Review of “Rousseau (Arguments of the Philosophers series)”

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Written lucidly, Timothy O’Hagan’s *Rousseau* provides us with an attentive, rigorous study of several themes: negative and positive religion, imagination and amour-propre, the morality of the senses, the progress of reason, sexual difference, totalitarianism, the longing for original innocence, and the books *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality Among Men*, *Emile*, and the *Social Contract*. Despite the incredible breadth of material, O’Hagan does not sacrifice rigorous scholarship in his defense of Rousseau’s overall coherence. The overlapping tensions considered from moral, political, religious, and secular perspectives are not so much resolved, however, as they are explicitly and systematically connected throughout O’Hagan’s *Rousseau*. Keeping this in mind, I will follow O’Hagan as he brings together seemingly disparate lines of thought in Rousseau’s oeuvre.

Although the first movements of nature are infallible, men are currently enslaved to ignorance and error. Rousseau provides an explanation for this development. In a primitive state the human soul is governed by two principles: self-preservation and compassion. We are naturally inclined to protect ourselves from danger, but we are also repulsed by the suffering of others. If we found ourselves in the original state of nature, it is the combination of these two principles which would universally and unerringly guide our behavior. Corruption only enters into our human constitution at the onset of social life. In the civil state most of us live in contradiction with ourselves: reason and passion, duty and interest, as well as autonomy and dependence are among the dualities which are antagonistically opposed. The vast majority of us are plagued by these inner conflicts of the soul. A veneer of happiness is precisely that: a veneer.

O’Hagan is cautious in his assessment of Rousseau’s strategy for overcoming man’s psychological disintegration: he does not ascribe to Rousseau a one-sided alternative to social inequality (the root of inner conflict). It is true that the imagination and *amour-propre* evolved in a context of socialization which reinforced unfair legal practices and property systems (165). Society, in this way, has been in a state of discord since the discoveries of metallurgy and arable farming (52-53). But social inequality is not an inherent logic of civilized people. When individuals participate in ritualistic determinations of rank and recognition, *amour-propre* begins to grow. It does this either in connection with virtue or hypocrisy. Social hierarchies are nefarious only in the second circumstance. To admire another person based upon the criterion of moral goodness is ultimately to rejoice in a shared sense of dignity and honor. In this vein O’ Hagen writes, “To depend on opinion in the sense of passing fashions would indeed be to surrender one’s autonomy. But to find one’s
identity in the mutual play of considered judgments would be an ideal to be striven for” (174). Sublimated forms of self-interest and mutual recognition are not in themselves pernicious. As long as they are generalized in such a way that everyone identifies with a common purpose, or a sovereign will, we should consider them benign.

Questions of political and personal freedom are in this regard closely related. It is impossible to develop a sense of morality without the proper social environment. The sentiment of conscience is irreducible as an active faculty of freedom, for it presupposes that an autonomous individual is capable of making decisions according to laws which apply to all members of a given society. Rousseau argues, in his Second Discourse, that humans are distinguished from other species by the cultivation of ideals. We strive for perfection, that is to say. But we are capable of doing this only insofar as we are moral beings (44). In the state of nature mankind is confined to a pre-moral state of existence for the simple reason that morality is not equivalent to an instinctual demand. Actions based solely on physical need are passive in the sense that they are determined by a force which exists regardless of human choice. Society introduces the likelihood of economic and political factions, but at the same time it creates the psychological reality out of which true freedom arises. The final realization of this process comes about through the social contract. This is not an agreement which is forced upon the weaker members of society by those who merely wish to solidify their advantage. Such an agreement is derived from the exercise of force as opposed to freedom. For the agreement to have moral value, it must guarantee that the interests of each person will be better served by promoting the common good than by remaining in a state of political hostility. O’Hagan describes the resultant moral state of the individual quite lucidly:

Thus the passage from the natural to the social state involves a passage to a new way of conceiving the relation of the self to others. In a legitimate society, based on the social contract, the individual is once again dependent on society, not on another individual, and all are equally dependent. The goal of the passage is to transform our moral psychology, in bringing it about that we automatically consult the public interest in our deliberations, while leaving intact the requirement that self-preservation take priority over other demands (100).

Paradoxically, then, the process which brings us closer to freedom is the same one which requires us to become dependent on a sovereign power.

Timothy O’Hagan concludes his book with three chapters on religion. As with earlier discussions on morality, nature, education, and government, he elucidates the tensions in Rousseau’s work by showing how they tend to be provocative and fruitful. Across the ideological divide, as O’Hagan reminds us, Rousseau’s critics were united against his idiosyncratic theology. He rejected his earlier Encyclopédiste thinking on religion and mankind when, by the Third Walk of the Reveries, he finally came to see the dogmas of mechanistic determinism as “working in complicity with established power to deprive the poor of their last vestige of comfort in an uncaring world” (236). At the same time, however, he outraged Catholics and Protestants alike with his attacks on ‘original sin’. If the doctrine were true, he claims, not only is God made responsible for a host of crimes committed by man, and man alone, but it also follows that God becomes the source of another injustice, namely, punishing the innocent for the sins of their father (243). Perhaps most explosive was Rousseau’s treatment of civil religion in the Social Contract. The distinction between two basic religions, internal and external in nature, guides him through the extreme points of tension between
liberal, enlightened tolerance on the one hand and theocracy on the other. The religion of man is eternal and good in that it transcends the superstitious dogmas of local custom. The religion of the citizen, however, compensates for its externalized displays of worship by grounding itself in the body politic. Religion is thus divided as either abstract or concrete, personal or social, veritable or false. The compromise between the two sets of antitheses, as envisioned by Rousseau, depends upon a civil religion stripped of its dogmas. These dogmas are few and simple in their assertions of a beneficent, all-powerful deity, an afterlife, everlasting happiness for the just, and the sanctity of the social contract. The one negative dogma against intolerance raises some questions for O’Hagan. It is essential for Rousseau to separate religious dogmas which are crucial to the social contract from others which are not, but every dividing line has its flaw: “The details of the doctrine of the Trinity may indeed be distant from practical behavior. But Rousseau himself has argued that the doctrine of original sin is morally dangerous, and the reader of Weber’s Protestant Ethic might be persuaded that belief in justification through works is a spur to an industrious life” (230). Moreover, as O’Hagan continues his line of questioning, if there are certain beliefs, especially theological ones, which exceed our powers of voluntary assent, as Rousseau himself claims, then the problematic nature of punishing individuals for having the wrong beliefs is all the more pronounced (231-32). Such criticisms, laid out with deliberate and methodical attention, are all the more compelling in a context of respect and serious engagement that can be found throughout this book.

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