An examination of Rousseau's Discourse on Equality

In 1754, Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote for the Academy at Dijon a competitive essay on the subject:
What is the Origin of Inequality among Men, and is it authorized by Natural Law?
(also known as the Discourse on Equality) Five years before, winning the Academy's prize had launched his stellar career, and although on this occasion he missed the prize, he might have been consoled to know that the dissertation is still read a quarter of a millennium later, and that it has a reputation as one of the seminal works on the origins and nature of society and government.

It doesn't seem to have been very much read in his life-time – but it contains some of his first-expressed thoughts on one of the subjects for which he is best remembered – that of the 'state of nature', and is for that reason of some interest. Rousseau did not invent, or even use the epithet *noble savage*, but it is nevertheless more closely associated with his name than with any other – and not without reason. For in this essay, he speculates about the condition of mankind before civilization, and provides a hypothetical history for the evolution of society from its original state.

He does so from the point of view of someone already convinced of the corrupted state of the contemporary world. In an appendix to the essay, he pours out a lengthy diatribe on the evils of the society he knew, and the entire work is infused with the same scolding, sometimes disgusted, always disapproving language and sentiments. On the other hand, whenever he speaks of the original state of men, it is with approval. More than that – by the end of the essay he claims that the pre-social condition of men conformed to a 'natural law'; as society developed it brought multiple evils which cumulatively far outweigh the advances that came with them.

Such, in brief, is the foundation of this part of Rousseau's legacy – an idea of nature as original and virtuous, and a distrust of civilization as corrupt and pathological. Much is at stake here. His reputation and the reading of his books was like a catalyst to the early Romantic Movement which emerged within a decade or two of his death. The opinions given in this essay, and in his other major works were claimed by the revolutionaries in France and implicitly by radicals ever since; and in his approach to the issue of the legitimacy of governments and the foundation of a just society, he made suggestions which have reappeared in totalitarian regimes of both right and left of the last century. So if we ask 'How much did he get right or wrong?' it is a question of some importance.

And there is another reason for looking back to this essay. Rousseau's contribution to thinking about human origins has had a permanent effect on the way European people understand and relate to non-Europeans, and because the ideas were in place during the great colonizing century, they were enormously influential. They still are. Their presence can be seen as much in current debates about the Northern Territory as in James Cook's famous remarks on the aborigines of 1770. So we should ask ourselves – what did Rousseau really say about primitive people, and did he know what he was talking about?

From casual reading, one could be forgiven for thinking that Rousseau started the whole tradition of celebrating the primitive – but this is certainly false. Interest in 'savages' began as soon as Europeans encountered New World peoples at the close of the fifteenth century, and was a major intellectual concern of the later Renaissance. We don't know if Shakespeare ever contacted any 'Indians', but he certainly knew Montaigne's essay on the subject, prompted by his own interview with a 'cannibal' in the 1550s. From *The Tempest* we can get some idea how the puzzles of confronting 'primitives' appeared to European observers 150 years before Rousseau, and already that tension was in place in the figure of Caliban – does 'primitive' mean 'original and uncorrupted', or 'base and undeveloped'? Humanists have an interest in this because the answer affects how we value all cultural products; politicians are interested because it bears heavily on perennial questions of just government. Finally, Australians must be interested because, whether we like it or not, the discourse Rousseau kicked along in the middle of the Enlightenment still very much affects the terms of our thinking about indigenous people.

It is a bit hard to appreciate now just how successful Rousseau was. Feted and admired from 1750 until his death 28 years later as a celebrity of the first order, his reputation afterwards stimulated what can only be called a cult. After he died, he was buried on a small island on the estate of one of his noble admirers, and devotees attended his tomb exactly as if it had been a shrine, until a grateful revolutionary government moved his remains to the Pantheon in 1794. People compared him to Jesus; not a few very accomplished followers thought his soul to have been the noblest ever to have inhabited a human body (a judgement in which he would have concurred).

Paul Johnson called him the first public intellectual, meaning he was the original of a type now commonplace, someone who writes independently for a large general educated audience on subjects bearing on the conduct of life and affairs. The really big reason he did so well at this is that he was an

extraordinarily gifted writer with an unusual, nimble intelligence and a burning desire to succeed. People at the time described the effect of reading him as a revelation, and uniquely moving. He could be hypnotically persuasive, and he had in a high degree the lawyers' gift of assembling and addressing arguments for any point of view in language calculated to convince.

But he had serious limitations too. Although widely read, his curiosity was of a bookish kind, with a lax approach to detail, and a much weaker interest in the real world than in the literary one. His temper was the opposite of those scientists who, in his lifetime were doing so much to change the approach to learning and to our understanding of the world. His writing was careless and inconsistent – he appears to have been incapable of creating a large project in his head before committing it to paper. Instead his method seems to have been to write hastily what came to him in the vivid style that was natural, and that made him famous, renewing his thoughts as he went along.

This is a technique suited to discursive and occasional writing, but it produced serious obscurity in his forthright longer works which still keeps would-be interpreters busy today. Library shelves are consequently burdened with a vast number of attempts to provide the last word on this or that aspect of what he said, and their number grows each year. In fact he is at his best in some of his letters, specially those he wrote to justify himself (there are many of them - he quarrelled with people all the time). These can be focussed and sustained arguments running for many pages.

Personally he was a profoundly dysfunctional character. In principle, this need not take anything from his work on the important subjects he tackled – but in practice his disabilities as a person very much determined his stance, his methods and his conclusions, as well as the areas he chose to write about and the views he could countenance. All this must be kept in mind by anyone reading him today.

Before turning to the essay itself, it is as well to remember that the question it addresses appears to us quite differently than it would have 250 years ago. The reason of course is that our perspective has the benefit of insights discovered by disciplines unknown or undeveloped in Rousseau's time – anthropology and the social sciences, as well as psychology. That is not to say we no longer need to think about it because it is not mysterious – far from it. But the long enquiry into human origins, society, the mind and behaviour, using new approaches has altered our capacity to see the

problems in all their complexity, as well as to understand what we need to know to illuminate them.

The foremost of these results has been that we now take the social nature of humans for granted, and so the long chain of speculations about origins, beginning with Plato, in which the first men are imagined solitary (and of which Rousseau's is one instance) have become, in that respect at least, obsolete. There never were any solitary human natures and the family (the 'proto-society) was never invented by them under any kind of compulsion.

A second source of difference is due to our experience of government. When the essay appeared there had been no American revolution – that was 20 years away – and the ideas we think of as founding the classical liberal tradition were as yet undeveloped. Locke's Treatise was 60 years old; Montesqieu was in the last year of his life; the French crown and church actively prosecuted the authors of any ideas they held to be subversive. The things that might come to our minds reading Rousseau, particularly the large-scale Utopian social-engineering projects of the twentieth century of course were unimaginable – and yet they rightly preoccupy us because we have the burden of understanding what provoked them, and preventing their recurrence.

In another sense, Rousseau's question resolves differently for us because of its intersection with very immediate, ever-present political problems – especially the contemporary form of polarity between 'right' and 'left': "If inequality is natural, should governments act on egalitarian aims? If it is not, what kind of equality is natural?" and so on.

Last, it is as well to remember that, to men of Rousseau's time, the notion of equality was radical. Its history in our cultural tradition is due to our Christian roots, but in the eighteenth century it was re-invented as a secular ideal, based on a foundation of primary, or natural rights. As it happens, Rousseau does not share this approach, but all the political movements that followed assumed that these existential rights underlay their claims to equal opportunity. The idea has become so routine that it is a surprise to find that this author thought it controversial.

The Discourse

In what follows I will try to show the steps of Rousseau's argument in an annotated outline, with an eye on what he asserts about the condition of mankind before society – what he called 'the state of nature'.

Part 1

1. First he says, the study of man and society is both the most important and the most difficult. Its importance is due to the fact that, to understand any natural law we must understand nature; the difficulty is due to the fact that modern humans are not in their original form – that has been lost and is unrecoverable by investigation. Many authors, he tells us, have made the mistake of pronouncing on the subject of natural law using ideas and understanding only available since men left behind the natural state, but this is impermissible. Instead, the only warranted approach is a kind of imaginative archaeology, guided by intuition, judgement, and what secondary evidence we can get from contemporary primitive people. This should ring alarm bells for us. We who have seen the whole course of 'scientific racism' and its ghastly consequences must know that questions about human nature ought to be answered, to the extent that they may be, by empirical methods, with the greatest possible reserve toward speculations such as those proposed here.

2. So what were original humans like? Straight from the creator's hand, says Rousseau, they acted 'constantly, from fixed and invariable principles', and bore a 'celestial and majestic simplicity'. At this and several points in his argument Rousseau gives to 'the Divine' an explanatory role he can see no other way of filling. What he seems to mean by specifying their condition this way is that they were free of the motives that, with us, cause conflict.

3. What caused their alteration since?

- Knowledge ('multitude of truths and errors')
- The arrival of complex desires – beyond the basic ones necessary for survival. (He calls this 'continual jarring of the passions')
- Physical (bodily) degeneration

4. Human nature manifests two primary principles only – those of self-preservation, and compassion. Rousseau believes these are sufficient to derive everything that develops after. Here again is an assumption, unwarranted anywhere in the Discourse. If he meant merely that these two impulses are present in what we would be comfortable to call 'human nature', that would be uncontroversial, but he means more than this. He wants us to accept that these and no other motives are present in our natures prior to society – that, for example, there is no 'aggression', no disposition to form groups or clans, and no capacity for intellectual or imaginative creativity. It is fair to say that such a formula corresponds to nothing we now know about early humans or their probable ancestors.

5. Inequality is of two kinds: 'natural', or 'physical'; and 'moral', or 'political'. Only the first was present for natural man – that is, although people had different innate endowments, these were not mirrored in uneven status or privilege. This is to say that pre-social existence was 'egalitarian', in the sense that accidental advantages coexisted with identical opportunity.

6. Rousseau next makes a rather puzzling claim. Scripture, he says, makes clear that men were given "understanding and commandments immediately from God" at their creation, and this means they never were in a state of nature, because ipso facto that state precludes those gifts. So, he says, we must conclude that the inequalities that followed were intended by God – but we might still succeed in learning what humans were like before this (ie before the creation): "what might have become of the human race, if it had been left to itself". Sometimes in the remainder of the Discourse he seems to say that the state of nature is an abstraction and no real people ever lived that way; other times he seems to say that they did. Here then is a first instance of a basic confusion which as far as I can tell is not resolved at the end of the work.

This issue (whether Rousseau ever intended his putative pre-history to be taken as anthropology) has been much discussed. A controversy so enduring, over such an elementary matter in his argument suggests that the author didn't know the answer himself. On one hand, after undertaking to show his readers how and when human nature was corrupted, he needed to provide a cultural history; but on the other, he knew and acknowledged that no such history was forthcoming from any known evidential source. So he begins by promising an heuristic, conceptual account, but soon lapses into an evolutionary one. "In so doing", says Crocker, "he falls into a common fallacy of his time, that of superimposing a 'natural', normative history on actual history, the latter being conceived as a story of 'pathological deviations' from an ideal norm."

7. Rousseau briefly entertains the idea that men might have had a pre-human existence, evolving their human form, but dismisses the issue as unresolvable. Then he considers that before receiving his "supernatural gifts" straight from the Creator, he was a being that came "from the hands of nature". Again it is hard to know what he has in mind, or even if it is coherent. Sometimes he uses the word 'nature' like this, to mean 'original'; but other times it seems to mean something more like what we mean when we say that nature is the opposite of culture. At any rate, in this state humans have the advantage of the brutes because while they are governed by a single 'instinct', man is not, and so can exploit more varied resources.

Living in the wilds makes them tough and the rigours of life winnow the weak (survival of the fittest).

8. He now refutes Hobbes and others who aver that man in a state of nature is oppressed by predators and other dangers and so lives in fear. This cannot be, says Rousseau, because in a state of nature, "all things proceed in a uniform manner". Just what this means is a bit hard to discover. On one hand he seems to picture these men dispersed and always alone, therefore free of the strife of interaction, but when he says "the face of the earth is not subject to those sudden and continual changes which arise from the passions and caprices of bodies of men living together", it sounds as if he imagines both the human and the physical world radically different from the one we know, ordered by regular relations so that nothing out of the way could occur.

Men use their guile to prevail over more powerful beasts, and the beasts, having learned this, normally refrain from attack. He adduces as evidence the case of the Venezuelan natives, in the first of many references to the reports of French & Spanish explorers in the New World. Perhaps we should not be too surprised that this desk-bound authority takes his informants on trust, but all the same, his practice of quoting travellers' tales uncritically has the effect of weaving hearsay into his argument at many points – and so we should apply proper caution assessing them.

9. Next, he tries to show that there is no sickness in the state of nature, pointing out the increase of vigour acquired by domestic animals when they return to the wild. It follows that every socializing step brought with it enfeeblement and decay: "his effeminate way of life totally enervates his strength and courage". Even the basic inventions of clothing and shelter, made at the beginning of this long process, were strictly unnecessary; so much the more were those that came after.

Because survival was uppermost in the concerns of savage man, those senses most useful for it were the most exercised – and that is why, travellers say, they see, hear and smell remarkably well, but also why the refined senses of touch and taste are coarse.

10. Turning now to the inner nature of original men, Rousseau finds two cardinal distinctions between men and animals. The first is free will. Whereas animals act upon the dictates of their natures, men may choose to act otherwise. To illustrate this point he suggests that a pigeon, given a choice of eating meat or starving, refuses the food because in fact it has no choice – which is true enough. But when he says that with free will the

pigeon could save itself, he is wrong. The necessity here is biological, not moral, and Rousseau shows his confusion about both the operation of 'instinct' and its relation to will – assuming that instinct is merely inflexible rather than adaptive, and that refusing nature's commands is harmful.

The second distinctly human character is the "faculty of self-improvement". He says nothing interesting about what kind of thing this is, or why it began to operate after a lengthy lapse, but he does tell us that this very capacity is the source of our degeneration since it makes of man "a tyrant both over himself and over nature".

Here is the nub of Rousseau's idea of original felicity and inevitable corruption: there is something in human nature that sets men against nature – something we see in his habitual sins of pride, impulsiveness, greed, envy, dominion, and all the rest – yet the reader may be left with a strong impression that the full explication of this key notion is missing, or even that it is beyond the author's powers to provide it. At this stage, one may well feel that he is less interested in a rigorous analysis of this complex side of human nature than in propping up his invective against society.

11. Next, he makes an *a priori* case that savage man can neither reason nor experience any passions beyond those of hunger, lust and fatigue. That this precludes imagination is attested by the reported behaviour of the Caribbeans, who appear to be unable to conceive of their future needs at the distance of half a day. This is another instance of that armchair anthropology which, in the hands of a skilled advocate, can be made to produce any desired conclusion whatever.

12. So how did men begin to cross the enormous gap between this impoverished but obligatory condition and the one we find them in now? The problem is greater even than it first appears because we must account not only for the advent of thought, but simultaneously, language; not only for sensibility, but also for the intelligence that made it possible. What then follows is an extended speculation on these questions. But, having shown how great are the difficulties, he gives no more than a hint of an answer, instead assigning the process an unimaginable length of time.

13. What are we to say about good and evil in the state of nature? Rousseau is certain that in this state man is incapable of moral consciousness, and therefore of moral relations. He tries to show that Hobbes was mistaken in finding natural men ruled by vice. This cannot be, he says, because primitives have neither the emotional capacity nor the inventiveness. And then, he says, Hobbes overlooked the primacy of compassion, an impulse

which must have been present even in unreflective savages, just as it is in some animals, because they are all capable of identifying with a sufferer. How, otherwise, in the absence of laws, was natural selfishness restrained? Some altruistic motive must have served in the place of moral precepts.

Today, when we think about this question (the origin of ethics), we follow Darwin, who first asked it in the paradoxical form: "How can it be that self-interested creatures adopt the interest of another against their own?" Having regard to what we've learned from taking this approach, we might say that Rousseau at least saw there was a problem, but his solution seems unsatisfactory. If the promptings of compassion was all that balanced self-interest, what governed the competition for resources? His attempt to persuade us that this was naturally accomplished with little strife sounds fanciful. Regarding sexual competition he uses the example of the Caribbeans again to show that there was no jealousy, because no imagination, and so these encounters were fleeting and inconsequential – rather like the mating of scrub-turkeys.

14. Concluding the first part of the *Discourse* Rousseau reasserts his belief that conditions of life in a state of nature are free of inequality, undisturbed by the passions or the products of intellect or imagination. One often suspects something circular in his reasoning, and the feeling is particularly strong here. In order to show that something or other could not have troubled people in the state of nature, he simply affirms that it is precluded by definition. For example, addressing the issue of 'natural' inequality, he says it would not cause actual competition ('political' inequality) because ipso facto the protagonists are incapable of feeling and therefore acting upon motives of domination or acquisitiveness. With repetition, this move leaves a modern reader decidedly sceptical, and it is difficult not to think that at least some contemporaries felt the same.

More generally, his major conclusion, the original "goodness" of man, is actually not established at all, despite his claim to the contrary. What he does is attribute goodness to a pre-human figment which cannot be capable of either goodness or badness, because it lacks moral equipment and a social existence. This abstraction, it is alleged, becomes wicked just as soon as he becomes fully human. But this, besides being empirical nonsense, is a sophistry designed to uphold Rousseau's ambition of radical social criticism. Nothing he says about 'natural men' contradicts what we now understand about actual pre-civilized people – that they are both good and bad, exactly as we are. Civilization multiplies our means of doing harm, but not by depriving us of the power to do good.

In the second part, Rousseau promises to show how men fell from the state of nature, warning the reader that to do so, he must resort further to guesswork – but, he says, "such conjectures become reasons when they are the most probable that can be drawn from the nature of things, and the only means of discovering the truth". What should we think of a philosopher who asks for trust instead of discernment? Is he really a preacher disguised as a student? So it is with these reservations that we embark on the second part.

Part 2

1. Property was the beginning of society – but as Rousseau rightly says, this notion could not have arisen *de novo*, out of the state of nature – other developments must have preceded it and changed the pattern of interaction between people. To account for this he must show how, and by what causes, the long-lasting, stable state of nature was disturbed. This will be no easy task, and in fact he sidesteps it. His one plausible suggestion is that increasing population density and dispersal into varying ecological niches brought different modes of life – fishing for some, hunting and gathering for others, etc. This in turn stimulated technological specialization.

So far so good, but then he merely suggests that while this was happening men, still solitary began to notice these differences, and this "at length produced in him a kind of reflection." That's it. This is his account of the beginnings of self-awareness and hence human relations and hence the social contract, both cooperation and conflict. Acquiring what he elsewhere called *amour-propre* – the kind of self-regard that makes us dependent on the recognition of others – is often thought of as one of Rousseau's characteristic discoveries about human social nature. Here, though it is not expounded in detail, it is still shown to be a watershed of cultural evolution, on the other side of which is the alienation of men from their true selves.

2. As to the actual steps along this progress, first, by degrees, came language; then the construction of dwelling places; then, after the experience of living under one roof, families and the sexual division of labour. Having greater leisure, people used their time to produce "conveniences", by which he seems to mean luxuries, because he says, these things pleased by their novelty rather than utility, and so produced the beginnings of avarice. As life became less nomadic and more sedentary, communities aggregated and from these larger groups arose the opportunity to experience the pleasures of assembly, then eventually all the gamut of social intercourse.

Interdependence, propinquity, comparison – these were the beginnings of inequality, and hence of ambition, envy and intrigue. At this stage, says

Rousseau, with rudimentary social institutions and morality, but before the invention of law, property and government, men might have lived in contentment indefinitely. This, he says, is in fact the condition of New World savages today, and so we might still be, but for two inventions – agriculture and metal-working – which, coinciding by chance, gave men the capacity to subdue large tracts of forests and to build towns and cities.

3. With property came commerce then law. Unequal individual characters – strength, ingenuity, industry etc – were amplified into conditions of rank; this in turn bred the habits of dissimulation and trickery. At the same time, and by the same causes, an economic division of labour was born. It is worth pausing to be clear about what Rousseau is claiming here. He says that innate (natural) sources of inequality did nothing to disturb equality of station until certain technological advances, namely the cultivation of crops and the metallurgy needed to make agricultural implements brought with it specialized forms of work and the means of economic exchange. This is how he puts it:
"Thus natural inequality unfolds itself insensibly with that of combination, and the difference between men, developed by their different circumstances, becomes more sensible and permanent in its effects, and begins to have an influence, in the same proportion, over the lot of individuals."

On the face of it this assertion is easily refutable by recourse to our established knowledge of actual 'indigenous' and pre-industrial peoples. But perhaps we should allow Rousseau a more general point – that under conditions of competitive exchange, advantage will accrue to those individuals best adapted to exploit them – hardly more than a commonplace, but nonetheless true.

4. Rousseau then proceeds to sketch the dire effects of property upon the tranquillity of existence, and this is possibly where he is at his brilliant best – explaining the working parts of the society he knew using a seemingly endless palette of grey and gloomy tones. The details of how he derived the various ills of society from its innocent beginnings need not detain us here – except to observe that his review is much more interested in pathology than achievement, suggesting something about his critical stance. At any rate, he tells us that from the strife of competition came the necessity of monarchy and the ultimate structural inequality.

5. While the state of nature had been thus thoroughly subverted by the growth of social institutions, the situation *vis a vie* the individual collectives and their relations was otherwise, and this became the spur to developing civil government. Originally these arrangements were *ad hoc* but eventually

power became vested in magistrates and chiefs. What persuaded people to yield their liberty to their governors? It was the threat of conquest.

What Rousseau describes here might be called a 'contract of government' – a conditional and revocable bargain struck between the sovereign and his subjects. On the other hand, he says, no contract can have produced absolute sovereignty, because anything so unequal could not have been voluntary. He uses a curious argument to deny Locke's notion of the trusteeship of government. Instead, he says, the people by uniting, or having "concentrated all their wills in one" this greater will becomes "so many fundamental laws, obligatory on all the members of the state without exception". Such is the nature of the social contract as it occurs in this essay.

Entailed under the laws are those which regulate the appointment and dismissal of the magistrates, yet if the laws have no higher authority than themselves, how can adjudication be possible? Therefore sovereignty requires divine sanction, and this is the true source of princely power.

6. The different forms of government (monarchy, oligarchy, democracy) came about by accident, but in time all were subject to abuses of power, ending in despotism. He pictures this process of retreat from contractual government as a cycle in three phases: "the establishment of laws and the right of property was its first term, the institution of magistracy the second, and the conversion of legitimate into arbitrary power the third and last". A tyrant, having extinguished legitimacy and exchanged obligation for force, has established something like a renewed state of nature, albeit one founded by corruption rather than original innocence, and in this state, no law is stronger than strength itself.

7. Rousseau now summarises his argument, reaching the following conclusions.

- Many authors have failed to understand human origins because they tried to infer them by observing their contemporaries. This was bound to lead to error, because in the course of time human nature itself has changed.
- Modern men are in a sense artefacts – the product of processes partly endogenous, partly accidental – which only (and imperfectly) resemble natural men in outward form. "The original man having vanished by degrees, society offers to us only an assembly of artificial men and factitious passions".
- Fundamentally, the difference between natural and civilized men is psychological: "the savage lives within himself, while social man lives

constantly outside himself, and only knows how to live in the opinion of others".

- The high achievements of civilization – the works of imagination, embellishment, refinement, philosophy and morals – are a sham. Far from promoting improvement, they have made us betrayers of our true selves: "we have nothing to show for ourselves but a frivolous and deceitful appearance, honour without virtue, reason without wisdom, and pleasure without happiness".
- All inequality and injustice is due to "the development of our faculties and the advance of the human mind", a state of affairs upheld by the institution of laws and property.
- The inequalities with which we are so familiar – of rank, wealth, privilege, opportunity – are distributed against the natural law, and thus deplorable.

8. In the Appendix, Rousseau extends this diatribe at length. Though it purports to lay before us the contrast between the innocent life of savages and the depravity of the civilized, it is the latter which receive nearly all his attention. The best word to describe this rhetoric is misanthropy. The author simply finds every feature of life he can think of vile or reprehensible. If such a position were sincere, it would be like nothing so much as the ghastly nihilism that animated the last century's worst tyrants. But there are good reasons to doubt both the sincerity and the intellectual credentials of Rousseau's declarations here. First is the issue of his consistency, which is problematic to say the least; then the more difficult one of how his beliefs are related to his life experience and emotional disposition.

However, it is at the very end of the essay that we have the most reason to pause and consider what sort of expert we have been attending, for here he asks the famous question, "What, then, is to be done?" And his answer is revealing. First, he says, if you are the kind of man who is content with the ordinary rewards of life, who has "never heard the voice of heaven", by all means retire to the wilds and recover what may be of "your ancient and primitive innocence".

But he never intended this advice for himself. For those superior men "who are persuaded that the Divine Being has called all mankind to be partakers in the happiness and perfection of celestial intelligences", and "who can no longer subsist on plants and acorns", he recommends living virtuously amidst the evil, leading by example and striving by exhortation and precept to mend things. Not that he expected to have much company. He often wrote of his conviction that no man as virtuous and noble as himself had

ever lived. So it looks as if, having delivered a devastating diagnosis of the social disorder, he alone is permitted to continue living as before. Everyone else must either adopt an uncomfortable simplicity, or become guilty by complicity. It is hard to see what could be more misanthropic than that.

Rousseau: thinker, and man

We know from many sources that, in his own life, far from abjuring the crimes he furiously condemns here, Rousseau was fully involved in them. Beneath a carefully cultivated veneer of indifference, he was ambitious, very concerned for his reputation, and guilty of multiple forms of deceit in upholding it. For example, among the evils he specifies is that of "the exposure or murder of multitudes of infants". By the time he wrote this, he had been ten years in a permanent relationship with Therese Levasseur, and had prevailed upon her first in 1746, after that at dates unrecorded, to abandon in turn each one of their five children, at birth, at the institution for unwanted infants in Paris. He well knew what this meant – either a very short or a very miserable life, and when he could no longer conceal it, was most inventive in excusing himself.

It is interesting that the scholars most inclined to credit Rousseau with a rigorous and consistent production of ideas tend to treat those ideas as if they had for their provenance a disembodied intellect. But if one thing is obvious, it is that this is a writer who's declared commitments have everything to do with his psychological and emotional predicament. In other words, the man and the philosopher were made in Rousseau's childhood, and one cannot possibly be understood without the other. Now saying this opens a whole nest of controversy about the assessment of creative people, but setting this larger issue aside for now, all we need to do to be fair to Rousseau is to examine carefully what is known about the circumstances of his early life, and his responses to them, and so provide a context of clinical and analytical psychology on which to view his history, including his didactic works. One sympathetic biographer, Lester Crocker, has done this admirably, and many other students have written perceptively about the relation between Rousseau's ideas and his inner life.

To take the abandoned babies as an instance – various attempts have been made by his apologists to explain away his behaviour. It has been claimed that the story was his own fabrication; that the children had another paternity; that it was not his, but Therese's wish; that both were coerced by her mother; that the practice was not exceptional, and so on. The fact remains that Rousseau believed they were his own children, and in his correspondence, expressed appropriate remorse more than once. In his

Confessions he is more devious, but even here there are hints that he understood at an unconscious level that his actions were both determined by his emotional pathologies, and reprehensible.

His mother died of childbed fever a week after his birth. His father, according to the most reliable evidence (not that of his son) in his relations with Jean-Jacques alternated between lachrymose affection and explicit blame, so that the sensitive boy acquired a heavy sense of guilt for his mother's demise. Nearly all of his childhood was a chaos of changing relationships, cared for by different relatives at various times; his father was an unstable man whose violent abuse caused Rousseau's only sibling, his brother to run away while still a child. The boy was never seen again. When he was 10, his father deserted, in order to escape a charge of assault against a fellow citizen. This upbringing would have produced neurosis in a personality more robust than his; as it was, this exceptionally sensitive and imaginative child acquired his permanent burden of shame, his strong sense of isolation and its corollary of solipsism, his ambivalence between dependency and responsibility, his paranoia, his deviant sexual drives, hypochondria and self-pity all by the time he left home as a lad.

He must have known, by middle age, that he was quite unable to function as a parent (even though he wrote occasionally of his fondness for children); the shadow of his own rejecting and dysfunctional father never left him. Yet he produced a book, the novel/manifesto *Emile* with the express purpose of instructing the world in the nurture and education of children. It was one of his great successes and has had a permanent influence on educational theory and practice ever since. It is hard not to think he must have understood at some level, that this was to be his reparation for the sordid actions which he could see no way of avoiding, and the disability he sensed behind them.

When it comes to his beliefs about society, morality, the conduct of a good life, and good government, it isn't hard to see how this gravely unsocial man with his desperate need for approval – not ordinary doses of it, but continual fervent affirmations of his uniqueness and virtue – would adopt the stances that he did. Some contemporary critics, impatient with his extravagant attack on society, believed he was posing, in order to better display his unusual rhetorical brilliance. But they were only half right. Rousseau needed to make these displays, to confirm his poor opinion of other men, to place himself in the position of isolated prophet, to assuage the ever-present guilt, and to earn the mastery he craved.

The absolute turning point, the creative node of Rousseau's life came to him one day in October 1749 while he was walking to Vincennes to visit his

friend and colleague Denis Diderot in prison. He carried a copy of the journal *Mercure de France* on the journey, and chanced upon an advertisement for an essay competition proposed by the Dijon Academy on the subject "Whether the renaissance of the sciences and the arts has contributed to the improvement of morals". Remembering the moment of inspiration in the Confessions years later, he wrote, "The instant I read those words I saw another universe and I became another man." It was no ordinary rush of ideas. He felt his "mind dazzled by a thousand lights; throngs of ideas came up all together with such power and confusion that I was overcome by an indescribable turmoil." He became too dizzy and breathless to walk; his heart palpitated; he trembled; he wept without knowing it; and with the greatest clarity he saw what he must do.

He would write his vision and confound all those who expected the essayists to affirm the new values of enlightenment. He only regretted that he'd not been able to set down all that had flooded his mind and agitated his body in that half hour of illumination: "with what clarity would I have revealed all the contradictions of the social system, with what force would I have exposed all the abuses of our institutions, with what simplicity would I have shown that man is naturally good and that men become wicked by their institutions alone. … That is how, when I was least thinking of it, I became an author." He wrote the essay, won the prize and in a matter of months was a European celebrity.

For the rest of his life he lived and wrote the contents and consequences of that vision. A stridently anti-establishment voice; a confused, but radical-sounding political creed; non-conformist in his person, but deeply dependent in his desires; a self appointed moral instructor to his age; sometimes persecuted, but always ready to revile in his turn, he employed his brilliant gifts composing and defending a sequence of statements to his readers and to posterity that would disclose what appeared so clear to him – both the ills and the remedy. His diagnosis of society and of man is exactly mirrored in himself.

Crocker quotes a fragment from one of Rousseau's notebooks, which seems to hold the essence of his political beliefs. It is also an uncanny self-diagnosis.
"What makes humanity unhappy is the contradiction between our condition and our desires, between our duties and our inclinations, between nature and social institutions, between the man and the citizen."
There are many kinds of pessimism, but this is a particularly discomforting vision of man as a social misfit, a creature fundamentally at odds with his own nature, one who, without contrivance, must be miserable, conflicted

and unfulfilled. Rousseau's prescription is equally grim. Individuals must be totally subsumed in the State, for their own good. Then, he says, "…their happiness will be that of the republic. For being nothing except by it, they will be nothing except for it; it will have all they have, and will be all they are. To the force of coercion you have added that of will".

This totalitarian theme in Rousseau is very much at the heart of his legacy. His concept of freedom was not that of the liberals, but more like that of Plato; and like Plato, he admired Sparta for its successful integration of its subjects into an overbearing and efficient State. In the classical liberal tradition, two concepts of liberty have run together – what Isaiah Berlin called negative and positive. The first is the notion of freedom from constraint, an idea known to the ancients, and endlessly discussed ever since. Rousseau believed this to be the source of all oppression: men free in this sense employed their liberty to become stronger than their fellows. Positive liberty, according to Berlin, corresponds to our desire to be 'master of ourselves', and is inherently as much a psycho-social as it is a political concept. To be free in this sense is to be both an individual with a sphere of unrestrained action, and a free citizen with a voluntary complement of opportunities and responsibilities.

Rousseau's version of this second species of liberty was restricted by his insistence that the citizen was only really free by an act of complete submission; in yielding his individuality to the collective, he becomes, and partakes of the power of the whole, but loses himself.
"… complete alienation by each associate member to the community of all his rights. … As soon as the act of association becomes a reality it substitutes for the person of each of the contracting parties a moral and collective body…". "… whoever shall refuse to obey the general will must be constrained by the whole body of his fellow citizens to do so: which is no more than to say that it may be necessary to compel a man to be free – freedom being that condition which, by giving each citizen to his country, guarantees him from all personal dependence …" [*Social Contract I,VI & VII*]
It is not hard to see where this leads.

Rousseau and Nature
Rousseau's cult of nature has a curious position in the history of ideas. On the one hand, there is no question about his role in founding a whole cluster of values and attitudes we've long since taken for granted, concerning relations between the human and the natural world. The way he drew this contrast, his evaluation of the natural and the social, has stuck fast in our

cultural traditions, so we can hardly think of these categories without following him. As Paul Johnson says, "He introduced the critique of urban sophistication. He identified and branded the artificialities of civilization. He is the father of the cold bath, systematic exercise, sport as character-forming, the weekend cottage."

But on the other hand, he was the bearer of a very bitter message about human potential. Free and autonomous individuals, he seems to be saying, can never form a just society; they will always exploit one another. Only a totally empowered collective can act in the true best interest of a sovereign people, and even then they might require a supreme legislator to discern and execute their genuine will. This is very unwelcome news indeed, especially to people who have known two or three centuries of political liberty. For Rousseau is without doubt a profoundly anti-liberal thinker.

So there is a shocking paradox inside his intellectual legacy. He is there at every orienteering event, each new occasion of the adventure movement, and at the heart of the politics and sociology of the environment. He placed the idea of primitive innocence and purity on a platform that became permanent. He is the reason why we conduct debates about indigenous peoples in the terms we do, rather than in those of the Spanish colonists. He sits like a ghost at the table wherever decisions are made between the interests of development and conservation. But he is also the shadow behind each of the utopian monsters who savaged the last century with their various blends of idealism, false history and megalomania.

Article VI of the French Declaration of the Rights of Man, the preamble to the first revolutionary constitution of 1791 begins: "The law is the expression of the general will …" This apparently innocuous piece of pure Rousseau, showing up in a document otherwise modelled after the Virginia Declaration of Rights of 1776, turned out to be a premonition of the centralizing tendency which overcame the revolution in France, that gave us the first revolutionary tyranny, and ensured that its republic became a very different one from its American predecessor.

As far as we can tell Rousseau was not specially drawn to the enjoyment of nature – neither by a scientist's analytical curiosity, nor a poet's rapture. His introspective impulse, which was very strong, is nothing like that of the early Romantics who closely followed him. There are charming passages in *Emile* where he tells of his pleasure in woods and fields, but they are not convincing evidence of a soul enthralled, rather they eulogise rustic simplicity. The book is a prolonged examination of the psychology of education; its moral sub-text is not the horror of 'satanic mills', but

Rousseau's incurable distaste for his fellows. This is probably nowhere clearer than in his treatment of women in Book V of *Emile*: "… a woman is made specially to please man … and is to be subjugated. … By the very law of nature women are at the mercy of men's judgements, as much for their own sake as for that of their children. … Woman is made to yield to man and to endure even his injustice."

His misogyny has been a puzzle to many of his apologists, and yet its true explanation is probably the simplest one – that it reflects exactly his own incapacity in relationships and his insecure and painful sense of self. He enjoyed a good walk – in those days that was not unusual, and often necessary. He liked the seclusion of country estates, and spent a lot of time in some of the best of them, as a guest of various patrons and benefactors. He took up the hobby of botany as he grew older, and wrote a short treatise on it. But nowhere do we find rapturous appreciation; instead his correspondence at these times of ease and beautiful scenery is full of a sense of indolence mixed with neurotic concerns. As for his teaching about human origins, there is no reason to think he ever had any direct experience of primitive people, or went out of his way to gain any, or was even particularly interested in them.

If Rousseau did not win his fame by competence, then how did he do it? Many scholars who've asked this question are satisfied that Rousseau had genius of a sort – but not the kind that makes a truly great and original thinker. Rather, he was a supremely gifted processor of literature. He read perceptively, retentively, and widely, and seems to have had an unusual gift of sensing the currents of ideas that circulated around him, capturing and reformulating them. When it came to presenting himself in print (after he found his feet at the rather late age of 38) he was out on his own – a genuine phenomenon of an inventive age, and a paragon of self-promotion.

After a decade of frustrating attempts to make his name among the Paris intellectuals and salons, his rise to literary stardom was sudden, due to the publication of his first Discourse in 1750. Over the next decade he produced nearly all of his enduring works – articles for the *Encyclopedie*, plays, operas, essays and pamphlets, polemical letters, a best selling novel *La Nouvelle Heloise*, his book on education *Emile*, and the political tract for which he is best remembered, *Du Contrat Social*. Looking at the original *Discourse* today, it is a bit hard to see what the fuss was about; we must assume that it struck some nerve that was ready for the shock, and that Rousseau was subtle enough to keep these rewarding neurones stimulated for the next thirty years.

But this doesn't explain why his reputation has survived until today. Normally we expect that the difference between passing fashions and genuine cultural innovations is revealed over time. Perspective, and accumulating reflection should demonstrate which novelties endure. But this is not really the issue here. In so far as Rousseau was the herald of a new understanding of 'nature' his standing is not in doubt; the question is rather about the quality of his contributions to the theory of society and government. Again there is an expectation that the community of scholars can eventually bring some consensus out of controversy. This is warranted as long as we believe that the author is capable of valuable utterances and that his intentions can be disclosed by interpretation.

The case of Rousseau appears to be a bit different. While there is a fair-sized group of professional students still at work explaining what he meant, and why we should be interested, there is another group claiming that he meant nothing important at all; and a third which holds that the valuable parts of his work have to be recovered bit by bit from the tissue of contradictory ideas and arguments, beguiling prose and deceptive logic that is his body of work. To the most sceptical the long project of maintaining Rousseau the sage has been mostly wasted effort – worse, for them it raises troubling questions about human gullibility in general.

This is difficult territory. Reputations tend to be self-sustaining; when they are up for grabs argument is often badly contaminated by passion; protagonists stake their own reputations; and worst of all, by the time the issue is serious, the dispute has a dimension in worldly affairs as well as the academy – it has become political. Think of the enormous argument about Marx. Think of the vast cost of whatever mistakes were made in his evaluation; think of the grinding bigotry that destroyed debate, and the ghastly passions harnessed by this contest and their destructive power in the hands of men of action. Or on another level, think of Tolstoy's attack on Shakespeare, his earnest conviction that he was doing us a favour by exposing an impostor – and his error in mistaking prejudice for judgement.

In fact both examples have something to tell us about the case of Rousseau. To uphold a sceptical view of him it is necessary to impute to his posterity something like a Tolstoyean conspiracy, a massive intellectual swindle, and this is a very disturbing verdict, to both victims and perpetrators. But as well, a whole socio-political legacy needs to be unwound and reassessed – something not only difficult and unwelcome in practice, but perhaps impossible in principle. Nothing as ambitious as this will be tried here. Instead I'll try to make a bit clearer exactly what Rousseau said on a few of his most important topics, and in this way it might be easier to decide

whether it is proper to treat him with the respect due to an original, if sometimes obscure thinker.

1. The state of nature.

We've already seen that his view of this is apparently confused as to its reality. There are passages in which he seems to hold that this is an historical era, and yet he tells us that from the time of their creation, men were removed from it by the gifts of their understanding. If it is an abstraction, he tells us nothing about its relation to the real, nor is it clear where his data came from. He nevertheless claims as certainties that original men did not associate with one another, that they had no moral capacity, and that original liberty is not backed by natural right.

Now although it might look a bit fanciful to us to speculate about human origins in this way, that is only because we now have different methods. Interest in the issue is as old as man himself – every known group has its stories of creation. Analytical curiosity – questions about the nature of society and of humans themselves – is as old as philosophy. Herodotus tells the story of a Pharaoh who, in order to find which people were the first, had a newborn infant isolated on an island together with a mute nurse. When the baby's first word turned out to be the Phoenician word for bread, he had his answer.

Pharaoh had the wrong experiment but the right idea – to investigate human origins you had to think of ways to reveal or infer them. That is why the discovery of New World and then Pacific peoples triggered so much interest in Europe. They were exotic to be sure, but more, they were seen as an open window onto that remote and vanished time before life became complicated. And the light from that window seemed to fall on most of the perennial questions of moral and political philosophy. Were men good or evil by nature? Is there a 'natural' form of government, social structure, justice? Are men naturally war-like, and is might right? If not, is there a 'natural' morality? What about human relations – between men and women, children and parents, neighbours? What about commerce, law and government: what were their inner natures?

So it was no accident that the great original thinkers of the following centuries, Hobbes, Locke, Spinoza, Hume, Montesqieu, wrote some of the most fruitful and suggestive books on these very questions – works we can still read with profit today. When placed alongside these, Rousseau's strikes us as being different. First, the Discourse is not an enquiry of the same kind. Perhaps the best way to characterize it is as a logical tour de force working over a prolonged conjecture – a kind of performance, embracing

daring assertions, heroic refutations, memorable epithets, acrobatic sentences, obscure concepts – all of a piece. Probably that is what it took to win essay competitions, but this is not the stuff of sober reflection. It is only original in the manner of its presentation. The reasoning is undisciplined and badly distorted by its rhetoric. It is careless in respect of its many inconsistencies, and it is heavily burdened with a program of invective which reappears so frequently it is never really absent.

The second thing that impresses a reader is the quality of Rousseau's rational procedure. There is something casuistic, as if he wanted to show how he could reason like a mediaeval schoolman. It is like watching a torch beam pass over a magician's bench. Things fascinating, obscure, grotesque, incredible clamber after one another in a bewitching array; our disbelief is half suspended.

Compare this now with the work of John Locke on the same subject (work which Rousseau certainly knew well).

- As to defining the state of nature, Locke says that it is the state of perfect liberty, and equality.
- Following Hooker, he founds the (natural) moral law upon the principle of reciprocity: "being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions".
- Natural right follows from the doctrine of unique creation. In the last resort, he says, we are indemnified in our freedom by the creator's grace. "Being furnished with like faculties, sharing all in one community of nature", we may not be disposed one by another.
- For Locke, society is natural; our interdependence is no contrivance, but the effect of our natures.
- It is clear that in considering this subject, Locke is interested in establishing a framework for his discussion of political concepts, not re-creating an imaginary history of the species. In so far as the state of nature is an existent one, it is the condition of societies prior to the various undertakings by which they "make themselves members of some politic society".

Here is a body of thought we can easily recognize. The state of nature, for Locke, is something we might think of as the condition of 'simple' societies – a notion elaborated at length by the discipline of anthropology. The foundation of society is both our 'human' nature and the social adhesive of our 'moral' nature. These ideas have their counterparts in modern understandings of the origins of ethics and social behaviour. "In the beginning, all the world was America", he says, and we know what he

means. He was clearly very interested in the affairs of the American colonies, and his use of New World evidence strikes one as judicious and knowledgeable. He was both a scholar (Rousseau was an autodidact) and a politically educated man, having worked for some years as secretary to a minister of the crown.

Is the state of nature still a useful concept? Yes and no. On one hand, we can think now with much greater confidence about the real history of human cultures – think of them as both the inventions and the definers of human collectives, and their beginnings in an immensely long era of 'simple' societies, of which there exists a large body of organized knowledge. On the other hand, having achieved an ecological understanding of human social existence, the idea of beginnings has changed irrevocably, and so has the idea of 'nature'. As a close associate of the idea of the divinely created universe, it is much weaker and much less current than it was in the eighteenth century; in its place is the material world, particularly the biosphere, animated by, and obedient to its own laws; including ourselves and all that we create, regarded and examined by ourselves, from within it.

What Rousseau sharpened for us was the opposition of nature and culture – the idea that within or behind us is an innate character due only to our being what we are, that is, human; and that this has been overlaid or obscured, or as he said, corrupted, by the operations of reason and passion. In our first nature we are at one with the rest of the creation; but in so far as we inhabit a cultivated world, so much are we removed from it. In his hands the old nostalgia for pure beginnings assumed this form, and it has survived – apparently immune from refutation, attracting new enthusiasts from among the jaded citizens of the West, ever since.

2. <u>The social contract</u>

Rousseau famously taught that society was possible only by a form of compact between its members. So did the other thinkers of that period. But when we look closer, Rousseau's version of this idea is distinctive. For Locke, the notion of social compact was a natural consequence of our "love and want of society", while Rousseau accounts for it as a contingent development without ever explaining clearly what its motives were. While Locke understands the terms of the compact organically, saying that all that is needed to make a community, in addition to the innate desire, is that its members "give up all the power necessary to the ends for which they unite into society to the majority"; Rousseau's view is more complex – and a good deal more obscure.

In the *Discourse* he says very little about it. In Part II, he tells us that in the original state of nature, man took no more notice of his fellows than of the other animals. Bit by bit, however, he discovered the advantages of cooperation, and this led to cohabitation, then to community. The story, as we've seen is an imaginary one, and its usefulness as an account of social origins is almost negligible. In *Du Contrat Social* however, he says a lot more.

Before touching on this, it is worth making a distinction – between the agreement supposed to have created societies in the first place, and that required by the society to govern itself. The first might properly be called a social contract; the second, a contract of government. As Ernest Barker has pointed out, the two ideas are not really independent, but still distinct. Now, it is not clear that Rousseau understood this, and so there is a sense of confusion about his account of the nature of the compact. At I/IV he merely says that the union of a people implies a contract. In the following chapter, he explains how he understands the necessity of a social contract:

"Some form of association must be found as a result of which the whole strength of the community will be enlisted for the protection of the person and property of each constituent member, in a such a way that each, when united to his fellows, renders obedience to his will, and remains as free as he was before." This shows where Rousseau's preoccupation diverges from Locke's – for the Englishman, liberty is a right, and is not lost or altered by association; but from this point, Rousseau goes to great lengths to show how it is possible to combine and yet be free. In the process he leads his readers into some very murky waters indeed.

At I/VI he gives what he understood to be the terms of the contract: "each of us contributes to the group his person and the powers which he wields as a person under the supreme direction of the general will, and we receive into the body politic each individual as forming an indivisible part of the whole." His characteristic insistence that each member of a collective yields (or 'alienates') the whole of his freedom, yet retains more than he contributed is explained by the concept of the 'general will', an invention of his which has remained as obscure, or even inexplicable, as it was when he first proposed it.

At II/III we find the nearest thing to a definition of the idea.
"There is often considerable difference between the will of all and the general will. The latter is concerned only with the common interest, the former with interests that are partial, being itself but the sum of individual wills. But take from the expression of these separate wills the pluses and

minuses – which cancel each other out, the sum of the differences is left, and that is the general will."

From this we learn that the general will somehow always divines the true common good, no matter what people think. And indeed, when he discusses legislature in II/VI &VII he makes it clear that "The general will is always right, but the judgement guiding it is not always well informed. It must be made to see things as they are, sometimes as they ought to be." How does this work out in practice? How is it possible for a people to maintain fully their liberty and yet submit to a majority in assembly? Well, he says, when a minority opposes a measure in the legislative chamber, it is not because there can be two comparable opinions on the question, but because they are mistaken as to the general will. (IV/II)

The strangeness of this idea has not prevented many tortuous efforts to make it coherent, but it seems unlikely that anything new can be found now, and the best thing to say is that the concept of the general will is exactly as obscure as it sounds. What made him go for something so indefensible and put it at the core of his account of the nature of society? It looks as if he wanted to show that the community in which he was raised – the canton of Geneva – with its sovereign assembly and direct democracy was the model for an ideal state. But he seems to have been quite unfamiliar with the real reasons why this form of government was, and always had been confined to small city-states, and tried to generalize it using invented political entities. In the process he not only created an ambiguous text, but (perhaps unwittingly) provided suggestions that, in their time, were to be avidly absorbed by a new kind of autocrat.

This is the legacy that begins with the Jacobins: "each individual will no longer believe himself to be one, but part of the unity and recognizable only in the whole". J H Huizinga pointed out the uncanny similarity of this thought to that of the one-time East German party boss, Grotewohl: "Only by acting in and through the community can the individual find himself". Was Rousseau an anti-democrat? Was his concept of liberty autocratic, or merely convoluted and confused? It's hard to say, but some things are plain. He was stridently opposed to representative government, and unlike Voltaire he thought English institutions decadent and unjust. He doesn't seem to have had much sympathy for the great French liberal Montesqieu; and when he was invited to draft a constitution for the new republic of Corsica, the result was a very strange formula indeed, with a good many hints of the totalitarian flavour of his long-lasting tract.

3. <u>Society as corruption</u>

I don't suppose social criticism flourished under the pharaohs – there is no reason why an absolute ruler should allow it. The Hebrew dissenters of the Old Testament were interested in iniquity rather than injustice; it is probably in the time of Aristophanes that we get the first instances of what we recognize as modern social critique, in this case ironic, but nonetheless intentional. Probably the greatest of Rousseau's contemporaries in detached criticism was Voltaire, scathingly anti-clerical and an enthusiastic amateur scientist; but in France, by the mid eighteenth century there was already an old and varied tradition of criticism, so Rousseau, had he wished to join it, had any number of predecessors. But what he did was something different.

He did not, like Swift, wish to advertise the absurdity of much that passes for civilized behaviour; nor, like Rabelais, to bring the absurd to centre stage – he was much too humourless for that. Neither did he bring a clear sighted moral indignation to bear on the social evils he mentions so often – acerbic, yes; enraged, no. He had no tragic temper with which to regard the predicament of men, no heroic insight at all. For a one who pretended to be a close student of men and society, he never wished to apply the methods and intellectual habits of science to its analysis, as, for instance, Adam Smith was to do not long after, and others were attempting in his time. It is vacuous to think that he was really interested in reform – that is, if we look for evidence in his informal writings, his deeds and the decisions that reflect his real commitments, rather than what are taken to be his polemical tracts.

Perhaps the best way to convey the flavour of his attack on society is to let him speak for himself. Here is a short bit from the Appendix to the Discourse.
"That men are actually wicked, a sad and continual experience of them proves beyond doubt; but all the same I think I have shown that man is naturally good. What can have depraved him to such an extent except the changes that have happened in his constitution, the advances he has made, and the knowledge he has acquired? We may admire human society as much as we please; it will be none the less true that it necessarily leads men to hate each other in proportion as their interests clash, and to do one another apparent services, while they are really doing every imaginable mischief."

A bit further on he reminds us of the contrast he was so keen to impress on us – between primitive felicity and civilized rapacity.
"Savage man, when he has dined, is at peace with all nature, and friend of his fellow-creatures. If a dispute arises about a meal, he rarely comes to blows … the victor eats, and the vanquished seeks provision elsewhere, and all is at peace. The case is quite different with man in the state of society, for whom first necessaries have to be provided, then superfluities; delicacies

follow next, then immense wealth, then subjects, then slaves. He enjoys not a moment's relaxation …"

This will be enough to suggest what is moving him. There is disgust here, whether feigned or felt is hard to know. If genuine, then with the benefit of psychoanalytical hindsight we won't find it hard to locate its source – in himself. This, at least is clear, that all misanthropists – that is, everyone who's considered view of men is that they are wicked – not part-time, but essentially – that person is neurotic to the extent that this view is simply not sustainable in practice without both self-deception and insincerity, and its origin is not judgement but self-loathing. No matter how sanguine we might be about the robustness of virtue or the veneer of civilized values, we could not even stop to think about them were we not their beneficiaries.

It is possible that Rousseau was clever enough to have completely invented his cause out of nothing except the ambition to succeed as a litterateur – possible but not likely. Much more probable is that he employed his considerable talents this way, after discovering how to profit from them, by expressing sentiments that occurred spontaneously, or which were easy to evoke. Certainly there is a sense of effortless invention whenever he speaks of corruption, suggesting it was always rehearsed in his mind – just as the pattern of his fractured friendships suggests a paranoid and grotesquely insecure human agent. His epiphany on the road to Vincennes released a store of energized feeling that lasted the rest of his life.

Noble savage?

Our attitudes toward primitive people still matter. In the settler lands in the Americas, Africa, the Pacific and Australia, indigenous people still await a just reconciliation with their conquerors. As well as that, former colonial peoples continue to struggle to adapt to futures that were uninvited but now inevitable. A few groups, mainly in Brazil have barely begun the journey of integration with the industrial world or whatever it is that succeeded it. When one listens to the talk that flows freely around these things, it is hard not to think that something remarkably powerful has kept us from thinking clearly about them.

As Western society has come adrift from the moorings of its traditional past, values sanctioned by religion and durable sources of authority, its people have responded to their new freedom in different ways – sometimes by looking back to old certainties, and sometimes by discovering new ones, where before there were none. It is not surprising that in times disturbed like this, interest in human origins should flourish again, focussed by

questions about the conduct of a good life, the meaning or otherwise of our human existence, and the proper management of our affairs.

There is a way of reading Rousseau, I guess, that makes him a sage – insisting that we mend our ways and return to our natural state – and if we think we need a sage to say those things, we can be pretty sure he would have put up his hand for the part. But these are important issues and the cost of mistakes is high. One might say that until now, the savages have paid most of that; but this would be only half true, and in any case, the matter of helping pre-industrial people into 'civilization' has now become conflated with the malaise of civilization itself.

But hadn't we better check the sage's credentials? It seems to me that as a guide to the important truth of human origins, he is not much help; as an interpreter of the social world, both primitive and modern, he is far too fictional for an historian, and much too dysfunctional to be a participant-analyst. If experience has taught us anything at all, it is that primitive people are neither better nor worse than civilized ones, just different; that nobody freely chooses to relinquish all the advantages of civilized life just to enjoy those of the jungle or the desert – on the contrary, all contacted 'indigenous' peoples have tended to move in the other direction, often but not always under compulsion, and always at their great cost.

As to the supposed purity of savage life, while it is 'simple' in some material and technological sense, in all the other dimensions we can think of – imagination, ingenuity, relationship, the capacity for deep enjoyment of life, as well as for destructive aggression, and all the ills of which Rousseau excuses them, they are, or can be exactly as we are. Part of Rousseau's error, of course, was to place them all in a single category, while we now know that there is as much diversity among the cultures of 'primitive' people as there is in the whole human family. If we are inclined to a nostalgia for some more virtuous and less troubled era of the human story, it is likely that the Parisian society that first gave Rousseau his plaudits felt the same, possibly for some of the same reasons – but they could never be the basis for a decent reconciliation between indigenes and their oppressors.

If Rousseau's legacy is his backing for 'romantic' visions of primitiveness, then it is an empty one. It was poorly supported by evidence, even by his own standards, and easily refuted on ours. It was not so much an investigation of human origins, as the ranging of an agile mind over the implications of his own psychic and emotional predicament. The pity of it is that such a gifted man came to produce such uneven work, so gravely constrained by therapeutic, rather than philosophical inventiveness. Perhaps

the survival for so long of the ideas and themes he made so vivid has less to do with their truth than with the resonance of that predicament in the minds and hearts of so many of his cultural inheritors.

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