

Recensione

Lee MacLean, *The Free Animal. Rousseau on Free Will and Human Nature*

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Giada Margiotto

In her latest work *The Free Animal. Rousseau on Free Will and Human Nature*, Lee MacLean intends to reassess the role of man's capacity for free will in the context of Rousseau's political philosophy. In the *Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau metaphysically distinguishes man from other animals by means of two concepts, both of which expressing man's partial independence of nature: free will and perfectibility. According to Rousseau, man is free because "he feels the call of instinct 'but realizes is free to acquiesce or resist'" (p. 4). This "power of willing and the consciousness" of this power (p. 19) cannot be explained by mere mechanical laws, and reveals the spirituality of man. Perfectibility, on the contrary, as already noticed by Leo Strauss, is "metaphysically neutral". This means it could also be acceptable in the framework of a comprehensive materialism, of the kind which was rife in Rousseau's days. This is also why Rousseau, willing to preserve his theory from the materialists' attacks, grounds the rest of his "genealogy" of society – in the *Second Discourse* – on the very faculty of perfectibility. Many interpreters were thus led to imagine that the use of the notion of free will *chez* Rousseau is merely rhetorical. Rousseau employs this notion, they say, in order to avoid hassles with religious authorities, and pretends to trust it for he thinks that the stability of political life relies on such a belief. At any rate, being Rousseau well aware of "the difficulties surrounding all these questions" (*Second Discourse*, in *The First and Second Discourses*, ed. R. M. Masters, St. Martin's, New York 1964, p. 114), when he introduces the quality of perfectibility, "about which there can be no argument" (*Second Discourse*, p. 114), he actually dismisses the notion of free will. Strauss also claimed that Rousseau's characterization of perfectibility challenges the free will argument, because the development of human faculties comes about contingently, through a "chance combination of external circumstances which need never have happened" (*Second Discourse*, p. 144). In the footsteps of Strauss, Marc F. Plattner argues that Rousseau deliberately writes in an esoteric way to debar an open conflict with Christian orthodoxy.

Against such kind of reading, MacLean holds that Rousseau really believes in free will as a distinctive quality of man. First, Rousseau's argument

for free will is “too intriguing [...] to have been merely rhetorical” (p. 18). According to Rousseau, human spirituality emerges not only from the capacity to discern between good and evil, but also – that which he himself particularly emphasizes – from the *consciousness* of free will. In order to avoid contrasts with religious authorities, indeed, it would have been enough to resort to the more conventional notion of free will as the power of choosing between good and evil. Secondly, the free will premise plays a crucial role with regard to politics. Rousseau’s critique of the legitimacy of voluntary slavery (to be found in the *Second Discourse*, and in the *Social Contract* as well), grounding his attacks on despotism and arbitrary government, “relies on the premise that humans have free will” (p. 18). Thirdly, as MacLean points out, Rousseau’s emphasis on the contingency of the faculties’ development is only to stress the natural goodness of mankind, rather than to plead for the idea of a man merely shaped by history and blind chance. In fact, Rousseau himself underscores the active role played by man intended as a free agent in his own corruption. Yet the most effective defence of MacLean’s argument can be found in chapter 2 of *The Free Animal*, where she demonstrates that perfectibility alone is not at all sufficient to explain the genealogy of vice, and particularly the emergence of the *amour propre*; free will is all the same necessary. Of particular interest, in this regard, are MacLean’s scrupulous analyses of passages from the *Second Discourse* and from the *Emile*, and of some texts from Rousseau’s private correspondence.

As a further step, chapter 3 of the book discusses the core philosophical tenets of the *Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar*, which, as MacLean says, “really does contain much of Rousseau’s own position about metaphysics and religion” (p. 123). In the *Profession*, Rousseau presents a thorough critique of comprehensive materialism, advocating the idea that free will really exists. This he does, as MacLean suggests, in order to give rational plausibility to his hopes about the existence of God and free will. Rousseau, talking through the Savoyard Vicar, tries to “establish [...] a new civil religion” (p. 96) that is grounded in a natural religion of which free will is a *sine qua non* condition. In chapter 4, then, MacLean takes into account some textual evidence that could possibly undermine her argument. In the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, Rousseau seems indeed to raise doubts on the plausibility of the metaphysical views formerly expressed in the *Profession of faith*. However, “after analysing the principles that he [Rousseau] says have guided him in telling truth and lies”, MacLean concludes that “his principles would never have permitted him to lie about the issue of the freedom of the will” (p. 132).

In conclusion, interpretations *à la* Strauss neglecting the relevance of Rousseau’s anti-materialism fail to give a satisfactory account of his views on human nature. In opposition to the canonical definition of Rousseau’s position as “metaphysical neutrality”, MacLean thus proposes that of “metaphysical ambivalence”. She suggests that Rousseau employs a strategy which consists in using different registers on different occasions: when developing his theory, he tries to keep metaphysical neutrality to protect himself from the materialists’

attacks; but when he wants to unfold his real beliefs on human nature, “he also uses dualism to protect against the assimilation of human to animal nature” (p. 151). Ultimately, the picture of Rousseau coming out of *The Rational Animal* is that of a radical critic of Enlightenment, more than what it has been thought until now. Rousseau, MacLean writes in the end, “sets himself against the very foundation of modernity with its material view of the universe” (p. 155).