

## Rousseau: Conservative or Totalitarian Democrat?

Scott P. Richert

IN RECENT YEARS, there has been a movement among certain people who call themselves conservatives to reinterpret the radical French thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau as a conservative. To most people who have studied Rousseau's thought, and its influence on the French Revolution, such an idea must seem absurd. In the past four years, however, this idea has gained public currency through such works as Allan Bloom's popular best-seller, *The Closing of the American Mind*, and Arthur M. Melzer's more scholarly work, *The Natural Goodness of Man: On the System of Rousseau's Thought*, which received a glowing review in one of the most respected conservative publications in America, *National Review*. The review, written by Joel Schwartz, the executive editor of *The Public Interest*, refers to a "surprisingly conservative Rousseau" who is "deeply indebted to Platonic and Aristotelian political philosophy" and concludes by referring to Rousseau as an "unexpected friend." (RR, 47-48)<sup>1</sup> What element have conservatives since Edmund Burke failed to see in Rousseau, which now leads Bloom and Melzer to openly embrace him? The answer, according to Schwartz, is Rousseau's "communitarian solution" to the problems of society. (RR, 47) Rousseau's emphasis on a "common good" is designed to stop the "disintegration of society into particular wills." (See CAM, 118)<sup>2</sup> But can Rousseau's communitarianism really be considered conservative? Many enemies of conservatism, such as the Jacobins and modern-day Marxists, have used the language of the common good. One important thing that separates conservatives from the others who emphasize the common good is the conservative concern that the common good not come at the expense of the particular good. This

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means that the goals of a society must not be destructive of the important subunits of that society, such as the family, the neighborhood, the individual states, and the Church. When measured by this standard, Rousseau's thought is anything but conservative.

Melzer finds Rousseau's answer to the problems of society in the *Social Contract*, and so we should, conceivably, be able to find Rousseau's doctrine of communitarianism therein. (See NGM, 120)<sup>3</sup> Only six paragraphs into the *Social Contract*, however, we have Rousseau's first attack upon the role of subsidiary organizations, in the form of the family.

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The most ancient of all societies and the only natural one, is that of the family. Even so children remain bound to their father only so long as they need him to take care of them. As soon as the need ceases, the natural bond is dissolved. Once the children are freed from the obedience they owed the father and their father is freed from the care he owed his children, all return equally to

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independence. If they continue to remain united, this no longer takes place naturally but voluntarily, and the family maintains itself only by means of convention. (SC, 142)<sup>4</sup>

The only natural society is the family. All other associations must be merely conventional. The idea that, for example, race and nationality are more than merely conventional does not seem to occur to Rousseau. Only the immediate and undeniable bond of father to children can be considered natural. But even this bond, Rousseau goes on to say, is, in the end, merely conventional.

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Children, when they come into the world, are helpless. They need someone to care for them, and, in return for their care, they are obligated to obey the one who cares for them. In turn, a father, because he has brought his children into the world, owes them a basic minimum of care. When the children no longer need the father to care for them, they no longer have to obey him, and he is no longer obliged to care for them. The family becomes, at this point, merely conventional. It is important to note, however, that Rousseau does not state, as one might expect, that when the children are able to care for themselves, the family becomes merely conventional, but rather that the family becomes merely conventional when the children no longer need the father to care for them. This latter possibility could come at a much earlier age if, for example, the father sent his children off to an orphanage. In that case, they would no longer need their father to care for them, and the family ties would be severed. Thus the family is, according to Rousseau, merely conventional at all times, for the father could, at any time, arrange for someone else to supply his children's needs. If he does not do so, it is simply because he has decided not to. Nothing more than the father's whim holds the family together. The "only natural society" turns out to be as conventional as any other other subsidiary organization.

If the family is viewed as merely conventional, what will replace it as the basic building block of society? Rousseau sees only one alternative: the relationship of the individual to the state.

He who dares to undertake the establishment of a people

should feel that he is, so to speak, in a position to change human nature, to transform each individual (who by himself is a perfect and solitary whole), into a part of a larger whole from which this individual receives, in a sense, his life and his being . . . (SC, 163)

Man's physical life and being which he has received from his parents is not enough to tie him to his family, but the life and being, the "partial and moral" existence, which he shall receive from the sovereign, will tie him to the sovereign. It will do this because it satisfies a need that he has, and, consequently, binds him as the child is bound to the father. This need is summed up in Rousseau's statement of the "fundamental problem" of politics: How to find "a form of association which defends and protects with all common forces the person and goods of each associate, and by means of which each one, while uniting with all, nevertheless obeys only himself and remains as free as before?" (SC, 148) As long as the sovereign fulfills this need, each person is obligated to

obey the sovereign, just as he was obligated to obey his father. Indeed, the relationship of the individual to the sovereign is at least as encompassing as the relationship of a person to his father, for the social compact requires “the total alienation of each associate, together with all of his rights, to the entire community.” (SC, 148) The extent of this alienation is revealed by Rousseau in the *Emile*, when he states:

Good social institutions are those that best know how to denature man, to take his absolute existence from him in order to give him a relative one and transport the I into the common unity, with the result that each individual believes himself no longer one but a part of the unity and no longer feels except within the whole.<sup>5</sup>

Should this unity be destroyed, should the social compact be violated and the sovereign no longer be able to, or be needed to, protect the “person and goods of each associate,” “each person regains his first rights and resumes his natural liberty, while losing the conventional liberty for which he renounced it.” (SC, 148) The individual is only obliged to obey a sovereign that meets his needs, just as he is only obliged to obey his father while he meets his needs.

If the individual is bound to the sovereign by a complete alienation of rights, is there any need for intermediary organizations? Indeed, if intermediary organizations happened to help “defend and protect . . . the person and goods of each associate,” couldn’t they be viewed as breaking down the relationship between the individual and the sovereign, by removing the element of need, and, therefore, the obligation to obey? Rousseau seems to think so.

If, when a sufficiently informed populace deliberates, the citizens were to have no communications among themselves, the general will would always result from the large number of small differences, and the deliberation would always be good. But when intrigues and partial associations come into being at the expense of the large association, the will of each of these associations becomes general in relation to its members and particular in relation to the state. (SC, 156)

Men’s participation in intermediary organizations is always at the expense of the sovereign, because it lessens their need for the sovereign, and thereby contributes to the breakup of the social compact. Only if intermediary organizations are abandoned, only if “there is a single community to love and not a pluralistic collection of diverse ethnic groups or competing economic interest groups” can the social compact survive. (NGM, 95) “Enlightened self-interest,” which cannot be bound up with one’s membership in intermediary organizations, is the only factor which should be taken into consideration

when one is involved in the deliberations of the populace. As Allan Bloom states,

In the past men were members of communities by divine commandment and by attachments akin to the blood ties that constitute the family. They were, to use Rousseau’s phrase, “denatured.” Their loyalties were fanatic and repressive of their natures. Clear reasoning wiped that slate clean in order to inscribe on it contracts calmly made with expectation of profit involving the kinds of relations found in business. (CAM, 167)

“The love of one’s own,” one’s attachment to his family, neighborhood, state, and Church, must be swept aside so that “clear reasoning” can allow one to “love what is good.” “What is good” is the general will, for it, and only it, constitutes “the rule of what is just and unjust.”<sup>6</sup>

**R**OUSSEAU’S DISTRUST of intermediary organizations is so complete that he is forced to reject the idea of a constitutional framework. “He argues that the sovereign power cannot be bound by a constitution or limited by natural law.” (NGM, 97) A constitution would represent an intermediary organization, because it represents a contract between past, present, and future citizens, a contract that would set limits on the sovereign. Since the sovereign derives its power from the alienation of the rights of the citizens, any limit set on its power is a limit set on the extent to which the rights of the citizens can be alienated. Unless the rights of the citizens can be completely alienated, the social compact cannot survive.

For if some rights remained with private individuals, in the absence of any common superior who could decide between them and the public, each person would eventually claim to be his own judge in all things, since he is on some point his own judge. The state of nature would subsist and the association would necessarily become tyrannical or hollow. (SC, 148)

The best that one can hope for in the Rousseauistic state is the rule of law. Rousseau’s rule of law, however, is much different from what most thinkers would consider the rule of law to be:

But when the entire populace enacts a statute concerning the entire populace, it considers only itself, and if in that case a relationship is formed, it is between the entire object seen from one perspective and the entire object seen from another, without any division of the whole. Then the subject matter about which a statute is enacted is general like the will that enacts it. It is this act that I call a law. (SC, 161)

This corresponds more with the classical definition of the “rule of the people” than with the “rule of law.” There is nothing in this definition that would prevent the law from changing from day to day, or even hour to hour.

Rousseau would claim that that is as it should be: "Yesterday's law does not obligate today." (SC, 194) If the law cannot change constantly to reflect the general will, then the sovereign cannot be all powerful. But for Rousseau, the sovereign power is "absolute, wholly sacred and inviolable." (SC, 158) "[T]he supreme authority cannot be modified any more than it can be alienated; to limit it is to destroy it. It is absurd and contradictory for the sovereign to acquire a superior," even if that superior is only a constitutional framework. (SC, 200)

Rousseau's redefinition of law requires a redefinition of justice and morality. If law is simply the enactment of the general will, then justice and morality are simply acting in accordance with the general will. Since there is nothing that can legitimately limit the general will, justice and morality become as fluid as the general will itself. It makes no sense to ask "whether a law can be unjust, since no one is unjust to himself." (SC, 161) The desires of the general will are to be considered not only law, but justice as well.

Rousseau recognizes that any attempt to do away with intermediary organizations is not likely to succeed. He therefore suggests an alternative: "If there are partial societies, their number must be multiplied and inequality among them prevented." (SC, 156) Lest one find in this a foreshadowing of Madison's *Federalist No. 10*, an impor-

tant difference should be noted. Rousseau wishes to see "partial societies" multiplied so that the general will can be expressed. Ideally, each partial society would be composed of only one person. Madison, on the other hand, welcomes "a greater variety of parties and interests" in the hopes that a "factious majority" will be unable to form. Common action should come about through the interaction of a diversity of parties and interests. Madison would not have people deny the intermediary organizations to which they belong; rather, he would encourage a diversity of intermediary organizations as a means of making the government more stable.

In addition to attempting to multiply intermediary organizations out of existence, Rousseau attempts to co-opt the most powerful of those organizations, religion, for his own ends. Christianity, Rousseau believes, is ultimately the intermediary organization most destructive of the general will, because it divides men's loyalties between the sovereign and the kingdom of God. "In separating the theological system from the political system, [Jesus] made the state to cease being united and caused internal divisions that never ceased to agitate Christian peoples." (SC, 221) "In giving men two sets of legislation, two leaders, and two homelands, [Roman Christianity] subjects them to contradictory duties and prevents them from being simultaneously devout men and citizens." (SC, 223) "Roman Christianity" in particular breaks up the absolute unity which the general will requires, and "[w]hatever breaks up social unity is worthless." (SC, 223) The only answer to this lack of unity is the one which Hobbes proposed, "the reunification of the two heads of the eagle and the complete restoration of political unity, without which no state or government will ever be well constituted." (SC, 222) Therefore, Rousseau proposes a civil religion, "a purely civil profession of faith, the articles of which it belongs to the sovereign to establish." (SC, 226) Rather than an intermediary organization between the sovereign and the citizen, religion now becomes an integral part of the relationship between the sovereign and the citizen. Just as Rousseau's redefinition of law necessitates a redefinition of morality as acting in accordance with the general will, so the redefinition of religion necessitates a redefinition of virtue as acting in accordance with the general will. Religion becomes nothing more than the worship of the general will.

Melzer provides a useful, if lengthy, summary of Rousseau's "communitarian solution."

Perhaps the best formula for Rousseau's thought is this: a radicalized humanism that seeks to translate all of the purported benefits of the divine and transcendent, the "vertical" dimension,

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onto the level of the merely human and "horizontal." His understanding of the human problem . . . reduces everything to the horizontal issue, other men. All the evils of human life derive from personal dependence and oppression and not from man's supposed baseness and insufficiency, his fallenness from a higher natural or divine perfection. But for a purely horizontal problem one needs only horizontal solutions. Rousseau will cure men simply by arranging them properly among themselves.

His political solution is to create nonoppression and freedom through the reign of "law" and "virtue," where these familiar classical concepts have both been redefined in a formal, democratic, and horizontal way. They have been emptied of all substantive and inegalitarian reference to a higher end or perfection of human nature, and identified with formal "generality" or reciprocity in relation to other men. Through a unique synthesis of liberal and classical thought, Rousseau develops this radical humanistic claim: he will bring true unity and happiness to men not by uplifting them to some divine or transcendent standard, but simply by preventing them from using and ruining each other. (NGM, 112)

What, it might be asked, can be considered "conservative" about such a project? How can the attempt to destroy those institutions—the family, the neighborhood, the Church—which conservatives hold dear, be considered conservative? It is these institutions, not the state, which are most important in shaping who and what we are. It is through them that we learn virtue; it is through them that we learn what it means to be a citizen. It is through them that the historical sense that helps us to get our bearings in our changing times, what Burke refers to as "the general bank and capital of nations and of ages" (RF, 76),<sup>7</sup> is handed down from generation to generation. To forsake these institutions for a monolithic, egalitarian state with no historical sense, not even the historical sense that a constitution would provide, is not conservative, but rather destructive of society as we know it.

**P**ERHAPS ROUSSEAU'S CONSERVATISM shows itself in his "radicalized humanism." After all, in the modern world, have not conservative thinkers such as Irving Babbitt generally been the main proponents of humanism? The humanism which conservatives espouse, however, is very different from that which Melzer attributes to Rousseau. Far from seeking to "translate all of the purported benefits of the divine and transcendent . . . onto the level of the merely human," the conservative humanist reaffirms man's relationship to the divine. "Now humanism must, like religion, rest on the recognition, in some form or other, of the inner life . . . [i]t must also, like religion, subordinate intellect to the ethical will and so put its ultimate emphasis on humility." (DL, 220-21)<sup>8</sup> To claim that "[a]ll the evils of human life derive

from personal dependence and oppression and not from man's supposed baseness and insufficiency" is not a mark of the humanist, but rather of the humanitarian. "The humanist, then, as opposed to the humanitarian, is interested in the perfecting of the individual rather than in schemes for the elevation of mankind as a whole."<sup>9</sup> The idea that men can be cured "simply by arranging them properly among themselves" is likewise a humanitarian, rather than a humanistic, idea. The humanist recognizes the fundamental dualism in man, which arises from "his fallenness from a higher natural or divine perfection," while the humanitarian, like Rousseau, denies this dualism. "The old dualism put the conflict between good and evil in the breast of the individual, with evil so predominant since the Fall that it behooves man to be humble; with Rousseau this conflict is transferred from the individual to society." (DL, 99) To look to Rousseau's "radicalized humanism" in order to discover his conservatism is to look in vain.

If we cannot find Rousseau's conservatism in his desire to replace intermediary organizations with a devotion to a monolithic common good or in his "radicalized humanism," then where shall we turn? Melzer mentions Rousseau's use of the "familiar classical concepts" of "law" and "virtue," and speaks of his "unique synthesis of liberal and classical thought." This, too, is where Schwartz finds the conservative Rousseau. "The surprisingly conservative Rousseau whom Melzer portrays is deeply indebted to Platonic and Aristotelian political philosophy." (RR, 47) However, as Melzer admits, Rousseau has redefined both "law" and "virtue" "in a formal, democratic, and horizontal way" that empties them "of all substantive and inegalitarian reference to a higher end or perfection of human nature" and identifies them with obedience to the general will, rather than to an objective morality. What, one might ask, is "classical" about this? Plato and Aristotle would recoil at the suggestion that "law" and "virtue" should be defined with reference to a merely human "general will." Plato would find the suggestion that law is based merely on human desire, as expressed in the general will, rather than on a knowledge of the Forms, to be particularly repulsive. Law, for Plato, is an attempt to embody the Forms in the medium of society. As such, it should be written by those who best know the Forms and who best reflect them in their own souls, namely, the philosophers. To claim that law is based not in philosophic insight but rather in the expansive longings of a "general will" is to replace the "rule of law" with the "rule of the people." Once the "rule of law" has been abandoned, a polis cannot be expected to last long.

Although Aristotle abandoned Plato's theory of the

Forms for a more moderate realist epistemology, he did not abandon the idea that the main purpose of law and virtue is to lead men to a “higher end or perfection of human nature.” Men can only experience true happiness through the process of perfecting their nature, not through a system which simply prevents “them from using and ruining each other.” Because of his belief in the “natural goodness of man,” Rousseau does not see the need for the habitual exercise of the human will to perfect human nature. It is only through the casting off of restraints, including the classical understanding of law and virtue, that man’s already perfect nature may assert itself.

It would seem that Rousseau’s “conservatism” cannot be found in his “communitarian solution” after all. Why, then, do Melzer, Bloom, and others continue to insist that Rousseau was a conservative? The answer can be found in Melzer’s discussion of Rousseau’s “mission” in chapter thirteen of *The Natural Goodness of Man*. There Melzer discusses various views of Rousseau which have gained currency. After short sections on “Rousseau the Revolutionary” and “Rousseau the Progressive,” Melzer states, in “Rousseau the Conservative,” that

the “progressive Rousseau,” a construction actually far more current than the “revolutionary,” is no less a myth. Abundant evidence, drawn from every period of Rousseau’s career, suggests that his opposition to revolution, indeed his political thought in general, was fundamentally conservative . . . Rousseau, it would appear, was no progressive, but a staunch conservative opposed to reform as well as to revolution. (NGM, 264-65)

How, then, does one explain what even Melzer calls the “unquestionably radical, doctrinaire, and subversive books” which Rousseau wrote? (NGM, 265) Melzer offers his explanation in a section entitled, “Rousseau’s Primary Audience and the Puzzle of his Revolutionary Rhetoric.”

The writings of this conservative have appeared—and, historically, have been—so subversive and revolutionary only because of a tragic misunderstanding of their intended addressee. These doctrines were never meant to be applied to the world at large, to the monarchies that all but cover the earth, but only to Europe’s small, dwindling republican population, for whom they would be nonrevolutionary and beneficial . . . In sum, Rousseau’s seemingly revolutionary writings were actually in the service of a conservative intention, for their purpose was not to overthrow the monarchies—which could no longer be harmed or helped by what he wrote—but rather to conserve the few last remaining republics. (NGM, 272-274)

There is one problem, however, with this solution. The *Social Contract* is not a book that can “apply” to some states and not to others. It proclaims universally binding principles—principles which rendered all European monarchies illegitimate . . . Thus,

even if he composed his doctrine only for the purpose of “applying” it to the few small republics, the great question remains why this self-professed conservative was not restrained by the delegitimizing and subversive effect his doctrine was likely to have on the monarchies.

The answer lies . . . in Rousseau’s historical pessimism. He believed that the deterioration of monarchic Europe had reached such a point . . . that politically, it no longer mattered what one said . . . That is why Rousseau now felt free to promulgate his radically democratic doctrines without fearing their consequences for monarchic Europe. (NGM, 273)

Buried in this rhetoric about Rousseau’s “conservative intention” and the distinction between the small republics and the large monarchies, we finally catch a glimpse of what Melzer considers to be the truly “conservative”

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nature of Rousseau’s thought. “The *Social Contract* . . . proclaims universally binding principles.” And what are those principles? They are “radically democratic doctrines.” Rousseau is a conservative because he believes in political absolutism, in the applicability of democratic doctrines to all places at all times. In discussing Rousseau’s “admiration” for Plato, Bloom states, “In Plato, eros led to philosophy, which in turn led to the rational quest for the best regime, the *one* good political order vs. the plurality of cultures.” (CAM, 305; emphasis in the original) Rousseau’s great accomplishment, his “conservative” element, is his ability to recognize the “best regime.”

On close inspection, however, the radically egalitarian democracy of Rousseau’s “best regime” proves to be profoundly anti-conservative, as we have shown above. As John Lukacs has pointed out, in *The Passing of the Modern Age*,

The democratic development of mankind homogenizes peoples; they become alike, they conform in habits, opinions, thoughts, they wish to identify themselves with the ‘cause’ of their national state, they are suspicious of outsiders within their state even more than they are of foreigners, a form of nationalism becomes their tradition, their only ideology. This is different from patriotism, a more ancient phenomenon that means love for a certain land, for a certain town, for a certain people, something that is basically defensive and not expansive, anchored as it is in a living past.<sup>10</sup>

The nationalism which is the logical result of Rousseau’s radical democracy, a nationalism which Rousseau eagerly embraced, is not conservative; the patriotism which

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that nationalism destroys, is.

The "conservatism" of Rousseau is thus exposed for what it is: a dangerous political absolutism, a form of nationalism which would attempt to impose an abstract, rationalistic set of "universally binding principles" on all nations. Its ahistorical outlook and its totalitarian tendencies are in direct opposition to all that conservatives hold dear. Under its domain, the intermediary organizations that conservatives see as playing the primary role in the creation of virtuous men and good citizens would be swept away, in favor of an undifferentiated mass with no ties to its patrimony. To those who would urge them to drop their "irrational prejudice" against Rousseau, and embrace him with open arms as an "unexpected friend" (RR, 48), conservatives should not be ashamed to say with Edmund Burke:

You see, Sir, that in this enlightened age I am bold enough to confess that we are generally men of untaught feeling, that, instead of casting away all our old prejudices, we cherish them to a very considerable degree, and, to take more shame to ourselves, we cherish them because they are prejudices; and the longer they have lasted and the more generally they have prevailed, the more we cherish them. We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason, because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations and of ages. (RF, 76)

1. Joel Schwartz, "Rousseau Revisited" in *National Review* (February 25, 1991), 47-48; hereinafter referred to in the text as "RR."
2. See Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1987), 118; hereinafter referred to in the text as "CAM."
3. Arthur M. Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man: On the System of Rousseau's Thought* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 120; hereinafter referred to in the text as "NGM."
4. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract* in *The Basic Political Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1987; translated by Donald A. Cress), 142; hereinafter referred to in the text as "SC."
5. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile; or, On Education* (New York: Basic Books, 1979; translated by Allan Bloom), 40.
6. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on Political Economy* in *On the Social Contract with Geneva Manuscript and Political Economy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978; translated by Judith R. Masters and edited by Roger D. Masters), 212.
7. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1987; edited by J.G.A. Pocock, 76; hereinafter referred to in the text as "RF."
8. Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1979; first published in 1924), 220-221; hereinafter referred to in the text as "DL."
9. Irving Babbitt, *Literature and the American College* (Washington, D.C.: National Humanities Institute, 1986), 75.
10. John Lukacs, *The Passing of the Modern Age* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 65.

## Babbitt Provides Answers for Our Troubled Age

Joseph Baldacchino

**R**OUSSEAU AND ROMANTICISM (Transaction Publishers, lxxxiii + 426 pp., \$24.95, quality paperback), probably the most widely discussed work of the influential scholar and critic Irving Babbitt (1865-1933), is now available in a new edition featuring a comprehensive introduction by NHI Chairman Claes G. Ryn.

Some have accused Babbitt of having laid all that is wrong with Western society at the doorstep of a single man, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. But this is a misreading. Babbitt makes clear, as Ryn notes, that Rousseau is but one leading exponent of a large and powerful historical movement that far transcends the work of any one writer.

Babbitt does not claim to give a balanced description of Rousseau's life and work. Rather, he is interested in Rousseau as a leading exponent of an ethical-aesthetical worldview that Babbitt calls sentimental humanitarianism. This worldview has been replacing the classical and Christian moral and artistic ethos in the Western world with results that Babbitt deems subversive of traditional

morality and destructive of civilized life.

Babbitt stresses the duality of the human self. There is a conflict within man between an unceasing flow of particular desires, on the one hand, and an ethical will that transcends the impulse of the moment and orders life to an enduring purpose. Man's higher will is experienced as an "inner check" on incipient actions that would be destructive of real happiness.

For Babbitt the great danger of Rousseau is that he denies the inner conflict in man between good and evil and identifies goodness with giving vent to one's unrestrained feelings. Goodness, instead of requiring effort, becomes an easy yielding to the flow of passions.

The Rousseauistic imagination paints the flight from personal responsibility in enticing colors. All responsibility for the bad that occurs is projected outward onto society. Nature is good; if horrible things are going on, that is the fault of society with its rules and conventions.

"Instead of the old dualism between good and evil in the breast of the individual," writes Babbitt, the Rous-

seauistic imagination conjures up a “new dualism . . . between and artificial and corrupt society and ‘nature.’”

Babbitt notes that “[m]ost men according to Rousseau are perverted by society, but there are a few in whom the voice of ‘nature’ is still strong and who, to be good and at the same time beautiful, have only to let themselves go. These, to use a term that came to have in the eighteenth century an almost technical meaning, are the ‘beautiful souls.’”

The Christian doctrine of grace at its best, says Babbitt, makes “man feel desperately sinful at the same time that he is less open to reproach than other men in his actual behavior. The beautiful soul on the other hand can always take refuge in his feelings from his real delinquencies.”

“Rousseau dilates on his ‘warmth of heart,’ his ‘keenness of sensibility,’ his ‘innate benevolence for his fellow creatures,’ his ‘ardent love for the great, the true, the beautiful, the just,’ on the ‘melting feeling, the lively and sweet emotion that he experiences at the sight of everything that is virtuous, generous and lovely,’ and concludes: ‘And so my third child was put into the foundling hospital.’”

Thanks in no small part to Rousseau’s influence, the distinguishing characteristic of the “beautiful soul,” his “subordination of all of the other values of life to sympathy,” has become a dominant theme in the literature and social thought of the last two centuries.

Perhaps the ultimate literary expression of “the new evangel of sympathy as a substitute for all the other virtues,” Babbitt notes, occurs in a story by Victor Hugo, “Sultan Murad.”

“Murad, Hugo narrates, was ‘sublime.’ He had his eight brothers strangled, caused his uncle to be sawn in two between two planks, opened one after the other of twelve children to find a stolen apple, shed an ocean of blood and ‘sabred the world.’ One day while passing in front of a butcher-shop he saw a pig bleeding to death,

tormented by flies and with the sun beating upon its wound. Touched by pity, the Sultan pushes the pig into the shade with his foot and with an ‘enormous and superhuman gesture’ drives away the flies. When Murad dies the pig appears before the Almighty and, pleading for him against the accusing host of his victims, wins his pardon. Moral: ‘A succored pig outweighs a world oppressed.’ (*Un pourceau secouru vaut un monde égorgé*.)”

The person who gets rid of the traditional virtues that restrain the appetite “in favor of an indiscriminate sympathy,” Babbitt writes, “does not simply lose his scale of values. He arrives at an inverted scale of values. For the higher the object for which one feels sympathy the more the idea of obligation is likely to intrude—the very thing the Rousseauist is seeking to escape. One is more irresponsible and therefore more spontaneous in the Rousseauistic sense in lavishing one’s pity on a dying pig.”

When Babbitt wrote in 1919, the example of Hugo’s “Sultan Murad” still seemed an extreme case. In our own day—when many of the same people who crusade in favor of abortion refuse to eat meat lest an innocent cow be killed—it seems less so. Indeed, ours could be called “The Age of Inverted Values.” Babbitt explains how civilization sank to this level and points to the ethical imagination and inner moral working as offering the hard but true way out.

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