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THE THEORY OF "NATURAL GOODNESS" IN ROUSSEAU'S *NOUVELLE HELOÏSE*

The present article proposes to study in detail the theories expressed in the *Nouvelle Héloïse* regarding what is commonly called the "natural goodness of man." It is evident that no subject can have greater importance for an accurate understanding of Rousseau's novel. Mr. Schinz has already pointed out that Rousseau's views on the question of natural goodness did not remain fixed and free from variation in works anterior to the *Nouvelle Héloïse*: namely, the First and Second Discourses.¹ It is therefore dangerous to speak of the theories of Jean-Jacques *en bloc*. Each work is deserving of separate and detailed study from the point of view of this theory and generalizations must be made with great caution.

Can we safely follow Mr. Schinz in grouping together the *Nouvelle Héloïse* and *Emile* in the statement that both picture man as "bon au fond"?² Shall we, with Beaudoin, speak of all Rousseau's work in one breath and say: "Dans son système, suivre sa nature est toute la morale"?³ Ought we to agree fully with M. Cuendet that Rousseau's conception of nature "est dans tous les cas aux antipodes de la conception augustinienne de la corruption radicale de l'homme séparé de Dieu et privé de la grâce"?⁴ Was Masson right in accusing Rousseau of forgetting "la faiblesse

¹ Albert Schinz, "La notion de vertu dans le Premier Discours de J. J. Rousseau," *Mercure de France*, 1er juin 1912. "La théorie de la bonté naturelle de l'homme chez Rousseau," *Revue du XVIIIe siècle*, 1913.

² *Rev. du XVIIIe siècle* (1913), p. 445.

³ H. Beaudoin, *La vie et les œuvres de J. J. Rousseau* (1891), II, p. 513.

⁴ W. Cuendet, *La philosophie religieuse de J. J. Rousseau* (1913), p. 162.

humaine" and is his a Christianity "d'où le sentiment du péché a disparu"?⁵ To what extent did Rousseau in the *Nouvelle Héloïse* deny the reality of "the civil war in the cave,"⁶ the struggle between good and evil in the breast of the individual? How far did Jean-Jacques believe in the doctrine of "innate goodness"⁷ so often associated with his name?

An answer to these questions, so far as the *Nouvelle Héloïse* is concerned, can safely be given only after a study of all the passages which mention or imply the existence or the non-existence of "la bonté naturelle." Among these, as will appear, there are contradictions to be taken into account, contradictions doubtless in part explained by the necessity, in a philosophical novel, of permitting the clash of conflicting points of view. Moreover, no study of this subject would be accurate or complete if it were limited to weighing the evidence of individual passages, important and necessary as that is; we must also consider the trend of the work as a whole.

We soon find that the term, "natural goodness," needs definition and that Rousseau himself does not always offer us the same conception of it. The word "nature," then as now, is used sometimes with one meaning, sometimes with another. In a majority of cases, however, the word is employed to designate a state, a character, or impulses, which are primitive, instinctive, or non-artificial.⁸ Thus,

⁵ Pierre Maurice Masson, *La religion de J. J. Rousseau* (1916), II, p. 294.

⁶ Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (1919), p. 187. Cf. pp. 122, 130, 157, 256, 330. Cf. Diderot, *Œuvres* (Assézat), II, p. 246.

⁷ Paul Elmer More, *Shelburne Essays*, VI, pp. 215, 223.

⁸ After analysing the use of the word "nature" in the *Nouvelle Héloïse*, I have reached the following conclusions. *Nature* is used fifty-five times to designate the original creative force in the universe; one hundred five times to mean that which is due only to this original creative force, hence a primitive, instinctive, or non-artificial state, character, or impulses; ten times to indicate the existing scheme of things; twelve times applied to the physical universe; twelve times meaning the physical human or animal body or life; once in the sense of sort or kind; and three times to indicate accord with truth or probability. Of course, in such classifications, the dividing line is not always easy to draw and it is not claimed that these figures are to be taken as more than approximately true. Different individuals, even the same individual at different times, would undoubtedly make a somewhat different classification. Hence, we feel justified in concluding only that Jean-Jacques puts the emphasis overwhelmingly upon primitivism in the passages where he uses the words *nature* or *naturel* or *naturellement*.

it is clear that in the passages where Rousseau specifically uses the word "nature" he is most often stressing his belief in *primitivism*, but when the question of man's goodness or virtue is raised, we soon find Rousseau offering us several different points of view.

There is, for example, the belief expressed by Wolmar that man is neither good nor bad, but neutral. "Je conçus que le caractère général de l'homme est un amour propre indifférent par lui-même, bon ou mauvais par les accidents qui le modifient."⁹ This theory might be criticized as implying that man is really selfish, hence ready to commit a bad action at the invitation of circumstances, and therefore already bad in principle. But I have not found this idea expressed elsewhere in the *Nouvelle Héloïse* and we need not dwell upon it here.

Much more important, as we should expect from our previous discussion, is the place given to what we may call *primitive goodness*. Man was good "before the Fall," said the Church, "before being spoiled by society," said Rousseau as he looked back regretfully, like many another since, to "the good old days." Saint-Preux writes: "Tout consiste à ne pas gâter l'homme de la nature en l'appropriant à la société."¹⁰ Julie comments upon her children: "Nourris encore dans leur première simplicité, d'où leur viendroient des vices dont ils n'ont point vu d'exemple?"¹¹ Saint-Preux, using a commonplace of voyage literature, speaks of "les peuples bons et simples"¹² and Julie says: "L'on devient comme un nouvel être sorti récemment des mains de la nature."¹³ Saint-Preux feels himself "confus, humilié, consterné, de sentir dégrader en moi la nature de l'homme."¹⁴ "Tous les caractères sont bons et sains en eux-mêmes, selon M. de Wolmar. Il n'y a point, dit-il, d'erreurs dans la nature; tous les vices qu'on impute au naturel sont l'effet des mauvaises formes qu'il a reçues."¹⁵ Other similar passages might be quoted.¹⁶

Closely allied to this theory of *primitive goodness* is the idea of *instinctive* or *innate goodness*, which has offered to opponents of

⁹ J. J. Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes* (Hachette, 1863), III, 459.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 545.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 525.

¹² *Ibid.*, 492.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 368.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 291.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 510.

¹⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 131, 375 (man is here admitted to have a tendency toward evil), 455, 512, 525. Contrast p. 513.

Rousseau abundant opportunity to hold him up to easy ridicule. It is really *primitive goodness* looked at from a slightly different angle, for, if men are good by instinct, then primitive men are more likely to be true to their instincts, and hence good. Julie writes to Saint-Preux: "Tu reçus du ciel cet heureux penchant à tout ce qui est bon et honnête: n'écoute que tes propres désirs; ne suis que tes inclinations naturelles."¹⁷ Later she herself thanks Heaven "de lui avoir donné un cœur sensible et porté au bien."¹⁸ Saint-Preux writes of her to Edouard: "Pour Julie, qui n'eut jamais d'autre règle que son cœur,¹⁹ et n'en sauroit avoir de plus sûre, elle s'y livre sans scrupule, et, pour bien faire, elle fait tout ce qu'il lui demande."²⁰

But more frequently the *Nouvelle Héloïse* offers still another conception of life; namely, that of a combat against one's desires and inclinations. "La foiblesse est de l'homme," says Julie, but, "suivant une règle plus sûre que ses penchans, il sait faire le bien qui lui coûte, et sacrifier les désirs de son cœur à la loi du devoir."²¹ Claire writes to Julie: "Toute ta vie n'a été qu'un combat continu, où, même après ta défaite, l'honneur, le devoir, n'ont cessé de résister, et ont fini par vaincre."²² If it be objected that here "honor" and "duty" are but man's "natural goodness" gaining the victory, we are merely brought to a conception of goodness as a result of man's higher nature triumphing over the lower. This constitutes a third interpretation of "la bonté naturelle," perfectly legitimate here, but certainly very different from that usually given. Note too that Julie writes to Saint-Preux: "Voilà, cher Saint-Preux, la véritable humilité du chrétien; c'est de trouver toujours

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 269.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 624.

¹⁹ When Rousseau here uses the word *cœur*, does he mean *instinct*, *intuition*, or *emotional feeling*, all three being in contrast to *raison*, or does he perhaps mean *conscience*? If the latter, then of course, this passage means something quite different from merely following the path of least resistance. The query helps to illustrate the difficulty of treating this subject of "la bonté naturelle" and warns one of the danger of basing an argument wholly, or even chiefly, upon Rousseau's use of special words or upon what seems to be his meaning in particular passages quoted.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 486. Cf. pp. 142, 175, 260, 347 (this view is later renounced), 488, 153, 252 (this instinctive goodness is later lost), 253, 268, 271, 293, 521, 577.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 367.

²² *Ibid.*, 467.

sa tâche au-dessus de ses forces.”²³ Saint-Preux himself writes to Julie: “Chère amie, ne savez-vous pas que la vertu est un état de guerre et que pour y vivre on a toujours quelque combat à rendre contre soi?”²⁴ Certainly this would seem to accord with Mr. Schinz’s statement regarding the First Discourse that virtue is considered as “une lutte contre les penchans naturels de l’homme,” thus implying that “l’homme est naturellement mauvais.”²⁵ If it be maintained that man, primitively good, is now struggling against himself to get back to his former state of goodness, what have we but the Biblical doctrine of the Fall, expressed in other words? Certainly, to all intents and purposes, man, whether spoiled by society or not, whether fallen from his state of original goodness or not, now appears in the words of the *Nouvelle Héloïse* as evil and forced to struggle “contre soi” in this present age. Surely Rousseau has not here lost sight of “la faiblesse humaine,” as Masson has stated he sometimes did. We note these words of Saint-Preux to Julie: “S’ensuit-il de là que la prière soit inutile? A Dieu ne plaise que je m’ôte cette ressource contre mes foiblesses!”²⁶ Julie is orthodox enough when she says: “Nous sommes libres, il est vrai, mais nous sommes ignorans, foibles, portés au mal. Et d’où nous viendroient la lumière et la force, si ce n’est de celui qui en est la source?”²⁷ Thus she refers directly to divine aid as necessary to supplement human weakness. “J’osai compter sur moi-même,” says Julie, “et voilà comment on se perd.”²⁸ In another passage she observes: “Le premier pas pour sortir de notre misère est de la connoître. Soyons humbles pour être sages; voyons notre foiblesse, et nous serons forts.”²⁹ Saint-Preux quotes Julie on the Protestant religion, which not only follows nature but corrects it, “qui la suit et la rectifie.”³⁰ Moreover, Julie came to modify her first views on the education of her children. “J’avois d’abord résolu de lui accorder tout ce qu’il demanderoit, persuadée que les premiers mouvemens de la nature sont toujours bons et salutaires. Mais je n’ai pas tardé de connoître qu’en se faisant un droit d’être obéis, les enfans sortoient de l’état de nature presque

²³ *Ibid.*, 585.²⁴ *Ibid.*, 595.²⁵ *Rev. du XVIIIe siècle* (1913), p. 445.²⁶ Rousseau, *Œuvres*, III, 596.²⁷ *Ibid.*, 587.²⁸ *Ibid.*, 625.²⁹ *Ibid.*, 588.³⁰ *Ibid.*, 434.

en naissant, et contractoient nos vices par notre exemple, les leurs par notre indiscretion." ³¹ This saves the face of the theorizer, but "tout juste." It is really an absolute denial of any practical value in the goodness of nature principle, primitive or otherwise. Who does not here see the practical Rousseau replacing, at least for a moment, the theoretical? In support of the combat theory of virtue there are, strange as that may seem in the light of traditional views regarding Jean-Jacques, many more passages than there are in favor of other theories of life and conduct.³²

³¹ *Ibid.*, 516.

³² Note also the following: "Il n'y a que l'art de les réprimer [les passions] qui nous manque" (p. 143); "l'honneur de combattre" (p. 144); "j'ai si peu de combats à rendre contre moi-même, tant je vous trouve attentive à les prévenir" (p. 145); "la dure espèce de combat que nous aurons désormais à soutenir" (p. 173); "témoins de ses combats et de sa victoire" (p. 179); "tu as plus combattu" (p. 181); "ce noble enthousiasme . . . qui t'éleva toujours au-dessus de toi-même" (p. 181); "tel est, mon ami, l'effet assuré des sacrifices qu'on fait à la vertu: s'ils coûtent souvent à faire, il est toujours doux de les avoir faits" (p. 198); love, "qui sait épurer nos penchans naturels" (p. 209); "ma foiblesse" (p. 209); "ne serez-vous vertueux que quand il n'en coûtera rien de l'être?" (p. 221); mention of "la fermeté stoïque" and of "Epictète" (p. 239); "il est fait pour combattre et vaincre" (p. 246); "veux-je être vertueuse" is contrasted with "veux-je suivre le penchant de mon cœur," but nature is here thought of as on the side of duty (p. 252); "je vois ainsi défigurer ce divin modèle que je porte au-dedans de moi, et qui servoit à la fois d'objet à mes désirs et de règle à mes actions" (p. 291); "les premiers actes de vertu sont toujours les plus pénibles" (p. 330); "Julie m'a trop appris comment il faut immoler le bonheur au devoir" (p. 331); "insensée et farouche vertu! j'obéis à ta voix sans mérite; je t'abhorre en faisant tout pour toi" (p. 332); "en te livrant à la fois à tous les penchans, tu les confonds au lieu de les accorder, et deviens coupable à force de vertus" (p. 348); "celui qui, par respect pour le mariage, résisteroit au penchant de son cœur" (p. 349); "les désirs mêmes ne sembloient naître que pour nous donner l'honneur de les vaincre" (p. 359); "la force dont j'avois besoin pour résister à mon propre cœur" (p. 363); "malgré que j'en aie, il m'élève au-dessus de moi-même, et je sens qu'à force de confiance il m'apprend à la mériter" (pp. 415-16); Julie believes in discipline, not indulgence, for children (p. 421); "elle soutint ce jour-là le plus grand combat qu'âme humaine ait pu soutenir; elle vainquit pourtant" (p. 481); "on n'a besoin que de soi pour réprimer ses penchans, on a quelquefois besoin d'autrui pour discerner ceux qu'il est permis de suivre," thus pointing out the necessity of a check upon many of our inclinations (p. 483); "le spectacle d'une âme sublime et pure, triomphant

If it seems that these passages are not in themselves conclusive, consider the book as a whole. The first parts of the *Nouvelle Héloïse* are the story of the downfall of Saint-Preux and of Julie through following their natural instincts without check. Then comes Julie's conversion, and what started as though it were to be a glorification of the primal rights of passion and of "natural" instincts, continues as the narrative of Julie's struggle toward a virtue to be won, not through her own strength or "natural goodness" alone, but through divine aid. It is true that at the end we find her love for Saint-Preux still burning, but in spite of this she is able to rejoice that death will soon remove from her the possibility of yielding to this love, a fact which seems to show that she too at the end finds herself very human in her weakness and unable to work out alone her own salvation. Her very acquiescence, however, in this outcome shows that duty has triumphed over her natural instincts. Is not the outcome optimistic rather than pessimistic?³³ Was not her real mistake in thinking that the *ménage à trois* could be successful? Whether Rousseau consciously intended it or not, such seems to be the conclusion of his book. Let us note

de ses passions et régissant sur elle-même" (p. 482); "je doute qu'on puisse jamais tirer un bon parti d'un mauvais caractère, et que tout naturel puisse être tourné à bien" (p. 513); "aurions-nous jamais fait ce progrès par nos seules forces? Jamais, jamais, mon ami; le tenter même étoit une témérité" (p. 582); "ne goûtons-nous pas mille fois le jour le prix des combats qu'elle [la vertu] nous a coûtés?" (p. 582); "l'homme est plus libre d'éviter les tentations que de les vaincre" (p. 583); "si la vie est courte pour le plaisir, qu'elle est longue pour la vertu!" (p. 584); "un homme qui sut combattre et souffrir pour elle [la vertu] (p. 585); "toute la résistance qu'on peut tirer de soi je crois l'avoir faite, et toutefois j'ai succombé" (p. 602); These passages emphasize clearly the necessity of effort and struggle to realize the possibilities of one's higher nature. They are numerous enough to show that Rousseau by no means escaped so completely from tradition and from his Calvinistic ancestry as some have led us to believe. Whether they were written by Rousseau consciously or unconsciously, the important thing is that they are there and must not be passed over.

³³Did Rousseau bring about Julie's death at the end of the novel because he was afraid she would yield to her love for Saint-Preux, because he wished the novel to close with a scene likely to affect "les âmes sensibles," or because he felt the impossibility of continuing successfully the *ménage à trois*?

too with Lemaître³⁴ that marriage, though an institution approved by society, is greatly instrumental in Julie's redemption and that in consequence we must conclude that nature and society are not always and completely at war. If it be urged that Rousseau, who is here writing a novel, merely yields to the necessities of the *genre* in depicting a struggle, that he is unconsciously influenced by his voracious reading of novelistic literature and by his familiarity with French classic drama, or that his Genevan and Protestant heritage is here to the fore, I do not doubt that all these factors played their part in thus causing him to emphasize the idea of a struggle for virtue. Explanation may account for the fact, it does not dispose of it.

Furthermore, though Saint-Preux is generally taken as more completely Rousseau's mouthpiece than Julie and though it is true that Saint-Preux less commonly expresses doubt in human self-sufficiency, yet we note that he is generally guided and overruled by her in thought and action and is portrayed as looking up to her with respect and deference.³⁵ His virtue is almost wholly dependent upon hers. Julie herself has a chance to yield to her love for Saint-Preux, marry him, and live on Edouard's estate in England, but, in favor of her duty to her family, she refuses to follow her own inclinations.³⁶ Saint-Preux will not permit Edouard to follow "nature" to the extent of marriage with Laure,³⁷ and thus quite evidently defers to the conventions of society. Julie advocates humility rather than self-confidence,³⁸ although belief that man's inclinations were naturally good would produce exactly the opposite attitude.

Thus, in addition to the unemphasized neutral attitude of Wolmar, we have found expressed in the *Nouvelle Héloïse* three other conceptions of human life in relation to good and evil. These are the theory of *primitive goodness*; the theory, so closely allied with primitivism, of *instinctive goodness*; and the theory of *goodness as harmony with man's higher nature*. The first and the last have this in common; namely, that both admit that man in this present age must struggle against evil tendencies in order to become virtuous. Even the second, conceived as following the *inner light*

³⁴ Lemaître, *J. J. Rousseau* (Eng. trans., N. Y., 1907), pp. 199-200.

³⁵ Rousseau, *Œuvres*, III, 418.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 257-58.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 553.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 585.

possessed by every one, does not necessarily exclude the idea of difficulty and struggle in carrying out the dictates of one's conscience, though this is hardly the normal, natural interpretation that we should expect it to have. It is not the interpretation given to it by those who most closely followed so-called Rousseauistic doctrine.

We have shown that in the *Nouvelle Héloïse* Rousseau broke much less with tradition than has been thought. He is more conservative than radical, clinging instinctively to much of his Calvinistic heritage, conscious that his own life was filled with bitter struggle, influenced also probably by the technique of the novel and the drama. Explain as you will the reasons for this, the fact remains. Does it not seem that the closely associated ideas of *primitive* and of *instinctive* goodness were theoretical conceptions which pleased his fancy and gave him a *point de départ* from which to attack the shortcomings of his own time, but did not really form part of his own actual experience, did not harmonize with his own struggle-filled life, which showed so clearly the presence of evil tendencies that must be overcome by actual combat against one's natural inclinations? If Rousseau did not always hold to this latter view, the fact but shows how his theories sometimes led him away from the rock bottom of tested experience. The *Nouvelle Héloïse* is in the main truer to life. "*La Nouvelle Héloïse*," says M. Lanson, "est dans le plan du réel."³⁹ As between the three conceptions of "la bonté naturelle," primitive goodness, instinctive goodness, and goodness that is natural to the best in man, we find most prominently emphasized in the *Nouvelle Héloïse*, not the second, the untenable doctrine that has often been considered as summing up all of Rousseau's thought, nor the first, which is opposed to all modern evolutionary ideas, but the third, which portrays man's higher nature warring for the victory against the evil in his lower nature, a doctrine which does in fact seem most in accord with daily experience.

Rousseau, as we have seen, uses *nature* in a majority of cases to indicate a primitive state or character, which is non-artificial and good, but this prehistoric state must in no way be confused with the present, for man now is not good but possesses bad tendencies

³⁹ G. Lanson, "L'unité de la pensée de J. J. Rousseau," *Annales de la Société J. J. Rousseau*, VIII, p. 24.

and must fight to overcome these evil inclinations. Hence virtue requires a moral struggle. It is no easy road. In proportion to the success of this struggle will man recover his primitive goodness and divest himself of artificial accretions, which are "unnatural" and bad. The contrast between Rousseau's idealistic attitude toward the past and his realistic estimate of the present helps to explain many of the seeming contradictions in his thought. It is a contrast which should be taken into account by modern criticism.

The true significance of the doctrine of natural goodness may easily escape us at this distance from the eighteenth century. Especially is this the case if emphasis is placed upon the false psychology patent in any theory of instinctive goodness literally interpreted. But its real significance lies elsewhere. To those who held a horrible belief in the eternal damnation of unbaptized infants or of the non-elect⁴⁰ it preached the gospel that any one might be freed from his sin regardless of his creed, a belief which is now becoming a commonplace of our daily thought. To many others, devoted to *salon* and *boudoir* life, it called for an about-face toward a wholesome frankness, simplicity and naturalness.⁴¹ It opposed fatalism and *laissez faire* and called man to fulfil a nobler mission than in the past and to realize the highest possibilities of his nature. These are its permanent contributions to the cause of civilization. For them it deserves to be remembered.⁴²

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⁴⁰ Cf. W. E. H. Lecky, *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe* (N. Y., 1886), I, pp. 357 ff.

⁴¹ Cf. G. Lanson, *Histoire de la littérature française* (14th ed., 1918), p. 784.

⁴² For helpful suggestions made during the composition of this article, I am very grateful to Professors G. Chinard, E. P. Dargan, H. C. Lancaster, and A. O. Lovejoy. It is a pleasure to acknowledge their kindness.