For the vast majority of his life, Jean-Jacques Rousseau felt as though he was surrounded by phoniness and hypocrisy. Indeed, he believed this to be the case for most of Europe (excepting perhaps Geneva and Corsica), and he was bothered so much by this that he eventually adopted *vitam impendere vero* (dedicate life to truth) as his personal motto. Rousseau adopted this motto - which he borrowed from Juvenal’s *Satires* - in 1758 in the *Letter to d’Alembert on the Theatre* (v:120;x:348)\(^1\). Despite the dramatic nature of this pledge, no scholar has yet approached Rousseau’s work through the lens of truth or truth-seeking. What did it mean for Rousseau to lead a life dedicated to truth?

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** Professor of Political Science and Political Theory at the University of La Verne, USA. Member of Rousseau Association. Jason teaches political theory, along with other subjects, such as the politics of urban land use and urban design, constitutional law, contemporary legal issues, and the politics of the modern Middle East, among others. E-mail: jneidleman@laverne.edu
In *Rousseau as Author* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), Christopher Kelly explored this question with respect to the theme of authorship. This book extends Kelly’s inquiry to include the broader ethical implications of Rousseau’s pledge. There is an ethics of truth, I argue, that animates Rousseau’s diverse writings on politics and religion, on solitude and society. The models of unity and reconciliation that emerge in these diverse writings have frequently been read as being at odds with one another. However, in reading Rousseau’s corpus through the lens of truth or truthseeking, symmetries emerge between and among what have generally been viewed as incompatible models of reconciliation.

In developing my reading of Rousseau, I have leaned on the voluminous existing scholarship. On truthseeking, I am indebted to Henri Gouhier, Robert Derathé, and Pierre Burgelin; on sincerity, to Alessandro Ferrara, Judith Shklar, and Arthur Melzer; on communion, to Laurence Cooper, Jean Starobinski, and Julia Simon; on reverie, to Marcel Raymond and Gaston Bachelard; on republicanism, to Bonnie Honig, Joshua Cohen, Anna Stilz, Stanley Hoffmann, Shklar, Melzer again, and, especially, the recently deceased Bronislaw Baczko, whose writings on Rousseau have inexplicably yet to be translated for into English. On hermeneutics, I am indebted to Elizabeth Rose Wingrove; on religion, to P.M. Masson, Yves Touchefeu, Victor Gourevitch, Gouhier, Derathé, Ronald Beiner, Helena Rosenblatt, and Patrick Riley; on reason, to Ernst Cassirer, Timothy O’Hagan, and Starobinski. Despite the depth and breadth of these influences, the work breaks new ground as the first book in English and, arguably, the first in any language to address Rousseau’s philosophy of truth. Henri Gouhier (*Les méditations métaphysiques de J.-J. Rousseau*, J. Vrin, 1984) Robert Derathé (*ROUSSEAU*, 1948), and Pierre Burgelin (*ROUSSEAU*, 1952) have written on related themes, but their work has yet to migrate substantially to the English language literature on Rousseau.

My hope is that the scope and subject of the book will make it of interest to those working on a variety of aspects of Rousseau’s corpus, whether it be politics, literature, education, biography, religion, or ethics. In addition, the book serves as a good overview of Rousseau’s philosophy, inasmuch as Rousseau’s ethics of truth is central to his philosophy as a whole, and the work engages all of Rousseau’s major writings, as well as many of the minor ones. I hope the book will also be useful for scholars studying truth from an ethical perspective. It should be of interest, for example, for those working in Foucauldian or Kierke-
gaardian traditions of truth that regard truth as an existential or dispositional problem - as a relationship to oneself, to use a Foucauldian phrase. Finally, the book should be of interest to anyone concerned with truthseeking. I have treated Rousseau as a man interested in understanding what he called the “truths that pertain to human happiness” (Discourse on the Arts and Sciences, iii:3; ii:3)² While I engage several scholarly debates, the book is primarily an effort to map Rousseau’s ethics of truthseeking, and, inasmuch is this is the book’s focus, it should be of interest to a lay audience as well.

OVERVIEW OF THE ARGUMENT

The inspiration for the book came from an arresting phrase - communion des coeurs (communion of hearts) - that appears in Marcel Raymond’s commentary on Rousseau’s Reveries of the Solitary Walker.³ A “communion of hearts” was the aim, Raymond wrote, of Rousseau’s solitary reveries. Although it had long been clear to me that a communion of hearts - fraternité in the French political tradition - was at the core of Rousseau’s writings on politics and society, it initially struck me as strange to see Rousseau’s expressly unsocial nature walks described in this way. After all, Rousseau’s aim in the Reveries would seem to be antithetical to a communion des coeurs. His stated purpose there was to attain an entirely self-regarding, self-sufficient state of consciousness - one that ceased to be dependent in any way on recognition from others. How could a paean to solitude double as a meditation on communion? As I reflected on the Reveries, it became clear that Rousseau sought in reverie something analogous to the fellowship of citizens he so famously celebrated in political writings like the Discourses, Social Contract, and Government of Poland.

This realization started me thinking about the ways communion and the desire for it animated Rousseau’s various attempts to theorize wholeness and reconciliation. Over the course of his literary career, Rousseau pursued a variety of such pathways, in an attempt to understand and possibly recuperate the original goodness that he believed humanity had once enjoyed but could no longer comprehend. He correspondingly produced writings in a variety of registers, recommending a variety of (potentially contradictory) solutions to the problems that plague modern society. The prospect of a grand unifying theory of Rousseau’s philosophical system, one capable of reconciling
Rousseau’s ambivalence about solitude and society, religious liberty and civil religion, particular and general will, reason and sentiment, has long been discounted as illusory. The pursuit of such a theory has been dismissed as futile or even imperious, insofar as it implicates the critic in the imposition of a unifying structure on texts which are themselves not susceptible to one.

It is my contention, however, that the texts are in fact susceptible to such an interpretation - that, in reading Rousseau through the lens of communion and his preferred pathways to communion, a coherent and consistent philosophy of truthseeking emerges. There is a symmetry that unites the communion Rousseau experienced in solitary reverie, with the religious communion he enjoyed among his “brothers” in Neuchâtel, and the political communion he extolled in his writings on politics. (Political Fragment, iii:178; iv:54) There is an impulse represented in each of these experiences to become part of something larger than oneself, to “extend our being,” as Rousseau puts it in Emile. (iv:430; xiii:312) This impulse toward communion is manifested across the spectrum of Rousseau’s writings, whether as the savage’s love of existence, the citizen’s love of the patria, the solitary’s love of nature, the philosopher’s love of the “whole human race,” (Geneva Manuscript, iii:178; iv:54), or the Christian’s love of her “brothers.”

Neither religious faith, nor civic virtue, nor nature walks, nor public festivals were ends in themselves for Rousseau. Each was rather judged by him on the basis of its capacity to move human beings closer to the communion that the savage and solitary experience as communion with nature, the citizen, Julie, and Emile experience as a communion des coeurs, and that the religious believer experiences as communion with God and with his or her fellow believers. Each could be hijacked, usually under the influence of amour propre, such that it undermined communion and fostered instead division and inequality. But each could be redemptive as well, when pursued within the constraints of Rousseau’s philosophy of truthseeking.

Tracing these various pathways to truth requires attention to the entirety of Rousseau’s corpus. The Discourses, Essay on the Origin of Language, Social Contract, Julie, Emile, Moral Letters, Letter to Beaumont, Letter to Voltaire, Confessions, and Reveries all receive substantial attention in the book. More significantly, the philosophy of truthseeking delineated in the text reveals a series of symmetries among the disparate themes treated in these texts, and, in so doing, forces a
reconsideration of common interpretations of Rousseau would describe him as hopelessly divided. Rousseau’s ethics of truthseeking, I attempt to show, animates Rousseau’s various images of unity. In the chapters that make up the book, I first describe the nature of the truths sought by the solitary, the citizen, the religious believer, and the intuitive reasoner and then the contours of the various pathways to truth traced in Rousseau’s writings. In so doing, I put to one side the metaphysical question of truth’s final status and work under the supposition that there is much to be discovered via a sincere investigation of Rousseau’s pledge to dedicate life to truth.

I am more interested (in this book) in exegesis than evaluation. While I address some common critiques of Rousseau, it is not my purpose either to defend Rousseau against the various criticisms leveled against him or to rescue him from the various agendas in the service of which he has been deployed. My aim is rather to influence those appropriations and criticisms by reflecting on the structure of Rousseau’s argument from a perspective that maximizes its intellectual force. This is necessarily an interpretation “from within,” which begins from Rousseau’s first principles and then demonstrates how Rousseau used those principles to mount a critique of modernity, for which he then proposes a series of solutions. It is an exegesis of Rousseau’s argument that I undertake in this book rather than an assessment of the viability of his first principles, the accuracy of his critique of modernity, the adequacy of his proposed solutions, or the various ways psychological or socio-political agendas may infiltrate Rousseau’s texts. Those questions will have to wait for another occasion—hopefully an occasion over which the argument of my book will have exerted some influence.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE WORK

Following Rousseau, the book offers a guide for those engaged in the pursuit of truth. It does not attempt to provide a formal definition of truth, often characterized in contemporary philosophy as an account of “what it means for a statement to be true.” This latter question is the foundation for most of what currently occurs in the philosophical study of truth, and the scholarship addressing this question is formal, rather than substantive or ethical. Instead, this book situates Rousseau’s philosophy of truth in the Socratic tradition, which runs through many of the ancient philosophers and has been revived most prominently by Kierke-
gaard and Foucault. This tradition treats truth as an ethical, aesthetic or subjective problem rather than an objective or linguistic one, as it is typically approached in the academic study of truth, whether inspired by Descartes, Kant, Wittgenstein, or most of the twentieth and twenty-first century analytic philosophers. The latter approach - which Kierkegaard refers to as the “objective path” - treats truth as something to be understood from a distance, as something external. By contrast, the ethical or “subjective path” develops from the premise that all access to the truth is subjective that, there is no truth apart from the individual’s subjective engagement with world. Truth is, in this sense, mediated by subjectivity and necessarily so. As Kierkegaard wrote, “the ‘how’ of truth is precisely truth.”

The book presents Rousseau’s normative account of truthseeking, his account of what human beings ought to do – what they must do – if they hope to discover the truths that pertain to human happiness. Rousseau’s writings constitute a practical guide to the pathways that lead back to these truths; they describe how Rousseau arrived at them and how others might as well. For Rousseau, the paths to truth were many but their contours were similar. He believed that the truths essential to human happiness could be known, that they were known, in fact, by human beings in their natural state, and that they are only obscure now, because they have been obscured by civilization, leaving most of us unhappy and morally corrupted. Nevertheless, several avenues will lead back to truth, for those willing to consecrate themselves to it.

The book is divided into two parts, the first of which lays out Rousseau’s reasons for writing, his defense of philosophical, theoretical and literary inquiry, and his general understanding of truth and truthseeking. The second part of the book follows Rousseau down the various pathways to truth he traced across the spectrum of his writings: reverie, republicanism, religion, and reason.

Chapter one, “Rousseau’s ‘Great Principle’,” describes the concept of original goodness or natural goodness and situates it as the starting point of Rousseau’s philosophical system as a whole and of his ethics of truth in particular. The framework of Rousseau’s ethics of truth - that truth is singular and the pathways to it many - is grounded in the principle of original goodness, which Rousseau placed at the center of his philosophical system and which he viewed as fundamental: Human beings are born good and are corrupted by society. Rousseau believed that the truths necessary for happiness are apparent to
us in our natural state and only become opaque in society. Truthseeking consists, therefore, not it “curing the vices of the human heart,” as Rousseau put it, “but in preventing them from being born and in keeping tightly shut the passages through which they enter” (Rousseau Judge of Jean-Jacques: Dialogues, i:687; i:23)

Chapter two, “Communion,” describes the particular extension of being that Rousseau regarded as essential to both truth and happiness. Whatever the differences among Rousseau’s various models of recovery and reconciliation, they are unified, I argue, by a desire for communion, whether it be communion with nature, with God, or with one’s fellow human beings. This chapter describes the various ways in which the impulse toward communion is pursued across the spectrum of Rousseau’s writings on society and solitude. When Rousseau’s writings are read through the lens of communion, symmetries begin to emerge among Rousseau’s otherwise disparate models of reconciliation. I argue that, among the truths that pertain to human happiness, the ecstasy of communion plays a particularly significant role in Rousseau’s ethics of truthseeking.

In chapter three, “Rousseau’s Ethics of Truthseeking,” I describe Rousseau’s normative philosophy of truthseeking, his account of what human beings must do if they hope to (re)discover the truths that pertain to human happiness. In so doing, this chapter operates also as an exegesis of Rousseauean sincerity. This chapter maps the component parts of Rousseau’s ethics of truthseeking: utility, autonomy, immediacy and simplicity. Together, these four components define what it means to be “upright and sincere,” as Rousseau put it in an essay on the character of a good author (Idea of Method in the Composition of a Book, ii:1243; xii:239).

Chapter four - “Reverie” - marks the beginning of Part Two, over the course of which Rousseau’s specific pathways to truth are traced. The first pathway I explore in the book was the last one that Rousseau himself embraced, coming to it only very late in his life. Reverie was Rousseau’s last and most successful (in his view) attempt to recuperate natural goodness. But, in and of itself, reverie will not always elicit our most noble sentiments. Reveries must be detached from the corrupting influences of modern society; they must be unstructured; and they must be directed inward in order to access natural goodness. Otherwise, they will merely reflect the prejudices that result from inflamed amour propre. In order for reverie to facilitate truthseeking, the subject - the
promeneur - must adhere as closely as possible to the four principles of truthseeking described in chapter three.

Chapter five, “Republicanism,” pushes beyond a formal reading of Rousseau’s political theory, in order to discern a substantive argument for democracy, grounded in love of la patrie. Rousseau’s political writings, I argue, offer more than a formal account of what Rousseau refers to in the subtitle to the Social Contract as the “principles of political right.” The formal institutions of legitimate governance were central to Rousseau’s political theory, to be sure, but his political theory itself was composed in service to a recuperation of the immediate love of existence that was characteristic of human beings in their natural state (Discourse on Inequality, iii:144; iii:28). Political institutions that serve liberty and equality were to be guaranteed not only because they are our birthright, but also because they are preconditions for a communion of hearts in a republic of virtue. Civil solidarity, on this reading, becomes not just a supplement for popular sovereignty but the very reason for entering civil society. Political association becomes a viable pathway to the recuperation of the “truths that pertain to human happiness.”

In Chapter six, “Religion,” I read Rousseau’s writings on religion through the lens of the ethics of truthseeking described in chapter three. In the scholarship on Rousseau’s religious writings, it is often argued that Rousseau never successfully reconciled his ecumenical theology with his political argument for an exclusive civil religion. On the contrary, in this chapter I show how Rousseau’s writings on religion are structurally parallel to his writings on his other preferred pathways to truth: reverie, republicanism, and, to a lesser degree, reason. All of these were reliable pathways to truth in Rousseau’s view, provided that they are pursued within the constraints of autonomy, immediacy, simplicity, and utility. Just as the practice of reverie and the practice of popular sovereignty present canvases upon which subjects are enabled and empowered to pursue communion, so too does Rousseau’s theology open up a space for the cultivation of religious and political solidarity. This framework suggests a reconciliation of Rousseau’s political and religious writings. Rousseau’s religion naturelle and the republic of virtue prove to be alternate but complementary paths to the same “truths that pertain to human happiness” to which Rousseau claimed to have dedicated his writings and his life.

Chapter seven, “Reason,” draws on Rousseau’s distinction between simple reason and philosophical reason to distill the elements of
his proposed “genuine philosophy.” One of the many things that makes Rousseau so compelling is that, in the midst of a historical moment known for its elevation of reason, Rousseau embraced a series of non-philosophical, non-rational (not irrational) pathways to truth. Among the pathways to truth he embraced, Rousseau regarded reason as the least reliable. When properly constrained, reason could yield sublime truths, but, when exercised imperiously (as it ordinarily is), it leaves us less auspiciously positioned toward truth than we would be if we simply remained ignorant. Reason opens up sophisticated possibilities, but it obscures what Rousseau calls the “sublime science of simple souls” - the unmediated love of existence, common to human beings in our natural state. (Discourse on the Arts and Sciences, iii:30; ii:22) Rousseau did preserve a space for what he called “simple” or “natural” reason in his system, assigning it a critical, if subsidiary, role in understanding the “truths that pertain to human happiness.” Discursive or philosophical reason is, in Rousseau’s view, almost always corrupting, but simple or intuitive reason, when properly circumscribed and tied to sentiment, can serve truth. Just as Rousseau proposed a new social contract as the solution for the degenerate one, so too did he favor simple, intuitive reason as the solution to the deficiencies of discursive reason. This philosophy will be guided by the principles described in Part One of the book: it will be circumscribed, activated only in response to an urgent necessity; it will reason from experience rather than a general framework or system; and it will be yoked tightly to sentiment.

The book concludes with a discussion of the implications of Rousseau’s ethics of truth, both for those with an academic interest in truth and truthseeking and for those everyday truthseekers who might find in Rousseau the inspiration to dedicate their own lives to truth.

ROUSSEAU’S ETHICS OF TRUTH - A SUBLIME SCIENCE OF SIMPLE SOULS

Abstract: this paper is a summary of the book published by Routledge in the United States. The author aims to discuss the coherence of Rousseau’s texts thought which it is possible to prospect an “ethics of truth”, so to achieve a communion bond with people and things. The author tries also to discuss the implications of Rousseau’s ethics of truth on our sense of self and the implications in the real existence in the world.
Keywords: Rousseau. Ethics. Truth. Philosophy.

Notas


2 At the outset of his literary career, Rousseau committed himself to the pursuit of these truths. These basic, elemental truths were, for Rousseau, the only justification for philosophical inquiry or a literary career.


References


