

Profession of Faith of a Savoyard Vicar

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Always somewhat at odds with his fellow philosophes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) offers a deism much more reflective of heartfelt religious sensibility. This profession of faith is from his 1762 novel, Emile.

I believe, therefore, that the world is governed by a wise and powerful Will. I see it, or rather I feel it; and this is of importance for me to know. But is the world eternal, or is it created? Are things derived from one self-existent principle, or are there two or more, and what is their essence? Of all this I know nothing, nor do I see that it is necessary I should. In proportion as such knowledge may become interesting I will endeavor to acquire it: but further than this I give up all such idle disquisitions, which serve only to make me discontented with myself, which are useless in practice, and are above my understanding.

You will remember, however, that I am not dictating my sentiments to you, but only explaining what they are. Whether matter be eternal or only created, whether it have a passive principle or not, certain it is that the whole universe is one design, and sufficiently displays one intelligent agent: for I see no part of this system that is not under regulation, or that does not concur to one and the same end; viz., that of preserving the present and established order of things. That Being, whose will is his deed, whose principle of action is in himself—that Being, in a word, whatever it be, that gives motion to all parts of the universe, and governs all things, I call GOD.

To this term I affix the ideas of intelligence, power, and will, which I have collected from the order of things; and to these I add that of goodness, which is a necessary consequence of their union. But I am not at all the wiser concerning the essence of the Being to which I give these attributes. He remains at an equal distance from my senses and my understanding. The more I think of him, the more I am confounded. I know of a certainty that he exists, and that his existence is independent of any of his creatures. I know also that my existence is dependent on his, and that every being I know is in the same situation as myself. I perceive the deity in all his works, I feel him within me, and behold him in every object around me: but I no sooner endeavor to contemplate what he is in himself—I no sooner enquire where he is, and what is his substance, than he eludes the strongest efforts of my imagination; and my bewildered understanding is convinced of its own weakness.

For this reason I shall never take upon me to argue about the nature of God

further than I am obliged to do by the relation he appears to stand in to myself. There is so great a temerity in such disquisitions that a wise man will never enter on them without trembling, and feeling fully assured of his incapacity to proceed far on so sublime a subject: for it is less injurious to entertain no ideas of the deity at all, than to harbor those which are unworthy and unjust.

After having discovered those of his attributes by which I am convinced of his existence, I return to myself and consider the place I occupy in that order of things, which is directed by him and subjected to my examination. Here I find my species stand incontestibly in the first rank; as man, by virtue of his will and the instruments he is possessed of to put it in execution, has a greater power over the bodies by which he is surrounded than they, by mere physical impulse, have over him. By virtue of his intelligence, I also find, he is the only created being here below that can take a general survey of the whole system. Is there one among them, except man, who knows how to observe all others? to weight, to calculate, to foresee their motions, their effects, and to join, if I may so express myself, the sentiment of a general existence to that of the individual? What is there so very ridiculous then in supposing everything made for man, when he is the only created being who knows how to consider the relation in which all things stand to himself?

It is then true that man is lord of the creation, that he is, at least, sovereign over the habitable earth; for it is certain that he not only subdues all other animals, and even disposes by his industry of the elements at his pleasure, but he alone of all terrestrial beings knows how to subject to his convenience, and even by contemplation to appropriate to his use, the very stars and planets he cannot approach. Let anyone produce me an animal of another species who knows how to make use of fire, or hath faculties to admire the sun. What! am I able to observe, to know other beings and their relations; am I capable of discovering what is order, beauty, virtue, of contemplating the universe, of elevating my ideas to the hand which governs the whole; am I capable of loving what is good and doing it, and shall I compare myself to the brutes? Abject soul! it is your gloomy philosophy alone that renders you at all like them. Or, rather, it is in vain you would debase yourself. Your own genius rises up against your principles; your benevolent heart gives the lie to your absurd doctrines, and even the abuse of your faculties demonstrates their excellence in spite of yourself.

For my part, who have no system to maintain, who am only a simple, honest man, attached to no party, unambitious of being the founder of any sect, and contented with the situation in which God hath placed me, I see nothing in the world, except the deity, better than my own species; and were I left to choose my place in the order of created beings, I see none that I could prefer to that of man.

This reflection, however, is less vain than affecting; for my state is not the effect of choice, and could not be due to the merit of a being that did not before exist. Can I behold myself, nevertheless thus distinguished, without thinking myself happy in occupying so honorable a post; or without blessing the hand that placed

me here? From the first view I thus took of myself, my heart began to glow with a sense of gratitude towards the author of our being; and hence arose my first idea of the worship due to a beneficent deity. I adore the supreme power, and melt into tenderness at his goodness. I have no need to be taught artificial forms of worship; the dictates of nature are sufficient. Is it not a natural consequence of self-love to honor those who protect us, and to love such as do us good?

But when I come afterwards to take a view of the particular rank and relation in which I stand, as an individual, among the fellow creatures of my species; to consider the different ranks of society and the persons by whom they are filled; what a scene is presented to me! Where is that order and regularity before observed? The scenes of nature present to my view the most perfect harmony and proportion: those of mankind nothing but confusion and disorder. The physical elements of things act in concert with each other; the moral world alone is a chaos of discord. Mere animals are happy; but man, their lord and sovereign, is miserable! Where, Supreme Wisdom! are thy laws? Is it thus, O Providence! thou governest the world? What is become of thy power, thou Supreme Beneficence, when I behold evil thus prevailing upon the earth?

Would you believe, my good friend, that from such gloomy reflections and apparent contradictions, I should form to myself more sublime ideas of the soul than ever resulted from my former researches? In meditating on the nature of man, I conceived that I discovered two distinct principles; the one raising him to the study of eternal truths, the love of justice and moral beauty—bearing him aloft to the regions of the intellectual world, the contemplation of which yields the truest delight to the philosopher—the other debasing him even below himself, subjecting him to the slavery of sense, the tyranny of the passions, and exciting these to counteract every noble and generous sentiment inspired by the former. When I perceived myself hurried away by two such contrary powers, I naturally concluded that man is not one simple and individual substance. I will, and I will not; I perceive myself at once free, and a slave; I see what is good, I admire it, and yet I do the evil: I am active when I listen to my reason, and passive when hurried away by my passions; while my greatest uneasiness is to find, when fallen under temptations, that I had the power of resisting them.

Attend, young man, with confidence to what I say; you will find I shall never deceive you. If conscience be the offspring of our prejudices, I am doubtless in the wrong, and moral virtue is not to be demonstrated; but if self-love, which makes us prefer ourselves to everything else, be natural to man, and if nevertheless an innate sense of justice be found in his heart, let those who imagine him to be a simple uncompounded being reconcile these contradictions, and I will give up my opinion and acknowledge him to be one substance.

You will please to observe that by the word substance I here mean, in general, a being possessed of some primitive quality, abstracted from all particular or secondary modifications. Now, if all known primitive qualities may be united in one and the same being, we have no need to admit of more than one substance; but if some of these qualities are incompatible with, and necessarily exclusive of

each other, we must admit of the existence of as many different substances as there are such incompatible qualities. You will do well to reflect on this subject. For my part, notwithstanding what Mr. Locke hath said on this head, I need only to know that matter is extended and divisible, to be assured that it cannot think; and when a philosopher comes and tells me that trees and rocks have thought and perception, he may, perhaps, embarrass me with the subtlety of his arguments, but I cannot help regarding him as a disingenuous sophist, who had rather attribute sentiment to stocks and stones than acknowledge man to have a soul.

Let us suppose that a man, born deaf, should deny the reality of sounds, because his ears were never sensible of them. To convince him of his error, I place a violin before his eyes; and, by playing on another, concealed from him, give a vibration to the strings of the former. This motion, I tell him, is effected by sound.

“Not at all,” says he, “the cause of the vibration of the string is in the string itself: it is a common quality in all bodies so to vibrate.”

“Show me then,” I reply, “the same vibration in other bodies; or, at least, the cause of it in this string.”

“I cannot,” the deaf man may reply, “but wherefore must I, because I do not conceive how this string vibrates, attribute the cause to your pretended sounds, of which I cannot entertain the least idea? This would be to attempt an explanation of one obscurity by another still greater. Either make your sounds perceptible to me, or I shall continue to doubt their existence.”

The more I reflect on our capacity of thinking, and the nature of the human understanding, the greater is the resemblance I find between the arguments of our materialists and that of such a deaf man. They are, in effect, equally deaf to that internal voice which, nevertheless, calls to them so loud and emphatically. A mere machine is evidently incapable of thinking, it has neither motion nor figure productive of reflection: whereas in man there exists something perpetually prone to expand, and to burst the fetters by which it is confined. Space itself affords not bounds to the human mind: the whole universe is not extensive enough for man; his sentiments, his desires, his anxieties, and even his pride, take rise from a principle different from that body within which he perceives himself confined.

No material being can be self-active, and I perceive that I am so. It is in vain to dispute with me so clear a point. My own sentiment carries with it a stronger conviction than any reason which can ever be brought against it. I have a body on which other bodies act, and which acts reciprocally upon them. This reciprocal action is indubitable; but my will is independent of my senses. I can either consent to, or resist, their impressions. I am either vanquished or victor, and perceive clearly within myself when I act according to my will, and when I submit to be governed by my passions. I have always the power to will, though not the force to execute it. When I give myself up to any temptation, I act from

the impulse of external objects. When I reproach myself for my weakness in so doing, I listen only to the dictates of my will. I am a slave in my vices, and free in my repentance. The sentiment of my liberty is effaced only by my depravation, and when I prevent the voice of the soul from being heard in opposition to the laws of the body....

Enquire no longer then, who is the author of evil. Behold him in yourself. There exists no other evil in nature than what you either do or suffer, and you are equally the author of both. A general evil could exist only in disorder, but in the system of nature I see an established order, which is never disturbed. Particular evil exists only in the sentiment of the suffering being; and this sentiment is not given to man by nature, but is of his own acquisition. Pain and sorrow have but little hold on those who, unaccustomed to reflection, have neither memory nor foresight. Take away our fatal improvements, take away our errors and our vices, take away, in short, everything that is the work of man, and all that remains is good.

Where everything is good, nothing can be unjust, justice being inseparable from goodness. Now goodness is the necessary effect of infinite power and self-love essential to every being conscious of its existence. An omnipotent Being extends its existence also, if I may so express myself, with that of its creatures. Production and preservation follow from the constant exertion of its power: it does not act on non-existence. God is not the God of the dead, but of the living. He cannot be mischievous or wicked without hurting himself. A being capable of doing everything cannot will to do anything but what is good. He who is infinitely good, therefore, because he is infinitely powerful, must also be supremely just, otherwise he would be inconsistent with himself. For that love of order which produces it we call goodness, and that love of order which preserves it is called justice.

God, it is said, owes nothing to his creatures. For my part, I believe he owes them everything he promised them when he gave them being. Now what is less than to promise them a blessing, if he gives them an idea of it, and has so constituted them as to feel the want of it? The more I look into myself, the more plainly I read these words written in my soul: *Be just and thou wilt be happy*. I see not the truth of this, however, in the present state of things, wherein the wicked triumph and the just are trampled on and oppressed. What indignation, hence, arises within us to find that our hopes are frustrated! Conscience itself rises up and complains of its maker. It cries out to him, lamenting, *Thou hast deceived me!*

“I have deceived thee, rash man? Who hath told thee so? Is thy soul annihilated? Dost thou cease to exist? Oh, Brutus! stain not a life of glory in the end. Leave not thy honor and thy hopes with thy body in the fields of Philippi. Wherefore dost thou say, virtue is a shadow, when thou wilt yet enjoy the reward of thine own? Dost thou imagine thou art going to die? No! thou art going to live! and then will I make good every promise I have made to thee.”