ORDER, HARMONY, AND THE GENERAL WILL: ROUSSEAU AND THE POLITICS OF NATURE

by

JOHN WARNER

(Under the Direction of Alex Kaufman)

ABSTRACT

Rousseau's conception of nature often seems altogether disconnected from his political philosophy. Where the former serves as the central motif in Rousseau's general philosophical outlook, the latter is a juridical doctrine that appears to operate outside his comprehensive theoretical framework. This essay, however, seeks to demonstrate the opposite conclusion. Far from being independent of it, Rousseau's political philosophy depends decisively upon his conception of nature. My argument proceeds by way of three claims.

First, I seek to explain Rousseau's conception of human nature, and to demonstrate how it gives rise to the possibilities that his political philosophy explores. Second, I link the critical and constructive elements of Rousseau's work and make the case for "post-state of nature naturalness," arguing that the teleological aspects of Rousseau's conception of nature have important implications for his political philosophy. Finally, I make an explicit case for a "politics of nature," connecting Rousseau's political prescriptions to his conception of nature in concrete ways.

INDEX WORDS: Rousseau, Nature, Politics, General Will

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JOHN WARNER

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JOHN WARNER

Major Professor:	Alex Kaufman
Committee:	Keith Dougherty John Maltese

Electronic Version Approved:
Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
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CHAPTER

I. Introduction

Rousseau…constantly speaks of nature as though it were a simple, almost self-evident notion, but as soon as his reader tries to understand its precise function in the many and varied contexts in which it is used, he may be unable to arrive at a clear and consistent comprehension of its meaning.

--Ronald Grimsley, "Rousseau and His Reader"

I have only one precept for you, and it comprehends all the others. Be a man. Restrain your heart within the limits of your condition. Study and know these limits. However narrow they may be, a man is not unhappy as long as he closes himself up within them. He is unhappy only when he wants to go beyond them…wishes without hope do not torment us. A beggar is not tormented by the desire to be a king. A king wants to be God only when he believes he is no longer a man.[1]

--Emile, *Book V*

Rousseau's political philosophy, if it is anything, is polarizing. Robespierre called Rousseau "the divine Jean-Jacques," but Edmund Burke accused him of lewd pedantry.[2] At once a revolutionary and a reactionary, a rationalist and a romantic, a liberal and a totalitarian, a solitary and a citizen, Rousseau has been blamed both for the excesses of the French Revolution and the conservative backlash it caused. The scholarly response to Rousseau has been divided as well: Rousseau vexes scholars even as he stimulates them, posing stunning syntheses and insoluble dilemmas in the same breath. The perennial interest in Rousseau has much to do with his rhetorical acumen, which even his most passionate detractors admire. But Rousseau is no mere sophist. Though he may employ the rhetorical tools of the pamphleteer or the novelist, the continued relevance of his critique of civil society suggests that he is a philosopher of the first rank. And while it is not my purpose to argue for Rousseau's importance to the contemporary

[1] *Emile*, P. 445-446.
[2] Edmund Burke. *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1993. p. 274.

age, it is clear enough that we must study him both to understand ourselves and to make sense of the world we inhabit.

Scholarly controversy surrounds nearly every aspect of Rousseau's thought. Seeming contradictions between his early and late works have led many scholars to conclude that Rousseau's writings are irretrievably confused.[3] In his early work, Rousseau contrasts the idyllic state of nature, in which we were free and happy, with the state of society, in which we are miserable and degenerate. He holds that all social relations are unnatural because they involve dependence on others, which in turn engenders misery and corruption. Now, if social relations inevitably corrupt man, as Rousseau seems to hold in his early writings, then it is difficult to imagine that the idea of social order could ever really be justified. But this is precisely what Rousseau attempts to do in his later works. Indeed, he becomes quite interested in legitimating social order, and attempts to develop institutions that allow individuals to enjoy the advantages of society without suffering from its defects.

Critics of Rousseau argue that his critique of civil society disallows such possibilities, holding that it is impossible to derive a social theory from the premise that society necessarily corrupts. Rousseau's writings are therefore divided into incompatible parts, with one criticizing social order and the other trying to legitimate it. Other scholars, however, suggest that Rousseau's inconsistencies are more apparent than real, and that his interest in legitimating social order is a natural outgrowth of his critical work. They suggest that Rousseau's critique of civil society does not eliminate the *possibility* of a just society, but only seeks to establish that society, as it is, is both unjust and morally corrosive. I am more sympathetic to this view, and

[3] See Shklar, *Men and Citizens. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge,* 1969; Charvet, *The Social Problem in the Philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1974*;* and C.E. Vaughan, *Studies in the History of Political Philosophy Before and After Rousseau.* Manchester, 1939.

believe that Rousseau is a fundamentally consistent thinker. But how are the critical and the constructive elements of his thought related?

In order to understand the continuity in Rousseau's thought, we must understand his conception of nature. This, however, is easier said than done: while it is generally accepted that nature is the central motif in Rousseau's thought, scholars cannot agree about the nature of nature itself. Some argue that society and nature are mutually exclusive concepts for Rousseau, and that his political philosophy is designed to "denature" man rather than restore him to it. These critics tend to associate nature with the state of nature, and point out the many differences between the "noble savage" and social man. A just society, so they argue, cannot be predicated on a return to nature, because returning to nature requires us to abandon society itself. I do not agree with this view. In fact, this essay is dedicated to establishing precisely the opposite conclusion. That is to say, I will argue in this essay that Rousseau's conception of nature is connected to his political philosophy in important ways. We will therefore need to know: 1) what Rousseau's conception of nature actually is; 2) whether it is applicable in the context of civil society; and, 3) how it is connected to Rousseau's political philosophy. My argument proceeds by way of three principle claims.

If Rousseau's conception of nature is indeed consistent with his political philosophy, we will first need to understand what his conception of human nature actually *is*. My first task, therefore, is to examine Rousseau's conception of human nature, and to demonstrate that it leaves room for the political possibilities explored in the *Social Contract* and *Emile*. My interpretation diverges from at least two influential accounts of Rousseau, and the critical thrust of this chapter will be directed at the "historicist" view advocated by Asher Horowitz. Many scholars follow Horowitz in holding that, for Rousseau, man lacks a nature in the conventional

sense; human nature is not fixed by some essence or set of stable characteristics, but is adaptive to particular historical circumstances. This "historicist" view, in insisting on the limitless plasticity of human nature, drives a wedge between the state of nature and the state of society. Social man is so radically different from savage man that no serious continuities could hold between them. To put it another way, the social and the natural are, on the historicist view, thought to be tracks of development largely independent of each other. I believe this historicist view is mistaken on two fronts. First, it gets Rousseau's conception of human nature wrong: human nature is not limitlessly plastic, but has limits that must be respected. Rousseau *does*, in other words, believe in such a thing as human nature. Indeed, without such a belief, the central principle of Rousseau's thought—that man is good by nature and corrupted by society—becomes incomprehensible. Second, Rousseau does not hold that the social and the natural are autonomous spheres of existence. In fact, serious continuities obtain between the state of nature and the state of society. Consequently, the natural may well have important implications for the social. Rousseau himself acknowledges this when he identifies both himself and Emile as a "man of nature," and distinguishes between "the natural man living in the state of nature and the natural man living in the state of society."[4] I will focus first on explaining Rousseau's argument for the natural goodness of man, and then show how society corrupts man's natural goodness. I will conclude by examining Rousseau's conception of human nature in a comparative perspective, contrasting his view with other influential conceptions.

Second, I make a case for what Laurence Cooper calls "post-state of nature naturalness,"[5] and argue that Rousseau's conception of nature indeed has important implications for his normative social agenda. My argument here is directed at advocates of the "two Rousseau"

[4] *Emile*, p. 205.

thesis, who assert that the critical and constructive elements of Rousseau's thought are incompatible, and that his critique of civil society disallows the possibilities his political philosophy explores. Without denying that the savage is a "man of nature," I hold that Rousseau considered Emile to be no less natural than the savage. Nature, then, is not to be found only in man's brutish origins, but in some deep similarity or set of similarities that obtain between savage man and his cultivated counterpart. I will argue this similarity is comprehended by the principle of ordered harmony, a subjective condition in which man's internal life is reoriented to approximate the psychic peace found in the state of nature. Many have argued along these lines, but have worried that Rousseau's psychological conception of nature is too subjective to be a useful standard for judgment. Melzer has gone so far as to argue that Rousseau is advocating a "coherence theory of happiness" in which "it no longer matters what a man is, so long as he is it wholly and consistently."[6] I believe this is a distortion: while Rousseau does not explicitly or systematically specify the content of the "life according to nature," he gives us more substantive guidance than Melzer allows. Close consideration of Rousseau's argument will show that the substantive essentials of the natural life are adherence to necessity and the rejection of excess and luxury. That is, following nature has to do with developing the abilities one genuinely *needs* in order to live well. Since the necessities of social life are quite different from those of the state of nature, Emile's life will differ greatly from that of the savage insofar as he will reason, make judgments, form settled social relations, and subject himself to a political regime. But deep continuities—freedom from *amour propre's* dominion and a properly ordered soul—nonetheless connect Emile and the savage as "men of nature."

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[5] Laurence Cooper. *Rousseau, Nature, and the Problem of the Good Life*. Penn State Press: Pennsylvania, 1999. p. 1.

[6] Arthur Melzer. *The Natural Goodness of Man*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1990. p. 65

But what sort of regime is most likely to produce individuals with Emile's lofty soul, keen judgment, and compassionate heart? Not coincidentally, Rousseau has some recommendations about what political regimes ought to look like. I point to ways in which the institutional arrangements set forth in the *Social Contract* are connected to Rousseau's conception of nature. That is, I will show that just social arrangements do not replace nature, but are designed to cultivate the abilities that allow man to flourish in accordance with it. The goal of a Rousseauian politics is first and foremost the creation of virtuous individuals. The question of the good life at the individual level therefore gives way to the question of the good state. To this end, I will point to three important parallels between Rousseau's general will and his conception of nature, and will also illustrate interesting symmetries between Rousseau's conception of the good life and his conception of the good regime.

The approach offered here will, I believe, give us added leverage in our quest to understand a brilliant and perennially relevant, if enigmatic and peculiar, thinker. The Rousseau that emerges here is neither a systematist nor a muddled reactionary, but a rigorous and generally consistent thinker whose arguments should be taken seriously, but applied with great caution. It is not my purpose to extract the "usable" or "good" parts of Rousseau's theory from the excessively utopian and distasteful aspects of it, for this would obscure the continuity that I hope to reveal. Rousseau's thought should be treated as a whole, and placing it in the service of contemporary sensibilities and popular conceptions will only do violence to it. This kind of approach embodies a kind of conceited assumption that I wish to avoid, namely that Rousseau has nothing to teach us beyond what we already know, and is only valuable to the degree that his ideas square with our preconceived notions about justice, freedom, and nature. I believe we have much to learn from Rousseau, even if his lessons are ambiguous and unsettling. The present

purpose, however, is more to understand Rousseau's achievement than to stand in judgment of it. I aim, above all else, for an honest and clear appraisal of nature as Rousseau is likely to have understood it himself.

II. The Social Contract and the State of Nature: Rousseau, Legitimacy, and Modernity

Rousseau is the first serious critic of modernity, and his thought is in many ways a response to the intellectual tendencies of his predecessors. We must understand something of these predecessors if we hope to understand anything of Rousseau himself, so the initial task of this essay will be to place Rousseau's political philosophy within the context of modernity, and to show how Rousseau treats the problems he inherits from Hobbes and Locke. Rousseau is far from an uncritical heir: he radically challenges the doctrines of Hobbes and Locke, and attempts to reorient politics, humanity, and nature based on the idea of man's natural goodness. But if Rousseau is critical of the modern legacy, he nonetheless accepts its philosophical agenda as his own; Rousseau ultimately rejects the mechanistic conception of nature developed by modern science, but still believes a proper conception of nature must incorporate modern insights. Briefly analyzing Rousseau's relationship to his predecessors—Hobbes and Locke—should make this abundantly clear. I do not intend this analysis to be exhaustive, but simply want to place Rousseau's thought in a context that best reveals its unique character.

Modern political philosophy, which is often said to have its origin in Hobbes, centers on the theme of political legitimacy. Before Hobbes, the question of the best regime was generally thought of in substantive terms. That is, the best state was believed to be governed by a set of precepts derived from the nature of things. These imperatives, taken collectively, were called the natural law, and seen as the normative standard by which positive law was to be judged. Human beings were believed to be naturally social, and justifying the existence of the state, insofar as such a justification was necessary at all, was a matter of showing that its laws were in conformity

with natural law. Drawing on the findings of the "new science," Hobbes rejected all this out of hand.[7] The law of nature is silent where justice is concerned, and individuals are naturally selfish rather than social. To clarify his claims about human nature and justice, Hobbes conceives a "state of nature" where there is no sovereign to restrain human impulses and desires. What type of outcome, Hobbes asks, is likely in the absence of a state? His answer is as disturbing as it is rigorous: competition for scarce resources, combined with a general distrust ("diffidence") that prevails in human relations, creates an incentive to attack others before they can attack you.[8] In Hobbes' state of nature, the logic of preemptive warfare that prevails initiates a cycle of violence that culminates in a "war of all against all." But if rational incentives drive us to fight, they can also lead us back to peace. All rational individuals share an interest in order and, with their own self-preservation in mind, they will agree among themselves to relinquish their natural liberty in exchange for the security that an absolute sovereign provides. That is, rational individuals will inevitably see that the costs of the state of nature far outweigh its benefits, and they will consequently agree among themselves to institute a government capable of "overawing" them all. Hobbes is hardly original in advocating an absolute monarchy or advancing a pessimistic conception of human nature, but the way in which he justifies the political enterprise is nothing short of revolutionary. Hobbes uses the "state of nature" thought experiment to show that government derives from the consent of self-interested individuals, not from some "divine right" or dubious claim to fundamental moral insight.

[7] Though Hobbes does base his political philosophy on so-called "laws of nature," Curley is correct to distinguish between traditional conceptions of natural law and Hobbes' laws of nature, which are more properly thought of as "hypothetical imperatives" conducive to individual self-preservation.

[8] Hobbes actually identifies 3 causes of war: competition, diffidence, and "glory." Rousseau focuses on the last, believing human pride to be the source of opinion and prejudice. The main difference between Rousseau and Hobbes is that Hobbes holds that the desire for glory is natural, and Rousseau denies that any desire that involves the opinion of others could be natural.

Locke also brings the state of nature to bear on his political philosophy, but argues that Hobbes is mistaken about both human nature and its political consequences. Hobbes argued that men are rational, and therefore seek above all else to maximize their own welfare and prospects for survival. Locke does not deny that humans are naturally self-interested, but he does deny that the rational pursuit of self-interest entails a war of all against all. For Locke, human beings are not mere cost/benefit calculators, but moral persons who respect the natural rights of others.[9] The state of nature is not a state of anarchic combat, but the "inconveniences" associated with it are sufficient to justify the institution of civil government.[10] As with Hobbes, the legitimacy of political institutions is derived from the consent of the subjects, but the Lockean contract differs substantially from the Hobbesian version. Hobbes believes liberty and order are incommensurable, and his social contract requires us to divest ourselves of our natural liberty so that we might enjoy a measure of peace and security. Locke, on the other hand, argues those who relinquish their natural rights to an absolute government are worse off than in the state of nature.

> This [the subjection of oneself to an absolute sovereign] is to think that men are so foolish that they take care to avoid what mischiefs may be done them by pole-cats, or foxes, but are content, nay think it safety, to be devoured by lions.[11]

It is never rational to give any person or institution absolute power over your life, liberty, or property. In fact, Locke argues that anyone who seeks absolute power over anyone else declares a "sedate, settled design" upon his life, and thereby enters into a state of war with him.[12] Hobbes' sovereign, on Locke's view, does not protect his subjects from the state of war, but

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[9] John Locke. *Two Treatises of Government* (Laslett ed). Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2002. See Chapters II and III ("Of the State of Nature" and "Of the State of War"). All quotations from the Second Treatise will come from this edition, unless otherwise noted.

[10] Such "inconveniences" include the lack of a common judge to arbitrate disputes, and the fact that each individual in the state of nature enjoys "executive power of the law of nature."

[11] ibid, p. 282.

[12] ibid, p.280.

rather brings them into it. Persons in the state of nature would never consent to a government against whom they reserved no rights; the purpose of government is not to diminish liberty, but to enlarge and better secure it. For Locke, the legitimacy of government is predicated on its ability to secure our natural rights to "life, liberty, and estate," and institutions that do not enlarge the scope of individual liberty can be considered illegitimate.

Whatever their differences, Hobbes and Locke both used the state of nature thought experiment in similar ways. First, both Hobbes and Locke assumed human beings in the state of nature are rational, and impute to natural man fairly sophisticated cognitive machinery. Hobbes' natural man is a very agile reasoner, making complex calculations about his own interests and how they relate to the incentives of others. Contemporary "rational-choice" theorists are greatly indebted to Hobbes' understanding of rationality, and Hobbesian man can be fairly characterized as a rational maximizer.[13] Locke's man of nature, on the other hand, is rational insofar as he is capable of recognizing himself and others as rights-bearers and possessors of moral inviolability. So, where Hobbes believes rationality is the cause of war, Locke believes that war signals the failure of rationality. On either analysis, the institution of legitimate government improves the condition of mankind, which brings us to our second similarity. Second, Hobbes and Locke both believe that the institution of government and civil society adds value to human life. For Hobbes, the institution of *any* government is an improvement over the state of nature, in which we will inevitably destroy each other. For Locke, the unpleasantness of the state of nature provides reason enough to institute a limited government, but does not warrant the creation of an absolute state as it does for Hobbes. We should note the broader similarity, however: whether we divest ourselves of our natural right or act to better secure it, the institution of government

secures the enjoyment of some fundamental human good (order for Hobbes, liberty for Locke), and in doing so improves human prospects for both happiness and justice. Third, Hobbes and Locke both use the state of nature because they are to some degree interested in *hypothetical* consent. That is, both thinkers are interested in uncovering the conditions under which rational individuals *would* consent to be governed, but are less interested in the historical or empirical genesis of government as such.[14] Fourth, Hobbes and Locke both argue that sovereignty is alienable. That is, in passing from the state of nature into civil society, sovereignty is transferred from the people consenting to be governed to the government itself.

Rousseau, however, challenges all these continuities in some fundamental way, and reinterprets the state of nature and the social contract by claiming that man is good by nature, and is corrupted by society. First and most fundamentally, Rousseau disputes the notion that man is by nature rational or moral. Faculties like reason require society for proper development and, as natural man is solitary, he lacks the settled social relations that would make reason useful. Indeed, the lack of settled social relations prevents man from acquiring language, and therefore prevents him from forming the general ideas necessary for abstract moral reasoning. All distinctively human abilities are latent in the state of nature, and natural man is on first glance indistinguishable from other beasts. Consequently, man lacks the intellectual equipment to conceive of anything like Locke's "natural rights," and is also incapable of the complex calculations that Hobbes allows. Man's natural simplicity would prevent anything like the anarchic warfare that Hobbes prophesied. In fact, the state of nature appears to be a fairly

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[13] Rousseau does not always see this, identifying Hobbesian man as "wicked" or "evil." Rousseau's frequent mischaracterizations of Hobbes do not, however, affect their larger disagreement—whether it is reason or a full compliment of passion. Hobbes is still guilty of imputing socially acquired characteristics to natural man.

[14] *Leviathan*, I.xiii.11; *Second Treatise, Chapter VIII*, sections *16-22*. This point requires some qualification to be defensible: while Hobbes is reasonably clear about consent, Locke settles on a "tacit consent" which is a kind of midway point between the hypothetical consent of Hobbes and Rousseau's empirical story in the *Second Discourse*.

pleasant place, lacking in the toil, drudgery, and endless discord that characterize life in civil society. Nature had provided an abundance of material resources for men to share, so conflict in the state of nature would be infrequent. And because natural man had no idea of pride, the occasional conflict would be brief and minimally injurious. How had Hobbes erred so egregiously? How had he failed to see the advantages of the state of nature?

Rousseau argued that Hobbes misunderstood human nature because he had failed to properly identify man's original nature. Hobbes had "spoken of savage man and depicted civil man;" that is, Hobbes had given characteristics and dispositions to natural man that he could only have acquired through the process of socialization. In making man naturally prideful, power-hungry, and fearful of death, Hobbes had overlooked the fact that natural man lacked the cognitive equipment necessary to have such ideas in the first place. Concepts like "pride" presuppose the ability to make extrinsic comparisons, and natural man lacks the intellectual capacity to compare his own situation to those of others. By nature, man is benignly indifferent to his fellows; natural man's primary drive is, as Hobbes held, self-preservation, but self-preservation does not entail dominating or subjecting others. "Domination" and "subjection" are relational concepts that could only have meaning where settled social relations obtain. Rousseau criticizes Hobbes (and, to a lesser degree, Locke) with clarity and vigor, asserting that man is by nature good but is corrupted by society.

Rousseau also provides a critique of civil society that calls the very idea of human civilization into question. For Hobbes and Locke, the institution of civil society has enabled moral, economic, and social progress, but Rousseau argues in the *First* and *Second Discourses* that the costs of civilization are far more apparent than the benefits. Before Rousseau, man in the state of

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Locke vacillates between an empirical and a hypothetical account in Chapter VIII ("Of the Beginnings of Political Socieies"). He makes a historical argument first, and a "tacit consent" argument second.

nature was either feared for his viciousness or ridiculed for his stupidity, but Rousseau was the first to point to the benefits of our natural condition. In the state of nature we were limited and ignorant, but free and happy; in the state of society we are cultivated and learned, but degenerate and miserable. Society may have elevated man above his native stupidity, but has introduced ills (pride, dependence, malice, and obsession with appearances) far worse than ignorance. And while critics since Voltaire have exaggerated Rousseau's hostility towards civil society, Rousseau still argues that society destroys our happiness as often as it facilitates it.

Rousseau also differs from Hobbes and Locke in the way that he applies the state of nature and social contract devices. Both Hobbes and Locke were in some way interested in providing an account of hypothetical consent; that is, they were interested primarily in identifying the conditions under which rational persons would give their consent to be governed. This type of analysis makes no sense for Rousseau, as persons in the state of nature are not rational. And even if they *were* rational, they would not consent to be governed: the risks of entering society and subjecting oneself to political authority are high, and the benefits are at best uncertain. In fact, the best that can be hoped for in society is the conscious replication or re-creation of psychic conditions that prevailed in the state of nature.[15] Given this, it makes no sense for Rousseau to develop an account of hypothetical consent. The theory of consent that Rousseau develops in the *Second Discourse* is not at all hypothetical, but empirical. Rousseau does not treat the state of nature hypothetically but historically; he does not take the state of nature as a conditional first premise in a syllogism, but as a historical reality with real empirical explanatory power.[16]

[15] This point will be developed in Chapter 4.

[16] This is some controversy about this point. Rousseau, oddly enough begins the *Second Discourse*, in which he gives us the "history of the species," by "laying all the facts aside, as they do not affect the question." But Rousseau was no doubt aware of the conflict between the biblical account of human history and his own, and such comments

The political implications of the state of nature and social contract are somewhat different for Rousseau as well. For Hobbes and Locke, individuals emerge from the state of nature upon relegating sovereignty to the government. For Rousseau, individuals consent to be *governed*, but they never agree to divest themselves of sovereignty. In fact, sovereignty is inalienable, so a people is still the rightful sovereign even if another body has taken its lawmaking power. Individuals, then, never relinquish their natural power of self-determination, but give it different expression through the general will. Ultimately, the fact that individuals retain their natural power of self-determination in a just political society indicates that Rousseau's political philosophy is deeply linked to his conception of nature.

The preceding discussion has highlighted some differences between Rousseau and his predecessors, and has hopefully cast some light on the nature of Rousseau's thought. These remarks are certainly cursory, and much more can be said about Rousseau's relationship to Hobbes and Locke. This is not intended to be the "final word" on modern political philosophy, or, for that matter, on Rousseau. His central doctrine—the natural goodness of man—is not yet understood, nor is it clear exactly *how* society corrupts man. It is to these questions that the following section is dedicated.

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are likely intended to pacify the views of the religious establishment. Rousseau does not want to put scientifically valid facts aside (the *Second Discourse* is thoroughly empirical in its method and argumentative style), but he is eager to advance his argument without being accused of heresy. I take Rousseau to have explained things as he believed them to have actually happened.

III. Human Nature in the *Second Discourse*

Rousseau systematically presents his conception of human nature in the *Second Discourse*. He notoriously defends the natural goodness of man against a host of attackers, holding that man's predilection towards moral vice and domination are not natural at all, but are products of his social relations. The unifying principle of all Rousseau's work is that man is by good by nature, but is corrupted by society. But what does Rousseau mean by "good," or for that matter, by "nature?" He never offers an explicit definition of goodness, and his discussion of nature at the beginning of *Emile* confuses as much as it clarifies. The purpose of this chapter is to explain the conception of human nature Rousseau articulates in the *Second Discourse* and *Emile*, and to clarify the ways in which it is "corrupted" by civil society. This argument involves three steps. First, we must look at Rousseau's natural man as a whole, and identify the source and precise nature of his goodness. Second, we will examine the corrosive effects of social order upon man's natural goodness. Finally, we will look at Rousseau's beliefs about human nature comparatively, contrasting it with the beliefs he was determined to refute.

In the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau offers an account of man as he emerged from the "bosom of nature." He discerns two instincts that inform the actions of natural man: *amour de soi* (love of self), which gives man an "overriding interest in his own preservation," and *pitie* (compassion, or pity), which prevents him from harming or injuring others unless it is vital to his own survival. In addition to these instincts, natural man also possesses two "metaphysical and moral" qualities that distinguish him from the rest of nature.[17] The first is freedom, which allows

[17] *Second Discourse* (Roger and Judith Masters edition). Bedford & St. Martin's: New York, 1964. P.113. I will use this edition of the *First* and *Second Discourses* unless otherwise mentioned.

man to reject his instincts: "nature commands every animal, and the beast obeys. Man feels the same impetus, but he realizes he is free to acquiesce or resist."[18] The second is "perfectibility," which allows human beings to form and pursue conceptions of excellence. We might think of the "faculty of self-perfection" as an innate restiveness unique to man; it provides him with an internal desire to improve himself and his condition. But man's unique distinction has, ironically, been the source of his downfall. In striving to ennoble and uplift his soul, man has only made it weak and petty. It is man's perfectibility that:

> by dint of time, draws him out of his original condition in which he would pass tranquil and innocent days; that it is this faculty [of perfectibility] which, bringing to flower over the centuries his enlightenment and his errors, his vices and virtues, in the long run makes him a tyrant of himself and nature.[19]

The actions of natural man are informed at some level by all of these characteristics and, though much more needs to be said about each one, we should first draw back from the specific characteristics of Rousseau's natural man so we may view him as a whole.

III(a). Rousseau's Natural Man: A Harmonious Whole

Order and harmony are consistent and centrally important themes in Rousseau's thought. If man is intrinsically good, it is only because nature has arranged his inclinations in a way that promotes internal harmony. In fact, the natural goodness of man is actually predicated on the natural equilibrium and internal harmoniousness of man.[20] In the state of nature, man is a "numerical unity, the absolute whole which is relative only to itself or its kind."[21] Rousseau's savage is an almost purely physical being, sharing more similarities with animals than with the civilized members of his own species. He is limited and simple, with calm passions and

[18] ibid, p.114.
[19] *Second Discourse*, p. 115.
[20] See John Scott, "The Theodicy of the Second Discourse: the Pure State of Nature and Rousseau's Political Thought." *American Political Science Review*, Vol 86, No. 3, 1992.
[21] *Emile*, P. 39.

uncomplicated motives. Rousseau sees natural man "satisfying his hunger under an first oak, quenching his thirst at the first stream, finding his bed at the foot of the same tree that furnished his meal, and therewith his needs satisfied."[22] Man's internal harmony depends in large part on an equilibrium between his desires and abilities; so long as the former do not outstrip the latter, man' soul is undisturbed and his internal life harmonious. All the unfulfilled wants that torment man in the state of society do not affect the savage in the least: for the corrupt men of society, "it is first of all a question of providing for the necessary, and then for the superfluous; next come delights, then immense wealth, and then subjects, and then slaves; he does not have a moment of respite."[23] Natural man, unlike social man, is physically and psychologically self-sufficient, doing what he wants *but* wanting only what he can do. Natural man, it is important to add, is not only an ordered whole himself, but participates in a larger order from which he draws his life and happiness. Laurence Cooper appositely observes that, "the original natural man…was good for himself and others. He was well-ordered both as a whole in himself and as a part of a larger whole. His faculties were equal to his desires, and he did not interfere with the greater natural order surrounding him…As a well-ordered being he was able to enjoy the sweetness of existence and had no reason to keep others from doing the same."[24] The tremendously complex natural order in which natural man participates is truly the "best of all possible worlds," but over time, human artifice and convention upset the delicate balance nature established. As we shall see, drastic measures are required in order to re-create the goods it provided.

If man is by nature an ordered whole situated within a larger natural order, we have yet to see exactly *what* within him is ordered. That is, we have yet to examine the constitutive elements of

[22] *Second Discourse*, p. 105.
[23] *Second Discourse*, p.195.
[24] Laurence Cooper. *Rousseau, Nature and the Prob1em of the Good Life*. Penn State Press: University Park, PA, 1999. p. 59

man's nature, and how they work together to produce goodness. For Rousseau, natural man is first and foremost a self-loving creature. Man's first, and central, passion is *amour de soi* (self-love), which gives him a special and intimate interest in his own preservation and happiness. Self-love motivates all of natural man's activity: it is the "source of our passions, the origin and principle of all others, the only one born with man and which never leaves him so long as he lives…"[25] This in itself is a fairly unremarkable belief. Rousseau's originality does not consist in his privileging of self-interest (which accords with conventional modern moral psychology), but rather in his analysis of its implications and consequences. Hobbes, articulating his conception of human nature based on the findings and methods of modern science, argues that the centrality of self-interest entails a war of all against all. Rousseau turns Hobbes' reductionistic logic against Hobbes himself, arguing that Hobbes' conception of natural man is not yet natural enough. Hobbes had imputed characteristics to natural man that he could not have possessed,[26] and was therefore mistaken about the implications of self-interest. Hobbes' conception of self-interest included a full compliment of passions and desires. With men, and their turbulent passions, struggling for scarce goods, there was always cause for war. But Rousseau holds that, absent settled social relations, men could never possess such motives, and that peace would obtain in their infrequent meetings:

> Savage man, when he has eaten, is at peace with all nature, and the friend of all his fellow-men. If it is sometimes a question of disputing his meal, he never comes to blows without first having compared the difficulty of winning with that of finding his subsistence elsewhere; and as pride is not involved in the fight, it is ended by a few blows; the victor, the vanquished goes off to seek fortune, and all is pacified.[27]

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[25] *Emile*, p. 212-213.
[26] For a full—perhaps too full—development of this theme, see Arthur Melzer "Rousseau's Moral Realism: Replacing Natural Law with the General Will." *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 77, No. 3, 1983.
[27] *Second Discourse*, Note i. p. 195.

Hobbesian man possesses a distorted and socially acquired form of self-love (*amour-propre*) that leads him to judge his own well being based on his assessments of the well being of others. *Amour-propre*, or vanity, is "a relative sentiment…[that] inspires in men all the harm they do to one another, and is the true source of honor."[28] Authentically natural self-love (*amour de soi*), on the other hand, is an absolute sentiment, and only takes account of others where they represent a threat to one's physical well being. Pride, glory, and similar notions of social standing fall outside the purview of *amour de soi*, which directs a creature to its own good but does not involve a desire to get the better of others.[29]

Rousseau distinguishes between *amour de soi* and *amour-propre* to show that man is not wicked or malicious by nature, but *amour de soi* alone is not enough to show that man is by nature *good*. Self-love, if untempered by compassion, leaves man perfectly indifferent to the fate of his fellow creatures. Rousseau needs, then, an additional cognitive capacity if he wishes to demonstrate the natural goodness of man—he finds one in compassion (*pitie)*: "pity is a natural sentiment which, moderating in each individual the activity of love of oneself, contributes to the mutual preservation of the entire species."[30] Rousseau makes the development of compassion is the centerpiece of Emile's moral education, and compassion is operative in the state of nature as well (the savage's operative principle is "do what is good to you with the least possible harm to others"[31]). Rousseau's analysis of pity reveals the fundamental importance of the passions, and illustrates his belief in the relative weakness of reason as an independent faculty:

Mandeville sensed very well that even with all their ethics men would never have been anything but monsters if nature had not given them pity in support of their reason…although it may

[28] *Second Discourse*, Note o, p. 221.
[29] N.J.H. Dent. *A Rousseau Dictionary*. Blackwells: Oxford, 1992. p. 31.
[30] *Second Discourse*, pp. 132-133.
[31] *Second Discourse*, p. 133.

behoove Socrates and minds of his stamp to acquire virtue through reason, the human race would have perished long ago if its preservation had depended only on the reasonings of its members.[32] For Rousseau, it is the passions that spur us to action; in choosing our ends, reason has only a secondary or instrumental significance.[33] For Rousseau, *pitie* grounds morality by making it pleasurable for the actor, who in the state of nature lacks consciousness of his own moral agency.[34] In grounding morality in our natural inclinations, Rousseau distinguishes himself from contemporary postmodernists, who in general believe that morality is socially constructed and has no deep foundation in human nature (or anywhere, for that matter).

In addition to self-love and compassion, original man has two "metaphysical and moral" attributes that distinguish him from the rest of nature. The first is freedom, and the second is our faculty of self-perfection (*perfectibilite)*. And while these aspects of human nature are latent in our original state, they can develop in accordance with our operative natural endowments if proper precautions are taken. In the *Second Discourse,* Rousseau defines freedom as the ability to deviate from the natural "rule prescribed to it," and observes, "it is above all in the consciousness of his freedom that the spirituality of [man's] soul is shown." Rousseau does not seem to believe that human freedom is compatible with the causal processes of the physical world, and in this way departs from the compatibilism of Hobbes and Locke and anticipates Kant's contracausal conception of freedom: "for physics explains in some way the mechanism of the sense and the formation of ideas; but in the power of…choosing…the laws of mechanics explain nothing."[35] It is, however, somewhat unclear how man in the state of nature could exercise freedom in this sense: without general ideas or the capacity for morally significant

[32] *Second Discourse*, pp. 132-133.
[33] See Alex Kaufman. "Conceptions of Freedom in Rousseau and Kant." *Review of Politics*, Vol. 59, no. 1, 1997.
[34] Isaiah Berlin claims in his Romanticism lectures that Rousseau is a rationalist who fails to take the passions seriously, but he fails to see that it is only *because* the passions are central that Rousseau believes he must safeguard

conscious choice, contracausal freedom would seem unnecessary for the savage. Freedom in the state of nature seems largely to consist in the absence of constraint, and the more developed freedom of which Rousseau speaks is best thought of as latent in the state of nature.

Another distinctively human faculty that is latent in the state of nature is man's "perfectibility," or his "faculty of self-perfection." This is a crucial concept for Rousseau, and we must understand it if we hope to make sense of his conception of human nature or his critique of civil society. The "historicist" interpretation of Rousseau, articulated most powerfully by Asher Horowitz, holds that man's *perfectibilite* makes his nature limitlessly plastic and adaptive to circumstances. Horowitz argues that, for Rousseau, "human nature…is…not something fixed or static; nor does it appear whole, either at the origin of the historical process or as an abstract end transcending it. Human nature is, rather, constituted in historical activity."[36] Human nature, in other words, is not fully disclosed by the savage or by social man, but in the developmental process by which the former turns into the latter. On Horowitz' view, Rousseau does not subscribe to a traditional theory of human nature, but stakes out new ground by historicizing human activity and the limitless capabilities that give rise to it; there is, in short, no distinctively *human* nature, at least not in the conventional sense of the term.

I believe this view is mistaken. Rousseau does believe in such a thing as human nature, and to argue for its limitless plasticity is to confuse what is novel in Rousseau's theory with what is central to it. Rousseau himself tells us in the *Confessions* that the unifying theme in his thought is that man is by nature good, but is corrupted in society. If this is true, then Horowitz' interpretation is immediately problematic: unless there is an original conception of human nature

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Emile from their dominion. If the passions were not such powerful motivators, there would be no reason to discipline and, where necessary, suppress them.

[35] *Second Discourse*. P. 114.

[36] Asher Horowitz. *Rousseau, Nature, and History*. P. 81

to which Rousseau can appeal, it makes no sense for him to believe either that man is naturally good or that he is corrupted by society. For, lacking a distinctive nature in the first place, there is no human nature for society to corrupt. On this score, Laurence Cooper correctly argues that, "If the acquisition of new characteristics were not a matter of actualizing natural potentials it seems doubtful that Rousseau would have referred to the capacity for such acquisitions as 'perfectibility.' 'Perfectibility' makes sense only if there was already something present to be perfected."[37]

Man's perfectibility, then, is best conceived of as the means by which man develops his other abilities and raises himself to a full realization of his nature. Unfortunately, the faculty of self-perfection has debased man rather than raised him:

> …the faculty of self-improvement, a faculty which, with the aid of circumstances, successively develops all the others…It would be sad for us to be forced to agree that this distinctive and almost unlimited faculty is the source of all man's misfortunes; that it is this faculty which…draws him out of that original condition in which he would pass tranquil and innocent days; that it is this faculty, which…in the long run makes him the tyrant of himself and of nature.[38]

> All the animals have exactly the faculties necessary to preserve themselves. Man alone has superfluous faculties. Is it not very strange that this superfluity should be the instrument of his unhappiness?[39]

Without this faculty of self-perfection, man would never develop the distinctively human capacities that distinguish him from the rest of nature. But both passages seem to suggest that this would not necessarily be a bad thing. In fact, Rousseau seems to suggest that man's potential is the very source of his unhappiness. The great irony of the "faculty of self-improvement" is that the same mechanism that raises man to an awareness of his moral duties makes it nearly impossible for him to fulfill them; the capacity that elevates our consciousness of

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[37] *Rousseau, Nature, and the Problem of the Good Life*. P. 46
[38] *Second Discourse*, p. 115.

the good enervates the spirit necessary to realize it. We might take Rousseau to mean that, because our moral and rational aspirations are the source of our unhappiness, we would do better to abandon them and return to our original simplicity. Rousseau's actual position, however, is a good deal more complex than this. In fact, he rejects this rather simple position outright:

> Must we destroy societies, annihilate *meum* and *teum* and return to live in the forests with the bears? A conclusion in the style of my adversaries, which I would sooner forestall than permit them to disgrace themselves by drawing. Oh you…who can leave your fatal acquisitions…[and] reclaim—since it is up to you to do so—your ancient and first innocence; go into the woods and lose the sight of and memory of the crimes of your contemporaries…As for men like me, whose passions have destroyed their original simplicity…[they] will respect the sacred bonds of the societies of which they are members.[40]

Why would Rousseau conclude thusly? Given the destructive effects of socialization, why wouldn't Rousseau argue that man is better served in neglecting to develop the abilities to which his *perfectibilite* gives rise? Two reasons come to mind. First, such a simplistic conclusion would violate Rousseau's premise that man is by nature an ordered whole. That is, because the faculty of self-improvement is itself from nature (it is "inherent in the species as in the individual"[41]), to say it is the source of all our misfortunes is to say that man is by nature in conflict with himself. Because *perfectibilite* is itself from nature, then it must be at least potentially good. Indeed, Rousseau acknowledges the positive side of man's *perfectibilite* in the *Social Contract*:

> Although, in this [civil] state, [man] deprives himself of some advantages which he got from nature, he gains in return others so great, his faculties are so stimulated and developed, his ideas so extended, his feelings so ennobled, and his whole soul so uplifted, that, did not the abuses of this new condition often degrade him below that which he left, he would be bound to bless continually the happy moment which took him from it for ever, and, instead of a stupid and unimaginative animal, made him an intelligent being and a man.[42]

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[39] *Emile*, P. 81.
[40] *Second Discourse* (Maurice Cranston trans.) Penguin: New York, 1984. Note i, p. 153.
[41] *Second Discourse (*Maurice Cranston trans.) Penguin: New York, 1984. P. 88.
[42] *Social Contract*, I.8 (Maurice Cranston trans.) Penguin: New York, 1968.

To deny that man's *perfectibilite* could in principle work in accordance with nature would be to deny that man is an ordered whole, and to affirm that he has a confused and internally-contradictory nature. But, one might object, this implies that *all* human behavior is natural, since it necessarily issues from a potential that is from nature. This would make Rousseau's vain contemporaries as natural as Emile or the savage! I am not, of course, suggesting anything like this. All I want to say is that the extension and development of man's moral and rational potentials is *potentially* natural not only because it is a potential that nature supplies, but also because it is a natural potential that does not contradict other fundamental aspects of human nature. The potential for moral action, in other words, does not necessarily fall into tension with *amour de soi* or *pitie*, but can develop in concordance with them.

Second, the problem with social institutions is that they *under*nourish the "metaphysical and moral" aspects of human nature, and it is this *under*nourishment that leaves our moral and rational faculties in the lurch. Rousseau begins *Emile* by observing that "our species does not admit of being formed halfway," and continues to argue that the problem with social man is that he "floats" between his original and his potential condition.[43] Social man, far from consistently adhering to the requirements of justice and morality, obeys a "composite impulse" that takes something from society and something from the state of nature. In following these contrary inclinations at once, man prevents the full realization of his highest capacities, and passes his days "without having been good for himself or for others." The true source of human misery, then, is not the "faculty of self-improvement" itself, but our unwillingness to accept the requirements of the moral potential to which it gives rise.[44] It is not necessary to abandon the possibilities our *perfectibilite* opens in order to live in accordance with nature; indeed, since

[43] *Emile*, p. 37.
[44] *Emile*, p. 37.

perfectibility is from nature itself, the abilities it develops are, so long as they do not disrupt the natural harmony of human nature, natural as well.

III(b). The Distorted Self-Love of Social Man: Rousseau's Critique of Civil Society

Whatever Rousseau meant to include in the concept "nature," it is clear he intended to *exclude* both his aristocratic contemporaries and the rising bourgeoisie. Rousseau's indictment of civil society is undoubtedly directed both at the crumbling aristocracy and the rising bourgeoisie.[45] Such men, who subvert the principles of justice even as they appear to enact them, bear a striking resemblance to the unjust man praised by Thrasymachus in Plato's *Republic*.[46] Thrasymachus unapologetically holds that justice is the advantage of the stronger, and argues that the requirements of justice should be abandoned where they harm one's interests. Because injustice is always more beneficial than justice, the question "why be just?" quickly turns into the question "how can I get away with being *un*just?" Thrasymachus' unjust man maintains the appearance the justice so he may enjoy its benefits without bearing its burdens; he dominates others even as he appears to serve them. The unjust man is a dissembler, appearing to do one thing while actually doing the opposite. In Book I of the *Republic*, Thrasymachus mocks Socrates for his naiveté, pointing out that, as shepherds tend to sheep only so they may later slaughter them, so too do political institutions serve the interests only of the ruling class while appearing to assist the destitute.[47] Rousseau shares Thrasymachus' pessimism on this point, and speculates in the *Second Discourse* about the sinister motivations behind the original compact that instituted government:

[45] See Allan Bloom's insightful introductory essay to Emile and his helpful essay, "Rousseau's Critique of Liberal Constitutionalism" for a full development of the 'bourgeois' theme. While I follow Bloom in believing that Rousseau's attack on civil society is directed at a particular, and particularly corrupt, permutation of it, I do not believe the text supports Bloom's belief that Rousseau is only after the bourgeoisie.
[46] Glaucon and Adiemantus, it should be added, take up the argument further in Book II.
[47] Interestingly enough, Rousseau uses the same analogy in I.1 of the *Social Contract*.

The rich, pressed by necessity, conceived the most deliberate project that ever entered the human mind: *it was to use in his favor the very forces of those who attacked him*… 'Let us unite,' [the rich man tells others]… 'Instead of turning our forces against ourselves, let us gather them in a supreme power which governs us according to wise laws, protects and defends all the members of the association, repulses their common enemies, and maintains us in an eternal concord."[48]

Social institutions, then, are built on a foundation of dishonesty, hypocrisy, and oppression. Institutions founded on "banks of shifting sand" gradually corrupted the impressionable, not only forcing them into dependence, but tricking them into loving it. Since government issued ultimately from the deceit and trickery of the rich, it is unsurprising that dishonesty quickly became a pervasive feature of social life. The appearance of virtue and goodness came in time to be more important than the possession of it. "Happy slaves" Rousseau proclaims in the *First Discourse*: "you owe them (talents) the delicate and refined taste on which you pride yourselves; the sweet character and urbane morals which make for such engaging and easy relations among you; in a word, *the appearances of all the virtues without having a single one."*[49] The *Second Discourse* echoes these themes, complaining that "we have nothing to show for ourselves but a frivolous and deceitful appearance, honor without virtue, reason without wisdom, and pleasure without happiness."[50] In the course of his critique, then, Rousseau adds a moral dimension to Plato's epistemic distinction between appearance and reality, arguing that the lofty moral speeches common to civil society actually conceal dark pathologies endemic to social life; the rich praise morality only so they may be secure in their own fortunes, and speak in favor of justice only so they may act against it.

Perfect injustice is, Thrasymachus and Rousseau agree, often economically and materially advantageous. But where Thrasymachus sanctions and even advocates unjust

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[48] *Second Discourse*, p. 159.
[49] J.J. Rousseau. *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings* (Gourevitch ed.). Cambridge, 1997. p.7. Italics added.
[50] *Discourse on Inequality* (G.D.H. Cole translation). Everyman: London, 1993. P. 116.

behavior, Rousseau is disgusted by the men of civil society, who in his mind exemplify injustice through their immoral designs and concealed motives. With this in mind, Rousseau attempts to develop an account of justice that appeals not to the interests of the victims, but to those of the *perpetrator*. The dishonesty that injustice requires, Rousseau argues, slowly devours the soul and upsets the psyche of the unjust man. Rousseau depicts typical social man as unjust, and argues that dependence and weakness are the sources of his corruption: where the savage "lives within himself…social man lives constantly outside himself, and only knows how to live in the opinion of others, so that he seems to receive the consciousness of his own existence merely from the judgment of others concerning him."[51] The contradiction between word and deed, issuing from a distorted and vain desire for prestige, results only in alienation and misery. "The man of the world is whole in his mask," Rousseau observes in *Emile.* "Almost never being in himself, he is always alien and ill at ease when forced to go back there. What he is, is nothing; what he appears to be is everything for him."[52] The perpetual need for approval and honor multiply desires while dividing abilities, making man unable to provide for—or be at peace with—himself: "Society has made man weaker not only in taking from him the right he had over his own strength but, above all, in making his strength insufficient for him."[53] The plight of social man, driven to madness and moral bankruptcy by runaway desires, is indeed bleak: lacking knowledge of "his nature, his duties, [and] his ends," man ultimately suffers the tragic fate of seeking contentment in the very source of his unhappiness.

We should step back from generalities and look at the mechanics of Rousseau's argument. Why are the psychic costs of entering social order so high? What, in the final analysis, is so psychologically traumatic about civil society? Society, according to Rousseau, is

[51] ibid, p. 116.
[52] *Emile*. P. 230.

psychically destructive because it disrupts man's natural order; it does so in two ways. First, civil society makes man weak. That is, in multiplying man's desires while sapping his strength, civil society produces turbulent passions that transport man outside himself; society gives individuals desires without providing the means of fulfillment. Unable to control his insatiable and disordered passions, man becomes weak and unhappy not only because he wants more, but because he has grown too weak to bear any privation at all. Once desires outstrip capabilities, man must rely on inconstant and unreliable intermediaries for his happiness; unable to provide happiness for himself, that is, he must rely on the opinions of others. Opinions, variable and inconstant as they are, provide only precarious and temporary pleasures, but do not secure lasting happiness. Second, the conflict between our desires and our duties turn man's remaining powers against each other. The consequence of this conflict is an unrest of the mind that cleaves man apart, upsetting the psychic balance natural to the species:

> From these contradictions is born the one we constantly experience within ourselves. Swept along in contrary routes by nature and by men, forced to divide ourselves between these different impulses, we follow a composite impulse which leads us to neither one goal nor the other. Thus, in conflict and floating during the whole course of our life, we end it without having been able to put ourselves in harmony with ourselves and without having been good either for ourselves or for others.[54]

Society weakens man, then, not only in taking some of his power away, but also in pitting his remaining powers against each other. All his acquired desires blind him, and turn him against those who he is naturally inclined to help. Society therefore pits man not only against others, but against himself as well.

It is important that we understand precisely what Rousseau is arguing here, as his critique of civil society has been misunderstood ever since Voltaire called his *Second Discourse* a "book against the human race." Rousseau is not arguing against that civil society is necessarily corrosive or

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[53] ibid, P. 84.

destructive of human happiness; he is not arguing that we "return to the forests to live with the bears." Rousseau's more pessimistic observations are meant to bring the moral crises of the 18th century into full focus, and to question the unexamined premises of his contemporaries, but do not entail the conclusion that social order necessarily violates the natural order of things. In *Emile*, Rousseau tells us that, "although I want to form a man of nature, the object is not, for all that, to make him a savage and to relegate himself to the depths of the woods. It suffices that…he not let himself get carried away either by his passions or the opinions of men."[55] We will build on this insight in chapters 4 and 5, and demonstrate that Rousseau's political philosophy is not independent of, but depends decisively on, his conception of nature.

III(c). Hobbes, Plato, and Original Sin: Rousseau in Comparative Perspective

It is important to remember that Rousseau's undertaking is in many ways a Socratic enterprise. As his praise of Socrates in the *First Discourse* indicates, Rousseau felt a profound kinship with "that first and most unhappy" of wise men.[56] It should come as no surprise, then, that Rousseau would conceive of his task in much the same way that Socrates did. In advancing his own ideas, Rousseau sought to dislodge the preconceptions of his readers, and to challenge the popular philosophy of his day by entering into a critical examination of its sources. The central feature of Rousseau's account—the premise that man is by nature good—is therefore interesting not only in its own right, but in its contrast to conceptions of human nature that prevailed during Rousseau's time.

Rousseau's first, and most obvious, target is Hobbes. The *Second Discourse* often reads like a conscious effort to refute Hobbes and his "wicked doctrine," which advances the notion that man is naturally prideful and disposed towards conflict. Hobbes puts "for a general

[54] *Emile*, P. 41.
[55] *Emile*, p. 255.

inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire for power after power, that ceaseth only in death."[57] Men are naturally competitive, and seek to better each other not only in the pursuit of material resources, but also in the hunt for "honour, command, or other power."[58] Chaos and violent conflict will reign until an absolute sovereign is empowered to curb man's destructive propensities. These violent inclinations, it is important to add, are irredeemably rooted in our nature as human beings; they cannot be replaced, so their effects must be controlled through institutional design. Hobbes' primary error, according to Rousseau, is to attribute characteristics and ideas to savage man that he could only have acquired through the socialization process. Hobbes, "carried over to the state of nature ideas…acquired in society," and, perhaps more than anyone, "spoke about savage man and depicted civil man."[59] How could savage man be competitive and fearful of violent death by nature, Rousseau asked rhetorically, if concepts like "power" and "death" are derived from experience? The power struggles that Hobbes depicts in the state of nature presuppose a considerable amount of cognitive sophistication, and Rousseau's point is that man, by nature, lacks the cognitive equipment to form sophisticated ideas.

There are further differences that require attention as well. Hobbes, the consummate empiricist, conceived of man as a kind of machine, a complex of causally interacting systems. The motivations of Hobbesian man are remarkably undifferentiated and materialistic; he has no higher purpose, no *summum bonum*. Human nature, on Hobbes' tough-minded empiricist account, is as it does: human behavior is evidence of the eternal laws that govern it. It is by definition impossible to act "outside" our nature, as our nature is defined in large part by what

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[56] *First Discourse*, p. 43.
[57] *Leviathan*. (Curley, ed.). Hackett, 1994. p. 58
[58] ibid, p. 58.
[59] *Second Discourse*, p. 102.

our observable behaviors are. Rousseau diverges in this as well. First, he argues human nature is not rigidly fixed by eternal and immutable regulatory standards, but is itself pliable and adaptive to circumstances. The second part of the *Second Discourse* traces the "life of the [human] species," and tracks the successive stages in its historical development. It is important to add that, though human nature is flexible, it nonetheless has limits that must be respected; human nature, as we have seen, is not limitlessly plastic. Second, Rousseau argues that human nature is precisely the *opposite* of what it does. That is, since our natures are pliable, it is more reasonable to conclude that history and circumstances have altered, indeed have disfigured, what was original in it. Rousseau, like Nietzsche, does not associate prevailing patterns of behavior with natural ones.[60] Human behavior, therefore, is not evidence of our nature, but evidence that we have abandoned it. Like the statue of Glaucus,

> which time, sea, and storm had so disfigured that it looked less like a god than a wild beast, the human soul, altered in the bosom of society by a thousand continually renewed causes, by the acquisition of a mass of knowledge and errors, by changes that occurred in the constitution of the body, and by the continual impact of the passions, has, so to speak, changed its appearance to the point of being unrecognizable; and, instead of a being acting always by fixed and invariable principles, instead of that heavenly and majestic simplicity with which its author had endowed it, one no longer finds anything except the ugly contrast of passion which presumes to reason and of understanding in delirium.[61]

It is not, then, for nothing that Rousseau continually invokes the Delphic precept. To "know thyself"—that is, to live in accordance with one's nature—is not as simple as Hobbes made it appear. This reflects a larger difference between Rousseau and Hobbes about the nature of nature. Where Hobbes conceived of nature as a purely causal order that was silent on normative questions, Rousseau sees nature as the most fundamental source of moral guidance. Living a life in accordance with one's nature is not, for Rousseau, a matter of instinct or reflex, at least not in

[60] See Keith Ansell-Pearson, *Nietzsche Contra Rousseau*, for a full development of this theme.
[61] *Second Discourse*, pp. 91-92.

light of the changes human nature has endured in process of socialization. In fact, Rousseau holds that living a natural life is a monumentally difficult task, requiring the recreation of the psychic conditions that prevailed in the state of nature.

Rousseau's insistence on the natural goodness of man brought him into inevitable conflict not only with Hobbes, but with religious authorities and the biblical teaching of man's fall. The traditional Christian conception of human nature is deeply pessimistic about the prospects for moral progress without divine guidance, and the story of the fall asserts that human nature is irredeemably sinful. Rousseau's own religious views owe much to the Malebranchean deism that was popular during the 18th century, but his insistence on the natural goodness of man ran aground of the Augustinian and biblical tradition. Religious authorities became concerned with Rousseau's own religious beliefs, and *Emile* was eventually banned both from France and his native Geneva for the religious teachings it put forth. Emile is not taught the bible, and reads only one book—*Robinson Crusoe*—his entire childhood. In fact, Rousseau's insistence that he "hates books" seems to be directed primarily at the bible itself. In the Creed of the Savoyard Vicar, which seems to be a mixture of traditional doctrines and Rousseau's own views, Rousseau advances deistic religious principles and insists that man's harmonious nature is evidence of divine wisdom. And while it is impossible to discuss the Creed of the Savoyard Vicar fully, it is important to understand that Rousseau's conception of human nature diverged radically from those of his religious readers, and that Rousseau was well aware of these differences.

Though Rousseau saved most of his vitriol for Hobbes, his conception of human nature diverges from the Platonic tradition as well. Rousseau, as we have seen, believes that man's goodness derives from his orderliness; man is good because the constitutive elements of his nature (*amour de soi*, pity, etc…) work in harmony both with each other and with the larger

natural order in which they participate. Men are naturally accepting of privation, and struggle against it only where they perceive malicious intent. Allan Bloom puts it nicely when he states, "Rousseau says that a child who is not corrupted and wants a cookie will never rebel against the phrase, 'There are no more,' but only against, 'you cannot have one.'"[62] Society may upset nature's delicate balance, but Rousseau is nevertheless confident in the proposition that "everything is good as it leaves the hands of the author of things."[63] Plato paints a very different picture of the human soul in the *Phaedrus*, in which he has Socrates compare the soul to a chariot pulled by two winged horses.[64] One horse is drawn upward towards noble and eternal objects, but the other desires low and ephemeral pleasures. Socrates evokes a similar picture in the *Republic*, arguing the human soul is a tripartite entity whose parts are naturally in conflict.[65] In both dialogues, Plato seems to suggest that conflict within the human soul is both natural and inevitable, and characterizes man's internal life as chaotic and divided. Consequently, man is naturally disposed to make demands on nature, and becomes angry when it resists him. Where Rousseau's child who wants a cookie would accept "there are no more" without a struggle, Plato's child by nature sees intention where there is none, and struggles against a nature which bears him no ill will. For Plato, the conflict between high and low human desires can be allayed only by subordinating man's *thymos* (spiritedness) to his reason. Rousseau's disagreement with Plato comes down to whether the causes of conflict are natural or acquired. Where Rousseau holds that man's struggles, both within his soul and with nature, are artificial, Plato believes they are natural, and can only be overcome by philosophic wisdom

[62] Introduction to *Emile*, p. 12.
[63] *Emile*. p. 37.
[64] *Phaedrus*, 245b-246d.
[65] *Republic*, 435c-441c.

IV. Nature and Internal Harmony: The Possibility of Civilized Naturalness

If I introduce him to society with the sole aim of instructing him, he will instruct himself more than I want. If I keep him away from society until the end, what will he have learned from me? Everything, perhaps, except the most necessary art for a man and a citizen, which is knowing how to live with his fellows.

--Emile, *Book IV*

Now that Rousseau's conception of human nature is clear, we can see how it fits into Rousseau's broader conception of "nature" as a universal order in which human beings find their bearings and from which they receive their duties. To see man as he came from *nature*, of course, we must begin by removing characteristics acquired through a process of social and historical development. Rousseau inherited this conception of nature from other modern philosophers, but the full implications of thinking about nature in this way are not immediately clear. Rousseau, like other moderns, encourages us to associate man's nature with his psychological and historical *origins*. To see what is natural in man, we need only discover what qualities and characteristics are present in him prior to the process of socialization. That is, we will see who natural man is only after removing the "artificial" capabilities and inclinations with which society has provided him.

We are heirs to this view, and in general have accepted it without fully examining its consequences. If we adopt the modern conception of nature and associate the natural with the original, it is difficult to see how distinctively human capacities can be understood as natural. That is, those characteristics which we generally regard as the highest and best expressions of our nature (the capacities for rational and moral action, for instance) appear to be "reduced to yet-to-be understood manifestations of matter in motion or interpreted as nonnatural

phenomena."[66] The "modern" conception of nature is purely mechanistic, and stands in marked contrast to the conception of the ancients, particularly by Aristotle, who believed that nature was teleological. Nature, for Aristotle, comprehends not only human origins but human *ends.* The ancient conception of nature, unlike the modern notion, provides a source of moral guidance: reason and morality are considered natural not only because they are innate capacities but also, and especially, because they are necessary for the realization of natural human potential. What Aristotle believed was the very culmination of human nature (participation in the philosophic life) would be regarded by many moderns as non-natural.

Where, then, does Rousseau fit into all this? On one hand, he exaggerates the modern tendency to pare down the realm of the natural: unlike both Hobbes and Locke, Rousseau regards original man as wholly lacking reason or other distinctively human characteristics. After "stripping this being…of all the supernatural gifts he could have received and of all the artificial faculties he could only have acquired by long progress," Rousseau's savage is a stupid but happy animal.[67] On the other hand, however, Rousseau vastly expands the natural realm. In *Emile,* Rousseau distinguishes between the "natural man living in the state of nature and the natural man living in the state of society," thereby opening the possibility that nature comprehends the highest human capacities after all.[68] I will argue Rousseau is advancing a *prototeleological* conception of nature, or one that includes aspects of both the ancient and modern teachings. Rousseau's conception of nature is teleological because it provides moral guidance derived from nature herself, and *proto*teleological because that conception of flourishing involves the re-creation of man's *original* psychic condition. We see this most clearly in the education of Emile,

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[66] Laurence Cooper. *Rousseau, Nature, and the Problem of the Good Life*. Penn State Press: Pennsylvania, 1999. p.72.

[67] *Second Discourse*. *The First and Second Discourses* (trans. By Roger and Judith Masters.). p. 105. I will use the Masters edition for both Discourses unless otherwise noted.

to whom Rousseau explicitly refers as a "man of nature:" Books I-III safeguard his natural self-love from the corrosive effects *amour-propre*, and Books IV and V develop and build upon his natural compassion.

There are many scholars who argue that "nature" and "society" are distinct and mutually exclusive concepts for Rousseau.[69] And it is, to some degree, somewhat counterintuitive to think nature is implicated to any great extent in Rousseau's political or moral vision. After all, he often employs the term "nature" to mean state of nature, which by definition excludes the political and social institutions that make human flourishing possible. This passage from *Emile* exemplifies Rousseau's tendency to equate nature with the state of nature:

> He who in the civil order wants to preserve the primacy of the sentiments of nature does not know what he wants. Always in contradiction with himself, always floating between his inclinations and duties, he will never be either man or citizen. He will be good neither for himself nor for others. He will be one of the men of our days: a Frenchman, an Englishman, a bourgeois. He will be nothing.[70]

The view taken by many scholars seems, rather sensibly, to take Rousseau at his word in the passage above, and understands his conception of nature as synonymous with the state of nature. I disagree with this view even while recognizing its inherent attractiveness, and will offer an alternative view in this chapter. I believe Rousseau employs nature in a second and more expansive way, giving us a sense that he meant for it to serve as more than a foil for civil society. Rousseau's rhetorical strategy in the *Second Discourse* is, I believe, most illustrative of this point.

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[68] *Emile*, p. 205.
[69] See Shklar, *Men and Citizens. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge*, 1969; Charvet, *The Social Problem in the Philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1974; and C.E. Vaughan, *Studies in the History of Political Philosophy Before and After Rousseau.* Manchester, 1939.
[70] *Emile*. p. 41.

It is worth emphasizing that Rousseau's critique comes not from within the confines of society itself, but from a standpoint somewhere outside of it. In the preface to the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau seeks some separation from the vain scribblers he vigorously calumniates:

> O man, of whatever country you are, and whatever your opinions may be, behold your history, such as I have thought to read it, not in books written by your fellow creatures, who are liars, but in nature, which never lies. All that comes from her will be true; nor will you meet anything false, unless I have involuntarily put in something of my own.[71]

In his indictment, then, Rousseau lambastes his contemporaries from *the standpoint of nature herself*. But, if society and nature represent distinct and mutually exclusive spheres of value, we are forced to wonder how valuable a critique of society from the standpoint of nature actually is. Such a distinction, in fact, renders Rousseau's own critique of civil society superfluous: for Rousseau's own critique of society to be effective, the law of nature must be an appropriate standard for assessing social and political conventions. Just as we would not judge an opera by its efficiency, or a painting by its logical consistency, so too would we avoid judging society by its naturalness (*unless*, of course, nature is an appropriate critical standard). If nature and society are autonomous and freestanding spheres of value, we do not gain much at all from imposing the critical standard of one on the other. That is, if nature has no real bearing on social phenomena, it is clearly an inappropriate standard of judgment, and should be abandoned in favor of a more relevant criterion. To the degree that the aims of nature and society are incommensurable, therefore, a criticism of social and political institutions from the standpoint of nature is superfluous.

The point of the preceding considerations is that, at least for Rousseau, nature is not irrelevant to social and political institutions. Indeed, nature must serve not only as a standard for criticizing existing social institutions, but also as a model for reforming them. Rousseau indeed

[71] *Second Discourse* (introduction)

criticizes his own society for its unnaturalness, but implicit in his criticism is the recognition that better social institutions are possible. And if these considerations are worth anything, it is clear that social institutions are better or worse to the extent that they conform to nature.

Explicit textual considerations also militate in favor of my conclusion. If Rousseau intended a dichotomy between "nature" and "society," he would not have explicitly identified both himself and Emile as "men of nature." In *Emile*, Rousseau anticipates the criticism leveled by many modern scholars, and explicitly denies the nature/society dichotomy that is so often attributed to him. In teaching Emile to reason, Rousseau recognizes that many critics will charge him with "abandoning nature," but he "does not believe that at all."[72] Ignorance will not serve young Emile as well as it served the savage: "unhappily this (ignorance)…will not work for us anymore. Everything is important to us, since we are dependent on everything; and our curiosity extends with our needs."[73] Rousseau continues:

> Now, needs change according to the situations of men. *There is a great deal of difference between the natural man in the state of nature and the natural man living in the state of society. Emile is not a savage to be relegated to the desert. He is a savage made to inhabit the cities.* He has to know how to find his necessities in them, to take advantage of their inhabitants, and to live, if not like them, at least with them. Amidst so many new relations on which he is going to depend, he will, in spite of himself, have to judge; let us teach him, therefore, to judge well[74]

The clear implication is that the natural man prepares himself for the necessities presented by his particular life circumstances, whatever they may be. While a savage "would not take a step out of his way to go and see the working of the finest machine," it is Emile's business to be intimately familiar with things on which he will be dependent.[75] Does ignorance of machines make the savage natural, and does knowledge of how they work denature Emile? Rousseau does not seem to think so. Emile can live according to nature to the extent that, "he knows how to

[72] *Emile*, p. 204.
[73] *Emile*, p. 204-205.
[74] *Emile*, p. 205 (italics added).

find the 'what's it good for?' in everything he does and the 'why?' in everything he believes."[76] Man in society ignores these considerations, and it is thus that he deserts nature. He is unnatural because vanity motivates him to learn, not by the mere *fact* of his knowledge. Social man, that is, pursues knowledge not because he loves truth for its own sake, or because some iron law of necessity demands it, but because he is vain, and wishes to gain a reputation for wisdom. Emile remains "natural" in Rousseau's eyes because he does not utilize superfluous faculties, but develops the ones that nature supplies and that circumstance requires. Even in the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau observes that reasoning is as necessary in civil society as instinct is in the state of nature:

> It appears that Providence most wisely determined that the faculties, which [man] potentially possessed, should develop themselves only as occasion offered to exercise them, in order that they might not be superfluous or perplexing to him, by appearing before their time, nor slow and useless when the need for them arose. In instinct alone, he had all he required for living in the state of nature; and with a developed understanding he has only just enough to support life in society.[77]

There is no hint of irony or false deference, so it seems that we can take Rousseau at his word here. But what does adherence to necessity have to do with psychic unity? We can begin to understand this by attending to the psychological consequences of ignoring the law of necessity. Once we abandon necessity, Rousseau argues, we can only appeal to the opinions and prejudices of other men. But these are obviously unreliable and unattractive sources of authority, for "even domination is servile when connected to opinion, for you depend on the prejudices of those you govern by prejudices."[78] Civil society offers only illusory goods, ones deriving their value from the opinions of others; dependence on opinion will arouse and multiply unruly passions, and this

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[75] *Emile*, P. 205.
[76] *Emile*, P. 207.
[77] *Second Discourse*. Part I
[78] *Emile*, P. 83

will only frustrate, rather than content, man. Abandoning the law of necessity also encourages us to entertain the impossible, a tendency which Rousseau vigorously discourages:

> Restrain your heart within the limits of your condition. Study and know these limits. However narrow they may be, a man is not unhappy as long as he closes himself up within them. He is unhappy only when he wants to go out beyond them. He is unhappy only when, in his senseless desires, he seeks to put in the rank of the possible what is not possible…wishes without hope do not torment us. A beggar is not tormented with the desire to be a king. A king wants to be God only when he believes he is no longer a man.[79]

In submitting to the law of necessity, therefore, it is possible for man to restore the psychic unity that he enjoyed in the state of nature. That is, man can rediscover nature in the cultivation of those faculties that are *necessary*; human happiness is secured by the recognition of necessity and the rejection of superfluity. With full cognizance of the profound differences between the savage and social man, we should draw a distinction for the sake of clarity between the state of nature and the natural state. The former is a historical era to which we cannot and should not return; the latter is a condition available to man both in the state of nature and the state of society. To live according to nature in the context of civil society, it is necessary to cultivate the rational and moral faculties. *Amour de soi* and *pitie* are not in any cases distorted by an unnatural dependence on the opinions of others, but develop in accordance with one's reason and moral sensibilities. Rousseau incurs no contradiction in arguing such development occurs in different contexts. Indeed, since nature "chooses her instruments and regulates them according to need," the charge that his political and educational prescriptions are unnatural seem manifestly absurd.[80]

Rousseau did not intend a distinction between the social and the natural, as some scholars believe, but rather a distinction between that which is in accordance with nature and that which is not. This distinction leaves room for the possibility of post-state of nature naturalness, but in

[79] *Emile*, P. 446.

what does this peculiar type of naturalness consist, and what kind of stimuli can bring it out? When we compare Rousseau's "men of nature"—the savage and Emile—all we see on first glance are differences: where the savage is indolent, aconceptual, and lacking in imagination, Emile is active, intelligent, and very imaginative. But these superficial differences are rooted in profound similarities: the naturalness of the savage and Emile consists in their appreciation of harmonious order. For the savage, maintaining harmony within himself and with the external world is merely a matter of following his instincts. But for Emile, "a savage raised to inhabit cities," instinct will not suffice; he will need to properly develop the "metaphysical and moral" aspects of his nature if he wishes to live in accordance with nature. Emile's moral and rational capacities, in other words, will do for him what instinct did for the savage: they will inspire in him a love of harmony and an appreciation for the larger order in which he participates. Emile's education is ultimately designed to recover or recreate the subjective conditions that prevailed in the state of nature; his rational and moral controls are developed in such a way as to approximate the goodness—harmoniousness—of the savage. To this end, Cooper appositely observes that:

> the harmony that characterized the civilized natural man must therefore be a harmony between and among the original and the acquired. The goal of a natural education is to bring one's acquired characteristics into a concordant relationship with the original ones…Emile's naturalness differs from that of the savage only because there is so much *more* in him to be harmonized. [81]

In acknowledging the possibility of post-state of nature naturalness, Cooper properly identifies the teleological aspect in Rousseau's conception of nature. For Rousseau, nature comprehends not only man's origins, but also prescribes a set of ends towards which he can strive: civilized naturalness consists in replicating the psychological peace that existed in the state of nature. Cooper, however, is concerned that Rousseau's conception of nature is too *subjective* to be a

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[80] *Emile*, p. 205.

useful standard of judgment. That is, Rousseau does not associate nature with the exercise of virtues or behaviors that can be objectively identified, but rather with the psychological condition that certain types of behaviors produce. Consequently, Rousseau does not give a single answer to the question of the good life, but "proposes that man has available several goals—several divergent and equally valid paths—and not just different degrees of realizing the same goal."[82] Melzer (1990) echoes these sentiments, arguing that Rousseau advocates a "coherence theory of happiness" in which, "it no longer matters what a man is, so long as he is it wholly and consistently." I do not endorse this conclusion, and will argue that Rousseau's conception of nature gives us more substantive guidance than either Melzer or Cooper allow. My primary reason for believing this is Rousseau's insistence on the incredible difficulties involved in producing civilized naturalness. The subjective character of Rousseau's conception of nature does not make its realization less, but rather *more*, difficult than the objectivist version exemplified by Aristotle.

Emile is full of warnings about the dangers involved in the rearing of a civilized savage. Any misstep or error could unhinge young Emile, and subject him to all the prejudices he was raised to reject. Bringing Emile's rational and moral capacities into concordance with his natural dispositions is, in other words, as complex as it is demanding. Cooper is nonetheless worried that, since Rousseau's conception of nature is subjective, it will fail to provide any substantive principles that can be usefully applied. But Rousseau does, in fact, utilize substantive principles that can be usefully applied. His rejection of luxury and superfluity, for instance, is certainly a substantive essential of the pedagogical "method" used in *Emile*. An important continuity between the naturalness of the savage and the naturalness of Emile is that both men embrace

[81] Laurence Cooper. *Rousseau, Nature, and the Problem of the Good Life*. Penn State Press: Pennsylvania, 1999. p. 62

only what they genuinely *need* in order to live well, and they reject everything that is not conducive to their well-being. Both Emile and the savage see that "your freedom and your power extend only as far as your natural strength, and not beyond," and that "all the rest is only slavery and illusion."[83] Rousseau never allows Emile to indulge idle curiosities or to cultivate frivolous faculties, but wants him to see the "what's it good for" in everything he does.[84] Emile is taught to develop not only those faculties that accord with his nature, but also those which his individual circumstances require. The natural life will therefore vary according to circumstances. The criticisms of Cooper and Melzer imply, however, that this variation is limitless because Rousseau does not supply any identifiable substantive principles about nature or the good life, but resorts instead to a procedural conception that does not specify any definite content. But Rousseau, as we have seen, does supply a substantive principle—avoid luxury—and this principle limits the possible ways one could use to achieve civilized naturalness. The difficulties involved in rearing a civilized man of nature also seem to limit the possible ways in which naturalness could be realized: all Rousseau's warnings in *Emile* point to the fact that nearly every path to naturalness is impeded by obstacles and dangers, and that there are in truth very few ways to properly raise a man of nature. In spite of this, Rousseau's conception of nature does allow limited variation with respect to the good life: the savage, Emile, and Jean-Jacques (the hero of Rousseau's autobiographical writings) all partake of nature in some significant sense. But the point of the preceding discussion has been to emphasize not the variation that Rousseau's conception of nature allows, but rather the variation that it does *not* allow. The concern Cooper and Melzer voice is ultimately not as problematic as they believe, because Rousseau's conception of nature *does* utilize substantive principles to distinguish the

[82] ibid, p. 1.
[83] *Emile*, p. 83.

natural from the unnatural. Rousseau's subjective conception of nature is sensitive not only to the characteristics common to all men, but to the individual circumstances in which each man is embedded.

Rousseau's ultimate hope of casting Emile in the mould of nature reveals a social aspect in his conception of nature. Emile is at once a man of nature and a man of society, thereby casting doubt on the society/nature opposition that many scholars have attributed to Rousseau. In one sense, Rousseau pares down the realm of the natural: in arguing that original man lacked all distinctively human characteristics, Rousseau circumscribes the sphere of the natural even further than Hobbes or Locke. In another sense, however, Rousseau greatly expands the purview of nature, arguing that it comprehends the very highest human capacities. I have argued that to understand Rousseau's conception of nature, we must understand the continuities that hold between man in the state of nature and man in the state of society. I have argued further that the sufficient condition for naturalness is a harmonious ordering of one's internal life. The subjectivity of this standard has worried some commentators, but I have tried to show that these concerns are either exaggerated or altogether misplaced.

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[84] *Emile*, p. 207

V. A Politics of Nature: The *Social Contract* and *Emile*

In the previous chapter, I argued Rousseau's conception of nature is comprehended in the principle of ordered harmony. Emile's internal life is harmonious, and this psychospiritual health suffices to make him a man of nature. At this point, we may know something of man's internal life, but what of his *external* life? How will a civilized savage relate to and benefit from others, and what mechanisms need to be in place to ensure harmonious relations among naturally asocial individuals? For Rousseau, the answers to the above questions will ultimately be political. The present purpose, then, is to connect Rousseau's political prescriptions to his conception of nature. It should be emphasized that the task here is not evaluative but interpretive; the purpose here is not to make a case for or against Rousseau's specific recommendations, but to show that they depend decisively on his conception of nature.

A politics of nature ultimately demands a transformation of human nature, but this transformation requires citizens committed fully to the common good. A natural politics also conforms to stringent procedural and institutional prerequisites. This chapter is devoted to explaining what these prerequisites are, and how they are connected to Rousseau's conception of nature. To this end, I will develop two major themes. First, I will analyze Rousseau's conception of sovereignty and his treatment of the general will. The general will enables nature in three primary ways: 1) it allows civil liberty serves the end of self-determination; 2) its intolerance of faction encourages psychic harmony; and, 3) it encourages conditions of rough equality, thereby discouraging the kind of extrinsic comparisons that facilitate dependence on opinion. Second, there are important symmetries between Rousseau's account of the good life and his account of

the good regime. Rousseau, as we know, argues that a good life is lived in accordance with nature. But nature itself is somewhat flexible, "choos[ing] its instruments and regulat[ing] them according to need." So too does the good regime: good governments, that is, vary according to the historical, geographic, and cultural contexts into which they are placed. The life according to nature can vary in limited ways, and the natural regime follows the same internal logic.

The *Second Discourse* reveals a conception of human nature that is fluid and adaptive. Rousseau believed human nature had, so to speak, lurched off course, and required institutional mechanisms to restore it to its proper condition. Restoring human nature to its original harmonious condition is certainly an ambitious task, but Rousseau believes political institutions must do just this. In this spirit, he observes in the *Social Contract* that:

> Whoever ventures on the enterprise of setting up a people must be ready, shall we say, to change human nature, to transform each individual, who by himself is entirely complete and solitary, into a part of a greater whole, from which that same individual will then receive, in a sense, his life and his being.[85]

During his unpleasant tenure as an assistant to the French Ambassador to Italy, Rousseau began to realize that, "everything was radically dependent on politics, and that whatever was done about it, no nation would be other than what the nature of its government made it…"[86] But after what ideal will a morally legitimate body politic be fashioned? What conception of good, that is, will serve as the standard by which civil association can be justified? Rousseau reveals the overall purpose of his political thought in a crucial passage from the *Confessions*:

> This great question of the best possible Government seemed to me to reduce to this one. What is the nature of the Government suited to make a people the most virtuous, the most enlightened, the wisest, and, in short, the best, to take this word in its largest sense? I thought I saw that this question was closely tied to the other one, if indeed it was different from it. What is the Government which by its nature most closely adheres to the law?[87]

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[85] *The Social Contract* II.7
[86] Quoted from Maurice Cranston. Introduction to *The Social Contract*. Penguin: New York, 1968. p. 13
[87] Quoted from Arthur Melzer. "Rousseau's Moral Realism: Replacing Natural Law with the General Will," American Politicalc Science Review, Vol. 77, No. 3 (1983). P. 633.

The goal of politics, then, is not merely to provide wealth and security, but to produce healthy and good human beings. And if goodness and health of soul are predicated on harmonious order, as I have suggested, it appears that Rousseau's political philosophy takes its bearings from his conception of nature. A truly just civil association should look to create in people the harmonious internal order that characterized the state of nature. Psychic peace, individual liberty, and freedom from the caprices and selfish whims of others are hallmarks of the good society. Not coincidentally, they are also the qualities that Rousseau perceived in nature. If men are to realize their own nature within the context of civil society, they must do so through the exercise of morally legitimate political power, and all such power resides in the general will. On this score, I offer the following arguments.

V(a). The General Will, Civil Liberty, and Self-Determination

How, exactly, does the general will enable a politics of nature? Rousseau provides us with his agenda in the first book of the *Social Contrac*t, stating clearly that "the problem is to find an association which will defend and protect with the whole common force the person and goods of each associate, and in which each while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone, and be as free as before."[88] Rousseau, then, casts the problem of legitimating social order in the language of freedom. The clause "as free as *before*" is particularly interesting, as it implies that a just civil association may not compromise man's natural freedom. But what exactly does Rousseau mean by "freedom?" He does not accept the Hobbesian definition of freedom as the absence of constraint, for Rousseau argued the bloated passions of social men will enslave them as effectively as any tyrant. A society which liberates man's body while corrupting his mind has not restored him to nature, but has removed him from it twice over.

[88] *Social Contract*, I.6

Hobbes' conception of freedom, furthermore, has no moral dimension; it occurs within the causal processes of the mechanistic physical world, and does nothing to evince the "spirituality of man's soul." This "negative" conception of freedom may well have worked for the savage in the state of nature, but it is clear that Rousseau's conception of civil liberty encompasses more than the absence of constraint. In the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau tells us that liberty has a normative dimension: human freedom is exhibited in the distinctively human ability for conscious choice, and conscious choice requires the full use of moral and rational faculties. Civil liberty implies both willful direction and voluntary forbearance. Rousseau defines it as "obedience to a law that one prescribes for himself," and adds that civil liberty alone truly "makes man master of himself."[89] The connection with nature is clear. Rousseau's point is that just institutions do not subject anyone to an unnatural authority. For government to be legitimate, no man may be subjected to a will that is not his own, and every man must remain master of himself. Rousseau's preoccupation with self-determination is the defining feature of his political philosophy, and is clearly an extension of his doctrine of nature. Even if Rousseau's moral conception of liberty is not *original* to man, its exercise is nonetheless *natural* because it concords with man's original goodness, and therefore promotes his internal harmony.

V(b). The General Will and Psychic Unity

Rousseau emphasizes that sovereignty, which he defines as "an exercise of the general will," is both inalienable and indivisible. In holding that sovereignty is inalienable, he distinguishes himself from both Hobbes and Locke, who both argued the social contract transferred sovereignty to the government. But Rousseau joins Hobbes, though for very different reasons, in holding that sovereignty is indivisible, for:

[89] *Social Contract*, I.8

either the will is general or it is not; either it is the will of the body of the people, or merely that of a part. In the first case, a declaration of will is an act of sovereignty and constitutes law; in the second case, it is only a declaration of a particular will or an act of administration, it is at best a mere decree.[90]

Government responsive to the general will is a necessary precondition of legitimate civil association. The general will is the engine of Rousseau's body politic, reflecting the considered convictions about matters of general concern. And while we should be clear in emphasizing that the scope of the general will is limited,[91] it is also important to understand that it is "wholly absolute, wholly sacred, [and], wholly inviolable" where matters of the general interest are concerned. For Rousseau, a just civil association cannot tolerate faction or private interest where general matters are concerned. Because everything is "radically dependent on politics," the disunities and conflicts that characterize typical politics will inevitably manifest themselves in man's soul, and will corrupt his natural goodness. Ordering man's internal life in accordance with nature, therefore, requires institutions capable of transcending the quarrels that characterize typical political life. How does the general will manage to achieve this extraordinarily ambitious goal? Recall first that contemporary man, having never fully committed himself to the social compact, clings to the vestiges of a liberty that is inappropriate for his station as a citizen; unable to return to the state of nature and unwilling to accept the duties connected to membership in a morally just civil association, man drifts between duty and inclination without ever attending fully to either. The exercise of legitimate political power can help fully reconcile man to his new station as an individual moral agent *and* a citizen; participation in democratic politics is a means

[90] *Social Contract*. II.2

[91] Rousseau is often misunderstood here. Though he holds the general will is absolute in its sphere, he seems to advocate something like a "right to privacy" where general interests are not implicated. He argues in II.4 of the *Social Contract* that, "the general will, to be truly what it is, must be general in its purpose as well as its nature; that it should spring from all for it to apply to all; and that it loses its natural rectitude when it is directed towards any particular…object." He continues in II.4 to say "the sovereign power…does not go beyond…the limits of general covenants…every man can do what he pleases with such goods and such freedom as is left to him by these covenants."

by which man can restore order to his soul by identifying a larger order whose good he can serve, and whose good serves him. A politics in which individuals surrender themselves to the social bond will overcome the internal division, alienation, and misery wrought by prevailing social institutions. A return to nature is premised on the full commitment to a just political regime and the abandonment of the simple self-regard of the savage. This is precisely what the general will—indestructible, inalienable, and indivisible—can do: it eliminates political conflict while preserving the perfect freedom of each individual associate. In committing fully to a morally legitimate democratic politics, that is, man can reestablish the harmony—internal and external—that characterizes the natural condition.

To clarify this point a bit, it might be useful to briefly contrast Rousseau's republican political theory with the divided sovereignty model developed by James Madison.[92] Where Rousseau follows the mainstream tradition in republican political theory by insisting on the centrality of civic virtue, Madison holds that properly-ordered institutional mechanisms make the exercise of civic virtue unnecessary. For Madison, justice is constructed from the clashing private interests of individual citizens; politics should not aspire to transform human nature, which is irredeemably corrupt, but to secure measures of liberty and order for ordinary citizens. The causes of division and faction were "sown in the souls of mankind," and attempting to remove them would require excessive infringements on individual liberty to be effectual. Justice, for Madison, is the consequence of political conflict and disunity. Rousseau's conception of justice, on the other hand, consists not in the sum of individual interests but in a single general interest which all citizens share (even if they do not always recognize) and in which they all actively participate. Justice is not constituted by political conflict, but transcends

[92] Though both Madison and Rousseau ultimately make a "heteronomous" appeal to politics—an appeal based on self-interest—the way in which those interests are conceptualized and ordered are quite different.

it. A well-ordered regime mimics the ordered harmony Rousseau perceived in nature, and is able to overcome the self-interested partisan rancor that characterizes contemporary democratic discourse. Just civil associations do not sanction the unbridled pursuit of self-interest, but teach their citizens the importance of unity, virtue, goodness, and self-sacrifice. Politics must secure order, to be sure, but they must also help citizens realize their full natures as human beings. One way it can do so is to eliminate the causes of political conflict, as such disunities inevitably lodge themselves in the souls of citizens.

V(c). The General Will and Equality

Rousseau is both criticized and admired for his radically egalitarian political philosophy. Whether or not Rousseau is truly the "Homer of the losers," as Judith Shklar calls him, his reputation as a champion of the downtrodden is well-deserved.[93] Rousseau believed that the state of nature was characterized by equality: in the *Second Discourse,* he argues that men were equal in the state of nature because they were independent of each other. Social institutions set up to rectify these inequalities in fact only perpetuated them, and exaggerated their effects. Inequality, and the dependence and oppression that result from it, are the sources of all human ills, and must be avoided if citizens are to realize their full potential as human beings. Those placed in unequal circumstances will, Rousseau believes, inevitably take notice of them, and grow to despise each other because of them. Extrinsic comparisons engender only misery illusion, and vice, corrupting even those who seem to compare favorably by virtue of them.

How, though, will the general will rectify this situation, and recreate conditions of rough equality? It is clear that independence cannot be the goal of a legitimate civil association, so if Rousseau seeks to take his political bearings from nature, he will need to substitute a different

[93] Judith Shklar. "Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Equality," from Political Thought and Political Thinkers. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1998. p. 290.

kind of equality for the purely "natural" equality of the state of nature. This is, in fact, precisely what he does:

> The social pact, far from destroying natural equality, substitutes, on the contrary, a moral and lawful equality for whatever physical inequality that nature may have imposed on mankind; so that however unequal in strength and intelligence, men become equal by covenant and right.[94]

If men can no longer be equal as a consequence of their independence, they can be equal as a consequence of their consent. Conditions of rough equality will discourage the extrinsic comparisons that Rousseau believes are so injurious to human happiness and virtue, and will promote the integrity and strength of soul that democratic politics require. Rousseau believes the general will is the best guarantor of equality because "the private will inclines by its very nature towards partiality, and the general will towards equality."[95]

There are also interesting formal similarities between Rousseau's conception of the good regime and his conception of the good life. The form of a good government, though always based on the principle of popular sovereignty, varies according to time, place, and the needs of individual citizens. In this spirit, Rousseau observes in the Social Contract that, "Throughout the ages men have debated the question, 'what is the best government?,' and yet they have failed to see that each of the possible forms is the best in certain circumstances and the worst in others."[96] Rousseau identifies three types of government—democratic, aristocratic, and monarchical—and argues that the success of each one is in large part determined by the circumstances in which they will be situated. Though he immediately qualifies this, arguing there are general reasons to favor an aristocratic form of government, the point is that the success of a government is not determined solely by its form. For, "there is only one good government possible for every state; but as a thousand events may change relations within a nation, different governments may not

[94] *Social Contract* I.9
[95] *Social Contract* II.1

only be good for different peoples, but good for the same peoples at different times."[97] This bears a striking resemblance to Rousseau's conception of nature. The lives of Rousseau's protagonists—Emile, the savage, and the autobiographical hero of the *Confessions*—vary in important ways, but they are all exemplars of the "natural" life. Each knows his station and does not attempt to stray outside of it. In this spirit, Jean-Jacques tells Emile:

> I have only one precept for you, and it comprehends all the others. Be a man. Restrain your heart within the limits of your condition. Study and know these limits. However narrow they may be, a man is not unhappy as long as he closes himself up within them. He is unhappy only when he wants to go beyond them…wishes without hope do not torment us. A beggar is not tormented by the desire to be a king. A king wants to be God only when he believes he is no longer a man.[98]

Different circumstances, then, call for different measures. Individuals differ in their capabilities, sociological circumstances, and their genetic endowments. A life according to nature is not the exclusive domain of the philosopher or the "high human type," but is possible for every individual willing to accept the appropriate course of action in the context of his particular life situation. Rousseau does not, it is important to add, lapse into pure relativism—a natural life is always to be preferred to an unnatural one—but argues that the content of the natural life will vary in limited ways, and according to time and place. Rousseau, that is, would not follow Locke or Hobbes in rejecting the idea of a *summum bonum*, but does believe that individual life circumstances must be taken into account in order to comprehend the requirements of the truly good life.[99] If the life according to nature need not take one form, a government according to nature may vary as well. Rousseau may have had something like this in mind when he observed

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[96] *Social Contract* III.3
[97] *Social Contract* III.1.
[98] *Emile*, P. 445-446.
[99] See *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (II.XXI.55) and *Leviathan*

that, “the government which is in itself the best becomes the most evil unless its relations with the state are modified to meet the defects of the body politic to which it belongs.”[100]

[100] *Social Contract* III.1

VI. Concluding Considerations

The aim of the preceding considerations has been to shed some light on the nature of nature, at least as understood by brilliant, if enigmatic, thinker. If it is uncontroversial that nature is the central motif running through Rousseau's work, determining what his conception of nature actually entails is contentious. The conclusions reached here are hardly conventional, but textual and analytical considerations seem nonetheless to gather in their favor. While I hesitate to provide yet another interpretive option in an already vast literature, the account provided here has potential to give us new leverage in resolving the baffling paradoxes that Rousseau posed in such striking terms. Rousseau is no fatalistic pessimist, nor is he a blind utopian; he is neither a prophet of decline nor an irresponsible advocate of revolution. The fortunate, if taxing, truth is that there is nothing simple about Rousseau. His writings, far from being "black and white," are a symphony in grays; to try to understand him on any terms other than his own is to fail to understand him at all. Rousseau's work, like anything original, cuts across the concepts we use to make sense of it, but we should not immediately presume, as some scholars have, that he is incoherent because his work is incomprehensible to us.

To understand Rousseau's political philosophy, I believe we must be sensitive to the ways in which it interacts with his account of nature. My argument on this score proceeds by way of three fundamental claims. First, I analyze Rousseau's conception of human nature, comparing it to other influential conceptions of his day. I also trace the logic of Rousseau's critique of civil society, and examine Rousseau's unwavering belief in the natural goodness of man. Second, I maintain the association between nature and the state of nature obscures important dimensions of Rousseau's argument. Rousseau's conception of nature is ultimately

*proto*teleological: that is, it advances an authentic conception of human flourishing based on the recreation of the psychic conditions found in the state of nature. Rousseau draws from both Aristotle and Hobbes and in developing his conception of nature, and ultimately develops a conception that comprehends man's origins as well as his ends. A natural life, on my reading, is possible in the context of civil society so long as the principle of ordered harmony is followed. Third, I make an explicit case for the "politics of nature," connecting Rousseau's treatment of nature to the specific political recommendations he puts forth in the *Social Contract*. Though some passages suggest the best social institutions are those that effectively "denature" man, I believe the overall architecture of Rousseau's argument militates against such a conclusion. Rousseau's interest in legitimating social institutions is in many ways a natural outgrowth of his scathing criticisms. Nature, because it "chooses its instruments and regulates them according to need," can, so to speak, work through social and political institutions. And while it may well be true that the movements of nature are more difficult to preserve in a social context, the rewards bestowed by just institutions more than compensate for the extra effort.

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