

Victor Gourevitch

Rousseaus politische Philosophie



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My project was to complete a commentary of Jean Jacques Rousseau's early critical writings that would serve as a companion to the edition of these writings which I brought out two years ago. I devoted the greater part of the year to that project, and I leave the Wissenschaftskolleg with a very nearly finished draft of the work I set out to do.

My reading of Rousseau has been guided by two working hypotheses: that his thought is coherent; that all of his writings are informed by political — or by moral/political — considerations. Sometimes the positions he adopts in the early critical texts appear to be at odds with these assumptions: the *First Discourse* criticizes the arts and sciences from a political perspective, yet the *Second Discourse* seeks a scientific basis for politics, and the *Essay on the Origin of Languages* is a work of and on aesthetics; the account of origins in the *Second Discourse* is far more radical than the apparently corresponding account in the *Essay*. The list could be extended almost at will.

I spent much of the year reflecting on these and similar difficulties, and trying to show how they might be resolved.

The main disagreements that surround Rousseau's account of origins, his famous account of the state of nature, seem to me to be due to a failure to attend to the distinction he draws between the "pure" state of nature on the one hand, and the state of nature as such and without qualifications on the other. Ever since Hobbes, "state of nature" has come to be understood in contrast to "civil state". It thus serves to mark the distinction between pre-political and political forms of rule. Rousseau radicalizes the question regarding rule by asking: what are the conditions of any rule whatsoever?; and hence: what might correspond to a total absence of

ruling and being ruled? On a few occasions he refers to such a state or condition as the "pure state of nature". But ruling and being ruled appears to be coeval with human relations. In trying to think the pure state of nature, Rousseau is therefore led to try and think a condition without any human relations whatsoever; and hence also without art or artifice of any kind. Such a "pure" state of nature is necessarily conjectural, and Rousseau very explicitly says that it is. But the state of nature as such and without further qualifications, the state of men in various prepolitical relations with one another, is a factual and indeed an entirely familiar state. Once the distinction between these two senses of "state of nature" is clearly seen, the disagreements about Rousseau's account of this state in the *Second Discourse* are resolved; and so are the apparent inconsistencies between that account and the account of "the first times" in the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*.

The *Essay* is commonly read as a work strictly devoted to aesthetics, and sometimes it is read as also one more Rousseauan quest for "origins", i. e. for the transparency of the unconditioned. Yet it is clearly and at every level informed by political reflections. I have tried to give a reading of the *Essay* that does justice to this political dimension: The *Essay* opens with a discussion of the difference between gesture and speech; that distinction rests on the difference between seeing and speaking; and that difference points to the difference between detachment and involvement, between nature and human community. Seeing invariably remains somewhat contemplative, "theoretical", whereas the voice is the medium of the passions and of our relations with our fellows. The voice both declares and expresses the passions; it thus both conveys and arouses them. Languages, in turn, typically tend to exhibit the accents of the dominant passions that gave them rise. Now, on Rousseau's argument, people speaking different languages will not only voice the passions differently, they will experience them differently. The character of the language stamps the character of its speakers. His thesis, then, is that families of languages — or, more precisely, their passional and prosodic features, their inflections, accents, rhythms, together with their imitation in music — express and structure distinctive economics of the passions, and so establish distinctive moral orders. Languages thus broadly understood, languages and musics, are ways of life. They are therefore properly objects of political concern.

In Spring 1988 I presented this reading of the *Essay* at a Colloquium of the Forschungsgruppe Literaturwissenschaft at the University of Konstanz, and learned much from the ensuing discussion.

In addition to work on my main project, I also made considerable progress on a very different project: to prepare an edition of the correspond-

ence between Leo Strauss (1899-1973) and Alexandre Kojève (1902-1968). I leave the Kolleg with an almost complete and, I believe, accurate transcription of these often nearly indecipherable letters, as well as with the beginnings of a critical apparatus. I hope to have an annotated translation of this correspondence together with an Introduction to it ready for publication by spring 1989.

This has been an intellectually most profitable year for me. I have learned more than I can say from my colleagues, especially from my German colleagues. I am extremely grateful to the Wissenschaftskolleg for providing the setting and the opportunity for these contacts.