

Rousseau on Reading “Jean-Jacques”: *The Dialogues*

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Most students of Rousseau’s political thought have tended to ignore his autobiographical writings, or at most to cite passages in which he explains the circumstances of the composition of his obviously theoretical works. Those who make greater use of the autobiographical works usually do so in order to interpret Rousseau’s thought in the light of his personality. As a rule this approach entails discrediting the theoretical works by exposing Rousseau’s personal derangement. Such students follow the lead of Burke who denounced Rousseau’s “mad confessions of his mad faults” as a part of his attack on the principles of the French Revolution (Burke, 1835, p. 306). Only a few scholars (Hartle, 1983) have attempted any systematic treatment of the theoretical significance of the autobiographical works.

If this characterization is true for the autobiographical works in general, it is all the more true of *Rousseau juge de Jean-Jaques*. As a rule scholars refer to *Rousseau juge de Jean-Jaques—Dialogues* by the short title *Dialogues*. The short title is convenient, but its absence from some of the manuscripts suggests that the longer version has the better claim to be Rousseau’s own choice for a title. The translation of the long title into English poses some difficulties because the word *juge* can be either a noun or a verb in French. This ambiguity cannot be preserved in English. The few scholars who have translated this title are divided between *Rousseau Judges Jean-Jacques* (Hendel, 1934) and *Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques* (France, 1987). An Italian translation, *Rousseau giudice di Jean-Jacques*, (Rousseau, 1972) also uses the noun. We have elected the latter (the more common of the two) for a number of reasons, none of which could be said to exclude the alternative which would be more precisely rendered as *Rousseau Judges about Jean-Jacques*.

This book has surely been the least read of Rousseau’s important works; until recently, most of those who did read it seemed primarily interested in the

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Dialogues as a source for evidence of the depth of Rousseau's paranoia. Even a critic who attempts to be sympathetic describes the work by saying, "The terrible paranoid nightmare is frequently illuminated by flashes of extraordinary lucidity and insight" (Grimsley, 1969, p. 233). Virtually all of Rousseau's other major works were translated almost immediately upon their publication in French. The *Dialogues* has only now appeared in English for the first time (Rousseau, 1989).

One of the reasons for this long period of neglect is very easy to see. At first, or any subsequent glance, the *Dialogues* is a very peculiar book. It consists of three dialogues between a character named Rousseau and an interlocutor identified only as a Frenchman. The two discuss the bad reputation of a famous author, his true character, a virtually universal conspiracy being conducted against him, and the substance of his books. The Rousseau of the *Dialogues* both is and is not Jean-Jacques Rousseau himself; that is, he is Rousseau as he would be if he had read but not written his books and had only recently arrived in France. The author of the books is Jean-Jacques, the character to be judged by Rousseau and the Frenchman. This preliminary splitting of Rousseau into two is complicated by further splits that take place within the discussion. The major additional split is between the author, Jean-Jacques as he really is and his public image as a "monster." This disproportion leads to the suggestion that there are two different people: one of them, Jean-Jacques is a monster; the other, the real author of the books, is not. The dizzying quality of these divisions reaches its height when Rousseau reports after a visit to Jean-Jacques that the latter is composing a series of dialogues about his false public reputation. In effect, the character meets his author at the very moment the author is writing about him (Rousseau, 1989, p. 136).

Both Rousseau's claim about the existence of a universal conspiracy against him and the procedure of splitting himself into numerous characters, images, and counter-images are cited as major pieces of evidence by those who wish to assert Rousseau's insanity. Nevertheless, it should be recognized that such a procedure is not entirely unique to Rousseau or to presumed madmen. The trilogy of Platonic dialogues formed by the *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Statesman* consists of conversations among a cast of characters including Socrates, a boy named Theaetetus who looks like Socrates, a young friend of Theaetetus who is named Socrates, and a somewhat mysterious Eleatic stranger who questions his interlocutors in a manner that partially (though not completely) resembles that of Socrates himself. One of the major themes of the trilogy is the question of the relation between images and their originals. Furthermore the trilogy is partially framed by another dialogue about how Socratic dialogues came to be written and preserved. Thus Plato apparently thought that a sort of splitting of characters would be dramatically appropriate in the illustration of an important philosophic issue as well as the demonstration of the problematic relation between a written text and the people or subject matter about which it is written.

The issues involved in the communication or transmission of written philosophic doctrines, which are of immense importance throughout the Platonic corpus, are Rousseau's overriding concern in the *Dialogues*. This work is not overtly concerned with the general issue of the relation between original and image. It is, however, concerned with a narrow version of this issue: the relations among Rousseau as he is, as he appears in his books, and as he is perceived by others. It is, above all, the work in which Rousseau undertakes his most comprehensive reflection on the relations among himself as an author, his books, and his audience. Rousseau's reflections on the misjudgments of his books and the proper way to judge them links the theme of the *Dialogues* to another Platonic dialogue, the *Apology* in which Socrates both judges and is judged by an audience that does not understand him.

The parallels between the *Apology* and the *Dialogues* are worth noting. In both cases, a philosopher is accused of violating society's legal, ethical, and religious standards; in both, the defense entails presenting the thinker's life and works in a manner that addresses the difference between popular and philosophic judgment; in both, the claim of the philosopher's moral concern for the city is combined with an implicit condemnation of the political life. Despite the autobiographical nature of the *Dialogues*, it—like the *Apology*—is written by an author who is absent from the action of the dialogue. As these parallels suggest, the treatment of these issues with the *Dialogues* makes it worthy of the attention of anyone who hopes to understand the most serious themes within Rousseau's thought.

I. THE PLACE OF THE *DIALOGUES* WITHIN ROUSSEAU'S "SYSTEM"

The *Dialogues* has an important place within what Rousseau calls his "system" in part because it is one of the most important contexts in which he claims that he has a system. Rousseau first announced the existence of a system in a defense of the *First Discourse*, the preface to "Narcisse" which was written in 1753–54 (Rousseau, 1958, Vol. II, p. 964). In the *Dialogues*, he has the Frenchman declare that the content of Jean-Jacques's books "were things that were profoundly thought out and forming a coherent system which might not be true, but which offered nothing contradictory" (Rousseau, 1989, p. 209). This insight could almost be said to be the culminating moment of the *Dialogues*. Thus at the end of his literary career, Rousseau reaffirms what he had asserted at the beginning, that his thought is consistent and furthermore that it has been explained consistently in all of his works.

That the *Dialogues* is meant to bring Rousseau's literary enterprise to a sort of completion by stressing the connection of his first and last works is also indicated by Rousseau's choice of epigraph, "*Barbarus hic ego sum quia non intelligor illis.*" (Here I am the barbarian, because no one understands me). This line from Ovid is also the epigraph of the *First Discourse*. Some reflection

on the significance of the shared epigraph can indicate the similarities and differences between the two works. In fact, in the *Dialogues* the character, Rousseau insists on the importance of epigraphs for indicating the character of a book (Rousseau, 1989, p. 218).

Some scholars have noted that in the *Discourse* the epigraph points to certain complications in the argument that are not immediately apparent (Masters, 1968, p. 208). In the first place, it indicates that Rousseau anticipates that his argument will be misunderstood. Second, the epigraph identifies Rousseau himself with one of the very poets he condemns in the text of the *Discourse*. As Rousseau was obliged to point out to his critics time and again, his attack on the arts and sciences is not a blanket condemnation. As he announces in the same title page that contains the epigraph, Rousseau most openly adopts the perspective of the "Citizen of Geneva" when writing the *Discourse*. His epigraph calls attention to his exile from Geneva (and his loss of citizenship) and his less open adoption of the perspective of the poet. Along with its attack on the effect of the arts on healthy communities, the *Discourse* contains a complaint against the degradation of contemporary taste which compels an artist, like Voltaire, to "lower his genius to the level of his time" (Rousseau, 1964, p. 53). In sum, even in his first work Rousseau was capable of splitting himself into a number of *personae* in his effort to present the complexities of an argument. He can be both the citizen who objects to the "crowd of obscene authors" like Ovid, (Rousseau, 1964, p. 40) and also be a spokesman for Ovid himself. He can address himself to citizens, common people, and philosophers in the same work.

The first of these implications of the epigraph is also reflected in the *Dialogues*, although, rather than predicting a lack of understanding, the remark now complains about an existing one. In spite of his efforts to expound his system, Rousseau's thought continues to be misunderstood. This theme of misunderstanding predominates over all others in the *Dialogues*. Here the focus on Rousseau's position as a writer is not subordinated to his position as a citizen. He no longer identifies himself as the "citizen of Geneva." Rousseau's analysis of Geneva in the *Letters Written from the Mountain* indicates that he came to believe that the Genevans shared the corruption of the French. Accordingly, in the *Dialogues* his two personae are Jean-Jacques, the writer and Rousseau the reader. Rousseau is Genevan, but he only very occasionally shows ardor for his homeland (Rousseau, 1989, p. 84).

If the epigraph of the *Dialogues* is not entirely novel for Rousseau, neither is its form. Aside from the dialogue contained in his plays and operas, Rousseau wrote one other dialogue with himself as a character. This is the second preface to *Julie*. To his interlocutor, who is a man of letters, Rousseau explains why he does not identify himself as a citizen on the title page of this work. Once again he is concerned with misinterpretation of his intentions. Also, some of his responses to the critics of the *First Discourse* resort to a sort of dialogue form

as Rousseau quotes individual objections and then makes his responses. Thus, he regularly uses something approaching a dialogue form when he seeks to answer critics or to prevent misunderstanding.

The themes of misunderstanding and self-explanation clearly link the *Dialogues* to one last work, the *Confessions*, the immediate predecessor of the *Dialogues*. In his introduction to the later work, "On the Subject and Form of this Writing," Rousseau explains the relation between these two works quite clearly.¹ He indicates that he wrote the *Dialogues* in recognition of a failure of the *Confessions*. He warns,

As for those who want only some agreeable rapid reading, who sought and found only that in my *Confessions*, and who cannot tolerate a little fatigue or maintain their attention in the interest of justice and truth, they will do well to spare themselves the boredom of reading this. It is not to them I wished to speak, and far from seeking to please them, I would at least avoid the ultimate indignity of seeing that the picture of the miseries of my life is an object of amusement for anyone (Rousseau, 1989, p. 7).

This statement points to the great difference in form between these two autobiographical works and provides some justification for Michel Foucault's characterization of the *Dialogues* as the "anti-Confessions" (Foucault, 1962) It should be kept in mind, however, that Rousseau's statement is less a criticism of the substance of the *Confessions* than it is of some of that work's readers.

Rousseau claims that those who read the *Confessions* only for pleasure have missed its point. To the extent that this is a criticism of the *Confessions* itself, it implies only that Rousseau made it too easy for his readers to seek pleasure rather than understanding. The deliberately unpleasant *Dialogues*, then, is based on an acknowledgment of the unreliable character of readers. The change in focus from the title, *Confessions to Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques* indicates this acknowledgment. By confessing to his readers, Rousseau made them his judges as well as his confessors. In the *Dialogues* he has removed the readers from their office, not they but he himself will be the judge of Jean-Jacques.

This acknowledgment of a failure of the *Confessions* and its audience is not a criticism of the substance of the *Confessions*. By showing the proper way to judge Jean-Jacques, the *Dialogues* can be regarded as a sort of training manual for readers of the *Confessions*, or indeed for any of Rousseau's other works. Once they have learned from Rousseau how to judge, readers can turn back to the other works and read them properly. Rather than being simply the anti-*Confessions*, the *Dialogues* is the cure for its defects. Whatever defect the *Confessions* may have by being too agreeable a book can be overcome by the more fatiguing *Dialogues*. It is not until his *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, if even then, that Rousseau decides that his audience is simply uneducable.

This brief sketch of the relation between the *Dialogues* and several of Rousseau's other works has revealed two different aspects of this baffling

work. First, the *Dialogues* brings Rousseau's philosophic system to a sort of completion. Rousseau's reuse of his first epigraph and his device of splitting himself into different characters affirm that his entire body of work is internally consistent and guided by a single purpose. Second, the *Dialogues* focusses special attention on judgments made about Jean-Jacques himself. Rousseau insists upon the goodness of his own character and on its being misunderstood. Perhaps the key to understanding the *Dialogues* is to see why these two themes, one theoretical and the other personal, should be contained in the same work. What is the relation between Rousseau's system and the character of Jean-Jacques?

II. THE AUTHOR AND HIS SYSTEM

A preliminary description of the relation between Rousseau's system and the character of Jean-Jacques can come from a rephrasing of the question. While the central part of the *Dialogues* is a description of Jean-Jacques's character, the necessity for this description is provided by the false descriptions of Jean-Jacques circulating in public opinion. From the beginning of the work the real Jean-Jacques is placed in opposition to his reputation as "an abominable man" or even a "monster" (Rousseau, 1989, pp. 8 and 12). Furthermore the character of the monster is opposed to the character of the books such as *Julie* and *Emile*. Rousseau has read the books, but as a recent arrival from abroad is unacquainted with the bad reputation of the supposed author. The Frenchman knows the reputation, but because of it he has not read the books. The mystery to be solved by these interlocutors is the mystery of the disproportion between the books and the reputation of the author. Are the books exemplars of virtue or of hypocrisy? Are they filled with a subtle and corrupting poison or have their influential interpreters injected them with venom where there was none before? If the books are filled with virtue, how could they have been written by "a soul of mire" (Rousseau, 1989, p. 8)? Is the monster Jean-Jacques a plagiarist, and, if so, who is the real author of these books?

Contained in this series of questions is a Rousseauian account of the importance of the relations among an author, his book, and his readers. Unlike some of today's critics he insists that books do or can contain intelligible teachings about matters such as virtue or nature that are in the world outside the texts. On such matters, in principle, the books need no support beyond the force of their arguments and their correspondence to experiences accessible to the readers. In spite of his insistence on the truth of his reasoning, or perhaps because of it, Rousseau is also acutely aware of the difficulties involved in the accurate interpretation of his books. The character "Rousseau" read these books without any prejudices about their author. He knows, or thinks he knows, only that the books were written by a single author. He defends this unknown author against

charges of plagiarism and claims to be able to distinguish books truly written by Jean-Jacques from ones falsely attributed to him. Rousseau's position as a recently arrived foreigner gives him a privileged status as a reader. This was a necessary, although not a sufficient, condition for his ability to detect the meaning of the books. Rousseau explains the need to approach the books with an open mind: "Don't even think of the author as you read, and without any bias either in favor or against, let your soul experience the impressions it will receive. You will thus assure yourself of the intention behind the writing of these books" (Rousseau, 1989, p. 31). For readers not in Rousseau's fortunate position of ignorance, successful understanding is a profound problem. For this unlucky majority, the interpretation of the books is dependent in decisive ways on a prior interpretation of the author. Within the *Dialogues*, the first dialogue sets out the issues to be discussed and the second investigates Jean-Jacques's true character. It is only after this investigation that the third dialogue can describe the content of the books and the proper method for reading them. Thus, at first, the *Dialogues* is less concerned with the status of the author's system than it is with the way that system will be approached by readers. Far from being concerned with a matter of purely personal interest to Rousseau (or of professional interest to students of abnormal psychology) the *Dialogues* is concerned with the effective communication of a philosophic teaching and its dependence on the author's name or reputation.

This issue at the center of the *Dialogues* has both a narrow scholarly importance and a broader political significance. Reference was made above to the long tradition of Rousseau scholarship that focuses on Rousseau's personality and regards his books purely as expressions of that personality. In effect, the *Dialogues* predicts and attempts to preempt such a critical response. To be sure, modern scholars are more likely to characterize Rousseau as a madman (or as someone suffering from mental illness) than as a monster. As a result they adopt a condescending tone rather than outright hostility to his works. Like the Frenchman of the *Dialogues*, these critics are distracted from the substance of the work because their view of the author's personality makes it inconceivable to them that the work could be profound or true. In Rousseau's account, the works and their system can be rescued from such interpretations only by a defense of his character (unless there are other interpreters who, like the Rousseau of the *Dialogues*, come to the works in ignorance of the claims made about Jean-Jacques's character or at least with openness to alternative claims). The *Dialogues* is Rousseau's attempt to avoid depending on such a lucky occurrence.

One explanation of the political aspect of Rousseau's project of forcing his readers to focus on his personality can be seen in a consideration of his account of the importance of nonrational persuasion in politics. Although one can debate about Rousseau's revolutionary intentions and his prudential conservatism, it cannot be denied that Rousseau wished his books to have an influence outside

the academy or scholarly conference. From the beginning of his career Rousseau distinguished between what is necessary to win “the approval of a few wise men” and “the approval of the public” (Rousseau, 1964, p. 33). Although he expresses a preference for the former, he is by no means indifferent to the latter. The importance of this distinction led Rousseau to write in popular forms such as novels, plays, and autobiography normally shunned by philosophers and to adopt a decidedly unacademic tone even in his most philosophic works. Although the *Dialogues* must be understood in part as an attempt to defend Rousseau’s character before the public, his choice of a less popular form indicates that his true audience is “good minds” rather than seekers of pleasure (Rousseau, 1989, p. 7). In sum, the *Dialogues* is a philosophic or unpopular dramatization of the need for a way to influence unphilosophic readers.

In the *Dialogues* the distinction between the philosophic audience and the popular audience is embodied in the two characters, Rousseau, and the Frenchman, as they begin the discussion. From the beginning Rousseau declares “About things I can judge by myself, I will never take the public’s judgments as rules for my own” (Rousseau, 1989, p. 19). He resolves to be guided neither by “the secret desires” of his heart or by “the interpretations of others.” In short, he insists on being an independent “judge” of Jean-Jacques (Rousseau, 1989, p. 85). The Frenchman, on the contrary, is completely dependent on public opinion; his knowledge of Jean-Jacques and his books is the product of hearsay. He consistently responds to Rousseau’s arguments by making appeals to the number of people who are on the other side and to the good character of their authorities. In the end the Frenchman reads and understands the books, but he does so only after he hears the defense of Jean-Jacques’s character given in the second dialogue. He may end as a philosophic reader, but he begins as an unphilosophic one. Unlike Rousseau, his openness to the books is dependent on his opinion of the character of the author. He is the picture of someone enslaved to public opinion because of his trust in the authority of those who direct it.

This connection between trust in the character of the author of a teaching and acceptance of the teaching has an important place in Rousseau’s understanding of political life. Frequently he emphasizes the near impotence of reason alone to have an effect on more than a few people (Rousseau, 1958, Vol. III, p. 955 and Vol. IV, pp. 1142–44). Others can be influenced only by a variety of nonrational methods of persuasion. One might even say that for Rousseau the very possibility of social life is constituted by the susceptibility of humans to this nonrational persuasion, a susceptibility which they lack in the isolation of the pure state of nature. Perhaps Rousseau’s clearest example of the importance of the authority given by character (although far from his only one), appears in the *Letters Written from the Mountain*, in which he defends the *Social Contract*. In the course of this defense, he explains the success of Christianity. There he distinguishes three different “proofs” of Christian doctrine.

The least significant are miracles, which can inspire only those people who are "incapable of coherent reasoning, of slow and sure observation, and slave of the senses in everything" (Rousseau, 1958, Vol. III, p. 729). Most certain is the doctrine itself, but this "proof" is understood only by a few. The most important "proof" for the widespread acceptance of the doctrine is the character of those who preach it. Rousseau says that "their sanctity, their veracity, their justice, their mores pure and without stain, their virtues inaccessible to human passions are, along with the qualities of understanding, reason, mind, knowledge, prudence, as many respectable indices, the combination of which, if nothing belies them, form a complete proof in their favor, and say that they are more than men." As this passage makes clear, Rousseau was convinced that the truth of a teaching was insufficient to give it a practical efficacy in the public arena, even or especially among good and just people. Thus the defense of Jean-Jacques's character is indispensable if his system is to have any practical effect. Even fundamentally just people will simply not give a hearing to those who have a bad reputation (Kelly, 1987a).

Some who have opposed Rousseau's popular influence have agreed with his analysis of the connection between opinions about his character and that influence. Burke's treatment of Rousseau in his "Letter to a Member of the National Assembly" was mentioned above. There Burke attacks Rousseau on personal grounds much more than on the basis of an analysis of his thought. He justifies this approach by saying "Your assembly, knowing how much more powerful example is found than precept, has chosen this man (by his own account without a single virtue) for a model" (Burke, 1835, p. 306). Burke's remark is in complete accord with Rousseau's analysis.

III. THE PLACE OF ROUSSEAU'S SYSTEM WITHIN THE *DIALOGUES*

To this point the *Dialogues* can appear as a necessary prelude to Rousseau's system that, if it is successful, predisposes the reader to approach the system with an open mind. As such the *Dialogues* is external to the system, it is the precondition of—or even advertisement for—the system, it would not be a part of the system itself. There are, however, two respects in which the *Dialogues* represents the system. First, there is the description of the system that is given in the third dialogue and second, there is what could be called the drama of the *Dialogues* which embodies or portrays crucial aspects of the system.

The description of the system given in the third dialogue is a very simple one. Having been convinced of the necessity of reading Jean-Jacques's books by Rousseau's account of the author's character in the second dialogue, the Frenchman has undertaken the task of deciphering the system. He claims that, among the books of this age, Jean-Jacques's are uniquely difficult to read. They are filled with "ideas and maxims that are very paradoxical" (Rousseau,

1989, p. 211) as well as apparent contradictions. These real paradoxes and apparent contradictions can be clarified only by a sustained effort of study. At the end of this effort, however, one will discover a clear system which is based on one main principle and a number of secondary principles of which the Frenchman mentions only one.

The main principle of the system could be called Jean-Jacques's revolutionary principle. The Frenchman says, "I saw throughout [the books] the development of his great principle that nature made man happy and good, but that society depraves him and makes him miserable" (Rousseau, 1989, p. 213). In its insistence on natural happiness, this principle is a rejection of the Hobbesian or liberal understanding of human life outside of society as miserable. In its insistence on untainted natural goodness and the social origin of depravity, it is a rejection of the Christian understanding of original sin. The second principle cited by the Frenchman limits the revolutionary consequences that might be drawn from the first principle. "But human nature does not go backward, and it is never possible to return to the times of innocence and equality once they have been left behind." It is this secondary principle that accounts for Jean-Jacques's prudential conservatism. Because he has no hopes for the reinstatement of natural goodness, he restricts himself to recommending measures that will mitigate or retard the inevitable corruption. In a work devoted to his public reputation Rousseau is silent about the possibility of a radical change of society which would cure corruption without a return to nature.

The account of the basic principles of the author's system is useful, but it by no means claims to be a complete exposition. One would like to see a list of the other secondary principles, for example. One should also keep in mind that this characterization of the system is given by the Frenchman. Rousseau warns earlier that one should be careful about attributing to Jean-Jacques opinions expressed by characters in his works (Rousseau, 1989, p. 70).

The Frenchman's account of his reading is an extremely important one and so is Rousseau's presentation of the results of this reading. The Frenchman does not experience the immediate communication of the ideal world portrayed in the first dialogue. He understands Jean-Jacques's books only after he has read them numerous times with particular care. Furthermore, he more obviously grasps the basic principles of the writings than he does their implications and details. Finally, even when he transcribes texts, he makes many small errors some of which could be attributed to carelessness and others to rewriting passages. He appears to be unable to see exactly what is before his eyes when he reads. Thus Rousseau reveals or suggests the practical impossibility of a perfect reading even from the most sympathetic and painstaking reader. Even though suggesting that both immediate transparent communication and the lesser goal of a perfect reading of a text are impossible, Rousseau indicates that the Frenchman does achieve an essentially correct understanding of both the books and their author. Perfect transparency is impossible, but genuine understanding

is merely difficult. Nevertheless, this account can orient the potential reader who can begin to judge any one of Rousseau's books by seeing how the work in question applies these principles to a particular problem, such as an education that can preserve natural goodness or the options available within particular corrupt societies.

Within the *Dialogues*, the account of the system has an additional function, that of explaining Jean-Jacques himself and his relations with the conspirators. After all, if this system is a true account of human nature, it should be able to account for those most unusual individuals, the discoverer of the system and those who conspire to make him miserable. In fact, the Frenchman admits that "his system may be false" (Rousseau, 1989, p. 212), but insists that the one thing that it unquestionably describes accurately is Jean-Jacques. Jean-Jacques's account of natural human goodness and happiness depends on his ability to reject the social distortions of human nature. To some extent, or in some sense he must have moved backward so that he could rediscover nature. "A man had to portray himself to show us primitive man like this" (Rousseau, 1989, p. 214). This assertion of Jean-Jacques's own naturalness is only the echo of what Rousseau has already asserted about him: "He is what nature made him. Education has changed him very little" (Rousseau, 1989, p. 107). In making this claim of an intimate relation between Jean-Jacques's personality and his system, Rousseau and the Frenchman seem to be defending the personality at the expense of the system. One might well claim that a systematic explanation of nature is a reflection of its author's character if one wished to dismiss the system. Rousseau and the Frenchman are not attacking the system, however. Instead, they are pointing out that Jean-Jacques was able to discover the true principles of human nature only because he is the virtually unique example of someone who has "started by removing the rust" (Rousseau, 1989, p. 214) from his own nature. Jean-Jacques's discovery of his system depends on his having acquired some access to primitive nature. For his books to be true, he must be, in some sense, the man of his books.

If Jean-Jacques is the incarnation of the great principle of his system, he appears to be the refutation of the second principle; that is, if he is a natural man, he seems to demonstrate that nature can go backward at least in some individuals. To some extent this is precisely what Rousseau intends to teach. Emile's education, for example, is meant to show how it might be possible for some individual to escape the corruption of a social upbringing.

While all this is true, it must also be said that the Jean-Jacques of the *Dialogues* bears only a very limited resemblance to the natural humans described in the first part of the *Second Discourse* or to the young Emile. Like these natural humans he is good, but not virtuous (Rousseau, 1989, p. 126) and like them he is free from the distinctive social passion of *amour propre*. Unlike them, however, he is a knower, a discoverer of a philosophic system that is beyond their comprehension. In addition, he possesses the most important natural attribute

only in a very qualified sense. Purely natural humans live completely in themselves (Rousseau, 1958, Vol. IV, p. 249). Especially they lack imagination that could take their thoughts away from themselves (Rousseau, 1958, Vol. III, p. 144). As for Jean-Jacques, it is true that “he can truly say, in contrast to those people in the Gospel and those in our day, that where is heart is, there too is his treasure,” but this reversal of the formulation from the Sermon on the Mount means only that he is free from the torments of foresight that plague Christians who hope for salvation or the bourgeois who hope for wealth. Jean-Jacques’s “heart” exercises itself in constantly renewed flights of the imagination, one of which allowed him to rediscover nature, but others of which lead him to purely imaginary worlds. In the latter flights even his perception of nature, his “physical sensitivity,” is radically altered by his imaginative “moral sensitivity” (see Rousseau, 1989, pp. 112–128). He sees nature very differently from those natural humans who seek only food and rest. Thus rather than being a natural human, Jean-Jacques is a civilized human who has preserved some natural characteristics along with some radically civilized ones. The manner of being represented by Jean-Jacques is one of developed civilized imagination liberated from the corruption of *amour propre* and foresight. Instead of being a natural human, he is an example of what social humans could be. Thus, even in a “Jean-Jacques,” nature has not quite gone backward; the irreversible departure from nature has been given a direction that is both salutary and somewhat consistent with nature.

This picture of a quasi-natural civilized human must be understood in contrast to the opposite picture of the conspirators. However implausible one might find Rousseau’s presentation of the very complicated plot against “Jean-Jacques,” one must also acknowledge that the conspirators are perfect extreme versions of the corruption Rousseau attributes to social humans in his theoretical works. While “Jean-Jacques” represents civilized imagination liberated from foresight and *amour propre*, the conspirators represent civilized imagination enslaved to foresight and *amour propre*. The conspirators are the victims of the most extreme departure from nature just as much as they are the vicious perpetrators of a crime against an innocent man. They are immensely powerful, exercising as they do a complete control over the government of France and the public opinion of Europe (Rousseau, 1989, p. 77). Nevertheless, the direction of this power into a conspiracy against Jean-Jacques is a sign of their enslavement. They are obsessed with the future when they take endless precautions to control Jean-Jacques’s present and future reputation. Furthermore, they live outside themselves in a much more radical sense than Jean-Jacques does even though they exercise power in the real world and he flees to imaginary worlds. “While he is occupied with himself, they are occupied with him too. He loves himself and they hate him. That is the occupation of both. He is everything to himself; he is also everything to them. For as for them, they mean nothing either to him or to themselves” (Rousseau, 1989, pp. 154–55). Thus the *Dia-*

logues presents two different pictures of the extreme possibilities open to civilized humans: seeking one's happiness in flights of imaginative reverie and withdrawal from public life, or seeking one's happiness in the distant future and the exercise of power over one's fellows. These are the opposing poles around which civilized humans, unable to go back to the forest and live with the bears and unfortunate not to live in the healthy communities of antiquity, must orient their lives.

The *Dialogues* reveals much about Rousseau's obsession with a conspiracy directed against him by his former friends Diderot and Grimm with the active complicity of both *philosophes* like Voltaire and d'Alembert and the French government. Surely a part of this obsession must be attributed (and is attributed by Rousseau himself) to his peculiar personality. For two reasons, however, it would be a mistake to connect the conspiracy solely to Jean-Jacques's psychological condition. First, Rousseau did in fact experience persecution from the French government, the Genevan government (which apparently acted against him because of pressure from the French government) and other governments. Public demonstrations were in fact stirred up against him. Finally his former friends and associates did in fact make concerted efforts to damage his reputation and financial position. Examples abound to illustrate the ill will of many of Rousseau's contemporaries and of their efforts to act upon that ill will.

The second reason for paying attention to Rousseau's discussion of the conspiracy has even less to do with Jean-Jacques's personality or mental state. In the *Dialogues*, he claims that he is only incidentally the object of the conspiracy. Its true object is to destroy the current foundation of society and to provide a new one which would solidify the influence of a faction or sect of intellectuals sharing the opinions of Grimm, Diderot and the others. This charge warrants serious attention because it so precisely mirrors these men's understanding of themselves. Who would want to deny that around the project of Diderot's *Encyclopedia* was united a party or sect linked by both generally shared opinions and interests, that these men and women hoped to modify the traditional basis of public opinion which they regarded as infamous prejudices, that they hoped to gain influence over the public, and that to do so they had to act in a more or less conspiratorial way? As Peter Gay has said, "The philosophes . . . thought of themselves as a *petite troupe*, with common loyalties and a common world view. This sense survived all their high-spirited quarrels: the philosophes did not have a party line, but they were a party" (Gay, 1966, p. 6; see also Wilson, 1972, Starobinski, 1988, and for a comparable case Hamburger, 1963). Rousseau's claim is that the Enlightenment's "party of humanity" is in fact essentially indistinguishable from other parties and that its effects will be pernicious. Thus the *Dialogues* present in a more radical form arguments against the Enlightenment project which Rousseau had already made in the *First Discourse*, the *Letter to d'Alembert* and elsewhere. He claims that it is his opposition to this project that causes him to be treated as a traitor.

CONCLUSION

One would hardly wish to deny that the *Dialogues* contains expressions of Jean-Jacques's mental anguish at the time of its composition. Nevertheless, to be read properly, this work must also be seen as a dramatization of the fundamental principles of Rousseau's systematic thought and his deepest reflections on the problem of making this systematic thought accessible to an audience. By attempting to teach his readers how to judge "Jean-Jacques," Rousseau hopes not only to secure his own reputation, but also to open the way to an accurate understanding of his thought.

The conclusion of the *Dialogues* and, still more, the postscript called "History of the Preceding Writing" indicate that Rousseau was not optimistic about the prospects for the success of his work. In the latter Rousseau seems to abandon hope of finding the sort of readers who can understand his work. Even in the *Dialogues* itself the converted Frenchman and Rousseau conclude only that they will offer consolation to Jean-Jacques and work unobtrusively to preserve his works for the day they can be appreciated as they deserve. Rousseau's principle that nature never goes backward and that at best corruption can be retarded implies that proper judgments about Jean-Jacques and his system will be rare indeed: his readers will all be more or less denatured and corrupt. If it is true that the denaturing undergone by civilized humans removes them so far from primitive nature that they cannot recognize it (Rousseau, 1989, pp. 147–48), it is hard to see how Rousseau could expect any readers to understand either him or his system. In fact, near the conclusion of the *Dialogues* Rousseau suggests that people will recover "those innate feelings that nature has engraved in all hearts" only after the depth of corruption has been reached (Rousseau, 1989, p. 242). It will only be at this point that a *general* appreciation of Jean-Jacques and his system could occur. In other words, the complete, popular success of the *Dialogues* depends on changes in human nature that Rousseau considers himself powerless to bring about. If the principles of Rousseau's system are true, he is constantly faced with the dilemma of the relations between the author and his readers' failure to understand that is the theme of the *Dialogues*. The *Dialogues* itself can overcome that dilemma for only a few readers who have avoided the general corruption. Only these few can join Rousseau in judging Jean-Jacques.

NOTES

1. For a discussion of the relation between the *Confessions* and the *Dialogues* that repeats and enlarges on some of these points see Kelly, 1987b.

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