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Adrastus versus Diogenes

Frederick the Great and Jean-Jacques Rousseau on self-love

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A portrait of Frederick the Great adorned Jean-Jacques Rousseau's study at Montmorency. It stood on his desk, accompanied by the epithet: 'He thinks as a philosopher, and behaves like a king' (*Il pense en philosophe, et se conduit en Roi*). Yet before Rousseau's guests could be duly impressed by this potentially laudatory sentence, most of them were treated to the complementary rhyming line, inscribed on the back of Frederick's portrait: 'Glory, self-interest – that is his God, his law' (*La gloire, l'intérêt, voilà son Dieu, sa loi*).¹ This couplet, which Rousseau feared would cost him a desired asylum in Prussian-ruled Neuchâtel, testifies to the crucial role of self-regarding notions in the largely unconsummated intellectual relationship between the Genevan author and the Prussian king.

By contrast to the widely advertised collaboration between Frederick the Great and Voltaire, the king's attitude towards Rousseau has not been the focus of much scholarly attention.² Indeed, in this case one can find neither a close alliance nor an enduring mutual appreciation. Yet several of Frederick's philosophical works and his correspondence betray

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¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions and Correspondence (The Collected Writings of Rousseau, vol. 5)*, ed. Christopher Kelly, Roger D. Masters, and Peter D. Stillman (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1995), Book 12, 496; *OCI*, 592–593.

² Emil du Bois-Reymond saw them in the late nineteenth as paragons of an outdated Gallo-Roman classicism (Frederick) and a new form of Romantic literature (Rousseau): Du Bois-Reymond, *Über das Nationalgefühl; Friedrich II. und Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Berlin: Dümmler, 1879), 33–86. A recent essay by Jörn Sack, *Friedrich der Grosse und Jean-Jacques Rousseau – Eine verfehlt Beziehung und die Folgen* (Berlin: Berliner Wissenschaftsverlag, 2011), erects a largely conjectural edifice on the basis of the few known facts, while misrepresenting Rousseau as a founding father of parliamentary liberalism.

a long-lasting preoccupation with the themes discussed by Rousseau in the 1750s. The Genevan, for his part, had already become captivated by Frederick's public persona in his youth.³ Both Frederick and Rousseau were, moreover, among the most effective masters of public self-fashioning in the eighteenth century.

Though our protagonists never met one another, their mutual fascination reached its peak in 1762 in their indirect correspondence through George Keith, the Jacobite governor of Neuchâtel on Frederick's behalf, when Rousseau sought refuge in the Prussian enclave. Thereafter, well into the 1770s, Frederick continued to tackle the themes that had preoccupied Rousseau. He was acquainted with the renowned discourses Rousseau wrote for the Academy of Dijon, although there is no conclusive evidence of the king's sustained engagement with Rousseau's later works. To a large extent, Frederick's interest in Rousseau's works fits the more general pattern of his involvement with contemporary French philosophy. After the end of the Seven Years War, his interest in and enthusiasm for contemporary French authors gradually waned.

Given Frederick's engagement with the main themes of Rousseau's early career, this chapter focuses on the problematic notion of self-love, or *amour propre*. Self-love is not only a major theme in the *Discourse on Inequality* (*Second Discourse*, 1755), but also in the preceding *Discourse on the Arts and the Sciences* (*First Discourse*, 1750), where Rousseau traced the origins of different scholarly pursuits back to hubris and the desire for self-promotion.⁴ The notion of self-love, with its background in various strands of ancient and early modern Epicureanism and Stoicism, is particularly salient in Frederick's correspondence with George Keith and in the king's essays on the topics highlighted in Rousseau's discourses: the *Essay on Self-Love as an Ethical Principle* (1770) and *Discourse on the Usefulness of the Sciences and the Arts within a State* (1772). These items are closely linked to what Frederick saw as the defining features of human nature and the sort of happiness available to human beings in this world.

Over the last generation self-love, or *amour propre*, has increasingly come to the fore as the unifying thread running through Rousseau's different works, mainly due to a new approach to this thorny term (suggested in Nicholas Dent's 1988 interpretation of Rousseau and elaborated in Frederick Neuhouser's more recent book of 2008).⁵ Self-love is indeed a key term in Rousseau's various writings, linked as it is to the origins of social interaction especially through the wish for mutual recognition. Traditionally, it had been common to emphasise Rousseau's strict distinction in the *Discourse on Inequality* between *amour de soi-même*, a benign care of the self or basic self-preservation – which he deemed one of the essential characteristics of the man of nature – and the inflamed, socially generated *amour propre*, seen as an excessive drive for recognition and domination. According to the *Discourse on Inequality*, while the former was a natural instinct leading both animals and human beings to care for their self-preservation, '*amour propre* is only a

³ Rousseau, *Confessions*, Book 5, 179; *OCI*, 214.

⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'Discourse on the Sciences and Arts', in *DI*, 1–28; here 16; 'Discours sur les sciences et les arts', in *OC III*, 1–30 (17–18).

⁵ N. J. H. Dent, *Rousseau: An Introduction to His Psychological, Social and Political Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), esp. 52–56, 143–145; Frederick Neuhouser, *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-love: Evil, Rationality, and the Drive for Recognition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). For an overview of the changing views on the unifying core of Rousseau's philosophy, see particularly the contributions to this volume by Axel Honneth (Chapter 11), Christopher Brooke (Chapter 8), and Céline Spector (Chapter 9).

relative sentiment, factitious, and born in society, which inclines every individual to set greater store by himself than by anyone else, inspires men with all the evils they do one another, and is the genuine source of honour'.⁶ Since Rousseau's state of nature is pre-social and pre-political, self-love in its negative guise could not have been present there. As he noted more rhetorically towards the end of the *Discourse on Inequality*: 'The Savage lives within himself; sociable man, always outside himself, is capable of living only in the mind of others and, so to speak, derives the sentiment of his own existence solely from their judgment'.⁷ Indeed, self-love as the constant need for recognition by others, a competitive zero-sum game, had already been recognised by Hobbes as a major characteristic of human beings in the absence of natural sociability.⁸

Yet, as Dent has suggested, one can distinguish not only between *amour de soi-même* and *amour propre* in Rousseau's works, but also between two different kinds of *amour propre* itself: its basic form as a natural need for recognition which accords others the acknowledgement one seeks for oneself, and its corrupt version, consisting in a malignant desire for preference over others. Following Dent, Neuhauser examined Rousseau's use of self-love in its positive version, especially in *Emile* (1762), by contrast to its inflamed appearance in the *Discourse on Inequality*. These changes in Rousseau's use of the term *amour propre* have also been highlighted by Christopher Brooke, who has argued that Rousseau's initial Epicurean approach to self-love in the *Discourse on Inequality* was tempered by Stoic impulses in later works, most manifestly in *Emile*.⁹ Drawing on this new interpretative framework concerning self-love, I shall try to situate Frederick's views on the interaction between the care of the self and the common good against the background of Rousseau's works, and conclude with a discussion of the synthesis between Epicureanism and Stoicism that underlay much of the king's *œuvre*.

The Môtiers triangle: Rousseau, Keith, Frederick

The distant relationship between Rousseau and Frederick the Great intensified in 1762 when Rousseau asked for Frederick's protection in Môtiers, within the territory of Neuchâtel. Following the uproar, censure, and official ban provoked by his publications of

⁶ Rousseau, 'Discourse on the origin and foundations of inequality among men', in *DI*, 111–222, here 218 (Note XV); 'Discours sur l'origine et les fondemens de l'inégalité parmi les hommes', in *OC* III, 109–223 (219).

⁷ Rousseau, *DI*, 187; *OC* III, 193.

⁸ On this notion in Hobbes see, recently, Philip Pettit, *Made with Words: Hobbes on Language, Mind, and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); István Hont, *Politics in Commercial Society: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith*, ed. Béla Kaposy and Michael Sonenscher (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 6–12.

⁹ Christopher Brooke, *Philosophic Pride: Stoicism and Political Thought from Lipsius to Rousseau* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 183–202. See also John Rawls's view that *amour propre*, prior to its corruption, made it possible to reconcile self-interest and justice: Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy*, ed. S. Freeman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 198–200; cf. Céline Spector's contribution to the present book (Chapter 9).

the same year, the *Social Contract* and *Emile*, Rousseau saw Neuchâtel – sufficiently close to Geneva and France, yet governed by Brandenburg-Prussia – as a viable refuge. In the *Confessions*, Rousseau related his hope that Frederick would grant him asylum despite the mocking couplet on his portrait; Rousseau was certain that Frederick had heard of it through his Parisian correspondents. A second problem was Rousseau’s unflattering if indirect reference to Frederick in his recently published *Emile*. In Book V, the protagonist Emile reads Fénelon’s *Télémaque* with his tutor while discussing international relations and various arrangements of civil society. In this context, the tutor mentions that Adrastus, the bellicose and treacherous king of the Daunians in Fénelon’s novel, could be identified in present-day Europe; this was probably a reference to the Silesian Wars of the 1740s and the still raging Seven Years War, in which Frederick played a major role. The barely concealed allusion to the Prussian king would not have been lost on most contemporary readers. Though the tutor immediately adds that links between the novel and contemporary Europe are ‘invidious comparisons that the author himself dismisses or makes in spite of himself’, Rousseau’s retelling of the Môtiers episode in his *Confessions* makes it clear that this comparison was precisely and deliberately intended. To make things worse, the subsequent paragraph is a much more explicit attack on eighteenth-century kingship, following a rhetorical dissociation of Emile from Fénelon’s princely protagonist, Telemachus:

Emile does not travel as an idle man, and he does more good than if he were a prince. If we were kings, we would no longer be beneficent. If we were kings and were beneficent, we would do countless real evils without knowing it for the sake of an apparent good that we believed we were doing. If we were kings and were wise, the first good thing that we would want to do for ourselves and others would be to abdicate our royal position and become again what we are.¹⁰

Retrospectively, having been granted asylum by a king who was much more concerned with the ongoing Seven Years War than with philosophical squabbles, Rousseau changed the royal comparison. In the *Confessions*, he recast himself as another ancient hero, Coriolanus, exiled from Rome and looking for refuge among his erstwhile enemies, the Volscians. Arguing he knew all along that Frederick’s generosity would not disappoint him, Rousseau exclaimed: ‘When Jean-Jacques raises himself up next to Coriolanus, will Frederick be beneath the General of the Volscians?’¹¹ In fact, the situation in 1762 was much more prosaic. Frederick granted Rousseau asylum fairly easily, as he had done in the case of La Mettrie and other authors whose views he did not necessarily share. While the protection of Rousseau cost Prussia next to nothing, this magnanimous gesture towards the renowned Citizen of Geneva enhanced Frederick’s carefully managed credentials as a philosophically inclined king and an enemy of religious persecution. Indeed, d’Alembert subsequently argued that Frederick was glad to strike a pose against the Protestant

¹⁰ Rousseau, *Emile, or on Education*, trans. and ed. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), Book V, 467; *OC IV*, 849. Cf. Rousseau’s *Confessions*, Book 12, 496; *OC I*, 593. See also Rousseau’s critical comments on monarchs in the *Social Contract* of 1762 (*SC* 96–98; *OC III*, 409–411). On the role of Fénelon’s *Télémaque* in Frederick’s education, see Ernst Bratuscheck, *Die Erziehung Friedrichs des Großen* (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1885), 27–8; Eduard Spranger, *Der Philosoph von Sanssouci*, 2nd edition (Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1962), 29–30.

¹¹ Rousseau, *Confessions*, Book 12, 497; *OC I*, 593.

clergymen who attacked Rousseau's publications in Geneva and beyond.¹² Furthermore, it was a unique opportunity for the self-fashioned philosopher-king to prove that his own monarchy was much more tolerant and clement than Rousseau's republican *patria*.

While in Môtiers, Rousseau forged a close friendship with the Scottish Jacobite exile George Keith (the tenth Earl Marischal), governor of Neuchâtel and one of Frederick's most trusted companions. Rousseau regarded this fellow exile as a father figure; Keith became the mediator between Frederick and Rousseau, transmitting their views and requests in both directions. Approving Rousseau's request of asylum, Frederick also proposed to provide the fugitive with an allowance. He noted that if Prussia had not been ruined by the contemporary war, he would have built Rousseau a hermitage with a garden where the Genevan could re-enact the state of nature. Yet Rousseau 'would never persuade me to graze the grass and walk on all fours', Frederick added, replicating Voltaire's misrepresentation of the argument of the *Discourse on Inequality*.¹³ Keith augmented Frederick's offer with corn, grain, and other supplies, which Rousseau resolutely declined in a letter to Frederick:

You wish to give me bread; is none of your subjects in need of it? Take away from my eyes that sword which dazzles and wounds me; it has done only too much of its duty, and the royal sceptre is abandoned. There is a grand career in wait for kings of your mettle, and you are still far from its end; nevertheless time is running out, and even a spare moment is not left for you to proceed towards the goal. If I could see Frederick the just and the dreaded covering his lands with a numerous populace and becoming their father, then J.-J. Rousseau, the enemy of kings, will come to die at the foot of his throne.¹⁴

While paying tribute to his benefactor, Rousseau unapologetically uses here the same anti-monarchical language he employed in *Emile*, and for the same reasons. On both occasions, before and after finding refuge in Neuchâtel, Rousseau charged Frederick with extreme bellicosity, grounded in excessive self-love and a pathological pursuit of glory which undermined not only the European peace but also the domestic welfare of Prussia itself. Rousseau's allusion here is to the ancient Cynic philosopher Diogenes of Sinope, who allegedly told the warmongering Alexander the Great to stand out of his sun.¹⁵

Frederick retorted that making peace was not such an easy task, and that the political leaders with whom he had to deal were as intractable as the philosophers with whom Rousseau had fallen out. Apparently impressed by Rousseau's rejection of his offer of financial and material aid, Frederick wrote to Keith that Rousseau exhibited the apex of virtuous disinterestedness. Yet just like Rousseau's compliment to Frederick, this was a double-edged remark. For Frederick, every virtue had its value in moderation – which applied equally to self-love and disinterestedness. Frederick admitted in the same letter to Keith that excessive voluptuousness, or what he called 'Asiatic luxury', was not at all

¹² Jean le Rond d'Alembert, *Éloge de Milord Maréchal* (Paris: Libraires Associés, 1779), 68–75.

¹³ Frederick II to Keith, 1 September 1762, in *Œuvres de Frédéric le Grand*, ed. Johann D. E. Preuss, vol. XX, 322.

¹⁴ Rousseau to Frederick, 30 October 1762, *ibid.*, 333–34.

¹⁵ On Rousseau and Diogenes, see Michael Sonenscher, *Sans-culottes: An Eighteenth-Century Emblem in the French Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 134–201; Louisa Shea, *The Cynic Enlightenment: Diogenes in the Salon* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 89–105.

necessary. But he immediately qualified this point by wondering why we should renounce most of the conveniences of modern life as long as they could be innocently enjoyed without detriment to society. ‘The true philosophy’, Frederick argued, ‘is the one that does not proscribe luxury but limits itself to the condemnation of its abuse’. And where could one find this ‘true philosophy’? Frederick confided in Keith that he always remained faithful to John Locke, Marcus Aurelius, ‘my friend Lucretius’, and the physics of Epicurus – everything, in his words, ‘that can make us moderate, good, and wise’¹⁶

This sound philosophy seemed to Frederick to be the direct opposite of what he interpreted as Rousseau’s call for austere self-denial in the *Discourses*, enhanced by the philosopher’s rejection of his offer of material help. The king argued that his own philosophical heroes would reject the claim that because we were all born equal, we had to live like savages without law, or that the arts and the sciences had actively damaged morality. Writing to Keith in Neuchâtel, Frederick contrasted his own moderate philosophy with what he saw as Rousseau’s pitiable rehearsal of Diogenes’s Cynicism:

I believe that your Rousseau has missed his vocation. He was undoubtedly born to become a famous Cenobite monk, a Church father of the desert, celebrated for his austerity and self-maceration, a Stylite. He would have performed miracles, he would have become a saint, and would have enlarged the enormous catalogue of any martyrologist. But at present he cannot be seen as anything but a peculiar philosopher who resuscitates the sect of Diogenes after two thousand years.¹⁷

Frederick added that disinterestedness is no doubt the foundation of virtue, but in Rousseau’s case it was highly exaggerated: one should know how to do without various things while renouncing nothing. Therefore, if Rousseau seemed to Frederick to exhibit abstract morality by renouncing his natural self-love, this very quality made his philosophy inconsequential in the real world.¹⁸ Several years later, Frederick would elaborate this argument in his own essays on the topics that stood at the centre of Rousseau’s *Discourses*.

The benign effects of natural self-love

In his *Discourse on the Usefulness of the Sciences and the Arts within a State*, Frederick referred only briefly and in a veiled manner to Rousseau, though it was clear that this essay was the royal reply to the Genevan’s *First Discourse*. True to the utilitarian tones of the title, the king sought to demonstrate the close alliance between cultural progress and national greatness. For this purpose, he turned Rousseau’s narrative of ancient and modern history upside down. In Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, Sparta was the glory of Greece rather than Athens; the *Discourse* ended with a distinction between a people who knew how to speak well, and another who acted well. Among the Romans, ‘all was lost’ when instead of practising virtue they started studying it. For Frederick, on the other hand, the Greek heroes were not only Pericles and Alexander but also Thucydides,

¹⁶ Frederick to Keith, 1 September 1762, *Œuvres*, XX, 323.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ ‘Ce grand désintéressement est sans contredit le fond essentiel de la vertu; ainsi je juge que votre sauvage a les mœurs aussi pures que l’esprit inconsequent.’ (*Ibid.*)

Euripides, Xenophon, and Plato; the Romans truly came into their own when Cicero, Varro, Virgil, and Livy produced their ‘brilliant’ masterpieces.¹⁹

Yet the difference between these texts runs much deeper than a disagreement on the historical links between political and intellectual greatness. For Rousseau, the problem with the arts and the sciences lay right at their source: an excessive desire for self-aggrandisement. Eloquence was born out of ambition, hatred, flattery, and lying; geometry originated in greed; and physics was the offspring of vain curiosity. In a nutshell, all forms of scholarly inquiry owed their emergence to human pride and self-love; they were intellectual and social luxuries, widening the gap between appearance and essence while generating inequality. In Rousseau’s cultural critique, the arts and the sciences were the closest collaborators of political usurpers and arbitrary rulers, pacifying their exploited subjects. As Rousseau famously argued, the arts and the sciences ‘spread garlands of flowers over the iron chains with which they are laden, throttle in them the sentiment of that original freedom for which they seemed born, make them love their slavery, and fashion them into what is called civilized Peoples’.²⁰

Frederick celebrated, by contrast, the most renowned scientists and artists as national heroes. He too saw a close link between the arts and politics – obviously not in a conspiratorial alliance of despots and their scientific advisors, but through a quasi-cameralist view of scientific progress as enhancing the size of the national population, contributing to manufacture, and creating budgetary surplus and military superiority. As Frederick summed up his utilitarian vision of science, ‘all enlightened princes have protected those whose savant works honour the human mind; now things have come to the point that if a government failed only slightly in its promotion of the sciences, it would soon find itself a whole century behind its neighbours’.²¹ (As usual, Poland was Frederick’s example of this sorry state of affairs.) In Frederick’s account, scientists and artists acted for the common good. If self-love fired up their intellectual pursuits or if they wished to excel in order to outshine their peers, this only promoted the lustre and greatness of their homeland. As real patriots, their self-interest was perfectly aligned with that of the state, according to Frederick’s *Discourse*: detrimental self-interest was ascribed to those sects and individuals who delayed the progress of science or prohibited experimentation and the publication of new discoveries. Only swindlers, impostors, and religious zealots were harmed by scientific progress, not public or individual morals. Intellectual self-love was in Frederick’s eyes the source of patriotic pursuits rather than a cause of personal and national corruption.²²

¹⁹ Rousseau, *DI*, 10–11, 28; *OC III*, 10–11, 30; Frederick II, ‘Discours de l’utilité des sciences et des arts dans un état’, in *Œuvres*, IX, 195–207; here 205–206.

²⁰ Rousseau, *DI*, 6; *OC III*, 6–7.

²¹ Frederick II, *Œuvres*, IX, 206.

²² A rare point of agreement between Frederick and Rousseau is the significance of scientific academies as promoters and regulators of genuinely useful knowledge. Both discourses were addressed to such institutions: Rousseau’s treatise won the prize of the Dijon Academy, while Frederick’s essay was first read at a public session of the Berlin Academy in the presence of his sister Ulrike, the dowager queen of Sweden (27 January 1772). On this topic, see Alexander Schmidt, ‘Scholarship, Morals, and Government: J. H. S. Formey’s and J. G. Herder’s responses to Rousseau’s *First Discourse*’, *Modern Intellectual History* 9.2 (2012), 249–274.

Frederick's *Essay on Self-Love Considered as an Ethical Principle* was read at the Berlin Academy in January 1770 and published later that year.²³ Despite the much-touted collaboration between Voltaire and the Prussian king, the treatise was much longer and substantially different from Voltaire's 'amour propre' entry in his *Dictionnaire philosophique* of 1764.²⁴ Both Voltaire and Frederick saw self-love as a natural instinct, yet the latter presented a wider overview of its workings (with no reference to Voltaire's examples of a Spanish beggar and an Indian fakir). In fact, Frederick probably replied here to recent works by Helvétius and d'Alembert, while keeping in mind both Rousseau's *Discourse on the Arts and the Sciences* and his *Discourse on Inequality*, where self-love played a pivotal role within the overall argument.²⁵

Frederick's view of self-love in the essay is fairly similar to Rousseau's modified theory in *Emile* (1762). In this work, Rousseau revised his dichotomous distinction in the *Discourse on Inequality* between the positive *amour de soi-même* and its inflamed relation, *amour propre*, as well as their separation from pity, which he had described as the source of all fellow-feeling. In *Emile*, Rousseau argued that the same self-love could be the source of both 'humane and gentle' passions and 'cruel and malignant' ones, depending on context and education. He now proclaimed that 'love of men derived from love of self is the principle of human justice'.²⁶ Indeed, *Emile* can be read as a guide to the transformation of one's self-love into benign social and civic sentiments rather than inflamed self-preference; this is the direction in which the tutor tries to channel the child's mental development. The point is to make us genuinely linked to other human beings in such a way that their interests would approximate our natural self-love or become its extension.

But when the strength of an expansive soul makes me identify myself with my fellow, and I feel that I am, so to speak, in him, it is in order not to suffer that I do not want him to suffer. I am interested in him for love of myself, and the reason for the precept is in nature itself, which inspires in me the desire of my well-being in whatever place I feel my existence.²⁷

Frederick too regards self-love as a most natural human inclination, and hence the most durable hinge on which virtue and civic behaviour could turn. As he puts it, human beings are usually the secret object of all the good they perform: 'Through a hidden and barely perceptible sentiment, men trace everything back to themselves, placing themselves at the centre where all lines of circumference end.'²⁸ Frederick then anticipates the objection that equates virtue with perfect disinterestedness – which he had already mentioned in the 1762 letter to Keith concerning Rousseau's rejection of royal assistance. In a similar manner to Emile's tutor, Frederick's task here is to rectify the human judgement of what was natural about self-love and what constituted its corruption. Drawing on examples from

²³ Frederick II, 'Essai sur l'amour propre envisagé comme un principe de morale', in *Histoire de l'Académie royale des sciences et belles-lettres, Année 1763* (Berlin: Haude & Spener, 1770), 341–354. References here are to the Preuss edition: *Œuvres*, IX, 99–114.

²⁴ *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, vol. XXXV, ed. Christiane Mervaud (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1994), 334–36.

²⁵ Frederick to Voltaire, 17 February 1770, in *Œuvres*, XXIII, 169–70. Frederick's interest in the natural aspects of self-love is already apparent in his *Réfutation du Prince de Machiavel* (*Œuvres*, VIII, 311).

²⁶ Rousseau, *Emile*, Book IV, 235; *OC* IV, 523.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Frederick II, *Œuvres*, IX, 111.

Roman history, Frederick claims that ‘our greatest examples of disinterestedness are provided to us by the principles of self-love’.²⁹ One had to regulate self-love, showing human beings that others’ interests could be conceived as their own.³⁰ Yet how could such a regulation of self-love be achieved? Frederick suggests here the adoption of the Hellenistic view of happiness as a perfect tranquillity of the mind. Once we opted for it as the ultimate goal of our actions, there could be no contradiction between disinterestedness and self-love. Such mental tranquillity would teach us not to attach ourselves vehemently to tempestuous passions, unhealthy debauchery, or excessive anger.

Frederick’s use of a term so similar to the ancient Epicurean *ataraxia* or its Stoic version, *apatheia*, is telling. It is complemented by a fascinating enumeration of those who had not properly understood how to reconcile self-love and love of one’s fellows or fatherland. One of the authors who allegedly went astray was La Rochefoucauld, whose Epicurean emphasis on self-love as the font of all social action dismayed Frederick because it slandered virtue and presented it as a fig leaf covering merely egotistical sentiments.³¹ But first and foremost among Frederick’s targets were the monotheistic faiths – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – which, together with Confucianism, were charged with advocating the wrong sort of ethics. According to Frederick, their anchoring of morals in a transcendental God and divine rewards and punishments was a serious obstacle to the proper motivation of virtuous action. Virtue, for Frederick, could only be based on natural self-love. Though he claims that errors on this front were made equally in pagan antiquity as well as in Christian times, the gist of the argument is clearly directed against Christianity:

How the Christians degenerated and corrupted the ancient purity of morals! Cupidity, ambition, and fanaticism filled those hearts that made their vocation the renunciation of this world, and perverted what simple virtue had established. History is teeming with similar examples. With the exception of a few hermits, as pious as they are socially useless, the Christians of our day are eventually not preferable to the Romans of Marius’s and Sulla’s times; I limit this parallel, of course, only to the comparison of morals.³²

Apart from the unsurprisingly joyful condemnation of Christianity, one may identify here a serious issue that specifically bothered Frederick in Christian ethics, and which he saw epitomised by hermits and other recluses: the interpretation of virtue as self-denial. This is the crux of his attempt to rehabilitate self-love as a moral principle, or to derive socially beneficial actions from a healthy care of the self. Like Emile’s tutor, Frederick tries to get rid of an ethics of dependence on external factors, be they priests or divine rewards and

²⁹ Ibid., 110–111.

³⁰ Ibid., 104–105. One crucial difference between the two accounts of benign self-love is Frederick’s pronounced emphasis on military glory and fear for one’s reputation as major extensions of natural self-love.

³¹ Ibid., 105. This did not prevent Frederick from including in 1780 La Rochefoucauld’s *Maxims* in the list of exemplary works to be translated into German in order to enrich the language. (‘De la littérature allemande’, in *Œuvres*, VII, 119.) See Louis Hippeau, *Essai sur la morale de La Rochefoucauld* (Paris: Nizet, 1967), Jean Lafond, *La Rochefoucauld: augustinisme et littérature*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Klincksieck, 1994); Michael Moriarty, ‘La Rochefoucauld on Interest and Self-Love’, in *Fallen Nature, Fallen Selves: Early Modern French Thought II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 225–48.

³² Frederick II, *Œuvres*, IX, 102.

punishments. Self-love could lead to all the sociable and patriotic actions usually deemed virtuous; it is disinterestedness in the guise of self-denial and withdrawal from this world that Frederick saw as detrimental to both individual health and the social fabric.

Such self-denial is precisely what the king had criticised in Rousseau's behaviour in 1762, when he described the Genevan as a potential Christian saint or a philosopher whose disinterestedness was thoroughly useless in the modern world. Frederick formed this view on the basis of the letters he received from Rousseau and Keith in 1762, as well as on an all-too-common interpretation of the *Discourse on Inequality*. Ironically, Frederick did not realise how close his understanding of the benign effects of natural self-love was to Rousseau's own revised stance in *Emile*. His only direct reference to this book is in a letter of February 1763, where he indicates he has just started reading it. Disrupted as his reading must have been by the negotiations leading to the Peace of Hubertusburg, it does not seem likely that Frederick ever made it to Book IV of *Emile*, where Rousseau elaborated his theory of the careful, positive extension of *amour propre* from its natural basis in the self onto others.³³

Frederick's pagan synthesis

The king's combination of ethical principles from different Hellenistic schools is hardly surprising. After all, already in the 1762 letter to Keith about Rousseau, Frederick confessed that the Stoic emperor Marcus Aurelius and 'my friend Lucretius' were among the very few sources of his 'true philosophy'. Indeed, when Frederick used *De rerum natura* as his breviary, especially during the Seven Years War, he was particularly interested in its consolatory effects against the fear of death and what he saw as its exhortation to moral self-sufficiency given the absence of divine providence. One of his most extensive meditations on Lucretius's poem is the work known as the Epistle to Keith, which bore the title *On the Futile Terror of Death and Fear of Another Life* (1752); in its 1760 edition, a subtitle was added to indicate that this was 'an imitation of the third book of Lucretius'.³⁴ Yet even towards the end of this largely Epicurean poem, Marcus Aurelius makes a grand appearance (together with Julius Caesar, Virgil, and Newton) to recommend a full recognition of the transitory nature of human existence and the mortality of the soul.³⁵

In the Epistle, Frederick tries to console Keith by recourse to the same argument he would use in 1770 in his essay on self-love. Keith and Frederick, made wiser by their constant confrontation with death, learned to appreciate what Lucretius and Marcus Aurelius had taught: the reward of a benevolent act is in the act itself, and its proper motive is natural self-love. Frederick contrasts this mode of action to the behaviour of Christian

³³ Frederick to Luise-Dorothea of Saxe-Gotha, 10 February 1763, in *Œuvres*, XVIII, 248–50.

³⁴ Frederick II, 'Épître XVIII. Au maréchal Keith', in *Œuvres*, X, 226–37. It first appeared in the 1752 private edition of *Œuvres du philosophe de Sans-Souci*. On the Epicurean overtones of this work, see Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus, "Mein Freund Lukrez." Friedrichs "XIII. Epistel an den Marschall von Keith: Über die leeren Schreckens des Todes und die Angst vor einem anderen Leben", in *Friedrich der Große als Leser*, ed. Brunhilde Wehinger and Günther Lottes (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2012), 121–142.

³⁵ The Stoic emperor also rode to the rescue of the ill-informed moderns in the conclusion of Frederick's *Essay on the Forms of Government* of 1777 (*Œuvres*, IX, 239).

believers, deemed cowardly criminals whose illicit desires are blocked only by the external bulwark of divine damnation. As in the *Essay on Self-Love*, the king sees here Christian virtue as mere illusion, for instead of flowing from the natural self it depends on outward factors. By contrast to the Christians, Frederick depicts Keith and himself as unsullied by artificial interests precisely because they have renounced any hope for future rewards in another life. Their Epicuro-Stoic synthesis leaves them with no other motivation for virtuous action than the here and now. Keith and I, Frederick argues, can bestow benevolent actions on the world because we stare death in the eye with no regrets, having acted solely from a love of humankind generalised from natural self-love. In the Epistle (part of which is reproduced below in the original rhyming French) ‘interest’ is the opposite of the healthy extension of self-love: *amour propre* as a moral principle is not the same as the pursuit of excessive self-interest at the expense of others.³⁶ Frederick was not, of course, the only author to distinguish between self-interest and love of self: at the beginning of this chapter we witnessed Rousseau accusing Frederick of placing glory and ‘interest’ before the common good. Both Rousseau and Frederick thus contrasted the unbridled pursuit self-interest to the socially benevolent aspects of benign self-love.³⁷

Frederick’s ‘true philosophy’, if he ever had a coherent one, is hard to pin down as an appropriation of a particular intellectual school or trend. Well acquainted with seventeenth-century French works in which either a Christianised Epicureanism or its more ancient versions played a major role (such as La Rochefoucauld’s), he did not follow wholeheartedly the fashionable fusion between Epicurean elements and the Augustinian notion of fallen man.³⁸ This intellectual amalgam had been manifest in the work of Jansenists like Pierre Nicole and Blaise Pascal, yet, as we have seen, Frederick refused to

³⁶ Allez, lâches chrétiens, que les feux éternels
Empêchent d’assouvir vos désirs criminels,
Vos austères vertus n’en ont que l’apparence.
Mais nous, qui renonçons à toute récompense,
Nous, qui ne croyons point vos éternels tourments,
L’intérêt n’a jamais souillé nos sentiments:
Le bien du genre humain, la vertu nous anime,
L’amour seul du devoir nous a fait fuir le crime;
Oui, finissons sans trouble et mourons sans regrets,
En laissant l’univers comblé de nos bienfaits. (Frederick II, *Œuvres*, X, 235–36).

In the 1760 edition, the sensitive ‘lâches chrétiens’ was replaced by a more neutral ‘mortels craintifs’; on this modification, see Meyer-Kalkus, “Mein Freund Lukrez.”, 122–124. For the instrumental use of this poem and the entire *Œuvres du philosophe de Sans-Souci* by the French government during the Seven Years War, see Thomas Biskup, ‘Die Schlacht von Sanssouci: Der roi-philosophe und die klandestine Literatur im Siebenjährigen Krieg’, in *Krieg und Frieden im 18. Jahrhundert: Kulturgeschichtliche Studien*, ed. Stephanie Stockhorst (Hanover: Wehrhahn, 2015), 75–92.

³⁷ For Rousseau’s distinction between ‘vulgar’ Epicureanism and an Epicureanism true to its sources, which closely resembled Stoicism, see Jared Holley, ‘*In verba magistri?* Assessing Rousseau’s Classicism Today’, in *History of Political Thought* 37 (2016).

³⁸ Jean Lafond, ‘Augustinisme et épicurisme au XVIIe siècle,’ *XVIIe Siècle* 34 (1982), 149–58; Pierre Force, *Self-Interest before Adam Smith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 48–90; John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680–1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 127–30; Neven Leddy and Avi Lifschitz (ed.), *Epicurus in the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2009), 5–10.

temper the arbitrariness of the Epicurean universe, or its lack of any teleological principle, with the Augustinian view of original sin or a belief in the Christian God.

If the traditional image of Frederick the Great as a staunch neo-Stoic is due for reappraisal, it seems that the king cannot be considered as an all-out Epicurean either. Indeed, Frederick's admiration for Marcus Aurelius – which probably had much to do with the desired image of a philosopher-ruler – was accompanied by his enthusiastic appropriation of major Epicurean themes and an almost instinctive aversion to metaphysics. The 1762 letter to Keith actually points to a volatile *mélange* of Epicurean physics and Stoic ethics. The total dissolution of the soul upon one's death, the lack of rewards and punishments, and the denial of any grand design or meaning of life fit the Epicurean worldview. Happiness as tranquillity of the mind could be associated either with the Epicurean *ataraxia* or with the Stoic *apatheia*. Yet it was Frederick's pagan ethics of action that exuded a particularly strong Stoic aroma. His treatment of self-love is redolent of Cicero's account of *oikeiosis* in Book III of *De finibus*, as well as of Seneca's similar stance in Letter 121 to Lucilius.³⁹ This synthesis may be grounded in Frederick's double distaste for grand metaphysical systems and for Christian ethics. Towards the end of the *Essay on Self-Love*, Frederick suggested that his views on virtue and love of the self could be promoted by studying the ancients and prioritising ethics over metaphysics. Even theologians should change their focus, Frederick argued, and instead of 'unintelligible dogmas' teach what we might call applied ethics – or, in his words, 'practical morals'.⁴⁰ Generally, instead of metaphysics Frederick recommended reading the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* by John Locke, another member of the pantheon of 'true philosophy' in the Epistle to Keith.⁴¹

If this specific philosophical fusion was peculiar to Frederick, it was far from bizarre or exceptional in the mid eighteenth century. Christopher Brooke has pointed out the malleability of the Stoic legacy in the early modern period, while Neven Leddy and I have argued that the seventeenth-century baptism of Epicurean atoms and their presentation as moved by God entailed a confusion of philosophical tenets, which was exacerbated by the Epicurean-Augustinian blend. Eighteenth-century Epicureanism was an amalgam in constant evolution through its interaction with different philosophical traditions. Given the creative transformation of Epicureanism by Enlightenment authors, we argued it was time 'to substitute the notion of selective appropriation for the traditional concepts of reception and influence'.⁴² This term may well apply to Frederick's Epicuro-Stoic synthesis. Dispelling some of the long-lasting debates over the king's identity as an Epicurean or a Stoic, it may also direct us back to the texts themselves and their sources, or towards an identification of the themes that remained relatively stable throughout Frederick's life. It is clear that the king used (and at times abused) his philosophy for political purposes, maintaining in the

³⁹ Cicero, *De finibus bonorum et malorum*, ed. H. Rackham (Loeb Classical Library) (London: Heinemann, 1914), Book 3, V, 233–237; Seneca, Epistle CXXI, in *Ad Lucilium epistulae morales*, ed. Richard M. Gummere (Loeb Classical Library), vol. III (London: Heinemann, 1925), 397–411.

⁴⁰ Frederick II, *Œuvres*, IX, 113.

⁴¹ See, for example, 'Instruction pour la direction de l'académie des nobles à Berlin' (1765), *Œuvres*, IX, esp. 93–94; 'Lettre sur l'éducation' (1769), *ibid.*, esp. 137–138.

⁴² Leddy and Lifschitz (ed.), *Epicurus in the Enlightenment*, 3–5; cf. Thomas Kavanagh, *Enlightened Pleasures: Eighteenth-Century France and the New Epicureanism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 4–9.

public sphere an intellectual persona that yielded tangible benefits.⁴³ It may also be the case that Frederick's self-identification with the advocates of moderate luxury and natural self-love, coupled with his denial that virtue consisted in self-renunciation, was aimed at undermining some tenets of republican ideology. Yet the constant wrestling with these themes in his correspondence, poetry, dialogues, and treatises could also point to genuine fascination and an open-ended engagement with such issues. This may be attested by Frederick's enduring suspicion of Christian morality as a dishonest ploy, generating self-alienation and dependence on external forces in lieu of a confident and self-reliant confrontation with a meaningless universe. His essays of the 1770s on self-love as the motor of the arts, sciences, patriotism, and virtue are testimony to the long but steady trajectory he had traversed since his Epistle to Keith in the early 1750s on the futile fear of death.

Rousseau's *Discourses* of the 1750s were an important medium through which Frederick developed his own understanding of self-love in relation to the common good. His reading of the *Discourses*, alongside his correspondence with Rousseau via George Keith, made Frederick classify the Genevan as a modern champion of virtue as self-denial. However, one cannot help wondering whether more direct contact between Rousseau and Frederick might have prompted a thicker – if no less problematic – intellectual (and musical) exchange. Unlike Voltaire, Frederick did appreciate Rousseau as a person and a philosopher: rebuking Voltaire in a letter of December 1766, the king wrote that Rousseau was unfortunate – and only perverse souls would heap abuse on such people rather than respect them.⁴⁴ In his own last letter to Frederick, sent in 1766 from Wootton, Rousseau seems to have regretted his rejection of the king's offer of residence in a Huguenot village next to Berlin (probably Buchholz). Having left for England despite his naturalisation in Prussian-ruled Môtiers, Rousseau thanked Frederick and Keith for their protection and benevolence, noting that he wished to remain Frederick's protégé and most loyal subject.⁴⁵ The avowed 'enemy of kings' may have after all identified some similarities between the ruler he had vilified as Adrastus and his own unresolved conflicts between *amour propre*, public self-fashioning, and authentic social interaction.

⁴³ On Frederick's self-fashioning, see recently Jürgen Luh, *Der Große. Friedrich II. von Preußen* (Munich: Siedler, 2011); Jürgen Luh and Andreas Pečar, 'Repräsentation und Selbstinszenierung Friedrichs II. von Preußen', in the online proceedings of the Halle-Potsdam conference of 28–29 September 2012: www.perspectivia.net/content/publikationen/friedrich300-colloquien/friedrich_repraesentation/pecar_repraesentation (accessed 2 March 2015). For some of the attempts to categorise Frederick's philosophical creed, see Eduard Spranger, *Der Philosoph*, 50–53; Wolfgang Bernard Fleischmann, 'Frederick the Great and Lucretius: A Reevaluation of a Relationship', *Comparative Literature Studies* 2.2 (1965), 153–159; Meyer-Kalus, 'Epikureische Aufklärung in Deutschland. Johann Georg Sulzers Gespräch mit Friedrich II. von Preußen am 31.12.1777', *Hyperboreus* 9 (2003), 191–207; Reid Barbour, 'Moral and Political Philosophy: Readings of Lucretius from Virgil to Voltaire', in *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius*, ed. Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), 149–166 (esp. 161–166).

⁴⁴ Frederick to Voltaire, December 1766, in *Œuvres*, XXIII, 131. See also Tim Blanning, *Frederick the Great: King of Prussia* (London: Allen Lane, 2015), 326–329.

⁴⁵ Rousseau to Frederick, 30 March 1766, Nr. 5136 in *Correspondance complète de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, ed. R. A. Leigh, vol. XXIX (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1977), 76–77. Cf. Du Bois-Reymond, *Friedrich II. und Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, 41–42.