Rousseau Redux: The American Environmental Movement

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Since their inception in the 1960s, the causes of environmentalism and ecology have sought a philosophical foundation. The works of Spinoza, Hegel, and Heidegger, among others, have been suggested for this purpose. Several periodicals – *Environmental History Review, Environmental Ethics, Ethics & the Environment*, etc. – continue the search. Up to this time, Jean-Jacques Rousseau has been mentioned, but his work has not yet become thematic. Commentators are aware that the writings of the eighteenth century Frenchman have influenced studies of nature and experience, but only indirectly by way of Goethe, Wordsworth, Emerson, and Thoreau. It is the contention of the paper that the French tradition can and should be an essential component for environmental thinking. More especially the Gallic approach concerning the individual's encounter with nature can ground the greening of America. Preservation, conservation, and planning, implicitly if not explicitly, rest on this source. Rousseau provides an indispensable pre-phenomenological account of the subject/object field from which natural piety emerges. This phenomenology is presented in *Emile* but is supplemented in *The New Eloise,* the *Botanical Letters,* and *Reveries of a Solitary Walker.*

The novel *Emile* (1761) outlines Rousseau's educational principles. The goal is to retain and sustain the child's innocence in the face of multiform encroachments and threats. Over-intellectualizing, artificial inclinations, and the acquisition of useless skills are discouraged. In a natural setting, corrections of bad habits and connections with *things-themselves* follow the needs of the child: "Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things. Everything degenerates in the hands of man."[1] Healthy intellectual development requires respect for the individual's original goodness. Nature, in its pre-human purity, is an occasion for security, wonder, and acclaim. Any configuration of trees, plants, lakes, stars, and rocks supplies a normative model for human fulfillment. Such patterns are wholes, not fragments; orderly, not chaotic; concrete, not abstract. According to Gilbert Lafreniere, Rousseau supplies "a paradigm to what man's relationship to nature ought to be."[2] Moreover, Rousseau catalogues the social, intellectual, and psychological barriers to this relationship. The main focus is on essences not facts. In fixing upon the person/nature encounter, a space in consciousness is cleared for the mutual contributions of nature and self. The child – taught by direct method

through his mother, his teachers, and his playmates – can realize affinities for God-given entities, artifacts, and happenings.

> Everything we do not have at our birth and which we need when we are grown is given us by education. This education comes to us from nature or from men or from things. The internal development of our faculties and our organs is the education of nature. The use that we are taught to make of this development is the education of men. And what we acquire from our own experience about the objects which affect us is the education of things.[3]

This ideal process of sustained harmony and orderliness contrasts with indifference to the environment, the thirst for power, or withdrawn passivity. As a free agent the child learns to "let nature be" rather than to bend, contort, or revise it to fit his/her wishes. The properly taught infant registers soil, fire, climate, wind, and water as these elements present themselves. The given conditions are accepted as they are given. An intermixture of nature's time, space, and movements is blended with parallel categories for the self. Sameness and difference are noted and assimilated. Adults who at times unreflectively do violence to both nature and the student must be neutralized. Rousseau says, "Nature wants children to be children before being men ... Childhood has its own ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling."[4] Any pupil who encounters particulars – plants, animals, stones, stars – can better relate to persons. Direct relations combine attachment and detachment: "Natural man is ... for himself. He is a numerical unity, the absolute whole which is relative only to itself or its kind."[5] Involvements are independent acts, not forced reactions. Detachments have a similar structure. The conscientious teacher allows inclinations for pets and farm animals to appear unrestricted. The interfering teacher – armed with abstractions, prohibitions, and confinements – damages and debilitates the student. The dangers of contamination from unrestricted contact with things are outweighed by the benefits of such encounters. Appreciations acquired through detached panoramic views, abstruse conversations, or abstract contemplations are vapid and empty. Books containing descriptions and narratives aid or deter the uninhibited approach to nature. Reading is acceptable only when it supplements hands on exploration. Fairy and folk tales often exemplify an unencumbered central experience of items in the world and hence are of inestimable value. In these tales, animated agents who undergo adventures and exploits quicken the child to experiment for her/himself. Such animation never justifies escape into a world of static symbolism.

Rousseau's recommendations are to enhance general feelings and to intend aspects of nature with feelings. Those who deny or deprecate intuitive, sensual,

and/or emotive experiences are for Rousseau enemies to the true spirit of learning:

> We are born with the use of our senses, and from our birth we are affected in various ways by the objects surrounding us. As soon as we have, so to speak, consciousness of our sensations, we are disposed to seek or avoid the objects which produce them, at first according to whether they are pleasant or unpleasant to us, then according to the conformity or lack of it that we find between us and these objects ...[6]

In Book One of *Emile*, Rousseau contrasts his own "crippled" personality with the adequately educated. Of himself he writes, "My tastes and thoughts always seemed to fluctuate between the idle and the base."[7] As a balance for emotional fluctuations, he at last realizes that a touch of and from nature is stabilizing. The nature-anchored person minimizes conflicts and confusions. Rousseau contends that human beings are initially (by disposition) good, kind, and compassionate. Many are corrupted through the pressures of society. The properly educated, embedded in nature, avoid such nefarious influences. Original, natural exposure to the life-world imposes integration. Rousseau does not ask his readers to emulate his own personal life. He writes, "I easily forget my misfortunes, but I cannot forget my faults, and still less my virtuous sentiments."[8] The awareness of every individual for both the ideal and the real evaporates into the remembrance of a predisposition for natural piety.

Rousseau rejects superficial mechanism:

> It is thus that nature, which does everything for the best, constituted him [the human] in the beginning. It gives him with immediacy only the desires necessary to his preservation and the faculties sufficient to satisfy them. It put all the others, as it were, in reserve in the depth of this soul to be developed there when needed. Only in this original state are power and desire in equilibrium and man is not unhappy.[9]

"Authorized" by the deity, undisturbed nature is always "divine." In his romantic appraisal, Rousseau accepts that simple people have a more unobstructed view for reality than the bourgeoisie or the aristocrats, who are educated for artificiality. He writes in *Emile*:

> It is the common people who compose the human race; what is not the people is hardly worth taking into account. Man is the same in all ranks; that being so, the ranks which are most numerous deserve most respect.[10]

That thinkers should confine themselves to the cognitive is widely accepted in America. However common, such a practice lacks an enriched response to the polymorphic appearance of the beautiful and the sublime. A corrective for such a detached and idle (or idol) curiosity is found in Rousseau and those French thinkers who follow his example. The nineteenth century novelist, Honoré de Balzac, in *Le Lille de la Valle*, narrates a simple tale which demonstrates Rousseau's call for a kinship with nature. In the story, Balzac contrasts a child's response with an adult's (The child speaks in the first person):

> One night while I quietly nestled down under a fig tree, I looked at a star with that curious passion which captures children and to which my precocious melancholy added a kind of sentimental understanding ... She (the governess) pretended to look for me and called me. I answered. She came to the fig tree where she knew I was.
>
> "What are you doing there," she said.
>
> "I am looking at a star."
>
> "You are not looking at a star," said my mother, who heard from her balcony. "Can one know astronomy at your age?"[11]

Eugene Minkowski cites this tale in *Towards a Cosmology* to demonstrate the Rousseauian principle of encounter. Awareness of objects requires more than a bare scientific cosmology. The mother figure deprecates the child's astronomical contemplation as only important in so far as it is a pre-scientific enterprise. Moreover, she presupposes that there is only one adequate way to know the heavenly bodies: the scientific way. The governess, on the contrary, recognizes that the child is aware after a fashion which most scientists find futile and unnecessary. By adding melancholy and sentiment –subjective qualities – a kind of consciousness emerges to which the scientist and parents are often indifferent. Balzac and Minkowski accept *"poetic-knowing"* just as does Rousseau. Minkowski summarizes the lesson succinctly:

> The mother accepts the generally accepted thesis that "Nature consists merely of observable facts, and anything over and above these facts that we sometimes believe we discover in nature is merely a song of the poet who just projects outwardly without value for science images which he draws from his own soul."[12]

It is Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his followers, Balzac and Minkowski, who supply the missing phenomenological ingredient for American environmentalists. These French thinkers avoid comprehensive vision of the universe, a particular

social order, or even the morality of individual accomplishment. Their lesson is often forgotten: Wisdom is immediate experience. That Rousseau, the writer, commends a comprehensive vision, a particular social order, and an individual morality becomes secondary. What is primary is a return to simple description of the immediate. It is direct contact which needs to be restored. Without such restoration, environmental programs collapse into vague and general theory, sentimental ethics, or political ideology. Ecological leadership can and should be founded on accounts of children, mad people, dreamers, and fantastic practitioners – characters out of Rousseau. So called mature adults are likely to stifle sympathies and empathies within themselves. Rousseau and his followers revive the person and downplay overly abstract goal-oriented programs and plans. The scientist, the technologist, the philosopher, and even the person of common sense who dwell in reductions, laws, theories, and models need to learn to share with simple human beings nature's charm, delight, and fascination.

The acceptance of any environmental program begins with the acknowledgment of inherent values which appear only to immediate consciousness. The affirmation of such values entails a letting go, a relinquishment of force and intellectual formality. Modern man (circa 1750 onward) is, according to Rousseau, becoming feeble, anxious, and unhappy. This is due to his alienation from raw experience. An attitude of strength, confidence, and contentment would follow a restoration of the original *touch-of-things*. Balzac in the nineteenth century and Minkowski in the twentieth repeat the same diagnosis and cure. Since the eighteenth century, the Romantic hope for rediscovering nature has proven to be largely disappointing. The enforced encroachment of science, technology, social planning, and pragmatic religion has continued like a juggernaut. Codes of valuation and value theory have made natural events and processes merely quaint. Even poetic calls for a reawaking to the forests, the skies, the deserts, and the oceans have been made to seem ridiculous and futile. Paradoxically, each individual must set aside the exclusively anthropological in order to become more human. An uncovering of Rousseau's descriptions of experiential kinship with nature will provide a foundation for the non-anthropological.

This paper advocates a reappraisal of Rousseauian thought. It presupposes that Rousseau's political recommendations, his moral admonitions, and his aesthetic pronouncements can be placed in a background of muted concern. That which remains is the foreground, the core of Rousseau, is the bringing to appearance of the structures of consciousness. It is further contended that the Rousseauian lessons can best be garnered from the text of Rousseau and not filtered through English, German, or American poets and essayists. Only Rousseau himself and those Frenchmen uniquely acquainted with his descriptions can surmount the shortcomings of modernism and revert to a foundation from which environmental plan-

ning can proceed. The advantage of such a procedure outweighs the potential threats of anti-intellectualism, naive sentimentality, and a questionable totalitarianism which others have seen as the Rousseauian legacy. Such faults do not show themselves in Rousseau's proto-phenomenology.

Notes

1. *Emile or On Education* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Introduction, translation, and notes by Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, Harper Collins, 1979), 37.

2. *Emile*, 42.

3. *Emile*, 38.

4. Ibid.

5. *Emile*, 39.

6. Ibid.

7. *Confessions* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Quoted in *A History of Political Thought* by George H. Sabine (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1937), 575.

8. *Confessions*, 576.

9. *Emile*, 80.

10. *Emile*, qtd in Sabine, 579 from a quote included in Morley, *Rousseau* (1886), Vol. II, pp 226f.

11. *Le Lille de la Valle* by Honoré de Balzac. *Toward a Cosmology (Vers une Cosmologie)* by Eugene Minkoswski (Paris: Aubier, 1936, pp 163-72), translated by Joseph J. Kockelmans and reprinted as "Prose and Poetry (Astronomy and Cosmology) in *Phenomenology and the Natural Sciences*, edited by Joseph J. Kockelmans and Theodore J. Kisiel (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1970), 239.

12. *Toward a Cosmology (Vers une Cosmologie)* by Eugene Minkoswski (Paris: Aubier, 1936, pp 163-72), translated by Joseph J. Kockelmans and reprinted as "Prose and Poetry (Astronomy and Cosmology) in *Phenomenology and the Natural Sciences* edited by Joseph J. Kockelmans and Theodore J. Kisiel (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1970), 240.

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_____. *Reveries of a Solitary Walker.* Translated, with Preface, Notes, and Essay by Charles E. Butterworth. New York: NYU Press, 1979.