

Rousseau Rousseau
and et la
Criticism Critique

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sous la direction de

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Rousseau as Critic of Morality

Alas...despite the most sound and most virtuous principles of education; despite the most magnificent promises and the most terrible threats of religion, the errors (perversities) of youth are still only too frequent, only too numerous. ...I have proved that these errors of youth of which you complain cannot be restrained by these means, in that they are the very handiwork of them. (*Letter to Christopher de Beaumont*, OC IV, 943; my translation¹)

I

Criticism of morality can take several distinct, though related, forms. First, there is what might be described as the criticism of prevailing moral norms and sentiments, such as a criticism of lax sexual standards, of inequalities of wealth, of unfair access to education, a denunciation of greed and selfishness when these are presented as if harmless or unproblematic. Frequently enough, we find Rousseau engaged in criticism of this sort, for example of idle *litterateurs* (at *D.S.A.* 15-16; OC III, 19); of inequality (at *DI* 105; OC III, 194); and (perhaps less seriously) of swaddling (at *E* I, 43; OC IV, 254). Though often impressive and cutting, criticism of this sort doesn't have, as such, much theoretical interest. This is not simply because Rousseau is "sounding off"; he is doing that, certainly, but that can be very arresting and enjoyable. (One of my favourites is: "Ingratitude would be less common if benefits were less often things being lent out at interest". *E* IV, 234; OC IV, 520; my translation). It is rather because criticism at this level doesn't go much beyond opposing what is criticised "head on", so to say, contending for the replacement of one way of doing things by another, without bringing up any deeper issues about how and why one way may be better than the other or about what, in some more penetrating terms, may be amiss with the way which is to be rejected.

Rousseau, in fact, rather seldom (outside his letters) does stop

¹ I have used the following texts and translations: J.-J. Rousseau: *Oeuvres Complètes*, eds. B. Gagnebin and M. Raymond (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1959, 4 volumes (OC); *A Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* (DAS) and *A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (DI) in: J.-J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses*, tr. G.D.H. Cole, revised and augmented J.H. Brumfitt and J.C. Hall (London, Dent: 1973); *Émile* (E), tr., with introduction and notes, Allan Bloom (New York, Basic Books: 1979).

his criticisms at this shallow level. Or, rather, it is seldom that his criticisms at this level are made unconnected with some deeper-going inquiry and theory. (This is, of course, a strength in Rousseau as a theoretician. But not necessarily a strength in him as an individual. There is a kind of person who can never hate or dislike but that they find some cosmic fault in their victims, some overall view of the world to demonstrate their own rightness in so disliking. This is wearisome). Thus, in the case of Rousseau's criticisms of inequality, referred to above, in the *Discourse on Inequality*, the deeper-going theory which sustains Rousseau's critical onslaughts on contemporary morality is very plain. In that, Rousseau argues quite generally that differences of rank and standing, which are comprised in part by moral notions of differential title and duty, responsibility and obligation, arise from and sustain the "universal desire for reputation...which inflames us all", arise from and sustain the "unremitting rage of distinguishing ourselves" (*DI*, 101; *OC* III, 189). His primary concern is with diagnosing the origin and ramifications of this "unremitting rage" which so profoundly structures people's sense of themselves and of their value, the nature and basis of social encounters, the purpose and shape of social institutions and political arrangements. And it is largely proper to see the criticisms of the sort I've referred to as primarily illustrative of this deeper diagnosis of men and society, rather than as self-standing.

Rousseau quite evidently hates this "universal desire for reputation". In one of his elevated passages he writes:

Insatiable ambition, the thirst of raising their respective fortunes, not so much from real want as from the desire to surpass others, inspired all men with a desire to injure one another...The wealthy...had no sooner begun to taste the pleasure of command, than they disdained all others, and, using their old slaves to acquire new, thought of nothing but subduing and enslaving their neighbours; like ravenous wolves, which, having once tasted human flesh, despise every other food and hence forth seek only men to devour. (*DI*, 87; *OC* III, 175)

In this he is, we might say, exposing and criticising what he sees as the underlying meaning or purpose which prevailing moral standards, moral differentiations have (along with very many other features of social life). He is not merely attacking instances of such standards, or their application, piecemeal.

So far, so familiar. Where, I hope, I may have something a little fresh

to say is in the account I want to give of a deeper level in Rousseau's critical approach to morality.²

II

That many humans (Rousseau says "all") have an "unremitting rage" for invidious distinction, and will more-or-less willingly perpetrate whatever evils are necessary to achieve that, is not, for Rousseau, simply a "given". It is not a given in two ways. First, it isn't simply something he posits, without further explanation or defence. Second it isn't something which is "given" in the sense that we merely have to accept it, have to learn to live with it. For Rousseau, it is an alterable, modifiable, even eliminable concern. The first sense concerns me now. This "rage", for Rousseau, is - to put it simply - an expression of aggression, a very deep and pervasive aggression in individuals and one which shapes social institutions and political procedures.

I want to say something about how I understand the nature and consequences of that aggression, without specific reference to Rousseau in the first instance. Particularly, this aggression involves three things.³ First, an aggressive representation of other people; second, a representation of the kind of relationship that obtains between other people and oneself, with the problems and tasks that

² Some of the material following is connected with the work I did for a paper in a *festschrift* for Richard Wollheim ("Aggression, Love, and Morality: Wollheim on Rousseau"; in J.Hopkins, A.Savile (eds). *Psychoanalysis, Mind and Art* (Blackwell, 1992). But the purpose of the present discussion is markedly different, and it takes up themes not mentioned in the earlier paper.

³ This sort of pattern of account I derive from Segal's conception of a "position" in Kleinian theory. See H. Segal: *Introduction to the Work of Melanie Klein*, pp. viii-ix (London, 1973). For a particularly brilliant use of this general pattern of interpretation, see: Richard Wollheim: "The Good Self and the Bad Self: The Moral Psychology of British Idealism and the English School of Psychoanalysis Compare", *Proceedings of the British Academy*, LXI, 1975, pp 373-398. Other relevant material of Wollheim's (from which I hope I have managed to learn something) is in *The Thread of Life*, ch. VII (Cambridge, 1984).

will involve; third, a representation of one's own character, attributes and dispositions so far as these enter into such relationships. (All of these are strictly complementary, at least in the idealised case). I shall argue that morality can assume a character and role which corresponds to, fits in with, this pattern of representation. I am particularly thinking here of the individual as the *subject* of moral direction or requirements, and of the representation of the nature and function of those requirements as playing a role in the regulation of his or her life. The character that moral demands will have for someone passing moral judgement on others will concern me less, but the significance of that will be plain. I shall say a bit more about it at the end.

An aggressive representation of another involves attributing to them certain beliefs, attitudes, properties, purposes etc. which in fact disclose the aggressor's own rage or hostility towards them (though very often, of course, the aggressor won't recognise that that is what is happening). Having represented them as being this way, one then is faced with certain needs or tasks if one (the aggressor) is to "negotiate" with someone like that; and one negotiates with them on the basis of certain ideas about one's own attitudes, purposes, attributes etc. This aggressive representation of another will include any or all of the following: when they do not respond to one they are being wilfully hard, spiteful and neglectful; when they do not agree to what one proposes or give one what one wants, they are being obstructive, unpleasant, malicious, vindictive, thwarting; if or when they do accede to one's wish it is too little too late--they have kept back more and better for themselves which they will enjoy when one isn't around; if they appear nice or helpful this is a trick--it either disguises some malicious design to cause one to "lower one's defences" so that one can then be taken advantage of, or else it is a way of enforcing a debt of gratitude on one which will be extracted relentlessly; their pleasantness is a mask, hiding their plotting and cheating against you, their jeering and scoffing at you behind your back. And much, much more. (I would suppose that, for all but the most sanguine or fortunate, some elements of the above construction will be familiar enough). I shall stick with this part of the overall pattern for now, and come to the other parts later.

In calling this an aggressive construction of another, two connected points are in view. First, the other person is construed as being very aggressive towards one. Second, that they are so construed

is the upshot of one's aggressive feelings towards them (or: towards "the world in general", or whatever). The first point is self-evident; the second is, of course, central to all psychoanalytical theorising (and practice). But one doesn't need to take a lot of that on board; realising that one does this is part of any reasonably sophisticated person's self-awareness. Anyway, I shall, here at any rate, rely more on the first, self-evident, point.

One of my central claims is that, in Rousseau's view, moral regulation is very standardly apprehended in the terms given by this aggressive representation of another. Moral requirements (aka "demands") can appear very obviously to have the character this construction places on any kind of direction or limitation of one emanating from another (though, in the case of moral regulation the "other" who voices these demands is usually rather under-specified). Indeed, though precisely how far Rousseau would go on this point isn't easy to say, it is in good part by possessing this very character that the demand is often understood as a distinctively *moral* one at all which is bearing down on one. The construction might go like this. Morality is an externally originating imposed demand, requirement or set of demands etc. It constrains one to obedience, in a peremptory and inflexible way, never leaving one in peace. It thwarts one's desires, demanding compliance.⁴ If one does comply, and is "good" (according to a standard of goodness one can scarcely understand let alone see point to) this has all been a trick to make one give up one's own designs and wishes for the sake of some nebulous reward which never arrives (save perhaps that of playing the same trick on others, out of a vengeful desire to inflict on others the same loss one suffered oneself or for the sake of some mysterious self-satisfaction called "righteousness").

Before I try to show that this is a fair assessment of Rousseau's position I want to say just a little about the other two parts of the overall pattern, viz. how I shall represent myself, and how I shall construe the nature and terms of the task I have under the demands of morality, here figured as a mode of attempted control of me by an aggressive other. I shall be apt to see myself as oppressed, ill-used and mercilessly thwarted, deformed and constrained to a pattern not my own having no pleasure or good in it for me. But, also,

⁴ See *The Thread of Life*, pp. 200-204.

I shall really see no good reason why I should submit if I can escape; trial for mastery or evasion will be the terms on which I encounter these demands, an attempt to outdo or outwit moral requirements and to scorn their failure to deny me or hold me in check.

I'm sure much of this will be familiar as a part of Rousseau's thinking, so reference to just a few passages from *Émile* will, I hope, be enough to show that I'm not making this up, so to say. A paradigm passage is this:

In trying to persuade your pupils of the duty of obedience, you join to this alleged persuasion force and threats or, what is worse, flattery and promises. In this way, therefore, lured by profit or constrained by force, they pretend to be convinced by reason. They see quite well that obedience is advantageous to them and rebellion harmful when you notice either. But since everything you insist on is unpleasant and, further, it is always irksome to do another's will, they arrange to do their own will covertly. They are persuaded that what they do is right if their disobedience is unknown, but are ready on being caught - in order to avoid a worse evil - to admit that what they do is wrong...[and much, much more] (*E II*, 90-91; *OC IV*, 319)

Or again, see the passage at *E II*, 101 (*OC IV*, 334-5), beginning:

With conventions and duties are born deceit and lying. As soon as one can do what one ought not, one wants to hide what one ought not to have done...[and so on].

And underlying these thoughts is Rousseau's depiction of the child's aggressive construction (as I have called it) of his world and of others in it. Thus:

the child who has only to want in order to get believes himself to be the owner of the universe; he regards all men as his slaves. When one is finally forced to refuse him something, he, believing that at his command everything is possible, takes this refusal for an act of rebellion. All reasons given him...are to his mind only pretexts. He sees ill will everywhere. The feeling of an alleged injustice souring his nature, he develops hatred toward everyone; and, without ever being grateful for helpfulness, he is indignant at every opposition...With their desires exacerbated by the ease of getting, they were obstinate about impossible things and found everywhere only contradiction, obstacles, efforts, pains. Always grumbling,

always rebellious, always furious, they spent their days in screaming, in complaining... Weakness and domination joined engender only folly and misery. (*E II*, 87-88; *OC IV*, 314)⁵

There is one very immediate corollary of all of this to which I want to pay particular attention. Suppose someone to have become habituated to apprehending the significance of moral regulation in the way outlined, to incorporating moral demands into the structure of his thought and action after the general fashion indicated. And suppose such a person to come to believe that all moral "checks" could be removed, that he need no longer be subject to moral direction (let us not inquire how this might come about).⁶ If we make the supposition that moral direction thus conceived has been the primary regulator of conduct, then we may suppose that the subject, never having had any occasion to or seen any need to control his behaviour except by reference to a punitive external check, would immediately be apt to behave in extremely destructive and unpleasant ways.⁷ Not only that, there would be, we should I think further reasonably suppose, a reservoir of resentment and grievance at what has been experienced as malicious thwarting which will be apt to express itself in vengeful acts

⁵ Another very central passage in this:

But as he [a child] extends his relations, his needs, and his active or passive dependencies, the sentiment of his connections with others is awakened and produces the sentiments of duties and preferences. Then the child becomes imperious, jealous, deceitful, and vindictive. If he is bent to obedience, he does not see the utility of what he is ordered, and he attributes it to caprice, to the intention of tormenting him; and revolts. If he is obeyed, as soon as something resists him, he sees in it a rebellion, an intention to resist him. He beats the chair or the table for having disobeyed him. (*E IV*, 213; *OC IV*, 492)

⁶ One is reminded here, of course, of the story of the ring of Gyges (Plato: *Republic*, 359 d ff). Plato's purpose in reciting it is somewhat analogous, to reveal what people would be like when the moral "checks" are off.

⁷ See, for instance, Rousseau's description on *E I*, 67 (*OC IV*, 288). Of course Rousseau is describing there what he thinks is *misunderstanding* of children's behaviour. But it serves as an illustration of the points nonetheless. Another striking instance is given in the note to *E II*, 97-8 (*OC IV*, 329-30).

directed more or less vaguely towards those persons or things which seem to represent the presence of the (now impotent) moral demand.

Since regulation and control has always been someone else's business (a business which, when it is carried out, is resented) the subject's own, self-possessed, wishes are boundless, chaotic, overpowering, without limit. This, then, provides the perfect image of an "unbridled monster" to protect ourselves from the excesses of which we supposedly need the stringent curb of sternly imposed moral control. Thus:

A child cries at birth; the first part of his childhood is spent crying. At one time we bustle about, we caress him in order to pacify him; at another, we threaten him, we strike him in order to make him keep quiet. Either we do what pleases him, or we exact from him what pleases us. Either we submit to his whims, or we submit him to ours. No middle ground: he must give orders or receive them. Thus his first ideas are those of domination and servitude. Before knowing how to speak, he is chastised before he is able to know his offenses or, rather, to commit any. It is thus that we fill up his young heart at the outset with the passions which later we impute to nature and that, after having taken efforts to make him wicked, we complain about finding him so. (*E* II, 48; *OC* IV, 261; numerous other passages make a similar point)

The passage I selected as epigraph applies here too. Palpably, Rousseau's point is that the mode of control (even if it does not create at the very least) consolidates, entrenches, the very problem which then requires that to be the mode of control which is needed to solve it. Vindictive morality, a system of control represented aggressively, creates the monster which just such a (form of) morality is needed to subdue.⁸ The issue is not, of course, that the individual does not require in any way to regulate and control his desire and action. That very aggression in the subject which, as I suggested earlier but will not now develop, is responsible for the aggressive representation of others, and of the character of moral control, is proof enough of that (though that aggression becomes *intensified* through the processes

⁸ Rousseau uses the image of "monsters" in a fragment from the *Ms. Favre* of *Émile* (*OC* IV, 231). Although the context is somewhat different, he is still emphasising the disproportion between desire and capacity which is so central generally to his account of the sources of rage.

considered). It requires moderation and restraint. What is crucial is the origin and nature of that restraint and the strategy (if I may so put it) by which it is applied. Rousseau himself makes very clear that moral ideas are not to be dispensed with, but rather that *corrupting distortions* of them are to be avoided. To avoid implanting "fantastic notions of the moral world" (*E* II, 89; *OC* IV, 316) is, of course, one of Rousseau's principal constructive purposes in *Émile* and in his other mature writings. But in this his critical function has been left behind; he is in the business of building afresh and I shan't follow him in this. It is important, however, to remember that aggression will never be eradicated, will not cease to operate. It is not the product of perverse moral control altogether. But it, with its construction of self and other, can cease to dominate a person's interpretation of his place in relation to others, and other less damaging ways of controlling aggression, but also of understanding and responding to other people generally, can come into play.⁹

III

This concludes the principal discussion of this paper. As I originally conceived it, I had intended to go on to include comparisons between both Rousseau's critical, and his constructive, interpretations of the character and role of moral regulation and some of the ideas of several other philosophers, such as Hume, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and others.¹⁰ This was over-ambitious. But I would like to include a few remarks on likenesses between Rousseau's ideas as I have

⁹ The elements of Rousseau's constructive theory are to be found in Book IV of *Émile*. See, especially, p. 213 (*OC* IV, 492) on the child's love of his nurse and governess; and p. 220 ff (*OC* IV, 502-3) on the shame of displeasing. His whole theory of pity, or compassion, is fundamental, of course. I am always struck, too, by Rousseau's sensitive observation (*E* II, 84; *OC* IV, 310) about how benign reciprocal *dependence* coming from affection on one side and weakness on the other gets distorted into *slavery* and domination.

¹⁰ The comparison with Schopenhauer remains an important one, particularly since Schopenhauer was so strong in his praise of Rousseau. See, for instance, *On The Basis of Morality*, p. 183 (tr. E.F.J. Payne, Bobbs-Merrill, 1965).

interpreted these, and some of Nietzsche's. I do so for a particular reason. Nietzsche's thinking about value, morality and so on is particularly associated, in my mind at least, with his criticism of pity as having any positive moral value or significance. On the contrary, it is the moral demand that we should show pity that is used as a weapon to subdue the healthy and strong (in Nietzsche's view).¹¹ And that would seem to set him radically at odds with Rousseau, to whose constructive assessment of the role of morality pity is central.¹² But for all their differences on this point (many of which are more apparent than real), I think there are a number of very significant likenesses of outlook particularly associated with the central theme of my paper--the role of morality in an aggressive construction of others and of one's relation to them.

Nietzsche tends to concentrate on the significance of morality in the hands of those who promulgate moral standards, who pass moral judgements, whereas, as noted earlier, I have more closely studied the significance of moral regulation from the point of view of those who are "recipients" of this. But this is not a difference which amounts to a real divergence of approach, and attention to it will supplement the preceding account. Or so I would hope.

Consider, for instance, this passage from *Human, All-Too-Human*,¹³ where Nietzsche is contrasting the concepts of good and evil "in the soul of the ruling tribes and castes" and "in the soul of the oppressed, the powerless". In regard to the latter he writes:

¹¹ From any number of passages of similar purport, one can cite: *Daybreak* (tr. R.J. Hollingdale, Cambridge, 1982), pp. 83-8; 100. Nietzsche's own explicit discussions of Rousseau by and large do *not* focus on this issue, but on the significance (in Nietzsche's estimation) of Rousseau's ideas about the need to "return to nature". See further in *Daybreak*; but also *Schopenhauer as Educator (Untimely Meditations, 3*, tr. R.J. Hollingdale, Cambridge, 1983).

¹² On Rousseau's conception of the nature and significance of pity, see *Émile*, Book IV, and my *Rousseau*, Ch. 4 (Blackwell, 1988). See note 10, above.

¹³ In *On The Genealogy of Morals with Ecce Homo*, tr. W. Kaufmann (New York, 1969) p. 167. This is the translation of the *Genealogy (GM)* also used, below.

Here all *other* human beings are considered hostile, ruthless, exploiting, cruel, cunning, whether they be noble or low...The signs of graciousness, helpfulness, pity are taken anxiously as wiles, as preludes to a disastrous conclusion, soporifics and craft, in short, as refined malice. As long as individuals have such an attitude, a community can hardly come into being (Para. 45)

It is not extravagant, I am sure, to see some likenesses to Rousseau's thinking in this. But more central is the role Nietzsche gives to resentment in his account of the origin and character of "slave morality" (the morality of the oppressed and powerless) in, for instance, *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Plainly the matter is a complex one, but one can say this much. For Nietzsche, the slave morality of "men of good will" with their minute justice is born of people whose urge to discipline and control comes not out of free abundance of strength but out of a vengeful reaction against that which they represent as hostile, as hateful, and for the sake of doing down which the idea of what it is to be "good" is created. *This* notion of what is morally good is identified in terms of what is essential to keep what is disliked and unwanted in check. Its origin is in hatred, not in anything creatively affirmed.

The crucial notion is, as noted, that of *ressentiment*. The following passage is representative:

The slave revolt in morality begins when *ressentiment* itself becomes creative and gives birth to values: the *ressentiment* of natures that are denied the true reaction, that of deeds, and compensate themselves with an imaginary revenge. While every noble morality develops from a triumphant affirmation of itself, slave morality from the outset says No to what is "outside", what is "different", what is "not itself"; and *this* No is its creative deed (*GM* I, 10).

There are things plainly going on here Rousseau had no notion of. But, for all that, there is I should say a real convergence of concern. Envious denigration is, perhaps, more central to Nietzsche's thinking about the psychological core of "slave morality" whereas, for

Rousseau, rage at denial seems to me to be more prominent.¹⁴ But what they have in common is the discovery that certain kinds of morality (Nietzsche), or certain ways in which moral control is exercised (Rousseau), substantively comprise methods of expressing aggressive, vengeful and domineering feelings rather than any concern to foster or preserve anything of value. It is hatred and a bitter sense of the poverty of one's own existence which underlies these supposed principles of worth and merit. Behind the passing of judgement is the desire to pay others out for real or imagined hurts or losses inflicted on oneself, or impoverishments in oneself, and what is deemed to be good or evil is turned to subserve that purpose.

In respect of these likenesses, which certainly could do with more refinement and detail than I've given them, rather than in the more familiar differences (which Nietzsche himself draws enough attention to), I think we can find some insights shared between these two critics of morality.

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¹⁴ See Scheler's discussion of the phenomenology of *ressentiment*, excerpted in *Nietzsche (A Collection of Critical Essays)* ed. Robert Solomon (Doubleday Anchor, 1973), pp. 243-257. And see, centrally, Melanie Klein "Envy and Gratitude", in *Envy and Gratitude And Other Works (Collected Writings Vol. III, London, 1984)*.