

Sentimentalism and jean-jacques rousseau

Profession, Philosophers



“ I want to show my fellow-men a man in all the truth of nature; and this man is to be myself”. Rousseau in *Confessions* did what most would not dare in an autobiography: reveal ‘ everything’. *Confessions* does not follow the conventions of a traditional eighteenth-century autobiography; he creates a self-portrait that shows both the good and bad qualities and actions. For a man that admits all his wrongdoings, he wanted people to believe, must be fundamentally innocent and therefore ‘ good’. Written in framework of morality, Rousseau believed that man is naturally good, and it is the environment that shapes the person. Comprised of juxtaposed stories of his sexuality and childhood traumas, the novel addresses topics that traditionally would have been regarded as irrelevant and therefore would be omitted. In Rousseau, coherence can be defined as a consistent account of both good and bad experiences whilst not omitting events that may seem small or unimportant. In Rousseau, his consistent reflection upon sexuality allows him to evaluate past events which shape his self-development.

In *Confessions* sexuality is at the foundation of Rousseau’s self, however not in a natural way. Growing up with his three aunts and father, their beliefs about chastity, Rousseau had confused thoughts about sexuality and had no sensual desire than what he received from Mlle de Lamercier. Mlle de Lamercier was the mother figure in his life; she cared for and similarly punished as a mother would do. “ Who would have believed that this ordinary form of childhood punishment, meted out to a boy of eight years by a young woman of thirty, should have decided my tastes, my desires, my passions, my whole self, for the rest of my life, and in a direction that was precisely the opposite of what might naturally be expected?” Rousseau’s

reaction to his punishment of spanking was perverse. Spanking, rather than creating fear, leads to an element of sensuality. Rousseau proclaims that it was primarily his early childhood that influenced his later self and that his sexual preferences were influenced by his early childhood spankings of an older mother figure.

Rousseau's desire to be spanked, he declares, shapes his whole self. However, it is outside his moral framework because according to Rousseau, sexuality is not natural. Often times, when children are punished, children associate their action with a negative consequence, and as a result will avoid doing that action again. Rather, Rousseau looks forward to punishment and considers this incident his entrance into adult sexuality. As his life progresses, he maintains an innocent knowledge and thinks the idea that sexual intercourse is disgusting, " Not only had I reached adolescence before I had any clear idea about sexual union, but such confused ideas as I did have always took some odious and disgusting form. I had a horror of common prostitutes that I have never lost...What I had seen dogs doing always came to mind too when I thought of how it might be for people, and the very memory was enough to sicken me". Rousseau's discourse about sexuality implies that a shameful connotation. He finds sexual pleasure in feeling guilt and shame and in the ways he first presents his sexual preferences.

As a child, Rousseau steals a valueless ribbon and when accused of doing so, blames a girl, Marion. Rousseau reflects upon this childhood moment as being the worst thing he has done. He imagines the suffering Marion must

have endured as a result of his actions despite having no knowledge, “ I do not know what became of the victim of my false witness...I fear too, that wretchedness and destitution were not the worst dangers I exposed her to”. Rousseau’s purpose in writing about the ribbon story is to allow himself to feel guilty. Rousseau imagines he caused terrible things such to happen to Marion so he can feel shame and derive sexual pleasure from that shame. In conclusion, Rousseau’s childhood events had a lasting effect that transformed how he viewed events and causing him to have a unique perspective from others about sexuality.