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## Response to Susan Meld Shell

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# Response to Susan Meld Shell

Geoffrey M. Vaughan

Jean-Jacques Rousseau marks one of the most important turning points in the history of political thought. He was the last of the state of nature theorists and the first of the moral as opposed to political philosophers; he was the inspiration for Romanticism as well as the two great philosophical system-builders of the modern world, Kant and Hegel; his imagination marks him as one of the greatest writers in the philosophical tradition, perhaps the last to merit consideration for his prose. And, as Susan Shell explains in her chapter, no other author so thoroughly explored what she calls the "primal natural sentiment" of freedom as did Rousseau. My comments will attend to this particular sentiment and to sentiments in general as a means of addressing the themes of this project sponsored by the Agora Institute.

## REASONING

Rousseau is one of those figures in the history of philosophy who divides readers, and especially scholars, not only on what he wrote but on whether his work really rises to the level of philosophy.<sup>1</sup> According to some, his work may be moving (or not) and contain arresting images, even be the basis for a proper philosopher, such as Kant, but it does not count as philosophy. Anyone looking for a tight logical argument, constructed with the intention of commanding assent from an attentive reader, will not find it in Rousseau's work. As Shell quotes from *Emile*, "I am reminded that my business here is not producing treatises on metaphysics and morals or courses of study of any kind. . . . Others will perhaps demonstrate what I only indicate here."<sup>2</sup> "Indicate" may be too much of an understatement, but this reticence to lay out an argument is one of the strengths of his work.

Rousseau's critique of argumentation arises from his concern, his observation, of just how easily we can be diverted when thinking too much. Shell draws our attention to an important distinction he drew in his *Moral Letters* between reason and reasoning:

The art of reasoning is not reason at all; often it is its abuse. Reason [*raison*] is the faculty of ordering all the faculties of our soul suitably to the nature of things and their relations with us. Reasoning [*raisonner*] is the art of comparing known truths in order to compose from them other truths that one did not know and which this art makes us discover.<sup>3</sup>

Reasoning, as described here, is the kind of philosophical argumentation that begins with sound premises and moves to counterintuitive—we might dare to say even unnatural—conclusions. Eric Voegelin, cited elsewhere in this volume by Barry Cooper, seems to be making a similar point when he wrote: "Truth is not a body of propositions about a world-immanent object; it is the world-transcendent *summum bonum*, experienced as an orienting force in the soul, about which we can speak only in analogical symbols."<sup>4</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, not only is reasoning less accessible than its practitioners think; it can seem entirely disconnected from the lives of the rest of us.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, although science and technology have proven to be a powerful tool, reasoning does not always aim straight. The following paragraph in *Moral Letters* confirms this:

In the chain of reasonings that serves to form a system the same proposition will return a hundred times with almost insensible differences that will escape the philosopher's mind. So often multiplied, these differences will finally modify the proposition to the point of changing it completely without him noticing it.

Subsequent reasoning by others merely takes one further and further away from the initial insight and leads to the general confusion that is, as he notes, the history of philosophy. A case in point would be Rousseau's legacy which, as Shell notes,<sup>6</sup> includes not only Kant, Hegel, and the Romantics, but also Nietzsche, Rawls, and Habermas. This is hardly a unified school of thought.

Indeed, one way to look at Rousseau's work is to see it as part caution and part genealogy of how reason, history, and our own lives all conspire to divert us from a sound development. The *First and Second Discourses* recount our historical diversions from what we should have been. The *Social Contract* and *Emile* try to show how things might be otherwise, both for a society and an individual. In *Emile*, after describing the confusion between physical and moral causes that is one of the greatest abuses committed by contemporary philosophy, he continues: "Nature's instruction is late and



slow; men's is almost always premature. In the former case the senses wake the imagination; in the latter the imagination wakes the senses; it gives them a precocious activity which cannot fail to enervate and weaken individuals first and in the long run the species itself."<sup>7</sup>

How should we understand these two processes? First, it should be noted that this distinction comes in the context of his reflections on the transition between childhood and puberty. This is significant because Rousseau is one of the few modern philosophers to give sustained attention to children and childhood. I do not think this can be separated from his critique of reasoning. The formation of children is not a straightforward process of reasoning. In the immediate context we should consider how, in the natural order, the senses will awaken the imagination rather than the other way around, but also that it is imagination that is awakened, not reasoning.

Reasoning takes us both beyond ourselves and beyond our experiences. In this way it is acquired and unnatural; we could say that reasoning is inauthentic. Reasoning is also unsettled and in constant motion, even or especially when it does not have any right to be. Further on in the *Moral Letters*, Rousseau writes: "Man's mind is in a condition to do a great deal but the senses furnish him with few materials, and our soul, active in its bonds, prefers to exert itself upon the chimeras that are within its reach than to remain idle and without movement."<sup>8</sup> Reasoning offers its false promise of felicity by providing novelty, new things to distract the individual. There is certainly an echo here of his criticisms of the sciences and the arts from the *First Discourse*. We must, therefore, pay attention to the fact that he considered reasoning an art and reason a faculty.

A clue to disentangling the distinction between reason and reasoning is that the latter is not only an art, it is an art of comparison. We might say it is comparable to the notion of *amour propre*. Just as we compare ourselves to others and develop new passions, so we compare truths to derive new ones. Both processes take us out of ourselves and away from our fundamental experience, what Rousseau calls the *sentiment* of existence.

## SENTIMENT

Rousseau always began from and returned to sentiment. In so doing he raised subjectivity to a new level of importance, even beyond that of Descartes. As he wrote in the *Moral Letters*, "I have already told you, my design is not to reason with you and it is from the depths of your heart that I want to draw the only arguments that should convince you."<sup>9</sup> In other words, he was avoiding reasoning in favor of a different way to explain and convince. He was not seeking to establish a correspondence between his ideas and the external world, or even to speculate on how we might find such a correspondence. He

was critical of the entire endeavor, as we hear again in the same work: "After having proceeded through the narrow circle of their vain knowledge it is necessary to end where Descartes had begun. *I think therefore I exist*. That is all we know."<sup>10</sup> In the face of such vanity one's sentiments are as certain as anything else.

It is certainty that Rousseau was seeking, not the certainty of Descartes, but a certainty that what he produced in *Emile* (or in a social contract) would not degenerate. Degeneration was a constant fear animating his work. In almost every case that he described, the initial stage is always the most pure, the one he preferred, the one identified as "natural."<sup>11</sup> (I am very much taken with the way Shell chooses to use the word "native" at one point.) Later stages lead away from that initial purity and will, without the kind of constant vigilance described in both *On the Social Contract* and *Emile*, quickly degenerate to a condition worse than the original. The converse of man's "perfectibility" is the tendency to become imperfect. Reason is not the solution because it is not as formative in this process as are the sentiments. Here is his comment on *Emile's* discovery of Sophie:

On this passion, perhaps the only one he will feel intensely [*vivement*] in his whole life, depends the final form his character is going to take. Once fixed by a durable passion, his way of thinking [*ses manières de penser*], his sentiments, and his tastes are going to acquire a consistency which will no longer permit them to deteriorate.<sup>12</sup>

With no prior imaginings, no indication of what it would be like to meet Sophie and to experience the passions associated with this discovery, the young man's sentiments are entirely natural, that is, they have retained their original form and have not been corrupted. Accordingly, they are also stronger and more durable than those that were awakened too soon and, as a result, are disconnected from their true object.

Rousseau's project, then, would seem to be the recovery of an original primitivism, and there are certainly strong indications that this is the case. And yet, however much it might seem that way, the largest part of his work never advocated an attempt to revert to the original conditions of mankind in the state of nature. He praises, or rather prizes, those early moments for their clarity rather than their features. Anachronistically, one might think of this as a Heideggerian perspective.<sup>13</sup> We could push it back a little further, a little closer to Rousseau, and look at Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols*:

Socrates was a misunderstanding; any improvement morality, including Christianity, is a misunderstanding. The most blinding daylight; rationality at any price; life, bright, cold, cautious, conscious, without instinct, in opposition to the instincts—all this was a kind of disease, merely a disease, and by no means a return to "virtue," to "health," to happiness. To have to fight the instincts—



that is the definition of decadence: as long as life is ascending, happiness equals instinct.<sup>14</sup>

I do not want to turn this into a comparison of Rousseau and Nietzsche or Rousseau and Heidegger. Nor can I more than point to Catherine Zuckert's *Postmodern Platos*<sup>15</sup> as a study of how some significant twentieth-century philosophers did exactly this. Rather, I wish to emphasize that Rousseau's return to nature was never a one-way journey. He was recovering possibilities, hoping to start our human story all over again or, as he put it in *The Second Discourse*, present history as read in the book of nature.<sup>16</sup>

As Shell points out, Rousseau's rewriting of our history, history as it ought to have been, does not convince even himself. And so instead he ended his literary career with what Shell describes as an "alternative view," one in which "the most 'natural' life—or the one that best rises to the challenge of the human situation—lies not in moral virtue, or the reconsideration of society, but reflection and reverie undertaken in solitude."<sup>17</sup> We can find its most developed expression in *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* and his letters to Malesherbes, but Shell also points to a remarkable intrusion of the idea in *Emile*, which she describes as being "surprisingly Epicurean in tone."<sup>18</sup> I would suggest that his Epicureanism is neither out of place nor surprising; rather, it is key to where he succeeds and, ultimately, fails.<sup>19</sup>

I cannot here develop the whole argument about Rousseau's debt to Epicurus other than to point out that the sentiment of existence which so animated his *Reveries* was a fundamental premise as early as the *Second Discourse*. Civilized man, he explained, is at the mercy of others because "it is, so to speak, from their judgment alone that he draws the sentiment of his own existence."<sup>20</sup> Moreover, and to paint with a very large brush, the sentiment of existence is a good because it is pleasant. Pleasure, and especially the simple, unadorned pleasures of *amour de soi* which Rousseau identified with natural man are replaced by those we cannot control when, as *amour propre*, we make the impossible demand that others love us more than themselves.<sup>21</sup> His project, which resulted in solitude, was to find a way to recover the original pleasure of our natural sentiments in common with others.

As I have already claimed, the power of Rousseau's writing comes from his direct appeal to sentiments rather than to reasoning. And I think it is no mere coincidence that the influence and popularity of his works, in his day and subsequently, corresponds to their ability to reflect sentiments we share and know well. So, for instance, his identification and analysis of *amour propre* is so arresting because it is so true to life. At the risk of identifying one age as more bourgeois than another, our present world of social media is perfectly captured by Allan Bloom's description of the one "who, when dealing with others, thinks only of himself, and on the other hand, in his understanding of himself, thinks only of others."<sup>22</sup> From my experience

introducing this idea to students, they get it. They love this part of Rousseau because they feel it more than they understand it. What of the "alternative view," that of the solitary walker? Even Rousseau had a hard time sharing this experience. Perhaps a solitary experience, by definition, cannot be shared. Or, in the words of Eric Voegelin, to attempt is "worse than futile: it is the desecration of a mystery."<sup>23</sup>

The tone of *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* is notably less confident and even a little apologetic. Here is the author relating one of his most important experiences: "What then was this happiness, and in what did its enjoyment consist? I shall let it be guessed at by all the men of this century, from the description of the life which I led there."<sup>24</sup> The author of the *Discourses* would not have left so much to chance. Why must he do so? Here is another passage from his reveries:

I rowed into the midst of the lake, when the water was calm; and there, stretching myself out at full length in the boat, my eyes turned towards heaven, I let myself go and wander about slowly at the will of the water, sometimes during many hours, plunged into a thousand confused but delicious reveries, which, without having any will-determined object, nor constancy, did not fail to be in my opinion a hundred times preferable to all that I have found sweetest in what are called the pleasures of life.<sup>25</sup>

How easy is it for us to share this experience? We might have felt something like it, but few have found a moment like this to be "a hundred times preferable" to all other pleasures in life. The problem with Rousseau's account of this "alternative view" is that he has become guilty of *reasoning* himself into a conclusion that *reason* rejects. From his earlier perspective this, and anything produced by such reasoning, is as much as to quote without irony Chico's line from *Duck Soup* (1933): "Who you gonna believe, me or your own eyes?"

Chico's question is a great leveler. It deflates the pretensions of one who claims to know more than another or of one who offers an argument someone else cannot understand. As the most comical version of an argument from authority, it also fits with Tocqueville's observation that "as citizens become more equal and alike, the penchant of each to believe blindly a certain man or class diminishes."<sup>26</sup> The critique of reasoning that animates so much of Rousseau's work prior to his *Reveries* can easily become, or at least sit comfortably beside, democratic egalitarianism. This part of his work is particularly suited to a democratic age, and it is no accident that among Rousseau's legacies is what Shell calls an "unreservedly egalitarian orientation" in contemporary moral theory.

Where does this leave the possibility, the alternative, of the solitary walker? Shell concludes her reflections with the tantalizing suggestion that Rousseau's deepest thoughts present "an alternative philosophical trajectory, de-



voted to a solitary quest for happiness through self-knowledge."<sup>27</sup> It is in this context that she introduces us to his distinction between reasoning and reason that I have relied upon throughout, suggesting that self-knowledge is to be found through the latter. Because I agree with her regarding the importance of the distinction and thank her for helping us to reflect upon it, I offer three questions for further reflection.

First, it seems that for Rousseau to remain himself he cannot abandon the place of sentiment for reason alone. To put it crudely, to replace Rousseau's sentimentality with reason would make him too much like Kant. But if reason in his precise form must still attend closely to the sentiments, especially to the sentiment of existence, how do the two relate? What comes to mind is a phrase from one of his heirs. Would we be looking at a Rousseauian version of Rawls' "reflective equilibrium"?

Second, if the mature Rousseau thought, in Shell's words, that the most natural life "lies not in moral virtue, or the reconstitution of society, but reflection and reverie undertaken in solitude," what is left to distinguish him from Epicurus? The earlier Rousseau—the Rousseau of virtue as seen in *The Discourses*, *The Social Contract*, and *Emile*—was the inspiration for Jacques-Louis David as well as Kant and the other philosophers already listed. This later Rousseau is the inspiration for Romanticism, a very different legacy. The interesting question, I think, is to what extent Rousseau the solitary walker is a development from or break with Rousseau the citizen of Geneva.

Finally, there is a great deal more to be said about the second half of Rousseau's distinction between reasoning and reason, the half my remarks have ignored completely. If his critique of reasoning [*raisonner*] is as significant as we both believe, what is this thing called reason [*raison*] and how would it work differently to order "all the faculties of our soul suitably to the nature of things and their relations with us"?

## NOTES

1. See Matthew W. Maguire, "Rousseau and Pascal," in *The Challenge of Rousseau*, ed. Eve Grace and Christopher Kelly (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 194ff.

2. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 235.

3. Shell in this volume, 134, quoted from Rousseau, *Moral Letters*, in *Rousseau on Philosophy, Morality, and Religion*, ed. Christopher Kelly (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2007), 80.

4. Eric Voegelin, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 16: *Order and History*, vol. III: *Plato and Aristotle*, ed. Dante Germino (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 418. See also Randall S. Rosenberg's contribution to this volume where he cites Neil Ormerod to the effect that Lonergan sought "something more than an argument, in the sense of conclusions drawn from premises" (217).

5. Plato's account of the philosopher returning to the Cave is the classic account of the disconnect between philosophical insight and public incredulity (517a). A contemporary exam-



ple would be scientific denials of the free will people experience every day. For a recent refutation of these arguments, see Alfred R. Mele, *Free: Why Science Hasn't Disproved Free Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

6. Shell in this volume, 134–135.
7. Rousseau, *Emile*, 215.
8. Rousseau, *Moral Letters*, 84.
9. *Ibid.*, 89.
10. *Ibid.*, 87.
11. An instructive contrast can be found in a passage from Aristotle: "Now in these matters as elsewhere it is by looking at how things develop naturally from the beginning that one may best study them." Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1252a25 (35), quoted by James R. Stoner, Jr. in his contribution to this volume (105).
12. Rousseau, *Emile*, 416.
13. See, for instance, Martin Heidegger, "The Anaximander Fragment," in *Early Greek Thinking: The Dawn of Western Philosophy*, trans. David Farrell Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1975), 27.
14. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, §11.
15. Catherine Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
16. Rousseau, *The Second Discourse*, ed. Roger Masters, 104. See also Rousseau, *Emile*, 416.
17. Shell, 134.
18. *Ibid.*, 133.
19. Here I follow Frederick Vaughan, *The Tradition of Political Hedonism from Hobbes to J.S. Mill* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 113–130.
20. Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, in *The First and Second Discourses*, ed. Roger D. Masters, trans. Roger D. Masters and Judith R. Masters (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964), 179.
21. Rousseau, *Emile*, 214.
22. Allan Bloom, "Introduction," in Rousseau, *Emile*, 5.
23. Voegelin, *Collected Works*, 73.
24. Rousseau, *The Reveries of a Solitary*, trans. John Gould Fletcher (New York: Burt Franklin, 1971), 105–106.
25. *Ibid.*, 109.
26. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. and ed. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 409.
27. Shell, 135.

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