

Interpretation

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Interpretation

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“My Entire Philosophy”: The Project of Rousseau’s *Lettres morales**

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Among Rousseau’s many perplexing claims, one of his most perplexing is that his writings comprise *un système lié*—“a connected system.”¹ On the face of things, this seems obviously untrue. Right at the surface of his ethical and political works Rousseau famously presents at least three incompatible exemplars of outstanding human beings.² In what way then can Rousseau be seen as advancing “a connected system”?

The answer may lie in the fact that Rousseau’s system is connected not (or perhaps not only) at the level of normative ideals but in terms of the relations that exist between the various philosophical components of his system—that is to say, the relations between his metaphysical, epistemological, psychological, and ethical positions. And if so, our best hope for understanding the connections between these may lie not in reading across texts, but in careful study of those texts in which Rousseau treats epistemological and ethical questions (as well as metaphysical and psychological questions) together.

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¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Rousseau juge de Jean Jaques*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond, 5 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1959–95) [hereafter *OC*], 1:930.

² See esp. Laurence D. Cooper, *Rousseau, Nature, and the Problem of the Good Life* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 1–2; Tzvetan Todorov, *Frail Happiness*, trans. John T. Scott and Robert D. Zaretsky (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004).

Foremost among such texts is one of the most neglected texts in Rousseau's corpus, the so-called *Lettres morales*.³ The neglect of the *Lettres* is striking in itself; one might have expected more attention to have been given to the text that Rousseau himself identifies as “my profession of faith” (*ML* 1085) and which he claims contains “my entire philosophy” (*ML* 1105).⁴ To now, most of the attention it has received has tended to focus on those of its passages that reappear in the Creed of the Savoyard Vicar.⁵ Some studies go further, and mine the *Lettres* for insight into certain discrete concepts in Rousseau's thought.⁶ But only very rarely and briefly have scholars pointed to the substantive philosophical significance of the *Lettres* read on its own terms.⁷ On this front especially notable is Christopher Kelly's suggestion that while the *Lettres morales* “do not present anything like the whole of Rousseau's system, they may well be the best introduction to it.”⁸

³ “So-called” because Rousseau never published them as a text under this title, even though he does call them “moral letters” in his correspondence; see Marco Di Palma, “The Ethics of the *Lettres morales* and Rousseau's Philosophical Project,” *Modern Philology* 100 (2002): 227. For the early publishing history of the letters, see the editor's note at *OC* 4:1786–87.

⁴ Citations of the *Lettres morales* [*ML*] are to the version in volume 4 of *OC* with my translations. Citations to *Emile* [*E*] are also to the version in *OC* 4.

⁵ These borrowings have long been appreciated at least since Pierre-Maurice Masson's critical edition of *La profession de foi du vicaire Savoyard* (Paris: Hachette, 1914); see esp. xvii–xviii and lvii–lix. More recently, see, e.g., Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 221–45 (esp. 224 and 243).

⁶ On sensation and the Molyneux problem, see Marion Chottin, “Pourquoi Rousseau n'a-t-il pas répondu au problème de Molyneux? La réponse des *Lettres morales*,” in *Rousseau en toutes lettres*, ed. Eric Francalanza (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2014), 263–82. On Rousseau's dualism, see Jeffrey Church, “Rousseau, the Value of Existence, and the Sacredness of Citizenship,” *Constellations* 28 (2021): 404–6. On Rousseau's engagement with Descartes, see Peter Westmoreland, “Rousseau's Descartes: The Rejection of Theoretical Philosophy as First Philosophy,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 21 (2013): 529–48. And on memory, see Jean-François Perrin, “Rousseau et saint Francis de Sales: Les lettres à Sophie ou la voie spirituelle,” *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France* 94 (1994): 221–30; Martin McCallum, “Nostalgic Enlightenment: Rousseau on Memory and Moral Freedom in *Émile* and ‘Lettres morales,’” *Journal of Politics* 81 (2019): 1254–65.

⁷ See esp. Judith Shklar, *Men and Citizens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 38–39, 67, 229–30; Cooper, *Rousseau, Nature, and the Good Life*, esp. 3. The most sophisticated extended study of the *Lettres* is Di Palma, “Ethics of the *Lettres morales*,” which also takes as its point of departure the need to correct those readings which attend to the text selectively or relegate it to “ancillary” status (227). Yet Di Palma's central claim—that the *Lettres morales* are chiefly valuable for the “creative response” they provide “to the social and moral predicaments of modernity” (228)—even as it usefully calls attention to Rousseau's practical realism, is orthogonal to the philosophical significance of the text for which I argue in what follows. My reading comes closest to Di Palma's in his emphasis on the “continuity” that connect the *Lettres* both back to the *Discourses* and forward to *Emile* (229).

⁸ Christopher Kelly, introduction to *Autobiographical, Scientific, Religious, Moral, and Literary Writings*, vol. 12 of *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, ed. Christopher Kelly (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2007), xxiii. In this vein see also the striking suggestions that the *Lettres* present “a perfect account of his moral psychology” and indeed represent “the clearest and most reliable

What follows argues that the *Lettres morales* in fact provide an unparalleled point of entry into Rousseau’s connected system, and indeed for two reasons. The first is historical. The *Lettres* were drafted at a crucial period in their author’s career; written between 1757 and 1758, the *Lettres* occupied Rousseau in the transition period between the composition and publication of the two *Discourses* in the first half of the 1750s, and composition of the three magisterial works of 1761–62: the *Contrat social*, the *Nouvelle Héloïse*, and *Emile*. The *Lettres* are thus a transitional work in the truest sense, a bridge between Rousseau’s “early” and “later” writings.⁹ One aim of what follows is to document some of the ways the *Lettres* both reprise Rousseau’s earlier themes and directly anticipate certain of his later themes.

The *Lettres morales* also deserve careful attention for another, philosophical reason. The aim of the *Lettres morales* is ultimately moral: to teach us how to live. But its grounds are ontological: an understanding of what we are. The project of the text as a whole is thus to show us how best to live given what we are by nature. As we shall see, in the *Lettres* this takes the specific form of showing how a sensitive being can become a virtuous being while remaining true to its nature. And in confronting the question of the relationship of feeling to virtue, Rousseau was compelled to confront the question of the relation of the various elements of his system in ways he had yet to do and would never again do so briefly and so directly. Rousseau’s compact treatment of these questions in the comparatively unguarded space of six short letters results in a text that offers students an unparalleled introduction to Rousseau’s philosophical system at the same time that it offers scholars an unparalleled opportunity to reimagine the ties that bind his philosophical system into one.

1

The *Lettres morales* is not, properly speaking, an autobiographical text. Yet the first letter is largely about Rousseau himself. Its first sentence presents Rousseau specifically as a lover addressing his beloved: “Come, my dear and worthy friend, listen to the voice of the one who loves you” (*ML* 1081). But Rousseau immediately insists that his is no ordinary love. In part this is because of its magnitude; later we will be told that theirs is in fact “the tenderest friendship there ever was” (*ML* 1085). Yet mostly this is because of

account of Rousseau’s real beliefs” (Shklar, *Men and Citizens*, 37, 229).

⁹ I use scare quotes here merely to acknowledge the existence of Rousseau’s many pre-1749 and post-1762 writings.

its nature. Rousseau's love "is not that of a vile seducer." Rather it is a love that preserves in his heart a commitment to "uprightness" (*honnêteté*) (*ML* 1081). Rousseau's love is a moral love.

Rousseau's carefully constructed self-presentation is important for two reasons at least. First, Rousseau would later describe his love of Sophie d'Houdetot, the addressee of these letters, as "intoxicating" and full of "agitations" and "quiverings" and "palpitations," yet the eros central to the account of their love affair in the *Confessions* is hardly hinted at in the *Lettres morales*.¹⁰ But even more important for our purposes is that the autobiographical opening of the first letter introduces not only Rousseau but also the philosophical project of the letters collectively: the reconciliation of feeling and virtue. In time Rousseau will argue that this reconciliation is in fact the end of morality. But for now he begins by offering us a glimpse of this reconciliation in action. The *Lettres morales*, we soon learn, came to be as a result of Sophie's request for moral instruction; Sophie asked Rousseau for a set of "rules of morality." Yet the effect of this request was not, in the first instance, the transformation of Sophie, but that of Rousseau. Sophie's request for moral guidance from Rousseau saved him specifically from "the danger to which a blind passion was exposing me." For in calling him to the "noble task" of providing moral instruction to her, Rousseau was brought to "virtue" (*ML* 1081–82).

Rousseau then identifies the specific mechanism at work in this transformation: "in submitting to duty and to reason the sentiments you inspired in me, you have exercised the greatest, the worthiest empire that heaven has given to beauty and wisdom" (*ML* 1082). Thus the frame through which we are invited to see the *Lettres morales*: the transformation of feeling into virtue drives the drama of its depiction of the Rousseau-Sophie relationship at the same time that it stands as the primary substantive lesson the author seeks to teach his reader. And in what follows these new transformed feelings are given a label.

My heart was far from detaching itself from yours in purifying itself;
blind love was succeeded by a thousand enlightened sentiments that
created for me the charming duty of loving you my whole life, and you

¹⁰ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*, in *OC* 1:444–47. Doing full justice to the *Lettres* would require a more comprehensive account than I can provide here of the way their presentation is necessarily shaped by the history of Rousseau's complex relationship with Sophie, described in part in books 9 and 10 of *Confessions*. So too one would need to provide a fuller account of the ways in which these ostensibly private letters were simultaneously written for both a specific addressee and for a broader reading public. On the latter issue in Rousseau, see esp. John T. Scott, *Rousseau's Reader: Strategies of Persuasion and Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

are only dearer to me since I stopped adoring you. My desires, far from cooling in changing their object, only became more ardent in becoming more upright. (*ML* 1082)

The key to virtue is “enlightened sentiment”—not a purgation of feeling, but transformation of it. And in being transformed, the passion that once was “blind” now is not only purified, but also focused, intensified, and elevated.

Sophie’s request, it is suggested, is what transformed Rousseau and introduced him to the moral life of duty. And now Rousseau aims to do for Sophie what she did for him. The language of reciprocity in the first letter is obvious and striking: “it is now my turn, O Sophie...” (*ML* 1081). Thus the project of the *Lettres morales*: not to lay out a mere set of rules, but to improve Sophie, and indeed to the point that she achieves “perfection” (a concept invoked four times in the four paragraphs that follow). But what is particularly striking is that the path to Sophie’s moral perfection is in fact the same path down which she led Rousseau: the enlightenment of feeling leading to the embrace of duty.

When considered in the context of his larger corpus, Rousseau’s fundamental claim that moral perfection begins with the enlightenment of sentiment invites two questions at least. The first concerns which sentiments need enlightenment. *Amour-propre* certainly stands among these. Prior to Sophie’s request, Rousseau had been lost to *amour-propre*: “after so many days lost in pursuing a vain glory...” (*ML* 1082). But in fulfilling Sophie’s request, Rousseau discovers a new glory: the “glory,” “esteem,” and “honor” he will receive when the world sees Sophie perfected (*ML* 1086); Rousseau even explicitly says that the *amour-propre* he expects to feel on seeing Sophie perfected will be both his consolation and compensation (*ML* 1082). Rousseau’s rehabilitation of *amour-propre* here anticipates the rehabilitation of *amour-propre* he will chronicle in *Emile*.¹¹

The language of enlightening sentiment also suggests a second question: how this is to be done. Crucially, Rousseau suggests that Sophie will not have to pursue perfection alone. In fact he will be with her always: “I will always have you under my eyes” (*ML* 1084). Here again Rousseau anticipates his later inventions of both Jean-Jacques the tutor and Wolmar. But perhaps more importantly, Rousseau here suggests that moral development takes place in a particular space between solitude and society, a binary condition in which two together make “solitary promenades” (*ML* 1084). Again Rousseau

¹¹ See, e.g., *E* 562.

points toward his mature work, here envisioning a reciprocal state of mutual improvement shared by paired solitaries standing apart from the world: “two sensitive souls encouraging each other mutually to virtue” (*ML* 1085).¹²

2

The key claim of the first letter is that moral transformation requires transforming sentiment into virtue. But how exactly is this done? In the letters that follow Rousseau will suggest that this is necessarily a two-stage process. First, sentiment must be “enlightened,” and then, the enlightened sentiments need to be made the foundation for reason leading to moral action. The second letter clarifies what is at stake in each of these steps by clarifying the central concepts of feeling and reason.

To this end, the second letter begins by reconsidering feeling. Now the suggestion is that feeling is as much the problem as the solution:

The object of human life is the felicity of man, but who of us knows how to get there? Without principle, without a sure goal, we wander from desire to desire, and those we finally satisfy leave us as far from happiness as we were back when we hadn't obtained anything. We have no invariable rule—neither in reason, which lacks support and purchase [*prise*] and consistence, nor in the passions which incessantly follow each other and destroy each other. Victims of the blind inconstancy of our hearts, the enjoyment of desired goods serves only to prepare us for privations and pains. (*ML* 1087)

We today are men who feel, but what and how we feel is not what and how we were meant to feel. We feel our way to felicity as Hobbes said men today feel their way to felicity, and Plato before said democrats pursue happiness: lacking an end and incapable of reason, we simply follow our passions—and in so doing, become their prisoner. Felicity and happiness of a truer sort will thus require that we learn how to feel feelings other than mere “desires” and “passions” and also to learn how to subject these feelings to “reason.”

In what immediately follows, Rousseau lays out the first step toward this goal. This involves, most crucially, an inward turn; we need to study ourselves in such a way that one “carries to the depth of one's soul the flame of truth, examining for once all one thinks, all one believes, all one feels, in order to know what one ought to think and feel and believe in order to be as happy as the human condition allows” (*ML* 1087). Rousseau's framing of this task is

¹² On the idea of “paired solitaries,” see esp. Arash Abizadeh, “Banishing the Particular: Rousseau on Rhetoric, *Patrie*, and the Passions,” *Political Theory* 29 (2001): 566–67.

clearly influenced by the ways in which Descartes framed his own introspective project in his second *Meditation*, and very soon Descartes will indeed become an important and explicit interlocutor in the *Lettres morales*. But for now the key point is that Rousseau means to distinguish what we actually feel (and think, and believe) from what we ought to feel (and think, and believe).

Rousseau then turns to consider the usual way in which men have tended to pursue the project of self-knowledge: the way of the “philosophers.” Rousseau has little good here to say about the philosophers; lost in their “metaphysical subtleties” and “perplexities” (*ML* 1087), the philosophers prefer “what is new to what is true” (*ML* 1089). Philosophy is thus presented here as the embodiment of *amour-propre*, insofar as the philosopher’s goal is “to shine in a circle,” to “parade before others’ eyes,” and to win “immortality, glory, even riches and often honors” (*ML* 1087–88). Here of course we hear the laments of the first *Discourse* regarding the vanity of the arts and sciences, just as later we hear echoes of the second *Discourse* in the second letter’s excoriation of the “luxury of the cities” for carrying “misery, hunger, hopelessness” to the countryside (*ML* 1089).¹³

Thus philosophy’s irony: philosophy claims to reveal to us the “sovereign good” and teach us “the art of being happy,” but in fact it is often driven by the passion most inimical to happiness (*ML* 1087). False philosophy at the very least requires the rehabilitation of *amour-propre* described in the first letter. Yet this is only one of several available paths to moral improvement. Sophie herself, we are told, did not suffer from a similar concern for esteem; she, we are told, has the talents to succeed in the world but already possesses the “enlightenment” that allows her to despise it (*ML* 1083). For Sophie, a different path is needed, and the aim of the third letter is to show this path.

The second letter concludes by turning back to reasoning. The art of being happy, we know, requires more than merely feeling properly; it also requires proper reasoning. Yet philosophy, as we have seen, cannot teach us how to reason properly. It is thus left to Rousseau to show us a new way of reasoning. And it is to this task that he dedicates the end of the second letter:

The art of reasoning isn’t reason—often it’s the abuse of it. Reason is the faculty of ordering all the faculties of our soul in conformity with the nature of things and their relations to us. Reasoning is the art of comparing known truths in order to form from them other truths of which we were ignorant and which this art enables us to discover.

¹³ Cf. *E* 568–69.

But it does not teach us to know these primitive truths which serve as elements of others, and when in their place we put our opinions, our passions, our prejudices, far from enlightening us it blinds us—it doesn't elevate the soul, it enervates it, and corrupts the judgment that it ought to perfect. (*ML* 1090)

Here Rousseau brings together the two essential components of the art of happiness. Both depend on a proper understanding of reason's role. Contra the philosophers, Rousseau is insistent that reason cannot teach us the first principles or "primitive truths" that are truly foundational: these, as we will soon see, can only be felt by the heart and not known by the mind. But once the heart has felt the primitive original truths upon which all else depends, the mind must then play its part, taking these primitive truths as points by which to locate the self in the world and identify those further truths that reasoning can allow us to know. And now *Emile* begins to come clearly into view. For virtue—and thus happiness—we can now provisionally say, depends on the right use of the heart followed by the right use of the mind, and indeed in that order.

3

Rousseau's suggestion that the moral life requires the right use of both feeling and reason itself suggests the uniqueness of his position. Rousseau, in short, is neither a pure sentimentalist nor a pure rationalist. His philosophy stands somewhere between these; a synthetic mixture of both camps, it aims to do full justice to the human condition as one of embodied cognition. In the third letter, Rousseau begins to sketch out his original position on this front.

The third letter's focus is sensation. Rousseau's engagement with sensation here is likely shaped by his recent engagement with Condillac's thought; the *Lettres morales* are in this respect a stage on the way from the second *Discourse* and *Essai* to *Emile*, which devotes much of its first three parts to the education of sensation.¹⁴ But there is also a substantive reason why Rousseau treats the senses now. His claim is that morality begins with proper feeling. Yet feeling necessarily has two sides. One, inner feeling, is understood through the lens of the moral psychology of sentiment. But feelings produced through contact with the external world are understood through the lens of sensation. Proper feeling thus requires attending to any possible corruptions of both our

¹⁴ On the evolution of Rousseau's views on sensation over the 1750s, see Chottin, "Pourquoi Rousseau n'a-t-il pas répondu," esp. 268–69, 280ff.

moral psychology and our senses. An aim of the third letter is then to show us both how sensation has led us astray and how it can be corrected.

Rousseau begins the third letter with a poetic call for self-knowledge. Amid the beauties of this poetic call, it is easy to miss the strikingly brutal epistemological claim that immediately follows. “Our senses are the instruments of all our knowledge. It’s from them that all our ideas come—or at least all are brought about by them” (*ML* 1092). Seemingly channeling Locke, Rousseau here denies innate ideas and credits sensation as the source of the whole of our knowledge. For both Locke and Rousseau this is a basic fact of the human condition, yet for Rousseau, much more than for Locke, it is a tragic fact. For even while it may be indisputably true that “we know nothing except by our senses,” it is yet also true that the senses are “insufficient” to teach us the full truth about our world and selves (*ML* 1096). And herein lies the tragedy of philosophy, in Rousseau’s eyes. The truth about the truths the senses teach us is that they are limited. The senses, Rousseau explains, “were given to us in order to preserve us, and not to instruct us, to warn us about what is useful or inimical to us, and not about what is true or false.” The philosophers thus err in thinking they can be “employed in inquiries into nature,” as here the senses are necessarily “insufficient” and merely “deceive” us (*ML* 1092). In Rousseau’s terms, the philosophers have employed powers given to us solely to advance the cause of *amour de soi* in the cause of advancing their *amour-propre*.

From all of this Rousseau draws several conclusions. The first is that the senses have been given to us by nature for the legitimate purpose of advancing our preservation. For this reason, we owe it to ourselves to heed their lessons and to learn how to judge the information they convey. Properly speaking, the problem with the senses is not the senses themselves but the “false judgments” (*ML* 1093 and 1094) we make on the basis of the information they provide us. The senses—and especially sight and touch, which between them contain “the entire philosophic spirit” (*ML* 1093)—thus should be not ignored but “rectified” (*ML* 1095). Rousseau does not, in these letters, show how this is to be done, but *Emile* will later and in detail show how to correct the “false judgments” of the senses (*ML* 1093–94).¹⁵

And this points to a second conclusion. Rousseau uses his critique of induction from the senses in the third letter to reprise the critique of philosophy

¹⁵ I trace this process in “Rousseau’s Virtue Epistemology,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 50 (2012): 239–63.

introduced in the second letter; here, once again, philosophical discourse is “babble” (*ML* 1092), and philosophers “proud and vain” and fixated on “puerilities” (*ML* 1095). But now Rousseau shows us the specific error made by the philosophers. For as he here makes clear, it is not simply their commitment to reason that has misled them, but the foundations on which they built their reasoning. The materialists, as we have seen, mislead themselves, Rousseau thinks, in trying to apprehend the truths of the external world by reasoning from sensation. But so too the rationalists: a point Rousseau drives home in his critique here of Descartes. On the face of things, Descartes, in Rousseau’s own account, seems to have followed the path Rousseau proposes to Sophie. In the second letter, Rousseau calls us to separate ourselves from the outside world and carry the torch within. This of course is Descartes: “Descartes, wanting to chop off in one stroke the root of all our prejudices, began by revoking everything via doubt, submitting all to the examination of reason.” Rousseau cannot but admire Descartes insofar as “he began by examining himself.” So too Rousseau is friendly to Descartes’s critique of the capacity of the senses to offer us true knowledge of the external world.¹⁶ Yet for all this Rousseau cannot but lament the way in which Descartes went about entering into himself, and the conclusions Descartes drew from his inquiry. For while reason taught him the “unique and incontestable principle” of the *cogito*, and while he “marched forward with the very greatest precaution” and “believed to be going towards the truth,” the truth was that he “only found lies” (*ML* 1095).¹⁷

Rousseau thus blames Descartes not for his use of reason, but for the foundation on which he based his reasoning. In this sense, Descartes’s failures help to bring into relief the alternative that Rousseau hopes to advance. “It’s not so much reasoning that we lack as the handle [*prise*] for reasoning” (*ML* 1095). Reasoning, that is, needs something it can grasp onto, a proper foundation on which it can build: a handle or foundation that neither reason itself nor sensation itself is able to provide. As Rousseau aims now to show, this category beyond reason and sensation still awaits our discovery, and once it is discovered we will at once be provided with the first principles that serve as a legitimate foundation for reason, as well as the key to moving productively beyond the debates of Locke and Descartes (*ML* 1096), of Newton and Condillac (*ML* 1096), of Plato and the materialists (*ML* 1097).

¹⁶ See, e.g., Chottin, “Pourquoi Rousseau n’a-t-il pas répondu,” 279–80.

¹⁷ On this point and how it compares to the vicar’s claims, see esp. Westmoreland, “Rousseau’s Descartes,” 536–37.

4

Rousseau’s critique of philosophy reaches its apex in the third letter, which names and addresses more philosophers than any other. The fourth letter, however, shifts focus, turning from their false philosophy to Rousseau’s new “healthy philosophy” (*ML* 1100). And as we soon learn, what distinguishes healthy philosophy from false philosophy is the foundation on which it builds. For where false philosophy builds on the senses or reason, healthy philosophy builds on sentiment, and indeed one sentiment above all: conscience.¹⁸

The entirety of Rousseau’s inward journey is structured around the search for and discovery of conscience. This search extends into the fifth letter and culminates only with its conclusion. But in the fourth letter Rousseau begins by showing that the search for the sentiment of conscience introduces us to (or induces in us) salutary new sentiments in its own right. “What is therefore the first lesson of wisdom, O Sophie? Humility! Humility, of which the Christian speaks, and which man so little knows, is the first sentiment which should be born in us from the study of ourselves” (*ML* 1100). Thus the antidote to the pride of the philosophers: they look outside of themselves into the world for attention on the basis of what they think they know; Rousseau looks within himself to find himself and finds an ignorance that induces humility. The benefits of this are clear: humility leads one to resist the propensity to “imbecilic vanity” that leads man to fancy himself “the King of the world” and that all nature was “made for him” (*ML* 1100). This discovery of humility is itself a response to Descartes and his project.

Of further note is that humility is “born in us” through our inward turn. Humility is thus not merely a sentiment that stands separate from both sensations and ideas, but one that stands somewhere between nature and convention. Equally importantly, humility not only resists the vanity and vulgar pride of reason, but at the same time it induces in man “a more worthy and more legitimate pride” (*fierté*), an “interior sentiment that raises him up and honors him.” Herein lies “the true title of nobility that nature has engraved in the heart of man.” Where sensation and reason mislead us, interior sentiment ennobles us. To feel humility is then “to feel in ourselves a voice which prevents us from despising ourselves,” for even as “reason creeps, the soul is raised up; if we are small through our enlightenment, we are great

¹⁸ In this context see also Kelly’s observation that the *Lettres morales* “are concerned with the pre-conditions for genuine philosophic activity” (introduction to *Autobiographical, Scientific, Religious, Moral, and Literary Writings*, xxiii).

through our sentiments” (*ML* 1101). Feeling properly at once makes us both good and great.

Rousseau provides his clearest statement of this new horizon of moral greatness in what immediately follows. Here, more clearly than anywhere else in the text, he suggests that our destiny lies in a transcendence of the self via immanent sentiment:

Have you never felt those involuntary transports which sometimes take hold of a sensitive soul in the contemplation of moral beauty and the intellectual order of things, that all-consuming ardor that comes all at once to set the heart ablaze with the love of the celestial virtues, those sublime confusions which raise us above our being, and carry us into the empyrean to the side of God himself?... My respectable friend, the principle of this force is within us, it shows itself for a moment in order to excite us to seek it out always; this holy enthusiasm is the energy of our faculties which liberates them from their terrestrial bonds, and which it depends only on us perhaps in order to remain endlessly in this state of freedom. (*ML* 1101)

Self-transcendence and the moral greatness inherent in it consist then not in the denial or overcoming of one’s sentimental nature, but in a capacity to experience its force within us correctly.

The first half of the fourth letter is devoted to the relationship of sentiment to moral greatness. The second half of the fourth letter, however, turns back to the autobiographical. In some sense this is a return to the first letter. But the way in which Rousseau returns to the autobiographical in the fourth letter is informed by its substantive themes. Rousseau’s return to himself here, and his decision to hold himself up as an “example” (*ML* 1104), is informed by his belief that discovery of one’s own inner sentiments can lead not simply to the discovery of moral goodness but to that of transcendent moral greatness, and specifically a transcendent moral greatness that emerges out of what is naturally immanent within us. Rousseau’s life, we are here told, has been dominated by two great facts: “nature gave me the most sensitive soul,” while “fortune subjected it to all imaginable affections” (*ML* 1102). These affections, he further explains, were sometimes good and sometimes bad, but always he was governed by a “hidden power” that “balanced” his reactions to his experiences, leading him to find peace within amid misfortune without, and amid good fortune to find indifference to external goods. All this led him to “feel in myself a seed of goodness that compensated me for bad fortune and a seed of greatness that raised me above good fortune” (*ML* 1102). This is a remarkable moment: Rousseau presents himself as having achieved

equanimity before and indifference to fortune not through insensitivity, but through his sensitivity to his sensitive nature.

The fourth letter ends with Rousseau invoking the principle that constitutes what we have already seen him call "my entire philosophy," which he here equates with "the entire art of being happy" (*ML* 1105). And the key principle at the heart of this art and philosophy is the "interior voice." Healthy philosophy and the happiness it brings rest entirely on this interior voice: "learn to hear it and follow it," he tells Sophie (*ML* 1105). This is not new advice; in the first letter he asked Sophie "only to interrogate your heart, and to do what it prescribes to you" (*ML* 1083).¹⁹ Yet the repetition of this call here clarifies the task ahead in the final two letters: to give a name to this interior voice we so need to hear, and to show the way by which we can follow and act upon it.

5

The fifth letter is the second part of the inquiry that began in the fourth letter. Here Rousseau continues his inquiry into the self, with the aim of now extending this inquiry to its furthest reaches and discovering what in fact defines the self at its core. The fifth letter to this end begins with a striking claim about both the nature of morality and the nature of the self. "All the morality of human life consists in the intention of man. If it's true that the good is good, it must be so at the bottom of our hearts just as in our works, and the primary reward of justice is to feel that one practices it" (*ML* 1106).²⁰ Here Rousseau signals that now he means to go all the way down and shine the light of his torch on "the bottom of our hearts." And in so doing, what he expects to find is what nature meant for us "to feel." And this most natural feeling or sentiment consists in a feeling that amounts to a pleasure one takes in being just: proof that "moral goodness conforms to our nature" (*ML* 1106).

The task ahead for Sophie and all who seek the good is clear: "to reenter oneself, to examine, all personal interest aside, what our natural penchants carry us to" (*ML* 1106). Here again, it is impossible not to be reminded of the second *Discourse*. There too Rousseau famously proposed to strip man of the self-love he had acquired over the course of his evolution in civilization in order to reveal his natural sentiments. When he did so, he of course found the

¹⁹ Cf. *E* 565–66.

²⁰ Cf. *E* 595–96, noting especially the crucial substitution of "judgment" for "intention"; cf. Rousseau's drafts of the *Lettres* passage transcribed at *OC* 4:1796n(b) for 1105.

two natural sentiments of *amour de soi* and *pitié*. For evidence of natural pity, the *Discourse* famously invokes the experience of the feelings of a spectator witnessing the suffering of the innocents at the hands of the powerful. Rousseau appeals to the same evidence in the fifth letter. “One sees on a street or on a path some act of violence and injustice: at that instant a movement of anger and indignation raises itself up from the bottom of the heart and carries us to take up the defense of the oppressed” (*ML* 1106–7).²¹ Yet as clear a reprise as this is of the evidence for natural pity given in the second *Discourse*, the *Lettres morales* gives this phenomenon a different name:

There exists therefore at the bottom of all souls an innate principle of justice and of moral truth anterior to all national prejudices, to all the maxims of education. This principle is the involuntary rule by which, despite all our own maxims, we judge our actions and those of others good or bad, and it is to this principle that I give the name conscience. (*ML* 1108)²²

What Rousseau once called pity, he now calls conscience. And a tremendous amount in fact hangs on what might seem to be a minor terminological shift. Pity and conscience are both natural (or “innate”). Pity and conscience both instinctively lead us to concern ourselves with the welfare of human beings beyond ourselves. But conscience, unlike pity, forms the ground on which we make our judgments, and specifically our moral judgments. It is thus presumably for this reason that Rousseau calls conscience not merely a natural sentiment, but a natural “principle.” For where pity merely provides us with impressions, conscience provides us with a type of information to which we can then apply the particular form of cognition he here calls judgment.²³

Rousseau reprises these themes in the conclusion of the fifth letter, in a key passage that will later reappear at an important moment in *Emile*:

Conscience, conscience, instinct divine, voice immortal and celestial, certain guide of an ignorant and limited but intelligent and free being, infallible judge of good and evil, sublime emanation of the eternal

²¹ Cf. the revision of this passage in *E* 596, which suppresses the language reminiscent of pity. Rousseau seems to have struggled even with the initial drafting of this passage for the *Lettres*; see the editor’s notes in *OC* 4:1797n(a) to 1107, and *Autobiographical, Scientific, Religious, Moral, and Literary Writings*, 308n104.

²² Cf. *E* 598.

²³ I provide a fuller account of the distinctiveness of Rousseau’s concept of pity in *Love’s Enlightenment: Rethinking Charity in Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); and “Pitié développée: Aspects éthiques et épistémiques,” in *Philosophie de Rousseau*, ed. Blaise Bachofen et al. (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2014), 305–18.

substance, which renders man similar to the Gods: it is you alone that comprises the excellence of my nature. (*ML* 1111)

Conscience, strikingly, is not merely natural, but the mark of the divine on our nature and the voice of God within us. Rousseau uses the reprise of this passage in the vicar’s creed in *Emile* to explore the theological implications of this idea.²⁴ Yet these issues are not pursued in the *Lettres*, which limit themselves to the epistemic and moral implications of conscience thus conceived.

First, as we have seen, conscience makes it possible to “judge” in ways that befit an “intelligent” being. Conscience, in short, is what makes it possible for Rousseau to resist or reject the Lockean claim that “there is in human understanding only what is introduced in it by experience and we judge nothing except by acquired ideas” (*ML* 1108). Conscience is, in Rousseau’s view, the voice of nature speaking within us, as others have noted.²⁵ But as important is the fact that conscience allows our nature to speak in ways that our reason can hear. Conscience, that is, is a particular form of “natural sentiment” that prompts in us both “love of the good and hatred of the bad” and renders this love and hatred intelligible to reason. The fifth letter twice reiterates that “we feel necessarily before knowing,” and indeed “to exist, for us, is to feel, and our sensibility is incontestably anterior to our reason itself” (*ML* 1109).²⁶ These claims about the lexical priority of feeling to reason remind us that knowledge and reason each have their place, and that proper feeling consists not in blind sensation but in sentiment amenable to reason. The discovery of conscience is thus the discovery of the nexus that makes this passage from feeling to reason possible. Put in the terms of earlier letters, conscience is inner sentiment that contains within itself the handle (*prise*) that enables reason to grasp it. In this sense conscience is presented here as both the long-sought foundation for reason and Rousseau’s solution to the mind-body problem.²⁷

The natural voice of conscience also has a second significance. For not only is it the ground of judgment, but Rousseau also calls it a “certain guide” for our lives and indeed the source of our “excellence.” Conscience thus has not just epistemic but ethical implications; to follow conscience is not merely

²⁴ See *E* 600–601. The *Emile* passage omits the reference to “sublime emanation of the eternal substance.”

²⁵ See, e.g., Abizadeh, “Banishing the Particular,” 565.

²⁶ Cf. *E* 599–600.

²⁷ In this context cf. Church on the role of freedom in this process (“Rousseau, the Value of Existence, and the Sacredness of Citizenship,” 404–5).

to prepare the grounds for reason but also to follow the path to virtue and happiness. To follow the voice of conscience is thus not merely to obey nature but to discover “with what sweetness it approves what it commanded” and indeed the “charm one finds in tasting the interior peace of a soul content with itself.” Conscience is the source of the “unalterable contentment” the just person finds everywhere, in society and solitude alike (*ML* 1107).

6

The fifth letter is the peak of Rousseau’s conceptual inquiry; with the concept of conscience it presents the heart of Rousseau’s philosophy. Yet the *Lettres morales* is not solely a philosophical inquiry; its stated aim of course is to promote Sophie’s perfection. This aim largely receded from view in the fourth and fifth letters, yet it reemerges to take center stage in the sixth and final letter. For with conscience discovered we can now turn to the last, practical task. Thus the opening of the sixth letter: “Finally we have a sure guide amidst this Labyrinth of human errors, but it’s not enough that it exists—it’s necessary to know it and to follow it” (*ML* 1112).²⁸ Rendering conscience practical thus requires two specific things from us: learning to hear its voice, and learning to act in accord with what it says.²⁹

The first of these tasks Rousseau believes to be complicated, if not imperiled, by the condition in which we find ourselves today. We are, he tells us, “incessantly occupied by public opinion,” with the result that we constantly live outside of ourselves. The necessary remedy is withdrawal: “Let us begin by regaining [*redevenir*] ourselves, by concentrating ourselves in ourselves, by circumscribing our soul by the same limits that nature has given to our being.” Man’s first task is to separate himself “from all that is not him” (*ML* 1112–13). To this end, Rousseau implores Sophie: “Collect yourself, seek solitude.” Only once one has returned to the self can we begin to engage in healthy philosophy (*ML* 1113).

Rousseau’s call for withdrawal and solitude seems on its face reminiscent of his other praises of solitude, both early (the first part of the second *Discourse*) and late (the *Reveries*). But in fact Rousseau has something slightly different in mind in calling Sophie here to solitude. Her solitude is not meant to be that of the one outside of society. On this he is explicit: “I’m not therefore saying to you: quit society; I’m not even saying: renounce dissipation and

²⁸ Cf. *E* 601.

²⁹ Cf. *E* 594–95.

vain worldly pleasures.” The solitude that Sophie must seek is one she can enjoy in the midst of society, one that will teach her “how to be alone in the middle of the world”—“the sort of solitude at issue here is less that of shutting your door and staying in your room than that of taking your soul out of the crowd” (*ML* 1113). Sophie thus needs to learn to live with herself at the same time that she lives with others. In this respect, she is being encouraged to live in the same space that Emile will be encouraged to occupy.

Rousseau has at least two reasons for encouraging Sophie to seek solitude of this sort. The first is that Sophie’s withdrawal into such solitude will help her better attend to her conscience.³⁰ Far from the chatter of the crowd and the noise of the passions, Sophie will be as well positioned as possible to hear conscience’s voice. At the same time, learning to hear the voice of conscience is not the end of the moral life, but its beginning. Rousseau knows the great appeal withdrawal into undisturbed silence has for some of us. But virtue, he insists, cannot be realized in a state of isolation even if it must begin with withdrawal. And thus the second reason why Rousseau calls Sophie to experience the solitude of the solitary in society. Put simply: insofar as morality requires not just feeling but acting, and specifically acting in a specific way to and for others, virtue can be realized only in a social condition.

The final section of the sixth letter details the sort of social action expected of the virtuous. But first Rousseau makes a final clarification, insisting briefly but crucially that the most important effect of listening to the voice of conscience is that doing so awakens a specific sentiment in the self. To illustrate, he compares this process to that of how we awaken a limb fallen asleep: just as the limb is revived by gentle massage, the soul is revived by pleasant feelings, and above all the pleasant feeling aroused in us when we recall moments when we have acted well.³¹ The significance for morality of this feeling prompted by willed memory should not be underestimated; Rousseau goes so far as to insist that “the sentiment of pleasure in doing good” is “the initial foundation [*prise*] for all the other virtues” (*ML* 1116). Here Rousseau not only reprises

³⁰ See Di Palma, “Ethics of the *Lettres morales*,” 249–50. In this context see also Shklar’s striking suggestion that Rousseau called Sophie to abandon the world and enter within in part so that she would, in retreating to her heart, there find Rousseau himself, after he had ceased to be part of her world (*Men and Citizens*, 229).

³¹ Cf. *E* 559. On the ways in which the *Lettres morales* here anticipate *Confessions*, see esp. Perrin, “Rousseau et saint Francis de Sales,” 222–23. The ways in which both the *Lettres* and *Emile* use this “nostalgic memory” to motivate moral action is especially well treated in McCallum, “Nostalgic Enlightenment,” esp. 1258 and 1261. In this context see also Di Palma’s treatment of how the “proper cultivation of the inner life” must precede moral agents’ “placing themselves in the service of their fellows” (“Ethics of the *Lettres morales*,” 233, see also 252).

his language of the *prise*, but he also makes the remarkable suggestion that the feeling that most matters for morality is not the pain we feel at the distress of others, but the pleasure we feel when we remember actions we have taken to relieve these pains. In short: “the exercise of beneficence naturally flatters *amour-propre*” (*ML* 1116).³²

Alone, our greatest pleasures thus come from recalling past moral acts to mind and experiencing the good witness of the self they awaken in us. With others, it is precisely the prospect of continuing to enjoy this good witness of ourselves that leads us to act morally. Rousseau ends the sixth letter by imploring Sophie to leave behind the comforts of home and hearth and seek out “the sick, the poor, the oppressed.” Only by living with them and serving them will she discover her genuinely “noble” function of acting in such a way that there come to be fewer evils on earth as a result of her existence (*ML* 1117). The feeling of pleasure in beneficence is then the means by which conscience leads us to action. Thus Rousseau’s virtuous cycle: doing good leads us to feel good about ourselves, and the desire to feel good about ourselves leads us to continue doing good for others.

7

The *Lettres morales* is an imperfect text. Perhaps for reasons owing to the limits of the epistolary genre, and perhaps for reasons owing to its date of composition, it is a text that introduces more questions than it is able to resolve. In particular, Rousseau’s attempt to graft the practical morality of the sixth letter onto the conceptual foundations of the first five letters seems rushed, even forced. As one suspects Rousseau himself likely recognized, a genuine resolution of this and several other tensions in the text would require more time and more space, and indeed one way to approach *Emile* and *Julie* is as attempts to work out problems set forth in the *Lettres morales*.

But more important than the fact that the *Lettres morales* is an imperfect text is the fact that it is a synthetic text. It aims to reconcile several seemingly incompatible binaries—sentimentalism and materialism, nature and virtue, feeling and reason—in ways that open up new horizons. Most importantly, it aspires to answer a question that would continue to occupy Rousseau and others in the years to come: that of how fundamentally sentimental beings can become dutiful and virtuous beings without doing an injustice to their

³² Cf. de Man, who suggests that in the *Lettres morales*, “virtue is spoken of in terms of a narcissistic economy of personal well-being,” which results in “the association of virtue with pleasure” (*Allegories of Reading*, 243–44); see also Di Palma, “Ethics of the *Lettres morales*,” 228 and 256.

natures. Among much else, study of the *Lettres morales* can thus help us see that Rousseau’s mature ethics was born in an effort to resolve the tension between “Romanticism” and “Kantianism” even before the world had heard of either.

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