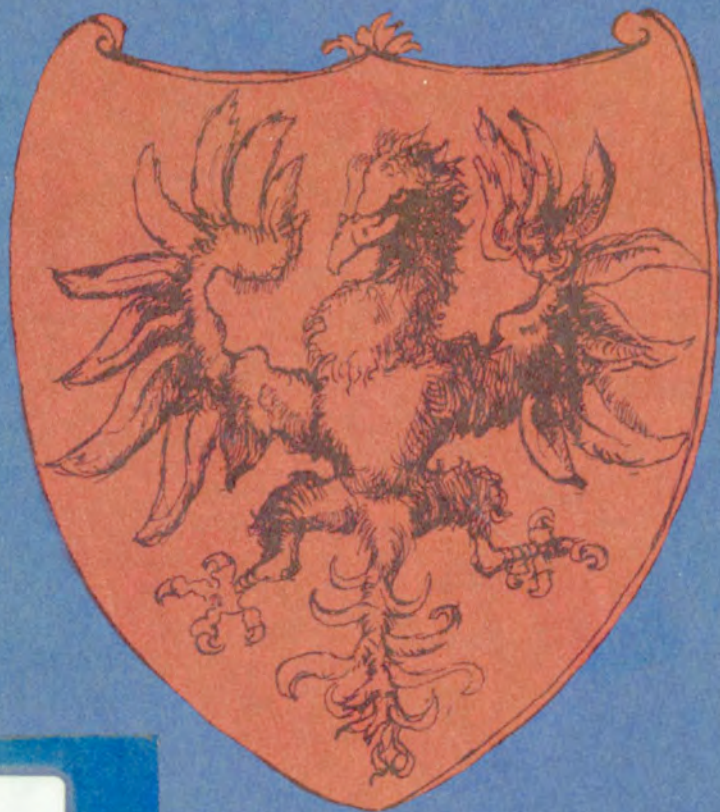


# ROUSSEAU, KANT AND GOETHE

by

ERNST CASSIRER



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ROUSSEAU


KANT

GOETHE

TWO ESSAYS by ERNST CASSIRER

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN BY JAMES GUTMANN,  
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INTRODUCTION TO THE  
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keenness of insight deserts him, otherwise so penetrating a psychologist, when confronted by Rousseau's personality. As is well known, Rousseau felt wounded to the extreme when in Diderot's *Fils Naturel* he read that "only the evil man seeks solitude." He never forgave Diderot these words. We may well believe Diderot's repeated assurance that the statement was not aimed at Rousseau. But on the other hand there existed here a genuine opposition of spirit which was bound to make itself more and more clearly felt as time went by and which in the end proved irreconcilable.

Diderot's whole thought moves within and is bound up with a specific social order. The *Encyclopedia* he edited took as its essential task to raise thought to a social level, to make it a function not of the individual but of society. Whatever Diderot accomplished was possible for him only because he was full of this enterprise and devoted all his powers of understanding and will to its service. And as he himself thought with and for Parisian society, he stood constantly in need of that society to stimulate his thinking and keep it active. His work could prosper only in the atmosphere of the Paris salons. Despite all his enthusiasm for nature, to which he too was devoted, he could not free himself from this standard, and he set up the same standard for Rousseau as well, with a naïveté that strikes us today as strange.

To Diderot, Rousseau's life in the "Hermitage" seemed an expression of morbid over-stimulation, and he can hardly speak of it save with bitterness and irony. Even in the letters he wrote Rousseau to effect a reconciliation and to allay his distrust, this bitterness appears. To one he even adds a contemptuous postscript: "Farewell, citizen," he writes, "what an extraordinary citizen a hermit is."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Letter from Diderot, March 10, 1757 (*C.G.*, III, No. 342, p. 20).

(C'est pourtant un citoyen bien singulier qu'un Hermite.) But in fact and in all seriousness Rousseau was just such a *citoyen bien singulier*. From the outset he stood in a paradoxical relation to society: he had to flee from it in order to serve it and to give it what he was capable of giving. In his hermitage he reflected upon the duties of citizenship, and only there did he become the author of the *Social Contract*. In the *Émile* also he retained the same trait: he requires that Émile be educated *outside* society, because in this way alone can he be educated *for* society in the only true sense.

All this Kant discerned. He gave himself up to the direct impression received from studying the *Émile*, and he thus gained a deeper insight into Rousseau's nature than the people among whom Rousseau lived and even his closest friends were capable of. For he was not blinded by prejudices. He neither exaggerated the value of life in society nor underestimated it. Kant was by no means unsocial; he sought and cherished social intercourse and saw in it an intellectual and moral discipline. Especially in his youth he yielded himself freely to the charm of such relations; "Magister" Kant was much sought after in all circles of Königsberg society, among merchants and army officers, by the middle class as well as the nobility; he was accounted an excellent conversationalist and man of the world. But if Kant possessed such advantages and if he sought to cultivate and perfect them, they were never capable of deluding him. He saw in them a grace and ornament of life, but nothing capable of constituting and determining its real worth. For him the demands of "mores" and of "morality" were quite distinct. And he was grateful to Rousseau because in an age when the best minds seemed to have forgotten this distinction, he drew the line with utter and thoroughgoing precision.

Kant regarded this as Rousseau's distinctive achievement. He did not think that Rousseau intended to alienate men from civilization or to lead them back to the wilderness by his enthusiastic praise of the state of nature. He explicitly defends him from such a suspicion, to which Voltaire had given so sharp and biting an expression. In his lectures on anthropology he declared that "it is surely not permissible to regard Rousseau's splanetic account of the human race that has dared to desert the state of nature, as a commendation of returning to this condition in the forests. His writings . . . did not indeed propose that man should go back to the state of nature, but that he should look back upon it from the level he has now attained."<sup>9</sup>

From this remark of Kant's it is quite clear in what sense he took Rousseau's doctrine of the "state of nature," and in what direction he developed it further. In it he saw—to express it in terms of his own subsequent ideas—not a constitutive but a regulative principle. He regarded Rousseau's theory not as a theory of what exists but of what should be, not as an account of what has been but as an expression of what ought to be, not as a retrospective elegy but as a prospective prophecy. For Kant the seemingly retrospective view should serve to equip men for the future and to make them fit to establish that future. It should not alienate men from the task of improving their civilization, but should show them how much in the values they prize in civilization is sham and show. This distinction is fundamental for Kant also; for him every genuine ordering of the values in human life and experience depends upon it. For him none of the merely social "virtues," no matter how glamorous they may seem, could ever constitute the true meaning of "virtue" itself. "Every social virtue of man

<sup>9</sup> *Anthropology*, par. 107 (*Werke*, VIII, 221).

is but a token," his anthropology declares; "he who takes it for real gold is but a child."<sup>10</sup>

For Kant all the goods of civilization have their "value," but this value does not suffice to assure them of genuine "worth." For Kant's ethics draws a sharp dividing line between the two. "In the realm of ends," declares the *Fundamentals of the Metaphysics of Morals*, "everything has either a value or a worth. What has a value has a substitute which can replace it as its equivalent; but whatever is, on the other hand, exalted above all values, and thus lacks an equivalent, . . . has no merely relative value, that is, a price, but rather an inner worth, that is, dignity. Now morality is the condition in accordance with which alone a reasonable being can be an end in himself, because only through morality is it possible to be an autonomous member of the realm of ends. Hence morality, and humanity, in so far as it is capable of morality, can alone possess dignity."<sup>11</sup>

For the moment let us not pursue the significance these words possess for Kant's theory of freedom and for the construction of his system. We shall ask merely how Rousseau's figure must have appeared to him in the light of this conviction. And here we can at once establish a characteristic difference as over against the judgment of most of his contemporaries. Kant was perhaps the first to do justice to that trait in Rousseau's nature which even his closest friends misunderstood. Rousseau gave repeated assurances in his writings, in his *Confessions* and in his letters, that he never loved men more warmly than when he seemed to be drawing away and fleeing from them. In contact with people and under the compulsion of social conventions, Rousseau could not discover the human nature he was

<sup>10</sup> *Anthropology*, par. 14 (*Werke*, VIII, 38).

<sup>11</sup> *Werke*, IV, 293.

All this is not merely characteristic of Kant's individual ideas; it provides more than a purely biographical interest. It offers an important clue in the history of ideas, for it reveals an aspect of Rousseau's influence unjustifiably neglected in the traditional view we are accustomed to hold of his effect on modern intellectual history. This traditional view was molded historically by the "Age of Genius" and by Romanticism. In Germany it was the generation of "Storm and Stress" that saw in Rousseau their ancestor and patron. This generation regarded him as the prophet of a new gospel of nature and as the thinker who had rediscovered the primitive power of the emotions and passions and had emancipated them from all restrictions, from the restriction of convention as well as that of "reason." Modern criticism also has not infrequently accepted this conception, and based on it all the charges it has brought against Rousseau, the visionary, dreamer and enthusiast.

But during the sixties of the eighteenth century, in the crucial period for Rousseau's influence on Kant, men saw his teaching in another light. For this period Rousseau was not in the first instance the restorer of the rights of the emotions, the apostle of "sentimentality"; he was, as Kant calls him, "the restorer of the rights of humanity." Not only Kant but Lessing also passed such a judgment. Lessing, the most circumspect and manly mind of the age, was surely not disposed to let himself be overcome by frenzy of emotion or to argue the case for sentimentality in any form. Yet Rousseau's work did not fail to have its influence on him also. In his notice of Rousseau's first *Discourse* he praised the "elevated attitudes" of the essay and the "manly eloquence" with which they were presented. And he declared that we must feel a secret respect for a man who dared "to speak for virtue against all accepted

own, and that another soul should move his limbs, this is absurd and perverse. Such a man is like the mere tool of another. . . . The man who stands in dependence on another is no longer a man, he has lost his standing, he is nothing but the possession of another man."<sup>21</sup> In this conviction Kant approached Rousseau, and in it he could greet him as a philosophical liberator.

## II. ROUSSEAU AND THE DOCTRINE OF HUMAN NATURE

KANT could accord Rousseau's thought no higher praise than to place it side by side with Newton's work: "Newton was the first to discern order and regularity in combination with great simplicity, where before him men had encountered disorder and unrelated diversity. Since Newton the comets follow geometric orbits. Rousseau was the first to discover beneath the varying forms human nature assumes, the deeply concealed essence of man and the hidden law in accordance with which Providence is justified by his observations. Before them, the objections of King Alfonso and the Manichaeans were still valid. After Newton and Rousseau, the ways of God are justified—and Pope's thesis is henceforth true."<sup>22</sup>

At first glance there can hardly be a stranger parallel than Kant is here attempting. For where is the actual basis of comparison? Rousseau never posed as an empirical investigator claiming to have reduced man's life and being to general laws that could be known and formulated with

<sup>21</sup> *Fragments*, VIII, 635f.

<sup>22</sup> *Fragments*, VIII, 630. King Alfonso of Castile, according to the anecdote, after having studied the Ptolemaic system of astronomy, is supposed to have found the system of the universe very irregular and confusing. "If I had been the Creator of the world," he said, "I should have made the thing better."

termed an aggregation but not an association; there is as yet neither public good nor body politic."<sup>40</sup>

We need no detailed demonstration to show how the attitude expressed in these phrases must have affected Kant. We hear their echo and reverberations in the most essential and crucial theses of the Kantian ethics. The "fundamental law of pure practical reason": "Act so that the maxim of thy will can always at the same time hold good as a principle of universal legislation," coincides with what Rousseau regards as the really fundamental principle of every "legitimate" social order. And we may surmise that Rousseau not only influenced the content and systematic development of Kant's foundation of ethics, but that he also formed its language and style.

This is particularly evident in the second striking formulation of the "categorical imperative," which Kant proposed in his *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*: "So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as means merely."<sup>41</sup> If in the first expression of the categorical imperative, which places the emphasis on "universal legislation," we recognize Rousseau the political theorist, the philosopher of the *volonté générale*, the second formulation takes us back to the main ideas of Rousseau's theory of education. Central to his educational theory is the requirement that the pupil is to be educated for his own sake, not for others. He should be developed to manhood, but to "natural" not to "artificial" manhood, to be *homme naturel* not *homme artificiel*. And for this reason we must not approach him at an early age with demands that have their source only in the utterly artificial and conventional structure of contemporary society. Instead of forcing him

<sup>40</sup> *Social Contract*, I, v (Vaughan, II, 31).

<sup>41</sup> *Werke*, IV, 287.

into the straitjacket of these conventions, we should awaken in him a sense of independence; instead of making him serve the purposes of others, we should teach him to think of himself as an end and to act in accordance with this idea. Only when he has become in this sense inwardly free is he to enter society, and only then will he be able to contribute to it in the right way; for only the free man is the true citizen. This is the underlying theme of the *Émile*, and this is the maxim that Rousseau has Mme. de Wolmar express in the later sections of the *New Héloïse*: "Man is too noble a being to serve simply as the instrument for others, and he must not be used for what suits them without consulting also what suits himself. . . . It is never right to harm a human soul for the advantage of others."<sup>42</sup>

But here too, however closely Kant approached the content of Rousseau's thought, he made a significant change in its methodological foundation, and thus he first freed it from various ambiguities that were present in Rousseau's own presentation. The complaint has at times been made with justice that Rousseau called his chief political work the *Social Contract* instead of retaining the "neutral" title *De la société civile* he had previously intended.<sup>43</sup> For the designation "social contract" is bound up by an age-old tradition of natural law with all sorts of secondary associations that have no connection with the actual task Rousseau set himself. It suggests the idea of a temporal beginning of society, of a single act by which it was once brought into being. Rousseau, to be sure, insisted that for him it was not a question of any such beginning, but of the "princi-

<sup>42</sup> *Nouvelle Héloïse*, v, letter 2; IV, 22.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Vaughan, Preface to his edition of the *Political Writings*, I, 22.



#### THE PROBLEM OF OPTIMISM

social contract not only as insignificant, but even as impossible; he argues, however, that its meaning is not thereby destroyed or even rendered questionable. In the *Metaphysical Basis of the Theory of Law* he declares that "the act through which a people constitutes itself a state, or to speak more properly the *idea* of such an act, in terms of which alone its legitimacy can be conceived, is the original contract by which all (*omnes et singuli*) the people surrender their outward freedom in order to resume it at once as members of a common entity, that is, the people regarded as the state (*universi*)."<sup>46</sup> Such a contract is thus "by no means to be necessarily assumed to be a fact—indeed it is not even possible as such"; it is "a mere idea of reason which has, however, its undoubted (practical) reality: that is, it obligates every lawgiver to promulgate his laws in such a way that they could have arisen from the united will of an entire people, and to regard every subject, in so far as he desires to be a citizen, as though he had joined in assenting to such a will. For that is the touchstone of the legitimacy of every public enactment."<sup>47</sup> Thus Kant achieved the same methodological transformation in the concept of the social contract as he had carried out in the interpretation of Rousseau's "state of nature." He transformed both from an "experience" into an "idea." He believed that he had thereby taken nothing from their value, but had in a strict sense grounded and secured this value.

#### IV. THE PROBLEM OF OPTIMISM

IN 1755 Voltaire delivered the first mighty blow at the system of philosophic optimism, in his poem on the Lisbon

<sup>46</sup> *Rechtslehre*, par. 47 (*Werke*, VII, 122).

<sup>47</sup> *Werke*, VI, 38of.