Rousseau
AND
Dignity
ART SERVING HUMANITY

EDITED BY Julia V. Douthwaite

UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME PRESS
NOTRE DAME, INDIANA

Copyright 2016 University of Notre Dame
Introduction to Rousseau 2012 and DIGNITY at Notre Dame

Julia V. Douthwaite

In order to be fair, to justify its existence, critical writing has to be partial, impassioned, and political.
—Charles Baudelaire (French poet and art critic, 1821–67)

Whether it is a question of the living or the dead, impartiality is just indifference.
—Jules Simon (French philosopher and statesman, 1814–96)

This is not a commemorative volume. Rather, this is an account of a series of events held in the name of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s tercentennial in 2012, a testimonial by some of the people who took part in those events, and a reminder of the work that lies ahead. Our aim is not to commemorate Rousseau in the ordinary sense of the term, that is, to celebrate or solemnly preserve his memory through eulogistic or honorable mention. We aim on the contrary to retrieve his work in all its imperfection, to subject it to updated critical inquiry, and put it back into circulation for what it can do today: help us remember how to use our talents and skills to be fully human. As Rousseau reminds readers of *Emile, or, On Education* (1762): “To live is not to breathe; it is to act; it is to make use 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” (*Emile*, CW, 13:167). That is a tall order to be sure and the author himself made it even harder.

The life and writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Geneva, 1712–Paris, 1778) exemplify the fascinating contradictions of the Enlightenment and show how the eighteenth century transformed the ferment of Renaissance humanism into the
rough-and-tumble political struggles of modernity. Rousseau was a self-made man. Although his mother died in childbirth and his father, an unsuccessful watchmaker, abandoned him at age twelve, young Jean-Jacques acquired a vast knowledge of Western philosophy through his own readings. His first books—the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* (1750) and the *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men* (1755)—launched this nobody into fame and made him sought-after by the aristocrats of the Parisian intelligentsia. But his ideas actually attacked the interests of his benefactors! The *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* includes many now-famous quotes that seem designed precisely to make the wealthy squeamish, such as: “Do you not know that a multitude of your brethren die or suffer from need of what you have in excess?” (*DOI*, *CW*, 3:53). Moreover, by pointing out that no one can “own” the earth (an idea that later inspired Karl Marx), Rousseau denounced the mainstay of capitalism, that is, private property: “The first person who, having fenced off a plot of ground, took it into his head to say this is mine and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society” (*DOI*, *CW*, 3:43). These quotes, and the love-hate emotions that characterized Rousseau’s relations with powerful people, make him hard to fathom.

Contradictions form a prominent theme in Rousseau’s life and works. An unhappy and tormented man, Rousseau refused to raise the five children borne by his illiterate common-law wife Thérèse and abandoned them to their fate in an orphanage. Yet his book *Emile* laid down the fundamentals for our modern understanding of the distinct phases of childhood and adolescence. Maria Montessori (1870–1952) drew heavily on Rousseau’s works in creating her method of child-centered education; these principles are still well respected and practiced by teachers today. During his tempestuous life, which took him from Geneva to Italy to a long sojourn in Paris, before state-sponsored persecution drove him back to Switzerland and to England, Rousseau was a prolific writer whose works were translated instantly into the major European languages. He is often held up as the first modern autobiographer for his poignant *Confessions* (first ed. 1782), where he explores the oddities of his psyche and expresses a sense of exultation with the natural world that resonated profoundly with writers of the Romantic age (1790–1830). Based on his lyrical descriptions of Alpine scenery and his awareness of how nature is everywhere threatened by human industry, some claim that Rousseau was the first green thinker.

Rousseau was also a religious renegade whose staunch refusal of orthodoxy has made him notorious among Catholics, Protestants, and organized religions in general. Although born in Calvinist Geneva, he converted to Roman Catholicism at age fifteen and later eschewed both approaches to the divine in *Emile’s* controversial chapter on the Savoyard Vicar. There he demands a more personal, Deist approach to worship that is similar to the writings of Thomas Jefferson and Joseph Priestley. It was this work—which was banned by the Catholic Church upon its publication in 1762—that forced Rousseau into the exile of his later life.
At times celebrated by the high and mighty across Europe, at other times outcast by all but a few tolerant souls, Rousseau was a thorn in the side of authority. In *On the Social Contract* (1762), he laid out the concepts of the social contract and the popular will, declaring for instance that: “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains,” “force does not make right,” and that “one is only obligated to obey legitimate powers” (SC, CW, 4:131, 134). These ideas inspired the leaders of the French Revolution to seek an alternative to absolute monarchy. Despite the fact that he died well before the tumult began, Rousseau’s writings have become notorious for generating the populist spirit of 1789 and serving as guiding light to Robespierre and the Jacobins whose hopes for national reform eventually degenerated into terrorist tactics. His utopian vision of a state led by a single will, with clear and luminous maxims and no contradictory interests, has been interpreted as leading to totalitarianism. Yet it also arguably contributed to the demand for democratic forms of government in Europe and South America that marked the nineteenth century and continue to drive social progress in our world. Indeed the slogan of the Amnesty International Demand Dignity campaign (“We are all born free and equal in dignity and rights—yet everywhere, these rights are being denied”) has a distinctly Rousseauian feel to it.

The tercentennial of Rousseau was a huge undertaking that was planned far in advance by the city of Geneva. Thanks to the Rousseau for All website, over the course of 2012 one could track the philosopher’s impact around the globe. Alongside lectures and scholarly gatherings in Switzerland and France, events included an opera in São Paulo, Brazil; conferences from Turkey to Tokyo; a soccer tournament in the village of Bohicon, Bénin; and a rowing regatta in Saint Petersburg, Russia. The efforts detailed in this volume were somewhat different because they sought to make Rousseau 2012 into a platform that might create intergenerational teachable moments, experienced not in a world capital or cultural haven but rather in provincial France and the heartland of the United States.

The events in South Bend, Indiana, came about by chance. In May 2010, Andrew Kelly (ND ’11) and I were in Paris on research and happened to visit the DIGNITY show during its opening at the Hôtel de Ville when the photographers were present. Based on our enthusiasm for the exhibit and our sense of its relevance to Notre Dame’s Catholic mission, we started making plans to bring the show to the United States; these plans culminated nineteen months later in tandem with an exploration of Rousseau’s tercentennial.

In January–March 2012, a program entitled Rousseau 2012/DIGNITY brought scholars, photojournalists, and the exhibit to the town of South Bend, Indiana, and the campus of the University of Notre Dame. Over five thousand people from various walks of life joined in events to learn why one should keep reading Rousseau through the lens of enduring concerns such as political justice, power relations, and religious liberty. An important visual component of the Notre Dame project was the large photographic exhibit created by Amnesty International to launch its Demand Dignity
campaign in France, and which was housed in the Snite Museum of Art during its American debut. DIGNITY shows what poverty looks and feels like through formal portraits and reportage of people telling their stories from five countries: Egypt, India, Macedonia, Mexico, and Nigeria. As readers will find below, the catalog includes not only these people’s names, ages, and hometowns, it also provides the text of their testimonials as recorded by the five photographers: Philippe Brault, Guillaume Herbaut, Jean-François Joly, Johann Rousselot, and Michaël Zumstein. The fact that all these people are named, and that they are our contemporaries, elicited strong reactions. Sympathetic observers had the feeling of walking in the shoes of some of the world’s dispossessed, if only for a while. Others were annoyed by the demands that DIGNITY seemed to be making on their conscience via the pitiful conditions of those portrayed. Some of the more graphic images brought to mind photography’s potential to exploit relations between viewer and image or to subtly manipulate the truth—to transform a supposedly objective snapshot into a staged experience. This ambivalence over truth and representation has inspired scholars Serge Margel’s and Philip Stewart’s contributions on Rousseau’s strange “dialogues” recorded in Rousseau Judge of Jean-Jacques, as well as Gabrielle Gopinath’s foray into relational aesthetics—a form of art based on one-on-one artist-viewer interaction. By reprinting the words and images of the exhibit alongside some reactions to it, and framing the whole in a sustained reflection on issues such as the truth-value of art, the multiple motivations behind altruism, and the cyclical nature of injustice and poverty—that is, concerns passed down to us from Rousseau—this volume aims to serve as a teaching tool.

Although the connection may seem tenuous at first, the linkage between the DIGNITY exhibit and Rousseau’s thought was not lost on the college students who visited the exhibit, some of whose reflections are included here, nor on the scholars involved in the lecture series and this volume. Written by some of the foremost experts in the academy today, the essays do not rehash traditional disputes or indulge in micro-analyses, rather they revisit the man’s work with an eye for his relevance to modern-day problems both sociopolitical and psychological in nature. Fayçal Falaky reminds us of one main difference between Rousseau and us, and that is his scorn for the very term “dignity.” The man refused to use that word and bristled at the very concept of privilege all the while enjoying many luxuries conveyed by such dignités. Conversely, his fear of indignités, Philip Stewart argues, drove much of the author’s angst in the Rousseau Judge of Jean-Jacques where he rails against unfair criticism. Other topics include the equivocal morality of cosmopolitanism in Rousseau’s political thought (Andrew Billing), Rousseau’s philosophy of human misery and advice for achieving happiness (Christopher Kelly), and the strains running through his utopian literature and social theory, as translated into the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011–12 (Christie McDonald). Margel and Stewart address the existential dilemma of seeing oneself objectified in the gaze of another, a dilemma that
Rousseau tried to address in his political writings as well as in his autobiography, with mixed results. Providing the connective tissue between DIGNITY and the philosopher’s paradoxical views on art, Gopinath is sure to spark debate with her frank embrace of subjective photography. In her interpretation of Guillaume Herbaut’s photograph of Raúl Lucas Lucía (fig. 9), for example, she argues that the sympathy between sitter and artist “affirms the value of a humanist ethics vested . . . in the righteousness of the authentic, individual conscience.” This “relational” aesthetic is akin to Rousseau’s ideal of human communion as found in his autobiographical writings as well as his political theory; Gopinath argues that it constitutes a “spiritual heirloom” left by Rousseau and trumps objectivity with its power to persuade. Finally, some heartfelt reactions to the debate were penned by schoolchildren from South Bend, members of a photography club in a nearby community center for the underprivileged, and college students, whose words and pictures are found at the end of this volume.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, a film was being made with a similar approach to commemorating Rousseau. Entre nous Jean-Jacques was designed as a community outreach program in Compiègne, France (a city of forty-one thousand people, forty miles north of Paris), and culminated in the creation of a fifty-six-minute documentary shown at the philosopher’s three-hundredth-birthday party at the Parc Jean-Jacques-Rousseau in Ermenonville. Created by a young director with modest financial backing from a nonprofit film institute and the regional offices of the Oise and Picardie departments, Entre nous Jean-Jacques unfolded over the course of winter–spring 2011–12 as filmmakers, teachers, and caregivers collaborated to explain the relevance of Rousseau’s writing to one-hundred-some people ages ten to ninety-two years old. Participants in Notre Dame events became aware of Entre nous Jean-Jacques thanks to the research of Monica Townsend, then a senior in college. As Townsend explains, the spirit behind the two events was rather different: organizers of the American events tackled the question of Rousseau’s relevance head-on by declaring, “Rousseau was a pioneer of humanitarian thought!” and juxtaposing readings to a militant art exhibit on human rights. Organizers of the French event were less directive and elicited more intimate, idiosyncratic responses from participants. In the video letters that constitute Entre nous Jean-Jacques (many of which are reprinted in the Teach This! section), some people identify primarily with the man’s self-doubt and loneliness or connect with his day-dreamy reveries in nature, while others seethe with frustration over his limited understanding of the stakes involved in their attempts to get justice from an indifferent state. Like Gopinath, film director Delphine Moreau explains how the subjective lens she chose for her work was not only an artistic choice, it was also a philosophical expression of compassion for her sitters. She orchestrated the film as a composite of individual voices speaking their own, uncensored views and compiled the whole in homage to the human spirit. Although the two programs unfolded simultaneously with no knowledge of each other,
they both aimed to prompt today’s audiences to find new insights into Rousseau. This volume focuses primarily on the events that transpired in South Bend, but because of the common cause that unites us, we felt it only fitting to include some of the words and images brought to life through Entre nous Jean-Jacques.

The core goal of both programs—and of this volume of essays and art—is the cultivation of what Rousseau called “seeds of humanity” through realization of our “common miseries.” The Rousseauian ideal is a liberating education that resists certain truths held self-evident in Western society today. It is centered not on social conditioning or technical training but on nurturing self-determining people: people who see through the blandishments of financial capitalism and manage to lead fulfilling lives despite the economic pressures that weigh on them. It involves fostering appreciation for humility and commiseration, “all the attractive and sweet passions naturally pleasing to men,” as Rousseau wrote in Emile, and that have their origins in empathy. The project is intimately linked to educating the young because, as Emile points out: “The first sentiment of which a carefully raised young man is capable is not love; it is friendship. The first act of his nascent imagination is to teach him that he has fellows [semblables]; and that the species affects him” (Emile, CW, 13:371). It is also crucial to forming active citizens: an ongoing concern in our day when voter turnout tends to be disappointingly low (ranging from 40–60 percent in the United States, and 60–70 percent in France). Rousseau hit that nail on the head when he wrote in the preface to the Social Contract, “Born a citizen of a free State, and a member of the sovereign, the right to vote there is enough to impose on me the duty of learning about public affairs, no matter how feeble the influence of my voice may be” (SC, CW, 4:131). The author was not unaware of the pitfalls of such idealism, however, and his own life story as recounted in The Confessions, Rousseau Judge of Jean-Jacques, and The Reveries gives ample evidence of weakness, contradiction, and cowardice. Readers of the Sixth Walk (Reveries), for instance, may be excused for smirking when they discover that this author—so famous for his discourses on pity and fellow-feeling—admits that his daily walks were ruined by the presence of a little lame boy who always asked him for alms. Although initially amused by the boy’s flattery and efforts to befriend him, Rousseau eventually found it bothersome, so much so that he began taking long detours to avoid running into him, even if it meant that he thereby broke his own rules on charity.

Given the philosopher’s imperfect record as a father, husband, and person, critics may well ask why we chose to invest so much time and energy on him. Surely such a problematic character should not be held up as a model? The answer lies in interpretation, of course. Rousseau is vast; perhaps we can pardon a writer for contradicting himself now and then when we realize that his collected writings form sixteen volumes and his vast correspondence adds up to fifty-two more. But it also lies in our interest in the civic morality and soul-searching that Rousseau strove to exemplify and which have often been misunderstood. One critic blasted Rousseau for opposing
what we see as the central project in *The Discourse on Inequality, Emile,* and *The Social Contract,* that is, “the urgent need for a reawakened awareness of personal character and responsibility as the basis of civilized society. The individual must be encouraged to face the hard and primary obligations of the here and now, chief of which is improvement of self and doing right by ‘neighbor.’” Where Claes Ryn interpreted Rousseau as an irresponsible “Jacobin” for his role as spiritual leader of the French Revolution (1789–94), we focus on the issues of justice, human development, and psychological integrity that Rousseau tried to address. He may not have succeeded 100 percent, but his innovative concepts of the social contract that binds us to our neighbors, the universality of suffering and its helpmeet compassion, and the benefits of child-centered education are still good food for thought.

Whatever one’s opinion on Rousseau’s thought, it remains potent. The issues raised here may be anchored in eighteenth-century circumstances, but they remain urgent. Which members of the population should be allowed to join policy debates? At what point does strong leadership verge into dictatorship, and how can one arrest such a development? How should democratic entities balance the loyalties that people feel they owe to other identities—religious, ethnic, or regional? Under what conditions must a state punish its own citizens, and what constitutes a fair punishment? These are tough questions, as a glance at any daily newspaper will show; and Rousseau’s answers are only partly satisfactory, as the testimonials in *Entre nous Jean-Jacques* make clear. Delving into the ways that these questions were visualized by the DIGNITY photographers and were debated by scholars and students may provide some perspective.

*Photography actualizes Rousseau’s otherwise impossible dream: it renders the invisible visible.*

—Gabrielle Gopinath

Visitors to the DIGNITY show were struck by the beauty of the photographs and the way that they captured destitute people in a manner that seemed serious and respectful. Consider the portrait of Rasheed Ajaï of Jakonde, Nigeria, by Michaël Zumstein (fig. 45). Although he is perched on a rock in a street flooded with waste water and sewage, Mr. Ajaï, a baker, stands with regal assurance. (Zumstein affectionately calls him *The Floating Baker.*) His upright posture and sober gaze compel viewers to appreciate the abject reality of his slum, yet the play of light and shadow running between the blues and greys of the buildings, reflected in the water, makes for a soothing image not unlike a seascape. None of the people in DIGNITY are crying or bleeding or prostrate with grief; the exhibit refrains from what Susan Sontag has qualified as “the indecency of such co-spectatorship.” But it was not the first exhibit to resist that temptation; artists have long fought against the tendency to dehumanize the poor and unfortunate. In order to put DIGNITY into dialogue with
that tradition, the Snite Museum of Art organized a sister exhibit that was displayed in the same room, and which gathered together works by artists such as Francisco de Goya, Jean-François Millet, and Félix Nadar from its permanent collection of eighteenth- to twentieth-century art. Viewers thus realized that: (1) poverty is not a new topic in art, and (2) artists from much earlier times devised their own strategies to confer dignity on the dispossessed.

Some works incite compassion through clever compositions that skew the observer’s perspective. In Pier Leone Ghezzi’s *The Alms Giver* (eighteenth century; fig. 1), for example, a well-dressed priest placed center-stage looks off indifferently as a beggar pleads for help from below. The traditional full-body portrait of the alms giver contrasts with the truncated portrait of the beggar who is represented only by his feet and crutches lying on the ground. Crammed into the corner of the frame, cut off by the border of the paper, this pauper’s presence is literally forced into the margins and forms a wry commentary on the self-satisfied gaze of the clergyman. Similarly, by magnifying the pathos of *Überfahren* (*Run Over*) (1910–13, fig. 2) in what appears to be an under-sized frame, Käthe Kollwitz forces viewers to acknowledge the scene’s silent, workaday horror. In this image of a dead child being carried by two hunched adult figures, a crowd of children anxiously follows the parents and seems to squeeze onto the page, in mimicry of their close tenement quarters. The flowing lines of the woman’s black dress and the horizontal composition conjure up a feeling of movement, as if the procession were going by in front of your eyes. The people’s lowered heads and the dead girl’s white gown sanctify the scene and demand a respectful response.

Compassion is also conjured up by the photographs of Guillaume Herbaut. A lowered gaze and sense of sadness mark the portrait of Modesta Cruz Victoriano (fig. 11) although the significance of the picture in her hands is unclear. The red and black of her clothing (symbolizing blood and death), and the stark white lines of her cottage wall, which form a cross behind her, place her in an aura of gravity. What is different here, as compared to Kollwitz’s etching, is the scene’s pressing actuality. In the testimonial recorded by Herbaut, Modesta Victoriano explains that she is holding a photo of her late husband Lorenzo Fernández Ortega’s dead body. Ortega was assassinated in 2008 at the age of thirty-nine after being kidnapped and tortured for his activism on behalf of their people, the Me’phaa. His murder was a deliberate reprisal by the army against the Me’phaa community. Through Victoriano’s portrait, the photographer explicitly shames the Mexican government and demands a response. Where Kollwitz’s image describes the agony of nameless witnesses to a tragic event, and stirs observers with what she called the “full force of the proletarian’s fate,” Herbaut’s work names specific perpetrators, explains the deliberate malevolence of the violence, and calls on viewers to demand reparation for the victim.11 Since visitors to DIGNITY could know who she is and where she lives, and that a respected NGO is working on her behalf, they could feel that this photo may actually get results.12
Figure 1. *The Alms Giver*. Engraving by Pier Leone Ghezzi, eighteenth century. Courtesy of Snite Museum of Art, University of Notre Dame.
Or they might feel manipulated by the emotional blackmail that such art wraps around the viewer. Neither reaction is wrong or unexpected. As the photographers stated in their interviews, the art makes no claim to objectivity; rather, it tries to involve the viewer. Young viewers were especially sensitive, and frequently sought more information on the sitters or voiced a desire to “make a difference” in some way. Will their wishes translate into action?

When my student assistants and I filmed interviews of the DIGNITY team members talking about their work, we were struck by a recurrent theme: each man expressed a drive to make his photos into a form of humanitarian statement, yet with their long experience of working in these countries, none harbored any illusions about their impact. The connection they felt to their subjects, the time they spent learning and listening to people’s stories, and the artwork they created to communicate those stories were worth it in themselves. Students were impressed by the candid views on photojournalism expressed by Johann Rousselot and Philippe Brault during their visits to campus; they underlined the difficult material issues posed by a profession caught between the global slump in newspaper production and competition with the Internet. Brault surprised us when he revealed the very few shots that he typically