

# The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the  
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Editor: DR. PAUL CARUS,  
Assistant Editor: T. J. McCORMACK.

Associates: } E. C. HEGELER.  
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VOL. XIII. (NO. 4)

APRIL, 1899.

NO. 515

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JEAN JACQUES ROUSSEAU.

(1712-1778.)

*Frontispiece to the April, 1899, Open Court.*

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## JEAN JACQUES ROUSSEAU.

(1712-1778.)

BY PROFESSOR L. LÉVY-BRUHL.

ROUSSEAU'S personality exhibits so much complexity and yet at the same time so much unity that it is no easy thing to study in him the philosopher apart from the man of letters. His philosophical tenets are the very soul of his talent as a writer. They are not merely the result of his mind's reflexions upon the great problems, but rather of his heart's inmost tendencies. Rousseau the philosopher is Rousseau's entire self. Yet this very fact gives to his philosophical doctrine, if we try to examine it separately, a certain character of unity. His solutions of the essential questions are in harmony with one another, and it is not impossible to discover the general principles from which all the rest springs.

The chief philosophical problem, according to Rousseau, is the moral problem from the two-fold point of view of the individual and of society. He feels but little curiosity for theoretical questions, properly so called. Though a subtle and sometimes rigorous dialectician, it never occurs to him to reflect upon logic. Exact sciences have but little interest for him. The strong liking for botany which he manifested in his later years came from an æsthetic, and, in a certain sense, religious feeling.

On the other hand, everything relating to man's conduct and destiny moved him deeply. He was led to philosophical reflexion by the discomfort, suffering, and often indignation bred in him either by his intercourse with other men, or by the sight of men's intercourse with one another. Morals, institutions, and beliefs all hurt him, and appeared to him false, and different from what

they should be. Whence comes it that the immense majority of men are sunk in poverty, in order to maintain in luxury the few who in their turn suffer from having no rule of life and nothing more to desire? Whence comes it that the weak and the powerful are equally dependent upon one another, and equally unhappy? Why do we find, lurking beneath the apparent refinement and mildness of manners, the cold rage of envy, base covetousness, desperate pursuit of personal interest, indifference to public good, hardness of heart, and cruelty? Why does the development of arts and sciences, notwithstanding the excellence of a few individuals, seem to have made mankind worse and more miserable still? And, lastly, why is hypocrisy universal, making it possible for Rousseau to appear original merely because he said what was as clear as daylight to everybody? In short, to reduce all these questions to two essential ones: is it necessary that man and society should be what they are? If we can conceive the possibility of their being otherwise, by what means can man be brought back to truth, virtue, and happiness?

To the first of these two questions there is a very simple answer, supplied by Christian theology. Man fell through sin. His nature is corrupt, and it is not a surprising thing that what springs from such a nature should be corrupt also. Rousseau did not content himself with this appeal to mystery. Had he done so, he might have been a more orthodox Christian, but his effect upon his contemporaries would have been far less great, and he might have had none whatever. How could the theological solution be proposed again to minds feverishly longing for enfranchisement, and impatient to apply reason to the treatment of those subjects which theology had kept to itself for so many centuries? And then, had he borrowed his argument from the doctrine of the fall of man, what could he have said on morals that had not been well said already by Nicole and Malebranche? Instead of simply taking human perversity as a fact, Rousseau, by a stroke of genius, set himself to the study of its genesis. Instead of supposing it to be innate, he sought to discover how it was acquired. "All you can see is man in the hands of the Devil," he writes to the Archbishop of Paris; "but I see how he came there. The cause of evil, according to you, is man's corrupt nature; but this corruption is itself an evil, and what ought to have been done was to seek its cause. We both agree that man was created good, but *you* say he is wicked because he has been wicked, while *I* demonstrate how he came to be wicked. In short, according to Rousseau, the



dogma of original sin is not so much a solution as a statement of the problem. He attempted to supply a real solution and to offer an explanation instead of a dogma.

The undertaking was a bold one, and characteristic of the age which asserted that in man "everything is acquired," and which, in its desire to set the individual man wholly free from all sense of solidarity with his fellows, except in so far as he himself freely accepted it, endeavored with Condillac and Helvetius to belittle and even to deny the influence of heredity. In the same way, Rousseau attacked the formidable problem of the origin of evil in the human soul, still unsolved save in religious metaphysics, without stopping to ask himself whether it was not beyond the reach of his reason. That reason set the problem, was for him sufficient ground for believing that reason was capable of solving it. Though Rousseau was an adversary of the philosophers and out of patience with their misuse of reason, it did not occur to him, any more than to them, to submit reason itself to criticism and to measure its power.

\*            \*            \*

The search for the genesis of moral and social evil implies that man was once innocent and good. If we thus admit a "contradiction" (a word Rousseau was wont to use with the meaning of "opposition") between man's primitive nature and our social order, we shall see that it is sufficient to explain all the vices of men and the evils of society.

But it is no light task to discern what is original and what is artificial in the present nature of man. How can we know his "primitive state, which exists no longer, may never have existed, will probably never exist again, but of which, however, we must have some precise notions in order to judge rightly of our present state?" We see that Rousseau does not for a moment claim for his researches the character of historical investigations. He makes no pretension to anthropological science. He does not even seek to discover what primitive man may actually have been. The genesis he undertakes to seek is an analytical one, like those attempted in psychology by Diderot, Condillac, and Buffon, to which the public had given a very favorable reception. Just as Condillac, in tracing our knowledge back to its first elements, did not have recourse to direct observation, but, by a sort of ideal analysis, eliminated imaginatively all the senses save one, in order to establish the special data of that one, after which he brought back the other senses one by one, so Rousseau proceeds, as he himself says, by

means of 'hypothetical and conditional' reasoning. He first considers the nature of man as he now is, and determines all that may be explained by the influence of social intercourse, of surroundings, education, etc. Then, suppressing all that is thus explained, he infers that what remains must have been the original nature of man.

Those who objected that Rousseau's "man in a state of nature" had never existed, failed therefore very egregiously to understand him. It is as if one should object that Condillac's animated statue never existed. Rousseau's method is quite a psychological one. It was "by meditating upon the first and simplest operations of the soul" that he endeavored to deduce the feelings and ideas of the natural man. Nature, whose voice cannot be completely hushed, was to tell him, by means of an inward feeling, whether his hypotheses were acceptable. He had in her a means, if not of verification, at least of control.

\* \* \*

In order to separate at once from man's present nature all that the successive generations have acquired in the course of the centuries, Rousseau supposes the original man to have lived alone. Even the family did not yet exist: it was a first revolution that brought about the establishment of families, and the distinctions between them. Originally man did not live in society any more than wolves and monkeys do; he occasionally joined his fellow-creatures, but usually kept aloof from them. He was an animal, inferior in certain respects to some but upon the whole superior to all others. His body was robust, and mainly unacquainted with other ills than wounds and old age. The innumerable diseases to which civilised man is a prey were unknown to men in a state of nature; moreover, as the sway of natural selection was undisputed among them, every weak and deficient individual, not being able to get beyond childhood, was eliminated at the outset. As regards his mind, his first state, in common with all animals, must have been that of simple perception and feeling to will and to be unwilling, to desire and to fear,—these must have been the first and almost the only operations of his soul. He felt no curiosity, and his mind stagnated indefinitely. As he wandered through the forests, without industry and without speech, neither at war with his kind nor bound by any ties to them, having no need of his fellow-creatures and at the same time no desire to harm them, he had only so much feeling and enlightenment as belongs to such a state; there could be no education and no progress. The species

was already old, and man remained still a child. His only passion was the love of his own person (not self-love which supposes a distinction between personal interest and the interest of others, that is, of society). He had a natural inclination to pity, when he beheld one of his fellow-beings in distress.

But this harmless animal, apparently so nearly like the others, had that within him which could create between him and them an almost boundless difference. He was "perfectible." He possessed the potentiality of reason, and of everything that comes in its train: language, civil society, morality, and progress. The difficulty is to understand how the solitary man became sociable, and what started that extraordinary evolution, of which modern societies are the outgrowth. Rousseau confesses that the transition puzzles him; he has recourse to "the spur of necessity," to the presence of want, occasioned apparently by the increase of population. How did man begin to think? "The more we meditate upon this subject, the greater the distance between pure sensations and the most simple form of knowledge" appears. And how are we to explain the origin of language? Rousseau thinks the problem insoluble; he does not know which was the more indispensable prerequisite for the creation of the other, a society already in operation or a language already invented.

Having reached this point, the author sketches a sort of hypothetical pre-history, in which man, having once left the state of nature behind him, is constantly led on to new inventions by new wants. His intelligence and sensibility developed, the family is constituted, and groups of families are formed; common tradition, knowledge, and beliefs are established. Finally, when the last traces of the state of nature are obliterated, the idea of property appears. This idea, dependent as it is upon many other previous ideas, which could have arisen only one after another, was not formed all at once in the human mind: many improvements had to be made and much industry and enlightenment to be acquired before it could occur to men.

Property implies the organisation of civil society, of penal justice, and the legal recognition of inequality. Henceforth there must be rich men and poor men; and, by a prodigious piece of dexterity, those who have possessions have managed to get their wealth insured and protected by those who have none. Soon there will be powerful men and weak men, and in the end masters and slaves. Inequality thus reaches its last stage. In the state of nature men were all equal, save for a few physical differences, since

they all led the same peaceful and solitary life. In the present state some are starving while others are wallowing in superfluous wealth, and all become crafty, jealous, and wicked.

But, one might object, was it not by virtue of his very nature that man developed his reason, and gradually formed the family, property, and civil society? If the social man existed as a germ or potentiality within the original man, is it fair to oppose them to each other? Rousseau forestalled the objection. Such an evolution, he says, was not inevitable. It might possibly not have taken place. Nature had but meagerly endowed men for sociability. She had very little share in all that they did to make fast its bonds. She had made him rather for solitude. Perfectibility, social virtues, and all other potentialities which the natural man had received could never have developed of themselves; they needed the chance conjunction of several causes which might never have occurred; man would then have remained forever in his primitive condition. But when once this evolution had begun, and, above all, when once society had been established, every step taken brought man farther from his original type.

Thus the long toil of civilisation, which gave us arts, sciences, and industry, also brought upon us diseases, misery, sufferings of all kinds, and especially vices. Society is an assemblage of artificial men, preyed upon by factitious, though only too real, passions, for which in the primitive state there was no occasion. Therefore, if man's nature is now corrupted, we must not infer therefrom that it has always been so. This corruption is his own work, and the ransom to be paid for his release from savagery.

Thus did Rousseau solve the first problem he had set himself, and trace the genesis of social evil. Where are we to seek a remedy for it? This remedy, if it exists, can be found only in a system of education that would rehabilitate man depraved by the morals and institutions of to-day. But such a system of education implies a whole system of philosophy, for it presupposes a thorough knowledge of man's nature, of the laws of his mental development, of his private and public intercourse with his fellow-creatures, of his place in nature, of his future destiny, and lastly, of the first cause of all things. This philosophy Rousseau was to undertake, and the idea of "nature" as opposed to everything fictitious or conventional, was to be the clue that he followed in his researches.

\* \* \*

Knowing what was the state of nature, which man has left forever, knowing what his present social state is, and what it ought to

be, what education ought man to receive? What is he to be taught, and how?

As a principle, education should be national and public. There lies the essential cause of the "superhuman grandeur" of Sparta. There are opened the ways unknown to the moderns, by which the ancients brought men to such fortitude and patriotic zeal as are unexampled among ourselves, but the germs of which are in the hearts of all men. To train citizens is not the work of a day, and in order to have men good citizens, they must be taught when children, and accustomed from their earliest years to regard themselves only as members of the State, and to consider their own existence, so to speak, as part of that of the State. Evidently this can be obtained only by public education entirely directed to this object. Public education is, therefore, one of the fundamental maxims of popular and right government.

But as nothing is more unlike Sparta than the States of the eighteenth century, our ambition shall not be to train citizens, and we shall turn from the question of public control. We must limit our task, which even then will be difficult enough, to preventing the social man from being entirely artificial. "Conformity with nature" is the motto of Rousseau's pedagogy. In accordance with this principle, he advises mothers to suckle their children themselves; in devotion to the same principle he waits, before speaking of religion to his pupil, till the latter is able to understand the twofold revelation of conscience and of the universe. The good teacher is he who assumes no other function than to present matters in such a way that the lessons of experience may be clear, striking, and calculated to produce a durable impression upon the child's mind. He leaves it to nature to educate by degrees the child's senses, understanding, and conscience; he sometimes encourages nature, but never forestalls her. Thus the child escapes the many prejudices insidiously instilled into his mind by the customary methods of education, which are afterwards so difficult to eradicate.

Thus, *Émile* shall not be a man made by man; he shall be one made by Nature. This does not involve making him a savage, or confining him in the depths of the forests; but, though absorbed in the vortex of society, we ask only that he be not led away by man's passions or opinions; that he see with his own eyes, feel with his own heart, be governed by no authority save his own reason. *To be one's self*: nothing is more rare, difficult, and even impossible, unless one has been prepared for it from child-

hood. As soon as he is born, man is wrapped in swaddling clothes; when dead, he is sewed up in a shroud; all his life long, he is pinioned by laws, manners, and customs, decorum, and professional obligations. Nobody ever suffered more than did Rousseau from social tyranny and hypocrisy; nor did any cry of revolt ever echo so far and so long as the cry he uttered against them.

Does this mean that he dreams of bringing man back to his primitive state? Certainly not, for there is a wide difference "between the natural man living in a state of nature, and the natural man living in a state of society." The latter must adapt himself to his situation. He is a "savage intended for life in towns." He must therefore receive a systematic education, and be instructed in all accomplishments. Mingling with other men, he must learn to live not like them, but with them. Our race does not like to be half finished. In the present state of things, a man left to himself among other men would be the most distorted of all. Whence it follows that in a well regulated republic, the State owes to every man not only the possibility of living by his own work, but also such education as will make of him a free man and a good citizen.

No philosopher, and, more broadly speaking, no writer for a century past, has had an influence comparable to that of Rousseau. But the very strength and durability of this influence, which is still deeply felt in our times, has often prevented him from being studied and judged with impartiality. He has enthusiastic admirers and intense opponents, and both sides have maintained legends often very far from true. Thus many people still believe that to Rousseau must in an especial manner be ascribed the responsibility for the excesses committed during the Revolution, and that the worst terrorists were inspired chiefly by his doctrines. But the responsibility of Rousseau in this connexion is neither greater nor less than that of other philosophers of the eighteenth century, and he even contributed, as Auguste Comte clearly perceived, to bring on the religious reaction which combated these very philosophers. The error may have arisen from the fact that other French philosophers, from motives of policy, met the temporal power with deference and with flattery, whereas Rousseau, being a Genevese citizen, boasted of his republican feelings. But for all that he is not a revolutionary spirit. On the contrary, he counselled political moderation and prudence. Even the unhappy Poles who were on the point of perishing he exhorted not to lay their hands rashly upon their national constitution, and he predicts most profound misfortunes for the French if they try to change the institutions

under which they have lived for so many centuries. Though the inequalities of fortune are monstrous, though "the demon of property pollutes whatever it touches," yet Rousseau does not mean to lay hands on vested rights, and it is in the future only that he perceives means of opposing the ever-increasing social inequality.

But, having said this much, we must acknowledge that Rousseau's philosophy was big with consequences. The opposition between what is natural and what is artificial, which is its leading idea, was apt to lead minds in love with logic and justice a very great way if applied to every aspect of human life. This opposition was, of course, not discovered by Rousseau; it had been known ever since there had been moralists; and especially since the beginning of the eighteenth century, the "good savage" and "nature" had been quite in fashion. Rousseau's achievement lies in making of this opposition the principle of a whole moral and social doctrine, and of finding therein a means of distinguishing between what is and what ought to be, by declaring nature to be good, and evil to have sprung from human conventions. Therefore, if the evils under which we labor are of social origin, the finding of remedies depends upon us. For this it is sufficient to "see with our eyes, to feel with our hearts, and to judge with our reason"; to free ourselves from traditional preconceptions and prejudices. We shall then plan for man, not a chimerical return to an impracticable state of nature, but a social organisation more in conformity with order and justice.

The very foundation principles of the present state of society are thus called into question. The lawfulness of individual property, the excessive inequality of fortunes, the sovereignty of the people, the reciprocal rights and duties of the individual and the State, the relation between the Church and political powers, are so many problems proposed by Rousseau in such a way that it became thenceforth impossible not to take an interest in them. He thought the solutions more simple and easy than they really are: witness the "civil religion" he wished to establish in the name of the State, which was often so entirely misunderstood. But the thought that led him to ask these questions was after all just, and many of his ideas were original and suggestive. In spite of his connexion with the "philosophers," he really follows none of them; how many others, friends and adversaries, have followed him!