

## Rousseau and Bourgeois Man's Search for Wholeness

Jean M. Yarbrough

Bowdoin College, Brunswick, Maine, USA

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*Why We Are Restless* is informed by a certain Tocquevillean urgency. As the Storeys tell us in their introduction, their students, among the most privileged young people in America, are profoundly uneasy, their souls agitated and restless as they ponder questions about how they should live and what will make them happy. The Storeys attempt to make sense of this by examining the thought of what they call four “old French philosophers” (xii). They acknowledge that such an approach, focusing on the writings of Montaigne, Pascal, Rousseau, and Tocqueville as a way of understanding this contemporary American unease, might seem “counterintuitive” (xii) and they are not wrong. The French *moralistes* are by no means the only thinkers who can shed light on what the authors argue is a distinctively modern form of restlessness. But they convincingly show that these thinkers offer a good, if for Americans somewhat novel, starting point to help our anxious young understand what is troubling them. In brief, the Storeys argue, it is the modern turn away from the transcendent in all its forms (philosophic, religious, and heroic) that explains the restlessness of their souls. As Tocqueville sagely observed, “the soul has needs that must be satisfied,” needs that we moderns have for too long ignored.<sup>1</sup>

I discuss Rousseau's contribution to what the authors call the shift toward “immanent contentment” inaugurated by Montaigne (and challenged a century later by Pascal). They see Rousseau as central to this project, for he tried to forge a third way between Montaigne's focus on the ordinary delights of the here and now and Pascal's anguished search for a hidden and mysterious God—albeit a third way that remains firmly grounded in this world. Rousseau tries to rescue Montaigne's “broad-minded [but] shallow” (99) search for this worldly contentment by infusing it with a certain Pascalian heft stripped of its transcendent longings.

<sup>1</sup>Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. and trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 510.

Given Rousseau's protean character, it is not surprising that he offers multiple solutions. The Storeys go beyond the usual three, discussing four and suggesting that there may well be others. Indeed, if we are multiplying the list, I would nominate Rousseau's "If I Were a Rich Man" fantasy at the end of chapter 4 in the *Emile* for at least a minor award. His luscious description of a country fete, tables laden with locally sourced organic foods, seems to have captured the imagination of today's back-to-nature enthusiasts and farmers' market crowd. Nevertheless, such an appealing portrait offers little nourishment for the hungry soul.

Rousseau's answer to the question of why we are restless is that modern human beings are divided. They are no longer the independent self-sufficient beings that they were in the original state of nature, but neither are they authentic members of a larger political whole. This is the condition in which the individual finds himself: torn between his inclinations and his duties, he is neither good for himself nor good for others. Neither a man nor a citizen, he is the *bourgeois*. One way Rousseau tries to overcome this division is by reconstituting classical republicanism on the modern principle of integrity, in which citizens devote themselves completely to their fatherland. But that solution ultimately fails because it would require an education that would thoroughly "denature" us. *Pace* Aristotle, we are not by nature political animals. Still, the Storeys go too far when they assert that Rousseau's treatment of citizenship "reminds every reader today of totalitarianism" (103).

At the other extreme, a return to our undivided self-sufficient nature, as Rousseau at various points attempted with his own reveries, proves impossible for any length of time or for very many people. Even in his few blissful hours of solitude, Rousseau confesses that he could not prevent his vanity from intruding on his sweet sentiment of existence. The *amour-propre* of civilized beings prevents a return to their original uncomplicated natures.

Although the Storeys consider the Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar another of Rousseau's attempts to overcome our dividedness, they find the Vicar's natural religion also unsatisfactory. Not only is the Vicar's reliance on his own feelings to judge right and wrong too sentimental and unreliable, but his belief in even a natural religion means that he is not truly whole or self-sufficient. By Rousseau's lights, that may well be true, but as they note, the line from the Vicar's Profession of Faith to today's "spiritual but not religious" sensibility is striking. Leaving aside Rousseau's reservations, many of our young find the Vicar's easygoing spirituality appealing.

This brings us then to the romantic couple of the *Emile*, which "of all the human possibilities Rousseau depicts . . . perhaps speaks most powerfully to the longings of the modern heart" (121). It is this image of the happy family that seems best to capture the modern meaning of "immanent contentment." But the Storeys almost entirely ignore Rousseau's insistence on the complementarity of the sexes, in which the romantic couple constitutes a whole or "a moral person." This, incidentally, is why their remark that

“even our heated contests over the nature of family testify to [its] overwhelming significance” (111) falls wide of the mark. It is not just any family, but only the romantic family based on the supposedly natural division of sexual roles that can possibly overcome our dividedness. Dual career and/or same-sex marriages cannot make us whole. Rousseau could not be clearer on this: “If woman could ascend to general principles as well as man can, and if man had as good a mind for details as woman does, they would always be independent of one another, they would live in eternal discord, and their partnership could not exist.”<sup>2</sup> To be fair, the Storeys do mention Rousseau’s emphasis on sexual differences in endnote 52 of their chapter on Rousseau. However, they merely state that they think he exaggerates these differences without further discussion. Yet without a more extended consideration of sexual complementarity, the romantic solution makes no sense. The Storeys seem to recognize this when in the same endnote they suggest that Rousseau “overemphasizes” these differences because he is trying “to make the solitary and self-sufficient individual a social whole” (215n52). In that same endnote, they add that Rousseau “underestimates the possibilities of friendship between the sexes,” while in the body of the chapter they observe that Emile and Sophie “lack the mysterious depths that characterize Montaigne’s friendship with La Boétie” (123). But what a standard to judge this couple by! As Rousseau emphasizes, Emile and Sophie are average in every way, while Montaigne and La Boétie are men of the world who considered their friendship so rare that it probably could not occur more than once in three hundred years. Speaking of friendship, the Storeys are right to point out that Rousseau managed to alienate every friend he ever had (including “*le bon David*” Hume), so perhaps we should not look to him for guidance on friendship, marital or otherwise.

Instead, the Storeys focus on two other “vulnerabilities” in Rousseau’s portrait of the romantic family. The first occurs in the short unpublished (and unfinished) sequel, “Emile and Sophie, or The Solitaries.” In a series of letters to his tutor, Emile recounts the decline of the marriage after the death of Sophie’s parents and their infant daughter. The Storeys present this as a Pascalian turn, in which death and diversion are linked. But I am not sure why the move to Paris could not be seen as a failed turn to Montaigne. They also suggest that, unlike Emile, Sophie’s education has not prepared her to endure the vicissitudes of harsh fortune. Two questions arise: Given that Emile’s education exposed him to the vices of Paris, why would he ever have taken Sophie to the city? As for the “failure” of Sophie’s education, what might her parents have done differently or better? Would the great-books education they recommend for their students have appealed to an average young woman like Sophie? Although they do not mention it, it seems clear that Sophie’s religious education (in book 5),

<sup>2</sup>Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 377.

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which centers exclusively on birth and death as natural occurrences, would hardly have been adequate to the calamity of three deaths in quick succession. The thin treatment of religion in the *Emile* is, however, consistent with Rousseau's attempt to fuse the complementary partners into a self-sufficient or nearly self-sufficient whole that is rooted in this world. The Storeys are right to note that once that whole is sundered by the malignities of fortune, Emile discovers a new source of self-sufficiency in the stoic endurance of his many trials. Yet while the fallen Sophie shows none of Emile's stoicism, she does survive, and in one possible plot line may indeed end her days in a *ménage à trois* with Emile and another woman!

The second vulnerability is Emile's total reliance on the tutor, who since childhood has manipulated his pupil's environment to give him the illusion of freedom. In the sequel, Emile goes so far in his letters to his tutor as to blame him for the failure of his marriage. It is hard to see how one could call the education of Emile a success or the romantic couple a model for even "immanent contentment." My students do not. But perhaps that is the point of the Storeys' very fine book.