A Letter from Jean-Jacques Rousseau

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The remarkable text by Rousseau that appears below has been published before. But it is a forgotten text, here translated for the first time into English.

It first appeared in Georges Streckeisen-Moulot's 1861 collection Oeuvres et correspondance inédites de J.-J. Rousseau, based on a copy made by Reverend Paul Moulot. To my knowledge, these pages were not reprinted anywhere until 1997, except for a Polish translation in 1964. They were not included in the admirable Correspondance complète de Rousseau edited by R.A. Leigh. Nor were they included in the Pléiade edition of the Oeuvres complètes edited by Bernard Gagnepain and Marcel Raymond. The Bibliothèque Publique et Universitaire of Geneva owns several fragments of the text in Rousseau's own hand. Along with Charles Wirtz, the director of Geneva's Institut et Musée Voltaire, I established a critical edition, which was published in Volume 41 of the Annales de la Société Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Several clues suggest that these pages were composed in the spring of 1757. At that time Rousseau was pondering issues that he would later take up in Émile. He is on the social bond, a second "existence" of mankind that has supplanted the original state of nature and independence that he had discussed previously in the Discours sur l'inégalité (which appeared in 1755). He here gives prominence to the duties that the individual discovers in this world when he consults his innermost feelings. The perfectly independent "primitive men" discussed in the second Discours, he writes, are "imaginary" beings.

One could scarcely hope for better confirmation of the hypothetical character of state of nature that Rousseau described as marking the point of departure of human history. As soon as men began to live in common, they entered into a "tact contract." The attitude for moral life is a gift that the individual receives from the society in which he grows up; hence he is in debt to that society. (The subject of giving and receiving in Rousseau deserves further exploration.) These ideas would reappear in his major doctrinal texts but almost never in such a radical form, except where Rousseau treats the life of the citizen as a "conditional gift of the state."

To be sure, it is always possible for a man to turn his back on society and choose voluntary exile. But Rousseau, as will be seen below, wants the state to take a severe attitude toward the dissatisfied citizen. With this swing of the balance was he not now granting too much to the state? The pages of his work that come closest to our text, but in a more moderate tone, can be found in the political conclusion to Book V of Émile. There, the fictional pupil does not know "where the fatherland [patrie] is," because he lives in an imperfect society. But every man, Rousseau writes, "has at least a country [pays]." "O, Émile! Where is the good man who owes nothing to his country?" The individual does not stand on his own. He commits an injustice when he fails to acknowledge what has been passed on to him.

J. S.
But what I cannot do for you, I shall try to do for myself. Can it ever be fruitless to engage in the study of virtue? No. Its divine effects are incomprehensible; it brings warmth even before it sheds light; one loves it even as one seeks it out; one feels it before grasping it; and should its pursuit lead my reason astray, I should easily console myself for my error provided it made me a better man.

It seems to me, first of all, that whatever is moral in me always seeks relations outside myself, and that, had I always lived alone, I would possess neither vice nor virtue and would be good only by dint of the absolute goodness that causes a thing to be whatever its nature requires. I feel, too, that I have now lost that natural goodness as a consequence of a multitude of artificial relations, which are the work of society and which have given me other penchants, other needs, other desires, and other ways of satisfying them which are inimical to preserving my life or constituting my self but consistent with particular views I have formed and fictitious passions I have acquired.

From this it follows that I must now consider myself as existing in a different way and must, as it were, appropriate goodness of another sort, suitable to this new existence. Because my life, my security, my liberty, and my happiness today depend on the cooperation of others like myself, it is clear that I must look upon myself no longer as an isolated individual but as part of a larger whole, as a member of a larger body on whose preservation mine depends absolutely, and any disorder in which I would necessarily feel.

I depend on my native land [patrie], at least for my needs, my native land in turn depends for its needs on some other country, and everything is to one degree or another subject to this universal dependency. Natural identity, common weakness, mutual needs, and the society they have made necessary thus give me duties and rights common to all men. These are truths which one feels rather than proves, and which I would refrain from elucidating further if I counted as much on your good faith as on your reason [lumières].

You will ask me, perhaps, whether a man who has received nothing from society can owe it anything. But I beg you to consider that such a supposition is worthless, for it is based on an impossibility: anyone can see that it is quite impossible for a man to be born, live, and maintain himself in a society without depending on it for anything. He is wrong to protest on the grounds of his poverty, woes, or misfortune. The state will answer: "Perhaps it would have been better for you to have been born in the midst of a desert, but you were born here, you have lived here, and you could not have survived here had I not sustained you. You should have quit this life if it was a burden to you and should have quit this country if its laws seemed to you too harsh; die or leave if you wish henceforth to owe me nothing, but pay me for the thirty years of life you have already enjoyed with my assistance. Until you are no longer, you owe me for what you have been."

Let us not think of ourselves as being like those primitive men of our imagination who needed no one because nature alone supplied all their needs. Nature relinquished her functions, so to speak, the moment we usurped them. Social man is too weak to do without others; he is in all ways needy from the moment of his birth to the moment of his death, rich or poor, could not survive if he received nothing from others. Nor do I think of myself as being exonerated of all debt because the people who served me had only their own pleasure or interest in mind. That may be true of individuals but not of the body of society, which looks out for all its members, and therefore for you and me, in everything that it does for itself. It is not as individuals that we are all in each other’s debt, but as members of society, to which each of us owes everything. Indeed, the price we pay for the help we receive is itself a gift of society. Can a man possess anything without the help and consent of others? Without this tacit contract, neither profit nor property nor true industry would exist. In the state of nature nothing exists but what is necessary, and the superfluity we see all around us is not the sum total of individual efforts but the product of general industry, which with a hundred hands working in concert makes more than a hundred men could make separately.

I anticipate another objection: you will speak to me of the disorders of the
social state, in which the public good serves as pretext for so many ills, but one must distinguish between civil order and its abuses. From the fact that not everyone repays his debt to society, it does not follow that we owe society nothing; and if we make ourselves unhappy by failing to do what society requires, it is not society that ought to bear the blame. Swayed as we are by opinion, moreover, we must, when judging things, take every possible precaution to distinguish between appearance and reality. How many ills that seem dreadful to us are nothing in themselves? How many men bemoan their fate who might be happy without changing their estate, and who have far better grounds to complain of reason than of fortune? A rich man may think he is ruined when he has just enough to live on, and may believe that he will die of hunger if obliged to rid himself of a parasite.

Proof that any number of alleged misfortunes are mostly imaginary can be seen in the fact that a condition that seems desperate to the man who finds himself in it might without alteration be accounted good fortune by a hundred others. We judge how things are in relation not to our needs or to the condition of others but to what we were or wanted to be. Ambition always counts what it achieves for nothing and what eludes it for everything.

But an advantage infinitely superior to all physical goods, and one of which we undeniably partake owing to the harmony of the human race, is that of attaining, through communication of ideas and the progress of reason, the intellectual regions, of acquiring the sublime notions of order, wisdom, and moral goodness, of nourishing our sentiments on the fruits of our knowledge, of raising ourselves through the grandeur of our souls above the weaknesses of our nature, and of equaling, in certain respects through the art of reasoning, the celestial intelligences; until finally, by combating and vanquishing our passions, we gain the power to dominate man and emulate Divinity itself.

This constant commerce of exchange, concern, aid, and instruction sustains us when we can no longer sustain ourselves, enlightens us when we need to be enlightened, and places within our power goods of inestimable value that cause us to despise those we no longer possess. These are true compensations, which console a civilized man [honnête homme] for the unhappiness occasioned by the loss of natural goods and the abuses of society. The vigor that was once in his limbs passes into his faculties; his reason rises upon the ruins of his decrepit body. If hobbies are placed upon his freedom, his heart gains a new empire. He obeys the voice of the stronger man but commands his own passions, and while he is oppressed here below, his pure soul soars toward the heavenly abode and savors in advance the reward of his virtue. He is Hercules, who feels himself burning on his pyre even as he becomes a god. Thus good and evil flow from the same source, but not in equal measure for all. Yet the wise man tormented by the wicked feels that he would be no more than a brute if he had received nothing from others, and for a man of courage very few ills can outweigh the gifts of the soul and the hope of goods to come.

Shall we now ask what can make us happy in this world? Let us look into ourselves and consult our hearts. We all feel that happiness is not within ourselves but depends on the things around us. The luxury that draws upon all of nature, the ambition that seeks to bring the universe to heel, the sensual pleasure that solitude reduces to nothing, the vanity that covets all eyes, the goodness that would make happiness universal — everything that engages our interest depends on foreign objects; all our vows evaporate; the only happiness we enjoy is that which others ascribe to us; and we would sooner not exist than go unnoticed. In a word, whether it be the need to love or the desire to please, friendship, trust, or pride, the habit of engaging in commerce with others makes such commerce so necessary that we may doubt that there exists a single person who, assured of having all his wishes granted, would not sink into despair if assured at the same time of never seeing another human being again.

Such are the indissoluble bonds that unite us all, and our existence, our survival, our reason [lumières], our fortune, our happiness, and, in general, all our goods and evils dependent on our social relations. I therefore believe that when I became a civil man, I contracted an immense debt to the human race, and that my life, and all the comforts it has brought me, should be devoted to the service of mankind. And even if I could procure for myself well-being of an exclusive sort and a few dubious pleasures by sacrificing everything else solely for my own sake, I still would not be able to assure myself of peace and lasting happiness except in a well-ordered society. I see that if I do not respect in others the rights I would have them respect in me, I make myself the common enemy of all and enjoy no more security in the iniquitous possession of my property than did the highwaymen who devoured what spoils they could take from others less fortunate than themselves.

This sacred duty, which reason obliges me to recognize, is not strictly speaking a duty of one individual toward another but a general and common duty, just as the right that imposes it on me is also general and common. The individuals to whom I owe my life, who gave me what I needed, who cultivated my soul, who communicated their talents to me, may no longer exist, yet the laws that protected my childhood live on. The good habits that I was fortunate enough to receive, the assistance that I found ready to meet my every need, the civil liberty that I enjoyed, the goods that I acquired, the pleasures that I savored — I owe all of these things to the universal order [pouvoir universelle] that directs public concern for the benefit of all, that anticipated my needs before I was born and will command respect for my ashes after I am gone. My benefactors may die, yet as long as human beings remain, I shall be obliged to repay mankind for all the benefits it has bestowed on me.