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A HISTORY OF
**MODERN
POLITICAL
THOUGHT**

Major Political Thinkers from Hobbes to Marx



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Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Introduction

An ancient with a modern soul

Rousseau's political thought is a strange and disturbing combination. He seems, somehow, to run together nostalgia for the freedoms of a simple pastoral age, still then to be glimpsed in alpine villages, an idealization of the classical military republics of Sparta and early Rome and a terrible awareness of the complex forms of meaninglessness and oppression – both liberal and totalitarian which have, in the mass societies of the twentieth century, insinuated themselves into our lives. He is an ancient with a modern soul. He would have us believe that the very cultural forms through which we live our lives crush and distort our natures: 'Civilized man is born and dies a slave. The infant is wrapped up in swaddling clothes, the corpse is nailed down in his coffin. All his life man is imprisoned by our institutions.'¹

A thinker of the Enlightenment, he subverts and denies the values and properties so often ascribed to it, opposing pessimism to its optimism, sentiment and will to its rationalism, and in particular rejecting its view of progress. In this he was of course, not alone, Voltaire had already impishly satirized the facile optimism of some in *Candide*. There is a strong strand of historical pessimism in the Enlightenment; as Peter Gay writes 'A program for progress, it is worth insisting, is not a theory of progress . . . the philosophes . . . were haunted by antique metaphors which they thought they had discarded; they pictured civilizations as individuals, with a distinct life-cycle ending in decay and death'.² If Rousseau differed from his contemporaries more than in the depth of his pessimism, it was perhaps that their pessimism arose from the fear that their ideals would not be realised, and his from the fear that they would. So, though often differing from their judgement, Rousseau nevertheless shares with the Enlightenment thinkers a preoccupation with certain issues, and an inheritance of certain ways of thinking.

The suspicion of reason

Rousseau's subversion of the common view of the Enlightenment is exemplified in Rousseau's rejection of what was, at least for many early Enlightenment thinkers, an

¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, tr. Foxley (London, 1911) p. 10.

² Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (2 vols, London, 1966–9), vol.2, p. 100.

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article of faith, and that is a belief in the progressive effects of the power and clarity of reason.

Although the Enlightenment's faith in reason is almost an intellectual cliché, it can be overemphasized. Locke's vastly influential *Essay on Human Understanding* could be (and was) read two ways, either as a sceptical critique of the limits of 'knowledge' considered precisely - without thereby undermining the existence of that which could not be so known (as, largely, in Britain) or, much more optimistically, using a definition of knowledge to establishing prescriptively what could be said to exist and what could not (as he tended to be read in France).³ In the British Enlightenment, and especially amongst Scottish and Irish thinkers the focus was on the role of feelings and the sentiments.⁴ Scepticism has an important and still under-acknowledged role in the development of political thinking. We should remember Hume's dictum about reason quite properly being the slave of the passions. But even though Hume and others played down the role of reason in everyday life, he remained confident enough about reason's limited reflective role in discovering the operations of the mind. In France moreover, the legacy of Descartes' rationalism led (against his intentions) to a more sustained, and potentially disruptive, optimism about the social and political benefits to be expected from the application of critical rationality.⁵

But Rousseau differed from all these, his rejection of rationalism was based, not on the view that it overestimates the role of reason in our lives, but on the observation that its role has increased, and with disastrous results. Reason, he thought, had overcome ignorance only to make us sceptics, it had tempered our chauvinism to the point where it had destroyed our patriotism. It had been used to suppress and distort our natural responses of sympathy and pity, and to construct, as objects of rational belief, 'vain sophisms' which crumble under attack because they do not engage the feelings. The very roots of the rational sciences lie in our least admirable qualities - astronomy came from astrology, resulting from our superstition, mathematics from accounting, needed by our avarice, law from our inequality and injustice. Everywhere the consequences of reason's work for morality was disastrous. The application of technology in warfare had undermined courage and personal bravery. And the progress of medicine had destroyed our capacity to face death.

I do not know what the doctors cure us of, but I know this: they infect us with very deadly diseases, cowardice, timidity, credulity, the fear of death. What matter if they make the dead walk, we have no need of corpses; they fail to give us men, and that is what we need.⁶

³ See for example Rousseau's contemporary, Turgot, *On Universal History*, in *Turgot, on Progress, Sociology and Economics*, ed. & intr. R. Meek (Cambridge, 1973), p. 95.

⁴ For Rousseau's famous predecessor Montesquieu, the 'principle' of a government is 'the human passions which set it in motion'. So, 'Virtue in a republic is a most simple thing; it is love of the republic; it is a sensation, and not a consequence of acquired knowledge'. Baron Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, tr. Thos. Nugent (New York and London, 1949), Bk. III, §1; Bk. V, §2. Francis Hutcheson, an Irish Scot, the Scots Adam Smith and David Hume, and the Irishman, Edmund Burke, all stress the operation of sentiment over reason in human nature.

⁵ N.O. Keohane, *Philosophy and the State in France, the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Princeton, 1980), pp. 210-12.

⁶ *Emile*, p. 21.

The perils of socialisation

Rousseau subverted a second major theme of the Enlightenment. He viewed with despair the growing belief in the adaptability of the human mind. Numerous philosophers in France during this period adopted or adapted the philosophical psychology popularized by Locke.⁷ Locke's attempt to show how the mind might come to build up a coherent picture of the world from sense-perception and without the aid of any 'innate ideas' excited both fear and optimism. Fear – widely expressed in Britain – that his position might (as indeed it did) support atheistic tendencies, in denying the role of God in at least establishing and enforcing moral belief. Optimism about social reform – more particularly in France – in that the mind, if only it could be furnished with appropriately selected experiences, could be formed to education, cultivation and a benevolent disposition. 'Education', wrote Helvetius, one of the most optimistic of its proponents, 'could do everything'.

Nor was philosophical psychology the only discipline which emphasised the way in which personality and belief were a product of circumstance. The historical sociology implicit in the early forms of political economy stressed the influence of socio-economic and geo-political circumstance on the formation of customs, manners and temperament.⁸ Although a recognizable historical political economy was only emerging in France at the time Rousseau wrote, legal thought had already provided there the basis for an essentially similar development. Comparative legal study, and the increasingly reflective and sophisticated 'travellers' tales' of foreign societies led to attempts to characterise the 'Spirit' of different peoples as suffused through their culture and institutions, and internalized by the individual.⁹

The variety of cultures demonstrated the adaptability of the human mind and the way it was shaped by experience, and this held out to many reformers the infinite possibilities inherent in education. But the very plasticity of mind also implied for Rousseau, that it could be infinitely degraded. Hume seemed almost happy to dissolve problems about the standards of morality into the natural history of how moralities emerge, and our growing understanding of the process of socialisation. For Rousseau this merely raised the question at another level – what values should we be socialised into? He sees with

⁷ Turgot's *Philosophical Review of the Successive Advances of the Human Mind* (1750), asserts that 'The most exalted mental attainments are only and can only be a development or combination of the original ideas based on sensation'; 'the senses constitute the unique source of our ideas'. Turgot . . . , ed. Meek, pp. 42, 46. D'Alembert's 'Preliminary Discourse' to the famous *Encyclopaedia*, is truly Lockean in denying innate ideas and stressing their origins in experience and reflection. In a Lockean subversion of Descartes he almost (but not quite) asserts 'I experience therefore I am': 'The fact of our existence is the first thing taught us by our sensations, and indeed is inseparable from them.' *Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopaedia of Diderot*, Jean D'Alembert, tr. & intr. R.N. Schwab with W.E. Rex (Indianapolis and New York, 1963).

⁸ Once again Turgot's earlier works and the later Montesquieu explore and develop these themes.

⁹ The most famous example being Montesquieu's *Esprit des Lois* (see especially books 14–19). Montesquieu's work was however the culmination of a long tradition of such reflections discussed in Ira O. Wade, *The Intellectual Origins of the French Enlightenment* (Princeton, 1971).

frightening clarity that we could be made *victims* of our sensations and experiences, if we were not taught how to master them; and that the content of the educational or socialising process cannot be assumed to be morally benign. Rousseau, typically, harnesses the new psychology to an old story, and uses it to elaborate the classical and Machiavellian theme of the enervation of virtue and decline into a servility where men lose even their desire to be free. His new version however, makes a return on Fortune's wheel even less likely than before, and instead leads him to explore not the possibility of returning to the past (however attractive), but of constructing an alternative future.

Freedom and the self

Rousseau's central preoccupation is freedom – his greatest fear, dependency. But he carries these preoccupations to levels of experience which had previously only been the concern of religion. Indeed his episodic concern to sustain the idea of an inviolable and authentic 'self' untouched by the pressures of socialisation and education seems to have an obviously religious, and indeed Protestant, source in a will which was ever inwardly retreating, and was ultimately unknowable even to its possessor. For thinkers in the British tradition, freedom had purely physical dimensions. For Hobbes and Hume freedom was an attribute of the person only as a body, the freedom of the will was they thought (though for different reasons) a non-question. Anyone having bodily freedom: 'not a prisoner and in chains', was free. Even the severity of the options facing us – coercion, life or death – was not a relevant issue; much less the question of the psychological constraints that may have been imposed on us through custom or our upbringing. But Rousseau shows deep awareness of these issues; awareness of the informal and structural constraints on our range of realistic choices. He sets out in the first *Discourses* to show the modern individual psyche as under constant and degrading assault from its social environment, and in the second to reveal the process by which that came about. In works such as *Emile*, *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, and the *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* he explores the always elusive, and often illusory possibility of an individual refuge from its pressures.

But to sustain both the claim that freedom is the essential property of humans and that modern forms of socialisation render us unfree – that 'man is born free but everywhere in chains' – Rousseau has to be able to demonstrate a social alternative. He has to be able to demonstrate the possibility of a socialisation – and a society – that would not constrain us, because it would neither require of us, nor lead us to demand, things which conflicted with each other, or our natures. The difficulty of doing so perhaps explains why, both in his personal and in his literary life Rousseau so often found himself exploring individualist and reclusive solutions. It is this possibility of a whole social environment which supported rather than harassed the individual personality which Rousseau explores in *The Social Contract*, the possibility of

a form of association which will defend and protect with the whole common force the person and goods of each associate and in which each, whilst uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone and be as free as before.¹⁰

The Social Contract thus provides an answer to the question raised in the *Discourses* of whether humans can enjoy both civilization and freedom, society and moral integrity. The two works need to be read together if sense is to be made of either.¹¹

The Discourse on the Arts and Sciences

The arts, sciences and morals

The first of Rousseau's *Discourses* was written in response to an essay competition set by the Academy of Dijon on the question 'Whether the Restoration of the Arts and Sciences has had the effect of purifying or corrupting morals.' It won the prize – a solid gold medal – in July 1750, but more important it was also published and promoted in Paris, thanks to efforts by Rousseau's friends the Abbé Raynal and the Encyclopaedist and philosopher Denis Diderot.¹² Born in 1712, Rousseau was already thirty-eight; previously a musicologist and composer existing on the margins of the fashionable salon society, known but not famous, he was soon, as a result of this and his next *Discourse* to become a figure of enormous controversy. The essay, if it does not quite, as Diderot later claimed, provide the knot from which Rousseau teased his whole social and political philosophy,¹³ did nevertheless provoke a debate which enabled Rousseau to clarify his eventual position.

The issue was not a new one. It was a recognizable civic variant of the 'ancients vs moderns' topic, a popular Renaissance genre, which had survived down to the eighteenth century. The questionable relationship between virtue, the arts and the luxury that made them possible was an aspect of revived civic humanism which in France, as in Britain, formed a major context through which contemporaries sought to judge the progress of that commercial century. Hume's parallel essay 'Of Refinement in the Arts' had given a resounding YES! to the Dijon question about the beneficial effect of the Arts and sciences. Rousseau's answer was an equally resounding NO!

¹⁰ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 12. References to *The Social Contract* and the *Discourses*, are to the Everyman's Classics edition, tr. G. D. H. Cole, revised J. H. Brumfitt and John C. Hall (London, 1973). Note that pagination in this edition differs from that of earlier ones. Where I have varied the translation I have given a reference to the French text, in C. E. Vaughan, *The Political Writings of Rousseau* (2 vols, Cambridge, 1915), or, if a work is not there, to the relevant volume of the Pléade Edition *Oeuvres* (Paris, 1959–69).

¹¹ There is also a biographical aspect to their unity. Although *The Social Contract*, was not published until 1762, work on the larger project of which it was a part had begun as early as 1744, and he was heavily involved in it in 1750–51, at the time when his first discourse was published (Vaughan, *Political Writings*, vol. 2, p. 2.)

¹² Maurice Cranston, *Jean-Jacques, the early life and work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1712–1754* (London, 1983), p. 240.

¹³ Cited Cranston, *Early Life*, p. 242; see also Robert Wokler 'The *Discours sur les arts* and its offspring' in *Reappraisals of Rousseau, studies in honour of R. A. Leigh*, ed. S. Harvey et al. (Manchester, 1980).

There is a discrimination to be made here. Whilst Machiavellian republicanism stressed the impact of *luxury* on morals, Rousseau's topic is the effect of *learning and culture* on morals. Whilst the wide tradition focussed generally on the baneful moral effects of economic growth, modernization and the emergence of a bourgeois culture, the focus on the arts is to be found in a narrower epistemological channel of influence running from the Cynics and Stoics, and into Christian and Protestant scepticism.¹⁴ Moreover the insistent defence of modernity had increased the salience of this tradition. Hume's *Essays* in particular countered the traditional view that luxury must corrupt since morals are based on austerity, with the claim that manners and refinement – if not a part of morals then a reasonable substitute for them – are increased by luxury and commercial progress. The impact of the arts – through cultivating manners – and the sciences – through stimulating and promoting economic progress – were thus central to the conflict between ancient agrarian virtue and modern commerce and manners, although understanding of their impact changed the centre of the conflict from the military/ political/ economic arena to that of the personal, cultural and economic.¹⁵

Ancient and Machiavellian themes

The broad argument of Rousseau's *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* is then, not original, although the precise articulation of it is. It is, broadly, the theme popularized by Machiavelli, and still being worked over in Rousseau's lifetime by Montesquieu in his *Considerations on the Greatness of the Romans and their Decline*, that of the relationship between luxury and growth, on the one hand, and moral decline and loss of liberty on the other: 'rectitude of morals is essential to the duration of empires, and luxury is diametrically opposed to such rectitude . . . The politicians of the ancient world were always talking of morals and virtue; ours speak of nothing but commerce and money.'¹⁶ The relationship of the arts and sciences to luxury and corruption was complimentary and mutually reinforcing. On the one hand the arts and sciences originate in our vices, on the other they mask and make bearable our depravity. They both bring about our corruption, and 'fling garlands of flowers over the chains' that result. They are wisely cultivated by despots to divert their subject people from awareness of their loss of liberty. The Barbarian invaders of the dark ages were not stupid in ignoring mental cultivation –

¹⁴ Scepticism was a particularly important tradition in French culture. Amongst the most famous exponents are Charron and Montaigne. On Montaigne see most recently D.L. Schaefer, *The Political Philosophy of Montaigne* (Ithaca, 1991). However such ideas are already present in the late Italian Renaissance, indeed it is in the writings of the famous humanist Pico della Mirandola that the strikingly Rousseauian assertion 'we are born free, we make our own bonds' is to be found. See John Hope Mason, 'Reading Rousseau's First Discourse', *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 249 (1987), p. 253, n.11.

¹⁵ On this see the excellent analysis offered in J. G.A. Pocock's 'Virtue, rights and manners, a model for historians of political thought' in Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce and History, Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1985).

¹⁶ *Arts and Sciences*, p. 17. The popularity of the theme is stressed by Keohane, *Philosophy and the State*, p. 381.

they *knew* its effects, and so left the Greeks their libraries, convinced that they would, as a result, be easier to rule.¹⁷

The mood of the whole piece is severely stoic. The expansion of commodities, no less than the increase in our wants, undermines our natural independence. The less we desire, the more free we are: 'What yoke, indeed, can be imposed on men who stand in need of nothing?'¹⁸ Sparta 'a republic of demigods, rather than of men . . . eternal proof of the vanity of science' which has 'left us nothing but the memory of their heroic actions' is Rousseau's ideal, not Athens, or Imperial Rome.¹⁹

Like the later Stoics too, notably Cicero (although he was hardly an ascetic), Rousseau insists on the destructive effect of a philosophy not tied to practical political needs. He has in mind here the sceptical effect of such philosophy on the strength of customary belief.²⁰ Every civilization that has nourished philosophy has subsequently been destroyed: Egypt by the Persians, Greece by the Macedonians, Rome by the Goths, China by the Tartars.²¹ Philosophy's 'fatal paradoxes sap the foundations of our faith and nullify virtue', it cultivates wit but undermines sincerity and conviction without which society cannot cohere.²² Simplicity, innocence, poverty and virtue are throughout opposed to refinement, wit, wealth and decadence.

New themes: authenticity and the irreversibility of history

There are though, two newer themes which Rousseau was to develop more fully in his subsequent works.

The first is the notion that the arts, manners and politeness are not merely effete and destructive of martial virtues, they also, in some way deny our natures, and force us to conceal our real selves. In the modern society 'we build our happiness in the opinions of others, when we [should] find it in our own hearts.'²³ Art highlights this truth, for art is deceit. Reflecting perhaps the emergence of commercial rather than patronage-based art, Rousseau observes that to gain the applause he seeks the artist must 'lower his genius to the level of the age'.²⁴ The arts and sciences originate 'in two wretched sources that are enlarged and sustained by scholarship: idleness and the desire for distinction'.²⁵

¹⁷ *Arts and Sciences*, pp. 15 (origins), 5 (flowers on the chains), 5fn (cultivated by despots), 20 (libraries divert Greeks from military pursuits).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

²⁰ See the 'Preface' to Rousseau's play *Narcisse*: 'Customs are the moral life of a people, and as soon as they cease to respect them, there is no rule but the passions, no restraint but the law . . . when philosophy once teaches a people to scorn customs, they soon uncover the secret of evading laws.' 'Preface to *Narcisse*' tr. *Political Theory*, 6, no. 4 (1978), p. 551.

²¹ *Arts and Sciences*, pp. 8–10.

²² See especially the 'Preface to *Narcisse*': philosophy 'loosens all the bonds of esteem and goodwill which tie men to society.' By learning to be critical, philosophers lose the capacity to respect men for 'it is difficult to hold in respect that which, on merit is despised . . . Family and fatherland are, for him, words void of meaning. He is neither parent nor citizen, nor man: he is philosopher'; pp. 548–9.

²³ *Arts and Sciences*, p. 29.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19. It extends beyond art to social attitudes at large: 'everyone wants to be a nice fellow, while nobody is content to be a good man.' 'Preface to *Narcisse*', p. 547.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 547.

Although the reason for this is not made clear until the second *Discourse*, deceit is clearly for Rousseau, the central characteristic of modern manners, and particularly of modern art.²⁶ His work is littered with images of falsehood and concealment: mirrors, clothes, veils, masks and roles, hide us from each other, and all too often from ourselves. In his *Confessions* he declared he was 'resolved on an enterprise which has no precedent . . . to display to my kind a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I shall portray will be myself.'²⁷ It has been suggested that the peculiar vehemence of the denunciation to be found in this *Discourse* results from Rousseau's recognition of the effect of the pursuit of artistic fame on his own psyche: '[it] was the voice of Rousseau condemning himself'.²⁸ This side of Rousseau anticipates in striking form the modern existentialist polarities of authenticity and bad faith, and it is clearly no accident that existentialism should have so flowered in France, where every school child reads some Rousseau.²⁹

The second new theme is the implied irreversibility of the process of corruption, identified as it seems to be, with the very forces of civilization itself. Once again this is an idea which is not fully clarified until the second discourse and *The Social Contract*, and the reasons are, even there, ambiguous. There are two reasons implicit in the account in the *Arts and Sciences*. The first is geo-political. Like his near contemporary Gibbon, Rousseau accounts for the renewal of virtue and the destruction of corrupt imperial societies through their conquest by barbarians on the edges of civilization. It was already apparent to most eighteenth-century thinkers that there was no reservoir of barbarism to effect the task in the modern world.³⁰ Part of Rousseau's recurrent despair derives from his perception of the corruption and stability of the modern state – a new combination. The peroration of the *Discourse* is concerned, not with the hopeless task of renewing simple virtue, but of preventing its further corruption by 'restraining men of letters' and keeping from the ordinary reading public the more destructive conclusions of modern culture. One might cynically say, that the part of the *Discourse* that won him the prize is the part praising the Academies as guardians, indeed, almost isolation wards, of 'the dangerous trust of human knowledge'.³¹

The second reason for the supposed irreversibility of corruption lies in the way Rousseau personalizes the process of social development. Once again there is an ancient

²⁶ 'There prevails . . . a servile and deceptive conformity.' *Arts and Sciences*, p. 6.

²⁷ *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, tr. & intr. J.M. Cohen (Harmondsworth, 1957[1953]), p. 17.

²⁸ Hope Mason, 'Reading Rousseau's First Discourse', p. 257. In the Preface to *Narcisse*, Rousseau records 'having explored the effect of literary success on my soul', p. 552.

²⁹ The most striking explorations of Rousseau's ideas from this perspective are those of Jean Starobinski, *Le Transparence et l'Obstacle* (tr. Arthur Goldhammer as *Transparency and Obstruction* (Chicago and London, 1988)), and, Marshall Berman *The Politics of Authenticity* (London, 1971).

³⁰ But notice Rousseau conjours up an impending barbarian invasion of Europe by the Tartars for his *Social Contract*, p. 219.

³¹ *Arts and Sciences*, pp. 24–5. In the 'Preface to *Narcisse*', the reason is more sinister, and harks back to the strategy of the Goths towards the Greeks. 'Leave be the academies, the colleges, the universities, the libraries and the theatres; indeed support them along with all the other entertainments that divert the wicked.' The arts and the sciences 'destroy virtue . . . in virtue's place they introduce decorum and propriety'; a poor substitute but better than nothing; 'Preface to *Narcisse*', p. 551 (cf. Poncelet 'Virtue, Rights and Manners').

and classical, as well as a modern aspect to this. Like the Roman historians on whom he draws, Rousseau sees history in moral terms. He describes social change using the moral vocabulary appropriate for describing the corruption of an individual. But there is a modern, and indeed a religious aspect to this. For the movement from virtue to corruption describes not only the substitution of selfish interest for public spirit, as it had for the Romans, but also a movement from innocence to knowledge. If the Romans moralized their history, Rousseau personalizes it. Rousseau's equation of virtue with innocence was much questioned by critics of the first *Discourse*.³² Rousseau cites Socrates as his source for the praise of ignorance, but the story of the Christian fall also haunts these passages, whilst the modernist aspect of his account is the notion of personal development as a process of self-knowing, and consequently irreversible – one cannot regain lost innocence.³³

The reason for his despair is clear. Rousseau's view of history is a combination of pagan and Christian, it is quasi-cyclical yet linear. There may be a linear universal history, yet each people may pass through but one round of growth and decline. The cycle is not connected at the base.

The reaction to the . . . Arts and Sciences

Rousseau's work provoked a storm of controversy.³⁴ Ironically – in view of his preoccupation with sincerity – he was praised for his eloquence and cleverness, but his paradoxes were taken by many as clear evidence of the fact that he could not be in earnest!³⁵ Among those who replied to Rousseau's work was the King of Poland, and Rousseau was also delighted (at this stage) to be distinguished by criticism in the preliminary 'Discourse' to the *Encyclopaedia*, which began publication in the same

³² Wokler, 'The *Discourse* . . . and its offspring', p. 258, ff.

³³ In the Preface to his play *Narcisse* he wrote shortly after — as he was to later in *The Social Contract*, 'The morals of a people are like the honour of a man: a treasure, to be preserved, but one which when lost, can never be recovered. . . since a vicious people can never return to virtue there can be no question of restoring the goodness of those who are no longer good.' 'Preface to *Narcisse*' p. 551. Rousseau was careful to warn critics against drawing the conclusion from his work that any return to a state of simple virtue was possible. In a note to the *Discourse on Inequality*, p. 229, (Vaughan, *Writings I*, p. 207), he added a passage ridiculing the possibility of a return to nature: 'must society be destroyed, mine and yours be abolished, and we return to the forests to live amongst bears?' To the King of Poland he wrote 'Beware of concluding that we ought today to burn the libraries and destroy the universities and academies.' Cited Cranston *Early Life*, p. 243.

³⁴ Most of the replies discussed here are reprinted in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau, The First and Second Discourses together with the replies to the critics and the Essay on the Origin of Languages* ed. and trs. Victor Gourevitch (New York, etc., 1986). I have drawn heavily on Robert Wokler's excellent discussion, 'The *Discourse* . . . and its offspring'.

³⁵ S.S.B. Taylor, 'Rousseau's Reputation in Contemporary France', *Studies in Voltaire and the Eighteenth-Century*, XXVII (1963), pp. 1548–9.

³⁶ Denis Diderot and Jean d'Alembert, *L'Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire Raisonné*, (repr. 5 vols, Elmsford, New York, N. D.), *Discours Préliminaire*, vol. 1, p. xxxiii. Praising Rousseau's work as eloquent and philosophical they argued that the evils he attributed to the arts and sciences arose from other sources.

year.³⁶ Those who took him seriously however, raised objections which provoked Rousseau to further elaborate his position, and he published no less than seven replies.³⁷

Rousseau, his critics claimed, had confused ignorance with virtue. Without the cultivation of the arts men were not innocent, but barbaric and cruel; the uncorrupted state was an illusion. Rousseau's history, they complained, was vague and shaky: ancient stoics were supporters of the world of learning, Sparta notwithstanding, and in any case when, exactly, did Rousseau see corruption setting in? What was the relationship between the barbarism that preceded classical learning, and the barbarism of the ensuing dark ages and medieval period, on the escape from which, Enlightenment thinkers were still busy congratulating themselves? Corruption, inasmuch as it existed, was surely a consequence of riches rather than of learning. Others argued that nations declined from political, rather than moral causes.³⁸ These and other criticisms spurred Rousseau to clarify and systematize his thought.

Rousseau's various replies were first synthesized in the brilliant preface to his play *Narcisse*, revived for publication at the time. There, and in his 'Reply to the King of Poland' he starts to focus on the problem of chronology and causality. Rather than simply associating together wealth, the spread of learning and moral corruption, he begins the process of sorting out the causal relationships between them, presenting the move from virtuous simplicity to immoral complexity as a temporally structured process, a true genealogy of corruption.³⁹ In the 'Reply to the King of Poland' he asserts the centrality of what was to prove a new and continuing focus of his political thinking from then on, inequality:

I never said that luxury was born from learning, but that they were born together, the one could not have gained strength without the other. . . . The first source of evil is inequality, from inequality comes wealth; for these words wealthy and poor are relative, and wherever men are equal there are neither rich nor poor. From wealth is born luxury and idleness; from luxury comes the refined arts and from idleness the sciences.⁴⁰

In answer to critics' assertions of the violence and rapacity of uncultured man, Rousseau begins to develop an understanding of the necessary role played by institutions in any serious depredations which humans might impose on each other.

Before these hideous words *yours* and *mine* were invented; before there existed that cruel and brutal sort of men which we call masters, and that other sort, knavish and deceitful, called slave; before there were men so loathsome as to dare possess more whilst others died of hunger; before mutual dependence forced all to become deceitful,

³⁷ The following list of objections is abridged from the discussion of the replies in Wokler, 'The Discourse . . . and its offspring', pp. 258–261.

³⁸ A point made by Hume in his essay 'Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences', but against Rousseau by his friend Charles Borde of Lyons.

³⁹ 'For to admit that these things go hand in hand is not to admit that one has led to the other. I have still to demonstrate a causal connection.' 'Preface to *Narcisse*', p. 547

⁴⁰ 'Observations, by Jean-Jacques Rousseau of Geneva on the Answer to his Discourse [by King Stanislas of Poland]', in *The First and Second Discourses*, ed. Gourevitch, p. 45, and in *Oeuvres Complètes*, III, pp. 49–50.

jealous and treacherous; I wish someone would explain to me in what it was that these vices and crimes with which [primitive man] is charged could have consisted.⁴¹

The Origins of Inequality

Apart from an unpublished *Essay on Wealth*,⁴² which explores what was to become for Rousseau an important theme – the effect of wealth and poverty on personality – the major fruit of Rousseau's reflections on his critics was his *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, completed in 1754, again in response to a competition from the Academy of Dijon (who clearly recognised good publicity when they saw it). The second *Discourse* elaborates in an extraordinary fashion a speculative history of human psychology and social institutions. As well as dealing with the issue of inequality it attempts to answer the question implicit in his earlier criticism of contemporary culture – if modern society is false and artificial, what would it be to be true and natural?

The problem of 'nature'

The question of what was 'natural' was of course, an exceptionally difficult one to answer, not least, as Hume had pointed out, because it was a word with so many meanings. If 'natural' is opposed to 'artificial' there are two senses in which its meaning could be explored. Our natural qualities might be thought of as essences which underlay our acquired characteristics in such a way that we might, by a process of philosophical analysis, succeed in stripping away what our selves owed to civilization to discover our true 'natures'. Yet this enterprise was fraught with difficulty. As Rousseau himself pointed out in the first pages of the *Discourse*, philosophers continually made the mistake of reading back into 'nature ideas which were acquired in society'.⁴³ The alternative, to conceive of 'the natural' historically, also posed difficulties. Thinkers of Rousseau's time, had to struggle both conceptually and politically to establish a developmental conception of humanity against the religious orthodoxy of the creation story in Genesis. To suggest that speculation about secular origins could answer questions about our nature was to virtually reject the Bible as a fable.⁴⁴ Even accepting that human nature could be identified with human origins which pre-dated civilization, or even speech, the 'nature' discovered there was, as his critics had pointed out, likely to be nothing but savagery, and irrelevant to the standards and criteria of civilized men. In the end Rousseau hovers between the two. This is hardly surprising given the leap of imagination needed at the time to think about human development in truly evolutionary terms. He

⁴¹ 'Last Reply, by J-J. Rousseau of Geneva', in *The First and Second Discourses*, ed. Gourevitch, p. 73, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, III, p. 80.

⁴² *The Discours sur les richesses*, eventually published in 1853. The essay is discussed in C.E. Ellison, 'The Moral Economy of the Modern City: Reading Rousseau's *Discourse on Wealth*', *History of Political Thought*, xii, 4 (1992).

⁴³ *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, p. 50.

⁴⁴ 'Religion commands us to believe that God Himself having taken men out of a state of nature immediately after the creation, they are unequal only because it is His will they should be so: but it does not forbid us to form conjectures based solely on the nature of man, and the beings around him, concerning what might have become of the human race, if it had been left to itself.' *Ibid.*, p. 51.

evaded criticisms about the accuracy of his ancient history by denying that what he was asserting could be tied down to specific historical episodes or sequences. In his response to the Abbé Raynal he denied having committed himself on these issues, he claims 'I cast my thesis in the form of a general proposition . . . I found the progress in these two things [decadence and literary culture] always to be directly proportional'.⁴⁵ Gradually, and emblematically (for social thought was in the process of shedding its preoccupation with the classical world) Rousseau substitutes anthropology for ancient history, the Abbé Prévost's *Histoire générale des voyages* for Plutarch's *Lives* as a primary source.⁴⁶ Confusingly, he warns that his investigations 'must lay facts aside'. His arguments 'should not be considered as historical truths but only as mere conditional and hypothetical reasonings, rather calculated to explain the nature of things than to ascertain their actual origin'. Yet the form of his argument is sequential: it is a speculative moral prehistory, and he tells us 'the times of which I am going to speak are remote', that it is 'the life of the species which I am going to write'.⁴⁷ The confusion is more apparent than real, for there is a sense in which for truly developmental beings our essences are our pasts, and we can never know what we are except by knowing how we have come to be so.⁴⁸

Rousseau tells us his concern in the *Discourse* was precisely to 'mark, in the progress of things, the moment at which right took the place of violence and nature became subject to law, and to explain by what bizarre chain of events the strong submitted to serve the weak, and the people to purchase an imaginary repose at the expense of real happiness.' This is an interesting and carefully worded account. The real disasters do not appear until the end of the sequence. The initial transition from violence to right does not seem an objectionable one. The progress from nature to corruption is not an uninterrupted decline. Rousseau recognises both the moral appeal of natural simplicity as well as the primitivism inherent in the idea of the 'natural'. He sets out to explain how humans advanced to the point where they *could* have become moral, as well stressing that from that point they *in fact* became vicious. There has been, in human history, a moment of moralization, but it has passed. There is, he suggests to the reader, 'an age at which you would have wished your species had stopped'.⁴⁹

The natural condition (i) physical

Rousseau assures us that man 'as he comes from the hand of nature' would have been, in terms of bodily skills and endurance, vastly superior to his modern descendants, whose reliance on the tools and contrivances of civilization has undermined their natural, unaided capacities. Mentally too, he would have had few, and easily gratified desires, and would have been accepting of natural processes such as ageing and death. His senses

⁴⁵ 'Letter to Monsieur L'Abbé Raynal' in *The First and Second Discourses*, ed. Gourevitch, p. 28.

⁴⁶ The antithesis is suggested by Wokler, 'The *Discourse* . . . and its offspring', p. 263.

⁴⁷ *Inequality*, pp. 50-1; Brumfitt and Hall suggest that 'the facts' to be laid aside are those concerning human origins related in the Old Testament, direct repudiation of these might well have caused Rousseau trouble, hence the confused attempt to sidestep the issue. See note, p. 345, and above, n.44.

⁴⁸ Jean Starobinski, 'The *Discourse on Inequality*', in Starobinski, *Transparency and Obstruction*, pp. 291ff.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 50, 51; (Vaughan, *Writings*, vol.1, p. 140).

of taste and touch being unrefined, would have conveyed to him no dissatisfaction with the coarseness of his existence; whilst his superior senses of smell, sight and hearing would have enabled him to discern things at as great a distance as we can with optical aids such as telescopes. We could never have guessed at these characteristics from any empirical investigations into cultivated men; for like domesticated animals, socialised man is weak and timid. But evidence of these qualities is given by travellers' tales of aboriginal peoples alive at his time.⁵⁰

The natural condition (ii) moral

The moral or psychological qualities of such men would have exhibited equally extraordinary differences. It is not in their knowledge or understanding that natural men differ from animals, so much as in their possession of free will. Animals operate intuitively, by instinct, men by choice.⁵¹ That capacity for choice often proves their undoing, but it also allows for improvement, the quality of 'perfectibility' by which human beings successively change their way of living, incorporating innovations, which, starting as conveniences, become necessities. The inventor of a blanket responded not to a necessity (he or she *had* done without it), but to an inconvenience. Once we are used to blankets however, the lack of them is unacceptable and they become necessities.⁵² The accumulation of such acquired necessities is what goes under the name of progress.

However, whilst free will offers the *possibility* of adaptation and improvement, it does not explain how individuals could become motivated to seek the initiation of such improvements. Reason develops only because the passions stimulate it. But the passions themselves can only motivate us beyond blind instinct, once we can depict to ourselves new possibilities, which in turn we cannot do without the further development of reason. Rousseau, in attempting to rely on sensationalist empiricism – 'seeing and feeling must be his first condition' – is in fact pushing at the limits of the doctrine. It seems we have to be able to imagine improvements before we can be motivated to attempt them, yet we cannot gain empirical knowledge of what is possible in advance of experience, 'so great appears the distance between pure sensation and the most simple knowledge'.⁵³ How then could progress begin? Chance and necessity must have played initially the major part.

However invention was explained, Rousseau points out, ideas and acts perish with their performers unless they could be communicated to another, nor would communication necessarily help unless men were sociable. Language and society were necessary for innovation to be sustained. Rousseau raises extraordinarily penetrating questions in this short diversion on the then popular topic of the origin of language. Is language inventable prior to abstract thought, or abstract thought prior to language? How did men move from naming of individual things to universal terms for general kinds? He cannot answer these questions; but he is clear that some explanation is needed: neither language

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 52–58.

⁵¹ A distinction in the operation of natural law emphasised by Aquinas (see Ch. 1 Hobbes, n.150). Note that the question of whether inequality is authorised by natural law is the second part of the title.

⁵² *Inequality*, p. 58.

⁵³ The gist of the problems raised at *ibid.*, pp. 61–2.

nor sociability can be assumed to be a natural quality of humans, and neither is possible without the other – 'speech is the first social institution'.⁵⁴

Although he cannot unravel the chicken-and-egg problem of language and sociability, Rousseau is decided on another issue, the question of whether humans are motivated by sympathy as well as by their own interests. A major problem posed by Hobbes, and recognised, especially by his critics, is that once we abandon God and try to give a secular account of morality, we seem thrown back on the pervasiveness of self-interest. And self-interest is, as Hobbes's and modern theorists' difficulties reveal, an unpromising ground on which to construct a morality. As Rousseau points out, even Hobbes's followers, such as Mandeville, acknowledged pity as a further natural impulse. This is not, in conventional terms, a virtue – a self-conscious principle which we use to limit our desire – but a natural sentiment of compassion which on occasion, and prior to any kind of reflection, 'tempers the love he has for his own well-being, through an innate repugnance at seeing his own like suffer'.⁵⁵ Anticipating his theme of the effect of civilization on our moral natures, Rousseau notes how reasoned reflection undermines the spontaneity of compassion. It is the cautious philosopher who stands aside from the street-brawl, whilst the mob and the common market-women intervene to prevent injury.⁵⁶

The absence of natural conflict

Hobbes's picture of the state of nature, is then, decisively rejected by Rousseau, but for complex and subtle reasons. It is not simply the existence of compassion which limits conflict between natural men, it is the poverty of their imaginations that limits the causes of it. Rousseau stresses how most serious causes of conflict and unhappiness are introduced by the civilizing of our tastes and the developing sense of a social self. Think these away and 'To what kind of misery is a free being subject whose heart is at peace and whose body in health?'.⁵⁷ Two particular cases exemplify how natural life denies causes of conflict common in cultured society.

The coarseness of taste and indifference to particulars severely limit the motives for conflict in the natural condition. One tree is as good as another to shelter under, another fruit as good as the one I have just had taken from me. Where difference is unperceived there is less motive to fight over losses.⁵⁸ This is even more true in the case of sexual passion, characteristically viewed by Rousseau from a male perspective. Before the emergence (and cultivation) of individuality, of ideas of beauty and moral worth, or the capacity to make comparisons based on these, sexual passion could not be directed at a particular individual. Such an element of love in sexuality must, thinks Rousseau, be a

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 64ff.; and *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, in *First and Second Discourses*, ed. Gourevitch, p. 240. Rousseau worked on the *Essay on the Origin of Languages* during the 1750s and 60s, but never published it (Cranston, *Early Life*, p. 289). Its theme parallels that of the *Discourse on Inequality*, language at first honest, open, expressive, becomes deceitful, exact, dry and abstract.

⁵⁵ *Inequality*, p. 73 (Vaughan, *Writings*, vol. 1, p. 160).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 180 (Vaughan, p. 158).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 79.