
The Theory of "Natural Goodness" in Rousseau's Confessions

Author(s): George R. Havens

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THE THEORY OF "NATURAL GOODNESS" IN ROUSSEAU'S *CONFESSIONS*

Although much has been written about what is commonly called Rousseau's theory of the "natural goodness of man," yet it seems not to have been made the object, until very recently, of any thing like detailed study. Professor Schinz has contributed two valuable articles treating from this point of view the First and the Second Discourses.¹ The writer of this present article recently published a study of the theory, or its opposite, in the *Nouvelle Héloïse*.² Perhaps a similar investigation of the *Confessions* may not be without value in helping to clarify our thinking about this subject which is so fundamental a part of Rousseau's ideas. It is hoped that the study may be made sufficiently objective to carry conviction and to avoid, as far as may be, the controversy which is still, it seems, so inseparably connected with Rousseau. But, after all, controversy is a tribute to the living quality in Rousseau's thought. Men do not fight about the dead. If conflicting opinions about Jean-Jacques are still violent, as they were during his life time, it is because his thought and his personality, whether for good or for evil, are still with us and underlie, often unrecognized, many of our most characteristic beliefs and institutions. It is because his opinions are both fundamental and potent that his adversaries and his advocates, even at the present day, are often equally intense

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 "The Theory of 'Natural Goodness' in Rousseau's *Nouvelle Héloïse*," *M. L. N.*, xxxvi, 385-394.

and violent. But, however that may be, the time seems at length ripe for an attempt to find out what Rousseau really said and thought about the important and interesting subject of "la bonté naturelle." In this connection the *Confessions*, his last major work, constituting, as they do, his most complete estimate of his own character and of his attitude toward life and conduct, have a very special interest.

There would seem to be only two methods by which this subject can be studied with the maximum of accuracy and the minimum of personal bias. These methods supplement and complete one another and both are essential. The first involves the consideration in their context of all relevant passages. The second demands taking account, where possible, of the trend of the work as a whole. As in his study of the *Nouvelle Héloïse*, the writer of this present article has tried to practice both these methods with due care and impartiality. If he has failed in any particular to reach conclusions fully convincing, he has at least brought together the materials without which no accurate conclusions can be formed.

If we endeavor first to discover the meaning Rousseau here attaches to the word *nature*, we find its occurrence slightly less frequent, but its meanings no less varied than in the *Nouvelle Héloïse*.³ We need not take time to discuss in detail uses of the word which have no bearing upon the subject in hand. Thus the words, *nature*, *naturel*, and *naturellement*, may signify: 1) accord with truth or probability, appropriateness; 2) the physical universe; 3) the existing scheme of things; 4) the physical human or animal body or life; 5) sort or kind. What is of real interest and importance to note is the fact that in more than half of the cases where these words are used they mean either: 1) the original creative force in the universe; or, 2) that which is due only to this original creative force: namely, that which is primitive, non-artificial, instinctive, or inherent. Primitivism, absence of artificiality, inherentness, as opposed to what is acquired through education or training or social prejudice, these are the dominant meanings of the words in question.⁴ Thus, Rousseau refers to

³ *Ibid.*, p. 386, n. 8.

⁴ I trust an attempt to analyze the uses of these words, *naturel* (adjective), *naturellement*, *nature*, as they are used in the *Confessions*, may not be without value, though of course I realize that the dividing line between

“ces fantasques humeurs qu'on impute à la nature, et qui naissent toutes de la seule éducation.”⁵ He tells us that “tout nourrissoit dans mon cœur les dispositions (Var., penchants) qu'il reçut de la nature.”⁶ He compares “l'homme de l'homme avec l'homme naturel.”⁷ “Il faut,” he says, “à travers tant de préjugés et de passions factices, savoir bien analyser le cœur humain pour y démêler les vrais sentimens de la nature.”⁸ But these are uses of the word *nature* entirely to be expected in Rousseau, a few examples serve as illustrations, and we need not dwell upon them longer.

In contrast to this state of primitivism is the present state of mankind. Man now is evil, thinks Rousseau. He himself must have had “un grand penchant à dégénérer.”⁹ If one would not commit evil, the only wise course, he tells us, is to avoid temptation.

different meanings is not always easy to draw and that different individuals, even the same individual at different times, might make a somewhat different classification. This variation, however, would hardly affect seriously the final results of the study, which are as follows. The references are to the Hachette edition, the Vulgate of Rousseau.

I. The Original Creative Force of the Universe, twenty-seven times. VIII, 1, 8, 65, 73, 76, 100, 108, 113, 116, 142, 222, 225, 226, 227, 235, 235, 245, 253, 269, 277, 307, 308, 320; IX, 70, 72, 73, 77.

II. That which is due only to this original creative force, hence a primitive, instinctive, non-artificial, inherent state, character, or impulses, fifty-six times. VIII, 1, 5, 104, 146, 253, 299, 20, 35, 58, 100, 110, 113, 126, 175, 234, 240, 315, 328, 335, 385-86, 12, 19, 47, 53, 61, 66, 85, 128, 135, 167, 205, 228, 231, 246, 255, 263, 269, 277, 279, 315, 345, 375, 376; IX, 2, 11, 31, 63, 8, 16, 29, 29, 35, 39, 72, 75, 80.

III. Accord with Truth or Probability; Appropriateness, thirty times. VIII, 9, 29, 139, 175, 299, 325, 14, 35, 47, 56, 59, 102, 102, 126, 139, 167, 190, 210, 217, 315, 388; IX, 35, 59, 62, 78, 11, 18, 26, 55, 74.

IV. The Physical Universe, seven times. VIII, 39, 115, 168, 265; IX, 71, 72, 72.

V. The Existing Scheme of Things, five times. VIII, 228, 312; IX, 37, 73, 21.

VI. The Physical Human or Animal Body or Life, six times. VIII, 39, 76, 162, 306-07, 328; IX, 13.

VII. Sort, Kind, or Character, nine times. VIII, 17, 74, 277, 289, 289, 289, 320; IX, 40, 56.

VIII. Ordinary, Usual, once. VIII, 27.

⁵ J. J. Rousseau, *Œuvres* (Hachette ed.), VIII, 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 277.

⁸ *Ibid.*, IX, 2. Cf. VIII, 104, 299, 307 and *supra*, note 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, VIII, 20.

“J’en ai tiré cette grande maxime de morale, la seule peut-être d’usage dans la pratique, d’éviter les situations qui mettent nos devoirs en opposition avec nos intérêts et qui nous montrent notre bien dans le mal d’autrui, sûr que, dans de telles situations, quelque sincère amour de la vertu qu’on y porte, on faiblit tôt ou tard sans s’en apercevoir, et l’on devient injuste et méchant dans le fait, sans avoir cessé d’être juste et bon dans l’âme.”¹⁰ Thus, while intending good, one may unconsciously slip into doing the easier thing, evil. Rousseau is as familiar with this possibility as we ourselves. The intentional coldness he uses to rid himself of his companion Bâcle on the road back from Turin shows some want of “natural goodness” in the usual acceptation of the term.¹¹ Rousseau agrees with La Rochefoucauld that man is evil,¹² adding that in youth “l’on n’aime pas à voir l’homme comme il est.” If men would not talk when they had nothing to say, “les hommes deviendroient moins méchants.”¹³ Rousseau himself, shortly after, has occasion to be ashamed of the ignoble thought that he will inherit the clothes of Claude Anet.¹⁴ The Abbé de Saint-Pierre was unpractical, said Rousseau, because he thought that men were guided by their reason instead of by their passions.¹⁵ Grimm was right, wrote Rousseau, in thinking men evil, but the value of this passage is somewhat discounted by the fact that Rousseau has in mind the supposed plot against him, in which Grimm is thought to be a leading spirit.¹⁶ Jean-Jacques considered that he had received an exceptionally good and sound education and upbringing. “Si jamais enfant reçut une éducation raisonnable et saine. ç’a été moi.”¹⁷ Why then did his youth turn out so badly? Was it that, as he might have said, society was so corrupt that he could not do otherwise? Or was it, as he himself had said previously, that he must have had “un grand penchant à dégénérer?”¹⁸ We are not concerned here with seeking the real answer to the question. It is sufficient for the present that Rousseau himself recognizes,

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 38. Cf. pp. 192, 317.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹² *Ibid.*, 78. Cf. the incident of the song recalled because of the *risqué* words, *ibid.*, 105.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 144.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 302.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 354.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

sometimes at least, that there are evil *penchants*, as well as good, and that these former are strong and dangerous.

Here then we have seen Rousseau, the realist, conscious of the existence of evil tendencies in himself and in others and pessimistically seeing man at his worst. It is, if you like, only a way of admitting that society, including himself, has fallen from its hypothetical state of pristine goodness into its present evil condition, which at all events, whatever its origin, offers much to combat.

But Rousseau himself takes no pleasure in evil. "Jamais je n'ai pris plaisir à faire du mal."¹⁹ He loves virtue. "L'amour du bien," he says, "n'est jamais sorti de mon cœur."²⁰ In his childhood he did not abuse the liberty accorded him. "On nous laissoit presque une liberté entière dont nous n'abusâmes jamais."²¹ He is not deaf to "la douce voix de la nature."²² Evil is not inherent, it is an abuse of one's natural faculties. "De tous ces maux, il n'y en avoit pas un dont la Providence ne fût disculpée, et qui n'eût sa source dans l'abus que l'homme a fait de ses facultés plus que dans la nature elle-même."²³ The value of this idea lies chiefly, no doubt, in its being a reaction against the theological doctrine of predestination. "Natural feelings" are to be found most readily among the lower classes of the people, says Rousseau.²⁴ They are evidently to be considered closer to nature. Love of justice, he holds, is innate in man.²⁵ Right instincts, however, may go with wrong judgment and this accounts for much of the evil that is committed. "Ce sont presque toujours de bons sentimens mal dirigés qui font faire aux enfans le premier pas vers le mal."²⁶ Mme de Warens, "au lieu d'écouter son cœur, qui la menoit bien, . . . écouta sa raison qui la menoit mal."²⁷ Here Rousseau puts the *heart*, meaning probably conscience, above the sophistries of a false philosophy taught by her first lover. Her virtuous intentions make Rousseau more indulgent toward her conduct, for he says: "Votre conduite fut répréhensible, mais votre cœur fut toujours pur."²⁸ Rousseau is in no way unique when he regrets his youthful state of goodness and innocence,²⁹ but he is somewhat more so

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 312. Cf. pp. 186, 292.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

²² *Ibid.*, 253.

²³ *Ibid.*, 307.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, IX, 65.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, VIII, 21.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 140.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 187. Cf. p. 141.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

when he calls attention to the fact that money was no temptation to him and required of him no struggle. "Mais encore une fois, je ne convoitois pas assez pour avoir à m'abstenir; je ne sentoie rien à combattre."³⁰

In these different passages we have seen mainly the theoretical Rousseau, looking back affectionately upon Nature as a kind mother, who had endowed mankind with a love of right and virtue, an instinct, which, if he will follow it, if he will not let it be obscured by bad judgment, will lead him aright. Evil as man may be, he is not inevitably predestined by an inexorable law of nature to remain so. He can escape if he will.

But it is indeed curious to note that Grimm believed in the doctrine of un-discipline so often considered to sum up all of Rousseau's own thought as, for instance, in this phrase of Beaudoine's: "Dans son système, suivre sa nature est toute la morale."³¹ So Grimm is said to have held that "l'unique devoir de l'homme est de suivre en tout les penchans de son cœur."³² There is a certain piquancy in seeing Rousseau here forestall some of his own later critics. "Cette morale, quand je l'appris, me donna terriblement à penser, quoique je ne la prisie alors que pour un jeu d'esprit."³³ Rousseau then, here at least, does not believe in the doctrine of following one's impulses wherever they may lead.

In contrast to this effortless morality, or un-morality, so often considered to be his whole teaching, we find him very frequently expressing the idea that virtue requires a struggle. "La vertu ne nous coûte que par notre faute; et, si nous voulions être toujours sages, rarement aurions-nous besoin d'être vertueux. Mais des penchans faciles à surmonter nous entraînent sans résistance."³⁴ Let us note especially this interesting phrase, "des penchans faciles à surmonter," so different from the idea of following one's inclinations exclusively. Again Rousseau says: "Je pris bien la ferme résolution de me combattre et de me vaincre si ce

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

³¹ H. Beaudoine, *La Vie et les Œuvres de J. J. Rousseau* (1891), II, p. 513.

³² Rousseau, *Œuvres*, VIII, 336. Grimm appears to Rousseau as one of "ces voluptueux de parade," mentioned in the *Dialogues*, IX, 198.

³³ *Ibid.*, 336. Rousseau continues: "Mais je vis bientôt que ce principe étoit réellement la règle de sa conduite. . . . C'est la doctrine intérieure dont Diderot m'a tant parlé, mais qu'il ne m'a jamais expliquée."

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 44. Cf. p. 63.

malheureux penchant venoit à se déclarer,"³⁵ and he continues: "Je l'exécutai courageusement, avec quelques soupirs, je l'avoue, mais aussi avec cette satisfaction intérieure, que je goûtois pour la première fois de ma vie, de me dire: 'Je mérite ma propre estime, je sais préférer mon devoir à mon plaisir.'"³⁶ The fact that good action is not easy is tacitly admitted by Rousseau when he prudently advocates avoiding temptation rather than trusting to ability to conquer it.³⁷ The struggle idea appears also in other passages. "J'ai souvent senti depuis lors, en y repensant, que si les sacrifices qu'on fait au devoir et à la vertu coûtent à faire, on en est bien payé par les doux souvenirs qu'ils laissent au fond du cœur."³⁸ Or note such a passage as this: "J'eus bien des plaisirs à la fois; mais je puis jurer que le plus vif fut celui d'avoir su me vaincre."³⁹ He states that he uses his will power to follow out the course of action upon which he has determined. "Mais les principes sévères que je venois de me faire, et que j'étois résolu de suivre à tout prix, me garantirent d'elle et de ses charmes."⁴⁰ He finds the struggle, however, very great. "Les obstacles que j'eus à combattre, et les efforts que je fis pour en triompher, sont incroyables."⁴¹ But such efforts of the will are not natural to him. "Il auroit fallu, pour me tirer de tous ces tracassas, une fermeté dont je n'étois pas capable."⁴² Of Julie in the *Nouvelle Héloïse*, he says he has portrayed her as yielding to love before her marriage but finding afterwards "d s forces pour le vaincre à son tour."⁴³ He himself desired to surmount his weakness. "L'indignation que j'en ressentis contre moi-même eût suffi peut-être pour surmonter ma foiblesse, si la tendre compassion que m'en inspiroit la victime n'eût encore amolli mon cœur."⁴⁴ But he is determined to conquer himself. "J'étois déterminé tout à fait à me vaincre."⁴⁵ Saint-Lambert's expressions of esteem and friendship in a critical moment "me donnèrent le courage et la force de les mériter. Dès ce moment je fis mon devoir. . . . Cette lettre me servit d'éguide contre ma

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 185.³⁶ *Ibid.*, 186.³⁷ *Ibid.*, 38, 192, 292.³⁸ *Ibid.*, 199.³⁹ *Ibid.*, 241.⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 255.⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 257.⁴² *Ibid.*, 261.⁴³ *Ibid.*, 312.⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 321.⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 332.

foiblesse Elle [Mme d'Houdetot] fut sensible aux efforts que j'avois faits pour me vaincre. . . . J'avois repris l'empire de moi-même. . . . J'étois d'un courage que je ne m'étois jamais senti: toutes mes forces étoient revenues."⁴⁶

Here Rousseau speaks the common language of mankind. His theories fade into the background before the consciousness that, however much he may love virtue, however much he may desire to do right, he can seldom do it without an effort of the will and a struggle against other and less worthy tendencies. Just as the *Nouvelle Héloïse*, in M. Lanson's phrase, "est dans le plan du réel,"⁴⁷ so also in the main are the *Confessions*. Here also Rousseau is probing his own memories, his experience. Considered as a whole, are not the *Confessions* the narrative of Rousseau's slow and painful uprising from the mire and filth of his early years? Slowly his conscience develops and he forms for himself a moral sense lacked by many of the greatest of his contemporaries. Because Rousseau was severe in his ideal for himself, posterity has oftentimes been oversevere with him. We see him in his early years almost completely unmoral. Even in middle life he abandons his children, as it seems, without qualm or scruple. But he lives bitterly to regret the day and to condemn himself for it, while out of the pain and suffering and struggle of this experience came finally to fruition a character which, with all its imperfections, was definitely on its upward way under the guidance of its own conscience. Again M. Lanson gives us a summary, in a sentence, of Rousseau's evolution. "Il a fallu que Rousseau fût supérieurement moral, pour n'avoir pas mal fini, après ses commencements."⁴⁸

Even the theoretical language which crops out from time to time in the *Confessions* hardly means an effortless morality or following one's appetites, as Rousseau himself seemed to perceive when he heard what might have been his own occasional phrases hurled back at him in a quotation from Grimm.⁴⁹ Those of Rousseau's contemporaries and of his later critics who have found

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 343, 344, 350.

⁴⁷ G. Lanson, "L'unité de la pensée de J.-J. Rousseau," *Annales de la Société J.-J. Rousseau*, VIII, 24.

⁴⁸ G. Lanson, *Histoire de la litt. fr.* (1912), p. 790.

⁴⁹ See *supra*, n. 32 and text.

in his works nothing but a justification for doing as they pleased, for following their instincts, have done so simply because they did not take all of Rousseau, but have noted in their reading only those passages which stand out because of their novelty or their paradoxical quality. The more numerous passages, which express the traditional attitude of moral struggle, have attracted less attention than they deserve. They show that Rousseau did not after all take his feet so far off the ground as has sometimes been thought.

Are we then with this idea of a struggle for virtue far from our original subject of "natural goodness"? No: for Rousseau, idealizing the past, yearned by struggle against present evils to win back to a supposed state of pristine innocence. In studying Rousseau, criticism should never lose sight of his realistic attitude toward the present and his idealistic attitude toward the past. We of this present age are inclined to put our Garden of Eden ahead of us, instead of behind.

What was the significance of the idea of "natural goodness" for Rousseau's own age? Rousseau wished to give, and did give, moral problems first place in his consideration. So Faguet says: "Pour Rousseau la préoccupation morale est la préoccupation dominante, et pour ainsi dire unique."⁵⁰ Of what value was progress, if it were not above all a moral progress? Any age may well ask and ponder the same question. Rousseau wished to react sharply against the fatalism of predestination and the damnation of unbaptized infants and of the non-elect. He wished to preach a return from the artificiality of *salon* and *boudoir* life to a more wholesome simplicity, frankness, and naturalness. How should he do this except by employing the language of his age? So he endeavors to show that by *nature*, without recourse to a special act of *grace*, man has it in him to be good, though this following "nature" will generally be the very reverse of effortless. The "natural goodness" theory means the turning over to the individual conscience rather than to theology of the problem of human conduct. It emphasizes the moral worth and the liberty of the individual, his freedom from theological bondage. This is the conclusion to which one comes, if Rousseau's thought is interpreted in the light of its historical background, of what it was

⁵⁰ E. Faguet, *Rousseau penseur*, p. 105.

intended to combat, and not made merely the subject of easy mockery after the fashion of many Rousseau critics.

Are these ideas now dead for us? We speak another language, we do not talk in these days of "natural goodness," but we have increasing confidence in mankind and in his ability to progress, albeit blunderingly enough. Certainly we think little of "natural depravity," but, if we do not talk of "natural goodness" now, the concept itself is no less potent for all that. Shall we then think that this whole attitude of mind goes back to Rousseau alone? Certainly not, though he was indeed a very powerful influence in that direction. But Rousseau himself was only part of a much larger movement toward greater confidence in mankind and that movement we are accustomed to call the Renaissance. Not the least important result of that movement was the theory of the "natural goodness of man," which Rousseau made his own and so powerfully espoused.⁵¹

GEORGE R. HAVENS.

Ohio State University.

NOTES ON OLD ENGLISH

I. ÆLFRIC'S *Hexameron*

The *Hexameron of St. Basil*, as it was called by Hickee in his *Thesaurus*, was first edited by H. W. Norman in 1848 and reissued as an enlarged edition in 1849. It has not been reëdited except as a selection was given by A. S. Cook in his *First Book in Old English*, p. 189 f. Norman misunderstood the text in certain places, as shown by his punctuation and translation. For example, the first few lines of Chap. V should be printed as follows:

Secunda die fecit Deus firmamentum—'On ðæm oðrum dæge ure Drihten geworhte *firmamentum*' ðe men hateð rodor, se belycð on his bosome ealle eorðan bradnyse. And binnan him is gelogod eal ðes middan eard, and he æfre gæð abutan swa swa yrnende hweol and he næfre ne stent stille on anum. And on anre wendinge—ða hwile ðe he æne betyrnð—gæð witodlice forð feower and twentig tida, ðæt is ðonne ealles an dæg and an niht.

⁵¹ This article has been read in manuscript by Professor G. Chinard of the Johns Hopkins University. Without in any way rendering him responsible for any errors it may still contain, it is a great pleasure to acknowledge my obligation to his knowledge and judgment and my appreciation of his cordial helpfulness.