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Clovis Gladstone, *Rousseau et le matérialisme*. Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020. 264 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. £75.00 (pb). ISBN 9-78-1789622027; £65.00 (eb). ISBN 9-78-1800345706.

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Jean-Jacques Rousseau has often been portrayed as being at odds with the materialist philosophers of eighteenth-century France. Critics have associated him with Stoic, Platonic, or Augustinian philosophy and, interpretative differences aside, the usual consensus is that he is an anti-materialist.[1] Rousseau ascribed after all to the idea of free will, and the *Profession de foi du vicairé savoyard* is plain-spoken in its criticism of that “gloomy philosophy”[2] that turns men into beasts rather than affords them a soul.

In *Rousseau et le matérialisme*, Clovis Gladstone argues, however, that such a facile conclusion ignores the fact that Rousseau spoke the language of his time, and materialist philosophy influenced both his autobiographical and theoretical writings. Gladstone’s book is therefore not just about Rousseau’s relationship with materialism, as the title may suggest. It takes the bolder step of setting out to prove Rousseau’s materialism and builds its premise around that most famous of Rousseau’s abandoned projects, *La morale sensitive, ou le matérialisme du sage*.

In the *Confessions*, Rousseau gives us a precise idea of the project and tells us how self-observation led him to conclude that while our characters are shaped by external causes, we could also act on these causes to make ourselves better. Whereas critics have noted the Lockean or Condillacian paradigm underpinning *La morale sensitive*, Gladstone stresses that the second title should not go unacknowledged. Rousseau’s reflections on the interactions between humans and their environment show that he believed in the materiality of human existence, and although he intended to solve the difficulties that materialist ideology posed for humankind, he was a materialist nonetheless. Rousseau’s differences with Diderot, Helvetius, or d’Holbach lie therefore not in kind but in purpose. Whereas he considered their atheist materialism to be destructive and immoral, he sought to develop a so-called wise materialism that sought to give a sense of permanence and stability in an incessantly changing world.

Although Rousseau’s project for *La morale sensitive* came to nothing, it is safe to say that it served as the fountainhead for other works such as *Emile*, *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, or *Du contrat social*. The first chapter of Gladstone’s book, “Un ‘bizarre et singulier assemblage,’” shows that it also allowed Rousseau to make sense of the development of his own being. As implied in this quote, Rousseau viewed himself as an assembly of a series of external influences, be they his stay with

the Lamberciers or the novels he read; and to understand him, one ought to follow the causal chain of mechanisms and interactions that have fashioned him. Through an excellent study of the language Rousseau used to describe his childhood, Gladstone shows us that the *Confessions* bear all the marks of an anthropological approach inherited from Lockean empiricism as well as from materialist determinism.

Unlike strict determinists, however, Rousseau refused to give contingency the last word. In chapter two, “Libre et maître de moi-même,” Gladstone shows how Rousseau, following the principles outlined in *La morale sensitive*, tried to carve for himself a space wherein he could exercise his free will and render the interactions with his surroundings more mutual and dynamic, in a way that evokes Diderot’s own vital materialism. Rousseau may thus be the product of life’s vagaries and of the secret chain of his affections. He nonetheless tries in turn to take control of that which can affect him by whittling his environment according to his own will.

Gladstone gives as an example Rousseau’s departure from Geneva, which he reads as a moment that highlights Jean-Jacques’ ability to take control of his becoming and to subdue the same events that were meant to fashion him. All the circumstances leading to the closing of the gates which left him stranded outside were beyond his control. Ultimately, however, the choice to leave Geneva was his. Unpredictability leads to a path where for a moment at least, free will takes the upper hand. Another example, more reflective of the principles charted in *La morale sensitive*, is the refuge Rousseau finds in the act of reading. Jean-Jacques’ love of novels may have stemmed fortuitously from his earliest childhood experiences, but he is able nonetheless to find in reading and in the imagination a space where he can protect himself from the contingent and from the influence of external factors. The imagination may inspire itself from the outside world, but it is also a rampart that can filter in only those objects and situations that conform to the subject’s free will.

Finally, Gladstone notes justly that Rousseau’s autobiographical works themselves are proof of the tension between free will and determinism which *La morale sensitive* tries to resolve. They are all attempts to shelter himself from factors beyond his control and to transform hostile external contingencies into a controlled environment that conforms with his vision of the truth. The paranoia exhibited in *Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques* and the general failure of his autobiographical project push Gladstone, however, to ponder the viability of the sage’s materialism. Although Rousseau’s paranoia could be interpreted as an extreme application of the principles of *La morale sensitive*, it may also be viewed as a betrayal of the empiricist principles behind it. Rather than interacting with his social surroundings, Rousseau finds himself withdrawn, alienated, and once again the plaything of an environment he cannot act upon.

In the third chapter, “*La morale sensitive en matière politique*,” Gladstone shows how Rousseau adopts for the political collectivity the same therapeutic measures he had intended for himself and for humankind in general. At the individual level, *La morale sensitive*’s prescription for moral freedom entails that humans free themselves from the whims of contingency and subject themselves rather to an environment that promotes a behavior in accordance with their conscience. At the political level, this transformation is achieved when individuals make a contract with themselves to become both citizens and subjects. As citizens and members of the sovereign, they are masters of their own transformation, and as subjects, they bind themselves to the conditions most favorable to moral freedom. At this scale, notes Gladstone, the general will constitutes a political abstraction meant to rid the citizen of the possibility of an interior

division between public virtue and private interest (p. 128). Yet, as in *La morale sensitive*, this prescription necessitates delimiting the influence of the outside world, and it is not surprising to see Rousseau advocate for self-sufficient forms of governance. The end goal this time, be it in *Du contrat social*, his later writings on Corsica or Poland, or his description of Clarens, is to create a political community which can withstand contingencies beyond its control, and which can guarantee the unalienated freedom of its citizens. That Rousseau rejects commerce as antithetical to civic virtue is in this regard unsurprising. Regardless of the political context, his objective is to establish a community that could stand the test of time and that could shield itself from foreign influences that risk thrusting it into that which it is not.

This dialectic between stability and unpredictability is tied to the phenomenon of temporality, and Gladstone's fourth and last chapter, "De la temporalité de l'homme," tackles precisely this issue. Although the notion of perfectibility is at the heart of Rousseau's indignation against modern social life in the *Discours sur l'inégalité*, Gladstone notes that the philosopher's relationship to time is a bit more complex, and the golden age itself is one testament to this complexity. Humans' transition from wilderness to the simplicity of the pastoral life is only possible because of their exposure to the contingencies of external circumstances. Here, temporality is welcome because the second state of nature is characterized by Rousseau as the happiest of states and the least subject to revolutions. The subsequent advances that follow this golden age are viewed however as responsible for humanity's servitude. For Gladstone, this ambivalent attitude towards temporality corresponds to the issue which sensitive morality aims to resolve: how to protect humans from contingency, while allowing them to be sustained by an outside world that is itself in the grip of change. It also reflects a tension in Rousseau's work between the necessary need for change and the desire to restrain evolution from going astray. Considering only Rousseau's longing for immobility would therefore be reductive. The many turns and twists of his own life point to the fact that at times, evolution is not only desirable but necessary, and that an everlasting stability is not compatible with the dynamic nature of humans.

By focusing on the materialist dimension of Rousseau's work, Gladstone's book challenges the neat opposition we often draw between Rousseau and the materialist mainstream of the French Enlightenment. At times, however, this focus is too hermetic, and Gladstone's keenness to demonstrate Rousseau's materialism ends up generating a portrait which many Rousseau scholars may find unrecognizable. Gladstone shows rightly how *La morale sensitive* holds the key to understanding Rousseau's work as a whole. Not only does it bridge his theoretical and autobiographical writings, but it also provides coherence to a thought which Rousseau himself qualified as a "coherent system."^[3] In many ways, the light Gladstone sheds on this philosophical consistency is one of the great strengths of his book. I believe, however, that it would have gained considerably if the materialism underpinning *La morale sensitive* was examined in conjunction with the metaphysical views expressed in the *Profession de foi du vicaire savoyard* or, generally, in *Emile* and in a number of other writings.

Gladstone is correct to point out that belief in dualism is not necessarily incompatible with basic materialist premises. However, the therapeutic which Rousseau outlines in *La morale sensitive* has as an objective to force the "the animal economy to favor the moral order it so often troubles." Far from encouraging a dynamic relationship with the contingencies or the temporality of the environment, this moral order presupposes that man in his current state is estranged from an original position, and that a metaphysical harkening back is necessary. Actually, one detail of *La morale sensitive* that goes largely ignored by Gladstone is the fact that it is meant to focus on "the

prior impression of external objects,” which we hold subconsciously, “without being aware of it,” and that the objective is to govern “in their origin the feelings by which we let ourselves be dominated.”[4] If this therapy implies a psychological mediation, we may also add that this psychology dovetails neatly with Rousseau’s anthropological and pseudo-Plotinian views.

In the last chapter of the book, Gladstone interprets *Les solitaires*, the enigmatic sequel to *Emile*, as a means for the pupil to forge his own destiny away from his tutor and assert his own will. He also notes that Emile is finally able to experience freedom because rather than resist contingency, he learns to embrace necessity not by yielding to it but by desiring it. If this recalls the fusion of voluptuousness and virtue in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, it is also in line with *La morale sensitive*’s objective of shaping the senses in a manner favorable to virtue. What ought not to be overlooked, however, is that Emile is a slave at this point, and if it is in this precise condition that he ultimately experiences freedom, it is because it is akin to the freedom of the simple inhabitants of the golden age or that of Jean-Jacques as a child. It harkens back to a point before the advent of progress, when desires were still bound, when freedom was concomitant with the constrictive parameters delimiting its expression. If we take into consideration the psychological dimension of *La morale sensitive*, it begets the question of whether Rousseau’s conception of free will is actually outward-looking as Gladstone contends, or whether it hinges on a ruse—the kind we see in *Emile*, *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, or even *Du contrat social*—meant to reverse temporality and realign our will with the dictates of that original moral order we so often trouble.

These slight misgivings notwithstanding, it goes without saying that Gladstone’s *Rousseau et le matérialisme* is a persuasive study that enhances our understanding of Rousseau’s thought and evinces how materialist ideology fits within the Rousseauian concept of *remède dans le mal*. Rousseau perceived the dangers it entailed, but evidently did not shun it completely. Rather, he confronted the problems it posed and tried to reappropriate it for what he believed was a positive outcome. Taking the project for *La morale sensitive* as point of reference, Gladstone’s book makes for a novel and convincing contribution to the long-running debate about the philosophical currents that have shaped Rousseau’s thought and shows clearly how materialist philosophy allows us to understand the connections between his autobiographical works, his philosophy, and his political thought.

NOTES

[1] See, for instance, Christopher Brooke, *Philosophic Pride: Stoicism and Political Thought from Lipsius to Rousseau* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012); Williams David Lay, *Rousseau’s Platonic Enlightenment* (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007); Jeremiah Alberg, *A Reinterpretation of Rousseau: A Religious System* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

[2] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education*, trans. David Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 284.

[3] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Rousseau Judge of Jean-Jacques: Dialogues*, in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, ed. Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1990), 1: 209.

[4] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions and Correspondence, Including the Letters to Malherbes*, in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, ed. Roger D. Masters, Christopher Kelly and Peter G. Stillman, trans. Christopher Kelly (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1995), 5: 343.

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