

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

*Selection from*

## Reveries of the Solitary Walker

At a corner of the boulevard near the Enfer toll gate exit, there is a woman who sets up a stand every day in the summer to sell fruit, herb tea, and rolls. This woman has a very nice, but lame, little boy who, hobbling along on his crutches, goes about quite graciously asking passersby for alms. I had become slightly acquainted with this little fellow; each time I passed, he did not fail to come pay his little compliment, always followed by my little offering. At first I was charmed to see him; I gave to him very goodheartedly and for some time continued to do so with the same pleasure, quite frequently even prompting and listening to his little prattle, which I found enjoyable. This pleasure, having gradually become a habit, was inexplicably transformed into a kind of duty I soon felt to be annoying, especially because of the preliminary harangue to which I had to listen and in which he never failed to call me Monsieur Rousseau many times, to show that he knew me well. But to the contrary, that only taught me that he knew me no more than those who had instructed him. From that time on I passed by there less willingly, and finally I automatically got in the habit of making a detour when I came close to this crossing. . . .

. . . I have often felt the burden of my own good deeds by the chain of duties they later entailed. Then the pleasure disappeared, and the continuation of the very attentiveness that had charmed me at first no longer struck me as anything but an almost unbearable annoyance. During my brief moments of prosperity, many people appealed to me; and despite the multitude of favors they asked of me, none of them was ever turned away. But from these first good deeds, which my heart poured out effusively, were forged chains of subsequent liabilities I had not foreseen and whose yoke I could no longer shake off. In the eyes

of those who received them, my first favors were only a pledge for those that were supposed to follow; and as soon as some unfortunate man had hooked me with my own good deed, that was it from then on. This first free and voluntary good deed became an unlimited right to all those he might need afterward, without even my lack of power being enough to release me from his claim. That is how very delightful enjoyments were transformed into onerous subjections for me ever afterward.

I know that there is a kind of contract, and even the holiest of all, between the benefactor and the beneficiary. They form a sort of society with each other, more restricted than the one that unites men in general. And if the beneficiary tacitly pledges himself to gratitude, the benefactor likewise pledges himself to preserve for the other, as long as he does not make himself unworthy of it, the same goodwill he has just shown him and to renew its acts for him whenever he is able to and whenever it is required. Those are not stated conditions, but they are natural effects of the relationship that has just been set up between them. He who refuses a spontaneous favor the first time it is asked of him gives the one he has refused no right to complain. But he who, in a similar case, refuses the same person the same kindness he heretofore accorded him, frustrates a hope he has authorized him to conceive. He deceives and belies an expectation he has engendered. In this refusal, we feel an inexplicable injustice and greater harshness than in the other; but it is no less the effect of an independence the heart loves and renounces only with effort. When I pay a debt, it is a duty I fulfill; when I give a gift, it is a pleasure I give myself. Now, the pleasure of fulfilling our duties is one of those that only the habit of virtue engenders; those that come to us immediately from nature do not rise so high.

## Questions for "Reveries of the Solitary Walker"

### For Reflection

Have you ever stopped helping someone whom you had been helping? What caused you to stop? What might have kept you from stopping?

### For Group Discussion

Why does Rousseau give money to the crippled boy? Why does doing so give Rousseau pleasure?

Why is the boy asking for alms?

Why is Rousseau disturbed by the boy's familiar attitude in addressing him as Monsieur Rousseau? Why does this lead Rousseau to avoid the boy?

How, according to Rousseau, can giving start out as a pleasant experience and then become unpleasant and onerous, or burdensome?

According to Rousseau, how is the contract between giver and receiver, benefactor and beneficiary, "the holiest of all"?

What does Rousseau mean when he says that the pleasures that "come to us immediately from nature do not rise so high" as those that come from fulfilling our duties?

Having helped someone once, do we have a responsibility to continue helping that person? When is it right to stop helping the person?