Lectures de La Nouvelle Héloïse
Reading La Nouvelle Héloïse Today

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ST. PREUX OR THE NEW HONNÊTE HOMME

"Suivre nature et plaire" — these were the watchwords of the honnête homme. As Nannerl Keohane pointed out, here “following nature” meant something “wholly unlike what Rousseau later meant by acting according to nature.” Though Keohane does have a great deal more to say about Rousseau, she does not explore this statement, nor does she connect him to the development or downfall of the idea of the honnête homme in French thought. In La Nouvelle Héloïse, however, the frequency with which the characters refer to each other as honnêtes hommes, or discuss the ideal character of the honnête homme, or criticize the actions of supposed honnêtes hommes in Parisian society, is striking. One might read La Nouvelle Héloïse as Rousseau’s effort to criticize honnêteté as a social ideal and to offer an alternative model of honnêteté. That is what I propose to explore in this paper.

I. The honnête homme in French society

The honnête homme, introduced into French literature by Nicholas Faret in his L’honnête homme ou l’art de plaire a la cour, closely followed the model of his Italian counterpart and inspiration, Baldeser Castiglione’s Cortegiano. For Faret, as for Castiglione, the ideal was first and foremost a military man, but one who also possessed other, tamer virtues that helped him fit in well in polite company. Following the tumult of the Fronde, the French Court came to appreciate the usefulness of an ideal which made peaceful social intercourse possible. At first the honnête homme retained his martial bearing, but gradually, this hero was housebroken and no longer a fighter. In fact, not only would he cease being a professional soldier, he would have no trade at all.

1. The honnête homme was an ethical ideal type found in seventeenth century literature, but one that continued to hold sway well into the eighteenth century as well. A. J. Krailsheimer, Studies in Self-Interest from Descartes to La Bruyère (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 82.
The *honnête homme*, as a new moral ideal invented in the seventeenth century, provided a means of softening the rough edges of warrior courtiers. Magendie, in his extensive study, showed how, as the ideal evolved, it contained two rather distinct strands: one worldly and aristocratic, emphasizing such matters as proper behavior at court; and the other, a moralistic, bourgeois strain. The ideal of the *honnête homme* could be used either to include or to exclude: thus, one might argue that true *honnêtes hommes* belonged to the social elite, those who qualified according to a class definition. On the other hand, those of inferior birth who nonetheless lived the lives of *honnêtes hommes* could hope for promotion and preferment on that basis. Still, there were definite economic limitations. As continental philosophy would later divide itself into two camps by seizing on different halves of Hegel’s famous dictum, “the real is rational; the rational is real,” in the seventeenth century the idea of the *honnête homme* played a similar role, thus we have the possibility that “gentlemen are *honnêtes hommes* or *honnêtes hommes* are gentlemen.”

The period covered in Magendie’s study extends from 1600 to 1660, yet, for good or ill, the influence and importance of the idea of the *honnête homme* continued well into the eighteenth century. It was an ideal that La Bruyère could poke some fun at when he noted in his *Characters* that “the well-bred man [*honnête homme*] is one who commits neither highway robbery nor murder, whose vices, in short, cause no scandal. Everyone knows that a good man is well bred, but it is amusing to reflect that not every well-bred man is good.” In the eighteenth century the *philosophes* attacked the ideal of the *honnête homme*, but, as more than one writer has suggested, it was Rousseau’s fate to administer the “coup de grace” to the philosophy of *honnêteté*,

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replacing it with a new commitment to the sensibilité du moi.\(^8\) La Nouvelle Héloïse was one of his principal vehicles for delivering this attack. Before looking at his challenge, we need to form a better idea of his target.

What did it mean to be an honnête homme? A full, detailed answer to that question would be long, complicated and well beyond the scope of this essay. For one thing, as a seventeenth century commentator wrote, the term “honnête homme” had become synonymous in popular usage with several similar phrases: le galant homme, homme de bien, and l’homme d’honneur.\(^9\) Perhaps we can simplify matters here by focusing on what it meant for an honnête homme to follow nature and please.

First of all, as Keohane rightly observed, nature to the mind of the honnête homme was certainly different from what it would become in Rousseau’s vision. “Nature” was nature in the classical sense, not something original, primal, savage, or uncivilized. Nature was not sans fard — unvarnished, raw — but rather nature at its most privileged and embellished. The honnête homme thought of “natural” in the sense that a fifth century Greek sculptor might have. Greek statuary represented the true nature of man — but let’s face it, no human being fashioned by the hand of God ever looked quite like a statue carved by Myron or Praxiteles. The sculptor’s work revealed man’s nature — that is, an eternal idea of man or man in his most perfect form, the goal to be attained. The natural could be revealed by stripping away all that was individualistic and instead seeking out what was best in order to create an ideal representation.\(^10\) The honnête homme, in following nature, was trying to “be all that he could be” by imitating the ideal. One exemplary honnête homme, the chevalier de Meré, suggested that a person could make honnêteté a part of his nature by acting honnête both in public and in private. But since “external appearances are only images of internal acts,” the result of this play-acting would be that honnêteté would become habitual.\(^11\)

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10. Dens, pp. 65-68.
Others were less sanguine about the success of this strategy. One observer of seventeenth century society wrote: "most men are artificially honnête. . . their honnêteté is merely counterfeit." Another suggested that people were merely masquerading, substituting what they wanted to be for what they were. All this suggests the underlying tension inherent in the command to follow nature, namely the dichotomy between being and seeming — être et paraître.

What of the other half of the injunction, plaire? Pleasing meant working toward harmony in society. It meant recognizing that everyone desired happiness and that the best way to achieve one's goal was to discover means of reconciling one's own happiness with the happiness of others. Sometimes reconciliation may necessitate a degree of self-sacrifice. Honnêteté is accommodationist. The honnest homme realizes that a display of vanity or aggressiveness will only invite retaliation. As Damien Mitton suggested, honnêteté is nothing but a well-regulated amour propre. It is the management of one's own amour propre and that of others. Honnêtes hommes know better than to try to catch flies with vinegar — they always use honey. Meré and other honnêtes hommes were able to discover ways of captivating others by appealing to their egos. How? The best method is through politeness — some people can resist talent or keenness of mind.

The honnête homme especially desires to please distinguished women. He is, after all, in many ways the creature of the salon. Central to salon life was the art of conversation; so, the honnête homme had to be a fine conversationalist. According to Meré, the art of conversation meant avoiding pedantry and making thoughts accessible and less abstract. It also meant fitting one's own comments into a conversation in a natural and constructive way, thereby supporting the harmony of the group. To do what honnêteté required, obviously a person had to be flexible. One modern critic has counterposed the

15. Stanton, p. 68.
flexibility of the honnête homme to the “ponderous rigidity of gens d'honneur.” 18

Not everyone was cut out for the life of an honnête homme. For one thing, the life required a good deal of leisure, hence the root of the class bias associated with the type. Honnêtes hommes had no time for or interest in productive activity. Consequently, only wealthy aristocrats or bourgeoisie had much hope of succeeding as honnêtes hommes. Domestics could not hope to be honnêtes hommes. 19 Aside from this class bias, there were other barriers. Chief perhaps was the simple fact that not everyone would have le bon goût — the ability, as Meré expressed it, to sense to what extent things will please and to prefer the excellent to the mediocre. 20 It took a certain natural instinct or a “hyperacuity of superior beings” able to see things at a glance and not through a gradual reasoning process. 21

The honnête homme was not a savant; though the honnête homme was well educated. He had read the classics, possibly under Jesuit tutelage. Nevertheless, he would avoid ostentatious displays of learning as well as disputation and such forms of verbal conflict.

Finally, in his search for harmony, the honnête homme avoided things that might rock the boat — anything that smacked of true originality. In the salons he frequented, life consisted of “obedience to common usage and identical taste, arranging the day according to a uniform timetable, wearing the same costumes, speaking the same language, having the same interests, playing the same games and indulging in the same distractions.” 22 He “transposed, reflected, reproduced but he did not start anything.” 23 His taste remained purely imitative. He was, in twentieth century parlance, quite other-directed.

II. Honnêteté and the Honnête Homme in La Nouvelle Héloïse

How does La Nouvelle Héloïse attack this ideal? Not directly. Readers soon become aware that the characters themselves have not abandoned their own versions of the honnête homme. Repeatedly, Julie or Claire

18. Stanton, p. 49.
or St. Preux or even Baron D'Étange make positive comments or generalizations about the conduct or character of *honnètes hommes*. Frequently these are used to describe the letter writer or recipient, or to enjoin one or the other to appropriate conduct. Thus, for example, we have St. Preux noting in a letter to Julie, that “one might imagine you more beautiful, but more lovable and more worthy of the heart of an *honnête homme*, it is not possible.” Or, St. Preux writing to Baron D'Étange that “the marriage of one *honnête homme* never dishonors another.” Or Julie, enlisting St. Preux's aid for Fanchon, remarking, “I say too much about it to an *honnête homme*.” Or Bomston, writing to console St. Preux, “Life is an evil for a villain who prospers, but a good for an *honnête homme* who is unfortunate.” Or, Julie describing Wolmar as “the *honnête homme* whose hopes she has fulfilled.” Nor are these versions of “*honnêteté*” so idiosyncratic as to be unrecognizable; they do fall well within the bounds of the traditional discourse concerning *honnêteté* and the *honnête homme*. Baron D'Étange calls upon Julie to renounce St. Preux, arguing that “it is time to sacrifice a shameful passion to duty and *honnêteté*.” The implication is clearly spelled out — only a “malhonnête homme would sacrifice his duty and his faith to a vile interest.” In the end, given Julie's “conversion” and St. Preux's “cure,” much of the Baron's call is heeded. And calls to individual sacrifice for the good of the larger society are, of course, consistent with the idea of *honnêteté*.

There is a class difference between Julie and St. Preux. When the Baron enquires about the young man's birth, he is told that it is “*honnête*” — not aristocratic. Recalling that Magendie claimed that *honnêteté* could be an inclusionary as well as an exclusionary ideal, St. Preux's class background need not automatically have ruled him out as a suitor for Julie, as Bomston later tries to convince the Baron. But Baron D'Étange himself represents less an *honnête homme* than an *homme d'honneur*. He comes from a family of soldiers and this background suggests the pre-*honnête homme* era. To prevent St. Preux from duelling with Bomston, Julie tells her lover that her father once

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killed a good friend in a duel. Honor carried to such lengths would seem to be the antithesis of honnêteté. Julie counsels St. Preux not to follow her father's example, but to be reconciled with Bomston.

So, how does Rousseau challenge the "honnête homme" in this text? He does so in both theoretical and practical ways. Like the moralists who put stock in the honnête homme, Rousseau accepts the value of a harmonious society ordered according to nature. But nature has a very different meaning and harmony a different manner of achievement. By allowing St. Preux to view the species in its natural habitat, the Parisian salons, he offers criticism of honnêteté as practiced. By designing an alternative society at Clarens, he gives new meaning to what it might mean to be honnête in a social setting.

III. St. Preux and the Salons

Much of the negative part of Rousseau's case against the honnête homme can be made by reviewing St. Preux's letters concerning Parisian life. St. Preux's task is to study man in his various relations. He expects Paris to be a great source of illumination. He praises the tone of conversation he hears, "neither ponderous, nor frivolous; knowledgeable without pedantry, gay without riotousness, [and] polite without affectation." In Paris, people reason without arguing. They don't plumb questions too deeply for fear of boring. No one attacks another's words with any heat, nor does anyone defend strenuously his own opinions.29

In this, St. Preux offers a textbook description of the conversation of honnêtes hommes. But on closer inspection, the delightful conversation of the salons is missing something — substance. What does one learn from all this? St. Preux asks. Does one learn "to judge soundly the things of the world?" Far from it. Instead, all this fine talk serves only to "plead with art the cause of falsehood, shake with the strength of philosophy the principles of virtue, color passions and prejudices with subtle sophisms and give error a certain fashionableness in the maxims of the day."30 People in Paris do not say what they think, but what suits them to say they think before their audience. A few men and women do the thinking for the rest, and each salon develops its own set of rules and

opinions. These rules may differ greatly with the result that an
"honnêtê homme in one house is a knave in the neighboring
house." 31 Since individuals commonly frequent more than one
salon, they need the flexibility of Alcibiades “to change their
principles as they do their assemblies.” 32 Thus, the same men are
“molinists in one [salon], Jansenists in another, vile courtisans in the
home of a Minister, mutinous frondeurs in the home of a
malcontent.” 33 The honnêtes hommes in Paris are not “those who
perform fine actions, but those who say fine things.” 34

Despite all that the great city had to offer, St. Preux was left to
conclude that the men there were no more humane, moderate or just
than those elsewhere. Furthermore, while appearing open and
agreeable on the outside, in fact, they hid their hearts away. 35 In
short, St. Preux concludes that for these honnêtes hommes, paraître
had replaced être.

A major factor contributing to this problem was the role played
by women in Parisian society. While among the Swiss, men and
women are scarcely ever together, in Paris it is totally the opposite.
“Women like only to be with the men; they are only at ease with
them.” 36 The mistress of a salon is surrounded by a circle of men,
men who seem to multiply by circulation. There, “a woman learns
to speak, act and think like the men and they like her.” 37 The critical
strain introduced by St. Preux is continued later by Claire when she
compares Genevan and Parisian women. She praises the simplicity
and taste of Genevan women as well as the Genevan practice of
separating the sexes and occupying each with its own particular
duties and amusements. The effect of this separation is to increase
the enjoyment of each other when they finally do come together:
s’abstenir pour jouir. 38

32. O.C., II, p. 234.
34. O.C., II, p. 254.
35. O.C., II, p. 255.
36. O.C., II, p. 269. Rousseau expands considerably on this same theme in his Letter
to d’Alembert on the Theatre.
37. O.C., II, p. 269.
38. O.C., II, pp. 661-662. This line of criticism resembles closely the arguments
developed much more fully in the Letter to d’Alembert. Rousseau also has a
great deal more to say about honnêteté there as well.
IV. Honnêteté at Clarens

St. Preux’s description of the order that prevails at Clarens parallels Abelard’s description of the appropriate rule for Heloise’s community of sisters. Old passions and energies that brought trouble have been purified and channeled into the constructive activity of community building. This is similar to the task honnêteté was expected to perform in French society; but, the methods of going about the task at Clarens would be quite different.

Several times in the text Wolmar is described as honnête or as an honnête homme.39 It is Wolmar whom Julie credits with establishing the order observed at Clarens. That order mirrors the order in his soul and in the government of the world.40 Though Wolmar directs things, he does so ever so subtly and according to nature. Thus, “one recognizes the hand of the master [but] never feels it... [things seem] to go by themselves and one enjoys at the same time rule and liberty.”41

At Clarens, in contrast with the milieu of honnêtes hommes in France, men and women will follow the Swiss practice of having limited contact between the sexes. After all, their inclinations, functions, duties and amusements are different; they “come toward a common happiness by different routes.”42

Like Paris, Clarens is no classless society. Yet Rousseau has attempted to reconstruct honnêteté in a manner that strips away its class-based aspect. The first requirement for servants at Clarens is that they be “honnête, . . . love their master and serve of their own accord.”43 Now ‘honnête’ here and in subsequent passages could be translated simply as ‘good’ or ‘honest’ without all the connotations associated with the honnête homme, yet a close look at the full texts in which Rousseau discusses what he means by honnêteté among servants suggests otherwise. One suspects that Rousseau was recalling his own days as servant when he allowed St. Preux to point out that “servitude is so unnatural to men that it is not known to exist without some discontentment.”44 Normally, harmony among servants is purchased only at the expense of the master. Servants who are not “honnête” steal.

42. O.C., II, pp. 450-51.
44. O.C., II, p. 461.
But what they steal is harmony. Heads of households have two bad choices: they can protect themselves only by “preferring their interest to honnêteté” and inciting servants to spy one on one another and report; or, they can let the thieves run wild. Wolmar’s household avoids the two alternatives by refusing to tolerate any but honnêtes gens who have no desire to trouble the order. St. Preux suggests that, in general, one might conclude that honnêteté and servitude were incompatible and that one might never hope to find domestic servants who were also honnête gens. Things at Clarens are different, however. Interaction among servants and between servants and masters is itself characterized by openness and honesty. The masters at Clarens do this by showing the servants their own character: they speak always in the same language and have one moral system for all. Servants see a master who is just, righteous, equitable, etc. and themselves strive to imitate such characteristics. Servants at Clarens become more gracious, honnête and superior than their station in life. What spurs this development is the light of their master and mistress and also a well-directed self-interest. The sentiments expressed here go well beyond what is required for simple honesty or goodness and recall Mitton’s description of honnêteté as well-regulated amour propre.

Rousseau’s new version of the honnête homme attacks class differences in another way as well. At Clarens there are no idlers; everyone joins in the productive labor of the estate. St. Preux, for example, helps with the grape harvest. The leisure of the Parisian honnête homme is forgotten.

There are no idlers and there is also no idle talk. People at Clarens do not converse for effect; they say what they think. Furthermore, they need not always talk; they are capable of observing silence and being contemplative.

For the inhabitants of Clarens good taste, whether in gardens or other things, consists in simplicity and truth, in good order rather than in magnificence. Good order results not from the opinions of people but from the concord that exists between things and nature. Taste is not

45. O.C., II, p. 461.
46. O.C., II, p. 467.
47. O.C., II, pp. 467-468.
49. O.C., II, pp. 469-470. Rousseau’s terms here are “grand intérêt” and “l’intérêt... si sagement dirigé.”
50. O.C., II, p. 468.
the result of marketplace decisions — "nothing is scorned because it is common; nothing is esteemed because it is rare." Nor are things considered tasteful because they bear the marks of art or contrivance. Good taste doesn’t let art show.51

The new *honnête homme*, in Rousseau’s plan, lets nature reveal itself instead of attempting to mold or correct it. In considering an educational plan for the Wolmar children, St. Preux suggests that the best method is to form a perfect model of the reasonable and *honnête homme* and then bring each child into conformity with the model through education — thereby "correcting nature." Wolmar’s response is to laugh St. Preux out of court. “Correct nature? That’s a good one!”52 Instead, at Clarens, education will give full play to children’s nature, channeling only ever so gently and with hidden hands. The constraints of the Jesuits’ classical education, familiar to the *honnêtes hommes* in Paris, would be absent at Clarens.

The result of Rousseau’s redefinition of *honnêteté* would be that "the good and *honnête* would depend not on the judgement of men but on the nature of things." He would eliminate the old difficulty of *honnêtés hommes* by elevating être over paraître.

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