I

INTRODUCTION

In this book I provide a critical reconstruction of the major steps in the argument of three of Rousseau’s works: the Discourse on the Origins of Inequality, Emile and the Social Contract. My interest in doing this lies with the problem that Rousseau presents and develops in these works about the individual’s relations to others in society. My reason for selecting only these three from the body of Rousseau’s writing is that they are the major statements of his mature thought on the subject and that taken together they constitute a unified argument. By concentrating on them I can isolate and criticize the essential steps in Rousseau’s reasoning about the individual in his social relations. As the first part of his argument the Discourse on the Origins of Inequality (first published in 1755) contains an account of how the social conditions of men’s existence create for them a fundamental problem as to their individual identities. It is the preliminary presentation and analysis of the social problem. Emile (first published in 1762) and the Social Contract (first published also in 1762) are attempts to conceive the solution to it. Emile provides an account of the educational and moral relations, and the Social Contract the political relations that must be realized between men for the problem to be solved.

The initial concern which gave rise to Rousseau’s enterprise can be expressed in terms of his well-known belief that man is by nature good and only corrupted in society. To show that this is so is what he undertakes in the Discourse on the Origins of Inequality, to reveal uncorrupted human nature on the one hand, and corrupted social man on the other. The definition of both the goodness and the corruption of human nature presents Rousseau with the problem which his subsequent work attempts to solve: how to conceive of a society and social relations between men in which this corruption is avoided and the potentialities in human nature for virtue are fully developed. The terms in which the goodness and corruption, and so the social problem are defined by Rousseau thus constitute the centre around
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which his intellectual enterprise is constructed and through which, if the terms are fundamentally misconceived, it must fail.

The essence of the corruption involves a certain sort of relationship of the individual to others. While this corrupt relationship has its necessary material conditions, namely economic interdependence, it is constituted not by economic relations, but by the sort of consciousness the individual has of himself in his relations to others. It is a consciousness of his individuality in which he comes to have for himself the identity and value that he has in the eyes of others. The individual becomes for himself what Rousseau holds to be an artificial creation out of the opinions of others. This essentially other-dependent consciousness makes it necessary for men to please others in order to be satisfied with themselves. As a result they lose their natural liberty to determine for themselves their own identity and value, and instead have these imposed on them by others.

The root of the social problem for Rousseau is this other-dependent consciousness, which Rousseau claims is not integral to human nature but only the artificial product of society. What Rousseau attempts to do is to reconcile nature and society by conceiving of a way in which men may be related to each other in society which nevertheless excludes this freedom-destroying and corrupting dependence. What is required is the development of a new consciousness, which will enable men to conceive of themselves in their relation with others in such a way that no one is dependent but all remain unrestricted and free.

The way in which Rousseau initially defines the problem of dependence is in terms of a contrast between nature and society where the idea of nature is represented by the concept of a state of nature, a condition of man in which no society exists and no social relations are experienced. This non-social nature is characterized as good and contrasted to society as corrupt, for in nature there is no dependence of men on each other, but only in society. However, Rousseau proposes to resolve the problem of dependence in society by returning to nature in the sense of refounding society on nature, and this project creates a paradox which lies at the centre of Rousseau’s ultimate incoherence. For there is no dependence in nature because there are no social relations. In the formation of
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society the independence of nature must necessarily be destroyed, and yet if society is to be made tolerable for men it must recreate the independence of nature. The good society, for Rousseau, must both denature man and yet be founded upon man’s nature. In my critical reconstruction of Rousseau’s argument I shall show why this paradox arises and how its dissolution involves the dissolution of Rousseau’s whole enterprise.

This book is not a commentary on Rousseau’s social and political thought in general. It is not even a full commentary on the three works I am considering. Much in these works that is peripheral to the crucial steps in the development of the argument will be ignored. For what I hope to achieve in concentrating on these crucial steps is to get to the root of Rousseau’s conception of the social problem, to reveal the fundamental presuppositions which govern both the terms in which he presents the problem and the terms in which the solution to it is conceived. In doing so I aim to show that because of these presuppositions his social problem is misconceived and his solution radically incoherent.

The critical nature of this enterprise supposes that Rousseau’s problems and ideas are of interest to us in other ways than as a mere episode in the history of past thought, an episode that may have historical significance but is without current philosophical relevance. Of course, subsequent thought has moved on from Rousseau, and does not confront its problems in exactly the same terms as Rousseau uses. Nevertheless it is the assumption of this work that the problems Rousseau raises about the nature of the individual’s relations to others in society have remained in different guises the unresolved concern of later thinkers. I do not deliberately attempt to show that this is so, but assume it and leave it to the reader, should he find any interest in my argument, to reflect on it in the light of this assumption.

It must be stressed that this work is not a history of Rousseau’s thought. It does not present Rousseau’s thought on the social problem as developing in a context of other thought. It is concerned only with its nature and logic, with the way in which the argument unfolds and with the fundamental philosophical difficulties it involves. This argument I have abstracted from the more complex and
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confusing historical reality of Rousseau’s thought. Such an abstraction may be in many respects a misleading picture of Rousseau. My claim is that it represents the central core of his thought on the individual and society.
2

NATURAL GOODNESS AND SOCIAL CORRUPTION

NATURE

The question that Rousseau undertook to answer in writing the Discourse on the Origins of Inequality was, what are the origins of inequality among mankind and is such inequality authorized by natural law? To answer this question Rousseau assumes that we have to know what the original condition of man was, so that we can trace from this starting point the development of inequality. He assumes therefore that this original condition was one of equality. He distinguishes between two sorts of inequality: on the one hand natural inequality, which consists in the differences created by nature between one person and another with regard to their qualities of body and mind; and on the other, what he calls moral or political inequality, arising out of some sort of convention, and consisting in the fact that some men are more rich, more honoured or more powerful than others.¹ Since the first sort of inequality is given by nature, we may say that Rousseau’s assumption of original equality is the assumption that moral or political inequality does not form part of man’s original condition, and thus its rise needs to be explained and to be justified.

Although the formal framework of the Discourse is provided by this question about inequality, Rousseau’s concern is much wider, for it is directed at understanding the fundamental causes of the corruption which he takes to be deeply rooted in the way of life and consciousness of civilized social man. The question about inequality provides an entry into this wider enquiry, for he takes the presence of inequality, of the moral and political variety, to be intimately connected with the existence of corruption, so that an understanding of the rise of the one will provide an understanding of the rise of the other. Rousseau’s concern to understand the causes or conditions of

¹ The Political Writings of J. J. Rousseau, ed. C. E. Vaughan (Oxford, 1962), vol. 1, p. 146. Unless otherwise stated all further page references in this chapter will be to the Discourse on the Origins of Inequality in vol. 1 of this edition. All translations in the chapter are my own.
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the corruption of social man is not simply the concern of a disinterested enquirer after truth, for it arises also out of his desire to vindicate human nature against society, by showing that this corruption is not an inherent part of human nature, but rather the product of the social conditions in which man comes to exist. That man is naturally good is what he wishes to show and he thinks he can show this by explaining how from an original condition in which inequality and corruption are absent, both can be supposed to arise.

The initial aim of the enquiry is to arrive at a characterization of this original condition, the so-called state of nature, by which is meant a pre-social condition of man, in which the whole social context of historical man’s life is assumed away, together with all those human characteristics that could have been acquired only in such a context. The result of the enquiry into the state of nature will provide the grounds to support the initial assumption that it is a state in which inequality and corruption are absent. This enquiry, however, will not be an historical one, and so the grounds provided will not be historical. About this Rousseau is clear, for he says that the state of nature is one ‘which no longer exists, which has perhaps never existed, which probably never will exist, and yet of which it is necessary to have a clear idea in order to understand our present condition’ (p. 136). If it is of no consequence whether the state of nature existed or not, what is an enquiry into it about? It is the exploration of an hypothetical idea which will enable us to say what can and cannot have been true of man’s life and relations with others under the conditions posited. In Rousseau’s case, what he hopes the exploration of the idea will enable him to say is that man in the conditions posited cannot have been subject to inequality and corruption, and cannot have been so subject for certain reasons. Understanding these reasons will help us to understand ‘our present condition’ whether or not man ever existed in a state of nature. The crucial question for Rousseau and for us then is what these reasons are.

The idea of a state of nature was not, of course, one that Rousseau invented nor was he unaware that his predecessors, notably Hobbes, had provided accounts of it which ran contrary to what he himself
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wished to establish. In this respect he makes the general claim that while previous philosophers have investigated the state of nature, not one has properly arrived at it, for all have imported into their account characteristics or attributes of human life that could only have arisen and developed in a social context. Thus those who attribute to men in a state of nature notions of just and unjust, of property and authority, together with all those who talk of natural men as subject to passions of pride and desires of domination, have, he claims, taken their ideas of man in nature from man in society, and while talking of natural man, are describing civilized, social man (pp. 140–1). This, of course, is what he has to substantiate in his own account, but it indicates the way in which he is going to set about his task. If, to arrive at a proper understanding of man in a state of nature, we must assume away every aspect of human life that only makes sense in terms of men who possess social relations and institutions, then in dispossessing man of his social context we must suppose men and women to be living solitary and independent lives in primeval forests, meeting occasionally to satisfy their sexual needs and so reproduce the species, and otherwise haphazardly as they wander about the forests in search of their food and shelter. He then proceeds to give an account of what he thinks man’s purely physical condition would be like in these circumstances, the details of which need not detain us, for they are only brought in to make the point that if man existed and survived in such a state, it would be reasonable to suppose that his physical characteristics were well adapted to the conditions of his existence.

Of more moment for Rousseau’s enterprise is what he has to say about the moral or metaphysical side of natural man. He has already told us in the preface to the Discourse that in meditating upon the first and simplest operations of the human soul, he believes himself to have discerned two principles prior to the development of man’s rational faculties; on the one hand a principle of self-preservation or self-love, which he calls amour de soi, and on the other a principle of pity, which he describes as involving a natural repugnance at seeing any sensitive being, but principally members of our own species, suffer or die (p. 138). These two principles he attributes to natural man, as being the fundamental determinants of his
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behaviour. However, Rousseau also attributes both principles to animals, although pity of course in a very restricted degree, so that if we are concerned to distinguish natural man as distinctively human, albeit not social, neither of these principles will do the job for us. The life of natural man as so far presented to us, and given the above attributions to both men and animals, is hardly distinguishable from a possible life of solitary animals.

It is far from Rousseau’s intention in depriving man of all his social characteristics to reveal him as in nature nothing but an animal, for in setting out to show man as naturally good and only corrupted in society, he has to show the being he describes as identifiably human. Otherwise he would deprive himself from the outset of a conception of human nature external to human nature in society, in terms of which the latter can appear as a corruption. He offers us two possible ways of distinguishing natural man from animals. The first is in terms of man’s free agency. Every animal, he says, is an ingenious machine, to which nature has given senses to keep itself going, and to preserve itself from everything that tends to distort or destroy its existence. The same applies to the human machine, with this difference: that whereas nature alone governs every animal’s activity, man contributes to the determination of his own in his capacity of free agent. This free agency manifests itself in man’s capacity to will or choose independently of his natural impulses. It is, Rousseau says, in the consciousness of this liberty that the spirituality, or non-physical nature, of man’s soul is displayed (p. 149), so that man even in nature is set apart from the natural world.

However, having offered us this, Rousseau immediately runs away from its implications, and because of the possible objections that might be made to the existence of free will, provides us with another way of distinguishing natural man from the animals, which he claims cannot be contested. This lies in the faculty of perfectibility, by which he understands a capacity in men to develop themselves, both individually and as a species, so that they change through time with the aid of changing circumstances in a way in which animals do not (pp. 149–50). What of course cannot be contested in this matter is the fact that men have so developed
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themselves, and so must have had the capacity to do so. But in attributing this development to a special faculty that is not otherwise identified, or identifiable, Rousseau leaves us in total obscurity as to how it is that the development comes about, and so what it is in terms of men’s characteristics that distinguishes them from animals.

The faculty of perfectibility explains nothing but merely points to facts, which from the standpoint of the original state of nature are not even present, but future. Nevertheless it provides an alternative to take us away from the first distinction offered, for the attribution of free will to natural man in the form described is not easily reconcilable with the other characteristics of natural man’s life that Rousseau develops. For he wants to say of his natural man that he has through the simple impulses or instincts of nature all that is necessary for him to live well in the conditions he finds himself in, that is to be happy and contented with himself and all nature. Thus he distinguishes between two sorts of desires: on the one hand desires dependent on our having ideas or conceptions of the object desired; and on the other hand desires deriving directly from the impulses of nature. Rousseau takes the existence of desires of the former kind to depend on the development of man’s rational faculty, which he claims is only latent in a state of nature. Thus natural man’s desires being simply the instincts of nature will correspond to his physical needs, so that the only goods he knows are food, sex and sleep, and the only evils, hunger and pain (p. 151). He possesses neither imagination nor language, and having no understanding of past and future, lives only in the present. His behaviour in the present is governed by those two principles, amour de soi and pity, which themselves are impulses of the soul derived directly from nature, and not dependent on the existence of reason. In allowing himself to be guided by them, he follows instinctively what Rousseau calls the maxim of natural goodness, ‘Pursue one’s good with the least possible harm to others’ (p. 163).

In so far then as natural man had, according to Rousseau, ‘in instinct alone all that was necessary for him to live in the state of nature’ (p. 159), free will would appear as an interruption of and potential interference with these natural impulses. For free will as described by Rousseau involves the capacity to distinguish oneself
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from nature, and determine oneself to follow or not to follow nature's impulses. It is to be conscious of oneself as apart from nature, and of nature working on one. One would have to say, then, that natural man having free will always determines himself to act in virtue of a conscious decision to do or not to do something, and therefore not instinctively. Thus if natural man has in instinct alone all that is sufficient for him to lead a happy life, free will is certainly redundant, as having no function in such a life any more than reason has, but would also, if it occurred, be disruptive of the instinctive nature of that life.

If the faculty of perfectibility fails to distinguish anything in natural man that is not the animal man, since it only points to potential, not actual, differences, and free will, which in any case Rousseau is not keen to press, cannot be accommodated with the rest of Rousseau's account of natural man, then we appear to be left with no distinction at all between natural men and animals other than the former's stronger impulse of pity. Nevertheless while free will plays no further role in the argument, and indeed its role altogether is very unclear, there is a very important aspect in Rousseau's account of it, which recurs at later points as an unquestioned and undiscussed assumption, and which serves to show why Rousseau is not more particularly concerned with this problem. This aspect is the self-consciousness involved in free will, the consciousness of oneself as an individual set apart from the rest of the world, arising out of one's consciousness merely as subject to, but at the same time capable of resisting, the impulses of nature. Thus although free will as such disappears from the argument, this assumption of self-consciousness remains underlying Rousseau's presupposition that he is talking about a human animal, and not merely the animal species man.

In describing natural man as without reason, without language and without imagination, governed only by his limited physical needs and directed by the instinctive sentiments of amour de soi and pity, Rousseau would appear to have successfully assumed away everything that in being connected with human corruption in society could cause its existence in the state of nature. But this needs to be demonstrated. The crucial question concerns the struggle for