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Philosophical Allegories in Rousseau

We usually think of philosophy as the production of theories and arguments. Yet there are other sides to philosophy, the recognition of which is necessary to understand its wider personal and cultural significance. Some of these sides are seldom acknowledged as philosophical at all, perhaps because literature has appropriated what professional philosophy unfortunately has lost.

One philosophical activity often overlooked is the construction of philosophical allegories: to describe one's life in explicit philosophical terms or philosophically suggestive ways. Reading life allegorically is to recognize philosophy in what seems merely details of the whole picture and to develop a sense for how philosophical constellations are mirrored in one's life, no matter how ordinary that life may seem.

Scepticism as a theoretical position is sometimes stated by saying that we are in a prison from which we cannot escape. What if one had actually been in some kind of prison, say, a home or a university, and then described that episode so that the sceptical picture is revealed in the description? That would be what I call an autobiographical philosophical allegory: a part of one's life is sublimated into a picture of

the human condition. To attain as much, the episode need not be imbued with philosophical significance at the time – it may have felt utterly ordinary or utterly private. Yet the telling of it can make it extraordinary and promote it into a philosophical piece.

In the following, I shall elucidate the concept of philosophical allegory through a reading of some episodes in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's autobiographical works.¹ Of course, Rousseau is an exceptional figure, and therefore it may be difficult to connect what he is doing to what any of us might do. On the other hand, his exceptionality can serve to make the concept of philosophical allegory conspicuous and thus make it clearer to us what we might become able to do. So Rousseau is exemplary in that he demonstrates methods by which we can discover our own exemplarity.

1. Autobiography and Allegory

Some of the anecdotes cropping up in Rousseau's autobiographical works express philosophical thoughts, or constellations of such thoughts, in an allegorical form. These allegories are typically both quite ordinary and quite extraordinary. Their extraordinariness is due to the strikingly odd or even bizarre quality of some of their elements, to their subtle ways of evoking philosophical connotations, to their allusions to famous philosophical

texts, and to how they are sometimes introduced by an announcement of their enormous importance, which seems way out of proportion to the story that follows. Yet even though there were certainly extraordinary features of Rousseau's life, these anecdotes are also quite ordinary on the face of it. A walk, a view, losing one's luggage, a failed love affair, a youthful transgression – these are just the episodes that an ordinary life is composed of, not at all what we are accustomed to think of as the stuff of serious philosophy. In that sense, there is nothing unique about his life: it is neither more nor less philosophical than our lives.

Yet exactly this combination of the ordinary and the extraordinary is what makes Rousseau's tales so instructive. Their extraordinariness induces us to look for something more in them than mere anecdotes; their ordinariness makes us realize that our lives, too, can be seen as something more than a series of anecdotes. So constructing philosophical allegories is not a god-given talent of philosophical genius, though geniuses make better allegories. It is a craft to be cultivated.

The philosophical content of Rousseau's allegories is usually implicit. Did he not see his anecdotes as allegories? Was life and philosophy so completely a unity to him that he did not notice any difference? Be that as it may, the important thing is that an allegory must be read, decoded, interpreted. The meaning of an allegory may be implicit, but

it can always be made explicit, at least in part, through an interpretation that it seems to invite but also to resist. The allegory is thus constituted by an odd blend of the literal and the cryptic, the explicit and the enigmatic. Enough must be given, and enough must be held back for us to sense something hidden in them, something worthwhile searching for.

2. Outside the Walls

At the beginning of the Confessions, Rousseau recounts the fateful story of how he was locked out of Geneva and then turned his back on the city or the city its back to him. It is tempting to see this event not only as formative for his philosophy but as an image of it. He is telling the story not only of himself but also of humanity as such.

The wealth of religious connotations turns this tale into a version of man's expulsion from Eden. Still, the biblical parallels do not make it into a religious allegory. They actually serve to highlight the secular character of Rousseau's tale, as they make the absence of transcendent elements even more palpable.

The story takes place on a Sunday, "after the morning service."² Rousseau's companions tempt him to take part in their "games" outside the city. He hesitates, but as he decides to go along, he is more willing than any of them. Twice he has been close to being locked out of the city as the

gates were shut at night. The third time his luck runs out. Although eager to avoid it, he repeats his transgression, because the "wretch of a captain" shuts the gate too early: "I saw the first drawbridge go up, and trembled at the sight of those terrible horns raised high in the air like some sinister and fateful omen of the inexorable fate that was beginning at that moment to pursue me."

This fateful moment is to determine Rousseau's life and philosophy. He swears never to return. But why does he not wait and return the next morning like his companions do? Why the sudden resolution to leave? Perhaps he is bored of the peaceful but provincial life; perhaps it is a childish wish for simultaneous love and revenge; perhaps he is simply afraid of punishment at the hands of his master. Or perhaps there is no determinate answer to the question; maybe that is the significance of the fact that we are not told why. His decision is more or less a whim, arising out of a strange brew of vanity, fear, boredom, longing, misunderstanding, and a swarm of other half-conscious thoughts and feelings. Rousseau had a better understanding of the contingency of human life than most other philosophers.

When Rousseau looks back and contemplates the lost possibilities, excitement passes over into melancholy.

I could have spent, in the bosom of my religion, my fatherland, my family and friends, a peaceful and pleasant life such as my temperament required ... I could have been content with my

condition; I might even, perhaps, have brought honour to it, and after a life that was simple and obscure, but even and sweet, have died peacefully in the bosom of my own kind. Soon forgotten no doubt, I would at least have been mourned for as long as I was remembered. Instead of which ... how different a picture I must paint!

Upon leaving our natural sphere, we are deemed to an intermediate existence, left to wander restlessly forever. Wherever Rousseau goes, he is in exile, neither at home in society, in Paris, nor by himself, in nature. This is his Fall – and ours. Yet it is not caused by any sin, at least not any serious sin, but more or less by accident, though occasioned by a little carelessness. It is not the serpent that tempts us with knowledge of good and evil but we who tempt each other with “games.” The human being is more unlucky than sinful, punished all too severely for its tiny transgressions.

We shall not assess this as a picture of the human condition or as a reading of Rousseau. Our concern is solely with a certain relation between life and philosophy. That relation is not causal. It may have been this event rather than rational considerations that shaped Rousseau’s philosophy, but it may also have been rational considerations that caused him to hold a certain philosophy and which then shaped the way he told the story of his life. At any rate, such causal hypotheses are usually pure speculation. What interests us here, rather, is how elements of one’s life are narrated in such a way that philosophical constellations are

displayed in them, regardless of any causal connections that may or may not obtain between that life and philosophy.

3. The Little Boy at the Gate of Hell

My second example is from the sixth walk of the Reveries. It is necessary to quote it in full:

In one corner of the boulevard, just by the Porte d'Enfer, a woman sets up a stall every day in the summer to sell fruit, rolls and tisane. This woman has a little boy who is very sweet, but a cripple, and he hobbles about on his crutches begging from passers-by in a not unpleasant way. I had struck up a sort of acquaintance with the little fellow, and every time I went past he came up without fail to make me a little compliment, which was always followed by a little gift from me. The first few times I was delighted to see him and gave him money very willingly, and I continued doing so for some time with the same pleasure, usually even giving myself the added satisfaction of engaging him in conversation and listening to his pleasant chatter. This pleasure gradually became a habit, and thus was somehow transformed into a sort of duty which I soon began to find irksome, particularly on account of the preamble I was obliged to listen to, in which he never failed to address me as Monsieur Rousseau so as to show that he knew me well, this making it quite clear to me on the contrary that he knew no more of me than those who had taught him. From that time on I felt less inclined to go that way, and in the end I unthinkingly adopted the habit of making a detour when I approached this obstacle.³

A whole philosophy unfolds from this little story. Its basic idea is that when our natural inclinations are imported into society, especially the loving and humane ones, they are relentlessly degraded. The naturally good act is in society a "Porte d'Enfer," a gateway to hell. And hell, as we have heard, is other people, being stuck with them in a network of dependency.

The first time it is a gift, the second a debt. Kindness creates expectations so that a kind of contract is entered into between benefactor and beneficent. The other now has a claim on me; I have committed myself. That gives rise to "chains of continuing obligation," which it is "impossible to shake off." Thus, natural inclinations to do good are "transmuted into burdensome obligations." And when kind acts have become a duty, they are no longer done with pleasure, with the result that they are seldom done at all. "I should have been a poor sort of husband in Turkey when a town-crier tells them it is time to perform their conjugal duties." First a pleasure, then a duty – that's society.

Natural inclinations are further deformed under the gaze of others. Superficial impressions form a false social identity: "instead of me they will never see anyone but the Jean-Jacques they have created and fashioned for themselves." The pleasant chatter turns unpleasant when permeated by awareness of social identity, and what was originally a natural act is now interpreted as the sort of thing that the

sort of person like you is typically doing. Paradoxically, you are treated more truly as yourself in society if you are a stranger, and you become more of a stranger when the others (think they) know who you are. That is why Rousseau imagines that he could only be really good if he remained unseen, if he were God or possessed the ring of Gyges.

From this point on, we prefer detours, following neither our inclinations nor our duty. "When I ought to do the opposite of what I want, nothing will make me do it, but neither do I do what I want, because I am too weak. I abstain from acting." Nevertheless, "there is no virtue in following your inclinations and indulging your taste for doing good just when you feel like it; virtue consists in subordinating your inclinations to the call of duty." Consequently, society makes virtue possible but also improbable. Thus we live in an in-between state, neither natural nor civilized, neither man nor citizen. This state is symbolized by the boy, who on the one hand is a child, the most natural of beings, but also a cripple, used by Rousseau as a symbol of the deformation of nature in one of his most intriguing allegories, the allegory of the deformed nipple in the Confessions.⁴

4. The Great Dane

One of the strangest and most complicated of Rousseau's allegories is found in the remarkable second walk of the

Reveries.⁵ This allegory does not serve to illustrate a specific theory or thesis but shows forth the complex interplay between key philosophical concepts, what I have called "philosophical constellations." Typically for Rousseau, it exhibits the passages between those concepts, the transformations they undergo as they are played out against each other.

The overture to the second walk presents its main themes. Rousseau reflects on his current situation and notes how "these hours of solitude and meditation are the only ones in the day when I am completely myself and my own master." Thus the two first themes are introduced: solitude and independence. These two, though, are joined by a darker third: "[A] tepid languor saps all my faculties, the vital spirit is gradually dying down within me, my soul no longer flies up without effort from its decaying prison of flesh." This third theme is that of death, or, as is apparent from the allusion to Socrates, death in life.⁶ The complex and often paradoxical connections between solitude, independence, and death are then allegorized in the story that follows: "On Thursday, 24 October, 1776, I set out after dinner ..."

Stage one: Rousseau is walking alone in the fields outside Paris. He is happy, "feeling the same pleasure and interest that agreeable landscapes have always aroused in me." Now and then, but only when he feels like it, he stops to study some flowers. Such spontaneous and disinterested exploration of

some fraction of the whole is here a symbol of that happy immersion in otherness where nature and culture come together.

Stage two: Rousseau's attention shifts from "detailed observations" to "the whole picture," and, although agreeable at first, the contemplation now takes on a darker tone: "The wine harvest had been completed a few days earlier, the city dwellers no longer came out this way, and the peasants too were leaving the fields until it was time for their winter work. The country was still green and pleasant, but it was deserted and many of the leaves had fallen; everything gave an impression of solitude and impending winter." He cannot help seeing the landscape as a picture of himself. Solitude is now recast as death. In the autumn of life, he realizes that life has been nothing but a form of death: "I saw myself at the close of an innocent and unhappy life ... Alone and neglected, I could feel the approach of the first frosts and my failing imagination no longer filled my solitude with beings formed after the desires of my heart. Sighing I said to myself: What have I done in this world? I was created to live, and I am dying without having lived."

The anxiety, though, is swiftly converted into a "gentle sadness" by his close friend, recollection: "I retraced the history of my soul from youth to years of maturity ... My afternoon went by amid these peaceful meditations." Yet bearing in mind what comes afterwards, one gets the impression that these meditations are but attempts to escape from the

painful awareness of death: this time, recollection is a form of forgetfulness.

Stage three: then, suddenly, catastrophe.

[Some] people walking in front of me suddenly stepped aside and I saw a Great Dane rushing at full tilt towards me, followed by a carriage ... I judged that my only hope of avoiding being knocked down was to leap into the air at precisely the right moment to allow the dog to pass underneath me. This lightning plan of action, which I had no time either to examine or to put into practice, was my last thought before I went down. I felt neither the impact nor my fall, nor indeed anything else.

What is going on here? Who or what is this strange dog emerging out of nothing? And what is the significance of the bizarre attempt to jump above the giant? I read it as follows: the dog is the dog of death, yet not death as the end, but death in life, the kind of madness called melancholia. The gentle sadness of the previous stage is succeeded by an acute despair that we might have felt was always already underneath. As Walter Benjamin makes a point of, the dog is an ancient "Sinnbild" of melancholia, of madness and wisdom, perhaps indicating that wisdom emerges out of madness or madness out of wisdom.⁷ Churchill, it is said, used the term "black dog" to refer to his depression. We are also reminded of Cerberus, the hound guarding Hades in Greek mythology and later in Dante. Moreover, the Great Dane evokes another archetype of melancholia, The Prince of Denmark, Hamlet. As for Rousseau's

jump (and fall), the religious connotations should be obvious: facing death in life, he reaches for heaven, but it is hopeless, even ridiculous, and he falls to earth.⁸

Stage four: "It was nearly night when I regained consciousness." Rousseau finds himself in the arms of strangers, badly hurt. But then a typical Rousseauan reversal occurs:

Night was coming on. I saw the sky, some stars, and a few leaves. The first sensation was a moment of delight. I was conscious of nothing else. In this instant I was being born again, and it seemed as if all I perceived was filled with my frail existence. Entirely taken up by the present, I could remember nothing; I had no distinct notion of myself as a person, nor had I the least idea of what had just happened to me. I did not know who I was, nor where I was; I felt neither pain, fear, nor anxiety. I watched my blood flowing as I might have watched a stream, without even thinking that the blood had anything to do with me. I felt throughout my whole being such a wonderful calm ...

In this experience, mind and world are united, but in a selfless way: he does not know who he is. Then, once again, a stranger helps him towards his destination, like the mystic teacher in Plato who liberates the philosopher and sets him on his way out. Without knowing where he is or where he lives, Rousseau picks his way home, securely and spontaneously. Rousseau, for whom humanity so often seemed to be not at home in this world, finds home only when he has lost everything, even himself. But his home is not heaven, not some realm

above, but where he has always lived. Yet death-in-life was necessary to that recognition – the dog was a bringer of wisdom.

Stage five: the philosophical equivalent to the state of grace cannot last. His home is in the middle of the city, and he cannot lock himself in or others out. Darker times are presaged with the ominous mention of a secret lock at the gate: even home is not safe. The happiness is transformed when imported into society: "I should have foreseen this metamorphosis, but it was accompanied by so many bizarre circumstances, mysterious words and silences." Among them is the strange visit of the lieutenant-general of police, representing the law: "This highly solicitous behaviour, together with the man's air of secrecy, showed me that there was something mysterious hidden beneath it all which I was unable to reveal." The law is now for him as it was for Josef K.; society as it was for Plato's philosophers returning to the cave for the first time after having seen the sun.

Later, when Rousseau leaves home and goes out into the world again, he discovers that people actually have thought him dead. A newspaper has even printed an obituary. So the world of doxa interprets his fall as death; it cannot see it the way Rousseau himself sees it, as a rebirth. In society, therefore, he is "beside himself," he is another. Words are attributed to him that are not his, symbolized by Rousseau's

discovery that "they had a collection of specially fabricated works ready to be attributed to me as soon as I was dead."

At this point, as so often in Rousseau, it all ends up in paranoia. It is tempting to conclude that we are now in the sphere of mere psychology. Or is there a philosophical significance in his paranoia? A clue is found at the end of the second walk, where it is no longer a matter of Jean-Jacques against the people but of humans against the divine. Humans are seen as "wrenched ... out of the natural order ... plunged into an incomprehensible chaos" (p. 27). But then another reversal: what seemed the most unbearable fate turns out to be what leads to peace. When all is lost, we might find ourselves. And then he starts another walk. We can easily imagine the same structure repeating itself, again and again.

5. Allegory and Melancholia

One may feel that there is something artificial about the readings above. If that does not mean simply that these particular readings or allegories are bad (which may be true), it is tempting to reply that allegories are artificial. They are not like symbols; they have no immediate unity between sign and sense; they must be read. That is their weakness but also their strength. For as allegorical reading is a deliberate endeavour, it is also one to be rehearsed and refined.

One may also feel that Rousseau's philosophy is nothing but the sublimation of his own all too private fate and feelings. But even if it is a sublimation, is it "nothing but" a sublimation? Indeed, we could turn the tables and claim that it is a strength of Rousseau's life and philosophy that they are like images of each other. It might be seen as a fulfilment of the ancient dream of fusing life and philosophy, though not in its ancient form of a philosophical life, in which one lives according to a philosophy, but in the form of discerning philosophy in one's own very ordinary and apparently un-philosophical life. If tables are turned this way, the suspicion turns towards ourselves: why are our lives not philosophical images? Why is my life nothing but my own private fate and feelings?

That is not to say that Rousseau should not be suspected. However, the suspicion that his philosophy is but a sublimation is not extra-philosophical but exactly the way to criticize a philosophical allegory, namely, charging it with being too transparent – the personality is, as it were, obtruding itself on us. So if Rousseau does not succeed in uniting life and philosophy through allegorizing, that is because we feel that it is an expression of his fears and desires, not ours – he does not speak for us, only for himself. Hence, the sublimation must be perfect to achieve exemplarity, and the mark of perfection is that it sublimates us, too.

Does the idea that philosophy can take the form of autobiography work against the objectivity of philosophy? It does. But it also works against its irrelevance. Does the particularity of my life work against the universality of philosophy? It might. But if one feels that it must do so, then that indicates a sense of a gap between life and philosophy, which in turn is a sense that I am philosophically irrelevant. To bridge that gap is not to psychologize philosophy but to depsychologize psychology through philosophizing the self.

Pierre Hadot has made comparable claims regarding Augustine. According to him, the autobiographical dimension of Augustine's Confessions is far from the most important. It is primarily a theological work, in which each scene assumes a symbolic meaning. Hence, the "I" of the Confessions must not be understood as the "singularity of the man Augustine, but, on the contrary, as universal humanity of which the events of the life of Augustine are only the symbols."⁹

This is not to say that Augustine or Rousseau did not live through the events they are recounting. It is to say that these events are told so as to make more universal patterns visible in them. More generally, there is no contradiction between telling a story of an individual self and telling one of a universal self, if, that is, there are universal aspects of that individual self that can be seen by telling the story in a certain way.

If philosophy is, as Nietzsche claimed, "the personal confession of its author," then it should at least aspire to be a confession on behalf of humanity.¹⁰ This movement from the individual to the universal, from the private to the public, should be the essence of a philosophical education: "the challenge of every great philosophy, which as a whole always says only: this is the picture of all life, and learn from it the meaning of your own life. And the reverse: only read your own life and comprehend from it the hieroglyphics of universal life."¹¹

Walter Benjamin's famous sections on melancholy and allegory in his Trauerspiel-book are written against the background of a Weberian thesis on Entzauberung. As a result of the Lutheran reformation, in which faith alone leads to salvation, the outer world is emptied of meaning. All value is inner; actions lose their religious significance; objects are no longer messages from God. The absence of any higher or intrinsic meaning in the "profane" world is the source of modern melancholia. Yet the emptiness is in Benjamin the occasion for a reversal worthy of a Rousseau. If the world is flat, everything can be made to stand out from the background. If nothing has intrinsic meaning, then everything can be given meaning. Allegory is thus dialectically counterposed to melancholia; it is its consequence as well as its counterweight.

This antinomy of allegory may express itself historically, even biographically, by characteristic changes in attitude towards allegorical work. The joy of playful allegorizing can give way to the sense that it is mere play, with the result that the emptiness becomes even more apparent. Then one experiences the well-known weariness of the endless but arbitrary play of interpretation, until one grows weary of weariness and starts all over again. Yet although the allegory has its own kind of disappointment, it is more robust as a response to melancholia than it might seem. The reason is that the allegory does not pretend: it admits the absence of inherent meaning and does not fool us into a dream about its presence. Hence, philosophical allegories work against melancholia through production of meaning but at the same time they acknowledge what we have lost. Reading life allegorically is done in the knowledge that there is no given message implicit in the texture of our lives. It is a kind of reading, not a revelation. But neither is reading a kind of projection. Rather, it is to order a material so that certain patterns come to view. We do not suppose that the constellations in the sky are messages to us – nevertheless, they are there.

A lingering doubt: haven't we now left philosophy behind and entered the field of therapy? No, to think that we have is exactly to think that melancholia is merely a private predicament, whereas that belief is itself one of the constituents of melancholia.

1. This essay is inspired by the title of Christopher Kelly, Rousseau's Exemplary Life: The Confessions as Political Philosophy (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987). Its substance, though, is quite different.
2. All quotations in this section are from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Confessions, trans. Angela Scholar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 40-43.
3. All quotations in this section are from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Reveries of the Solitary Walker, trans. Peter France (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979), pp. 93-103.
4. Rousseau, Confessions, pp. 311-313. This allegory is well read by Christopher Kelly (pp. 174-183).
5. All quotations in this section are from Rousseau, Reveries of the Solitary Walker, pp. 35-43.
6. The phrase "death in life" is used by Socrates in Xenophon's Memorabilia, Book 4, Chapter 8. Socrates refers to how bodily life is a prison for philosophers in Phaedo (82d-83a).
7. Walter Benjamin, Gesammelte Schriften - Band 1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972), p. 329.
8. Note a certain ambivalence surrounding the dog's relation to the carriage. These dogs were sometimes used to pull

carriages, and if this was such a dog, it is tempting to interpret it as being sent out by man, thus reinforcing the impression of paranoia in this Rousseau-text. I owe this observation to E. S. Eide.

9. As quoted in Arnold I. Davidson's introduction to Pierre Hadot, Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1995), p. 17.

10. Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future, trans. Marion Faber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 8.

11. Friedrich Nietzsche, Untimely Meditations, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 141-142.