

Interpretation

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Essays in Honor of Christopher Kelly

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Interpretation

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A Socratic Pedagogy? Rousseau's Response to D'Offreville

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All this, Sir, hardly seems very philosophical to you; nor does it to me.

—Rousseau to Aymon de Franquières

Study of Rousseau's correspondence shows that he rather quickly compelled recognition as the fascinating figure of a possible moral guide or spiritual director, in the eyes of a whole generation of youth in search of orientation in the second half of a disoriented century, marked by the growing crisis of the state, the slow but certain retreat of Catholic practice and culture in France, and the emergence of new aspirations and new moral problematics that neither Catholicism nor abstract deism, nor modern atheism, could satisfy. Faced with this demand, Rousseau sometimes adopts an attitude of caustic rudeness, systematically counseling the path toward oneself in accordance with duties owed and commitments made, responding on practical terrain to the sentimentally virtuous fancies of his correspondents. Sometimes, too, he responds substantively: to the moral principles that Carondelet, who has lost faith and seeks truth on the side of contemporary freethinkers, claims to give himself, he sharply opposes the aporias of their materialist-necessitarian foundations, and leaves him with a farewell after having recognized the antinomy of their respective moralities, not without having deplored that

“the heart’s peace” is not granted the abbot.¹ Does the young Aymon de Franquières share his metaphysical doubts with him? Rousseau takes up again the whole chain of reasonings which were his at the time of the Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar, but the body of principles has become more flexible: the proof of sentiment dominates, the necessity of being consoled no less, and the preference, not to say the roll of the dice for the cause of God rather than nothingness, because life is made better by it, at the risk of having believed in what is not.² He also happens to recognize his powerlessness, as when faced by Henriette’s distress. “You are to me an afflicting and humiliating enigma. I believed that I understood the human heart, and I understand nothing of yours. You suffer and I cannot bring you relief.”³

In all these cases and many others, it is the word “duty” which arises under his pen as the foundation of his response, a duty to communicate a truth “which is not so much metaphysical as moral,” as he says to Dom Deschamps.⁴ This commits him to an adaptation of his thought and of his style to the questions of his correspondents. In relation to this, what Christopher Kelly writes with respect to his approach to political questions applies just as well to the letters we are discussing: “His account of the practical limits of reason... led him to tailor his mode of presentation to the specific audience he had in mind for a particular work”⁵—the central stake being, as it is in all of his work, but most particularly in his letters, to discern “between useful and other truths.”⁶ Thus letters of moral and spiritual direction, but so to speak made to measure according to what Rousseau perceives one who is writing to him is able to understand and comprehend during some distraught moment of his existence, while gambling on the discernment of a celebrated author considered as a master of wisdom.

If, however, these letters are therefore responses as adapted as possible to their authors, Rousseau also knows that posterity will read them, since he organized everything in order to have his correspondence published: certainly

¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, letter of March 4, 1764, in *Correspondance complète de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, ed. R. A. Leigh, 50 vols. (Geneva-Oxford: SVEC, 1965–1988), 19:200 (no. 3166). Hereafter referred to as CC with volume, page number, and letter number.

² January 15, 1769, in CC 37:13–27 (no. 6529).

³ November 4, 1764, in CC 22:9 (no. 3621).

⁴ June 25, 1761, in CC 9:28 (no. 1437).

⁵ Christopher Kelly, *Rousseau as Author: Consecrating One’s Life to the Truth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 103.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

as documentation appended to his *Confessions*, but also because he judged it to be useful with respect to the transmission of his thought in the future. He was not mistaken in this plan, since some of his letters have become, to some degree, as seen by the critics, elements of his work considered on the same plane as his published works. This has been the case since the publication by Henri Gouhier of an anthology of “philosophical letters” collected from Rousseau’s correspondence, and which he presented “as appendices to various chapters of his philosophy.”⁷ Such an inclusion does not need to be proved regarding the letter to Franquières, but it does need to be proved regarding the letter to d’Offreville, about which a recent commentator writes: “We will examine one of the most developed expressions of the doctrine of interest in Rousseau: that is the letter of October 1761 to Grimprel d’Offreville.... We read this letter as a full-fledged work, which defends a precise position on interest.”⁸ It is the limits of such a strictly philosophical approach, which is moreover shared by the scholarly literature for half a century now, that we will examine, not in order to deny its pertinence from the disciplinary point of view for what it reveals, today, about the resonances of this letter with the fundamentals of Rousseau’s thought, but more in order to show that reading and study of this letter require taking into account its rhetorical dimension and therefore its enunciative disposition. To this end we will successively broach the topics of the religious system of reference in which d’Offreville presents his difficulty; then the at first deliberately destabilizing character of Rousseau’s response; next the pedagogical stakes of his enunciative strategy; and, finally, that of his prevarication regarding the metaphysical dimension of these questions, to the benefit of the suggestion of an experience of thought which he judges of a kind to clarify efficiently the controversy in question. We thereby hope to bring out certain aspects of what one could call a quasi-maieutic epistolary pedagogy for the use of those to whom one must not under any circumstances tell everything because they are not well equipped for it, but whom one can try to lead to ask themselves good and useful questions instead of those in which they get themselves entangled.

⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Lettres philosophiques*, ed. Henri Gouhier (Paris: Vrin, 1974), 8.

⁸ Michael O’Dea, “L’intérêt chez Rousseau: Une réhabilitation en cours,” in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau en 2012: Puisqu’enfin mon nom doit vivre*, ed. Michael O’Dea, Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 154.

ON ALMS: CHARITY AT THE RISK OF INTEREST

The problem that d'Offreville had submitted in his letter is the following: a friend with whom he is living on familiar terms and for whom, as his response of the 17th of October will attest, he feels great esteem, "claims, no doubt judging the sentiments of others on the basis of his own,"

that no man thinks, nor as a consequence carries out motions, except relatively to himself, even including his alms, and affirms that he is right to relate everything, even the good works he does, to himself. In vain did I represent to him that, since ambition and vanity ought not to be the spring that ought [*sic*] to stir our soul, one of the qualities that is essential and inseparable from alms both spiritual and bodily was to be vividly moved by the disgrace of the one to whom one gave them, that we would uselessly claim to enjoy the reward for our alms, if we give them either through vanity or with the aim of pushing away the miseries of our life. Finally, I was unable to bring into his heart this conviction that whoever, however noble the object he has in view, proposes only his own particular interest was far removed from his own advantage, that the wisdom and the heroism of virtue consisted in being animated by noble motives, that as for me I had always given alms with disinterested aims, and that I was easily persuaded that many others were governed by the same reflections.⁹

The terms in which d'Offreville poses this problem signal clearly that he reasons, as to himself, within a Catholic framework; it is in effect only in such a context that his distinction of "alms as much spiritual as corporeal" makes sense, the first being defined thus by the Dictionary of Trévoux (1771 edition) in the article "alms": "One sometimes calls alms, a spiritual deed of mercy practiced toward one's fellow man; but in this sense one never says it alone, one adds the epithet 'spiritual,' spiritual alms; 'alms' alone always signifies manual alms."¹⁰

It is therefore not only a question of material beneficence, to take up again here a term put into competition with the term "charity" by the Enlightenment since its promotion by the abbé of St. Pierre, but also of a purely moral beneficence practiced toward him who is supposed to experience the need for it. St. Thomas Aquinas formulates the distinction between kinds of alms thus:

⁹ September 15, 1761, in CC 8:128–29 (no. 1494).

¹⁰ *Dictionnaire universel françois et latin*, 6th ed., 8 vols. (Paris: Compagnie des libraires associés, 1771), 1:647, https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Dictionnaire_de_Trévoux/6e_édition,_1771/AUMÔNE.

"[it] is founded with reason on the variety of deficiencies of one's fellow man. Some of them are relative to his soul, and spiritual alms are ordained for them. Others are relative to his body, and corporeal alms are ordained for them."¹¹ As to their relation: "He who gives corporeal alms does not intend to buy a spiritual good by means of a corporeal good, because he knows that spiritual goods are infinitely superior to the corporeal ones, but it is by the sentiment of charity which animates him that he hopes to obtain a spiritual fruit."¹²

D'Offreville formulates this fruit as a claim to "enjoy the reward of our alms," the hope for which is strictly conditioned by their absolutely "disinterested" character, according to his own words. Here he follows the classic formulation of the First Epistle to the Corinthians which defines charity thus: "it does not seek its own interest,"¹³ a definition that Fénelon, in his "Exposition of different kinds of love" which introduces his *Maxims of the Saints Explained*, clarifies by distinguishing what the soul wants *for itself* and what it wants for *love of self*:

The disinterested soul in pure charity waits, desires, hopes for God as her good, as her reward, as what is promised to her and which is everything to her. She wants it for herself, but not for love of self. She wants it for itself, in order to conform herself to God's good pleasure, who wants it for her. But she does not want it for love of self, because it is no longer the motive of her own interest which incites her.¹⁴

It is true that d'Offreville admits, as an acceptable motivation for his act, the compassion experienced by him who benefits from his good work or his alms, an element which is outside of the Fenelonian definition, but he evidently recognizes in that definition the precept of loving God and one's fellow man as oneself which, according to *Trévoux*, "obligates us to do for one's fellow man everything that we would reasonably want to be done for us" in case we would find ourselves in the same state of material or moral deficiency.¹⁵

¹¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 32 ("Alms"), a. 2 (conclusion), ed. and trans. Projet Docteur Angélique (2017), http://docteurangelique.free.fr/livresformatweb/sommes/3sommethéologique2a2ae.htm#_Toc476936718.

¹² ST II-II, q. 32, a. 4, solution 2.

¹³ Saint Paul, 1 Corinthians 13:5, trans. Lemaistre de Sacy (Paris: R. Laffont, 1990), 1490.

¹⁴ Fénelon, *Œuvres*, ed. J. Le Brun, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1983–97), 1:1011.

¹⁵ *Dictionnaire universel français et latin*, 1:647.

For all that, one should point out, on this terrain of compassion for one's fellow man, that his answer to Rousseau of October 17 insists upon a distinction, which is essential in his eyes, between what comes about through natural sentiment and what comes about through spiritual will, the second alone being the agent of authentic charity, while the first participates in the original corruption of humanity:

I say that the alms of those who act only through the sentiments of nature and through that so dangerous interest which has its source in our corporeal being do not belong to virtue, one of the moral attributes of divinity; that they cannot be the object of God's rewards, who does works of charity only through an all-natural inclination, because man in his nature being physically or morally corrupted by sin, he loves only the search for his own interests and the rules of human propriety. Now, good works being by right divine, it is not by the senses that we ought to enjoy the pleasure of doing some, but uniquely through the sentiment of the spiritualized soul, from which we must necessarily conclude that everything that does not have its principle only in the human spirit cannot and must not be attributed to true religion.¹⁶

According to him, then, there is no authentic virtue if it is not purely spiritual in its intention, that is to say, ultimately of divine inspiration; this intersects with the classical debate about the virtues of the pagans, reconciled in the *Trévoux* in the article "alms" by means of a more accommodating perspective which claims that, without deserving heaven, their actions "have a moral goodness of a natural order, and which could by grace and a supernatural motive, be elevated to the supernatural order. Such, for example, is the aid a Pagan gives to a poor person in his necessity."¹⁷ This d'Offreville does not grant, all the more so in that with him the moral approach is founded upon a radically dualist philosophical approach to the relation between soul and matter (which the context allows us to situate as being on the side of Malebranchist occasionalism); that is what his answer of October 17 suggests:

I did not conceive...that man had to be metaphysically certain that another being which existed outside of us could be the occasional cause of our morally good or bad actions, without at the same time becoming the object of our reflections that a cause superior to all motions has within it the faculty of forming, without deriving their origin in the senses? It is evident that I am speaking of the soul, that purely spiritual substance, the greater part of whose ideas and thoughts form within it and in its essence, without their being incited in it by the

¹⁶ October 17, 1761, in CC9:179–80 (no. 1511).

¹⁷ *Dictionnaire universel françois et latin*, 1:647.

impression of external objects: for there are other thoughts that our soul forms according to things that we represent to ourselves as a corporeal image, and which are furnished to it by the vivid impression of the organ of the senses.¹⁸

WITHOUT ANY INTEREST? A PROVOCATIVE RESPONSE

Rousseau will not answer this second letter where, after the metaphysical digression just quoted, his correspondent develops his point of view and that of his friend fairly clearly regarding the judicial case that he himself had submitted to them in order to help them to clarify their disagreement. What might strike one at first in his answer to the first, is that despite what he could guess about the Christian presuppositions of his correspondent, it is not on this terrain that he chooses to answer him, as it appears from the manner in which he sums up the problem that is posed:

Your adversary maintains that every man acts, whatever he does, only relatively to himself, and that even to the most sublime acts of virtue, even to the purest acts of charity, each relates everything to himself.

You, Sir, think that one must do good for the sake of the good itself without any return of a personal interest, that the good works that one relates to oneself are no longer acts of virtue, but rather of *amour-propre*; you add that our alms are without merit if we give them only through vanity or with a view to pushing away from our mind the idea of the miseries of human life, and in that you are right.¹⁹

On one hand, the reduction of every motive in every act to self-love *considered as a fact*—the adversary's position; on the other, the radical incompatibility of every virtuous act with *amour-propre* and the lack of pity considered as an *ought-to-be*. Now, if he concedes the validity, in itself, of this moral requirement, it is to grant the essential of the opposing thesis:

But as to the ground of the question I must admit to you that I am of your adversary's opinion: for when we act we must have a motive to act, and this motive cannot be foreign to us, since it is us that it puts into action: it is absurd to imagine that being me I would act as if I were another. Is it not true that if one told you that a body is pushed without anything touching it, you would say that this is not conceivable? It is the same thing regarding morality, when one believes that one acts without any interest.²⁰

¹⁸ October 17, 1761, in CC 9:179–80 (no. 1511).

¹⁹ October 4, 1761, in CC 9:143 (no. 1500).

²⁰ Ibid.

“One does not conceive that a being acts without motives, any further than one does that the arm of a balance moves without the action of a weight,” writes Diderot in his *Letter to Landois* (1756).²¹ But with the paradox of the self-moving stone (the Spinozist argument of the letter to Schuller²² which was “widely promulgated in the 18th century,” according to Véronique Le Ru),²³ which aligns moral reason with physical reason, it is d’Offreville’s metaphysical and religious presuppositions which are instantly revoked, at least at first sight, in favor of what Pierre Force calls “the interest paradigm,”²⁴ summarized thus by Helvétius in *De l’esprit*: “if the physical universe is subjected to the laws of motion, the moral universe is no less so to those of interest”;²⁵ a paradigm which runs from the Epicureans to Sade, while passing through Hobbes, La Rochefoucauld, and Mandeville, without denying its resonance into our own day.

If d’Offreville had reread the *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality*, he would have found there that in the first state of nature, “the love of well-being is the sole motive of human actions,”²⁶ and as to the state of society, everything functions there in fact as Hobbes and Mandeville described it. According to this a posteriori rereading, he could then have objected to the apparent agreement between Rousseau and his opponent about the role that pity, second natural passion anterior to reason, plays in his system, which, as we know, serves as lever to overturn Mandevillian anthropology, because if the latter “sensed very well that with all their

²¹ Denis Diderot, *Correspondance générale*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. J. Assézat and M. Tourneux, 20 vols. (Paris: Garnier, 1875–77), 19:436.

²² “Conceive now, if you will, that the rock, while it continues to move, thinks and knows that it makes an effort, as much as it can, to move itself. Assuredly this stone, since it is conscious only of its effort and is in no way indifferent, will think that it is very free and that it perseveres in its motion only because it wills to. Such is the human liberty that all boast of possessing and which consists in this alone, that men are conscious of their appetites and are unaware of the causes that determine them.” Spinoza, Letter 58, in *Œuvres*, ed. and trans. Charles Appuhn, 4 vols. (Paris: GF Flammarion, 1966), 4:304.

²³ Véronique Le Ru, “Le scepticisme ‘raisonnable’ ou le matérialisme athée de D’Alembert à l’aune de la question de la liberté,” *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, no. 93 (2017): 80. This argument is taken up again in the article “Liberté” in the *Encyclopédie*.

²⁴ Pierre Force, *Self-Interest before Adam Smith: A Genealogy of Economic Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 7.

²⁵ Helvétius, *De l’esprit*, 3 vols. (Paris: Durand, 1758), 1:73.

²⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond, 5 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1959–95), 2:166. Hereafter referred to as *OC* with volume and page number.

morality men would never have been anything but monsters, if nature had not given them pity in support of reason”:

he did not see that from this sole quality flow all the social virtues that he wants to deny men. In effect, what are generosity, clemency, humanity, if not pity applied to the weak, the guilty, or to the human species in general? Even benevolence and friendship are, to consider it well, products of a constant pity fixed on a particular object.²⁷

But d'Offreville does not remember this, and the “wise man” to whom he submits his problem is careful, in all of his letter, not to breathe a single word of it to him, leaving him therefore with the sentiment that “at bottom” it is his opponent and friend who is right.

From *Emile*, then in press, Rousseau could moreover have drawn an argument of a nature to reassure his young correspondent, but he made nothing of it. Thus when his response opens by presenting the problem posed as a correlative of that of knowing “whether there is a demonstrated morality or not,” he is silent about what he said regarding this in the Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar:

If the conscience is the work of prejudices, I am no doubt wrong, and there is no demonstrated morality; but if to prefer oneself to everything is an inclination natural to man, and if nevertheless the first sentiment of justice is innate in the human heart, let the one who makes of man a simple being resolve these contradictions, and I will no longer recognize any but one substance.²⁸

D'Offreville could certainly have found there a concession to his opponent, starting this time however from the classical motif of *homo duplex* by combining with the “selfish hypothesis” a paradigm just as well recognized in the history of ideas: that of the “moral sense” (Shaftesbury)²⁹ either connatural or innate (Hutcheson, Smith) to the human species. When reading him, Rousseau could only have instantly sensed his adherence, a priori one might say, to the thesis of conscience as an innate divine instinct, immediately upon reading him, as his correspondent's response will confirm with regard to the predictable future of the criminal juror reported in the case submitted to him, where it is question of “the conscience, that sentiment of our soul and

²⁷ OC 1:155.

²⁸ *Émile*, in OC 4:584.

²⁹ See Laurent Jaffro, “Les ambiguïtés et difficultés du sens moral,” in *Normativités du sens commun*, ed. C. Chappé-Gautier and Sandra Laugier (Paris: PUF, 2009), 303–18.

innate in all hearts, that irreproachable witness” etc. (Cf. the extract in note 56 below.)

As to the argument in Rousseau’s response concerning the impossibility of a motion without cause in the material order as in the moral order, *Emile* presents it entirely differently by defining the human being, against Helvétius and the materialists, as able to put itself in action, that is to say, endowed with liberty:

No material being is active by itself, and I am. However much one disputes this with me, I feel it, and this sentiment which speaks to me is stronger than my reason which combats it. I have a body upon which the others act, and which acts upon them; this reciprocal action is not doubtful; but my will is independent of my senses; I consent or I resist, I succumb or I am victorious, and I sense perfectly within myself when I do what I willed to do, or when I only give way to my passions.³⁰

Thus are the thesis of the necessary determination of all human acts by self-love, and that of moral liberty in accordance with this necessity, included or harmonized with one another:

Doubtless I am not free not to will my own good, I am not free to want my own ill; but my liberty consists exactly in this, that I can will only what is fitting for me, or that I consider as such, without anything foreign to me determining me.

And when he objects to d’Offreville: “it is absurd to imagine that, being me, I would act as if I were another,” he has not forgotten that he wrote in *Emile*, immediately following upon what we just read: “Does it follow that I am not my master, because I am not master of being someone else than me?”³¹

PEDAGOGY: MAKING ONE THINK WITHOUT INDOCTRINATING

He therefore had at hand, within his own theses, enough to respond in accordance with his doctrine to the anxiety of his young correspondent; and even without this, he could indicate to him the possibility of putting forward to his opponent a point of view such as that of a well-known Christian moralist like Jacques Abbadie: “consequently it is a great aberration to oppose the love of ourselves to divine love, when it is well regulated. For what is it to love oneself properly? It is to love God. And what is it to love God? It is to love

³⁰ OC 4:585.

³¹ For this and the preceding quotation: *Emile*, book 4, in OC 4:586.

oneself properly.”³² That is the heart of the Malebranchist argument against the quietism of pure love to which d'Offreville seems quite near. It is true that Abbadie is Protestant; but Rousseau could refer his correspondent to the article “Love” in the *Encyclopédie* which copies it out *in extenso*.

But instead of that, he did so to speak the exact opposite, by first simulating a core agreement with his opponent. Why did he proceed in this way? One can suppose that he preferred to push him to think by himself, rather than to reassure or indoctrinate him. That would be the reason why, once he has pummeled him a little, he encourages him to reflect on the meaning of the word “interest,” by suggesting that it could be that there is a latent disagreement regarding this topic with his adversary. On one hand, a purely material interest: a kind of “commerce” of gratitude and/or of reputation obtained in exchange for a benefit granted without empathy, Rousseau rejoining here a classical criticism of the interest gift which runs from Seneca to Mme. de Lambert, and passing through Montaigne and La Rochefoucauld;³³ on the other, a “spiritual and moral” interest “which does not at all depend on the advantages of society, which is relative only to us, to the good of our soul, to our absolute well-being... which, for all that it does not have perceptible, material objects, is no less true, no less great, no less solid, and to say everything in a word, the only one which, stemming intimately from our nature, tends to our genuine happiness.”³⁴

Robert Derathé held this distinction, which casts light in his opinion on what Rousseau intends in writing the Profession of Faith, to be fundamental: “I therefore do not believe... that it is impossible to explain by *consequences of our nature* the immediate principle of the conscience independent of reason itself”; he interpreted there a psychological correspondence between a “metaphysical dualism” and a “duality of ‘primitive impulses’”: instinct for self-preservation and moral instinct.³⁵ A good half century later, Bruno Bernardi comments on the distinction in these terms: “False interest and genuine interest would therefore refer, in their opposition, to two distinctive

³² Jacques Abbadie, *L'art de se connaître soi-même ou la recherche des sources de la morale* (Lyon: Anisson and Posuel, 1696), 244 (part 2, chap. 6).

³³ See Jean-François Perrin, “Un questionnement radical de la civilité des Lumières: La question de l’amitié dans la correspondance de Rousseau durant la crise des années 1757–1758,” in O’Dea, *Rousseau en 2012*, 9–28.

³⁴ October 4, 1761, in CC 9:144 (no. 1500).

³⁵ Robert Derathé, “Les rapports de la morale et de la religion chez J.-J. Rousseau,” *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l’Étranger* 139 (1949): 151. His italics for the quotation (for the original quotation, see OC 4:600).

principles: the soul and the body on one hand, the spontaneity of the self and social artifice on the other.... Material interest is related to social artifice which first affects our mind. This interest which has as its object our absolute well-being seems to be the very one that the second *Discourse* showed was related to the principle of self-preservation common to all those living. Material interest is an interest belonging to opinion and the spiritual interest is a vital interest.”³⁶ This is a complete hermeneutic reversal, since the commerce of interest that Derathé relates to the instinct of self-preservation is now seen as artificiality belonging to opinion, while what he understood as moral instinct here becomes “vital interest.” Let us add moreover that a recent analysis of this letter defines this latter as a kind of spiritualist mutation in the problem of self-love since the second *Discourse*:

The second interest corresponds to self-love, since it “tends to our advantage without making use of anyone.” One will note (for it is perhaps new) that genuine well-being is specifically linked to the human soul. Now, at the outset the distinction between self-love and *amour-propre* did not entail that dimension; self-love in the man of Nature corresponds to a healthy will to preserve his own life and to assure his own well-being, this first man being an animal almost like the others. At the time of the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, Rousseau does everything to make his thought compatible with the materialist convictions of his friends, without for all that adhering to them; in the letter to d’Offreville, on the contrary, as in the Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar which shortly precedes it, the reality of the soul is loudly affirmed. The letter will in a way spiritualize interest, although within limits that are interesting to delineate.³⁷

When Bernardi, on the basis of this letter, orients the whole of Rousseau’s system toward a critical problematization of the metaphysical dualism³⁸ often ascribed to him³⁹—this to the point of interpreting in him a doctrine of immanence⁴⁰—O’Dea seems to draw (prudently) in the other direction. One specifically encounters here a good example of Rousseau’s pedagogy for the benefit of young correspondents who were seeking his help with philosophical and moral questions which had become central at some point in their lives—without having, most of the time, any training other than, at

³⁶ Bruno Bernardi, *La fabrique des concepts: Recherche sur l’invention conceptuelle chez Rousseau* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2014), 285–86.

³⁷ O’Dea, “L’intérêt chez Rousseau,” 155.

³⁸ Bernardi, *Fabrique des concepts*, 287.

³⁹ Since Henri Gouhier, *Les méditations physiques de J.-J. Rousseau* (Paris: Vrin, 1970).

⁴⁰ Bernardi, *Fabrique des concepts*, 298.

best, a traditional one, and without having read his works themselves other than superficially or partially. Consideration of this subtle pedagogy, always directed to particular persons, is unfortunately neglected when it is reduced to the strict logic of concepts peculiar to philosophical hermeneutics.

For Rousseau evidently does not confine himself to matters relative to the question which worries his correspondent, in adding that with regard to this a Christian has no other alternative than to be consistent with his faith within the perspective of his salvation. It is in this that his best-understood interest consists, whether it obligates him to all sacrifices, or whether he sublimates his lesser benefits, as by the way d'Offreville, aspiring to enjoy the "reward" of his alms, was suggesting from the start—a retribution from the other world which falls anew under the cutting edge of the contrary thesis, one of whose formulations is, as Pascal writes, that "All men seek to be happy. This is without exception.... It is the motive of all the actions of all men, even those who are going to hang themselves."⁴¹ That is certainly the foundation of what Diderot enjoyed pointing out in the article "Charity."

The theologies are sufficiently in agreement in moderating both pure love and mercenary love; but some maintain that in order to attain the truth, one must reduce pure love to its rightful limits; others on the contrary, that one must correct mercenary love. These last proceed from an incontestable principle; namely, that we very naturally seek to make ourselves happy. That is, according to Saint Augustine, the most well-understood truth, the most constant and the most clarified. *Omnes homines beati esse volunt, idque unum ardentissimo amore appetunt; et propter hoc caetera quaecumque appetunt.* That is the cry of humanity; it is the inclination of nature.... It is evident that this principle, that man seeks in everything to make himself happy, once avowed, he has the same ardor for supernatural beatitude as he does for natural beatitude: it suffices that the first is known and demonstrated to him. Let us effectively interrogate one's own heart, for our heart can here represent that of all men: let us listen to the inner sentiment, and we will see that the aim of happiness accompanies men even in the occasions most contrary to happiness itself.

Rousseau therefore abandons the first proposed semantic distinction concerning the substantive "interest," in order to suggest a third way which would focus the discussion upon the question of knowing if it is possible to do good for the sole pleasure of doing good, without any sort of calculation: "you will perhaps ask me if there is some other interest more immediately,

⁴¹ Pascal, *Pensées*, in *Moralistes du XVII^e siècle*, ed. P. Sellier (Paris: R. Laffont, 1992), 363.

more necessarily linked to virtue by its nature, and which must make us love it uniquely for itself.⁴² Neither for love of self nor for love of oneself, then, but for love of the thing itself for itself. Now this alternative, barely suggested, is eluded as involving a series of “metaphysical” problems which condition one’s assessment of it and which Rousseau limits himself to enumerating to his correspondent, by indicating to him *in fine* that everything fundamentally depends on the question of knowing if the innateness of the moral conscience is or is not a “prejudice,” as the contemporary thinkers who support his adversary’s thesis affirm. This gives him some grain to mill by obliging him to dig down to the implicit foundations of his own thesis. The points previously mentioned: the love of moral beauty, natural love of order, their primacy over that of the passions, are of course treated in *Emile*.

Everything is indifferent to us, they say, outside of our interest; and, quite to the contrary, the sweetness of friendship, of humanity, console us in our pains; and, even in our pleasures, we would be too alone, too miserable, if we did not have someone with whom to share them. If there is nothing moral in the heart of man, from whence these transports of admiration for heroic actions, these raptures of love for great souls? This enthusiasm for virtue, what relation does it have to our private interest? Why would I want to be Cato who tears his own entrails, rather than Caesar triumphant? Take from our hearts this love of the beautiful, you take all the charm from life.⁴³

But here is how the *Letter on the Theater* (1758), which d’Offreville may have read but to which he in no way alludes, links the innate love of self and the innate love of the beautiful:

As to me, were I again to be called wicked for daring to maintain that man is born good, I think it and I believe that I have proved it; the source of the interest which attaches us, which is honest and which inspires in us aversion to evil, is in us and not in the plays.... The love of the beautiful is a sentiment as natural to the human heart as love of oneself; it is not born of the arrangement of scenes; the author does not bring it, he finds it there; and from this pure sentiment that he gratifies the sweet tears that he causes to flow.⁴⁴

⁴² October 4, 1761, in CC 9:144 (no. 1500).

⁴³ *Emile*, book 4, in OC 4:596.

⁴⁴ OC 5:22.

AN EXPERIENCE OF THINKING IN TRIO

Rousseau therefore avoids for his correspondent this foundational debate, which he can carry on elsewhere, regarding similar questions, with interlocutors he considers capable of understanding him (like Vernes, Usteri, or Franquières), so as to orient him toward a concrete case drawn from English judicial reports. In so doing, he adds his argument to the habitual practice of his kind, that of a thought experiment intended to test this or that hypothesis, whether it be in the physical-moral domain (that is Diderot's game in *D'Alembert's Dream*) or in the juridical-moral domain, and that is again his game in this letter to Sophie Volland of October 12, 1761:

Here is a question. A rascal with a warrant out on him consults a lawyer, as to whether he can safely turn himself in. The lawyer examines his case and says yes, he will get him out of it. Not at all. The prisoner is at risk of being hanged. In the midst of his peril, he has his lawyer brought to him. He says to him: But Sir, they say I will be hanged. I knew that, the lawyer coldly replies. That is what you deserve. Did this lawyer do well or badly? There is enough matter there to argue for three days and three nights without cease.⁴⁵

In the example given by Rousseau for d'Offreville's consideration, an assassin with no warrant against him finds himself appointed as juror in an English trial of an individual accused of murder. The other jurors examine the case and conclude that the accused is guilty. He alone concludes that he is innocent, maintaining his opinion despite everything, knowing that the examination will end only when unanimity is obtained, the jurors being deprived of food as long as it does not result. It ends in favor of the accused. A while later, one of the jurors gathers from the one who has obtained the acquittal by dint of endurance that he is himself the assassin.

Rousseau admits that the case might be concocted (it is at least partially so according to R. A. Leigh,⁴⁶ which will not prevent Rousseau from taking it up again in his *Dialogues* in support of an argument directed against the secrecy of legal procedures in France), but he presents it to him nonetheless, knowing that the age is fond of judicial cases⁴⁷—he himself and the best of his kind being in no way unaware of the subtleties of Catholic casuistry⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Denis Diderot, *Lettres à Sophie Volland II*, in *Œuvres complètes*, 19:69.

⁴⁶ In reality, in such a situation one would dismiss the jury and begin the trial again.

⁴⁷ See Sarah Maza, *Vies privées et affaires publiques: Les causes célèbres de la France prérévolutionnaire* (Paris: Fayard, 1997).

⁴⁸ See Jean-François Perrin, "Du droit de taire la vérité au mensonge magnanime: Sur quelques

which they pastiche or parody on occasion (Voltaire) in favor of their own cause: “To dispute the validity of the fact would be to adopt a bad pretext; for one can always establish it as a supposition and seek, all extraneous interest put aside, what any man with good sense, who would be neither virtuous nor a rascal, would do in a similar case in his own interest.”⁴⁹ The context of the proposed reflection is methodically made precise: an examination of the case under every aspect; the impossibility that one is dealing with a devotee of virtue since it is about an assassin in whose interest it is to make the accused disappear; the risk the same assumes of denouncing himself by his obstinacy, constituted as an indication of culpability; the paradox of this obstinacy contrary to prudence; no element of “perceptible interest” (material interest distinguished from spiritual and moral interest above) likely to incite him to it. From which the enigma proposed to exercise their sagacity: “There was nonetheless only a very powerful interest which could have determined him thus in the secret of his own heart to every kind of risk; what then was this interest to which he sacrificed his very life?”⁵⁰

An enigma whose solution he reserves, since he will not respond to d’Offreville’s answer which one will see below. But before quitting the field, he suggests to them, in the guise of a methodological viaticum, first carefully to examine the alternative of condemnation or absolution of the accused by the assassin juror, the first assuring his tranquility, the second exposing him to every risk, and then to weigh the consequences for the rest of his life in each case, both clearly making explicit while doing so “the motives for the course of action he would have chosen.” Only at the cost of doing this, he pursues, will d’Offreville know exactly what he is talking about with his adversary and friend. The latter, he again anticipates, may want to avoid the debate by arguing from an a priori distinction between the decision to commit or not to commit a crime and that of performing or not performing a beneficial act; one will have to answer that one cannot essentially differentiate a crime that is favorable to you but from which you abstain, from a beneficial act that is exacting but which is unknown to men. The two situations are equivalent, for “one can have no interest in itself in not doing bad without having a similar interest in doing good.”⁵¹

arrière-plans théoriques et pratiques de la Quatrième Promenade,” *Littératures*, no. 37 (1997): 115–30.

⁴⁹ October 4, 1761, in CC 9:146 (no. 1500).

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

He adds that the identification of happiness with virtue, and so of a calculation of interest in favor of the latter, constitutes an illusion. If one can accord to the opposing thesis that to pretend to do good as an end in itself is an illusion masking the interest one has in doing it, "since it gives the soul an inner satisfaction, a contentment in itself without which there is no genuine happiness," and if it is certain that a wicked person cannot be happy "because happiness becomes poisoned in a corrupt soul, like the pleasure of the senses in an unhealthy body" (which Sade would never admit but the author of the *System of Nature* accords),⁵² it is not true that either virtue or vice guarantees in any way happiness in this world, although the first alone opens up the possibility for it while all along supporting its contrary, which d'Holbach again more or less accords.⁵³ That is why, Rousseau concludes, although Diderot does not say any different, each one's well-understood interest is to practice it, knowing—which the second, unless in error, never maintains—that there are cases when sustaining the ordeal supposes that one can resort to the beyond. This theme of remuneration by the Divine for the pains suffered here below by the just is vigorously defended in the Profession of Faith⁵⁴ and will be developed in 1769 in the letter to Franquières, in connection with the debate about the happiness of the just in the very midst of injustice in Plato's *Republic*.⁵⁵

The young man thus finding himself equipped with a precise pre-framing of the proposed debate, Rousseau there suspends his remarks, abandoning the two friends to a free examination *pro et contra* of the theoretical grounds and practical consequences of their respective theses, as long as they both consent to lend themselves to it. D'Offreville's answer will largely confirm their disagreement: besides, the pragmatic good sense of his adversary's analysis there contrasts advantageously with his own metaphysical dogmatism, which has remained rigorously impenetrable to his

⁵² "All things considered, nevertheless, although subject to afflictions, to physical ills, to poverty, to calumny, injustice, ingratitude, hatred, the good man in the midst of his reverses, of his pains and sorrows... finds support within himself... he feels his own dignity, he... consoles himself by the confidence he has in the justice of his cause. These holds are not made for the wicked: subject... to infirmities and to the vagaries of fate, he finds at the bottom of his heart only worries, regrets, remorse;... he is not sustained by his conscience; his mind and his body are overwhelmed at once on every side." D'Holbach, *Système de la nature*, 2 vols. (London, 1770), 1:323 (part 1, chap. 15).

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ OC 4:589.

⁵⁵ January 15, 1769, in CC 37:13–27 (no. 6529). See *Republic* 360a–361c.

correspondent's efforts to bring him to more solid ground.⁵⁶ As Stevenson wrote: "For the true, Babel is a divergence regarding morals."⁵⁷

⁵⁶ "According to strict rule, he said, it is better to save the guilty than to cause an innocent to perish. The juror in question began from this principle in order to hold fast in favor of clemency, and having in addition on his side the deprivation of provisions which necessarily had to implement what he wanted, that is to say to bring his colleagues over to his opinion, and bring them to submit to it rather than to persist in condemning an innocent and dying of hunger, the secret he told after is an indiscretion; he was human in holding out against his colleagues, and imprudent in declaring himself guilty.... I am tempted to believe on the basis of this response from my adversary... that he grants everything to nature, that he admits only its law, that he attributes to it all of our thoughts, a system which would not be admissible. Finally, Sir, you can judge... if it is sufficient to do acts of justice for God, to ennoble duties toward others, to confine oneself to natural law which, despite the magnificent ideas it gives us, is nonetheless enveloped in some darkness... It would, it seems, dishonor Christianity... When I reflect on the motives that determined the colleague in question, I consider it from another point of view... Fear of causing suspicion by his obstinacy that he was himself guilty of the crime which had been falsely imputed to the accused, and the desire to think about the preservation of his corporeal being, were not the first impression seized by his mind. A law superior to the natural law calling him to repent in memory of God himself, he recognized, in the moment that these reflections occurred to him, the origin of his being... and thinking that he had violated the rights of humanity by staining his hands with a homicide, the laws of truth and justice prevailed over the sentiments of a corrupt nature and of a crude interest which seem mutually to exclude one another... As to the different sensations that the soul of this juror would have experienced in the case that, having escaped human justice, he would have condemned to death, in concert with his colleagues, the alleged guilty man, it is indubitable, setting aside the barrier of prejudice, that remorse following the crime just as the shadow follows the body, the conscience, that sentiment of our soul and innate in all hearts, that irreproachable witness, that severe and incorruptible judge of the operations of the other, and of the morally good or bad actions of the body, would ceaselessly have torn his heart, burdened with two crimes, without nevertheless depriving him of the gratifying hope of enjoying the goods of the other life by expiating them here below, because according to the dogma of revealed religion there are no inexpiable crimes. That is my sentiment regarding the question you asked me, and that I responded to in the manner I think." Douai, October 17, 1761, in *CC 9:180-81* (no. 1511).

⁵⁷ Robert-Louis Stevenson, *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1909), 173.

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