

ROUSSEAU ET L'ÉDUCATION
ÉTUDES SUR *L'ÉMILE*

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ÉMILE AND MORAL EDUCATION

by Jim MacAdam

In this essay my purpose is to attain a critical standpoint from which to evaluate Rousseau's views on moral education. This aim, however, turns out to be much more difficult than one imagines. Can there be such a thing as a uniform moral education given the distinctness, to go no further, that one notices in one's own children? And if moral education is possible, should it be practised? If an important constituent of morality is self-government, if moral liberty is a law that one prescribes to oneself, will not moral education deny moral self-government?

I approach my purpose with three perspectives already in mind. Two can be indicated briefly. The third is a view of my own which I require to set out at greater length in order to have some alternative from which to think about Rousseau's.

The first perspective originates in my living in a part of the world where religious education was once a legal requirement in the primary school curriculum. Moral education has replaced religious education and is now a legal requirement. Having bitten this bullet, however, the government has an urge not to chew it. Application of the law has been made the responsibility of each local schoolboard. A number of interesting, and contradictory, alternatives are proposed. Some object to moral education if it amounts to "unreasoned indoctrination in the dominant ideology" and propose a broader study of more reasoning and/or education in values. Some object to restricting moral education to a few hours per week of the timetable and insist that it must be taught throughout the curriculum. Their critics respond that this is a sure way of ensuring it not be taught at all. Some parents, interested in religious education, withdraw their children from public schools and set up their own. Of late, little has happened. With regard to the law's application, perhaps the government has swallowed the bullet and already passed it, although not legislatively.

The second perspective is that provided by Plato. As a student of Plato, Rousseau is undoubtedly interested in Plato's views on moral education. In the *Meno*, Plato is highly sceptical to moral education and suggests it is impossible. Moral education lacks a subject-matter unless the essence, the one in the many, of the moral virtues can be ascertained. Yet in the *Republic*, which Rousseau proclaims as the greatest treatise on education ever written (Bloom 40), Rousseau is faced with the argument that moral knowledge is possible only for a few. Moreover apprehension of it necessitates thorough grounding in abstruse geometry, physics, astronomy and metaphysics. Moral knowledge is for experts only.

The third, my own view, shares something with Plato and something with Rousseau. I agree with Plato's scepticism concerning moral education as set forth in the *Meno*, although my grounds differ. I agree with Rousseau in finding morality democratic but because it is, it is not plain that the "education" in moral education can be significant regarding content.

Moral philosophers apart, morality for moral agents is constituted by ordinary moral obligations. Decisions, virtues, ideals and motivation have a place, but for the most part morality is constituted by duties that identify moral right and wrong. Thus when I speak of morality in this sense what I mean is the common morality understood by ordinary moral agents. This common morality is made up of distinct duties concerning kinds of acts; for instance, promising, stealing, lying, helping the helpless. Now, what seems significant regarding common morality is that its duties are what ordinary agents demand and expect of one another. In consequence of this characteristic, common duties are, and must be, knowable and doable for all moral agents. They must be within the reach and the competence of all. It is just for this reason that morality is democratic. All men are equally moral agents, common duties are known and are within the power of all. Moral knowledge is not expert knowledge. It if were then common morality would be impossible. The knowledge required for common morality cannot be esoteric or specialized. It cannot involve rare intellectual abilities. In consequence, we are sceptical of Plato's educational scheme in the *Republic* in which moral knowledge presupposes expert knowledge of geometry, physics, astronomy and metaphysics. For our own experience is that morality does not require such learning. On the contrary, experience shows that

persons possessed of it are not better at morality than those lacking it.

As a result of these reflections on common morality, I am drawn to two conclusions: first, that the common obligations that constitute morality are understood well enough for agents to act upon them; second, that as regards kinds of duties prescribing what is morally right or wrong moral education is not significant. Or at least, to the degree that common, democratic morality does involve education it must be of a very simple kind, something within the reach of all moral agents.

However, two things that are similar must be distinguished. For ordinary moral agents, moral duties are self-justified. But that is not the same as valuing moral duties for their own sakes. An example may illustrate the former. Suppose I see a man roughly pull another off the roadway and ask the first man why he did that. Suppose he replies: "because the man is blind and could not see the truck bearing down on him". From the agent's point of view the reason is sufficient. The question: "but what is the justification of the perceived duty?" is a philosopher's question. However, that moral duties are treated as if self-justifying (that is, as not requiring a reason beyond the duties) differs from valuing, or coming to value, the duties as self-justified. However, both would figure in the simple moral education that I prefer.

It could have three steps. First, when the child is young education consists for the most part of easily understandable, solemnly delivered "do's" and "don'ts", uncomplicated rules. If one says: "Don't hurt the dog" and the child persists in picking up the cocker spaniel pup by its ears then the child may get a whack. Second, and later, one may try to restate the duty in different terms; pointing out that animals suffer pain, that the infliction of avoidable pain for the sake of one's pleasure or convenience is not justified. Third, and later still, the child can be encouraged to reflect on what is right or wrong in the duties he has learned, upon that which is the moral characteristic each contains that makes it right or wrong. It is no doubt true that not many moral agents do come to value the common duties in this way, or that they value some but not others, but it remains a desirable goal for all that.

In the light of the foregoing, what is one to make of the moral education set forth in *Émile*? One puzzling, yet useful, question is to ask whether or not Rousseau would agree with my view

concerning common morality. It would be useful if he agreed because that would give a clearer sense to a claim that Rousseau, in contrast to Plato, views morality as democratic. It is plain that Rousseau does value men as equal in worth and seems also to think that neither rank, wealth, birth or learning render some superior moral agents. But beyond that, his democratic morality is obscure. Further, if he agreed that morality is known then that would permit a sharper focus on the real purpose intended for moral education.

Part of the problem concerning moral education is that we are led, because of our understanding of education in general, to think of moral education as having a content that is difficult to comprehend, one that necessitates formal and systematic instruction. But although Rousseau is not as straightforward as one would wish, there are reasons to think that Rousseau does not mean that the purpose of moral education is the acquisition of moral knowledge. A principal reason is that he categorically denies that the young child should ever be given anything resembling moral instruction: "the words *obey* and *command* will be proscribed from his lexicon, and even more so *duty* and *obligation*." (89)

I am aware that he has at least two other reasons for this position, one of which I agree with and one of which I don't. The first is that he does not believe that the young are capable of moral reasoning: "to sense the reason of men's duties is not a child's affair." (90) With this, I agree. The second is that introduction of moral duties will render morality unpleasing. This may be true, but also necessary. For all that, if Rousseau believes that morality has a subject-matter significantly different from that embodied in common morality then plainly that moral subject-matter would have to be introduced sometime and somehow into *Émile's* moral education. Yet, so far as I can determine, it never is.

This point deserves emphasis even at the cost of belabouring it. One can argue that Rousseau can have other reasons for proscribing any kind of instruction which concerns the content of moral duties: avoidance of the false opinions whereby corruptive *amour propre* is shored up, inconsistency between preaching and practising, the greater and more appropriate need to strengthen disposition and habit in the Aristotelian sense — and so on. None of this amounts to a rejection of the common morality that is alluded to in saying:

Cast your eyes on all the nations of the world, go through all histories... (Y)ou will find everywhere the same ideas of justice and decency, everywhere the same notions of good and bad. (288)

One can argue against him that he is naïve in assuming, even in the case of someone so preciously closeted as *Émile*, that disposition and habit can be cultivated efficiently in the absence of moral injunctions of any kind. But none of this amounts to a rejection of common morality. Rather we are led to believe that *Émile* is being brought up to share full citizenship in it.

Sometimes Rousseau leaves one with the impression that morality is not a matter of fulfilling understood obligations but is only one of extending one's sentiments: "The more one generalizes this interest, the more it becomes equitable and the love of mankind is nothing other than the love of justice." (252). This notion of extending interest to embrace humanity suggests the very idea he rebukes in the omitted chapter of the *Geneva Manuscript*. It also renders uncertain whether or not morality is, in any important sense, cognitive. Rather, it implies that morality is the absence of selfishness.

Despite this unclarity, I remain convinced that Rousseau does not think of the role of moral education as one of teaching new and specific duties. But if the purpose is not that of giving new content to old duties then what is its purpose? For if we cannot get clear on its purpose then how can we evaluate it all?

Its purpose seems twofold, having to do with a moral ideal and motivation. The two are closely connected. The moral ideal concerns the development of a man to complete moral agency. Education in this sense is a kind of nurture of nature. It is primarily an education of the emotions: preventing, so far as possible, corruptive influence of *amour propre* and rendering morality attractive.

I will not now dwell on Rousseau's moral ideal. What concerns me more are Rousseau's thoughts on motivation. In general, the doctrine in *Émile* is too much allied to self-interest and consequences, even though both Rousseau and Bloom (5) assure us that it is not. The most startlingly aspect of this is Rousseau's idea of placing *amour propre* at the service of morality. *Amour propre* is the «me first» passion, the competitive passion, the desire that I be preferred to, and above, all others. "But *amour propre*," as Rousseau acutely observes, "which makes comparisons, is never content and never could be, because this sentiment, preferring ourselves to others, also demands others to pre-

fer us to themselves, which is impossible." (213-14). This it was that *amour propre*, in the *Discourse On Inequality*, served as a chief causal agent in the degeneration of humanity.

Beyond doubt, Rousseau's rich and complex notion of *amour propre* required fuller consideration than can be given here. The significant change that occurs in *Émile* is Rousseau's assurance that *amour propre* is morally neutral and thus can serve morality. (214, 252). To the extent that I follow him, he seems to mean that *e.g.* we should praise a child for his interest in others, allowing the child to take pride and distinguish himself for his benevolence rather than in other ways. But if the sentiment of *amour propre* truly required each to prefer himself to any other then it is very difficult to see how *amour propre* can serve morality if morality involves due regard for the interest of others. For whereas morality requires respect for others and their interests as such, *amour propre* prefers oneself. A further concern over using *amour propre* to assist moral education is that what will get implanted in the young *Émile* is being pleased with himself when he is pleasing others. If he wants to feel nice, he must be nice. "Nothing is good for him, unless he feels it to be so." (178). It can be said that *Émile's* love for Sophie will overcome *Émile's* *amour propre* and that the contract of marriage constitutes morality for the adult *Émile*. But has *Émile* not met with moral obligations before his marriage to Sophie and does not a contract — a promise — itself presuppose moral obligation? What might be meant is that the contract and/or the relation with the other enable *Émile* to value morality and its duties independently of personal interest and happiness. But if so, that can only mean that morality is independently valuable.

A related motivational cause is pity. Pity, Rousseau seems to mean, is really self-interest. Actually I can't have genuine compassion for the other except by supposing him to be myself, even though I know I can't be him or exchange situations with him¹. This line of thinking is found again, remarkably, in Rousseau's explanation of the Golden Rule:

it is in order not to suffer that I do not want him to suffer. I am interested in him for love of myself, and the reason for the precept is in nature itself. (235)

Prima Facie, this statement goes beyond using self-interest in

1. In fairness to Rousseau, his earlier characterization of pity (222-3) is perceptive, important and not egoistic.

the service of morality. Rather it lends authority to the view that all action, moral or otherwise, is grounded in self-interest (212-213). The analyses of why one should keep promises and not lie combine self-interest and consequences (100-101, also 160). Moral education concerning promising, Rousseau seems to mean, should proceed along the lines of mutual self-interest. If the child does not keep his promises to another then the other will not keep his promise to *Émile* (what if the other never promises *Émile*?). Presumably, Rousseau intends that the student's motivation to keep a promise is in consequences beneficial to self-interest. Promise-keeping, by this method, has no moral value on its own².

Reflections on these instances where morality is motivated and justified through consequences for self-interest, force one to consider again Rousseau's moral ideal. A central feature of it is the harmonious soul, the end of the struggle between desire and duty. In one sense, a sense not as much dwelt upon in *Émile* as in other works, one sympathizes with Rousseau. A soul afflicted with corrupted *amour propre* is concerned only with appearance, exists only as others want him to be. He is an advertiser's dream and alienated himself to others. In another sense one can also agree with Rousseau, it is desirable that one should desire to do one's duty.

But in a third sense, Rousseau seems to want to go beyond both and to court the sacrifice of morality to happiness. To the degree that he does, he is mistaken. The struggle between desire and duty cannot be ended without also putting an end to morality and humanity. The reason is that the conflict between duty and desire is constitutive of morality. If humans were so constituted as always to want to do that which they morally ought to do then morality and morally responsible beings would differ from what we know them to be. When we sometimes desire and act contrary to duty, this is as much a part of being a moral agent as is the occasional desire to do something solely on the ground that it is morally right. Too much attention to the harmony of self-interest and duty leads Rousseau dangerously close in *Émile* to ignoring these homelies. For what, in the end, is the harmony of desire and duty? If its issue is a desire

2. On the same page Rousseau adds a footnote that, in part at least, can be read to mean that the duty of promising has moral value independent of self-interest and consequences and that promising for profit is a mistake. These truths reinforce my criticism concerning motivation.

that always causes one to do one's duty, with no contrary desire, then there is no, or little, place for morality. Hence, harmony, in that sense, is not a suitable moral ideal.

Let me now try to clarify the criticism that has been left implicit. There is one thing I wish to exclude. I do not want to argue concerning the efficacy of the self-interest. Possibly Rousseau is right, perhaps humans can be motivated to act morally only through self-interest. What I do question is whether or not this education of the emotions will foster an appreciation of doing what is morally right because it is morally right.

One can argue then that there is a confusion of aims — morality for its own sake and personal happiness — and a question whether the motivation given enables appreciation of morality as self-justified. The arguments that justice pays and morality makes you happy are dubious foundations for moral education for the only too obvious reason that sometimes they don't. There is a tendency in Rousseau's *Émile*, and in *Émile* himself, to eat one's cake and still have it (that, I take it, is the correct rendition of the proverb).

There is a final problem that may be linked with those I have discussed. It is suggested to me by Bloom's words:

Man requires a healing education which returns him to himself... *Émile* is an experiment in restoring harmony... by reordering the emergence of man's acquisitions in such a way as to avoid the imbalances created by them while allowing the full actualization of man's potential... [*Émile*] is a *PHENOMENOLOGY of the Mind* posing as Dr. Spock. (3)... Rousseau is at the source of the tradition which replaces virtue and vice... with such pairs of opposites as... authentic/inauthentic... real self/alienated self. (4)

There are ample textual suggestions, in *Émile* and elsewhere, to the effect that Rousseau contemplates the emergence of a yet unrealized moral nature which would exist were the conflict to end between *amour propre* and *amour de soi*. When the re-ordering is complete, it is dubious that man will return to himself. What will emerge is an unalienated being, thus a new moral being. The status of common moral duties in relation to that being will be unclear. Will they apply to him? In their absence we lack a moral standard by which to understand and morally judge the new morality that goes with the overcoming of alienation. No more could we understand how Dr. Spock would educate Mr. Spock.

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