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Rousseau's Critique of Nature
and the Transformation of Man

Eniola Anuoluwapo Soyemi

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Abstract

Much of the scholarship on Rousseau leads us to believe that Rousseau took either an exalted or an ambivalent view of nature, and that his political philosophy can, therefore, be explained as an attempt to correct or redeem men with nature as the example. On other interpretations, Rousseau simply accepted the extent to which modernity had removed us from nature and he attempts to give man a new consciousness that would make his existence within society both tenable and morally plausible. In this article, I argue that Rousseau's political philosophy presented what counts not simply as a low view of nature but as a critique and correction of nature. I suggest that this interpretation gives us further insight into some of Rousseau's political philosophy—in particular, Rousseau's distinction between the private and the public in his attempt to radically transform man and society.

Keywords

Rousseau; nature; freedom; deliberation; Rousseauian State

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I. Introduction

The question of Rousseau's philosophical intentions has occupied Rousseau scholarship since, at least, Leo Strauss' *Natural Right and History*.¹ In that highly influential work, Strauss' examination of Rousseau centres on the understanding that 'Rousseau attacked modernity in the name of two classical ideas: the city and virtue, on the one hand, and nature, on the other.'² Many Rousseau scholars followed Strauss in this line of thinking; variously concluding that

there are two roads from the state of nature and that they do not meet, the one leading to civil society, the other to the condition of men like Rousseau. One looks forward to the future and to a transformation of man, the other longs passionately for a return to nature. There is no harmonious solution to the human problem; there are unsatisfactory alternatives at tension with one another; the statesman versus the dreamer or the poet. They are mutually exclusive.³

More recently, scholars have argued that Rousseau offers a further path—civil and natural man combined. According to this interpretation, Rousseau's doctrine offers us a realizable 'utopia' in which man is able to realise his nature as a free individual who ultimately obeys only his own will while also participating in the kind of state that both realises and protects his individual liberty.⁴ In Joshua Cohen's interpretation, the tension between the nature of political community and that of individual freedom is erased by a new civil understanding in which the end of the individual's political autonomy and that of the community's common good become indistinguishable.⁵ According to Cohen, Rousseau's community protects the autonomy of the individual leaving her as free as before while promoting 'a shared understanding of and supreme allegiance to the common good'.⁶

Similarly, Frederick Neuhouser finds that the two seemingly distinct paths to man's redemption that Rousseau offers are compatible under 'the rational state'. Under Neuhouser's interpretation, the freedom that is specific to man as an individual becomes the same as, or is entirely replaced by, that obtained under the civil state.⁷ Neuhouser astutely distinguishes freedom from independence in Rousseau's doctrine and demonstrates the means by which Rousseau coherently maintains freedom with dependence.⁸ My aim here, however, is to take seriously what Rousseau explicitly states as one of the goals of his philosophical endeavours—that man be both '*independent* and free [*italics mine*].'⁹ Part of the argument that I present here is that Rousseau sought to establish a philosophical understanding in which man could be true to both his cultivated naturalness and to the requirements of

¹ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953).

² Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 253.

³ Allan Bloom, 'Jean-Jacques Rousseau', in *History of Political Philosophy*, ed. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 578. See also Arthur Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 3. Melzer notes that among the evidence often cited by those who view Rousseau's works as incoherent and contradictory is the famous conflict 'between the radical individualism found in the *Second Discourse* and the radical collectivism found in the *Social Contract*'. Melzer, himself concludes that Rousseau's solution to the human problem is to provide two independent pathways—the life of individualistic solitude and that of political virtue under civil institutions. See chapter 6.

⁴ Joshua Cohen, *A Free Community of Equals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁵ For criticism of this perspective, see Rafeeq Hasan, 'Autonomy and Happiness in Rousseau's Justification of the State' in *The Review of Politics* (Vol. 78/ 2016), 391–417.

⁶ Cohen, *Community*, 16.

⁷ Frederick Neuhouser, 'Freedom, Dependence, and the General Will' in *Philosophical Review* (Vol. 102, no. 3/ 1993); see also Frederick Neuhouser, *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love: Evil, Rationality, and the Drive for Recognition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 192-217.

⁸ See also Arthur Melzer, *Natural Goodness*, 98-99.

⁹ Rousseau, *Emile*, 457

the civil state at the same time and without either aspect being erased by the other. Neither does Rousseau achieve his philosophical aims by collapsing the requirements of the civil community under those of the independent individual will or vice versa. He maintains both sets of freedoms equally and transforms man into a being who is able to do something that he has never been able to do before. That is, maintain a true existence in both realms simultaneously.

Indeed, as Laurence D. Cooper has suggested, Rousseau presents not two, but three alternatives of the ideal life. Alongside the solitary walker, and the true citizen, there is also the life of he who is both ‘naturally’ independent and yet also of society.¹⁰ However, this last option – most exemplified by *Emile* – cannot be confused for the citizens envisaged by some of the more recent philosophical interpretations of Rousseau. The ideal of Rousseau’s ultimate intentions was that which would constitute the means through which nature itself, is finally, and purposefully, corrected. Such an interpretation, however, requires understanding the extent to which many of Rousseau’s ideas constituted as much a critique of nature as it is understood to have been one of science and of modernity¹¹.

I propose that Rousseau’s transformation of man rests on a distinction between public and private life. It is a transformation that solves, for Rousseau, not only the problem of what he saw as the poor state of morals in modern societies, but also nature’s own callousness.¹² It is, further, a transformation that has implications for the kind of political society that we can envisage on the basis of a Rousseauian political philosophy—neither totalitarian nor fully communally deliberative.¹³

II. Rousseau’s Critique of Pure Nature

Previous scholarship on Rousseau has maintained that at the heart of his thought ‘is an obvious tension between the return to the city and the return to the state of nature... He presents to his readers the confusing spectacle of a man who perpetually shifts back and forth between two diametrically opposed positions.’¹⁴ Following this line of thought, Judith Shklar notes that Rousseau ‘called upon his readers to choose between man and the citizen [and forced] them to face the moral realities of social life. They were asked, in fact, not to choose, but to recognize that the choice was impossible, and that they were not and would never become either men or citizens.’¹⁵ This notion that man’s ability to exist virtuously under the social contract is, in Rousseau’s political philosophy, inextricably opposed to his ability to live ‘naturally’ as a private person, misconstrues the conception Rousseau had of, and gave to, nature. Although the question remains whether Rousseau’s account of nature was intended to be strictly hypothetical or factual¹⁶, it has often been maintained that Rousseau sought, for man, a return to a nature

¹⁰ Laurence D. Cooper, *Rousseau, Nature and the Problem of the Good Life* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 1.

¹¹ For example, see Leo Strauss, ‘On the Intention of Rousseau’ in *The Challenge of Rousseau*, eds. Eve Grace and Christopher Kelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Jeff J.S. Black, *Rousseau’s Critique of Science* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009).

¹² Seen in this light, Rousseau’s *Social Contract* is not an ‘aberration’ in light of Rousseau’s other works but is indeed, the work in which he most fully lays out the solution to the tensions between the individualist tendencies born of nature and the communal pull of civil society, which Rousseau sets out in the *Discourses*. See Ernst Cassirer, *The Question of Jean Jacques Rousseau*, trans. Peter Gay, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), 3-7.

¹³ In this article, I follow the interpretative methodology of examining the following of Rousseau’s philosophical texts as an integrated whole: *On the Social Contract, Emile or On Education, the First and Second Discourses*, and *Political Economy*. I follow those such as Arthur Melzer who note that, ‘one must approach each one of [Rousseau’s] different writings on its own terms ... But in view of their utter interdependence, one must also study all of them together—and not just successively but, as it were, simultaneously, joining them not just book to book but, again, idea to idea in an effort to put back together... the complex, systematic whole of his thought.’ *The Natural Goodness of Man*, (Chicago and London, 1990), 12.

¹⁴ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right*, 254.

¹⁵ Judith N. Shklar, *Men and Citizens: A Study of Rousseau’s Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 214.

¹⁶ See Victor Gourevitch, ‘Rousseau’s Pure State of Nature’ in *Interpretation* (Vol. 16, no. 1, 1988), 23-59.

that he either wholly exalted or unproblematically accepted as the good order for human existence.¹⁷ Since at the base of all of Rousseau's investigations lies the question 'what does it mean for man to really be himself?'¹⁸ many scholars accepted that Rousseau's supposed view of nature as the never-erring model seemed to provide the answer.¹⁹ More recently, and even among those who recognise that Rousseau's understanding of nature is far more ambiguous than this, Rousseau's view of nature as amorally good has been maintained.²⁰

It is true that man's independence in the pure state of nature provides the almost divine template for the central characteristic Rousseau believed defined the essence of humanity and upon which he founds the civil right. Beyond the original image of independence that Rousseau derives from the picture he presents of man in a pure state of nature, however, there is, I believe, more in Rousseau's thought for which there is to berate nature than to praise it. This interpretation goes against an influential part of existing Rousseau scholarship, which locates the ultimate source of man's ills not in nature but in our own passions.²¹

Ernst Cassirer has noted that Rousseau's view of natural man was 'unsentimental' and unworthy of the excessive praise heaped on him by those such as Diderot.²² My reading is that Rousseau was far more critical of nature than this and further sought, as part of his philosophical ambitions, nature's correction. It is not simply that Rousseau thought about nature as imposing a kind of necessary order and 'goodness', which made it a goodness that has no moral value one way or another.²³ My contention here is that Rousseau's thoughts involved systematic criticism of nature, which meant that his philosophical aims involved correcting nature as much as he sought to use some of the principles of nature to correct man's corruption.

In the second *Discourse*, Rousseau paints for us the picture of the creature that a pure nature, prior to society, would birth. Of savage man, Rousseau tells us, 'his desires do not exceed his physical needs ... his imagination suggests nothing to him; his heart asks nothing of him. His modest needs are so easily found at hand, and he is so far from the degree of knowledge necessary for *desiring* to acquire greater knowledge [italics mine].'²⁴ 'His knowledge and his industry are limited to jumping, running, fighting, throwing a stone, scaling a tree.'²⁵ So much does he carry what he truly needs within himself

¹⁷ This assessment of Rousseau's account of nature is prevalent in interpretations by Leo Strauss, Judith Shklar, Arthur Melzer, and Allan Bloom. John T. Scott appears the most wide-ranging in his account when he states that in going farther back than Locke and Hobbes to an examination of a pure state of nature, Rousseau's natural man 'is a physical being who exists unproblematically as a good being embedded in a good nature. He is a being characterised by wholeness. Rousseau's pure state of nature and our place within it are positive standards ... [Rousseau] envisions the palliation or reconstruction of our corrupted existence by remaking our malleable... nature by imitating our natural condition as whole being embedded unproblematically in the whole of nature.' For Scott, Rousseau's easy acceptance of nature's correctness is not simply that often noted within the literature as applying to the health and unity of the individual. According to Scott, Rousseau's 'view of our place in nature in general serves as a ... theodicy.' See 'The Theodicy of the *Second Discourse*: The 'Pure State of Nature' and Rousseau's Political Thought', *American Political Science Review* 86, no. 3 (September 1992), 707-8; See also, Robin Douglass, *Rousseau and Hobbes: Nature, Free Will and the Passions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹⁸ I agree with Cooper that more than happiness and even virtue, Rousseau was most concerned with existence—most simply, with man's ability to simply *be*. See *Rousseau*, 21-4.

¹⁹ John T. Scott, 'Theodicy', 697. See also Arthur Melzer, *Natural Goodness*.

²⁰ Cooper, *Rousseau*, 39-50.

²¹ See Frederick Neuhauser, *Rousseau's Critique of Inequality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Frederick Neuhauser, *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love: Evil, Rationality, and the Drive for Recognition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

²² Ernst Cassirer, *The Question of Jean Jacques Rousseau*, trans. Peter Gay (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), 103.

²³ Roger D. Masters, *The Political Philosophy of Rousseau* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968), 151-2.

²⁴ Jean Jacques Rousseau, *First and Second Discourses*, trans. Roger D. and Judith R. Masters (New York: St Martin's Press, 1964), 116-7.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 189.

that 'it is impossible to imagine why, in that primitive state, a man would sooner have need of another man than a monkey or a wolf.'²⁶

Savage man lacks the kind of ego that makes social man desire what he does not need by nature and only on the conceit of others. Natural man does not wish to see his fellows suffer; any harm he does to them will be only for the gain of some necessary need. There is no vice in it, for he does not choose to act with the intention to cause the kind of 'offense' that is only the result of vain ego.²⁷ 'Savage man, when he has eaten, is at peace with all nature, and the friend of all his fellow men.'²⁸ He is 'without industry...and self-sufficient.'²⁹

Although savage man is 'good' in his simplicity, in his inability to be morally bad, he is, nevertheless, 'a lazy beast.'³⁰ He may be independent, and his absolute independence may hold the kernel for our ability to dig our way out of our present and modern ills, but savage man is not *free*, for freedom depends on moral consciousness.³¹ As such, savage man is incapable of virtue. I am not alone in noting the first of Rousseau's criticisms against the state of pure nature.

The second criticism at which Rousseau hints is that all the errors borne in the name of societal progress might be by our hands, but nature itself neither stops us, nor does it tell us *how* to stop progressing. So dispersed was man over the earth, Rousseau reasons, that any ideas that could be held by any one individual would have died there with him.³² In pure nature, man had the very minimal basis for a kind of interaction that would have no other purpose but the fulfilment of our *mutual needs*.³³ By our own conniving, our ceaseless imagination and ambition, we morally attached ourselves together in the name of a so-called progress.

This progress, Rousseau says, has taken man so far beyond any aspect he could have had in a pure state of nature. This desire for 'self-perfection',³⁴ which for all our labours, 'so many sciences fathomed, so many arts invented', the resulting virtues are still in deficit to the vices.³⁵ From all the arts and the sciences, all of this 'sociability', so many 'errors' have we engendered, making each man follow the opinions of others—the truth of which he has no guarantee.³⁶

In the same aim, we are forced to upend the equality of a pure state of nature so that all now being only superficially equal, we pay deference to those who are beneath us by natural character but surpass us in the material aspirations of society, wealth, and property.³⁷ From the inequality that society institutes, and which makes the rich idle and overburdens the poor,³⁸ so ensues all the vices that make

²⁶ Ibid, 107-126.

²⁷ Ibid, 128-131, 222.

²⁸ Ibid, 195.

²⁹ Ibid, 137.

³⁰ Allan Bloom, 'Jean-Jacques Rousseau', in *History of Political Philosophy*, 564-5.

³¹ 'Nature commands every animal', says Rousseau, 'and the beast obeys. Man feels the same impetus, but he realizes that he is free to acquiesce or resist; and it is above all in the consciousness of this freedom that the spirituality of his soul is shown.' *Discourses*, p. 114. See also Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), pp. 274-293; N.J.H. Dent, *Rousseau: An Introduction to his Psychological, Social and Political Theory*. (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 14-15.

³² Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, 119-121, 204.

³³ Ibid, 126.

³⁴ Ibid, 114

³⁵ Ibid, 192-203, 114-5.

³⁶ Rousseau, *First Discourse*, 34-74.

³⁷ 'For one's own advantage, it was necessary to appear to be other than what one in fact was. To be and to seem to be became two altogether different things.' Ibid, 155. See also *First Discourse*, 37, and Rousseau, *Emile* trans. Allan Bloom (Basic Books, 1979), 186.

³⁸ Ibid, *Discourses*, 109-10. But Rousseau is, I believe, very much aware that 'instituted inequality' found its way out of its 'natural' counterpart. For it is those that were stronger by nature that did more work, it was those clever by nature that turned it to their advantage in society; 'thus does natural inequality imperceptibly manifest itself along with contrived

civil law necessary: pride, petty jealousy, hatred, and avarice.³⁹ This is a world away from the peace of 'a state where men lived isolated and where a given man had no motive for living near another.'⁴⁰

Yet, at the root of all this advancement is nature itself. It is by nature that the material for the evil that constitutes society was conceived; for it is man's weakness that makes him sociable, Rousseau says.⁴¹ This weakness, which society may multiply, begins with life itself since 'man is weak by nature'⁴²; because, as Rousseau also says, 'with life there begin needs.'⁴³

If we dig beneath the surface Rousseau presents in the second *Discourse*, it becomes apparent that Rousseau locates the whole process of man's descent in nature itself. It is nature that at once 'hides' and yet gives us the example of how to begin our depravity.⁴⁴ It is nature, which though making us isolated from one another to begin with, yet gives us an appetite to perpetuate ourselves that would soon make society inevitable.⁴⁵

Additionally, while nature may not lead us directly to the inequalities of the civil state,⁴⁶ it gives us the very idea of what inequality is. We may appear to have founded societies by our own unnecessary initiative, but all along the path to our present damnation, nature does not tell us where and when to stop, and this is nature's fault. 'That there are no natural obstacles to man's almost unlimited progress [and therefore] unlimited degradation'⁴⁷, is man's fault precisely because it is a fault *in* nature.⁴⁸

I agree, in part, with Neuhouser that 'human nature' is not, for Rousseau, a fixed element. Unlike nature itself, human beings are highly malleable creatures and it is as a result, that Rousseau believes we can be redeemed.⁴⁹ I want to counter, however, that Rousseau does believe that, at least up till the point of our redemption, we carry ties to nature and it is these particular ties, characteristics, and instincts—those which make us *of* nature—that account for our present corruption. Consider together what Rousseau says first in *Emile*, and then in the second *Discourse*; if man has been made to move independently, then he has also been made—like He who establishes the order of things, the 'Being active in itself'—to be good. And to *choose* that good without external aid.⁵⁰ 'Nature commands every animal', says Rousseau, 'and the beast obeys. Man feels the same impetus, but he realizes that he is free to acquiesce or resist; and it is above all in the consciousness of this freedom that the spirituality of his soul is shown.'⁵¹ For the moment, my concern is neither with what Rousseau says about independence or about freedom, as it will later be, but with what he attempts to illustrate about our connection to nature itself. Like the other animals of the earth, Rousseau reasons, we have been made to hear nature's call—to be *base*. But we can '*resist*' nature and set ourselves *apart* from it in listening only to those parts of

inequality.' This is no more than saying it is natural inequality that presented the basis for contrived inequality. *Second Discourse*, 154-155, 138.

³⁹ Ibid, 156-172, 129.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 219-20.

⁴¹ Rousseau, *Emile*, 221.

⁴² Ibid, 444.

⁴³ Ibid, 56.

⁴⁴ Rousseau, *Discourses*, 152.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 119, 142, 226.

⁴⁶ Allan Bloom, 'Jean-Jacques Rousseau', in *History of Political Philosophy*, 562.

⁴⁷ See Leo Strauss, *Natural Right*, 271-3.

⁴⁸ I disagree with Neuhouser's opposing interpretation that, for Rousseau, nature is neither the ultimate source of social inequalities nor is it in need of reform. See Frederick Neuhouser, *Rousseau's Critique of Inequality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Frederick Neuhouser, *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love: Evil, Rationality, and the Drive for Recognition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). I believe much of Neuhouser's interpretation of Rousseau's view and use of nature rests on an over-reliance on the *Second Discourse*.

⁴⁹ Neuhouser, *Rousseau's Critique of Inequality*, 44-6

⁵⁰ Rousseau, *Emile*, Book 4, 277- 281.

⁵¹ Rousseau, second *Discourse*, 114.

ourselves that dictate our ability to independence, the one characteristic that does make us different from the rest of nature and is capable of separating us from it by calling us closer to the Divine.

It is at nature's door, not at that of man that I believe Rousseau lays much of the blame for our misfortune. But if Rousseau is not explicit in his criticisms of nature in the second *Discourse*, it is because he wants to be clear about what nature does give us that is central to the well-being of both the individual and the civil community. The absolute independence of man in a pure state of nature is the critical foundation for both the moral and civil freedom of Rousseau's political doctrine.⁵²

It is in *Emile* that Rousseau makes a fuller judgement of nature by demonstrating what he takes to be the particular characteristics nature attaches in us, but that we are capable of shaking. Like each of us, at birth, Emile is an innocent savage; unlike the real savage man, however, he is to be secured from a corrupted society that exists all around him.⁵³ *Emile* appears as an expression of sorrow for an imagined time when Rousseau conceives man to have been his most essential self. That is to say, when his understanding of his being had no other influence apart from the inner workings of his own mind and body.⁵⁴

What is it that we need that nature has not given us? Rousseau appears to ask. Nature gives us the senses⁵⁵ and conscience. 'Conscience! Divine instinct, immortal and celestial voice, certain guide of a being that is ignorant and limited but intelligent and free.'⁵⁶ When conscience eludes us, here are the faculties, from which we may procure reason sufficient for our natural needs.⁵⁷ So, here is man, by nature, 'whole', and with all that he requires to keep himself 'good'.⁵⁸ 'Any man who, [thus,] only wanted to live would live happily. Consequently, he would live as a good man, for what advantage would there be for him in being wicked'.⁵⁹

Yet, we are wicked.⁶⁰ So, says the Savoyard Vicar, 'man, seek the author of evil no longer. It is yourself. No evil exists other than that which you do or suffer, and both come to you from yourself.'⁶¹ Emile appears a lament for the rotting effects of society on the individual, of the teachings of other men, of history, and of philosophy. All of this, Rousseau appears to estimate, has been by the abuse we make of our natural faculties.⁶² Society has turned man's natural love of self into a hateful 'amour-propre' that forces him to refer to others in defining himself and makes everything revolve around himself alone.⁶³ Not only has 'society made man weaker ... in making his strength insufficient for him,'⁶⁴ it makes 'double men'. They are not 'natural men', entirely self-sufficient. Neither are they true citizens—he who

⁵²See John T. Scott, 'Theodicy', 708; Leo Strauss, *Natural Right*, 281-2.

⁵³ See Maurice Cranston, *The Noble Savage: Jean Jacques Rousseau 1754-1762* (London: Penguin Press, 1991), 175; John T. Scott, 'Theodicy', 698.

⁵⁴ Rousseau, *Emile*, 177.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 38, 156-7, 281. The whole of the first part of Emile's upbringing is dedicated to his feeling the need of his senses so that he feels the physical world. His *experience* is confined to the 'laws of necessity' brought by that world of which only his senses can enlighten him. See *Emile*, Book II.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 290.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 286, 80.

⁵⁸ Allan Bloom, 'Introduction' in *Emile*, 3.

⁵⁹ Rousseau, *Emile*, 81-2.

⁶⁰ Norman Barry has argued convincingly that the vision of nature Rousseau elaborates is not an elaboration of the true natural experience of man, but an idealized and 'peculiar' form. My argument, here, is that Rousseau's view is not simply 'peculiar'; rather, inherent in Rousseau's presentation of this 'ideal' nature is a dense criticism of pure or original nature. See Norman Barry, 'Hume, Smith and Rousseau on Freedom in Robert Wokler (ed.) *Rousseau and Liberty*, (Manchester University Press, 1995), 32-33.

⁶¹ Rousseau, *Emile*, 282.

⁶² Ibid, 281.

⁶³ Ibid, 213-4, 228-9; also Judith N. Shklar, *Freedom and independence: A Study of Hegel's 'Phenomenology of Mind'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 27.

⁶⁴ Rousseau, *Emile*, 84.

'believes himself no longer one but part of the unity and no longer feels except within the whole.'⁶⁵ The man of our day—'civil man'—he is that miserable unhappy soul, 'always in contradiction with himself ... he will never be either man or citizen.'⁶⁶ 'Civil man is born, lives, and dies in slavery. At his birth he is sewed in swaddling clothes; at his death he is nailed in a coffin. So long as he keeps his human shape, he is enchained by our institutions.'⁶⁷ He is an 'automaton', unalive though he breathes.⁶⁸

'Is it nature', Rousseau asks, 'which thus carries men so far from themselves?'⁶⁹ Rousseau's question is, I believe, rhetorical. And to demonstrate, Rousseau presents Emile. Emile does 'nothing on anybody's word. Nothing is good for him unless he feels it to be so.'⁷⁰ Emile experiences and *feels* what is good for him by his senses.⁷¹ He is an 'active and thinking being', and he will be completed by being made a 'loving and feeling' one.⁷² 'He considers himself without regard to others and finds it good that others do not think of him. He demands nothing of anyone and believes he owes nothing to anyone. He alone in human society has been taught to count only on himself.'⁷³ 'Forced to learn by himself, he uses his reason';⁷⁴ and thus, he alone amongst his fellows sees 'that society depraves and perverts men.'⁷⁵

Despite Rousseau's proclamations⁷⁶, the education of Emile does not consist in making a man who resembles the men of another time—the men of pure nature. As Rousseau admits 'natural man is entirely for himself' and 'what will a man raised uniquely for himself become for others?'⁷⁷ As Emile's governor, Rousseau turns pure nature against itself to create characteristics borne from a different sort of nature. My concern here is not so much with the substance of Emile's new character⁷⁸ but with what Rousseau intends Emile's educated character to say about the characteristics that continue to tie the rest of us to a nature we have yet to be educated in resisting.

Emile is trained to all at once feel his base or original natural instincts and characteristics but, also, be immune to them. He must be delivered 'at first without hindrance to the law of nature, but do not forget among us he must be above that law.'⁷⁹ The man Rousseau wishes Emile to be bears little resemblance to the men of original natural character; for the purpose of living in society, he is to *subject* the characteristics that nature itself gives him. The promise of Emile is the promise of a man nature never made; and who, despite all the effort that has gone into making him what he could never have been without his master,⁸⁰ is forever on the precipice of his own downfall. For the memory of nature

⁶⁵ Ibid, 38-40.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 39-40.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 42-3.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 118, p. 42.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 83.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 178.

⁷¹ Ibid, 77-355.

⁷² Ibid, 203.

⁷³ Ibid, 208.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 207.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 237.

⁷⁶ Rousseau insists continuously that Emile is not being brought up in the way of 'social man' and that while Emile is not being brought up to subsist in isolation but to be in society itself, he is nonetheless being raised on the tenets of natural man isolated to himself. See *Emile*, 184-6, 205, 255.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 39-41.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 195. Cooper has described this as 'civilised naturalness', *Rousseau*, 11.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 129. Emile is raised to be immune to the seasons, to exercise outside in the height of winter. To sleep late and wake early. Sometimes not to sleep at all. He is taught to ignore his fears despite all the common sense nature prescribes; and to shun medicine in favour of learning to be sick and to die. See *Emile*, 54-56, 60, 129-140.

⁸⁰ See Cooper, *Rousseau*, 104.

and the attachments it has given us to itself, threaten us always.⁸¹

Emile is not a figure of a forgotten time but of an imagined one that never has been. Emile is an elucidation of that wretched animal whose most natural internal contradictions have, and will always, put him at war with himself.⁸² Fitted with senses that both educate and abuse him; with a similar capacity for virtue as for vice; with desires and passions at the same time as he has conscience and reason, man for Rousseau is that pitiable soul who nature has made to be armed, always, against himself.

Emile might be a lament for man, but in turning upside down the characteristics that nature uses to attach us to itself, Rousseau intends also to admonish a creator of things that we are, ourselves, unable to correct except by the correction we make to our very selves in resisting and subjecting it. The painstaking, loving, and dutiful guidance Rousseau gives to Emile from his birth to adulthood is only a thinly veiled criticism of a nature that Rousseau believes ought to have done better in guiding us through our own evolution. For Rousseau, if man is wretched now by society, it is not because he was not already made wretched by nature before it.⁸³

Strauss gets at this when he says ‘if the state of nature is subhuman, it is absurd to go back to the state of nature in order to find in it the norm for man.’⁸⁴ But I do not think Strauss takes his thoughts far enough. Perhaps this is because he ultimately accepts the interpretation of Rousseau’s view of nature as fundamentally ‘good’ or ordered, even if amorally so. For Rousseau, however, it is not simply that the man moulded by a pure nature is ‘a stupid animal’,⁸⁵ it is that nature itself is callous in creating a being who is at one point, ‘stupid’ and yet feeling, at another reasoning and yet capable of the most egregious vanity and inhumanity.

Further, for Rousseau, the virtue of the civil right is a genuine value; and one which is not to be found in a pure state of nature but quite some way outside it. It is a virtue that is crucial for Rousseau not simply in remaking the civil state but, also, in remaking the individual, including his remodelling of what would be the individual given corrected ‘natural’ instincts and inclinations as encoded in Emile. Emile’s personal virtue in the knowledge and use of his personal independence is as crucial as the virtue of the citizen living under the social contract; and this constitutes part of Rousseau’s indictment of a pure nature.

Yes, it is society and its opinions that Rousseau believes to be the proximate source of all our erosion,⁸⁶ but Rousseau knows, also, that if society, and all the other deleterious progressions, were not—in a sense—‘natural’ advancements,⁸⁷ they were advancements for which nature is to blame for giving us the very ability to make.

III. The Rousseauian State: Transforming Man, Correcting ‘Nature’

For Rousseau, man’s redemption and the correction of his original instincts requires two interdependent, but distinct, remedies—moral independence and civil freedom. This requires the rightly-founded state but it also requires a separation between a purely communal or public space and a private one that makes the maintenance of Emile’s new naturalness possible. The responsibility the Rousseauian state has,

⁸¹ Even at the very end, when Emile is all but grown, his governor advises ‘watch the young man carefully. He can protect himself from everything else, but it is up to you to protect him from himself. Do not leave him alone, day or night. At the very least, sleep in his room.’ *Emile*, 333. Ten years later, when Emile is nearly married, his governor has not moved from the same advice ‘Dear Emile, it is in vain that I have dipped your soul in the Styx; I was not able to make it everywhere invulnerable. A new enemy is arising which you have not learned to conquer and from which I can no longer save you.’ 443.

⁸² Ibid, 211-458.

⁸³ Ibid, 154.

⁸⁴ Strauss, *Natural Right*, 274

⁸⁵ Ibid, 292.

⁸⁶ See Timothy O’Hagan, ‘Rousseau’s responses to Human Progress’ in *The Rousseauian Mind*, eds. Eve Grace and Christopher Kelly, (Oxford: Routledge, 2019), 235-240.

⁸⁷ Strauss, *Natural Right*, 271-3.

under this conception, is not singularly communal; rather, it is tasked with securing and protecting the separate public and private spheres of each of its citizens.

In *Emile*, Rousseau *accepts* the already-existing transformation of man⁸⁸; and to be virtuous, man must live in a society founded on the principles of natural right.⁸⁹ In both *Emile* and the *Social Contract*, Rousseau constructs a new naturalness, which though it takes its first principles from pure nature, fundamentally recognises, first, that man is incapable of a full return to pure nature.⁹⁰ And further, that pure nature not only has very 'little to tell man about how he ought to live'⁹¹, but is also, faulty. Nevertheless, from pure nature, Rousseau derives one singular principle—man's independence.

If 'the principle of every action, is in the will of a free being,'⁹² and man is an *active* being, then either he is moved by something else or he moves himself. It is clear to Rousseau that, regardless of anything else, man was made to act 'on his own'⁹³ and that it is this ability, above all else, that distinguishes man from the other animals of the earth and that, perhaps ironically, makes it possible for him to resist nature itself. For Rousseau, freedom—that is, the beauty of simply being oneself, un beholden to others—is the ultimate end of individual human existence, for *it is happiness*. Rousseau says, 'A truly happy being is a solitary being. God alone enjoys absolute happiness'; for he is free *absolutely*. He is perfect in '[sufficing] unto himself.' Though such a state cannot be envisaged for beings so flawed as we, it is only by our *base* judgement—judgement that comes to us by most of the instincts that attach us to an original nature—that we do not conceive happiness to lie in solitude.⁹⁴ So, 'you must be happy, dear Emile. That is the goal of every being which senses. That is the first desire which nature has impressed on us, and the only one which never leaves us.'⁹⁵

The last half of Rousseau's sentence is critical. Rousseau says that our happiness, which I believe he takes to consist most truly in our independence, is the *only* natural desire that does not leave us.⁹⁶ In other words, it is the only characteristic that an original nature attaches in us that cannot, nor ought it to be, suppressed. Indeed, for Rousseau, it is the only element given to us by nature that is useful and essential in correcting ourselves.

The theoretical necessity that conditions man's independence in the state of pure nature comes to undergird the logic of civil and moral freedom in political community.⁹⁷ Man is 'independent' in the state of nature because though he needs things, what he needs cannot be otherwise. If man's being bound by necessity does not circumvent the sphere of his independence in nature, then nor in society can his freedom be said to be impinged in any meaningful way by the fact that he does what is merely necessary in being dependent on and obligated to obey the laws of the virtuous civil state.⁹⁸ Nor, moreover, does

⁸⁸ When Rousseau writes: 'I assume that men have reached the point where obstacles to their self-preservation in the state of nature prevail by their resistance over the forces each individual can use to maintain himself in that state', he is not referring to his conception of the first stage of natural man; he alludes to a middle point. It is this middle point and the characteristics of man's existence in it that forms much of the substance of the logic of *the Social Contract* trans. Judith R. Masters (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), 52. In other words, Rousseau *accepts* that man is, already, irretrievably transformed. The transformation Rousseau, himself intends to make is an additional one.

⁸⁹ Rousseau, *Discourses*, 201-2.

⁹⁰ See Cooper, *Rousseau*, 18.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁹² Rousseau, *Emile*, 280.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 271- 281.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 221.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 442.

⁹⁶ I do not agree with the entirety of N.J. H. Dent's distinguished assessment of the role of nature in Rousseau's system, particularly the role of pure nature or what Dent calls the 'pre-social'. I think Dent is, however, precise when he examines that for Rousseau 'the most crucial defining mark of what is "natural" in man's character [is]... "freedom".' *Rousseau*, 14-17.

⁹⁷ *Emile*, 81-91.

⁹⁸ Rousseau is clear that obedience to the state's laws is a necessary, and 'obligatory' condition of the social contract, not simply as an abstract ideal but as a matter of the practical effectuality of the double-sided logic of the social contract. 'The death

moral freedom suffer in any meaningful sense by the fact that publicly, we are only free in the civil sense. It is simply what is necessary. Rousseau is his best interpreter here when he says, it 'is not the word *freedom* which means nothing; it is the word *necessity*.'⁹⁹

The organising principle of Rousseau's new naturalness is freedom, both civil or political and moral freedom. The former belonging exclusively to the virtuous citizen and the latter to each man in both his capacities as a public citizen and as a private individual. Rousseau intends, and logically succeeds in simultaneously locating both freedoms—that is, the independent freedom of Emile's new naturalness and the dependent freedom of the citizen¹⁰⁰—in the same unitary conception of humanness.

Rousseau's distinction between natural, civil, and moral freedom¹⁰¹ is critical for our understanding of the significance of Rousseau intentions in differentiating between public and private life.¹⁰² Civil freedom involves enjoying the benefits of obedience to the general will—that is, being free from private dependency in public matters.¹⁰³ Moral freedom, Rousseau says consists in 'obedience to the law one has prescribed for oneself.'¹⁰⁴ Civil freedom, therefore, incorporates a part of moral freedom in its definition since each citizen must be a participant to the general will. Similarly, moral freedom presupposes civil freedom—it is impossible to be morally independent and free from private and personal dependencies without being first free in the civil sense, that is, protected by the public dependency we have on the state.

If moral freedom plays a part in Rousseau's definition of civil freedom, it does so only technically, however. Substantively, and in light of the relationship that moral freedom bears to choice, Rousseau intends for moral freedom to pertain more closely to the realm of man's most essential, private self, and not to his public self.¹⁰⁵ Moral freedom is not the independence of original nature because the former, unlike the latter, is based on conscious choice.¹⁰⁶ Importantly, choice is not a feature of public life in man's capacity as a citizen under the social contract—he obeys the general will that is his because he must. It is in private, therefore, that conscious choice and its product, moral freedom or independence, truly speaking, have a place.

The freedoms of the new naturalness depend on the general will, which is the logically necessary basis for the engagement of free men into a society that they instigate.¹⁰⁷ It is the only thing that can logically underpin the existence of 'an association that defends and protects the person and goods of each associate with all the common force; and by means of which each one, uniting with all, nevertheless obeys only himself.'¹⁰⁸

penalty inflicted on criminals can be considered from approximately the same point of view: it is in order not to be the victim of a murderer that a person consents to die if he becomes one... Besides, every offender who attacks the social right becomes through his crimes a rebel and traitor to his homeland; he ceases to be one of its members by violating its laws... the State's preservation is incompatible with his own, so one of the two must perish.' *Social Contract*, 64-65, 62.

⁹⁹ Rousseau, *Emile*, Book IV, 280. See also Melzer, *Natural Goodness*, 98-99.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, Melzer.

¹⁰¹ Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Social Contract*, trans. Judith R. Masters (New York: St Martin's Press, 1978), 56.

¹⁰² That Rousseau intended to bring together the public and private in a unified understanding of the happy life is acknowledged in Mark Cladis' work on the relation between the public and private sphere in liberal-democratic societies. *Public Vision, Private Lives: Rousseau, Religion, and 21st Century Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 6-8.

¹⁰³ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 52-55.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 56.

¹⁰⁵ See Strauss, *Natural Right*, pp. 281-2. Where Strauss, however, thinks that the moral enhancement of the status of 'freedom' gives the almost exploded notion of the state of nature a new lease on life in Rousseau's doctrine, I disagree. I interpret Rousseau's conception of moral freedom as further evidence of Rousseau's ultimate rejection of the state of nature because by it, individual action based solely on need is replaced by conscious awareness and self-informed, self-generated choice.

¹⁰⁶ For Rousseau, the very definition of morality turns on the question of choice. Wherever there is no choice, there is only necessity, and as such there is no vice and no morality in it. See *Emile*, 85. See also Patrick Riley 'Freedom of a Particular Kind' in *Rousseau and Liberty*, ed. Robert Wokler (Manchester University Press, 1995).

¹⁰⁷ See Patrick Riley, 'The General Will Completed' in *The General Will Before Rousseau* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

¹⁰⁸ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 53.

Although the general will must regard the common good by the reason of each 'associate', just as the will regards the good of each individual through reason overriding passion¹⁰⁹, the common good in the social contract is nothing more, or less, than an equality of public circumstance that enables all members of the state to be *both* politically free in public *and* morally independent in private. As such, the general will regards nothing but what is *common* to a multitude of private interests so that each in obeying the general will promises only to obey his own self and the condition of public subjection is equal for all.¹¹⁰

In Rousseau's construct, obedience to oneself by way of participation in the general will is the necessary means of adhering to one's will publicly,¹¹¹ in order that one is allowed to be morally independent in private. When Rousseau says: 'for if the opposition of private interests made the establishment of societies necessary, it is the agreement of these same interests that made it possible. It is what these different interests have in common that forms the social bond,'¹¹² he means what he says. There is a singular interest that is *common* to all men in society, and that is to be free. The outcome of the general will as regards the relation of the members of the state to each other and then to the entire body is that 'this relationship should be as small as possible with respect to the former and as large as possible with respect to the latter, so that each citizen is in a position of perfect independence from all the others and of excessive dependence upon the City.'¹¹³ We are, again, reminded of Rousseau's yearning in *Emile*: 'who knows where one can live [both] independent *and* free, without needing to harm anyone and without fear of being harmed [*italics mine*].'¹¹⁴

For Rousseau, the real question was always, how do we arrive at men who are able to know what their independent private wills are and therefore know how to remove them from the interest that applies commonly to every other? On my reading, the general will is based on a partially hidden premise—that men *know* their independent private wills. That is, that they be capable of resisting the instincts and characteristics in themselves that attach them to nature. Rousseau's call for men to partake in the political freedom under the social contract is, at once also a call for us to cultivate our most independent private selves. That is, to be morally independent *and* civilly free. Rousseau's transformed man is capable of knowing, and consciously choosing to act in alignment with his independent *private* will, where it does not concern the community, and of acting with the community *only* when it concerns the communal good.¹¹⁵

Rousseau foretells of his intention to combine the private and public persons precisely by means of separating their domains when says 'but in addition to the public person, we have to consider the private persons who compose it and whose life and freedom are naturally *independent* of it [*italics mine*].'¹¹⁶ The man of Rousseau's intention is he who knows when to be concerned with, and act according to, the general will and when, in his private affairs, to withdraw to his solitary and independent desires. We are, now, speaking of man as he has never been before—with a level of conscious awareness so far beyond any aspect of the state of nature that the possibility of his existence corrects, for Rousseau, both the ills of previous societies, and nature itself.

¹⁰⁹ Reason, for Rousseau is not theoretical and neither is the will. The will consists in ascertaining what is good for you in the aim of your self-preservation on the basis of what you can judge or know to be good for you by way of your sensory experience through things and the judgment made of these through your natural bodily sense and faculties of the mind. See Rousseau, *Emile*, Books 1-4.

¹¹⁰ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 52-65.

¹¹¹ Rousseau explains that for the body politic or the State to be rightly constituted its three main parts—the government or executive power, the subjects and citizens, and the sovereign or legislative power (the latter being nothing but the citizenry when acting as a whole)—must be in continuous proportion with one another, meaning that the influence of each individual on the law as a member of the sovereign and by his vote is only as a fraction of the whole population whereas the whole force of the law on him as a subject remains unchanged. Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 79-80, 54-55.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 59.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, 77.

¹¹⁴ Rousseau, *Emile*, 457.

¹¹⁵ 'The right that the social compact gives the sovereign over the subjects does not exceed, as I have said, the limits of public utility.' Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 130, 55.

¹¹⁶ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 62.

This is a transformation that requires substantively more than either the domestic or public education of citizens to be made in Emile's mould.¹¹⁷ It also requires more than state institutions capable of directing its citizens to communal 'reason' in aim only of the general will for the end of communal goods and civil freedom.¹¹⁸ But where the interpretation that I have offered here does not lead us to totalitarian conceptions of the Rousseauian state, neither ought it to lead us towards the deliberative vision that has more recently been put forward in Rousseau scholarship.¹¹⁹ While a genuinely deliberative state requires acknowledgement of both public *and* private dependency among citizens,¹²⁰ deliberation on the general will in Rousseau's doctrine should not be interpreted as the kind in which the communal enterprise extends to citizens taking themselves as personally interdependent. Rousseau indicates that the good political society must be a 'cooperation', a communication, a common partnership¹²¹, but this is to be so in a very restricted sense—*only* where it does not concern the domain of our personal moral freedom.

Rafeeq Hasan has proposed that the legitimate aim of the Rousseauian state is not simply to enable civil freedom, but also to establish communal happiness.¹²² I agree that what Hasan calls 'Social Autonomy' interpretations of Rousseau cannot account for the way in which, as well as securing civil freedom, Rousseau intends *also* for the state to secure what he counts as the happiness of its citizens. It is, however, not my interpretation that Rousseau's construction of happiness is constituted in public or communal participation. As I have argued, I believe Rousseau saw happiness as lying in our ability to correct our original natures by resisting nature itself and holding steadfast to a moral independence, which while upheld by a necessary communal engagement in the benefit of protecting our civil freedom, was most fully realisable in our private, non-communal, selves. Under this interpretation, the ideal Rousseauian state is one that takes seriously its responsibility to secure and protect, for each individual citizen, both from its very self and from every other citizen, the sphere of our personal independence, and in which the communal sphere does not interfere. Only of such a state could it be said that those who live there, live 'independent *and* free.'

IV. Conclusion

My aim here has been to present an alternative interpretation of Rousseau's view and use of nature, which I believe to be significant for how we understand the extent of the transformation that Rousseau intends for man under the rightly constituted political society. I have argued that by seeing Rousseau's view of nature as one of systematic criticism, we more fully appreciate that the solution Rousseau seeks to present to the problem of man's corruption lies in a dual mechanism that, for Rousseau, enables man to correct himself by resisting and suppressing what is 'of nature' in himself. For Rousseau, this requires both a public and a private dimension—for the civil freedom of the public sphere ensures that the words independence, choice, and happiness are able to have moral meaning in man's private domain. The state Rousseau tasks such citizens to live under is one that must respect, and preserve, this interrelated division.

¹¹⁷ Neuhouser, *Rousseau's Theodicy*, 155.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, 187-201

¹¹⁹ See Joshua Cohen, 'An Epistemic Conception of Democracy' in *Ethics* 97, (1986), 28-9; Joshua Cohen, 'Reflections on Rousseau: Autonomy and Democracy' in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 15 (1986), 294; Joshua Cohen, *Rousseau: A free Community of Equals*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 10-11, 130-2; Frederick Neuhouser, *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love: Evil, Rationality, and the Drive for Recognition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 187-217.

¹²⁰ Eniola Anuoluwapo Soyemi, *The Normative Case for Helping the Empirical Outcomes of Deliberation*, Forthcoming.

¹²¹ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 53.

¹²² Hasan, 'Autonomy and Happiness'.

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