

The Question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau Revisited

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The aim of this article is to re-examine one of Cassirer's most famous and influential works in the history of philosophy: *The Question of Jean Jacques Rousseau*. The problem that Cassirer investigates is the tension in Rousseau's thought between his republicanism and his primitivism. While his primitivism saw society and the state as evil and upheld the virtues of the noble savage and the state of nature, his republicanism maintains that the republic is a form of society and state which can avoid the problems of the state of nature. Cassirer argued that this tension could be avoided if the natural goodness of man is interpreted as an implicit form of the moral autonomy which he finally attains in a republic. I argue that Cassirer underrates the role of passion in Rousseau's ethics and overrates the role of reason; he portrays Rousseau as a rationalist when he is more of a sentimentalist who stresses the importance of pity for the foundation of morals. Cassirer's interpretation makes an optimist of Rousseau, who allegedly believes the tension between natural and republican man can be overcome in history. But I contend that there is a deep pessimism in Rousseau's thought deriving from his primitivism, his belief that no form of society and state can ever completely redeem the lost innocence of the state of nature.

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I. The Idealist Interpretation

Students of Rousseau have always been troubled by the apparent tensions between his first two *Discourses* and the *Social Contract*. These tensions take several forms, but one of the most prominent, profound and pervasive is that between Rousseau's naturalism and republicanism. In the *Discourses* Rousseau steps forward as a naturalist, as someone who holds that life in the state of nature is superior to that of civilization. He defends the doctrine that

man is naturally good, and that he has been corrupted and enslaved by social and political institutions. In the *Social Contract*, however, Rousseau makes his debut as a republican, contending that the best life for a human being is in a republic. Far from attacking society and state, Rousseau champions a republic as the remedy for corruption and enslavement. Famously, he now argues that there are more advantages to living in a republic than staying in the state of nature.¹

This apparent tension raises the inevitable question: Is it possible to reconcile Rousseau's naturalism and republicanism? We cannot avoid the demand for a reconciliation if only because Rousseau himself insists on it. On many occasions he stressed that his thinking formed a systematic whole, and that he always had the same basic principles. In his retrospective *Letter to Beaumont*, for example, he stated: "I have written on various subjects, but always with the same principles: always with the same morality, the same belief, the same maxims, and if you will the same opinions" (CW IX, 22; OC IV, 928).²

Predictably and understandably, Rousseau scholars have wrestled with this tension for generations.³ While some have been content to find irreconcilable ideals or directions in Rousseau's thought,⁴ most have gone in search of the unifying core of his thought, that single concern or theme that wedds his naturalism and republicanism. Since the 1920s, many scholars have reached a consensus about how to resolve it and restore the unity of Rousseau's thought.⁵ According to their interpretation, there is no tension between the naturalism of the *Discourses* and the republicanism of the *Social Contract* because the purpose of Rousseau's republic is to recover, redeem or restore the freedom and happiness of the state of nature. We can regain the freedom and equality that have been lost with the rise of civilization if we only create the right form of state and society in the future: a republic ensuring the

¹ See *Social Contract*, CW, I, viii; OC III, 364–365. All references will be to the Pléiade edition of the *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969) (abbreviated OC) and, whenever possible, to the still incomplete *Collected Writings*, ed. Roger Masters and Christopher Kelly (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1990f.) (abbreviated CW).

² For similar statements, see *The Confessions*, CW V, 341–342; OC I, 406–440; and *Dialogues* CW I, 211; OC I, 932–933.

³ On the history of Rousseau interpretation, see Gay (1964, 211–261) and Cobban (1964, 13–31).

⁴ See, for example, Groethuysen (1949, 117–140) and Shklar (1969, 5–6).

⁵ Among the founders of this interpretation, see Lanson (1903), Wright (1929), and Hendel (1934).

freedom and equality of all its citizens under laws. Crucial to this interpretation is its understanding of natural goodness as an implicit or potential form of moral freedom realized by reason in republican institutions (see, for example Wright 1929, 28 – 29).

Though its immediate origins were in the 1920s, this interpretation has a much nobler ancestry. It first arose in the late eighteenth century in the German idealist tradition. Its grandfather was no less than Kant,⁶ and it was later popularized by Fichte, most notably in the last of his famous 1793 lectures *Über die Bestimmung des Gelehrten* (Fichte 1845 – 1846, 335 – 346). Kant's and Fichte's interpretation of Rousseau later became the inspiration for the philosophy of history of Schiller and the early romantics (Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis and Hölderlin). According to their philosophy of history, the goal of mankind is to recreate through reason the freedom and equality that we once had in the state of nature. The republic of the future represents the restoration of Rousseau's golden age of innocence. Hence Rousseau's philosophy is interpreted as a secularized and historicized version of the old Biblical scenario: innocence is the state of nature; the fall the onset of modern civilization; and redemption the creation of a republic.

Undoubtedly, the most impressive statement of this interpretation has been given by Ernst Cassirer in his 1932 *Das Problem Jean-Jacques Rousseau*.⁷ Fully aware of its historical precedents, Cassirer deliberately revived the idealist interpretation. Noting the impact of Rousseau upon Kant, he made Kant the basis for his interpretation of Rousseau, as if Kant were somehow the influence on Jean-Jacques.⁸ The heart of Cassirer's case for the unity of Rousseau's philosophy derives from his Kantian interpretation of Rousseau's concept of natural goodness. According to Cassirer, natural goodness consists in latent or potential moral autonomy, the power to live and act according to universal laws. This provides the crucial link between Rousseau's naturalism

⁶ The *locus classicus* is Kant's 1786 essay "Mutmaßlicher Anfang der Menschengeschichte" (Kant 1902ff., VIII, 107 – 124, especially 116 – 118). See also his "Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht" (Kant 1902ff., VII, 326-327); "Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht" (Kant 1902ff., VIII, 24, 26); and "Bemerkungen zu den Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen" (Kant 1902ff., XX, 29, 43, 44, 58 – 59, 176).

⁷ Cassirer (1932). These articles were translated and edited by Peter Gay, see Cassirer (1993), the edition I cite here. See also Cassirer (1963).

⁸ Cassirer stresses in several places that in the eighteenth century Kant alone saw the true heart of Rousseau's teaching. See Cassirer (1993, 58 – 70, 72, 127).

and republicanism: a republic restores our natural goodness by providing the institutions necessary for the exercise of moral autonomy. This reading seems confirmed by Rousseau's own proto-Kantian description of moral liberty as "obedience to a law one has prescribed for oneself."

Cassirer's interpretation has been very influential.⁹ Though it has not lacked critics,¹⁰ it has not ceased to stimulate and challenge. It remains the crucial touchstone for Rousseau interpretation, which measures itself by its distance or proximity to Cassirer. One must agree or disagree with Cassirer; one cannot ignore him.

Past critics of Cassirer have concentrated upon various aspects of his interpretation, especially his claim that Rousseau is essentially an ethical rationalist who made law the foundation of his ethics.¹¹ Oddly, however, they still have not focused directly and explicitly upon Cassirer's main effort: his attempt to reconcile Rousseau's naturalism and republicanism. My main aim here is to return to Cassirer's original question and to evaluate his interpretation strictly as an attempt to answer it.

My central thesis is negative: that Cassirer weds Rousseau's naturalism and republicanism only by underplaying his sentimentalism, pessimism and primitivism. I shall argue that Cassirer's most serious mistake lies where others have seen his greatest strength: his account of Rousseau's conception of freedom. I shall also attempt to restore some of the primitivist aspects of Rousseau's philosophy, which have been underestimated as a result of Cassirer's legacy.

II. The Role of Moral Feeling

Fundamental to Cassirer's attempt to synthesize Rousseau's naturalism and republicanism is his interpretation of natural goodness as potential moral autonomy. Since autonomy involves the capacity to act on universal laws, the hallmark of rationality, Cassirer also assumes the potential rationality of Rousseau's natural man (Cassirer 1932, 108 – 112). It is this rationality that forms the crucial link between man's natural and civil condition. Hence Cassirer explains that although Rousseau denies any bond between

⁹ Cobban, (1964, 153 – 154); Gay (1969, vol. 2, 529 – 552); Friedrich (1963, 122 – 130, 193 – 194); and Levine (1976).

¹⁰ Among the critics have been Strauss (1950, 252 – 294); Starobinsk (1988, 16, 19, 31); Derathé (1970, 181 – 191); Melzer (1990, 61 – 63); Ellenburg (1982); O'Hagan (1999, 28 – 32); Horowitz (1987, 16 – 17, 36 – 50); and Kelly (1968).

¹¹ This is the essence of the objections of Derathé (1970), Melzer (1990), and O'Hagan (1999).

individual and society on the level of man's *physical* nature, he affirms such a bond on the level of his *rational* nature (Cassirer 1932, 124, 126).

Cassirer's assumption is extremely problematic, however, because it seems to commit what Rousseau regards as the fundamental fallacy of the natural law tradition: it attributes to natural man what he could have learned only within society. According to Rousseau's critique of that tradition, the development of rationality, understood as the power to act on universalizable moral principles, should be a new acquisition of man in civil society. Since man in the state of nature lives in isolation and independence, he does not have steady moral relations with others, and so no need to act on moral principles. Furthermore, he has not developed his powers of reflection to the point where he can act on universalizable principles. As if to leave no doubt about the point, in the *Second Discourse* Rousseau declares that in the state of nature man still does not act according to "that sublime maxim of reasoned justice, *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*" (CW III, 37; OC III, 155). It is indeed for just this reason that Rousseau explains in *Emile* that the development of rationality is the last and most difficult stage in education.¹²

As much as Cassirer exaggerates the rational side of Rousseau's natural man, he underplays his sensitive side. Rightly, he points out that Rousseau was a sharp critic of the social instinct theory of Pufendorf, Grotius and Diderot, who postulated sociability and benevolence as natural dispositions of mankind (Cassirer 1932, 101 – 104). But he pushes this point toward a very general and radical conclusion: "Rousseau...eliminated feeling from the foundation of ethics" (Cassirer 1932, 99). Yet the evidence hardly warrants such a bold and strong claim. Although Cassirer rightly stresses Rousseau's critique of the social sentiments, it does not follow that Rousseau demoted, let alone rejected, the role of sentiment in morality. After all, the social sentiments are only one kind of feeling, which leaves it open to stress the importance of other forms of feeling. Sure enough, in the *Second Discourse* Rousseau gives a central role to pity in his account of natural goodness. It is indeed pity that allows him to maintain that mankind is naturally good in the state of nature, despite the absence of moral relations, and despite natural man's incapacity for moral reasoning. Rousseau explains that this feeling of pity consists in "an innate repugnance to seeing fellow men suffer" (CW III, 15, 36; OC III, 125 – 126, 154). While pity is not as strong as benevolence, which is an active disposition to work toward the happiness of others even when they are not in

¹² Rousseau (1979, 89); OC IV, 317. Cf. *Julie*, Part V, Letter III, CW VI, 460; OC II, 562.

distress, it does prevent us from ever wanting to harm others, and it will even lead us to aid others when they are in distress. Rousseau then goes on to point out – in passages completely ignored by Cassirer – the fundamental role of pity in the development of morality (CW III, 37; OC III, 155). He maintains that pity is the natural basis of all the social virtues. What are generosity, clemency and humanity, Rousseau asks, but pity applied to the weak, guilty and human species as a whole? He states that pity gives rise to the “maxim of natural goodness”: “*Do what is good for you with as little harm as possible*” (CW III, 38; OC III, 156). Cassirer’s failure to take into account the crucial role of pity in Rousseau’s ethics is most apparent when he claims that “According to Rousseau, the only flaw in Hobbes’ psychology consisted in its putting an active egoism in the place of the purely passive egoism which prevails in the state of nature” (Cassirer 1932, 101). This claim flies in the face of Rousseau’s explicit statement in the *Second Discourse* that Hobbes had ignored the role of pity (CW III, 36; OC III, 153 – 154). As if to retract such an extreme claim, Cassirer notes that Rousseau also held that “natural man is capable of compassion”; but he then underplays the role of compassion by stating that it is not “some originally “ethical” quality of man’s will” but only a “gift of imagination” (Cassirer 1932, 101). Yet this too clashes with Rousseau’s explicit statements that pity is a primitive and irreducible power of the soul on par with self-preservation itself (CW III, 14 – 15, 36; OC III, 125 – 126, 154).¹³ Rousseau does mention the possibility that pity could be “only a feeling that puts us in the position of him that suffers,” but only to dismiss it on the grounds that it does not undermine his insistence on its fundamental role in morality (CW III, 37; OC III, 155).

It is only when we recognize the fundamental role of pity in Rousseau’s account of natural goodness that we can explain his otherwise puzzling hostility to reason. Some of Rousseau’s outbursts against the dangers of reason in the *Second Discourse* are very hard to square with Cassirer’s interpretation. While Cassirer stresses the implicit rationality of natural man, Rousseau sometimes stridently insists upon the exact opposite. “...the state of reflection is a state contrary to nature and the man who meditates is a depraved animal” (CW III, 23; OC III, 138). Rather than thinking that reason empowers a human being’s capacity for morality, Rousseau contends that it

¹³ It is noteworthy that in his account of natural goodness in his *Letter to Beaumont*, written shortly after *Emile*, Rousseau maintains that the only innate passion is love of self. Here he neglects to mention pity (CW VIII, 28; OC IV, 935 – 936). For an illuminating account of Rousseau’s apparent inconsistency, see Derathé (1970, 100 – 107).

engenders *amour-propre* and stifles our moral feelings (CW III, 37; OC III, 56). While pity makes us feel for the plight of our fellow men, reason draws us back into ourselves, separating us from everything outside ourselves. Cassirer deals with these troublesome statements by relegating them to an earlier position that Rousseau had abandoned in his more mature works (Cassirer 1932, 56 – 57).¹⁴ But these kinds of statements reappear regularly in later works.¹⁵

To be fair, however, Cassirer's account of natural goodness is based on the *Emile*, where Rousseau's account of natural goodness does seem to confirm a more rationalist interpretation. In the "Confessions of the Savoyard Vicar" of Book IV Rousseau explains natural goodness essentially in terms of conscience, which is an implicit and inchoate awareness of moral principles. The vicar states that conscience consists in "an innate principle of justice and virtue according to which...we judge our actions and those of others as good or bad" (Rousseau 1979, 289; OC IV, 598). Man is naturally good, he explains, because the principles of morality are "written by nature with ineffaceable characters in the depths of my heart" (Rousseau 1979, 286; OC IV, 594). Hence there seems to be a basic difference between the *Emile* and *Second Discourse* regarding natural goodness: *Emile* ascribes "an innate principle of justice" to natural man, whereas the *Second Discourse* makes the principle "*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*" a later acquisition in civil society. This difference seems sufficient to warrant Cassirer's interpretation of natural goodness as an implicit awareness of moral autonomy.

It would be false to conclude, however, that Rousseau's appeal to conscience in *Emile* is meant to demote or dispense with the role of sentiment. The very opposite is the case. Rousseau stresses how conscience is ultimately based on sentiment. In Book IV he writes that, "if this were the place for it," he would show how the voice of conscience arises from "the first movements of the heart," and how the first ideas of good and bad arose from love and hate (Rousseau 1979, 235; OC IV, 522). Justice and goodness are not simply

¹⁴ The same strategy appears in Wright (1929, 30). It also must be said that Derathé has no convincing account of these statements, which is one of the most serious shortcomings in his rationalist interpretation of Rousseau.

¹⁵ Madame de Wolmar writes in *Julie*: "All great struggles, all sublime acts are their [the passions] doing; cold reason has never accomplished anything illustrious, and passions are overcome only by being set against one another." (CW VI, 405; OC II, 493). In the *Dialogues* Rousseau states: "The sensual man is the man of nature. The Reflective man is the man of opinion; it is he who is dangerous." (CW I, 114; OC I, 808).

abstract terms formed by the understanding, Rousseau argues, because they are “true affections of the soul enlightened by reason.” No natural law can be established by reason alone, independent of these affections: “the entire right of nature is only a chimera if it is not founded on a natural need in the human heart” (Rousseau 1979, 235; OC IV, 523). Even the precept to do unto others as we would have them do unto us has no other foundation than sentiment: when I identify myself with another, I do not want him to suffer because it makes me suffer. “I am interested in him for love of myself, and the reason for the precept is in nature itself, which inspires in me the desire of my well-being in whatever place I feel my existence” (Rousseau 1979, 235n; OC IV, 223n). We will the well-being of others, and imagine ourselves in the place of others, because we empathize with them, not because we universalize our principles and see that what applies to ourselves holds equally for others. The task of reason is to make us self-conscious of these affections, to clarify their underlying principles; but it cannot replace them and has no motive power whatsoever without them.

It is not that Cassirer completely ignores the role of feeling in Rousseau’s thought; but he does equivocate about what role to assign it. Sometimes he gives it a significance entirely outside the realm of ethics, where it is made the center of Rousseau’s enthusiasm for nature (Cassirer 1932, 106, 109). But at other times he reinterprets feeling as a primitive form of ethical judgement and decision, as if it were only an inchoate form of Kantian will. We are told that the term “sentiment” is ambiguous: it denotes not only something purely naturalistic and passive but also something idealistic and active involving deliberative judgement (Cassirer 1932, 110). Sometimes it refers to “a mere psychological affect” whereas at other times it denotes “an essential action of the soul,” the power of moral appraisal (Cassirer 1932).

Although Cassirer is correct to note this ambiguity and to stress the active role of feeling, he goes astray when he implies that it is *only* or *primarily* the product of a purely rational will. Rousseau’s point in *Emile* remains: there would be no ethical judgment, no moral appraisal at all, if there were not innate sentiments that make us love the good and hate evil. So, whether we consider the account in *Emile* or the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau gave sentiment a fundamental role in morality. While he thinks that reason clarifies, refines, universalizes and makes us self-aware of our sentiments, he does not hold that it can replace or eliminate them, as if the sole source of moral value lay in reason alone. Rousseau insists that a completely rational being would have no moral values whatsoever, and that the basis of all value ultimately lies in feeling alone:

“Sensitivity is the principle of all action. A being, albeit animated, who would feel nothing, would never act, for what would its motive for acting be?”¹⁶ Even if Rousseau did not believe in the social instincts of Grotius, Pufendorf and Diderot, he was still much closer to the moral sentimentalism of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson and Hume than Cassirer allows.

III. Natural Freedom

Cassirer’s interpretation of natural goodness as moral autonomy derives all its plausibility from one misleading apparent similarity: that between the independence of man in the state of nature and the moral liberty of a citizen in a republic.¹⁷ *Prima facie* these forms of freedom do appear very alike. Both seem to be forms of autonomy or self-government where the individual lives according to his own judgment and values without having to depend on others. Just as natural man is self-sufficient, able to satisfy his own needs without the aid of others, so civil man is self-governing, following only laws he would make himself as a rational being. The fundamental difference between these forms of freedom seems to be only that natural man follows his needs and feelings, whereas civil man follows rational principles. Hence natural independence seems to be only a *primitive* form of the autonomy of civil man. It is on these grounds that Cassirer holds Rousseau’s natural education to be only a preparation for civil life in a republic.¹⁸

To assess this crucial premise of Cassirer’s interpretation, we have to take a closer look at the freedom Rousseau ascribes to man in the state of nature. In the *Social Contract* Rousseau sometimes writes as if natural freedom were only “an unlimited right to everything that tempts someone” (CW I, viii; OC III, 364). This is freedom in the sense of complete license, the right to do anything when there are no laws. It would be a serious mistake, however, to think that Rousseau’s account of natural freedom stops here. One of the great merits of Cassirer’s interpretation is that it draws attention to a much richer concept of natural freedom present in both *Emile* and the *Second Discourse*.

Natural freedom consists first and foremost in what Rousseau calls “*independence*,” i.e., self-reliance and self-sufficiency, the power of providing

¹⁶ *Dialogues*, CW I, 112; OC I, 805. See *Julie* Part VI, Letter VII: “St Preux makes of moral conscience a sentiment and not a judgment, which goes against the definition of the philosophers. I think however that in this their putative colleague is right.” (CW VI, 561; OC II, 683)

¹⁷ Cassirer makes the comparison, see Cassirer (1993, 62, 123 – 124) and Cassirer (1963, 32 – 33).

¹⁸ Cf. Cassirer (1963, 9, 32, 33), and Cassirer (1993, 121 – 124).

for all my wants by myself without needing the aid of others. Rousseau idealizes such freedom because it is the key to happiness. My happiness depends on my having powers proportionate to my desires; for if I desire more than I can satisfy through my own efforts, I am doomed to misery. The independence of the state of nature ensures me against such misery, however, because there I have only physical desires, and I have the power to satisfy all of them through my own efforts.

There is another aspect behind the freedom in the state of nature, an aspect much less noted than independence but of no less importance. This is what we might describe as *individuality*, i.e., the power to follow my own *unique* talents and inclinations and not being compelled to conform with the expectations of others. It is the ancestor to the concept of individuality later defended by J.S. Mill in *On Liberty*: “pursuing our own good in our own way” (Mill 1978, 12). It is especially in *Emile* that Rousseau’s concept of individuality comes to the fore. The purpose of the program of natural education is to develop Emile’s individuality, more specifically, his sense of the value of his own identity, his ability to make his own choices without worrying about what others will think of him.

Although Cassirer is correct in assuming that natural freedom is more than complete license, he still goes astray in equating it with *moral* autonomy. The problem is that neither of its aspects—neither independence nor individuality—implies acting according to moral laws or universalizable principles. We cannot equate independence with moral autonomy because, in the state of nature, it concerns only how I can satisfy my desires; it does not involve any concern with others, still less submission to universal laws. Rousseau wants the independence of the state of nature because it secures happiness, our power of satisfying all our desires by ourselves, and not because it involves any implicit power of acting according to universal laws. Similarly, we cannot identify individuality with moral autonomy because it states that an action or way of life is good *for me*; it is good for me simply because I, as this very individual, have chosen it, not because it conforms to some universal rule. In other words, individuality gives value to acts of choice because they are mine and characteristic of me, not because they would hold for everyone alike as a rational being.

At this point one could argue in Cassirer’s defense that though independence and individuality are indeed not entirely the same as moral autonomy, their differences from it are precisely what makes them only *primitive* and *inchoate* forms of freedom. When independence and

individuality are developed in civil society they lose their concern with individual happiness; and they become moral forms of autonomy as the reign of law replaces that of individual caprice and inclination.

It is precisely in this regard, however, that we can see the weakness of Cassirer's interpretation. For Rousseau never ceases to think that independence and individuality are of value in their own right, apart from their role in the development of moral autonomy. They are not simply to be replaced or superseded by moral autonomy, as if it were somehow their culmination and purpose. This is especially apparent from the program of natural education in *Emile*, whose is to preserve, as far as possible, natural independence and individuality within society. Emile is to become self-confident and self-reliant, so that he learns how to satisfy all his needs by himself, and so that his happiness does not depend on the esteem of others. The chief goal of his natural education is not to develop his *moral* powers. To be sure, this is one part of his education; but it is only one part, and indeed only a much later part when Emile has become a man. Hence in Book III of *Emile* Rousseau stresses that the natural education focuses on the child as if he were a self-sufficient and independent unit, existing apart from everyone else. There is to be no consideration whatsoever of the child's moral relations with others (Rousseau 1979, 185, 187, 207, 208: OC IV, 455, 458, 487, 488). The non-moral aspect of Emile's natural education is most apparent when Rousseau advises him to judge everything as if he were Robinson Crusoe:

The surest means of raising oneself above prejudices and ordering one's judgments about the true relations of things is to put oneself in the place of an isolated man and to judge everything as this man himself ought to judge of it with respect to his own utility. (Rousseau 1979, 185; OC IV, 455)

The crucial point to see here is that it would be a mistake to equate Emile's independence with Kantian moral autonomy. There are two fundamental differences between these ideals. First, Emile's independence is entirely self-centered, asking what value things have for him. Moral autonomy, however, is essentially concerned with acting on principles that give equal rights to everyone alike, or that treat others as I would be treated myself. Second, the precepts Emile learns are all, in Kantian terms, "hypothetical imperatives," i.e., they determine value not according to moral principles but according to benefit or consequences. Hence Rousseau makes utility the governing rule of the child's development. Emile must always ask himself the question "What is that good for?" (Rousseau 1979, 179, 207; OC IV, 446, 487).

Of course, Rousseau does conceive of Emile's natural education as a basis for his later moral education, as a preparation for his final entrance into social and civil life. If Emile learns to rely on his own powers, Rousseau reasons, then he will learn to think for himself, which will make him a more responsible citizen when he joins the body politic (Rousseau 1979, 178, 190; OC IV, 463). It is important to see, however, that the development of moral autonomy will be only the final stage in the development of Rousseau's *natural* independence. We make the moral tail wag the natural dog if we subsume natural education under moral education. The very converse is the case: moral education is part of the much broader program of natural education. When, following Cassirer, we make moral liberty the chief purpose of natural education, we blur Rousseau's distinction between natural and civic education. Emile is to be first and foremost a *natural*, not a *moral*, man in civil society (Rousseau 1979, 205; OC IV, 483 – 484).

IV. Civilization and its Discontents

Another central assumption behind Cassirer's interpretation, and the idealist interpretation generally, is that the target of Rousseau's critique of civilization in the *Discourses* is not culture, society and the state as such but only his own *contemporary* culture, society and state. Clearly, if Rousseau were objecting to culture, society and the state in general, he could not have a republican solution to the problems arising from civilization.

There is a fair amount of textual evidence to support this assumption. In his *Preface to Narcissus* Rousseau stated that his diagnosis of the evils of civilization had established "a very consoling and useful thing": "that all these vices do not belong so much to man as to man poorly governed" (CW II, 194; OC II, 969). In several other retrospective statements about his argument in the *Discourses* he seemed to qualify his critique so that it applied specifically to contemporary civilization; hence he wrote of "a secret opposition between the constitution of man and that of *our* societies," or of "the abuses of *our* institutions," and he blamed "*our* social order" for the discrepancy between appearance and reality in human actions.¹⁹ Last but not least, in the *Geneva Manuscript* Rousseau wrote of the need "to draw from the disease the remedy that would cure it" (OC III, 288). These lines seem to imply that the disease has been poor government in the past, and that the remedy should be better government in the future.

¹⁹ See *Dialogues* CW I, 130 – 131; OC I, 828; Letter to Malesherbes, January 12, 1792, CW V, 575, OC I, 1136; and the *Letter to Beaumont*, CW IX, 52; OC IV, 967.

Upon closer examination, however, all this apparently hard evidence proves inconclusive. The consoling statement from the *Preface to Narcissus* has to be set against Rousseau's more pessimistic statement in the *Observations* of the "great and deadly truth" that "once a people has been corrupted it has never been seen to return to virtue" (CW II, 53; OC III, 56). Furthermore, the retrospective statements by no means imply that the ills of our modern civilization are somehow unique to it; they seem to regard them as only one example of the problems of civilization in general. Finally, when read in context, the statement from the *Geneva Manuscript* is much more pessimistic than it first appears. Rousseau writes not about the ills of present civilization but those of civilization in general (*l'association general*). When he proposes the state as a cure for these general ills he seems to be proposing nothing more than a palliative, something to relieve the symptoms rather than to provide a general cure. Very cautiously, he says that "perhaps" this remedy will work (Rousseau 1915, 1, 454; OC III, 288).

It is important to see that most of Rousseau's critique of civilization in the *Discourses* is intentionally general, applying to *all* cultures, societies and states. He is explicit in the *First Discourse*, for example, that the corruption of the sciences and arts is not specific to his age but that it is a universal law, a phenomenon "as old as the world" and "observed in all times and places," that as culture increases morals decrease (CW II, 7; OC III, 9 – 10). When he diagnoses the ills of civilization in the *Second Discourse* he blames social relations as such, not merely contemporary forms of them. Hence, he states that the history of illness follows that of civil society as such (CW III, 23; OC III, 138), that in becoming sociable man becomes weak, fearful and servile (CW III, 24; OC III, 139), that one finds in society reasons for the diminution of the species (CW III, 76-8; OC III, 205 – 207), and that love becomes a source of danger as soon as one enters society (CW III, 39; OC III, 158).

Admitting these general claims, the idealist might reply that there is still conclusive evidence that Rousseau's central target is contemporary civilization, or at least some specific forms of social and political organization. This evidence is nothing less than the central thesis of the *Second Discourse*: that the origin of inequality, the main source of human corruption and servitude, arises from inequality in the ownership of property. This thesis seems to imply that the source of corruption is fundamentally political, given that inequality seems to arise from specific social and political arrangements.

The point seems very plausible. It is striking, however, that precisely where we should expect Rousseau to offer a political solution to the problem

of civilization, he denies its very possibility. We learn in both the *Second Discourse* and in the *Discourse on Political Economy* that the only justice that can be established in civil society is distributive, where goods are apportioned according to merit, and that it is impossible to restore the absolute equality of the state of nature, where everyone had all the goods that they needed (CW III, 94, 157; OC III, 222, 262). Furthermore, Rousseau's diagnosis of the origin of inequality in the *Second Discourse* makes it natural and necessary, inevitable within any social or political system. He argues that the origin of inequality arises from three chief sources: 1) the division of labor, 2) natural inequalities in strengths and talents, and 3) the law of supply and demand, that make some goods command a higher price than others (CW III, 51; OC III, 173 – 174). The fact that some people produce more than others, or that the goods that they produce command a higher value in the marketplace, makes it inevitable that they will get more and have to work less. It is a natural economic law for Rousseau, whose tragic workings cannot be altered by the state, that the most indispensable arts, such as agriculture, are the least profitable, while the most dispensable, such as the production of luxury goods, are the most profitable (CW III, 78; OC III, 206).

If Rousseau held that the growth of inequality was natural and inevitable, the result of any socialization, he also said the same about that other potent source of human misery: *amour-propre*. The account Rousseau provides of the rise of *amour-propre* in both *Emile* and the *Second Discourse* makes it the necessary result of human psychology and social relations in general; it is not the product of a competitive capitalist economy alone.²⁰ *Amour-propre* develops when the individual compares himself with others and competes with them to be recognized for his better qualities; he then loses the independence and self-sufficiency that he had in the state of nature because his self-esteem is now contingent upon his acquiring the esteem of others. What generates the inequality of *amour-propre* is natural inequalities in merit and the natural demand for recognition of these merits.

V. Restoring Rousseau's Primitivism

A central feature of the idealist interpretation generally, and of Cassirer's interpretation specifically, is its vehement opposition to the primitivist

²⁰ Cf. Rousseau (1979, 213 – 214, 235); OC IV, 491 – 492, 523. Cf. *Second Discourse*, CW III, 46 – 47; OC III, 167 – 170

reading of Rousseau.²¹ The primitivist interpretation is the antithesis of the idealist interpretation. It sees Rousseau as the champion of the noble savage, as the advocate of a return to the state of nature, and as the enemy of culture, society and the state as such.²² The idealist rejects this reading on several grounds: that Rousseau did not think that it was possible, let alone desirable, to return to the state of nature; that he never rejected the arts and sciences as such; and that he never idealized the state of nature because he saw it as a state of barbarism and animality.

There is indeed something amiss with the primitivist reading, at least in its crudest and most unqualified forms. Its most stalwart critic was Rousseau himself, who indignantly dismissed it as a deliberate distortion. In his replies to the critics of the *First Discourse* he stressed that he never meant we should destroy libraries, abolish property, and dismantle the state, so that we could “go back to the forests with the bears.”²³ It was impossible to return to the state of nature, Rousseau argued, because once a people has been corrupted, it becomes accustomed to the comforts of civilization. Once lost, innocence is irretrievable. Rousseau also protested that he did not mean to criticize the arts and sciences as such, but only their misuse in contemporary society.²⁴ He was defending only “a modest ignorance,” one that restricts knowledge to things necessary for human life; he too opposed “a ferocious and brutal ignorance” that neglects all knowledge, even that necessary for life (*Observations*, CW II, 51; OC III, 54).

While Rousseau’s reply to his critics refutes the crudest forms of the primitivist interpretation, it also does not support the opposing extreme, which sees Rousseau as a champion of historical evolution (Lovejoy 1960, 25, 31). If Rousseau was not a primitivist who preached returning to the state of nature, neither was he an optimist who held that mankind’s ills can be resolved through striving to create a republican constitution. Both extremes are ruled out by Rousseau’s “great and deadly truth” that it is impossible for

²¹ Cassirer’s critique of the primitivist interpretation is implicit everywhere, but explicit in Cassirer (1963, 10, 14, 28, 58n). Undoubtedly, its most trenchant critic was Arthur Lovejoy, whose views in some respect anticipate Cassirer’s. See Lovejoy (1960, 14 – 37).

²² The chief Anglophone apostle of the primitivist reading was Irving Babbitt, see Babbitt (1919). Lovejoy’s and Cassirer’s interpretation was in basic respects a reaction against Babbitt. See Lovejoy (1960, 28), and Cassirer (1963, 58n).

²³ See *Observations* CWII, 53; OC III, 56; and *Second Discourse*, CW III, 79 – 80; OC III, 207.

²⁴ See *Preface to Narcissus*, CWII, 191; OC II, 965; *Observations* CW II, 37; OC III, 36; and *Final Reply*, CW II, 110 – 111; OC III, 72.

mankind to restore its lost innocence. What cannot be recovered by going back to the past – the happiness, freedom and equality of the state of nature – also cannot be redeemed by going forward into the future.

Contrary to the idealist interpretation, it is of the first importance to see that the motivation for so much of Rousseau's critique of the arts and sciences in the *First Discourse* was inspired by his republicanism. Rousseau does not think that these problems can be resolved in a republic, for the very simple reason that he thinks a republic is especially vulnerable to them.²⁵ In point after point in the *First Discourse* Rousseau argued that the fundamental values of a republic were undermined by the cultivation of the arts and sciences. A republic values equality; but the arts and sciences prize rare talents, the exceptional individuals who produce great works (CW II, 18; OC III, 25). A republic requires virtue, devotion to the common good; but people are devoted to the arts and sciences for the sake of vanity, their own private interest (CW II, 15, 19; OC III, 21, 25). A republic requires faith, a civic religion; but the arts and sciences result in a dangerous skepticism (CW II, 14; OC III, 18). A republic requires military qualities, like courage and forbearance; but the arts and sciences breed the luxury, and so a softness in character (CW II, 14, 16; OC III, 19, 22). That Rousseau never resolved the tensions between the arts and sciences and his republicanism is perfectly apparent from his later *Letter to D'Alembert*, where he banished the theatre from Geneva.

If Rousseau was not a naive primitivist, there were still persistent and prevalent primitivist strands in his thought. It is said to be a myth that Rousseau championed the noble savage; but it is strange that there is so much evidence to support this myth. In the *First Discourse* he praises "those savages in America" because their communal life has only "simple and natural" regulations (CW II, 9n; OC IV, 969 – 970n). In the *Preface to Narcissus* he contrasts Europeans unfavorably to savages: while Europeans seek only their self-interest, attempt to deceive one another, and treat the common good with contempt, savages are united only by their love of society and their need for the common defense (CW II, 194n; OC IV, 969 – 970n). We are told in no uncertain terms: the good man is a savage because he does not deceive anyone. In note 16 of the *Second Discourse* Rousseau regards it as a challenge to European culture that savages without fail reject it and prefer to return to their own life, whereas Europeans who live among savages prefer to stay with them. He cites the case of the Hottentot who renounces Christianity and all

²⁵ This is the essential thrust of Strauss's criticism of the idealist interpretation. He regards this as "a decisive objection." See Strauss (1950, 255).

the gifts Europeans have given him, and who runs back to his own people (CW III, 92-93; OC III, 220 – 221). The case was so symbolic for Rousseau that he made an engraving about it his frontispiece.

Perhaps the most notorious form of Rousseau's primitivism is his love of solitude and rural life. In his *Letter to Abbé Raynal* Rousseau resolutely affirms against his critics that he prefers rusticity to politeness and manners (CW II, 25; OC III, 31). In the *Confessions* he often tells us how he prefers the life of rural simplicity to the corrupt life of the cities (CW V, 327, 346; OC I, 389, 412). It is because of the corruption of urban life that, in *Emile*, Rousseau's pupil is taken away from the cities and educated in the country. Rousseau's preference for solitude and a rural life came not only from personal preference but also his deepest ideals: it approached the ideal of independence that man once enjoyed in the state of nature.²⁶ It was also the only way to follow what Rousseau called "the first principle of morality": never to harm anyone.²⁷ While it is impossible to obey this principle in civil society, where I achieve my own good only by harming someone else, I can honor it if I live alone, where there is no one for me to harm.

What demonstrates Rousseau's primitivism beyond a shadow of doubt is nothing less than the argument of Part I of the *Second Discourse*. The aim of Rousseau's argument is to vindicate the critique of the arts and sciences of the *First Discourse* by showing that we are better off in the state of nature than in civil society because we are happier and more virtuous in nature (Lovejoy 1960, 20, 31). On several occasions Rousseau explicitly asks us to compare which is better: life in nature or in civil society; he then argues at length that we are better off in nature (CW III, 23, 34, 35; OC 138, 152, 153). We are happier in the state of nature because we have independence, the power to satisfy all our desires; we are not plagued by the artificial desires of civilization. We are also more virtuous because, although we do not yet act on moral principles, we act on our feelings, first and foremost among them pity, the foundation of all virtues.

Nowhere is this line of argument of the *Second Discourse* more explicit than in Note 9 where Rousseau reaffirms his central thesis that "man is naturally good" (CW III, 74; OC III, 202). He again raises the question whether we are better off in nature or in civil society, and again affirms the superiority of nature over culture. Although Rousseau thinks that most people are too corrupt to recover their earlier innocence, he also advises those who can leave the corruption of urban life to do so. In some of his most passionate lines

²⁶ See Rousseau's account of solitude in the *Dialogues* CW I, 144; OC I, 846 – 847.

²⁷ See Rousseau (1979, 105n). Cf. *Dialogues*, CW I, 99, 127, 151; OC I, 788, 824, 855 – 856.

ever – lines completely ignored by the anti-primitivist interpretation – Rousseau advises them “*allez dans les bois.*”

In assessing the primitivist interpretation, it is of the first importance to see that Rousseau distinguished several stages of the state of nature, and that he had different views about each of them. He did not prefer the original or primal stage where people live in complete isolation, and where their only contacts consist in temporary alliances. Nothing was stable during this period, and peace and happiness were only momentary (Lovejoy 1960, 29 – 31). In Part Two of the *Second Discourse*, however, Rousseau writes of the period of “nascent society” where people lived in families and engaged in communal activities, such as hunting, singing and dancing. He states explicitly that this stage was “the best for man,” “the happiest and most durable epoch,” because a) people could enjoy the pleasures of conjugal and parental love, “the sweetest sentiments known to men,” because b) they still enjoyed their natural independence and equality, and because c) there was no property and no laws. Still, Rousseau does not think that this stage was perfect or idyllic either. Since people demanded recognition for their merits, they knew the first stirrings of *amour-propre* (CW III, 47; OC III, 169); and since there were no laws, they resorted to terrible vengeance when they felt that their rightful demands for recognition were violated (CW III, 48; OC III, 170).

The passages where Rousseau describes early society as the happiest state for mankind have been taken as decisive refutation of the primitivist interpretation (Lovejoy 1960, 29 – 31). But the underlying assumption behind this objection is false: that Rousseau sharply distinguishes the stage of nascent society from that of the state of nature. While Rousseau does distinguish nascent society from the pre-social stage of nature, he never removes nascent society entirely from the state of nature. For, in several senses of that ambiguous term, the stage of nascent society can be described as still within the state of nature. The state of nature could refer to the primal or original state of mankind, the absence of all laws or government, and finally the lack of the arts and sciences.²⁸ Nascent society falls within the state of nature in the last two senses. For Rousseau is explicit that there are no laws in the early

²⁸ Here, for the sake of argument, I adopt Lovejoy’s own distinction between the several senses of the term (Lovejoy 1960, 15). Rightly, Lovejoy stresses that the confusion among these senses has been responsible for much of the controversy surrounding Rousseau (Lovejoy 1960, 29n). Yet his argument against primitivism works only by overworking one of the senses of this term; he simply assumes that the primitivist must equate the state of nature with the primeval non-social state of mankind.

stage of mankind (CW III, 47, 48; OC III, 169, 170), and that people have not developed any of the arts and sciences that come from cooperation and common economic activity (CW III, 49; OC III, 171). It is indeed especially noteworthy that the two great values of the primeval stage of mankind – its freedom and equality – are still preserved at this stage, because people do not have artificial needs and satisfy all their natural needs by themselves without having to cooperate with one another (CW III, 49; OC III, 171). This stage also does not know the institution of property, which is the source of all civil inequality. Last but not least, Rousseau describes this stage as “precisely the point reached by most savages known to us” (CW III, 48; OC III, 170). In note 16 he defends his claim that this is the ideal stage for mankind by pointing out how savages prefer to live in it than to adopt the ways of life of more enlightened Europeans. It is for Rousseau one more example of how the state of nature is preferable to that of civilized life.

VI. Prognosis for Politics

One of the most problematic implications of the idealist interpretation is that it attributes an implausible optimism to Rousseau. It is as if Rousseau held that all the problems of civilization could be overcome if mankind only created – or at least approached the ideal of – republican constitution. Yet Jean Jacques never shared the optimism of the *philosophes*, or of Kant, Fichte and the German romantics. He was no believer in progress;²⁹ he held that the liberty and equality of the state of nature were lost forever; and he saw the problems of civilization as inherent in all social and political life. When, in the *Second Discourse*, he considered the question of what concrete political steps should be taken to address these problems, he forswore political idealism (CW III, 80; OC III, 208). He advised loyalty to the state and denounced the attempt to create a new constitution as doomed to create more problems that it would solve. For those who could quit the entanglements and forswear the comforts of civilization, Rousseau advised seeking personal redemption in rustic life.

It would be a serious mistake, however, to portray Rousseau as a complete pessimist, as if he were a preacher of stoic resignation.³⁰ For all his pessimism, there always lay deep within him, as many commentators have stressed, the makings of a moral and political reformer. According to his early

²⁹ See Rousseau (1979, 343); OC IV, 676: “...there is no true progress of reason in the human species, because all that is gained on one side is lost on another.” Cf. *Dialogues*, CW I, 130; OC I, 828.

³⁰ Shklar goes too far in this direction. See Shklar (1960, 7, 12, 29, 39, 54, 57, 60, 86, 98).

educational program, people are essentially what we make of them, what we educate them to be.³¹ It was one of his epiphanies, he wrote in the *Confessions*, that “everything is rooted in politics and that, whatever might be attempted, no people would ever be other than the nature of their government made them.” (CW V, 340; OC, I, 404) There is indeed good reason to think that, after the publication of the *Discourses* and in response to his critics, Rousseau was moved to reaffirm some aspects of his earlier idealism.³² It is in this light that we should read the passage from the *Geneva Manuscript* that we should take from the disease of civilization the remedy that should cure it. Although Rousseau never saw the social contract as a *goal* for political action, he probably did see it as a *guideline* for possible reform.

If the problems of civilization were inherent in state and society, the prince could still control and mitigate some of their effects. While he could not cure the disease, he could still palliate its worst symptoms through wise legislation and reform. Absolute equality was lost forever; but something approaching it could be achieved through politics. Hence in *Social Contract* II, xi, Rousseau warns that no citizen should be so rich that they can buy another citizen, and that none should be so poor that he is forced to sell himself. And in section III of *Political Economy* he envisages taxation as a means of equalizing extremes of poverty and wealth; he recommends taxing the luxury goods of the rich and abolishing taxes that weigh on the poor. In response to the dangers of *amour-propre*, Rousseau developed his theory of natural education in *Emile*, whose main purpose was to strengthen the child’s self-reliance and self-esteem so that it would not depend on the esteem of others. It is important, however, to balance Rousseau’s reformism against his realism. He saw himself never as a prophet with a miracle cure, but always as a doctor with a remedy for the worst symptoms. The philosopher’s role is not to legislate but only to advise princes and their ministers about the remedies to address the worst evils of contemporary life.³³ Rousseau’s faith in the powers of reform is greatest in the chapter on the Legislator in the *Social Contract* (CW II, vii; OC II, 381), where he gives the founder of the state the power to transform human nature itself. But even here we learn how exceptional such an individual must be. He would have to behold the passions of men without

³¹ On this early program, see Hendel (1934, vol. 1, 18 – 19).

³² This is the argument of Hendel (1934, vol. 1, 18 – 19, 97). See Wokler (1995, 25 – 27, 31 – 32) and Wokler (1980, 250 – 278).

³³ See *First Discourse* CW II, 21 – 22; OC III, 29 – 30. See also Note of the *Second Discourse*, CW III, 80; OC III, 207.

feeling them; he would have to have the deepest concern for our interests without profiting from it; and he would have to know our nature without sharing it. In short, Rousseau concludes, the legislator would have to be a god. Only a few individuals in history, such as Lycurgus and Moses, even approached this ideal.

Nowhere do we find in Rousseau's reformism what the idealist interpretation leads us to expect: the idea of the republic as the *restoration* and *rehabilitation* of the freedom, equality and happiness lost in the state of nature. Rather than regaining our original pristine condition, Rousseau thinks that we will gain *something new* to compensate for our loss—moral and civil liberty—that were not even implicit or potential in the state of nature. The comparison of the state of nature with that of civil society would show that though people had gained much, they also had lost much. There could be no simple comparison of the advantages versus disadvantages of civilization versus nature, however, for the simple reason that natural and civil man had completely incommensurable conceptions of happiness. What was happiness to civil man was misery to natural man, Rousseau tells us at the close of the *Second Discourse* (CW III, 66; OC III, 192). What would make the supreme happiness for one would reduce the other to complete despair.

Yet Rousseau never held that such a reflection should bring us to indifference or resignation. Politics still had a crucial role. For even if civil man had lost paradise, he could also, if he did not act well, lose the values society and the state had to offer him to compensate for that loss. It was this that made politics so crucial to the good life and redeeming the ills of the human condition. It is only along these modest lines, I would suggest, that we can begin to reconcile Rousseau's naturalism and republicanism.

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