

**Rousseau
and
Criticism**

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Critique**

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Lorraine Clark and Guy Lafrance

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Rousseau And La Fontaine: Postponing The Time Of Fables

How can people be so blinded as to call fables the morality of children?...Fables can instruct men, but the naked truth has to be told to children.

Emile II.112

In *Emile* II, Rousseau objects--quite vigorously, in fact--to the common practice of requiring children to learn the fables of La Fontaine. For, he argues, 'there is not a single child who understands them;' and this is because, no matter what effort is made to simplify them, the instruction that one wants to draw from them compels the introduction of ideas he cannot grasp; and because poetry's very skill at making them easier for him to retain makes them difficult for him to conceive, so that one buys delight at the expense of clarity. [E.113] My primary concern in this paper is to elaborate and explicate this argument. But I must emphasize that Rousseau is *not* rejecting La Fontaine's fables *per se*, as Allan Bloom suggests, but rather the practice of requiring children to learn (or at least memorize) these fables.

Bloom claims, first, 'that since La Fontaine had compared himself to Socrates in the Preface to his *Fables*, Rousseau's rejection of La Fontaine's tales is also the rejection of Socrates' argument about the teaching of tales to children;¹ and second, 'that since La Fontaine says--again in his Preface--that the parables of Jesus are species of the genus *apologue* (which is a synonym for fable) and since he also suggests that all apologues are god-sent, Rousseau's rejection of fables aims beyond La Fontaine or even Socrates.' [cf. E.484, endnotes 34,35; emphasis mine.] Both of these observations are misleading, since Rousseau clearly objects to the assumption that children could understand La Fontaine's fables and to the practice of requiring children to memorize these fables, but not to the fables themselves. In fact, Rousseau revisits La Fontaine's fables in *Emile* IV, where he

¹ Since Socrates' argument is to "persuade nurses and mothers to tell the approved tales to their children and to shape their souls with tales more than their bodies with hands" [*Republic* 377c]--that is, to encourage the use of selected, even censored stories--Rousseau's rejection of the putative use of La Fontaine's tales in moral instruction is more or less equivalent to a rejection of Socrates' argument. But what Bloom suggests here is something rather different.

shows how they can and should be used to help adolescents acquire moral knowledge.

Rousseau, then, postpones rather than rejects the use of La Fontaine's fables in moral instruction. His reasons for postponing the time of fables 'do aim beyond La Fontaine or even Socrates,' as Bloom remarks, though perhaps not so far as to the gods. For it was Locke who assumed that children were capable of understanding La Fontaine's fables;² it was Locke who assumed that children could comprehend and engage in moral reasoning. Indeed, contends Rousseau, "to reason with children was Locke's great maxim." [E.89] Locke, therefore, is the ultimate target of Rousseau's argument against requiring children to learn La Fontaine's fables.

I. Before the Age of Reason

Rousseau's argument, as sketched above, has an intermediate conclusion--that (pre-adolescent) children do not understand fables--which is supported by two further premises. The first is 'that the instruction one wants to draw from fables compels the introduction of ideas children cannot grasp.' The kind of instruction to which Rousseau alludes here is, of course, moral instruction--the inculcation of moral values, but also engagement in moral reasoning; and the ideas which must be introduced in order for such instruction to proceed involve moral beings and their social relations. But why does Rousseau insist that children are incapable of grasping, or even having, such ideas 'before the age of reason'? [E.89]

By 'the age of reason' Rousseau means that stage of cognitive and moral development in which the individual acquires the capacity "to generalize ideas, and to engage in the quest for abstract and

² Actually, Locke recommends Aesop's *Fables* and *Reynard the Fox* as appropriate for the moral instruction of young children--indeed, for combining such instruction with their learning to read. He does not specifically mention La Fontaine. However, Pierre Coste substituted La Fontaine's *Fables* for *Reynard the Fox*, beginning with the 1708 edition of his translation of Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. Accordingly, since this or some subsequent edition would most likely be the one Rousseau had read, he would have assumed that Locke endorsed La Fontaine's *Fables* for the purpose of inculcating moral values in small children. (Cf. Ross Hutchison, *Locke in France: 1688-1734* Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1991).

speculative truths, principles and axioms in the sciences."[E.386] Complementing this ability, which Rousseau identifies as theoretical reason, is practical reason, or the ability to comprehend the domain of moral beings and their social relations but also to form judgments regarding the moral qualities of such beings and the rightness or wrongness of their actions. According to Rousseau, this 'age of reason' begins at 12 years (i.e., at puberty): it is then that children begin to display the complementary abilities of generalizing ideas and forming moral judgments; it is then that they acquire intellectual or human reason (which is the combination of theoretical and practical reason).

Before the age of (intellectual) reason, children possess 'a reason of the senses.' [E.125] Rousseau *qua* tutor initiates quite an extensive program of games and situations intended to cultivate Emile's childish, sensual reason--a cognitive ability which includes 'learning to make use of the senses but also learning to judge well with them.' [E.132] Such judgments, which derive from measurements of the relations of one's own body to other perceivable objects in one's environment, comprise "a sort of experimental physics relative to the individual's preservation." [E.125] In other words, sensual reason is linked to prudential reasoning. As Rousseau remarks,

I am...very far from thinking that children have no kind of reasoning. On the contrary, I see that they reason very well in everything that relates to their immediate and palpable interest.[E.108]

And so, cultivating the pre-adolescent child's capacity to perceive, and to form judgments about, the natural relations of objects and thereby what is conducive to self-preservation, is quite apposite to the development of a capacity to understand, and to form judgments about, the social relations and moral qualities of persons. 'Sensual reason can serve as the basis of intellectual reason.' [E.125] But these two kinds of reason are distinct and develop sequentially. Rousseau insists that

the greatest, the most important, the most useful rule of all education...is not to gain time but to lose it...If children jumped all at once from the breast to the age of reason, the education they are given might be suitable for them...But, according to the natural progress, they need an entirely contrary one. They ought to do nothing with their soul until all of its faculties have developed, because while the soul is yet blind, it cannot perceive the torch you are presenting to it or follow the path reason maps out across the

vast plain of ideas...[E.93]

More specifically, the use of fables as an ingredient in moral education should be postponed until the child is capable of generalizing ideas and forming sound moral judgments about persons and their relations.³

In his line-by-line analysis of one of La Fontaine's most popular fables, "The Raven and the Fox," Rousseau identifies several terms that would be unfamiliar to children, or that are used figuratively or satirically; and misunderstanding could result in either case. But he also adds the following claims about the fable's moral: first, that since it is formulated as a general maxim, children will not understand what that entails--i.e., they have yet to learn what is involved in generalizing ideas; second, that even a ten-year-old child will fail to grasp what is meant by the moral itself ('that every flatterer lives at the expense of the one who listens to him'); and third, that few children will be able to comprehend the mockery involved in La Fontaine's statement regarding the value of the moral.[E.115] If confirmed, these claims would seem to justify the first premise of Rousseau's argument--'that the moral instruction one wants to draw from fables compels the introduction of ideas the child cannot grasp.' From which Rousseau concludes 'that a child does not understand the fables he is made to learn.'[E.113]

The second premise for this conclusion is 'that poetry's very

³ Rousseau acknowledges that it is "impossible to bring a child along to the age of twelve in the bosom of society without giving him some idea of the relations of man to man and of the morality of human actions. It is enough if one takes pains to ensure that these notions become necessary to him as late as possible and, when their presentation is unavoidable, to limit them to immediate utility, with the sole intention of preventing him from believing himself master of everything and from doing harm to others without scruple and without knowing it."[E.97] Certainly, to make young children learn fables as the means of inculcating moral values is directly contrary to what Rousseau urges here--'taking pains to postpone moral instruction as long as possible.' But he also alludes to two exceptions, that is, two valid reasons for engaging pre-adolescent children in moral instruction: one is to prevent the occurrence of unconstrained *amour-propre*; the other, to inculcate the principle of non-harming--which is "the only lesson of morality appropriate to childhood, and the most important for every age."[E.104] To avoid inconsistency, Rousseau would have to urge that such moral instruction be undertaken without any attempt to engage children in moral *reasoning*.

skill at making fables easier for the child to retain makes them difficult for him to conceive, so that one buys delight at the expense of clarity.[E.113] Presumably, Rousseau's point is that since La Fontaine's fables are rhymed, they will be easier to memorize, and consequently the child can 'learn' to recite a fable without learning what it means. This point seems much less controversial than the first premise, and readily supports the conclusion--'that a child does not understand the fables he is made to learn.'

Again, this is an intermediate conclusion which supports the more fundamental thesis that children should not be required to 'learn'--that is, to memorize--La Fontaine's fables. But Rousseau's second premise, regarding easy memorization, leads to another, even more crucial intermediate conclusion. In *Emile* IV, Rousseau observes that

not only have I never seen children make any solid application of the fables they learned, but I have never seen anyone take care to get them to make this application. The pretext of this study is moral instruction, but the true object of the mother and the child is only to get a whole gathering to pay attention to him reciting his fables.[E.249]

To be sure, this object is pernicious, since it can inflame a child's *amour-propre*. Rousseau contends that

up to the time when the guide of *amour-propre*, which is reason, can be born, it is important for a child to do nothing because he is seen or heard--nothing, in a word, in relation to others...[E.92,93]

Thus, another reason for not requiring children to memorize fables is to preclude, or at least discourage, that exacerbation of unconstrained *amour-propre* which would result when they recite a fable and then receive the expected praise. This difficulty would occur because, presumably, it is intellectual reason whose birth, at age twelve, is essential to the proper governance of *amour-propre*. Or, to put it another way, the fact that memorization can occur without understanding allows for the possibility of a display of what the child has 'learned' with praise for its precocity, when all it has really

learned is to repeat some words that rhyme.⁴

II. During the Age of Reason

Rousseau revisits La Fontaine's fables and the question of their use in moral instruction in *Emile* IV, and perhaps unsurprisingly this reconsideration is occasioned by the need to avoid inflaming Emile's *amour-propre* beyond the capacity of his reason to govern it. "The time of mistakes is the time of fables," writes Rousseau, and especially the mistake involved in assuming superiority over others. For this is the work of an unconstrained *amour-propre*. How, then, can the study of fables help in this situation? How can fables contribute to the acquisition of moral knowledge?

First, Rousseau indicates that by censuring the guilty party under an alien mask, one instructs him without offending him; and he understands then, from the truth which he applies to himself, that the apologue is not a lie. The child who has never been deceived by

⁴ Rousseau supplies an example of this problem, though what is recited (or related) is a story from Plutarch rather than one of La Fontaine's fables. A child has 'learned' a story from his tutor, and "at table they did not fail, according to the French method, to make the little gentleman babble a great deal. The vivacity natural to his age, along with the *expectation of certain applause*, made him reel off countless stupidities, in the midst of which from time to time there came a few lucky words which caused the rest to be forgotten. Finally came the story...He told it quite clearly and with much grace. After *the ordinary tribute of praises exacted by the mother and expected by the son*, there was discussion about what he had said." Rousseau subsequently confirms his suspicion "that my young doctor had understood nothing at all of the story he had told so well." (Or rather, his understanding of the story involved applying it to a recent experience of his own, to his own 'immediate and palpable interest.' Rousseau doesn't make this point explicit, but it is implied in the example itself.) How could it be otherwise? For "can anyone believe that the relations which determine historical facts are so easy to grasp that ideas are effortlessly formed from the facts in children's minds?" [E.110,111; Emphasis mine.] This episode is exactly parallel to the sort of case in which 'a mother and her child get a whole gathering to pay attention to him reciting his fables.' [E.249] Incidentally, N.J.H. Dent offers an illuminating discussion on 'inflamed *amour-propre*' in his recent *Rousseau: An Introduction to his Psychological, Social and Political Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1988).

praise understands nothing of the fable I examined earlier [to wit, La Fontaine's "The Raven and the Fox"]. But the giddy young man who has just been the dupe of a flatterer conceives marvellously that the raven was only a fool. Thus, from a fact he draws a maxim; and by means of the fable the experience he would soon have forgotten is imprinted on his judgment. [E.247,248]

Rousseau alludes here to his decision to replicate Emile's adventure with the magician by exposing him to flatterers, fools, and swindlers in order to prove to him that he is no wiser than others. [E.245] The original adventure, which involved the first manifestation of Emile's vanity as well as his discovery of the principle of magnetism (cf. E.172-175), occurred 'before the age of reason,' and the tutor had then to secure the mortification of Emile's vanity more directly. Now, when Emile has reached 'the age of reason,' the tutor can 'censure him under an alien mask': that is, he has Emile read "The Raven and the Fox," which Emile readily applies to his recent experience of being the dupe of a flatterer, thereby reinforcing the maxim--or generalized motive--he had (or should have) drawn from the experience. In other words, fables can be used very effectively to complement experience, so that the lessons to be drawn from one's mistakes are underscored by the equivalent lessons in the stories.

Such an application is appropriate whenever the risks involved in a possible experience are acceptable, or, in Rousseau's words, "when the test is inconsequential." But 'in circumstances where the experience would be too dangerous, one can draw one's lesson directly from the story instead.' [E.248] And so, a second application of fables in moral instruction would be as a substitute for, rather than as a complement to, experience. But again, 'the lesson one draws from a fable' would be in the form of a maxim which generalizes the motive in the particular situation the story is about.⁵

⁵ Rousseau's account of a maxim as a generalized motive or intention anticipates Kant's more extensive discussion of the role of maxims in determining one's moral obligations. One need only consider the initial formulation of the categorical imperative: "Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." And then proceed to the second formulation, the so-called 'universal imperative of duty,' together with the four thought-experiments that illustrate its application. Cf. Lewis White Beck, tr., Immanuel Kant: *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals and What is Enlightenment?* (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1959), pp. 39-42.

Rousseau adds two recommendations regarding the use of fables in moral instruction. First, the activity of framing an appropriate maxim, or in other words, of drawing the moral, from a fable should be the work of the person being instructed rather than the author of the fable. Accordingly, Rousseau indicates that

before putting this inimitable author's fables into a young man's hands, I would want to cut out all these conclusions where La Fontaine makes an effort to explain what he has just said no less clearly than agreeably.[E.248]⁶

And second, Rousseau recommends giving

these fables an order that is more didactic and more in conformity with the progress of the young adolescent's sentiments and understanding. Can one conceive of anything less reasonable than following exactly the numerical order of the book without regard to need or occasion?[E.248]

I would suggest that at least some of the maxims which can be derived from La Fontaine's fables in accordance with the procedure Rousseau recommends could be used to reinforce and clarify those thought-experiments. In other words, the student of Kant's moral philosophy might find helpful Rousseau's recommendation that fables be used to identify suitable maxims, and thereby acquire moral knowledge. In addition the student might consider the three maxims Rousseau formulates as guidelines for nurturing compassion in adolescents. [cf. E.223-226]

⁶ According to La Fontaine, "an apologue is composed of two parts, of which one may be called its body and the other its soul. The body is the Fable, and the soul the Moral." He proceeds to indicate that he has occasionally "dispensed with the moral, but only where I could not bring it in gracefully, and the reader could easily supply it." And he appeals to Horace as warrant for doing so: viz., "in a passage where he [Horace] tells us that a writer must not struggle too obstinately against the insufficiency of his wit or the intractability of his material..." [Preface] In other words, La Fontaine has not supplied the moral in cases where the difficulties of composition were insuperable. Rousseau would have preferred that the moral be left out in all cases, so that the recipient of moral instruction would have a greater opportunity to exercise his/her developing capacity to formulate maxims. Incidentally, Perrault added morals to most of his fairy tales; in fact, he sometimes added two morals at the end of a tale.

Rousseau does not supply any particular sequence of La Fontaine's fables, perhaps because the sequence would need to be individualized but also because there are such a great many fables to consider. But it is clear that he regards these fables as an especially valuable resource for moral instruction--at least, when the time is right.

III. Rousseau contra Locke

I have sketched Rousseau's argument against requiring pre-adolescent children to learn La Fontaine's fables, and then his reasons for incorporating a study of these very fables into a program of moral instruction for adolescents. Together, these considerations show that Rousseau postpones, rather than rejects, the study of fables. And of much else, of course: history, politics, biography, ethics and religion--all are to be deferred until adolescence. For, he contends, only when children reach puberty are they really equipped with theoretical and practical reason. Only then can they understand the abstract principles and general ideas involved in these fields of inquiry. And only then will reason have developed to the point where it can govern *amour-propre*.

La Fontaine himself seems to believe that his fables can help pre-adolescent children--including the Dauphin, to whom they were dedicated--acquire moral understanding. He even contends that 'we cannot be too early accustomed to wisdom and virtue, and it is for this reason that Plato gave Aesop a place of honour in the Republic from which he banished Homer.' But he also employs the following analogy: 'that just as we use the definitions of point, line, superficies and other familiar elements to attain the knowledge by which in the end we measure earth and heaven, so by the arguments and inferences which can be drawn from these Fables we form our judgment and our character, and make ourselves capable of great things.' [Preface to *Fables*] Now geometry is not usually studied until after children reach puberty; and likewise, whatever else children might do with fables, one may question whether they 'draw arguments and inferences' or even maxims (*qua* generalized motives) from them. Thus La Fontaine is less decisive on this point than at first appears.

But I have suggested that, in any case, Rousseau's consideration of La Fontaine's fables is an extension of his quarrel with Locke, and specifically 'Locke's great maxim: to reason with children.' [E.89] Rousseau's objections to this maxim, which implies that pre-adolescent children are capable of understanding and engaging

in moral reasoning, are twofold. First, he claims that Locke and his disciples invert the order of nature regarding the process of cognitive development: 'to raise a child by reason is to begin with the end, to want to make the product the instrument; if children understood reason, they would not need to be raised.'[E.89] In other words, children do not and cannot understand moral reasoning, since their rational capacity has not yet progressed to that point. So too, of course, they cannot be expected to derive any moral instruction from La Fontaine's fables.

Unfortunately, Rousseau is guilty of the straw-man fallacy in his formulation of this first objection to Locke. Consider Locke's explicit proviso that

when I talk of *Reasoning* [with children], I do not intend any other, but such as is suited to the Child's Capacity and Apprehension. No Body can think a Boy of Three, or Seven Years old, should be argued with, as a grown Man. Long Discourses, and Philosophical Reasonings, at best, amaze and confound, but do not instruct Children. When I say, therefore, that they must be *treated as Rational Creatures*, I mean, that you should make them sensible by the Mildness of your Carriage, and the Composure even in your Correction of them, that what you do is reasonable in you, and useful and necessary for them...[ST.81]

Locke does add that an adult may supply 'such Reasons as the children's Age and Understanding are capable of...' [ST.81] But these reasons could be prudential rather than moral, which would be entirely consistent with Rousseau's account of cognitive and moral development. Accordingly, Rousseau's first objection applies only to a distorted version of Locke's position and not the version Locke himself presents (and this, of course, is what the straw-man fallacy involves).

Rousseau's second objection refers to the dangers involved when reason (that is, intellectual reason) is not sufficiently developed so that it might constrain and guide *amour-propre*. Thus, he reminds Locke (not to mention Locke's many disciples) that

by speaking to [children] from an early age a language which they do not understand, one accustoms them to show off with words, to control all that is said to them, to believe themselves as wise as their masters, to become disputatious and rebellious...[E.89]

'Showing off with words!' But as already noted, Rousseau identifies that as the real reason children are made to learn--that is, to memorize and recite--fables, and not moral instruction. And he thinks the dangers involved to be quite real as well.

This objection, I think, comes much closer to the mark. For instance, the proviso I cited a moment ago is attached to Locke's recognition that

it will perhaps be wondered that I mention *Reasoning* with children: And yet I cannot but think that the true Way of Dealing with them. They understand it as early as they do Language; and, if I misobserve not, they love to be treated as Rational Creatures sooner than is imagined. 'Tis a Pride should be cherished in them, and, as much as can be, made the great Instrument to turn them by.[ST.81]

Elsewhere, Locke discusses this 'great Instrument'--that is, the child's desire to be praised and to avoid shame and disgrace--at greater length; and he explicitly endorses the application of these incentives as 'the great Secret of Education.'[ST.56] Or again, he argues that

since we are all, even from our Cradles, vain and proud Creatures, let their Vanity be flattered with things that will do them good; and let their Pride set them on work on something which may turn to their advantage.[ST.119]

In other words, Locke advocates the very thing that Rousseau inveighs against: namely, to encourage rather than constrain the development of *amour-propre* before reason has advanced to the point that it can govern that ever-dangerous passion.

In sum, Rousseau's quarrel with Locke involves two points: that Locke encourages adults to engage children in moral reasoning, which is beyond their capacity; and that Locke encourages adults to nurture children's pride as the means of governing them. I consider Rousseau's objection to the second point as much the more persuasive, and not least because his account of the utility of La Fontaine's fables in the moral education of adolescents specifically addresses the problem of constraining *amour-propre*, while his argument against requiring pre-adolescent children to memorize and recite these fables includes the idea that this practice exacerbates the child's nascent *amour-propre*. In other words, the more plausible aspect of Rousseau's thesis that the time for applying fables in moral instruction should be postponed supports a more effective response to Locke.

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