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978-0-521-17422-0 - Perfection and Disharmony in the Thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Jonathan Marks

Excerpt

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## Introduction

### *The Natural Perfection of a Naturally Disharmonious Being*

The argument of this book is that Jean-Jacques Rousseau's thought is a reflection on the natural perfection of a naturally disharmonious being. The Rousseau who emerges in the pages that follow, though he is anti-liberal, is more moderate than the Rousseaus to whom one has grown accustomed. This Rousseau has more to contribute to contemporary debates and to our understanding of enduring human problems than those other Rousseaus who are too frequently understood, even by friends, as childlike and fanatical. In order to unearth him, however, it is necessary to dig beneath the centuries of interpretation under which he has been buried and to oppose near unanimities of opinion about his understanding of nature and of human happiness or perfection.

Of course, as the footnotes will confirm, I owe a great deal to other interpreters. Although Rousseau's political and philosophical influence, both real and imagined, has caused him to be even more frequently misinterpreted, I think, than most, he has nonetheless drawn the interest of an extraordinary group of interpreters, from, to speak of the fairly recent past, Leo Strauss to Jean Starobinski to Jacques Derrida.<sup>1</sup> Such interpreters, however much their understanding of Rousseau and how to read him may differ, have read his works with rare insight and painstaking attention to detail. While I will deal in this introduction mainly with how my interpretation differs from the ones I know, and consequently emphasize what I think other interpretations have missed, I know full well that some of my predecessors have forgotten more than I know about Rousseau, and that my own attempt is bound to have missed much. I am confident, however, that this book opens up areas of inquiry and proposes

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answers that, when they have been explored at all, have been too rarely explored by Rousseau's interpreters.

#### NATURAL PERFECTION

Readers will find detailed remarks on the relationship between my thesis and the existing literature in each chapter. However, a few preliminary remarks are in order. I have said that Rousseau's thought concerns the natural perfection of a naturally disharmonious being. Yet few commentators take seriously the idea that Rousseau is interested in natural perfection at all. Those who think that Rousseau is interested in a kind of perfection point him in Kant's nonnaturalistic direction. The perfection to which human beings are destined is a moral perfection rooted in the spontaneity of the will, or in freedom. Insofar as nature has anything to do with this perfection, it is not because it guides human beings but because it leaves them free to renounce its guidance.<sup>2</sup> Those who take Rousseau to be a naturalist of some kind, whether they understand his conception of nature to be scientific or romantic, find that conception above all in the *Second Discourse*, in which nature appears to exclude not only perfection but the impact of perfectibility, the faculty responsible for taking man beyond the "purely animal functions" with which he begins (*Second Discourse*, SD hereafter, III, 143; I, 18). While human beings may look to the simplicity, unity, or independence of nature as, loosely speaking, a model for their own personal and political lives, the more fundamental meaning of the understanding of nature presented in the *Second Discourse* is that nature has left us to our own devices. However much human beings may flourish once they have left the state of nature, that flourishing cannot be properly called natural. Perhaps it would be better not to speak of flourishing at all, inasmuch as that may imply a natural direction of growth.<sup>3</sup>

The Kantian interpretation of Rousseau's thought, though perhaps the most influential, sacrifices Rousseau's coherence. Ernst Cassirer, the most important of Rousseau's Kantian interpreters, aside from Kant himself, recognizes that neither Rousseau's overwhelming emphasis on happiness nor his conception of reason is consistent with Kant's system. He attributes these inconsistencies to Rousseau's yearnings and to his failure to discover Kant's methodology (Cassirer, 1963, 42, 50–51). I will make the premises of my disagreement with Cassirer clear later, but my conclusion can be given away now: One does not need to dismiss salient aspects of Rousseau's thought to save his coherence. If my interpretation succeeds in showing

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that Rousseau's thought is coherent on Rousseau's own terms, it will give us good reason to reject Eric Weil's arresting but condescending claim that "it took Kant to think Rousseau's thoughts."<sup>4</sup>

The naturalistic interpretations emphasize the account of nature Rousseau presents in the Preface and First Part of the *Second Discourse* almost to the exclusion of the one he presents in *Emile*. While the *Second Discourse* seems strictly to divide nature from history, so that none of man's historical attainments are natural, *Emile* suggests that certain historical attainments are natural. For example:

As soon as we have, so to speak, consciousness of our sensations, we are disposed to seek or avoid the objects which produce them, at first according to whether they are pleasant or unpleasant to us, then according to the conformity or lack of it that we find between us and these objects, and finally according to the judgements we make about them on the basis of the idea of happiness or of perfection given us by reason. These dispositions are extended and strengthened as we become more capable of using our senses and more enlightened; but constrained by our habits, they are more or less corrupted by our opinions. Before this corruption they are what I call in us *nature*. (*Emile*, *E* hereafter, IV, 248; 39)<sup>5</sup>

Now, it is true that having a natural disposition toward something does not mean that attaining it is more natural than not attaining it. All I wish to note here is that *Emile* admits what the *Second Discourse* does not at first seem to admit, that our natural dispositions not only do not exclude historical development but unfold, are extended and strengthened, in history. Indeed, just prior to the passage in question and in other passages in *Emile*, Rousseau compares human development to the growth of plants, which might incline us further, though of course it does not compel us, to think that nature points toward certain outcomes, as we often do when we think of acorns and oak trees. In my view, *Emile* contains good evidence that Rousseau finally does urge us to think in this teleological way.

But again, my claim for now is only that the conception of nature advanced in *Emile* opens up the *possibility* that there is a natural end or perfection for human beings, toward which his constitution, his faculties, and his passions point. The *Second Discourse*, which asserts that human nature is only to be found at the beginning, in original man, prior to the impact of "circumstances and . . . progress" (*SD*, III, 122; Preface, 1), forecloses that possibility – one could say that the whole point of the First Part of the *Second Discourse* is to show that human faculties and passions, such as they are at the beginning, do not point beyond themselves to some idea of happiness or perfection given by reason and consequently do not propel us into a social and civilized life. Some of Rousseau's interpreters

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have noted this apparent contradiction between *Emile* and the *Second Discourse* and asked which understanding of nature is Rousseau's primary or real understanding. Almost unanimously, they have opted for the conception of nature found in the *Second Discourse*.<sup>6</sup> But this choice is not easy to explain. Rousseau, after all, called *Emile* his "greatest and best book" (*Dialogues*, *D* hereafter, I, 687; 23).

Some commentators think that the *Second Discourse* contains Rousseau's primary understanding of nature because it seems to be more scientific than *Emile*, and Rousseau, they think, was an exponent of "modern scientific naturalism" (Cooper, 1999, xiv).<sup>7</sup> But, since the *Second Discourse's* conception of nature is itself the main proof that Rousseau was an exponent of modern scientific naturalism, we cannot use Rousseau's scientific naturalism as a reason to insist on the primacy of the *Second Discourse*. Besides, the *Second Discourse* is not by any means obviously a work of modern natural science. Even if it is anti-teleological like modern physics, there is nothing scientific in Rousseau's time or ours about insisting that the original is the only thing natural. To understand today's human beings as having developed from a primitive predecessor may be a nod in the direction of one of the most important foundations of modern biology – the theory of evolution – but it is hard to imagine anything more contrary to the evolutionary spirit than Rousseau's distinction between nature on the one hand and circumstances and progress, or history, on the other.<sup>8</sup> It is surely a central claim of evolutionism that biological nature is historical through and through.

Indeed, this distinction is not only unscientific but also extremely implausible. Participants in the debate among Rousseau scholars over whether Rousseau intended his depiction of the original state to be scientifically accurate have almost always neglected how ridiculous it is to take a man who by Rousseau's own admission is the product of circumstances and progress and treat him as if he were untouched by circumstances and progress.<sup>9</sup> The distinction between nature as it is described in the Preface of the *Second Discourse* and history breaks down on even a cursory examination.<sup>10</sup> That the conception of nature advanced in the Preface of the *Second Discourse* is incoherent, while it is not a decisive reason for rejecting it as Rousseau's primary understanding of nature, is a pretty good reason. I will offer additional reasons in Chapter 1.

#### NATURAL DISHARMONY

I have said that Rousseau thinks that human beings are naturally disharmonious beings. But few commentators take seriously the idea that

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Rousseau thinks nature itself a source of disharmony.<sup>11</sup> True enough, the modern bourgeois is famously in “contradiction with himself” (*E*, IV, 249; 40), but it is to be expected that the bourgeois is here, as in so many other places, opposed to the natural man, who is above all not in contradiction with himself. Whether the interpreter understands Rousseau’s search for unity to be driven essentially by psychological needs, as Jean Starobinski does, or by philosophic considerations, as Arthur Melzer does, or more or less equally by both, as Ernst Cassirer does, he or she tends to understand Rousseau as in search of a lost wholeness that he locates at least at first in nature (Cassirer, 1989, 41, 48–51; Melzer, 1990, 21; Starobinski, 1988, 25–29, 45–47).<sup>12</sup> While estimates of the real importance of nature to Rousseau vary a great deal, the general pattern of natural wholeness–civilized dividedness–restored wholeness pervades the literature devoted to understanding Rousseau’s thought even when, as in Cassirer’s case, the final objective of the thought turns out to be a kind of freedom.

But if, as I have already suggested, the distinction between nature and history cannot be maintained, then it seems improbable, to say the least, that nature can be cleared of responsibility for the loss of wholeness Rousseau often seems to blame on history. To limit myself to a single portion of a single text and reserve the main argument for Chapter 1, it is obvious as early as the First Part of the *Second Discourse* that at least some kinds of disunity are perfectly natural. That fact is obscured by a passage that occurs toward the beginning of the *Discourse*, which paints an idyllic portrait of the most primitive human beings: “I see him satiating his hunger beneath an oak, slaking his thirst at the first Stream, finding his bed at the foot of the same tree that supplied his meal, and with that his needs are satisfied” (*SD*, III, 135; I, 2). The verisimilitude of this portrait is guaranteed only by the assumption of such a natural abundance as to demand no toil, or any adaptation, from human beings. Human beings, in turn, need alter external nature but little for their own advantage. Human nature and external nature are in harmony, so that human beings are not alienated from external nature, let alone their own natures.

But this idyllic portrait is in tension with another, harsher account of the lot of primitive human beings. This account, which follows on the heels of the idyll, is introduced without fanfare: “The Earth, abandoned to its natural fertility and covered by immense forests which no Axe ever mutilated, at every step offers Storage and shelter to the animals of every species” (*SD*, III, 135; I, 3). At first glance, this passage sounds as idyllic as the first, but it reveals that the Earth is not so fertile that it does not require even animals to store up food for later consumption. Nor is it so hospitable that it does not require even animals sometimes

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to seek shelter. That storage is necessary, incidentally, implies that even animals need foresight or its equivalent. Foresight, however, introduces a potential conflict between present desires (say the desire not to work) and future-oriented desires (say the desire not to starve when nature fails us). The idyll in which human needs are provided for spontaneously, and in which each human being is in harmony with nature and at peace with himself, is immediately exposed as an exaggeration; even animals are not granted so harmonious a relationship to nature. Animals have to work, and human beings “imitate their industry” (Ibid.). Yet the Lockean virtue of industry was hardly needed in the paradise world human beings inhabited but a paragraph ago. It was taken up, presumably without pleasure, by human beings who are said by Rousseau to have a “mortal hatred . . . of sustained work” (SD, III, 145; I, 22). Returning to the question of storage, it looks as if human beings are grasshoppers by nature, but external nature, as the fable confirms, compels grasshoppers to be more like ants.

Things get worse. Human beings are altered in body by difficult conditions. They are hardened by bad weather, fatigue, and the need to defend their lives and prey against ferocious animals (SD, III, 135; I, 4). These same dangers and nuisances, in addition, frustrate the desires of primitive human beings. Though they like to sleep, for example, the dangers with which they are surrounded compel them to be light sleepers (SD, III, 140; I, 13). Rousseau does not add, though one cannot help imagining, that they are often grumpy. They are altered in mind, too. Man must compare himself with the other animals to determine which he should attack and which he should flee: “Savage man, living dispersed amongst the animals and early finding himself in the position of having to measure himself against them, soon makes the comparison” (SD, III, 136; I, 6).

This is a remarkable change, though it is not announced as such, for at least two reasons. First, man, Rousseau does not doubt, is naturally frightened of what he does not know (SD, III, 136; I, 6). This fear is conquered in him with respect to the other animals only by the ability to make comparisons, which develops in man what Rousseau will later call “mechanical prudence” (SD, III, 165; II, 5). A division is introduced in man between a natural and spontaneous passion and an evidently natural but less spontaneous primitive reflection. Second, natural man, in order to compare himself to others, must stand outside of himself for the first time. In order to measure himself, he must look at himself, which requires a part of him to be detached or self-conscious. To this extent, natural man lives outside of himself before he even encounters other human beings,

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and while this is not as bad as living in the opinion of others, it is not unrelated. Rousseau suggests as much in the Second Part of the *Discourse*, when he admits that when human beings compare themselves to other animals, they begin to experience pride (*SD*, III, 166; II, 6).

I admit, of course, that civilized man in Rousseau's account is more radically divided than natural man. Natural man is, nonetheless, already divided – between present and future, subject and object – from the very beginning. I also think and will show that, for Rousseau, self-consciousness and immediacy, activity and indolence, and solitude and sociality are natural requirements of human happiness that are, at the same time, a source of psychic disharmony. Even in successful attempts to manage this disharmony, the result is not so much a seamlessly unified whole as a life that oscillates between the different goods.<sup>13</sup> While my focus will be on solitude and sociality, since so much of Rousseau's legacy and the questions surrounding it concern individualism and collectivism, I believe I will be able to say enough about the other two oppositions to make this proposition plausible: Rousseau finds the fundamental cause of our disharmony in human nature itself, not in what society or other external forces have done to it.

## PERFECTION AND DISHARMONY

If Rousseau's thought is a reflection on the natural perfection of naturally disharmonious beings, what will that perfection look like? Two main approaches to the problem of natural disharmony present themselves: suppress it, or seek to arrange for human flourishing in spite of it. I think that Rousseau takes the second approach and that for him human flourishing requires a difficult and delicate arrangement of conflicting goods.

But commentators have long been struck by Rousseau's presentation of two radically opposed models, the solitary natural man of the *Second Discourse* and of the autobiographical works, and the Spartan or Roman citizen of the *Social Contract* and of other political works. Indeed, this is one of the oldest questions about Rousseau: How can his praise of the asocial and lazy natural man, who lacks self-consciousness, be reconciled with his praise of the utterly socialized and active citizen who, far from lacking self-consciousness, is constrained by a self-made and self-imposed law? Note that what both models seem to have in common is the suppression of disharmony: Human beings are either utterly socialized or utterly asocial, but not both.



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Commentators who seek to defend Rousseau's consistency usually do so without mitigating the apparent polar opposition between natural man and citizen in his thought. As I have already noted, natural wholeness–civilized dividedness–restored wholeness is the typical pattern by means of which Rousseau's thought is understood, where at least one form of restored wholeness is to be found in the Spartan or Roman citizen. And so it is easy enough to claim that the apparently opposed models Rousseau praises have in common that they eliminate the tearing contradictions and complications that beset the bourgeois, whose soul is divided between, among other things, his natural inclinations and his civil duties (*E*, IV, 249–50; 40). This understanding of Rousseau, of course, emphatically denies that Rousseau seeks to preserve rather than suppress the oppositions that lead in the direction of bourgeois misery.

However, there is an obvious sense in which, once the unity of natural man's soul comes into question, Rousseau's demand for unity comes into question, too. Rousseau's psychologistic interpreters find themselves in the most difficulty here, for they have generally insisted, to use Michael Sandel's phrase, that Rousseau is "unable to abide disharmony" (1996, 320). If it can be shown that Rousseau understands that the happiness of "original man" himself depends on a fortunate balance between conflicting goods, there will be much less reason to suppose that Rousseau was pathologically attached to unity. More broadly, there will be much less reason to suppose that Rousseau's favored models are those that decisively choose the goods on one side of the conflict between natural man and citizen to the exclusion of the other – those models found at the extreme ends of Rousseau's supposedly bipolar system.

Emphasis on the Spartan and natural man poles has also been encouraged by the other apparent polarity in Rousseau's thought that I have been discussing, between nature and history. The assertion that natural man is radically solitary seems to depend on the assertion that the historical developments that put an end to that solitude are unnatural. But in the framework of the *Second Discourse*, that claim is maintained mainly as a corollary of the broader claim that all historical developments are unnatural.<sup>14</sup> This claim, which amounts to the claim that natural man is, strictly speaking, original man and only original man, exacerbates the tension between nature and society by making it appear that any development in the direction of society, let alone society itself, let alone a society on the order of Sparta or Rome, negates nature. Nature and society, on this account of Rousseau's thought, are like matter and anti-matter – to seek to put them together is to destroy both. That is likely, it seems



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to me, one reason that commentators have so often homed in on the Spartan, who is, as much as possible, all society, and the natural man, who is, as much as possible, all nature. The numerous states Rousseau praises between these two possibilities have received less attention because it is difficult to account for these hybrids in terms of the presumed and connected bipolarities of Rousseau's thought.<sup>15</sup>

Certainly, some explanation is needed for the relative neglect on the part of Rousseau's interpreters of one of Rousseau's most striking statements. In the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau praises what I will call the savage nation as "best for man" (*SD*, III, 171; II, 18). The savage nation succeeds the stage in which human beings first form settled families; in this new stage, human beings form troops and finally nations united by a common way of life and by its requirements and consequences. What is striking about the savage in the savage nation is that he, like the unfortunate bourgeois, is "in between."<sup>16</sup> Savages in the savage nation are between laziness and activity and between solitude and sociality, among other things.<sup>17</sup> Rousseau's high praise of this state, the highest praise he gives any historical state, suggests that disharmony is not only a feature of our nature understood as it is in the First Part of the *Second Discourse*, but also a feature of our nature understood as an end or perfection. The savage is not torn apart by the presence of conflicting goods in his life, but such goods, being present, must be arranged by fortune or art so as not to tear him apart. If, as I think I can show, this pattern of savage life is replicated in Rousseau's other and more constructive (as opposed to critical) works, we will have further reason to believe that Rousseau's understanding of human perfection allows and even requires the presence of goods that threaten to destroy each other. The savage is not Rousseau's dream of unity to counter the nightmare of bourgeois disunity, but rather a model that captures Rousseau's perfectly realistic understanding that a disunity natural to human beings should be artfully managed, not suppressed, for the sake of human flourishing.

## ROUSSEAU'S LEGACY

Rousseau is often read as one of the great extremists in the history of political thought. So radical is Rousseau that he is at least two extremists in one. The two extremists in question are connected with the natural man and the Spartan that Rousseau praises. The Rousseau who praises natural man is a radical individualist who goes so far as to see even speech and reason, once thought to mark out humanity, as agents of the deformation by

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society of naturally asocial man. This Rousseau is implicated in the most irresponsible romanticism, a childish but dangerous refusal to meet the most reasonable demands of civilized life. The Rousseau who praises the Spartan is a radical communalist or collectivist. This Rousseau argues that human beings are nothing but dumb, amoral brutes outside of society and that our humanity is ultimately salvaged only by means of the complete transformation of naturally independent individuals into parts of a communal whole, into human beings who are nothing without all the others. He is implicated in totalitarianism, however democratic.

Although these Rousseaus have been decried over and over again, almost no one denies that Rousseau also stands at the beginning of a more or less respectable tradition of individualistic criticisms of classical liberalism, the liberalism of Locke and Montesquieu.<sup>18</sup> Classical liberalism, at best, provides liberty understood as the absence of restraint without providing the autonomy sought after by Rawlsian liberals or the authenticity sought after by romantic individualists. More broadly, even those who complain of Rousseau's extremism are by and large willing to acknowledge that he drew our attention to the way in which dependence on others, not only political but also economic and psychological, may leave us unfree and dissatisfied, and that this concern is not by itself the concern of an extremist.

At the same time, Rousseau stands at the beginning of an equally respectable and sometimes closely related tradition of communitarian criticisms of classical liberalism. Communitarian thinkers like Charles Taylor and Michael Sandel, whatever their difficulties with Rousseau, are willing to concede that he helped initiate, or was at least among the first to articulate, modern concern with the psychological, social, and political consequences of modern individualism. Liberal modernity, which purports to unite human beings through rational self-interest, actually leaves them lonely, favors relationships of hypocrisy and exploitation, and turns them away from politics.

Steven Kautz has observed that, whatever the nominal separation between these two traditions of criticism, both exert a pull on the modern heart, so that Rousseau can be said to stand at the beginning of a single bipolar tradition:

Rousseau stands at the beginning of an enduring tradition of thought whose aim is to restore the "respectable extremes" – natural privacy and moral community – that have been destroyed by the rise of the bourgeois. Such thinkers (and artists, and sometimes even politicians) seek to radicalize our love of privacy or our love of community, in Rousseau's spirit if not always in his manner. (Kautz, 1997, 254)