or the immortality of the soul. It also commands the

second step of his philosophical quest, namely the adoption of an answer to these questions. Indeed, Rousseau's claim is not that the incapacity of his reason to solve metaphysical questions allowed him to choose the answers he preferred or wished were true. His claim is that it allowed him to adopt what his heart felt to be true: "J'adoptai dans chaque question le sentiment qui me parut le mieux établi directement, le plus croyable en lui-même" (*R*, OC I, p. 1018). His heart does not adopt what it *wishes* is the truth, but what is the most believable or likely to be true.

The source of Rousseau's confidence in his doctrine is that he has been as sincere as possible in seeking the truth. It is not therefore a case of willful self-delusion. His belief in the existence of a just God is not similar to the belief that a character of a play truly exists while we watch the play. It is true that the utility of his doctrine comforts his choice. But this is a secondary reason for choosing his doctrine. Given the fact that his doctrine rests on shaky grounds, thinking of its usefulness to make him happy gives him another reason to stick to it: "Quand je me tromperois dans cet espoir il est lui-même un bien qui m'aura fait supporter plus aisément tous mes maux."<sup>71</sup> The usefulness of his belief is not the decisive factor of its adoption, but it reassures him that his belief has a value. Even if his heart is mistaken and that there is no afterlife promised to the good person, it nonetheless helps him to be happy in this world.

Such is Rousseau's argument at the surface of the Third Walk. However, a set of contradictions – above all the fact that Rousseau has little use for his doctrine in the *Rêveries* to be happy, and his adoption of a different doctrine in the First Walk and in the

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71. *Au ministre Jacob Vernes*, 18 février 1758 in *Correspondance complète de Jean Jacques Rousseau*, Lettre 616, Tome V, p. 33.

Eight Walk – prevent us from adhering to this argument. These contradictions open the door for a variety of interpretations. They can indicate that Rousseau's doctrine is an exoteric teaching destined to his non-philosophical readers. Or it could be the result of his desire to be happy – a desire that sometimes defies reason – and of his taste for self-delusion.

I have sketched the problem of the relationship between truth and happiness for Rousseau. A more probing exploration of the problem that would provide more solid conclusions would have to explore many difficult questions. For instance, does the heart have an ontological reach for Rousseau? Can a sentiment state what is true or what exists, or does Rousseau only take reason as an authority? How can we know that what our heart tells us is true is not what it desires to be true? Another important question is the character of Rousseau's skepticism. Why does Rousseau adopt a positive doctrine when his reason demonstrates that he cannot know what is true? Why isn't Rousseau defending more clearly a doctrine of simple ignorance? Is it only for rhetorical purposes? Rousseau may adopt his doctrine only for the sake of non-philosophers who cannot live happily if they thought that there is no sure answer to the great metaphysical questions. But he makes his Vicar say that doubt on these questions is an unsustainable position. Could Rousseau include himself in the pack of men who need an answer because his being needs one?

Resorting to Rousseau's philosophical system only widens the problem of the importance of truth for him. If indeed, at bottom, we are solely motivated by *amour de soi*, how can we explain the love of the truth? If Rousseau is only motivated by *amour de*



*soi*, how are we to explain his pretense to have willingly made great sacrifice in his dedication to the truth?

Rousseau's theory of expansive self-love can explain a legion of human phenomena. Pushed to its limits, it can even explain why a man whose sole passion is to love himself can nonetheless sacrifice his life for his city. It is because he identifies himself to his city and that he feels himself only or mostly through his city that he is ready to die for it. But the love of the truth seems to be the human phenomenon his theory can't explain. For what would it mean to love the truth because we identify with it? If anything, this is the formula for bad faith: "I love the truth not because it is *the* truth, but because it is *my* truth." It can explain why men are *not* interested in the truth, but in defending their own particular views. They have a strong inclination to rally around their ideas and to want to see it prevail in the world because they are attached to them as if they were a part of themselves. If anything, Rousseau's theory of expansive self-love explains why Rousseau identified early on with his system and thought that the attacks against his ideas were attacks against his person. As he writes himself: "La persecution m'a élevé l'ame. Je sens que l'amour de la vérité m'est devenu cher par ce qu'il me coûte. Peut être ne fut-il d'abord pour moi qu'un système, il est maintenant ma passion dominante" (*Ébauche des Confessions*, OC I, p. 1164). While we can love all sorts of goods for the good it does to us, the love of the truth is exceptional. Love of one's own cannot be the source of genuine philosophizing. If a genuine love of the truth is to exist, it has to be for the sake of truth itself, and not for the good it does to us. Otherwise, our love of the truth would be self-serving. It would precisely be the opposite

of the love of the truth, because it would mean that we love the “truth” only insofar as it makes us happy. This position could not explain the deeply human experience of having one’s life transfigured by the discovery of a truth. Or rather, it would have to explain how this discovery is in fact an illusion of our passions or prejudices. The revelation that seems to indict who I am in fact supports who I would like to be. It is just one of the thousand of illusions of an *amour-propre* which believes to be selfless while it is selfish.

In the final analysis, it seems that Rousseau’s understanding of human nature, and his self-understanding, can explain the existence of so many contradictions in his work. It is because Rousseau is prisoner of a conception of human nature that is not genuinely interested in the truth that he is led to contradictions about what is human. Rousseau’s philosophy misses a part of reality. His self-understanding misunderstands a part of who he naturally is as a human being, a possibility that he realized in a sense more than most of us: a man who dedicated his life to find the truth for its own sake rather than for self-serving purposes.

# Conclusion

The conclusion of this dissertation mirrors the conclusion of the *Rêveries*. It ends without providing a sentiment of completeness. But this is not due to the fact that the author has been surprised by death. It is due to Rousseau's contradictory accounts of his happiness.

Most interpreters tend to overlook these contradictions for a multitude of reasons, perhaps primarily because they find one account more interesting than another.<sup>1</sup> I have tried to present Rousseau's contradictions with clarity. I have also discussed possible ways to resolve them. While I have at times preferred one account or one statement to others, it was for the sake of discussion. In the final analysis, the problems are more evident than the solutions.

I would sum up the difficulties of Rousseau's account of happiness into three major problems. The first problem is Rousseau's understanding of the source of his misery. Does Rousseau think that his misery is due to his character and his choices, or does he think it is due to external events? In the letters to Malesherbes, Rousseau writes: "Mes maux sont l'ouvrage de la nature mais mon bonheur est le mien" (*LAM*, OC I,

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1. For example, on the two different obstacles to beneficence presented in the Sixth Walk, Robert Ricatte writes: "Le thème du *lien* est pour nous plus intéressant que le thème du *piège*: il se rapporte au caractère même de Rousseau, et non à un épisode contingent de sa biographie" (Robert Ricatte, *Réflexions sur les "Rêveries"*, p. 93). Ricatte also justifies his preference by claiming (without evidence) that what Rousseau genuinely fears is unwanted obligations rather than falling into the traps of the plot. He claims (again without evidence) that Rousseau wants to hide his genuine fear with the excuse of the plot because the latter makes his selfishness innocent. I agree with Ricatte that the Sixth Walk opens up these possibilities, but I do not think that it is possible to say that this is what Rousseau thought. An equally legitimate interpretation would be to say that Rousseau defends a moderate attitude with respect to generosity and that he knows that he exaggerates in his refusal to be generous.

p. 1139). In the Second Walk, he writes: “J’appris ainsi par ma propre expérience que la source du vrai bonheur est en nous, et qu’il ne dépend pas des hommes de rendre vraiment misérable celui qui sait vouloir être heureux” (*R*, OC I, p. 1003). Yet Rousseau describes himself as a passive being whose happiness mostly – if not entirely – depends on his situation. His self-description raises the question whether he thinks a conversion of his soul or an effort of the will is required to become happy.

A satisfactory presentation of his understanding of his misery could cast a new light on his philosophy, for Rousseau usually holds the position that we are responsible for our evils. For instance, he demonstrates in his letter to Voltaire on Providence how our physical evils are mostly of our own making. If we did not magnify them with our imagination, they would be insignificant to us. And in any case, they are unavoidable, so we know that we must put up with them. Our moral evils, on the other hand, are entirely of our own making. Nature did not want us to suffer them. We should therefore not complain about our human existence. To exist is enough to make us satisfied. Modern philosophy stimulates our sense of having been wronged by nature because it stimulates desires that cannot be fulfilled. A true philosophy adopts the following point of view: “Tout est bien pour le tout”; “Tout est bien, sortant des mains de l’auteur des choses: tout dégénère entre les mains de l’homme.” The philosopher who adopts this stern perspective can hardly have compassion for the sufferings of humanity. From the point of view of the whole, human pain is insignificant; moreover, we are responsible for our greatest sufferings: “La pluspart de nos maux sont notre propre ouvrage, et [...] nous les aurions

presque tous évités, en conservant la manière de vivre simple, uniforme, et solitaire qui nous étoit prescrite par la Nature” (*SD*, OC III, p. 138).

But Rousseau is far from taking this cosmological perspective when he contemplates his own misery. For instance, in a bout of melancholia depicted in the *Confessions*, we see him revolting against his fate:

Il me sembloit que la destinée me devoit quelque chose qu’elle ne m’avoit pas donné. A quoi bon m’avoir fait naître avec des facultés exquisés pour les laisser jusqu’à la fin sans emploi? Le sentiment de mon prix interne en me donnant celui de cette injustice m’en dédommageoit en quelque sorte et me faisoit verser des larmes que j’aimois à laisser couler (*C*, OC I, p. 426).<sup>2</sup>

Isn’t there a lingering sentiment of revolt against nature in him? The difficulty, however, is to see if Rousseau approves of this attitude or if he merely describes it (while thinking that it is faulty).

A second and related problem lies in understanding Rousseau’s claims to be independent. They stand in stark contrast with those where he claims to be weak and easily malleable. Rousseau will answer that his independence comes from his situation rather than from his moral strength. Yet his situation is not as clearly one of independence as he claims it is.

What Rousseau’s writings illustrate above all is rather a conflict between a desire to be independent and a desire to love and be loved. “J’ai un coeur tres aimant, mais qui peut se suffire à lui-même,” he writes in the last letter to Malesherbes (*LAM*, OC I,

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2. Rousseau blames his “destiny” rather than nature, but the context makes it a synonym. See also *R*, OC I, p. 1004.

p. 1144). Rousseau wants to love and have attachments, but without dependence. He wants to love without being susceptible to be affected by the object of his love. “J’ai besoin de me recueillir pour aimer,” he writes in the last Walk of the *Rêveries* (*R*, OC I, p. 1099). Rousseau’s expansive desires require a contraction of his being to flourish.

The problem of independence is all the more acute for Rousseau since he apparently wants to be driven solely by his inclinations. He wants to be spontaneous and follow his desires wherever they lead him. His heart does not suffer limits: “Mon coeur [...] ne sait point s’attacher à demi” (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1146; see also *C*, OC I, p. 622). This feature of Rousseau’s character is in harmony with his idea that his heart has preserved its natural goodness. A naturally good being is not made for compromises and exceptions: he must follow his inclinations in their purity or totally bend to what obstructs them.<sup>3</sup> Rousseau’s personality commands an “all or nothing” attitude. He needs “*pures jouissances*” to be satisfied (*C*, OC I, p. 422 and 425). He will not be happy without having perfectly fulfilled his desires: “En fait de jouissance et de bonheur, il me falloit tout ou rien” (*C*, OC I, p. 422).

Given this requirement, Rousseau cannot be in a situation which requires him to manage his inclinations. His spontaneity calls for perfect independence. But Rousseau has never achieved such a state. And it is not clear that he truly wanted it, precisely because he does not want to be fully independent. For instance, in the *Confessions*, Rousseau claims he was tired of his “*vie mixte*” of society and solitude that he

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3. “Au reste il n’y a point ici de milieu; il faut n’en rien exiger du tout ou le plier d’abord à la plus parfaite obéissance” (*E*, OCP, IV, p. 321). I will try to demonstrate how in the *Rêveries* Rousseau needs to bend to any sort of necessity as long as it appears necessary if he wants to preserve his natural goodness.

experienced at l'Hermitage and Montmorency. He planned for a "*retraite absolue*" where he would no longer have contacts with society. But he received an offer from the Luxembourgs to live on their estate. Rousseau blames the failure of his project of independence on his fate rather than on his own decisions: "Ce projet de retraite absolue, un des plus sensés que j'eusse jamais faits étoit fortement empreint dans mon esprit, et déjà je travaillois à son execution, quand le Ciel qui me préparoit une autre destinée me jetta dans un nouveau tourbillon" (C, OC I, p. 515). Despite his resolution to become entirely independent and quit this *vie mixte* of solitude and social gatherings, Rousseau accepted the offer of the Luxembourgs to become their guest. In contradiction with his independent spirit, he argues the need to preserve a favorable public image as the reason for him giving in to the repeated demands for a visit from the Maréchal (C, OC I, p. 518). Rousseau further argues that he was seduced by the Luxembourgs' apparent desire to leave him entirely independent. They appeared to require no gratitude from Rousseau in exchange for their beneficence. Rousseau appears naïve. After claiming his wish to be entirely independent and alone, Rousseau settles again for a *vie mixte*. This is perhaps simply because a *retraite absolue* is opposed to his true desires. Again, what Rousseau wants is to love and to be independent at the same time: "Si mon cœur m'attiroit au Château de Montmorency par mon sincere attachement pour les maitres, il me ramenoit de même à mon voisinage goûter les douceurs de cette vie égale et simple, hors de laquelle il n'est point de bonheur pour moi" (C, OC I, p. 527).

Another sign that he did not desire true independence was the fact that his retreat would have meant the end of his career as a writer (C, OC I, p. 515). While Rousseau

makes numerous statements about his intention to put down his pen, he never did so. Luckily for us but sadly for him, his status as a writer seems to have been his greatest source of misery. This is because, arguably, it was his greatest source of dependence. Rousseau wanted to influence the life of men beyond his century (and surely during his own times). His concern to be useful to humanity – and without a doubt to be famous – provided his enemies the surest grip on his soul.

His dependence on opinion throughout his career as an author is related to the first problem I have underscored, namely the ambiguity of his evaluation of the source of his misery. Rousseau seems to have thought that moving out of Paris was enough to cure him of his excessive sensitivity towards opinion. He concedes that he had been motivated by an *amour-propre d'auteur* during his years in Paris (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1131 and 1136) but he thinks that this passion has disappeared from his heart with his move to the countryside.<sup>4</sup> Yet it is obvious that Rousseau carried with him his concern for opinion in his retreat, since he carried with him his ambition to be a famous author. To take the example of the letters to Malesherbes, while Rousseau claims to have detached himself from society and to be living within himself (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1138), he is working on publishing his complete works (*LAM*, OC I, p. 1137).

But Rousseau does not seem to see this problem. For instance, when he claims his resolution to put down his pen in Book X of the *Confessions*, it is not because it made him too dependent on opinion:

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4. See *C*, OC I, p. 400 and 640. Rousseau presents himself as a man free from the vanity of authorship in the *Dialogues*: “Rien [de l’amour-propre] d’Auteur et d’homme de lettres ne se fait sentir en lui” (*D*, OC I, p. 810).



Depuis quelque tems, je formois le projet de quitter tout à fait la littérature et surtout le métier d'Auteur. Tout ce qui venoit de m'arriver m'avoit absolument dégoûté des gens de lettres, et j'avois éprouvé qu'il étoit impossible de courir la même carrière sans avoir quelques liaisons avec eux. Je ne l'étois guères moins des gens du monde et en général de la *vie mixte* que je venois de mener, *moitié à moi-même, et moitié à des sociétés pour lesquelles je n'étois point fait*. Je sentois plus que jamais et par une constante expérience que toute association inégale est toujours désavantageuse au parti foible. Vivant avec des gens opulens et d'un autre état que celui que j'avois choisi, sans tenir maison comme eux, j'étois obligé de les imiter en bien des choses, et de menues dépenses qui n'étoient rien pour eux, étoient pour moi non moins ruineuses qu'indispensables (C, OC I, p. 514 – my emphasis).

Rousseau argues that his recent quarrel with his friends – above all with Diderot – left him “absolutely” disgusted with them. He realized that to be a writer necessarily entailed having some sort of acquaintance with them. If he wanted to cut his ties with them, he had to put an end to his career. He also argues that he did not have the means to be invited everywhere as a celebrated writer because these invitations meant spending money to thank the servants of his hosts, which he could not afford. Rousseau would not have been unhappy to spend his money if these invitations and parties had been to his taste. He would have paid the servants if he had enjoyed this life *dans le monde*. But these invitations and parties bored him. Rousseau says nothing about an intrinsic concern for opinion that comes with his status as a writer. He does not seem concerned at all by how his imagination as a writer is miserable because it extends his being into the future and makes him *sentimentally* dependent on men. The arguments he provides are extrinsic to the activity of writing: it is because Rousseau, by accident, has bad friends, and also because he is invited to parties that make him a miser in spite of himself, that he wants to

stop being a writer. What Rousseau dislikes are the accidents accompanying the life of a writer, not the trade itself.

Another piece of evidence that Rousseau thought writing as such did not make him miserable is that Rousseau's project to stop writing was accompanied by the decision to vindicate his public image with the help of his memoirs (C, OC I, 516). Rousseau did stop publishing, but he did not stop writing. What bothered Rousseau, again, were the social relationships attached to the profession of writing. He does not point out his concern for being loved or obtaining glory as the source of his decision to quit writing; nor does he blame his own peculiar nature as responsible for his incapacity to be happy as a writer.

However, the text of the *Confessions* allows the reader to interpret in a different light Rousseau's problem in living a *vie mixte* and being a writer. It is apparent earlier when Rousseau describes the context of his composition of his *Lettre à d'Alembert*:

A tout cela se mêloit un certain attendrissement sur moi-même, qui me sentois mourant, et qui croyois faire au public mes derniers adieux. Loin de craindre la mort, je la voyois approcher avec joye; *mais j'avois regret de quitter mes semblables sans qu'ils sentissent tout ce que je valois, sans qu'ils sussent combien j'aurois mérité d'être aimé d'eux s'ils m'avoient connu davantage* (C, OC I, p. 496 – my emphasis).

Rousseau was concerned that the public did not really know him, because his previous writings (the two Discourses) had been written under the inspiration of virtuous indignation – which, as we have seen, Rousseau considered not to be his true self. What was at stake for him if he did write his memoirs was to leave his public and posterity a

false image of himself; and not only a false image of himself, but an diminished image of himself: men would never have known “*tout ce que je valois*.”<sup>5</sup>

Rousseau’s concern for opinion is quite obvious here. But it is not considered by the author of the *Confessions* to be his major obstacle to being happy as a writer. Yet given what Rousseau says about the nature of his attachment to opinion: “Si je recommence à m’asservir à l’opinion dans quelque chose, m’y voila bientôt asservi derechef en tout” (C, OC I, p. 378), he should have put down his pen altogether. His spontaneous and passionate character, or his incapacity to be virtuous, called for an “all or nothing” attitude towards writing. But Rousseau’s solitude always seems to coexist with a concern for his reputation and his glory. He claims that his solitude is the evidence that his heart is empty of *amour-propre*, but he remains open to the following objection:

C’est une lasche ambition de vouloir tirer gloire de son oysiveté et de sa cachette. [...] Ce n’est plus ce qu’il vous faut chercher, que le monde parle de vous, mais comme il faut que vous parliez à vous mesmes. Retirez vous en vous, mais preparez vous premierment de vous y recevoir: ce seroit folie de vous fier à vous mesmes, si vous ne vous sçavez gouverner. Il y a moyen de faillir en la solitude comme en la compagnie.<sup>6</sup>

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5. Rousseau shows how he is sensitive to opinion and compliments throughout Book X and IX: see, for example, p. 542, 547 and especially 547: “Les femmes surtout s’enivrèrent et du Livre et de l’auteur, au point qu’il y en avoit peu, même dans les hauts rangs, dont je n’eusse fait la conquête si je l’avois entrepris. J’ai de cela des preuves que je ne veux pas écrire, et qui, sans avoir eu besoin de l’expérience autorisent mon opinion”. (In the last quotation, it is undeniably Rousseau the author who is proud of this possibility. In other words, Rousseau is not telling how silly he was at the time). – How can the reader not conclude that Rousseau’s *amour-propre* is at the source of his autobiographical writings? It does not preclude other causes and intentions, for instance giving an example of goodness to men. But it cannot be easily dismissed either as a cause of his autobiographical project

6. Montaigne, *Essais*, Tome I, Chapter XXXIX, p. 247.

Among other things, his attitude towards the plot belies his claim of independence and perhaps his claim of being simply good.<sup>7</sup>

We must not forget another important dimension to the problem of Rousseau's independence. It is also a means to prove that he is not a wicked man. Despite his weaknesses or his lack of virtue, Rousseau does not harm anyone, because he had no need for anybody. He can be simply good because he is never in a situation where he could wish to harm someone. Yet his claim to be innocent and good would be satisfying only if he did in fact live in perfect solitude. But Rousseau is far from being in this situation, whether at the time of the letters to Malesherbes or in the *Rêveries*. If the fact that his solitude or his independence is an exaggeration, his claim to be innocent and good becomes flawed. This would have a bearing on Rousseau's happiness insofar as he appears to need self-esteem to be happy.

In short, the second major problem of Rousseau's happiness is that it requires absolute independence. But Rousseau's actual situation was far from independent, and it is not clear if he was conscious of it.<sup>8</sup> Rousseau's claim of moral solitude in the *Rêveries* appears as a return to the fiction of the pure state of nature. But to borrow Nietzsche's critical remark, it is in fact a return to an impure state of nature.<sup>9</sup> While Rousseau returns to the purely physical happiness of the state of nature, he imports his developed faculties

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7. "Que si par intervalle quelque projet de gloire ou d'ambition pouvoit l'émouvoir, il le suivroit d'abord avec ardeur, avec impétuosité, mais la moindre difficulté, le moindre obstacle l'arrêteroit, le rebuterait, le rejetteroit dans l'inaction. Sa nonchalance lui montreroit de la folie à compter sur quelque chose ici bas, à se tourmenter pour un avenir si précaire, et de la sagesse à renoncer à la prévoyance, pour s'attacher uniquement au présent, qui seul est en notre pouvoir." (*D*, OC I, p. 822)

8. For an attempt to prove that Rousseau was conscious of the limitations of his solitude, see John T. Scott, "Rousseau's Quixotic Quest in the *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*" in *The Nature of Rousseau's Rêveries*. John C. O'Neal, ed. (Oxford: SVEC, Vol. 3, 2008), p. 139-152.

9. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, "Skirmishes of an Untimely Man", aphorism 1.

and intends to make use of them. In a situation that would demand complete sobriety on his part, he continues to expand his being, to use his imagination, and to live in his memory. He does not seem to be able to be happy while remaining simply good. His impure situation and his developed faculties call for being virtuous, i.e. for self-control.

The third major problem of Rousseau's happiness is its melancholic character. It makes it difficult to know if he is happy or not. As he argues in *Émile*, the happy man may appear miserable:

Le vrai contentement [i.e. happiness] n'est ni gai, ni folâtre; jaloux d'un sentiment si doux, en le goûtant on y pense, on le savoure, on craint de l'évaporer. Un homme vraiment heureux ne parle guere, et ne rit guere; il resserre, pour ainsi dire, le bonheur autour de son cœur. Les jeux bruyans, la turbulente joie voilent les dégoûts et l'ennui. Mais la mélancolie est amie de la volupté: l'attendrissement et les larmes accompagnent les plus douces jouissances, et l'excessive joie elle-même arrache plutôt des pleurs que des ris (*E*, OC I, p. 515).

Rousseau's frequent signs of sadness come as no surprise if happiness for Rousseau is closer to melancholy than joy. Tears, sighs, complaints, vapors are its external effects.<sup>10</sup> It is therefore difficult to identify whether Rousseau is happy or not. As he puts it in the Ninth Walk: "Le bonheur n'a point d'enseigne extérieure; pour le connoître il faudroit lire dans le coeur de l'homme heureux" (*R*, OC I, p. 1085). Rousseau tells us what

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10. "Les vapeurs sont les maladies des gens heureux" (*C*, OC I, p. 247); "Dans ce voyage de Vevai je me livrois en suivant ce beau rivage à la plus douce mélancolie. Mon cœur s'élançoit avec ardeur à mille félicités innocentes; je m'attendrissois, je soupirois et pleurois comme un enfant. Combien de fois m'arrêtant pour pleurer à mon aise, assis sur une grosse pierre, je me suis amusé à voir tomber mes larmes dans l'eau?" (*C*, OC I, p. 152). "Je sentois pour ainsi dire en moi le contrepoids de ma destinée, j'allois me consoler de mes peines dans la même solitude où je versois des larmes quand j'étois heureux" (*LM*, OC IV, p. 1102).

happens in his heart; but it remains true that his behavior seems in conflict with his claims.

His happiness is often presented both as a peak and as compensation. For instance, Rousseau says that his relationship to his imaginary creatures is better than any real human relationship; but he also says that they are a compensation for the absence of genuine relationships in his life: it is because he is sad that he needs them (*R*, OC I, p. 1081). Similarly, Rousseau, after describing the hypnotic *rêverie* as the supreme state of bliss, says it is a “*dédommagement*” to human felicities (*R*, OC I, p. 1047). Accordingly, the interpreter does not know if he must see in Rousseau’s descriptions of his happiness his genuine conception of happiness or something that is not choiceworthy in itself.

The *Rêveries* do not simply present happiness as being melancholic. But Rousseau’s most serene claims in the *Rêveries* are wrapped in such melancholic tones that it makes the interpreter doubt that Rousseau wants to be serene. Is his serenity “*du chagrin qui se repose*”? Rousseau talks of bending to necessity; he says that he has learned to be tranquil; but he makes claims that denote a resistance to being serene.

Rousseau notes in the Eight Walk that he has never been happier than when he was miserable:

Les divers intervalles de mes courtes prospérités ne m’ont laissé presque aucun souvenir agréable de la manière intime et permanente dont elles m’ont affecté, et au contraire dans toutes les misères de ma vie je me sentois constamment rempli de sentimens tendres, touchans, délicieux qui versant un baume salutaire sur les blessures de mon cœur navré sembloient en convertir la douleur en volupté, et dont l’aimable souvenir

me revient seul, dégagé de celui des maux que j'éprouvois en même tems  
(*R*, OC I, p. 1074).

Jean Starobinski concludes from this quotation that Rousseau cultivates his misery, because his happiness feeds off of it.<sup>11</sup> Yet he omits the ending where Rousseau claims to recall only his joy to his memory. Nevertheless, the question is worth being asked: does Rousseau cultivate his misery because it makes him happy? Rousseau, of course, would never admit it. The farthest he goes is when he says in the third letter to Malesherbes that “he would not want not to have” his melancholy. But it is the nature of the melancholic man to think that he is not responsible for his misery, otherwise the charm of melancholy would vanish. His sadness would be the result of his bad faith. He could not complain about his situation without feeling his hypocrisy.

Only an external observer can say of the melancholic man that he *wants* to be unhappy. This was Malesherbes's opinion of Rousseau:

Il vouloit estre malheureux, il vouloit estre pauvre, et par une suite il a voulu sur la fin de sa vie estre persécuté, et il étoit indigné contre tous ceux qui vouloient le tirer de la pauvreté ou le soustraire a la persécution. Je diray plus, je soutiens qu'il étoit sur cela de bonne foy, il ne se contentoit pas de passer pour estre pauvre et persécuté, il auroit voulu l'estre reellement.<sup>12</sup>

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11. Jean Starobinski, *La Transparence et l'obstacle*, p. 427.

12. Quoted by Pierre Grosclaude, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et Malesherbes* (Paris: Librairie Fischbacher, 1960), p. 106.

According to Malesherbes, Rousseau's bad faith was not in pretending to be poor and persecuted. It was in increasing his belief to be miserable so as to increase his melancholy:

Par exemple dans les premiers jours qu'il revint à Paris depuis son decret, il alloit quelquefois dans un caffè ou on jouoit aux échecs, on le scut et de ce moment il y arriva une foule de spectateurs ce qui l'engagea à n'y plus retourner. Il m'en parla, et je ne pus luy persuader que c'estoit un hommage rendu à sa célébrité et que tous ces spectateurs estoient des gens qui alloient voir le grand homme dont ils avoient lu les ouvrages. Il aima mieux croire que s'estoient des gens apostés par ses ennemis pour ebruiter son arrivée à Paris. Il est cependant vrai que si on avoit eu ce projet il auroit suffi d'avertir le Parlement qu'il estoit revenu, et le scavoir. Vrai aussi que si Rousseau eut voulu se montrer au public comme a fait depuis Voltaire, il auroit été suivi par des acclamations generales. C'estoit la ce qui pouvoit flatter son amour propre, mais il amoit mieux croire ce qui flattoit sa passion atrabilaire.<sup>13</sup>

In short, Rousseau painted a black picture of his enemies because it increased his self-pity.

As I have argued, Rousseau does not clearly think that lucidity is a condition of happiness. Self-delusion, if it increases a happy sentiment, is perhaps legitimate. The important thing is not to be actually happy, but to perceive oneself as being happy. The melancholic nature of his happiness would naturally stimulate a desire to live in self-delusion.

But melancholy could be just as well what Rousseau did not want to experience. His *Rêveries* give room to alternative interpretations. Rousseau may think that happiness is in being whole and sufficient (*R*, OC I, p. 1046). He may also think that happiness is

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13. Quoted by Pierre Grosclaude, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et Malesherbes*, p. 96-97.



impossible here below, because self-sufficiency is impossible. Nevertheless, we should not be sad about this prospect. Our imperfections are laughable; we should only be aiming at being content (*R*, OC I, p. 1085).

These three problems show how difficult it is to interpret Rousseau's autobiographical writings. To paraphrase Rousseau, the passions that govern his doctrine and his interest to make his reader believe this and that makes it almost impossible to know what he thought for himself (*R*, OC I, p. 1016). There are so many contradictions and bizarre claims in these writings that the prospect of gaining access to Rousseau's true understanding is dim. A solid interpretation would require a careful and long presentation of all these obstacles. It would not presume that Rousseau has a hidden intention or that his passions lead him to make contradictory claims. But after having presented these problems as they appear to the naïve reader, it would try to demonstrate how they cannot be resolved without presuming a philosophical intention or uncontrollable passions. For I conclude that these writings require the reader to dig below the surface of the text to be coherent.

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