

PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS

THE DEFECTIVE EXISTENCE (JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU)

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Abstract: Posterity ensured Jean-Jacques Rousseau with a glory tightly connected to the critique of history. The natural man has been perverted, his original qualities have been corrupted, and history, in its essence, started to move on the wrong path. Such a perspective, doubled by the solution found by Rousseau, that of restauration of the nature state and recovery of the man, obscured the profoundly philosophical qualities of his manner of thought. The present text, as a first part of an ampler study, attempts at discovering the metaphysical origin of this thought.

Keywords: defective existence, nature, corruption, history, human.

Biographic and historic bases. No one has denounced, with such fervour and pathos, the defects of the existence, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau did, the one who enjoyed declining in his name the quality of *citizen of Genoa*¹. With both anger and bitterness, he would thrust before the time and his fellow men, the ruthless verdict: the world is corrupt, the morals are spoilt, and the sciences and arts, far from contributing to the improving of morals, participated to their rotting. No consideration, no restraint, nothing from what the world of the 18th aristocratic, educated, mannered, cultivated French century cherished was found in the public answer of this unknown man, recently arrived at Paris, who, in addition, had the conceitedness of a provincial.

For the start, France, through one of its Academies, subjected a question to the public debate: had the sciences and arts contributed to the purifying of the morals? It was a rhetorical question, whose answer was assumed *a priori*, rather similar to a rhetorical caress on the forehead of the most loved nations. On another side, it was a question of its concern: it had the most beautiful arts, the most beautiful sciences, the most geometrical manners. Besides, its morals were subjected to the most solid supervision, that of the faith and tradition. The question of the Academy from Dijon had appeared to many a form of narcissism and academic endearment.

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¹ The belonging of Rousseau to the city of Genoa, frequently invoked, is one of the numerous forms of perfection that he meets. In the first part of his life, he prides oneself on his citizenship. It would not be the same later, when, from reasons of visionary difference, the city of Genoa would want to separate from him, condemning his papers. In reply, Rousseau said that no city was so well-constructed that the humanity of his sayings to be respected as laws and principles.

Naturally, the sciences and the arts had contributed to the purification of the morals and the embellishing of life. France did not need an answer, but a noisy confirmation. An affirmative answer could represent only a gesture made out of complacency, which would confirm its vanity truth. An academic endearment, a game of the rhetoric, and nothing more.

Consequently, when the unexpected answer was put out in the open, France, through its cultivated environment, tried a stupefaction that never before – and, alas!, nor after! – had experienced. Not only had the sciences and arts not contributed to the purification of the morals, but, on the contrary, had led to corruption, had took part to the degradation, replacing the truth with the lie, the sincerity with hypocrisy, the naturalness with the falsity.

Once the shock occurred, France understood more than an intellect would understand generally: it was, nonetheless, the answer given to its sciences and arts. Not only was there involved a generical answer that could have concerned anyone, any nation, but France itself was involved, the landmark of all the nations, sciences and arts. The manner in which it was affected, was both multiple and total. It had asked the question on arts and sciences in general, yet inferring its sciences and arts specifically. France was, at that time, the generous representation of all. The answer could only generate a double damage, one for the spirit in general, and another for the spirit of France. Behind an answer, there was hidden an insult.

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Friedrich Nietzsche had had a mention, at some point, referring to himself: I have enough power to divide history in halves. It was the moment when Nietzsche was already ill, thus, it cannot be precisely known whether the uproarious sentence belongs, in its turn, to the ill spirit of Nietzsche. For him, infatuation was a style, the art of truth and the superlative of method.

When Rousseau would answer the question asked by the Academy of Dijon, he was perfectly healthy. The few probes of his diseases, until that date, had not proved to be a concern that would question his expressing of the truth or the content. His answer was that of a healthy man, the answer of a philosopher. He had to be considered seriously, and he was. The fact that no answer seemed to lead to the validation of the answer and the consent on the harshest attempt upon culture. The importance of words must not be diminished, when dealing with a detailed answer, offered to an academic institution, in the middle of the 18th century.

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In 1749, Rousseau was thirty-seven years old. He had done nothing significant until that moment. He had trained for no profession – something that would attract reproaches from his father, even from the women, whose love he used to seek insistently. He had done nothing noticeable amongst the writers. Not

even among the philosophers, despite the sympathy he was shown. He was nobody, without any consistency. He had not been able to keep a job in administration. The year when he lived in Venice, as secretary of count Montaigu, had ended poorly, he had no manners, no tact and no diplomacy. He was sacked, followed by the worst references. He had no identity, and the truth was not a passion of his.

He had not subjected himself to any custom, any obligation, he had not been able to imprint a self-concern to his own life. He had precarious education, an arbitrary one that lacked discipline. What was certain about him: he had asserted his caprice and own-will everywhere. He was, according to his own confession, a vagabond: a sure statute in which he was complying without the intention to leave it.

It might be the reason in which the courage of his answer can be explained, without the science of assuming obligations, a code of manners, of a social art that would enable the cohabitation and the socialisation, the nerve of an insulting answer, given to an Academy, to a jury, to a culture.

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He reached Paris in 1743, after his affair with Mrs. Warens had ended. He ended his doubtful probation period in the bohemian Parisian atmosphere, cultivating his talents and accomplishing his education and culture. The few attempts of affirming himself in the musical and theatrical composition did not have the expected results. He hardly made ends meet, but he was accepted by the cultivated and aristocratic circles, he was introduced to the fashionable circle – *at Paris*, he used to say, *one cannot do anything without women!* –. And nothing he managed, indeed. Always in love, but with the wrong person, he got nowhere. Finally, he ended up in the arms of a housekeeper, Therese La Vasseur, who, without the power in the world of the above-mentioned circles and arts, would offer him nothing more than five children, all abandoned in foster homes.

Until that point, the life of Rousseau can be confused with his biography. He does not exist as a spirit. He does not produce anything remarkable, except for few feeble attempts. Not even his passion for the truth incites him. He has no intuition that may position him on a path. He shares the thoughts of anybody else. It is not the direction to predict anything. Life is what gives him the opportunity to move beyond his biography. The cultivated friendships are fruitful. He takes advantage of them. Not much, but focusing on one of them, the profit emerges. He was a friend of Denis Diderot who, looking for spirits that are apt for writing articles in the immense *Encyclopaedia* that Diderot, along with a group of intellectuals were making, seeing in it something similar to the *Book of Books*, requires him to write some articles on music and economy. The stake of the *Encyclopaedia* was huge: to reflect the entire culture and civilisation as basis for the change of the world. The reason was the piece de resistance of the *Encyclopaedia*, and the enlightenment

was its purpose and final result. The most adequate definition would be provided by Kant: *Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed nonage*².

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The manner in which Rousseau presents what happened has the data of an apotheosis. The biographers, most of them, took this manner of consideration, talking about a veritable revelation.

In 1749, Denis Diderot was imprisoned at Vincennes, on the outskirts of Paris, for minor crimes, common in that age. The imprisonment was bearable, without any difficulties. His friends would visit him, and the circumstances generated by incarceration did not deprive him of his wit. In the summer of that year, on his journey to Vincennes to visit Diderot, Rousseau bought *Mercur de France*, extremely popular at that time. Before reaching the edge of the forest, he halted and read the paper. He found the announce of the Academy of Dijon that was taking to competition the topic: *Have the sciences and the arts contributed to the purification of morals?* The impact of such announcement is devastating for Rousseau: the world is turned upside-down. Its entire truth is annihilated. A 180-degree turn.

That year, of 1749, the summer was extremely torrid. There are almost two leagues from Paris to Vincennes... The moment I read it, a different universe sprung before my eyes and I became a different person.

How was that possible? How, a spirit satisfied with the general truths, who had never aspired to revelation and truth, could experience a sudden enlightenment, after which the entire content of the world would be change, and the routine truth would stop? Could there be the lack of a passion for truth and complacency in the general routine to give birth to a sudden passion? Rousseau sees the truth of the world now, and the world is ready to mirror itself into a new truth.

The case seems to not have precedents in the history of philosophy. No one from the category of the *heroes of thought* (Hegel) ever pretended that the truth revealed to them in such a complete and miraculous form, as Rousseau mentions. On the contrary, the usual procedure of the belief that the philosophers usually complied with, enhances a long and sinuous journey, with the truth barely noticing at the end. Nobody pretended to have experienced the emergence of the truth swiftly, over-night.

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The laic ecstasy. Thus, at the half of Rousseau's life – 1749 – there occurs the event that would split his life in two: the announcement of the Academy of Dijon on the competition theme: *Whether the progress of sciences and arts contributed to the purification of the morals.* Reading the announcement, Rousseau

² I. Kant, *Ideea unei istorii universale. Ce este luminarea. Începutul istoriei omenirii. Spre pacea eternă*, Casa Școalelor Press, 1943, p. 83.

experiences a real enlightenment, *comparable to that it originated from*. The discourse on the method, *of Descartes, with the Memorial of Pascal*³. The terms in which Rousseau describes enlightenment are related to an ecstatic experience: *The moment I read it, a new horizon sprung before my eyes and I became a different person. Although I can remember well the impression I had, the details flew from my mind /.../ What I can clearly remember in this circumstance is that, reaching Vincennes, I was tormenting close to frenzy*. What announces these lines is the nature of a religious experience that changes, or creates, the destiny. But Rousseau does not have such experience, and nothing from the aura of the faith subject, of the new-man definitively classified by Rudolf Otto, concerns him. What Rousseau effectively experiences here is the nature of the laic ecstasy, its side that lacks sacrality, bearing, on the contrary, the entire power of change of the absolute truth. Not even the word ecstasy is formulated to characterise the experience of an amplex that only he can grasp. Rousseau undergoes a laic ecstasy that he describes within the coordinates of the original one, the sacred ecstasy. The entire carcass of the original ecstasy is found in the present description. Nonetheless, the content does not belong to him, because what he feels is not the sacred, is not the mystic God whose appearance should be described. What is more, not even the truth, which is the subject of this experience, is mentioned insistently. Two coordinates are provided as visioned: **another universe and another man**. They can be obtained sequencing the enlightenment generated by a vision whose object delays its naming. Nevertheless, the naming of the supplied feeling does not lack: *I was tormenting close to frenzy*, something typical for his mystical experience. What is prioritised, are the ideas, they are regarded, seen in the sacred altitude of the absolute object. They are followed by the feelings. *My feelings awoke hearing the voice of my ideas unbelievably swiftly*. Yet, when he had to describe his happenings, similarly to any mystical experience that intends to be described, Rousseau would hit against its successive, cursive retelling, as it occurred in the ontological order of the revealed absolute. He would describe the result of this vision in a series that would form his answer to the question asked by the Academy of Dijon, regarding the sciences and arts, but, regarded retrospectively, *this writing, filled with warmth and force, completely lack logic and order*. Yet, the experience was not lacking logic or order. Any mystical experience, as Heidegger would say later, is perfectly coherent and logical in its unfolding.

Any mystical experience has its own time in which it is rapidly consumed. The intensity that contributes to the power of vision does not pass without marking definitively the shape of the object of feeling. There is no slow experience, nor one sequenced on great segments of time. On the contrary, the mystical experience captures a time that is maximally concentrated, as much as time can be concentrated, being itself in the interior of its concentrated substance, the vision living the ontology of the sacred plenary. The sacred that is revealed does not need time. It is as the time allows the experience without its usual flowing. It is **an**

³ Irina Bădescu, in Rousseau, *Scrieri despre artă, prefață și tabel cronologic*, p. XXXIII.

experience that dispenses itself from time, being just a transcendental condition that lacks the effective reality.

However, what Rousseau experiences from now on has duration in the most ordinary time. *What is even more amazing, is that this torment has been lingering within my heart for more than four or five years, in such an impressive form, as it has never been felt before by the heart of a man.* In order to fully understand the duration Rousseau refers to, the time of the vision, measured in common units, depends on the assimilation of the idea that makes the difference between the sacred modality on God, in which the time is suspended and concentrated into a simple conditionality from which its effectively lacks, and the secular modality, the laic one, of obtaining a truth, even if only in the instantaneous form that is mentioned here. Because a laic truth is not obtained in the ecstatic manner of the sacred from the mystical experiences. It does not concern the absolute because the truth of Rousseau is not the truth from Parmenides' saying: there is only the being, nothing more besides. Such a being, offered to the ecstatic experience does not leave anything aside. While the truth from Rousseau' vision is not the ontological truth, that is, the secularised absolute. It is a modest truth, related to history and the human society, with an evolution within the parameters of error, justice and injustice. A moral truth from the moment implies notions as the rightful and the unrightful. The error, which belongs to the lexis of logic, is operational here only as a moral metaphor.