

**Rousseau      Rousseau**  
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**Criticism     Critique**

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## Charles Bonnet's Criticism of Rousseau's *Second Discourse*

In the October 1755 issue of the *Mercure de France*, Charles Bonnet (1720-1793), the eminent Swiss naturalist and *philosophe*, under the pseudonym of "Philopolis, Citoyen de Genève", published a letter in reply to Rousseau's *Discours sur l'inégalité* that had recently appeared.<sup>1</sup> One authority, writing towards the end of the last century,<sup>2</sup> suggested that, of the many refutations of the *Discours* that appeared at the time, Bonnet's was the only substantial one. In this century, however, when it is remembered at all, it is only to be casually dismissed. Eugène Ritter, for example, attached no importance to Bonnet's arguments,<sup>3</sup> while the editors of the Pléiade edition of Rousseau's *OEuvres complètes* reproduced Bonnet's letter but offered no comment as to its merit. In an article about the relations between Rousseau and Voltaire, the late Ralph Leigh, who clearly held Bonnet in low esteem as a *philosophe*,<sup>4</sup> found that his criticisms embodied the "complacent and indeed reactionary character of certain types of optimism [that] could hardly be better illustrated than in the mind and

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<sup>1</sup> Although Marc-Michel Rey finished printing the *Discours* on April 24 1755, and a copy was sent in June to the Conseil général in Geneva, it seems to have been only in August that Bonnet managed to read it, whereupon he promptly sent off his "Lettre au sujet du *Discours* de M. J.-J. Rousseau de Genève, sur l'origine et les fondemens de l'inégalité parmi les hommes" (August 25) to the *Mercure de France*. For the text of the letter, see the Pléiade edition of Rousseau's *OEuvres complètes*, vol.III, 1966, pp. 1383-1386. For Rousseau's rebuttal, *Lettre de J.J. Rousseau à Monsieur Philopolis*, that he never sent, see pp.230-236. Except where indicated, all Rousseau quotations are taken from volume III of this edition of which I have modernized the text.

<sup>2</sup> H. Beaudouin, *La Vie et les oeuvres de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, Paris, 1891, vol.I, p.314.

<sup>3</sup>"Rousseau et Charles Bonnet," *Annales Jean-Jaques Rousseau*, XI (1916-1917), 159-188.

<sup>4</sup> See the Notes explicatives to letter 312 (vol.III) in his edition of the *Correspondance complète de Rousseau*, Oxford, The Voltaire Foundation, 1965-1993, 53 vols, where he states, somewhat disparagingly, that Bonnet "ambitionnait le titre de philosophe."

attitudes of this pillar of religious and political orthodoxy... ."<sup>5</sup> More recently, Jacques Marx, in raising the issue of Bonnet's attack, has paid more attention to Rousseau's defence.<sup>6</sup> It is the intention of this paper to look again at what Bonnet had to say, to show that his remarks are more than worthy of consideration, and to reexamine the *Second Discourse* in the light of his observations.

Bonnet makes two main points, one having to do with the nature of man, the other concerning the intention and responsibility of God or Providence for man's nature. These two points are bound together, almost inextricably, in Bonnet's letter where his discussion of the role of Providence considerably obscures his remarks about the nature of man and society. Nevertheless, it is necessary to keep separate these two arguments if the validity of his attack is to be fully appreciated.

In his defence of Providence, Bonnet accuses Rousseau of taking a pessimistic view of man and society. He argues that if man has evolved as he has, it must be because this is what God intended. What appear to be defects in this world are merely part of the grand design in the universe as a whole which is necessarily good and harmonious, since it is a product of God's "sagesse parfaite." To declare that society is corrupt, and that it needs to be reformed, is to oppose divine wisdom and beneficence:

S'il s'agissait de justifier la *Providence* aux yeux des hommes, Leibniz et Pope l'ont fait, et les ouvrages immortels de ces génies sublimes sont des monuments élevés à la gloire de la raison. Le *Discours* de M. Rousseau est un monument élevé à l'esprit, mais à l'esprit chagrin et mécontent de lui-même et des autres (p.1384).

Bonnet goes on to imply that, in describing the development of society as an evil, Rousseau is attributing the responsibility to God.

This was certainly not the interpretation Rousseau expected, but he seems to have shared the fate of many authors (Salman

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<sup>5</sup> R.A. Leigh, "From the *Inégalité* to *Candide*: notes on a desultory dialogue between Rousseau and Voltaire (1755-1759)" in *The Age of Enlightenment. Studies Presented to Theodore Besterman*, Edinburgh, Oliver and Boyd, 1967, p.69.

<sup>6</sup> *Charles Bonnet contre les Lumières 1738-1850, Studies on Voltaire*, CLVII (1976), II, pp.485-493.

Rushdie, for example), who are judged in terms other than those they establish themselves. In the *Discours de la méthode*, during the discussion of the origin and nature of the physical universe, Descartes specifically stated that he was setting aside particular theological disputes in favour of a general hypothesis:

pour...pouvoir dire plus librement ce que j'en jugeais, sans être obligé de suivre ni de réfuter les opinions qui sont reçues entre les doctes, je me résolus de laisser tout ce monde ici à leurs disputes, et de parler seulement de ce qui arriverait dans un nouveau, si Dieu créait maintenant quelque part, dans les espaces imaginaires, assez de matière pour le composer, et qu'il agitât diversement et sans ordre les diverses parties de cette matière, en sorte qu'il en composât un chaos aussi confus que les poètes en puissent feindre, et que, par après, il ne fit autre chose que prêter son concours ordinaire à la nature, et la laisser agir suivant les lois qu'il a établies (p.104).<sup>7</sup>

As is well known, Descartes's premises were not accepted by the Church, and his apologists and deistic disciples suffered accordingly.

Rousseau, similarly, in attempting to set down his own terms of reference, inevitably encountered the same fate. His stated intention was to examine a hypothetical state of nature, inhabited by isolated, amoral individuals, in a world quite distinct from the one ordained by divine Providence:

Or sans l'étude sérieuse de l'homme,...on ne viendra jamais à bout de faire ces distinctions, et de séparer dans l'actuelle constitution des choses, ce qu'a fait la volonté divine d'avec ce que l'art humain a prétendu faire (p.127).

Bonnet's criticism, however, was based on grounds that Rousseau (like Descartes), had deliberately chosen to set aside. Bonnet related the human condition to the will of God whereas Rousseau, in the *Second Discourse*, traced it to man himself. This made it difficult for him to reply without taking into consideration Bonnet's own terms. There was also a further and more fundamental obstacle to framing a response, and this had to do with Bonnet's other and more cogent argument, namely, that society is simply and inevitably a product of

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<sup>7</sup> *Discours de la méthode*, introduction et notes par E. Gilson, Paris, J.Vrin, 1966, p.104.

man's nature:

Tout ce qui résulte des *facultés* de l'homme ne doit-il pas être dit résulter de sa *nature*? Or, je crois que l'on démontre fort bien que *l'état de société* résulte immédiatement des facultés de l'homme: je n'en veux point alléguer d'autres preuves à notre savant auteur que ses propres idées sur l'établissement des sociétés; idées ingénieuses & qu'il a si élégamment exprimées dans la seconde partie de son Discours. Si donc *l'état de société* découle des facultés de l'homme, il est *naturel à l'homme*. (pp.1383-1384).

Jacques Marx characterizes this observation as a syllogism that takes the following form: "tout ce qui résulte des facultés de l'homme résulte de sa nature; Rousseau démontre que l'état de Société résulte immédiatement des facultés de l'homme, donc l'état de société est naturel à l'homme" (p.487). This is one way of looking at Bonnet's argument. Another way is to take its implications a stage further by postulating that, if society is corrupt, as Rousseau maintains, then it must be because man's original nature is corrupt.

In his reply to Bonnet, that he never sent, for reasons to be discussed in a moment, Rousseau completely disregards this powerful objection and concentrates on the weaker and more traditional argument concerning the problem of evil and the beneficence of God. His basic point is that the the blind optimism of Pope and Leibniz leads to an unproductive, passive and fatalistic acceptance of the status quo:

c'est assez qu'une chose existe pour qu'il ne soit pas permis de désirer qu'elle existe autrement. ... Pourquoi faire appeler un médecin quand vous avez la fièvre? Que savez-vous si le bien du grand tout que vous ne connaissez pas n'exige point que vous ayez le transport...? Si tout est le mieux qu'il peut-être vous devez blâmer toute action quelconque...et le quiétisme le plus parfait est la seule vertu qui reste à l'homme (IV, pp.233-234).

I have shown elsewhere<sup>8</sup> that in this reply to Bonnet, Rousseau was led logically but unwillingly to the conclusion that, from the individual viewpoint, suffering is an evil that cannot be

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<sup>8</sup> *Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Providence, an Interpretive Essay*, Sherbrooke, Naaman, pp.48-49.

reconciled with the idea of a beneficent Almighty. This conclusion ran counter to the portrait of God (or possibly the monarch), in the *Second Discourse*, as a good and compassionate ruler:

En considérant ce que nous serions devenus, abandonnés à nous-mêmes, nous devons apprendre à bénir celui dont la main bienfaisante, corrigeant nos institutions et leur donnant une assiette inébranlable, a prévenu les désordres qui devraient en résulter, et fait naître notre bonheur des moyens qui semblaient devoir combler notre misère (p.127).

Obviously, one of the reasons for Rousseau's refusal to publish a reply was that he could not send to Bonnet a response in which the presence of evil in the world was in any way attributable to God. So he wrote to the *Mercure* that he had no intention of favouring cowardly anonymous writers with a reply and that he had no desire to engage in the kind of protracted polemics that followed his *First Discourse*.<sup>9</sup>

The other reason for not replying was that he had no answer to Bonnet's contention that it was the nature of man's *facultés* that determined the nature of society. Indeed, it was Rousseau himself who, in his discussion of the faculty of *perfectibilité*, had already acknowledged this essential relationship:

Il serait triste pour nous d'être forcé de convenir que [la perfectibilité], cette faculté distinctive et presque illimitée, est la source de tous les malheurs de l'homme; que c'est elle qui le tire, à force de temps, de cette condition originaire dans laquelle il coulerait des jours tranquilles et innocents; que c'est elle qui...le rend à la longue le tyran de lui-même et de la Nature (p.142).

In a more recent article examining the problem of what Rousseau understood to be the role of man's faculties before the development of society, I concluded that all the defects Rousseau attributes to man as a result of his association with others, are already

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<sup>9</sup> O.C., pp.1386-1387.

present in his nature and simply waiting to be developed.<sup>10</sup> In other words, it is not a question of man being corrupted by society but, on the contrary, of society being corrupted by man. This was, indeed, the opinion of Kant who argued that, if it is true to say that man is naturally good, it is equally valid to hold that he is naturally bad. Whereas, for Rousseau, moral evil resulted from society, for Kant it was innate.<sup>11</sup> In short, Bonnet and Kant, on different grounds, challenge Rousseau's view that man's misfortunes are of his own making.

Rousseau's philosophy is founded on three basic principles, none of which is capable of proof, and all of which are, quite simply, articles of faith. First, his belief in the existence of God is due, as he tells us in the *Lettre à Voltaire*, entirely to personal need: "parce que...l'état de doute est un état trop violent pour mon âme, que quand ma raison flotte, ma foi ne peut rester longtemps en suspens, et se détermine sans elle; qu'enfin mille sujets de préférence m'attirent du côté le plus consolant et joignent le poids de l'espérance à l'équilibre de la raison" (IV,pp.1070-1071). Second, his argument for a state of nature in which man lived in isolation is, as he says in the *Second Discourse*, purely hypothetical: "Car ce n'est pas une légère entreprise...de bien connaître un état qui n'existe plus, qui n'a peut-être point existé, qui probablement n'existera jamais" (p.123). Finally, his statement, at the opening of the *Emile*, that "Tout est bien, sortant des mains de l'auteur des choses" (IV,p.245), is similarly based on speculation and faith.

If we accept this last article of faith, that everything that comes from God is good, it must apply just as much to animals as to man and, indeed, in the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau makes much of the affinities between natural man and animals: both are instinctively peaceable and compassionate. It is with some surprise, then, that we learn from Wolmar, in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, that a dog can be born vicious:

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<sup>10</sup> "Eighteenth-Century Theories of Generation and the Birth and Development of Rousseau's Natural Man" in *Rousseau and the Eighteenth Century: Essays in Memory of R.A. Leigh*, ed. Marian Hobson, John Leigh and Robert Wokler, Oxford, The Voltaire Foundation, 1992, pp. 271-280.

<sup>11</sup> See Sidney Axinn, "Rousseau Versus Kant on the Concept of Man," *The Philosophical Forum*, XII (1981), pp.348-355.

Regardez...ces deux chiens qui sont dans la cour. Ils sont de la même portée; ils ont été nourris et traités de même; ils ne se sont jamais quittés: cependant l'un d'eux est vif, gai caressant, plein d'intelligence: l'autre lourd, pesant, hargneux, et jamais on n'a pu lui rien apprendre. La seule différence des tempéraments<sup>12</sup> a produit en eux celle des caractères, comme la seule différence de l'organisation intérieure produit en nous celle des esprits (II,V,3,p.565).

Wolmar then goes on to apply the observation about dogs to children: "il y a des caractères qui s'annoncent presque en naissant, et des enfants qu'on peut étudier sur le sein de leur nourrice." It is with these comments that Rousseau, presumably unwittingly, not merely undermines but totally destroys his contention that all things that come from God are good. As a result, his portrait, in the *Second Discourse*, of the state of nature and of natural man, turns out, in the light of the above, to be without foundation. It is quite clear that if a dog can be born vicious, then so can a child.

It might be objected that Rousseau simply puts these ideas into the mouth of Wolmar and that they are not his own. But, in this letter, Wolmar and Julie are unmistakably presenting to Saint-Preux Rousseau's ideas on education that are elaborated in the *Emile*. It might be further objected that this is the only instance in which Rousseau admits that the natural may be defective. It is true that this is the only overt example but, in the light of it, we must reread the *Emile*, and ask ourselves again what Rousseau means by "[le] génie particulier de l'enfant," a quality that would seem to merit considerably more attention than he devotes to it:

Une autre considération...est celle du génie particulier de l'enfant qu'il faut bien connaître pour savoir quel régime moral lui convient. Chaque esprit a sa forme propre, selon laquelle il a besoin d'être gouverné... . Homme prudent,...laissez d'abord le germe de son caractère en pleine liberté de se montrer... . Le sage médecin ne donne pas étourdiment des ordonnances à la première vue, mais il étudie premièrement le tempérament du malade avant de lui rien prescrire (IV,pp.324-325).

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<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of the significance of this word see my article, "Some Observations on the Meanings of "tempérament" in the Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau" in *Semantics, Literature and Translation*.



What unwilling and unconscious confession is hidden behind the strangely revelatory imagery that associates the "génie particulier" of the child with the "tempérament du malade"? Is there not some uneasy acknowledgement here that the child, like the dog, might be born vicious? The difference is that, with the right kind of education, the child can be cured, whereas the dog is a lost cause. After all, as Rousseau states in the *Second Discourse*, man has free will and perfectibility, so that, presumably, if he were born vicious he would also have the capacity for reform, whereas animals are, by their nature, incapable of change.

However, if my interpretation is correct, the conclusion that Bonnet was right is inevitable. The nature of society is determined by the nature of its individual members. If society is corrupt, it is the seeds of corruption were already present in the constitution of natural man.

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