

**Rousseau Rousseau
and et la
Criticism Critique**

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The Coherence of his System: Rousseau's Replies to the Critics of the *Second Discourse*

Rousseau's life contains many valuable lessons about the practical disadvantages of making too many enemies. However, it also illustrates the intellectual advantage that can be drawn from being attacked by a great number of people representing a wide range of points of view. The deluge of criticism from Jesuits and philosophes, defenders of tradition and proponents of innovation allowed Rousseau to pick and choose which attacks he would answer. His selections show his effort to stake out a consistent position that could transcend the differences that divided his opponents.

The storm aroused by the *First Discourse* was so great that it would have taken a life's work to answer all of its critics. Rousseau clearly expresses his view of this multitude of adversaries in his "Final Reply," by declaring, "I dare say that they have never raised a reasonable objection that I did not anticipate and to which I did not reply in advance."¹ In spite of this disdain he spent a good part of two years writing responses to five of these attacks.² These responses to a wide range of attacks solidified the reputation that Rousseau had acquired with the *Discourse*. More importantly, they allowed him to begin to show that the *Discourse* was more than a clever paradox and that a consistent set of principles underlay his conclusions.³

¹"Final Reply," in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, edited by Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1993), Vol. II, p. 110 (Pléiade, Vol. III, p. 72). This edition will be cited as *Collected Writings* with volume number. The introduction to this volume discusses the controversy over the *First Discourse*. For a somewhat different view of the controversy see Robert Wokler, "The Discours sur les sciences et les arts and its Offspring: Rousseau in Reply to his Critics," in *Reappraisals of Rousseau: Studies in Honour of R. A. Leigh*, ed. Simon Harvey et al. (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes & Noble Books, 1980), pp. 250-278.

² Rousseau discusses the way the reception of the *Discourse* absorbed his time in the *Confessions*, Book VIII in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1959-), Vol. I, p. 389. This edition will be cited as Pléiade.

³ On this point, see in particular, *Confessions*, Book VIII, Pléiade, Vol. I, p. 388.

The flurry of controversy that greeted the publication of the *Second Discourse* in 1755 was significant even though it did not match the sensation caused by the *First Discourse*. Although inequality did not find quite as many vehement defenders as the sciences and arts had, those who wrote about the *Second Discourse* were virtually unanimous in their disagreement with the work. Rousseau found these critics to be inferior to those who attacked the *First Discourse*. In the *Confessions* he implicitly dismisses them by saying that the work "found only a few readers who understood it in all of Europe, and none of them who wanted to speak about it."⁴ Nevertheless, what changed most in the several years that separated the publication of the two *Discourses* was less the quality of the criticisms than Rousseau's strategy for responding.

Rousseau did not publish a set of letters, observations, or replies to the critics of the *Second Discourse*. However, although he avoided public controversy, during the twelve months beginning in October of 1755 he could not resist composing answers to three of the most distinguished of his critics. The first of these was the Genevan naturalist Charles Bonnet, who argued for the natural basis of civil society in his "Letter from Mr. Philopolis." The second was the botanist Charles-Georges LeRoy, who relayed what were apparently Buffon's objections to some of the observations on animal behavior in the *Discourse*. The third critic was Voltaire. Of Rousseau's answers, only the letter to Voltaire of August 18, 1756 was actually sent and it was not published until 1760 when it was published without his permission.⁵ When they are considered in relation to each other these answers provide a striking example of Rousseau's effort to transcend the disputes of the day.

The letter to Voltaire is the most remarkable of these responses for a number of reasons. In spite of the fact that it concludes with an invitation to Voltaire to join Rousseau in the project of fostering a genuinely tolerant civil religion, the letter is an important step in Rousseau's rupture with the literary society of which

⁴ *Confessions*, Book VIII, in Pléiade, Vol. I, p. 389.

⁵ On the issue of whether Rousseau's "Letter to Mr. Philopolis" was published shortly after it was written see *op.cit.* Havens, p. 146, n. 16. These works can all be found in *Collected Writings*, Vol. III.

Voltaire was in Rousseau's own words, the "leader."⁶ This step is all the more striking in that it appears quite gratuitous. Unlike Bonnet and LeRoy, Voltaire had not yet made either a public or private attack on the *Discourse*, beyond a few reasonably good-natured jibes in his letter of acknowledgment for the copy Rousseau had had presented to him. In fact, nothing in the letter indicates that Voltaire had taken more than a cursory glance at the *Discourse* by the time he wrote it. At the time, Rousseau had responded to Voltaire's remarks with a gracious good humor. It was only upon his reading of the *Poem on the Lisbon Disaster* and *Poem on Natural Law* that Rousseau decided to regard Voltaire as an opponent of the *Second Discourse*. At first glance this must seem surprising to any reader of the *Discourse* and the *Poems* because the latter works contain no references to the former and there is little reason to believe that Voltaire had Rousseau in mind in his attack on providence and the optimism of Leibniz and Pope since the *Second Discourse* contains no explicit discussion of optimism.

The issue of optimism had been raised first by Charles Bonnet who read the *Second Discourse* as an attack on optimism. Under the guise of Philopolis, Bonnet explicitly presents himself as the ally of the "noble geniuses" Leibniz and Pope.⁷ He accuses Rousseau of being the enemy of their doctrine. In his "Letter to Mr. Philopolis" Rousseau attacks the version of optimism defended by Bonnet. However, less than a year later, in the letter to Voltaire, he imitates Bonnet's approach. His expression of dissatisfaction with Voltaire's poems focuses on their attack on optimism. In the midst of his discussion Rousseau contrasts the *Second Discourse* with Voltaire's bitter denunciation of providence. Having allied himself with Pope and Leibniz, he turns to a critical examination of the details of Voltaire's attack before concluding the letter with the effort at reconciliation. That Rousseau deliberately portrayed himself as a member of the optimist camp is confirmed by his remark in the *Confessions* that Voltaire's ultimate response to the letter was *Candide*, his most biting

⁶ Letter to Voltaire, September 10, 1755 in *Collected Writings*, Vol. III, p. 105 (Pléiade, Vol. III, p. 226).

⁷ *Collected Writings*, Vol. III, p. 124 (Pléiade, Vol. III, p. 1384).

satire on the principle that this is the best of all possible worlds.⁸ Thus in a rather short period of time Rousseau appears as both the defender and the opponent of optimism. This apparent contradiction suggests that Rousseau's defense of and attack on optimism warrant a closer look.

Most of the complexity of Rousseau's position on optimism emerges in the Letter to Philopolis. His argument is less with optimism as such than it is with Philopolis's version. In particular he claims that Philopolis's version is subject to a crucial objection that could not be directed against Leibniz. Philopolis fails to distinguish between general and particular evil and therefore is forced to deny that a particular evil, such as Philopolis suffering a stroke, is a real evil.⁹ The more sensible optimism of Leibniz and Pope relies on the crucial distinction and, while admitting that particular evils are in fact evils, claims that they make a contribution to the good of the whole. Sensible optimism provides a justification of providence in the face of a multitude of particular evils that are impossible to dismiss. Such an optimism does not need to reject efforts to eliminate particular evils and does not lead to the advice offered by Philopolis that we "let the world go on as it does, and be certain that it is going as well as it could go."¹⁰ In short, Rousseau's attack is directed only against a passive complacency which he regards as incompatible with the *Second Discourse* and unnecessary to optimism.¹¹

⁸ *Confessions*, Book IX, Pléiade, Vol. I, p. 430.

⁹ *Collected Writings*, Vol. III, pp. 129-130 (Pléiade, Vol. III, p. 233).

¹⁰ "Letter from Philopolis," *Collected Writings*, Vol. III, p. 124 (Pléiade, Vol. III, p. 1384).

¹¹ It has been argued that the narrative structure of the *Second Discourse* induces a satisfied passivity in the reader. See Dena Goodman, *Criticism in Action: Enlightenment Experiments in Political Writing* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 226. While it is certainly reasonable to argue that Rousseau's view of history that presents little hope for a comprehensive remedy for the human situation, his insistence that his account is specifically intended to bring about a sense of human responsibility suggests that he wished to avoid passivity. Furthermore, there is certainly evidence that readers of the *Discourse*, including those who disagreed with it, have been roused to activity by their reading.

While Rousseau argues that the doctrine of Pope and Leibniz is immune to the objection he raises against Philopolis, he does not go so far as to endorse their position. First he denies--against Pope and Leibniz as well as Philopolis--that providence needs justification from any system of philosophy. Optimism attempts a project that is both beyond its grasp and unnecessary. Finally he argues that, whatever strengths or weaknesses optimism might have, it has no bearing on his position. He says that "it is clear that properly understood optimism has no effect either for or against me."¹² In short, the argument of the *Second Discourse* is quite neutral with regard to the issues raised by sensible optimism.

The neutrality of the *Second Discourse* on the issues addressed by Leibniz and Pope does not commit Rousseau to a policy of forming no alliances. Even though he may not regard optimism as indispensable to the defense of providence, it is no contradiction for him to defend the sensible version against Voltaire's attacks. In fact, he uses some of the same arguments against Voltaire that he used against Philopolis. In particular, he insists that Voltaire, like Philopolis, has missed the crucial distinction between particular and general evil. Philopolis and Voltaire make opposite versions of the same error of making the case for providence depend on their own personal comfort. While Philopolis's effort to defend providence forces him to deny that his having a stroke would be an evil, Voltaire's effort to attack providence forces him to insist that his having a toothache would be proof of the absence of providence. As Rousseau says, "Thus, whatever part nature might take, Providence is always right among the Devout and always wrong among the Philosophers."¹³ Voltaire and Philopolis meet each other on the same ground, but they do not share this ground with either Leibniz or Rousseau. In fact, Rousseau's argument agrees with Voltaire in denying the existence of personal providence; it disagrees in claiming that the issue of personal

¹² "Letter to Philopolis," *Collected Writings*, Vol. III, p. 129 (Pléiade, Vol. III, p. 233).

¹³ Letter to Voltaire, August 18, 1756, *Collected Writings*, Vol. III, p. 116 (Pléiade, Vol. IV, p. 1069). It seems reasonable to regard Bonnet as a spokesman for "the devout" on this question. In the *Confessions*, Rousseau says that Bonnet was in fact a materialist but that he adopted "a very intolerant orthodoxy" in matters that anything to do with Rousseau. See *Confessions*, Book XII, Pléiade Vol. I, p. 632.

providence is of central importance.

While Rousseau uses other arguments against Voltaire which are very different from those in the "Letter to Philopolis," even these are comparable in one respect. Just as he had accused Philopolis of having a poor understanding of the position he is adopting, he accuses Voltaire, the French popularizer of Newton, of having a poor understanding of modern science. To Voltaire's claim that, far from being perfect as optimism required, nature is always imprecise and irregular, Rousseau responds that only nature is precise and regular and that its apparent irregularity is only a consequence of our ignorance of its laws. In effect Voltaire denies that nature follows regular laws, which Rousseau argues amounts to asserting "that there are some actions without a principle and some effects without a cause; which is repugnant to all philosophy."¹⁴ Even when Voltaire is being a better physicist, as in his denial of a universal fluid in space, he is unnecessarily dogmatic. He refuses to acknowledge that even the most persuasive scientific theories are subject to revision in the face of new discoveries. In short, Voltaire's adherence to science betrays an unscientific dogmatism that rivals that of his devout targets.

The consistency of Rousseau's position in his responses to Voltaire and Philopolis is shown best by his attacks against dogmatism whether it comes from the side of the devout or that of the philosophers. His expressions of approval toward optimism are based on its consoling character rather than on any claim it makes to being rationally defensible. As he says with regard to the question of whether the whole is good, "Then it is quite evident that no man would know how to give direct proof either for or against; for these proofs depend on a perfect knowledge of the constitution of the world and of the purpose of its Author, and this knowledge is incontestably above human intelligence."¹⁵ Even when he expresses a preference for one of the competing views, his preference is based on a skepticism or neutrality about the alternatives as they are asserted by the dogmatists on either side.

Another way of putting this, which Rousseau also uses in one

¹⁴ "Letter to Voltaire," *Collected Writings*, Vol. III, pp. 112-113 (Pléiade, Vol. IV, p. 1065).

¹⁵ "Letter to Voltaire," *Collected Writings*, Vol. III, p. 115 (Pléiade, Vol. IV, p. 1068).

of the versions of the letter to Voltaire, is that on matters in which reason provides no grounds for being convinced one chooses what is most persuasive.¹⁶ Persuasion, however, is not so much a guess about the way things are as it is an image about the way they ought to be.¹⁷ There are very strong moral reasons for attacking Voltaire's attack on optimism and allowing people a consoling view of the world as long as this view does not lead to the passivity Rousseau condemned in Philopolis's doctrine.

One of the responses to LeRoy shows the extent to which Rousseau's position can be considered as a sort of substitute for optimism. LeRoy objected to Rousseau's assertion that carnivores have an advantage over frugivores in finding food and had accused him of naively asserting that "everything is well regulated in nature."¹⁸ After defending his position on carnivores, Rousseau responded that his general conclusion about nature was not dependent on this particular issue. He continues, "Besides, whatever can be observed about particular facts, the proof that all is well organized is taken from a general and incontrovertible fact, which is that all the species continue to exist." This claim that nature follows general rules, resulting in the continued existence of species despite individual death and harm, is a much weaker and easily testable version of the optimist claim that the whole is good, as is evident from the fact that it is broadly compatible with recent neo-Darwinian theories of evolution.¹⁹

¹⁶ *Collected Writings*, Vol. III, p. 118 (Pléiade, Vol. IV, p. 1071).

¹⁷ See *Social Contract*, Book II, Ch. VII, Pléiade, Vol. III, 381-384. For Rousseau's distinction between persuasion and conviction, see Christopher Kelly, "'To Persuade without Convincing': The Language of Rousseau's Legislator," *American Journal of Political Science*, 31 (May 1987), pp. 321-335.

¹⁸ Reply to LeRoy's Observations, *Collected Writings*, Vol. III, p. 134 (Pléiade, Vol. III, p. 237).

¹⁹ Although the phenomenon of extinction central to Darwin's theory of evolution contradicts this point, Rousseau himself seems primarily concerned with the demonstration that natural variability is the result of rules or regularities. For example, Rousseau's specific point about the natural rules for foraging among different species parallels contemporary studies in the field of behavioral ecology. See *Collected Writings*, Vol. III, p. 199, note 5

This account of Rousseau's neutrality between the friends and opponents of optimism sheds light on the central issue of the *Second Discourse*, natural goodness. The doctrine of natural goodness could be considered as a metaphysically neutral replacement for optimism. It does not make the strongest of the claims on behalf of providence made by Leibniz and Pope; nor is it subject to the objections made by opponents like Voltaire. Its neutrality on the issues of providence, the existence of God, and whether this is the best of all possible worlds makes it more rationally defensible. Finally, the term has connotations that make it serve rhetorically as a vindication of nature or providence.

Using skepticism to give support to a consoling, but non-provable, doctrine is characteristic of Rousseau's thought. Staking out a position that is both morally salutary and neutral to the dogmatic alternatives is a major part of his effort to change the terms of debate between the enlightenment and its opponents. At the outset of the *First Discourse*, he made clear his opposition to both the dogmatic faith of the fanatics and the dogmatic skepticism of the philosophes: "At all times there will be men destined to be subjugated by the opinions of their century, their Country, their Society. A man who plays the free Thinker and Philosopher today would, for the same reason, have been only a fanatic at the time of the League."²⁰ Throughout his life, he sought a form of philosophic inquiry that could challenge convention in the name of nature without thereby undermining sound morals.

The prime example of this characteristic within the *Second Discourse* itself is perfectibility, Rousseau's newly invented term to describe the distinctive human characteristic. Although he introduces this subject with a vivid praise of freedom of will, he quickly drops free will from his discussion because of "the difficulties surrounding all these questions."²¹ Perfectibility has the advantage of being neutral

to p. 134. For the recent neo-Darwinian account of such rules, see Robert Trivers, *Social Evolution* (Menlo Park, California: Benjamin/Cummings, 1985) and--for human applications --Eric Alden Smith and Bruce Winterhalder, editors, *Evolutionary Ecology and Human Behavior* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1992).

²⁰ *Collected Writings*, Vol. II, p. 3 (Pléiade, Vol. III, p. 4).

²¹ *Second Discourse*, *Collected Writings*, Vol. III, p. 26 (Pléiade, Vol. III, p. 142).

to the metaphysical dispute between the materialists who deny free will and the different sorts of anti-materialists who assert it.²² In fact, Rousseau's doctrine of perfectibility allows him to combine apparently opposing characteristics of the two alternatives to which he remains neutral. On the one hand, perfectibility is close enough to materialism to allow him to claim that humans are to a very large extent determined by the external environment in which they live. Thus he can respond to Philopolis's claim that society is the natural result of the development of human faculties by saying that the state of society "is derived from the nature of the human race, not immediately as you say but only, as I have proved, with the help of certain external circumstances that may or may not happen."²³ On the other hand, perfectibility is close enough to free will to allow Rousseau to insist that the particular form of unnatural human development triggered by changes in the external environment is subject to human control and, therefore, that humanity has only itself (i.e. neither nature nor God) to blame for its vices. Thus he can respond to Voltaire's charge that the *Second Discourse* is a "book against the human race" by saying that "in depicting human miseries, my purpose was excusable, and even praiseworthy, as I believe, for I showed men how they caused their miseries themselves and consequently how they might avoid them."²⁴ This explanation consists in distinguishing "physical evils" (unavoidable particular events that are "inevitable in any system of which man is a part") from "moral evils"--and then by tracing moral evil to humans as a species that is "free, perfected, thereby corrupted:" (and hence responsible for the greatest part of such evils as those accompanying the Lisbon earthquake). As is the case for the issue of optimism, Rousseau's neutrality or skepticism about the reasonableness of the case against and for free will gives him the ability to stake out

²² On Rousseau's metaphysical neutrality, or "detachable metaphysics," see Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), pp. 265-266 and especially Roger D. Masters, *The Political Philosophy of Rousseau* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968), pp. 66-74.

²³ "Letter to Philopolis," *Collected Writings*, Vol. III, p. 128 (Pléiade, Vol. III, p. 232).

²⁴ "Letter to Voltaire," *Collected Writings*, Vol. III, p. 109 (Pléiade, Vol. IV, p. 1061).

a position immune to criticisms from either side, while lending rhetorical support to the more salutary of the opposing positions.

This complexity also helps to explain Rousseau's political theory which was elaborated at the same time and in the context of these rejoinders to more metaphysical criticisms. While the theological origin of the term "general will" is well known, the underlying distinction between the general and the particular on which Rousseau's famous political concept rests were elaborated in defending his explanation of human evil. Hence, the grounds for natural goodness also provide a basis for civic virtue: even apart from the rare cases in which genuinely legitimate political institutions can be established, virtuous political action is open to humans in the form of slowing the inevitable progress of political corruption.²⁵

In sum, an analysis of Rousseau's responses to the critics of the *Second Discourse* reveals a systematic strategy of constructive neutrality on the issues that most divided his contemporaries, a strategy that guided Rousseau throughout his literary career and which to a large degree succeeded in reshaping intellectual debate in the late Eighteenth Century. By neglecting to publish these responses, Rousseau took the advice he offered Voltaire during this period, "The more you are criticized, the more you should make yourself admired. A good book is a devastating reply to printed insults."²⁶ Thus, instead of engaging in a pamphlet war with people like his former confidante Pere Castel (author of a critique of the *Discourse* entitled "L'Homme moral opposé a l'homme physique"), Rousseau settled into the Hermitage and labored on his many literary projects, ultimately producing *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, *Emile*, and the *Social Contract*. These works, which include an extensive rejoinder to the criticisms of Diderot, must ultimately be regarded as the best defenses of the *Discourse on Inequality*.²⁷

²⁵ See "Final Reply," in *Collected Writings*, Vol. II, esp. pp. 125-128 (Pléiade, Vol. III, pp. 92-95).

²⁶ "Letter to Voltaire, September 10, 1755 in *Collected Writings*, Vol. III, p. 107 (Pléiade, Vol. III, p. 228). Not long afterwards he offered the same advice to Diderot. See *Confessions*, Book IX, Pléiade, Vol. I, p. 460.

²⁷ The "Geneva Manuscript" of the *Social Contract* in particular contains an important direct response to Diderot's *Encyclopedia* article "Natural Right" which disagrees with important parts of the argument of the

One example will suffice to illustrate the way Rousseau continued the strategy we have called constructive neutrality in these later works. Rousseau began contemplating *Nouvelle Héloïse* at approximately the same time he was writing the Letter to Voltaire. When he tells the story of the composition of this work in the *Confessions* Rousseau indicates that he decided to give his novel the political purpose of softening the mutual hatred of the devout and the Encyclopedists by destroying their prejudices against each other.²⁸ In the same context he indicates the dangers of this tactic. Rather than simply avoiding the disputes between the opposing parties or even bringing about their reconciliation, Rousseau's new system caused them to unite in opposition to him. The neutral who offered advice to both sides became their mutual enemy and ultimately suffered the consequences. He did, however, have considerable success at persuading a new generation of readers that the old disputes were irrelevant and that they should conceive of their problems in new terms.

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Second Discourse. An examination of the disagreement between Diderot and Rousseau is beyond the scope of this essay. For a brief discussion see *Collected Writings*, Vol. III, pp. xxii-xxiii.

²⁸ *Confessions*, Book IX, Pléiade, Vol. I, p. 436.