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## Rousseau's plutarchism

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## ABSTRACT

### ROUSSEAU'S PLUTARCHISM

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Jean-Jacques Rousseau gives Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* a prominent role in his treatise on education, *Emile*. In many ways, this decision is perplexing because Plutarch's teachings concerning virtue and vice seem to pose a direct threat to Rousseau's educational regimen which aims to produce a natural, whole, and sincere man. However, upon closer examination, there is evidence that suggests that Rousseau fully recognizes how Plutarch's writings threaten his program, which leads him to institute several innovative changes to how the *Parallel Lives* is administered in the *Emile*. Namely, the natural man is only allowed to be exposed to a few, heavily edited individual biographies in order to ensure that he is inoculated from wanting to be anyone but himself. These distinct changes have powerful effects on the manner in which the natural man lives in society with his fellows.

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ROUSSEAU'S PLUTARCHISM

BY

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## INTRODUCTION

Among the distinguished historians and philosophers of Classical antiquity it seems that Rousseau holds Plutarch in his highest esteem. In fact, as Rousseau candidly remarks in his *Reveries*, “Of the small number of Books I still occasionally read, Plutarch is the one who grips and benefits me the most. He was the first I read in my childhood, he will be the last I read in my old age; he is almost the only author I have never read without gaining something” (*Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, hereafter R, 28). In other words, Plutarch’s voluminous writings served as a constant companion and important touchstone for Rousseau throughout his prolific career (Keller 1939, 214). Even Rousseau’s most casual readers cannot help but be struck by the frequent allusions that he makes to antiquity by way of Plutarch throughout his corpus.

In many ways, Rousseau’s affection for Plutarch seems intuitive because the *Parallel Lives* and *Moralia* were almost unanimously cherished as treasures throughout the history of the West. Until only relatively recently, Plutarch’s biographies of Greek and Roman heroes were ubiquitous, and they played a foundational role in the administration of any serious education. That is, the biographies of Lycurgus and Numa, Timoleon and Aemilius Paulus, and Demosthenes and Cicero, to name a few, framed how the West conceived of its ancient forebears. In a word, Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* provided a set of heroic models that virtually all educated people knew and some even aspired to emulate.

Indeed, the *Parallel Lives* effortlessly weaves moral instruction together with historical detail. As suggested by its title, the *Parallel Lives* is composed of biographies of Greek and

Roman heroes that are deliberately yoked together. In fact, Plutarch offers a brief, yet pointed, comparison at the end of almost every extant paired set. This decisive innovation invites the reader into a conversation about how the virtues and vices of individual men influenced the history of both republics and empires alike. As one learns how to assign praise and blame to each respective hero in relation to one another, one is trained to identify what is noble and base, as such (Liebert 2016, 191-196).

Despite Plutarch's importance to Rousseau personally, and the foundational role the *Parallel Lives* played in a conventional Western education, it is still not entirely clear why it is given such a prominent role in the *Emile*.<sup>1</sup> After all, the educational regimen that Rousseau proposes in his treatise *On Education* is self-consciously unconventional. In Rousseau's estimation, the prevailing philosophy of the Enlightenment, ushered in by thinkers like Hobbes and Locke, did not sufficiently deal with its own internal tensions. Rousseau was not convinced that mere interest calculation was a strong enough mechanism to transform a collection of individuals into a people or society. Correspondingly, a society premised on this low, but firm, foundation contributes to the production of the most diminished human type yet, the bourgeois.

For Rousseau, the bourgeois is unhappy because he lives in a state divided between his inclinations to pursue personal interests and the duties imposed on him by the state (*Emile*, hereafter E, 40). In other words, the bourgeois only considers his own self-interest when he engages with his fellows. Yet, as the bourgeois senses his weakness or frailty, he is rendered dependent on the same people he desires to swindle. To use Allan Bloom's formulation, the

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<sup>1</sup> Specifically, Rousseau employs Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* in order to cultivate man's first moral sentiment, compassion or pity. In later stages, this sentiment plays an important role in making a connection between the naturally apolitical pupil and society. Pity is a key ingredient to mitigating the problems that correspond to organizing a society around self-interest.

bourgeois is “a hypocrite, hiding his true purposes under the guise of public spiritedness. And hence, needing everyone but unwilling to sacrifice to help others reciprocally in their neediness, he is psychologically at war with everyone” (Bloom 1997, 147). In response to this problem, Rousseau offers the *Emile* as a possible way to help reimagine an alternative model of human life to the calculating bourgeois who is neither good for himself nor his fellows: the natural man.

Rousseau’s *Emile* presents a comprehensive survey of the human condition (E, 42). By examining the course of a young boy’s education, from birth to marriage, Rousseau carefully lays out the complicated interplay that occurs between the several elements of man’s economy of soul to illustrate how a natural man can be produced and in what manner he will live in society. At the center of Rousseau’s project is the passion amour-propre or self-love, and if it can be properly cultivated, then it is possible to produce a whole and sincere man. Self-interest is not excised from Rousseau’s project; rather, it is radicalized, and its consequences are somehow made compatible with political life (Bloom 1997, 144-45). Rousseau’s *Emile* shows one way in which an individual can be both self-sufficient and able to live on the periphery of society without depending on anyone, anything, or any substantive standard to achieve happiness.

Herein lies the rub. Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* is almost wholly composed of comparisons between the relative excellence of Greek and Roman heroes. In the conventional use of the *Parallel Lives* one hopes that by reading Plutarch’s comparisons, one could better learn how to judge one’s own way of life. In this way, Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* seems like it introduces an external standard of happiness which could accidentally transform the pupil into an emulator or a role player instead of simply himself. If *Emile* would ever aspire to imitate the courage of an Alexander the Great, or even speak approvingly of the categories of virtue and vice, then the education that Rousseau proposes terminates in failure (E, 243). One must wonder how



Rousseau resolves the seeming tension between the type of education that Plutarch offers in his *Parallel Lives* and his own unique educational regimen contained in the *Emile*.

This essay attempts to explain both how Rousseau resolves the apparent tension between his innovative educational project and the *Parallel Lives* as well as explore the overall consequences that this book has on Emile's development as a natural man. To provide a comprehensive explanation, this essay will be composed of four interlocking parts. First, at the outset of the argument, this essay will offer an in-depth explanation of the apparent tension between the goals of Rousseau's *Emile* and a conventional reading of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*. During the course of this section, the essay will provide an inventory of the most salient components of Rousseau's economy of soul and illustrate precisely how the *Parallel Lives* seem to tempt its readers to emulate, or even surpass, the heroes that it chronicles.

Correspondingly, the second component of the essay will demonstrate how Rousseau anticipates the challenges that the *Parallel Lives* poses to his educational system. This is illustrated by the two extended treatments of Plutarch in the *Emile*. In sum, Rousseau clearly sees how both books in general, and Plutarch in particular, can interact and poison the natural man's nascent amour-propre and self-sufficiency. Still, from Rousseau's perspective, Plutarch's value as a proto-psychologist makes him the best possible author to inaugurate Emile into social life. As such, to avoid the pitfalls associated with reading Plutarch, Rousseau exposes his pupil to the *Parallel Lives* in several unconventional ways, which are discussed in the third part of this essay.

Specifically, Emile is deliberately only exposed to the biographies of *individual* heroes as opposed to *paired* ones. In addition to this change, Rousseau also suggests that Emile will only be exposed to an abridged version of the *Lives* that contains only a few carefully curated biographies. These subtle, yet decisive, changes to Plutarch's work have powerful effects on the

lessons that Emile gleans from the *Parallel Lives*. Namely, Emile only conceives of Plutarch's heroes in relation to himself, which serves to reinforce his impression that all men--slaves, peasants, bourgeois, statesmen, and tyrants alike--are susceptible to the pains of this world and thus are equals. Emile does not read the *Parallel Lives* in order to learn how to assign praise and blame or even to find models that he can emulate. Instead, the *Parallel Lives* help to further inoculate Emile against longing to be anyone but himself.

Finally, the fourth stage of this essay will explore the consequences of how this unique encounter with Plutarch affects the natural man's interest in political life. Surely, Rousseau does not think Emile will ever demonstrate the public spiritedness of an ancient hero. Instead, Rousseau's natural man will be autonomous and live quietly on the outskirts of society. At best, the natural man will be willing to bear the minimum burdens that are imposed by political life.

So, in the context of the *Emile*, it seems that Plutarch is given center stage if only to invert his deepest teaching. After being exposed to the *Parallel Lives*, Emile will think that the virtues of a hero like Aemilius Paulus, the public spiritedness of a Pericles, and the ambition of an Alcibiades are all equally misplaced, misguided, and vain. At its deepest level, subverting Plutarch is Rousseau's subtle way of severing the connection between honor or virtue and human excellence. That is, the happiness of Rousseau's natural man is deliberately independent of the respectability of the law or any substantive criterion for greatness. If the natural man is able to remain himself, then Rousseau considers his educational system to be considered a great success. Thus, despite Rousseau's abiding admiration for Plutarch, it seems that he offers Emile as an alternative model that quietly rebukes and aspires to supplant the heroes chronicled in the *Parallel Lives*.

## EMILE'S ECONOMY OF SOUL: AMOUR-PROPRE, IMAGINATION, AND THE PROBLEM OF EMULATION

As discussed earlier, this portion of the paper is devoted to explaining the problem that a conventional reading of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* poses to the unity of Rousseau's natural man. For Rousseau, happiness is not derived from any substantive criterion that can be discerned by reason or revealed by God. In light of this, the natural man is given an education that is designed to make him autonomous or radically free from all dependencies. If the maelstrom of the passions can be quieted, then it is possible for the natural man to find pleasure in his mere existence. However, imbedded in the *Parallel Lives*, there are discussions of virtue and vice that may cause the natural man to abandon his way of life in an effort to emulate the heroes of antiquity, which could spoil Rousseau's entire project.

To fully grasp this tension, it is essential to first take an inventory of several key components of Rousseau's economy of soul. The most salient elements of Rousseau's system for the present discussion are amour-propre and how it interacts with imagination during each distinctive epoch of a human life. At the core of Rousseau's account is the veritable well-spring of the passions, amour-propre. To gain some initial insights into this foundational concept, it bears recalling Rousseau's reflection on the implications of children's tears:

The first tears of children are prayers. If one is not careful, they soon become orders. Children begin by getting themselves assisted; they end by getting themselves served. Thus, from their own weakness which is in the first place the source of the feeling of their dependence is subsequently born the idea of empire and domination. But since this idea is excited less by their needs than by our services, at this point moral effects whose immediate cause is not in nature begin to make their appearance; and one sees already why it is important from the earliest age to disentangle the secret intention which dictates the gesture or the scream. (E, 66)

When an infant is born, he is only capable of learning by sensory experiences of pleasure and pain. Nature endows the infant with a sense of what he needs for survival in addition to a profound curiosity about the world without the direct means of satisfying either. Since the infant has not yet acquired the artifice of language, he resorts to communicating his needs to his parents through coos and cries. However, it is incumbent on parents to discern the intention that animates the child's screams. From the vantage point of the child, the world is populated with objects that he desires to manipulate for his own good or satisfaction. But, if parents indulge the whims of the child, then he will begin to conceive of his fellows as mere instruments that exist for the sole purpose of pleasing him. Conversely, if parents thwart their child's demands, then he will begin to think of himself locked in a lifelong competition with their will. The origin of man's taste for domination and empire is inherited from his dependence on others to satisfy his desires. In many ways, this is one of the fundamental challenges that Rousseau's educational system is designed to combat by limiting the degree to which man relies on his fellows for his satisfaction.

For Rousseau, amour-propre, by nature, does not tend toward imperiousness or slavishness because it is essentially a neutral faculty of the soul. In fact, Rousseau seems to think that the relative goodness or badness of amour-propre depends on how it is cultivated during an education:

There is not a single vice to be found in the human heart. There is not a single vice to be found in it of which it cannot be said how and whence it entered. The sole passion natural to man is amour de soi or amour-propre taken in an extended sense. This amour-propre in itself or relative to us is good and useful; and since it has no necessary relation to others, it is in this respect naturally neutral. It becomes good or bad only by the application made of it and the relations given to it. (E, 92)

Man is, by nature, good and amour-propre is the passion that drives him to love and preserve his own well-being. This state of natural goodness is only spoiled by an education that is not

attentive to the unique demands that correspond to each epoch of human life. In turn, Rousseau suggests there are essentially two species of self-love: amour de soi and amour-propre. Of course, both manifestations of this principal passion spur man to prioritize his own preservation and happiness. So, in this way, there is not a critical difference between amour de soi and amour-propre. Yet, as a child transforms into an adult, it seems that the things that he needs do radically change. Namely, once a child begins puberty he starts to sense that he has fellows because his sexual appetites awaken his sociability. So, even though there is not a substantive difference between amour de soi and amour-propre, Rousseau does intimate that these passions must be educated in profoundly different ways both before and after a human begins puberty.

As Rousseau discusses, during the prepubescent stage of an education, a child must learn about the necessity and limitation that things impose on him without giving him the slightest hint of being thwarted. Put slightly differently, Rousseau thinks that the essential goal of “the first education ought to be purely negative. It consists not at all in teaching virtue or truth but in securing the heart from vice and the mind from error” (E, 93). For Emile’s love of self to remain peaceable, as opposed to imperious, he must be inoculated from feeling as though he is in competition with his fellows. Emile must sense that any disparity between his own condition and the exterior world are caused by circumstances beyond his control and not the will of a competing interest. In order to illustrate this point, briefly recall the lesson that Emile learns from his encounter with Robert in the garden.

To illustrate the concept of justice to Emile, Jean-Jacques brings his pupil to the family farm to observe the workers who are busy ploughing. Given Emile’s insatiable curiosity, he becomes immediately interested in farming and asks Jean-Jacques to help him cultivate a small piece of land. Consequently, Jean-Jacques helps his pupil plant some beans in the field that they were

observing. After a few days, Jean-Jacques and Emile return to the field and find that their crops have been torn out. In response, Emile is devastated, which causes him to burst into tears over the apparent injustice. Moments later, farmer Robert confronts Jean-Jacques and Emile and lets them know that he was the one who tore their beans out because they accidentally destroyed his Maltese melon crop during their earlier escapades. After a brief conversation, Emile and Jean-Jacques come to learn that Robert was actually planning on letting them have some of his fabulous melons, but now they will not be able to enjoy them because of their actions. In the end, Robert and Jean-Jacques work out an agreement where the latter party will replace the exotic melon seeds if the former agrees to let Emile farm his land with the condition that he not touch Robert's crops in the future.

As explained earlier, Rousseau is convinced that mankind's first passion is amour-propre and it dictates all of the natural movements related to both preservation and well-being (E, 97). From these starting premises, Rousseau illustrates that man has a natural impulse to seek justice or at least to make sure that he obtains what he thinks is owed to him. In the episode above, Emile's tears were animated by his indignation because his creations were destroyed, his labor was in vain, and he was not able to chow down on delicious beans. In many ways, the first formulation on ownership that Jean-Jacques teaches Emile seems to mirror Locke's explanation of the labor theory of value. Namely, one owns a piece of nature once they combine their labor and time with it. Jean-Jacques deliberately shows Emile that this lesson is not true simply, and he reverses it to show his pupil that there can be prior conditions which prevent ownership. This allows Emile to see that his tears were unrightfully shed because he did not have a legitimate claim to the land he planted his crops on.

Most importantly, Emile comes to learn that he was not personally thwarted by the farmer. Rather, in this circumstance, Emile discovers that there are some factors in life that are simply uncontrollable and that he must accept them. As an aside, Emile also may sense that if he is willing to submit to these circumstances then it may result in ways that are better than he could have anticipated. After all, if he simply refrained from farming, then he would have been rewarded with something better than he could produce on his own. In any case, Rousseau uses this short vignette to show how amour-propre, or self-love, must be carefully contained before Emile begins to sense that he has fellows.

To make matters more complex, Rousseau suggests that imagination serves as a handmaiden to amour-propre and introduces its own unique challenges to his educational project. Imagination serves as the principal means by which a human being is transported from one's own empirical experience to conceive of one's future, fears, fellows, and even love. Correspondingly, Rousseau argues that imagination cannot be allowed free reign during childhood because:

As soon as his potential faculties are put in action, imagination, the most active of all, is awakened and outstrips them. It is imagination which extends for us the measure of the possible, whether for good or bad, and which consequently excites and nourishes the desires by the hope of satisfying them. But the object which at first appeared to be at hand flees more quickly than it can be pursued. When one believes that one has reached it, it transforms and reveals itself in the distance ahead of us. No longer seeing the country we have already crossed, we count it for nothing; what remains to cross ceaselessly grows and extends. Thus one exhausts oneself without getting to the end, and the more one gains on enjoyment, the further happiness gets from us. (E, 80-81)

Imagination has noxious effects on a child because it creates an unbridgeable disparity between desires and the ability to satisfy them. As children channel their superabundance of energy into their imagination, they run the risk of becoming constantly unhappy with their circumstances. Admittedly, since a child can hardly conceive of the world, it is likely that the first rumblings of imagination will only stoke small ambitions. But, as the child develops the habit of pursuing desires that he never can satisfy, then it will be impossible for him to attain happiness even in

later epochs. As such, in several instances during Emile's childhood, Jean-Jacques deliberately prevents imagination from spoiling his handiwork by teaching his pupil how to understand and investigate the physical world around him.<sup>2</sup>

Even though Jean-Jacques goes to painstaking ends to prevent Emile's amour-propre from developing during childhood, these are not features of man's economy of soul that can be simply purged. As Rousseau states, "As soon as man has need of a companion, he is no longer an isolated being. His heart is no longer alone. All his relations with his species, all the affections of his soul are born with this one. His first passion soon makes the others ferment" (E, 214). Put slightly differently, as a boy becomes a man, amour-propre and imagination become essential faculties for developing the passions, sentiments, and tastes that make it possible to recognize one's fellows and ultimately judge suitable mates.

As a sociable being, the first relationship that Emile comes to recognize is his relation to others through the first moral sentiment of pity. According to Rousseau, amour-propre begins to compel Emile to make comparisons to his fellows. In turn, the way that Emile begins to conceive of humanity is through his faculty of imagination. In a powerful way, imagination transports Emile from his own personal experiences to conceive of his fellows. As Emile compares his own circumstances to his species, the natural man sees that his fellows suffer. From this comparison, Emile is warmed to the concept of humanity and feels a sense of fellow feeling as he witnesses the pain that others are forced to endure. As a result, Emile experiences a sweet sense of satisfaction because he is not under duress.

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<sup>2</sup> By way of illustration, recall the night games that Jean-Jacques invites his pupil to participate in. One of the purposes of this game is to prevent Emile's imagination from creating lifelong fears of the dark by teaching him how to cope with darkness rather than populate it with superstition.



Since the sentiment of pity is extended by Emile to everyone in society, it seems that amour-propre is a critical ingredient in the glue that holds Emile and the society he lives in together. While it is incredibly doubtful that Emile will ever come to love whatever country he occupies, it seems that he will always be warmed by his happy relationship to the species. The great challenge that Rousseau must overcome in this epoch is ensuring that his pupil limits the number of comparisons that he makes and that, for the comparisons that are unavoidable, Emile must always place himself in first rank.

Taken as a whole, one catches a glimpse of the type of person that natural man will be and how he will act in society. On one hand, the first phase of the education describes a boy who is deliberately inoculated from becoming incensed, and thus enslaved, by the actions or opinions of others. As Emile experiences setbacks, he is trained to conceive of them as being caused by impersonal and indefatigable forces. In countless ways, this inoculation serves Emile well as his amour-propre and imagination eventually compel him to make comparisons between himself and his fellows. If Rousseau's education is successful, Emile should not even be able to conceive of imitating anyone because he is always content being himself. The limited number of comparisons that he makes will provide him with evidence that his way of life is the most conducive to human happiness.

For Rousseau, to summit the peak of human happiness, one must first achieve the self-sufficiency described above. If amour-propre is educated in precisely the right ways, its constant roar can be quieted to a soft whisper, which makes it possible for man to feel pleasure that emanates from his mere existence:

One ought to teach him to preserve himself as a man, to bear the blows of fate, to brave opulence and poverty, to live if he has to, in freezing Iceland or on Malta's burning rocks. You may very well take precautions against his dying. He will nevertheless have to die. And though his death were not the product of your efforts, still these efforts would be ill conceived. It is less a question of keeping him from dying

than of our organs, our senses, our faculties, of all the parts of ourselves which give us the sentiment of our existence. The man who has lived the most is not he who has counted the most years but he who has most felt life. (E, 42)

In contradistinction to the ancients, Rousseau consecrates sincerity as a virtue (Melzer 1997, 191-92). That is, the path to happiness for the natural man is not derived from any substantive standard. By learning to bear the burdens of life, one opens the possibility to experience moments when they sense their independence from the whims of their fellows and the influence of circumstance. In these moments of self-sufficiency, Rousseau claims that the natural man achieves a feeling of completeness or perfection (R, 41-8).

In light of this new standard, any education that inspires emulation undermines the sincerity of the natural man. That is, if the pupil ever senses the life of another is more appealing than his own, then it will be impossible for him to attain happiness because he will try to be like his fellows rather than himself. Emulation causes amour-propre to swell and imagination to run amok and transform a natural man into a role player, albeit in a somewhat different manner than the bourgeois.

Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* poses a challenge because it introduces the moral categories of virtue and vice which establish substantive standards that stand in direct competition with Rousseauian sincerity. It bears reflecting on the opening statements of Plutarch's preface to his biography of Aemilius Paulus, which serves to illustrate the nature of the tension:

I began the writing of my *Lives* for the sake of others, but I find that I am continuing the work and delighting in it now for my own sake also, using history as a mirror and endeavoring in a manner to fashion and adorn my life in conformity with the virtues therein depicted. For the result is like nothing else than daily living and associating together, when I receive and welcome each subject of my history in turn as my guest, so to speak, and observe carefully 'how large he was and of what mien,' and select from his career what is most important and most beautiful to know

'And oh! What greater joy than this canst thou obtain.'

And more efficacious for moral improvement? Democritus says we ought to pray that we may be visited by phantoms which are propitious, and that from out the circumambient air such only may encounter us as are agreeable to our natures and good, rather than those which are perverse and bad, thereby intruding into

philosophy a doctrine which is not true, and which leads astray into boundless superstitions. But in my own case, the study of history and the familiarity with it which my writing produces, enables me, since I always cherish in my soul the records of the noblest and most estimable characters, to repel and put far from me whatever base, malicious, or ignoble suggestion my enforced associations may intrude upon me, calmly and dispassionately turning my thoughts away from them to the fairest of my examples. (*The Life of Aemilius Paulus*, 261-263)

Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* contain historical lessons that are intimately intertwined with moral instruction. Each biography contained in the *Lives* provides a comprehensive illustration of a hero's actions. As an audience examines these detailed accounts of illustrious men, they are expected to gain insight into the distinct mixture of virtues and vices that their subject possesses. In many ways, Plutarch sensed that his work confronted his readers with a startling task. Namely, after convening with the ancients recounted in the *Lives*, students are spurred to reconsider their own moral behavior in light of the nobility and baseness of Plutarch's characters (Duff 1999, 49-51). Perhaps, it is almost impossible to read about the triumphs and failures of great men without holding them up as a mirror to better evaluate one's own way of life.

Still, for Plutarch to properly gesture his students toward virtue and away from vice, it seems that his work must somehow equip readers with the ability to judge the distinction between the two. Mere exposure to the virtues and vices of heroes is not enough to impart such expertise. For a moment, think carefully about the structure of the *Lives*. Plutarch's simple structural innovation challenges readers to weigh the noble and base actions of each individual hero in relation to a carefully selected counterpart. By structuring the *Lives* in this way, Plutarch helps to teach his students how to make key distinctions about human excellence. Moreover, Plutarch even seems to goad his readers into comparing his paired biographies by offering his own point-by-point analysis. Thus, in contrast to the education described in the *Emile*, as one studies the *Parallel Lives*, one seems to be given extensive practice in extending judgment beyond one's own

immediate individual experiences to discern the kinds of actions and characteristics most worthy of praise.

## ANTICIPATING TROUBLE WITH PLUTARCH

There is evidence that suggests that Rousseau fully anticipated the challenges associated with introducing Plutarch into his educational system. To illustrate this, it bears reflecting on the two extended treatments of Plutarch in the *Emile*. In the first account, Rousseau discusses the general challenges that reading books poses to the development of amour-propre before the pupil becomes sociable. In the second account, Rousseau teases out the particular problems that Plutarch poses in the epoch after amour-propre is extended. Fundamentally, these examples demonstrate the overall coherence of Rousseau's educational system and point toward how the *Parallel Lives* have to be carefully edited if Emile is to reap the benefits from his encounter with Plutarch while avoiding any pitfalls.

Throughout the *Emile*, Rousseau is reticent to expose his pupil to books because of their potent general effects on amour-propre. It seems that this concern stems from Rousseau's belief that each epoch that passes in a student's development is self-contained or non-teleological. That is, the pupil is only taught lessons that are appropriate to his age and which do not point toward any of the later stages of development. As a result, the education of childhood is almost exclusively administered through the use of experience. This allows a child to learn lessons without having to recognize his social relation to his fellows. The problem with books is that they tend to excite the imagination. This invites the pupil to extend himself outside of his own experiences, which raises the possibility of extending amour-propre.

Rousseau demonstrates the danger of prematurely reading books by recounting an experience that he had during a trip that he had taken to the French countryside. During Rousseau's visit, he

stayed with a woman and her children, and one morning he was present for the eldest son's history lesson. In typical French fashion, the eldest son's preceptor asked the young boy to recite one of his history lessons. Since the preceptor was currently teaching his pupil ancient history, the young man was asked to give an account of Alexander's life as originally told by Plutarch. The moment in Alexander's biography that he decided to speak about was when the famed conqueror's virtue compelled him to gamble his life by ingesting medicine given to him from his physician, Philip. Accordingly, the pupil articulates this moment of history with refinement, and when he is finished telling his story he receives the applause that he was expecting from his audience. After the recital, the adults who were listening began trying to decipher the lesson of the story. Even though Rousseau did not offer his account to his friends, he assures the reader that his fellows get their interpretations quite wrong, which upset him at the time.

Nevertheless, after this brief moment of controversy, Rousseau wanted to discern whether the eldest boy was able to understand Plutarch's lesson. So, Rousseau resolved to ask the pupil to tell him what he liked best in Plutarch's account of Alexander. After thinking for a moment, the young student confessed that he admired Alexander for his courage. And, after Rousseau asked his interlocutor a few more questions, he discovered that the action that the pupil thought exemplified Alexander's courage best was when he "swallowed at a single gulp a bad-tasting potion, without hesitation, without the least sign of repugnance" (E, 111). The reason that the pupil selected this moment of the story as his favorite was because he was sick only two weeks before and was forced to take bad-tasting medicine, too. In this sense, the eldest son thought himself as brave as an Alexander.

This brief anecdote reveals something essential about the general capacity of children to understand the lessons of history. That is, it is easy for a tutor to give children information to

read, and it is fairly easy for students to memorize what they are told. However, as Rousseau says, simply repeating words is not the same as understanding the ideas they represent: “It is easy to put into their mouths the words *kings, empires, wars, conquests, revolutions, laws*. But if it is a question of attaching distinct ideas to these words, there is a long way from the conversation with Robert the gardener to all these explanations” (E, 111). Since children have no conception of their social relations, it is impossible for students to comprehend the complicated ways in which human beings interact with one another, especially if these concepts do not resonate with them in any personal way. A child cannot understand any of the virtues found in Plutarch’s account of Alexander because he is limited by his own experience and does not have any conception of what virtue even is. Moreover, it is impossible for a child to understand the risk that Alexander was taking when he ingested the poison because he has no conception of death, either. So, at best, it is likely that lessons in history will simply bore children. However, at worst, premature exposure to Plutarch can have quite pernicious consequences as well.

As Rousseau suggests, the child in the vignette is enslaved to his studies. In a subtle way, Rousseau reveals to his reader that the pupil in his story is motivated by the desire to obtain applause from his parents for his studies. In this way, exposing the pupil to lessons in history too early has made the child slavish to the opinions of adults: “It is with the first word the child uses in order to show off, it is with the first thing he takes on another’s word without seeing its utility himself, that his judgment is lost. He will have to shine in the eyes of fools for a long time in order to make up for such a loss” (E, 111-112). As the pupil uses his lessons in history to garner applause it causes his amour-propre to swell and extend itself. Once this has happened, even when history becomes useful to know, the pupil will no longer be interested in learning it for its

content. Instead, he is motivated to learn so that he can be held in the esteem of his fellows and fools alike.

Thus, if the *Lives* are introduced during childhood, then they can radically undermine the pupil's inoculation against the opinions of others. History becomes reduced to the means by which a child ingratiates himself to his fellows. Admittedly, the problem associated with including Plutarch in the educational system echoes many of the general challenges that correspond to exposing a student to any book. Moreover, since this problem seems to be primarily related to timing, it seems that it can possibly be resolved by simply administering Plutarch and history in a later epoch of the education. Still, even when Rousseau administers Plutarch during the proper epoch, it seems that the same problems emerge and are actually only exacerbated by nascent amour-propre.

Correspondingly, as Emile transforms into a sociable being, and his amour-propre becomes impossible to contain, he is launched into a crisis. Because of this change, Emile becomes awakened to the social order, which gives him the impulse to compare his own condition to his fellows:

Since my Emile has until now looked only at himself, the first glance he casts on his fellows leads him to compare himself with them. And the first sentiment aroused in him by this comparison is the desire to be in the first position. This is the point where love of self turns into amour-propre and where begin to arise all the passions which depend on this one. (E, 235)

As discussed earlier, during the epoch before puberty, Emile's education was purely negative.

That is, Jean-Jacques went to great ends to prevent vices from entering the heart of his pupil.

Emile was inoculated from relying on the opinions of others to attain happiness. In fact,

Rousseau suggests that Emile conceived of the world and its inhabitants as mere objects.

However, as puberty approaches, amour-propre awakens Emile's sexual appetites, which makes



him sense that he needs to find a mate. Correspondingly, this leads Emile to compare himself to his fellows to estimate his relative ability to secure a favorable match.

Looming in the background of Emile's transformation are all the grave dangers that correspond to rendering comparisons. If Emile ever makes an unfavorable comparison between himself and another, then all of the work done to inoculate him from the opinions of others will be in vain. So, in order to avoid this fate and prime Emile to enter into society, Rousseau decides that this is the moment when his pupil must learn about man at a safe distance by studying history: "It is by means of history that, without the lessons of philosophy, he will read the hearts of men; it is by means of history that he will see them, a simple spectator, disinterested and without passion, as their judge and not as their accomplice or as their accuser" (E, 237). In Rousseau's estimation, the study of history provides a simple and important advantage. Namely, as Emile begins to study his fellows, he will be learning about men and actions that transpired long ago. The distance, in both time and place, will give Emile deep insight into how men in society behave while simultaneously protecting him from having to learn first-hand by suffering all the snares of political life.

Yet, as Rousseau admits, a number of important decisions need to be made concerning what kind of history will benefit Emile the most. Essentially, Rousseau thinks that there are two species of historians that he can expose his pupil to: ancient and modern. In Rousseau's estimation, the modern historians are inferior because their histories tend to be beautified. In other words, their work lacks substance and would thus be worthless to Emile. Additionally, Rousseau insists that modern historians are at a disadvantage to the ancients because there is very little variation among the people of Europe. After all, the bourgeois occupies France and

Spain alike, which gives the continent a monochromatic finish. Thus, Rousseau concludes that the modern historians are simply unsuitable for his project.

Although Rousseau praises several ancient historians for their great talent, he is still incredibly cautious about which one he is willing to expose his natural man to. Many of the ancient historians disqualify themselves because they either limit their scholarship to wars or they are too sophisticated for Emile to comprehend. Correspondingly, Rousseau thinks that the most suitable historian for his system is the one who is the simplest to understand and reveals history through biographies:

I would prefer to begin the study of the human heart with the reading of lives of individuals; for in them, however much the man may conceal himself, the historian pursues him everywhere. He leaves him no moment of respite, no nook where he can avoid the spectators piercing eye; and it is when the subject believes he has hidden himself best that the biographer makes him known best. (E, 240)

For Rousseau, this type of history is the most congruent with his overall educational project because it depicts human beings in both their public and private lives. That is, by comparing the former with the latter, Emile will be in the best position to know how politics distorts man's character. While other forms of history are confined to reporting facts, it seems that one of the key reasons Rousseau thinks biographies will be useful is that they can capture intentions. As such, Rousseau identifies Plutarch as the historian who is the best at providing intimate, subtle, and revealing accounts of illustrious men in both their public and private activities while remaining accessible to an average intellect (E, 240).

At base, Rousseau hopes that Plutarch will cause Emile to recoil at the horrors of political life. As Emile reads through the *Parallel Lives* and witnesses how the most heroic figures of Greece and Rome slaughtered one another, he will learn how to better appreciate his private and self-sufficient life:

Think of him at the raising of the curtain, casting his eyes for the first time on the stage of the world; or, rather, set backstage, seeing the actors take up and put on their costumes, counting the cords and pulleys

whose crude magic deceives the spectators' eyes. His initial surprise will soon be succeeded by emotions of shame and disdain for his species. He will be indignant at thus seeing the whole of humankind its own dupe, debasing itself in these children's games. He will be afflicted at seeing his brothers tear one another apart for the sake of dreams and turn into ferocious animals because they do not know how to be satisfied with being men. (E, 242)

Clearly, Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* gives Emile access to an incredibly intimate and comprehensive examination of how the ancients used to live. However, the previous parts of Emile's education have taught him to feel compassion toward his species, so he will recoil at the destruction that heroes do to their fellows. The violence that corresponds to founding regimes, expanding empires, and eliminating rivals strike Emile as horrific, absurd, and ultimately pitiable. In an important way, this experience should make Emile reject any temptation to muster any public spiritedness on behalf of his fatherland.

However, as Rousseau hastens to add, since Emile's amour-propre demands that he always be held in first rank, it may be more difficult to teach Emile to pity these illustrious men than initially thought. The reason the *Parallel Lives* may be a difficult book to administer is deeply related to how it interacts with the natural man's economy of soul:

Amour-propre is a useful but dangerous instrument. Often it wounds the hand making use of it and rarely does good without evil. Emile, in considering his rank in the human species and seeing himself so happily placed there, will be tempted to honor his reason for the work of yours and to attribute his happiness to his own merit. He will say to himself, 'I am wise, and men are mad.' In pitying them, he will despise them; in congratulating himself, he will esteem himself more, and in feeling himself to be happier than them, he will believe himself worthier to be so. This is the error most to be feared. (E, 244-45)

As the pupil reads the *Parallel Lives* his imagination becomes stoked. Emile reacts by thinking about his relative position to the hero that he is studying. Amour-propre naturally makes him to hold himself in higher esteem than anyone he compares himself to. For Rousseau, this impulse is both natural and good. However, if amour-propre is not carefully counseled during the moment that history is introduced, then it seems that the knowledge that Emile obtains can have destructive consequences. That is, as Emile encounters the heroes in the *Parallel Lives*, there is

always the danger that the natural man's self-sufficiency will make him feel exempt from the pains of life. That is, the natural man can develop noxious pride if he ever thinks himself to be superior, by nature, to his fellows. In a certain sense, even though the natural man does not embrace the substantive standards contained in the *Parallel Lives*, he may surreptitiously emulate the viciousness of the heroes that he rejects out of hand.

In light of this possibility, it seems that a more conventional use of Plutarch could be warranted. Even Rousseau seems to think that this could be respectable, but he reminds the audience of the obvious problem with this approach:

I see from the way young people are made to read history that they are transformed, so to speak, into all the persons they see; one endeavors to make them become now Cicero, now Trajan, now Alexander, and to make them discouraged when they return to themselves, to make each of them regret being only himself. This method has certain advantages which I do not discount; but as for my Emile, if in these parallels he just once prefers to be someone other than himself- were this other Socrates, were it Cato- everything has failed. He who begins to become alien to himself does not take long to forget himself entirely. (E, 243)

As addressed in the beginning, one of the most common ways to read the *Lives* is to use it as a way to re-evaluate one's own virtues. That is, by examining the lives of Cicero or Cato, students would be inspired to emulate certain virtues, which results in a certain degree of moral improvement. Rousseau seems to admit that this type of education has its uses. But the education in the *Emile* is not designed to produce a gentleman.

Thus, as illustrated in the two preceding examples, Rousseau has a keen sense of how Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* can undermine his educational project. Fundamentally, in both treatments of Plutarch, Rousseau identifies how knowledge tends to inflame amour-propre in any epoch of human life. Rousseau's anticipation of the challenges that Plutarch poses helps to explain why Rousseau introduces the *Parallel Lives* to his pupil in such an unconventional way. Without serious redactions, Plutarch's work would lead to disastrous consequences in the natural man.

## OVERCOMING PLUTARCH'S *PARALLEL LIVES*

In the context of the *Emile*, Rousseau gives Plutarch an indispensable role in teaching the natural man about human beings from a safe distance. Rousseau praises the *Parallel Lives* for both its simplicity and its deep insight into the public and private lives of Greek and Roman heroes. In addition to being a historian, Plutarch serves as a kind of proto-psychologist in the *Emile*. He reveals not only historical fact but also the intentions of the men he depicts. To ensure that Emile gleans the proper lessons from Plutarch, without becoming obsessed with pleasing others or consumed by his own pride, Rousseau makes three essential modifications to how his pupil reads the *Parallel Lives* in order to make it compatible with his overall project.

First and foremost, Rousseau suggests that Emile will not read the *Parallel Lives* as it is conventionally presented. That is, the natural man will only be exposed to the biographies of individual heroes as opposed to paired ones. This subtle, but decisive, change in method seems to be suggested during Rousseau's discussion concerning the advantages of biography over other forms of history. In Rousseau's estimation, one of the best ways to "study [...] the human heart [is] with the reading of lives of individuals" (E, 240). In the subsequent conversation explaining how Plutarch is the best author of biographies, Rousseau never once mentions the value of making comparisons between the heroes of Greece and Rome. In light of this, Rousseau suggests to his audience that Emile will not be getting a conventional education from Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*.

At base, the reason that Rousseau institutes this change is related to how Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* interacts with amour-propre. One of the most dangerous elements of the *Parallel Lives* is

that it goads its audience to draw comparisons about the relative excellence of its heroes. In this way, if Emile were to try to assign praise and blame to the heroes of antiquity, it would challenge him to contemplate virtue and vice, as such. After all, if Emile were ever capable of assigning virtues to a respective hero, then he would have to have some sense of what virtue is. This type of teaching falls outside the scope of Rousseau's educational scheme and lies beyond Emile's competency. Comparing the relative excellence of two men would subject Emile to an enterprise that could undermine his self-sufficiency because he would have to apply a standard of judgment that exists outside of himself.

To further ensure that Emile gleans the right messages from the *Parallel Lives*, Rousseau claims that it is essential to carefully control and edit the biographies that Emile is exposed to. Jean-Jacques does this to coax the formation of gentle compassion as opposed to noxious pride:

Certainly, given the pupil's natural dispositions, if the master brings a bit of prudence and selectivity to his readings, if the master gives him a small start on the way to reflections he ought to draw from them, this exercise will be for him a course in practical philosophy, better, surely, and better understood than all the vain speculations by which young people's minds are scrambled in our schools. (E 242)

It bears noting, the *Parallel Lives* is a comprehensive compendium of Greek and Roman history. Plutarch's impressive work spans over the course of several hundred years and offers keen insight into how great men shaped or dismantled the various republics and empires that emerged on the continent. However, Emile will only get Rousseau's abridged version rather than the whole corpus. Rousseau does not expose Emile to Plutarch's *magnum opus* to root him in the Western tradition. Rather, Rousseau wants to give his pupil a special vantage point to observe the human heart. Rousseau's syllabus will be carefully curated with examples that will do this and bolster Emile's nascent sentiment of pity. In turn, this suggests that the biographies that Emile is exposed to will contain specialized lessons that appeal to his natural sensibilities.

By way of illustration, Rousseau suggests that at a later point in Emile's education that the life of Antony will be an especially useful biography for Emile to study. This choice makes sense as Plutarch's account of Antony revolves around his self-destructive behavior brought on by his deep love for Cleopatra. Throughout Antony's life he was a great warrior, but he also had the propensity to squander his talents. It was Antony's infatuation with Cleopatra that eventually caused him to make a tactical blunder against Octavius which ended up costing him his empire and life (*The Life of Antony*, 139-333). So, when the time comes for Emile to marry Sophie, the natural man will need to sublimate his affections in order to long for the idea of his wife rather than her possession.<sup>3</sup> Otherwise, the natural man could be as slavish as an Antony.

The last check that Rousseau introduces into his system is spurred by his concern that amour-propre will become engorged if Emile ever comes to think of himself better, by nature, than all of the heroes of antiquity (E, 245). To curb the ill-effects of amour-propre, Rousseau decides to expose his pupil to countless humiliations during this phase of life. To accomplish this, Rousseau enlists several confederates who will play tricks on Emile in order to humiliate him. This is supposed to temper the pupil's notion that he is immune from the ills of this world (E, 245-50). This approach bears an eerie similarity between other lessons that Jean-Jacques employed to curb the pride Emile felt as a result of learning. Indeed, Rousseau claims that this check on his system will repeat the lesson that Emile learned from his encounter with the magician in Book III (E, 245).

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<sup>3</sup> As an aside, recall the frontispiece to Book V. The scene is of Circe and Odysseus. Circe was able to seduce Odysseus' friends and transform them into pigs while their captain was able to resist her charms. This picture, in addition to Rousseau's comment about the importance of Antony, seem essential for understanding Emile's relationship with Sophie.

Considering these decisive changes, it seems that Emile will glean an inverted lesson from Plutarch's *Lives*. This happens because Emile is really studying Rousseau's Plutarch as opposed to Plutarch on his own terms. That is, Rousseau's method of exposing Emile to Plutarch's work prevents his pupil from learning how to assign praise and blame to human action. Instead, Emile will consider all the men in the *Lives* to be some of the most pitiable of all men:

He pities these miserable kings, slaves of all that obey them. He pities these false wise men, chained to their vain reputations. He pities these rich fools, martyrs to their display. He pities these conspicuous voluptuaries, who devote their entire lives to boredom in order to have pleasure. (E, 244)

At the end of Emile's encounter with ancient republicans he discovers that there is not a substantive difference between a man like Pyrrhus and Demosthenes. After Emile is exposed to Rousseau's Plutarch, one must wonder in what manner the natural man participates in political life.



## NO FATHERLAND, NO PROBLEM

Rousseau's Plutarch helps to reinforce Emile's sense of autonomy and love of humanity, but it seems to come at the cost of any sense of public spiritedness that the fatherland might inspire. As such, when Emile finally reaches adulthood he will think of himself relatively free from the burdens of political life while he quietly lives on the fringes of society. While there is evidence to suggest that Emile will be willing to bear the minimum burdens of political life, it is doubtful that he can muster any more interest in serving his country than the bourgeois.

To explore how the natural man conceives of his relationship to the state and his fellows, it bears reflecting on a particularly illuminating conversation that happens between Emile and Jean-Jacques days before the pupil is returned to his beloved Sophie (E, 471). After having surveyed a handful of the nations in Europe, Jean-Jacques asks Emile with full candor where he plans on settling his new family and how he plans on living there. In response, Emile delivers an impassioned and revealing speech about his relative indifference:

What difference does it make to me what my position on earth is? What difference does it make to me where I am? Wherever there are men, I am at the home of my brothers; wherever there are no men, I am in my own home. As long as I can remain independent and rich, I have property to live on, and I shall live. When my property subjects me, I shall abandon it without effort. I have arms for working, and I shall live. When my arms fail me, I shall live if I am fed, and I shall die if I am abandoned. I shall also die even if I am not abandoned. For death is not a punishment for poverty but a law of nature. At whatever time death comes, I defy it. It will never surprise me while I am making preparations to live. It will never prevent me from having lived. (E, 472)

In response to Jean-Jacques, Emile maintains that he does not care very much where he is to settle in Europe because he prefers to remain the natural man that he was raised to be. As far as Emile is concerned, he is completely self-sufficient and can bear the burdens of any situation he is thrust into. The natural man conceives of himself as autonomous from whatever government

that he happens to live under because he believes that he has access to living a happy and full life without its assistance. Moreover, while the natural man does not hold political life in high esteem, Emile does admit that he senses a common brotherhood with humanity or the species. In turn, he audaciously claims that this will make him at home anywhere on earth.

In part, Jean-Jacques is pleased with Emile's response. That is, the tutor agrees that Emile is right to consider his own way of life superior to the one the political order can offer. In a way, Rousseau is confident that the natural man has a better sense of the "eternal laws of nature" than a government does or can (E, 473). After all, in order to access these laws, all the natural man needs to do is look inward and behave sincerely. The laws cannot provide such guidance because they are responsible for distorting and degrading man's natural sincerity. Nevertheless, Jean-Jacques hastens to add a slight correction to Emile's understanding of his obligations to the state.

According to Rousseau, Emile is correct to think that he does not have a fatherland, but the tutor reminds his pupil that he must at least maintain some kind of commitment to the particular place he was born in. Even though the natural man may not have any real respect for the laws, Jean-Jacques pleads that Emile's love for humanity should warm him to helping them:

But, dear Emile, do not let so sweet a life make you regard painful duties with disgust, if such duties are ever imposed on you. Remember that the Romans went from the plow to the consulate. If the prince or the state calls you to the service of the fatherland, leave everything to go to fulfill the honorable function of citizen in the post assigned to you. If this function is onerous to you, there is a decent and sure means to free yourself from it- to fulfill it with enough integrity so that it will not be left to you for long. Besides, you need have little fear of being burdened with such a responsibility. As long as there are men who belong to the present age, you are not the man who will be sought out to serve the state. (E, 475)

So, it seems that Emile must simply accept that his country may occasionally demand his help and that he should bear this burden just like any other indefatigable force. The natural man living on the fringes will serve, albeit reluctantly. Perhaps what is most odd about Jean-Jacques rejoinder is that he likens Emile's condition to that of the Roman called from his farm to serve as

consulate. Even though Emile may be called, he certainly will never muster public spiritedness in the manner of a Pericles or Cicero. Ultimately, while Rousseau may have found a way to recapture man's natural state, it is doubtful that a country could rely on these types of human beings to hold itself together.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

As discussed at the outset, this essay is composed of essentially four interlocking parts. In the first place, this essay revealed the abstract tension that Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* posed to Rousseau's educational project. In the second and third parts, this essay explained how Rousseau fully anticipated these challenges and then devised ways to counter them within the *Emile*. Lastly, this essay explores the consequences that Rousseau's modification of the *Parallel Lives* had on the public spiritedness of the natural man living on the fringes of society.

Despite Rousseau's praise of Plutarch, it seems that his *Emile* proposes an alternative model that quietly rebukes and aspires to supplant the heroes chronicled in the *Parallel Lives*. After all, the natural man is fundamentally uninterested in the honors that come from being a respectable citizen. Moreover, the concept of any traditional formulation of virtue is rendered laughable to Emile. So, even though Rousseau seems to have found a way to produce a natural man that represents an improvement to bourgeois life, it is questionable that he would be considerably more useful to the fatherland during difficult times. Even though Emile will certainly not dodge public service, it is doubtful that he will merrily skip to the barracks if his draft card is pulled. So, while autonomy may provide great happiness for the individual in Rousseau's estimation, one must wonder how conducive it is for a robust and self-governing society.

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