

# i nterpretation

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# The *Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality Among Men*

## On the Intention of Rousseau's Most Philosophical Work\*

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Rousseau in the *Confessions* called the *Discours sur l'inégalité* that piece among all his writings in which his principles "are made manifest with the greatest boldness, not to say audacity."<sup>1</sup> That does not mean, to be sure, that the complete boldness of the book is obvious or immediately discloses itself in its full measure at the first reading. The *Confessions* also tells us that when we concern ourselves with the *Discours sur l'inégalité* we venture into a work that, according to the pronouncement of its author, "found in all Europe only few readers who understood it, and none among them who wanted to talk about it."<sup>2</sup> We are, then, warned.

If the *Discours sur l'inégalité* found only few readers who understood it, Rousseau on his part left no doubt that he had from the outset written the book for "the few," for "those who know how to understand," for "a very small number of readers."<sup>3</sup> More exactly, the *Discours* is directed at two very different, at two unequal addressees: Rousseau directs his discourse at the true philosophers, whom he acknowledges as his sole judges, but at the same time he is well aware of the large number of listeners who will hear his discourse and whom he can reach with it. To the inequality of the addressees correspond the unequal ways of addressing them. Other objects for reflection are given to the philosophers than to the vulgar readers.<sup>4</sup> What must appear dark and erig-

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1. *Confessions*, IX, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1959–1969), 4 vols., Vol. I, p. 407. Hereafter cited as *OCP*. All page numbers that appear in the text or in the notes without further specification refer to the edition *Diskurs über die Ungleichheit / Discours sur l'inégalité. Kritische Ausgabe des integralen Textes. Mit sämtlichen Fragmenten und ergänzenden Materialien nach den Originalausgaben und den Handschriften neu ediert, übersetzt und kommentiert von Heinrich Meier*. (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1984). *FN* refers to the commentary in this edition. The translation by Roger D. and Judith R. Masters entitled *The First and Second Discourses* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964) has been consulted in order to render Rousseau's French into English.

2. *Confessions*, VIII; *OCP* I, p. 389.

3. *Lettre à Jean Jallabert* of March 30, 1755, *Correspondance complète* (CC), ed. R. A. Leigh (Geneva: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1966) Vol. 3, p. 115.

4. Cf. p. 172 and FN 213.

matic to the many can offer the few insight into the fundamental principles of the text and induce them to think its boldest thoughts.

The very conception of the *Discours sur l'inégalité* presupposes from the very beginning a fundamental inequality—an inequality that results from the intellectual inequality of men, and consequently from an inequality that is ultimately characterized by Rousseau as natural.<sup>5</sup> For the adequate understanding of the book, of its rhetoric and of its intentions, this presupposition signifies the following. The view—still widespread—that has had the strongest historical influence, namely the assessment that the *Discours sur l'inégalité* is first and foremost a moral, not to say moralizing, treatise intended to promote egalitarianism, is more apt to block access to the central core of the enterprise that Rousseau begins in the *Discours*, than to disclose it.

The theoretical insight into the fundamental inequality of men finds its most appropriate expression in the exoteric-esoteric double aspect that characterizes the *Discours sur l'inégalité* through and through. With the “art of careful writing,” with the presentation that consciously veils, by speaking in abbreviations and encoded allusions, Rousseau accommodates himself to the in principle problematical character of a public treatment of philosophic and scientific subjects. It is precisely out of the inequality of men that this problematical character arises, which Rousseau himself brought to light, beginning with the *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*, with increasing forcefulness in ever new discussions revolving around the tense relationship between philosophy and society.

In the *Préface d'une seconde lettre à Bordes*, which Rousseau composed in autumn, 1753—immediately before he began working on the *Discours sur l'inégalité*—but never himself published, Rousseau writes:

It is only successively and always for few readers that I have developed my ideas. It is not myself that I have spared, but the truth, in order to transmit it more surely and to make it useful. Often I have given myself a great deal of pain to try to enclose in a sentence, in a line, in a word dropped as if by chance, the result of a long series of reflections. Often most of my readers must have found my discourses poorly linked together and almost entirely disjointed, for want of perceiving the trunk, of which I showed them only the branches. But it was enough for those who know how to understand, and I have never wanted to speak to the others.<sup>6</sup>

What Rousseau intimates here about the character of the philosophical publications that preceded the *Discours sur l'inégalité* holds no less for the *Discours*. In the retrospective view of the *Confessions*, he said of the *Discours* that in it

5. See pp. 66 and 270–72; cf. *Premier Discours*, OCP III, p. 29; *Réponse au roi de Pologne*, OCP III, pp. 39, 41; *Lettre à Grimm*, OCP III, p. 64; *Lettre à Le Cat*, OCP III, p. 102; *Du Contrat social* I, 9, OCP III, p. 367; *Emile* (OCP IV), I, pp. 247, 266; II, p. 324; IV, p. 537; OCP I, p. 1123; *Confessions*, I, p. 5.

6. OCP III, p. 106. Emphasis added.

he “completely developed” his principles for the first time.<sup>7</sup> Three years after the appearance of the *Discours*, in the preface to the *Lettre à d’Alembert*—the first text of Rousseau that, although it is addressed to a philosopher, turns explicitly “to the people”—appears the remark that in this work the concern for Rousseau is “no longer to speak to the small number, but to the public; nor to make the others think, but to explain my thought clearly.”<sup>8</sup> With the *Discours sur l’inégalité*, Rousseau unquestionably does “speak to the small number”; in the *faire penser les autres* he appropriates to himself the basic maxim of every exoteric presentation.

Nevertheless, Rousseau’s *Discours* has evidently not one but two addressees. This is the case not only in that general sense in which the author of every publicly disseminated text has to take into account that his publication can in principle be read, beyond the “real addressees,” by all who are capable of reading. In the case of the *Discours* there is the additional fact that the double set of addressees corresponds to the double set of intentions that underlies the book. The *Discours* is first of all and as a whole a discourse to the few. It addresses philosophers of the stamp of a Plato or Xenocrates, and it is without question meant for the young or future philosophers who might be found among the “audience.”<sup>9</sup> But he expressly “speaks” also “to the many.” He speaks to the citizens of Geneva, to the “human race,” finally even to those savages to whom not even “the heavenly voice has made itself heard.”<sup>10</sup> All mere figures of speech aside, that the speech is emphatically directed to a second addressee is grounded in the fact that the *Discours* is a decisively philosophic book and at the same time in the precise and full sense a political book, judging by its object as well as by its intention. The plane on which the philosophic, real analysis occurs that Rousseau performs in the work, is overlaid by the plane of polemical presentation; on this polemical plane the critical potential of Rousseau’s political philosophy unfolds. The masterly alternation, back and forth, between the two different planes (which must be carefully distinguished if both are adequately to be understood) constitutes the central element, clamping everything back together, in the complicated rhetoric that is decisive for the *Discours* altogether. One must examine the eulogies and the condemnations, the exhortations and the admonitions, the impressive images and the graphic contrasts—all of which originate in the plane of polemical presentation—in the light of the concrete descriptions Rousseau develops on the plane of the philosophic, real analysis. Otherwise, the reader runs the risk of remaining a prisoner of slogans and of falling victim to the rhetoric of the *Discours* where

7. *Confessions*, VIII; *OCP* I, p. 388.

8. *Lettre à Mr. d’Alembert sur les spectacles*, ed. M. Fuchs (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1948), p.

8. Emphasis added.

9. Exordium, pp. 72 ff.; cf. Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1952), p. 36.

10. Dedication, pp. 8 ff., Exordium, p. 74, Note X, p. 318.

only the insight into the polemical meaning of Rousseau's rhetorical devices would lead to the things themselves. At the most, he in this way can really do justice to *one* intention of the text.

Just how indispensable it is to distinguish between the plane of presentation and the plane of the philosophic analysis may be illustrated in one of the most cited and most controversial passages of the book: in Rousseau's praise of the *jeunesse du monde*. Numerous interpreters have deduced from this praise that Rousseau's "real ideal" is savage society, while to others, to the more philosophic natures, his praise of the *jeunesse du monde* appears to be an odd, foreign body that more or less fills them with perplexity. In the final section of the Exordium, in which he addresses himself, with a pathetic *discours dans le Discours*, to man, "from whatever land he may be," Rousseau mentions that the reader will seek the age at which he would wish that the species had stopped; and that the reader, furthermore, would "perhaps" like "to be able to go backward in time," and that this sentiment must become the criticism of the contemporaries (p. 74). Rousseau does everything to nourish the sentiment "foreseen" by him, when he first extols the age of savage society as the "happiest and most durable epoch" and calls it the "best state for man"; and then sets before the reader's eyes the dismal picture of the consequences that the "great revolution," brought about by metallurgy and agriculture, will precipitate in the history of mankind (p. 192).

What should be taken into consideration in order to interpret these assertions without capitulating to Rousseau's rhetoric? We limit ourselves to five suggestions. (1) As Rousseau has amply shown in the immediately preceding paragraph of the text, in the state that he subsequently characterizes as the "best for man," the "vengeances had become terrible and men bloodthirsty and cruel" (p. 190). The reader who considers the concrete anthropological descriptions of the various stages of development can make his own judgment about their quality.<sup>11</sup> (2) In the "best state for man" not yet "all our faculties" are "developed" (p. 206); for that development, the occurrence of a "fatal accident" is needed (p. 192). The praise of savage society thus underlines the antiteleological conception of the Rousseauan reconstruction of history. (3) The characterization of the epoch of savage society as the "veritable youth of the world" contains, with the literal translation of *novitas mundi*, the most unmistakable reference in the book to Lucretius' *De rerum natura* (V, 780, 818, 943), the "original pattern" for the *Discours. De rerum natura*, proscribed as "atheistic," is nowhere mentioned by name in the *Discours*. When the heathen epoch of the *novitas mundi* is passed off as the "happiest and most durable epoch," Christianity emerges as a decline, as one of the "steps toward the decrepitude of the species" (p. 194). (4) Rousseau's eulogy of the "best state for man" is accentuated, in a way that

11. Cf. Rousseau's characterization of the primitive state of nature at pp. 136 and 190.

no other passage in the text is, by means of Note XVI, which refers to that praise and which in its turn contains the subject for the frontispiece of the whole work. The first sentence of Note XVI brings Christianity and the Christian mission into play, and the Note ends with the discourse of a Hottentot who renounces the “paraphernalia” of European civilization “forever” and for his “entire life renounces the Christian religion” (p. 376). Rousseau adds to this discourse of the savage—the final *discours dans le Discours*—not a word of his own, no commentary, but merely the comment “See the frontispiece.” (5) It is true that on the plane of polemical presentation, Rousseau mostly contrasts man of the civil state with the sociable savage, the Hottentot, the Carib, or the Indian, and that he often intentionally blurs the distinction between the solitary savage and the sociable savage. But his philosophic analysis leaves no doubt that the anthropologically most radical change is the development from solitary man to sociable man. Rousseau uses the adjective *sociable* exactly three times in the *Discours*: in becoming sociable, man becomes a *slave* (p. 92), he becomes *evil* (p. 166), he henceforth only knows how *to live in the opinion of others* (p. 268). All these characterizations are inseparably bound with one another. They describe one and the same thing. The philosophically decisive break between solitary man and sociable man precedes the *jeunesse du monde*, and Rousseau takes pains, in the section directly preceding the praise of savage society, once again to call the reader’s attention particularly to the necessity of making an exact distinction (p. 190).

On the plane of the polemical crossing of swords with European civilization, Rousseau makes the position of the savages his own. In the final paragraph of the *Discours*, he borrows the criticism that Montaigne directs through the mouths of some savages at the political and social reality of the French monarchy, and concludes therewith the Second Part of the book: What dismays the savages, “that a child commands an old man,” and “that a handful of people are glutted with superfluities while the starving multitude lacks the most necessary things,” “is manifestly against the law of nature, in whatever way it may be defined.” This assertion applies no less to the scandal that Rousseau—silently supplementing the savages or Montaigne (the “third thing” that had filled the savage visitors of France with dismay had “escaped” Montaigne, to his chagrin)—places in the center in his enumeration, namely, that “an imbecile leads a wise man.” The “sort of inequality that reigns among all civilized peoples” contradicts the “natural law” and the “law of nature” together (pp. 270, 272). It violates the “natural order,” but is no less incompatible with the political order of the good commonwealth that has in history superseded the “natural order” or that can and should replace the “natural order” anew after it recurs in history. The political thrust of the *Discours* is expressed in the praise of savage society, in the identification with the savages’ (extended) criticism at the end of the Second Part, and, most prominently, in the discourse of the Hot-

tentot, which the frontispiece highlights as *the discours dans le Discours*. But the political intention is only one intention that Rousseau pursues with his book, and it is professedly not his crowning intention.

What holds true for the political intention, holds all the more for the philosophical intention: The artistic discourse in which Rousseau makes manifest his principles, is “more audacious” than it may appear at first glance. The boldness of the *Discours* discloses itself in its full extent only through a careful study of the rhetoric of the work. Rhetorical elements determine the complexion of the *Discours* more than that of any other theoretical text of Rousseau. None of his other books exhibits a political-philosophical “topography” of comparable significance to that of the *Discours sur l'inégalité*—written in France, dated from the Savoyard Chambéry, published in Amsterdam—which was formally dedicated to the Republic of Geneva, but is presented “in the Lyceum of Athens” to the philosophers and from there will be brought to the ears of the “human race.” No other book by Rousseau has such an intricate external form, such a multipartite structure, whereby all individual parts out of which the *Discours* is composed are firmly bound into the rhetoric of the text as a whole, and receive their respective functions therein. I cannot delve into all those matters in detail here. I must also refrain from elaborating the profound consistency inherent in the fact that the text in which Rousseau makes manifest the principles of his philosophy “with the greatest boldness” is also his most rhetorical text.<sup>12</sup> Allow me instead to provide a sketch of Rousseau’s principles as they become visible when, starting from Rousseau’s rhetoric and always taking it into account, one attempts to forge ahead to the heart of the work.

“If one observes the natural constitution of things, man seems evidently destined to be the happiest of creatures; if one reasons on the basis of the present state, the human species appears to be the most deplorable of all.” The deep cleft (which Rousseau trenchantly expresses in a fragment, p. 418) between the natural possibilities of man on the one hand and the historical reality of his depraved existence on the other hand is the great challenge with which Rousseau’s philosophy comes to grips. In the center of what Rousseau never tired of characterizing as “my system” is a pattern of thinking that takes the previously described cleft radically seriously, anthropologically speaking. He derives from

12. There is a more detailed discussion in the introduction, and in the commentary, of my edition of the *Discours*. The volume presents for the first time a complete reproduction of two illuminating lengthy passages—which Rousseau suppressed in the final editing—from a fair copy of the *Discours*. The first fragment contains a harsh criticism of absolutism, the second an attack, no less massive, on the spiritual power of the priests; Rousseau intended to have the *Discours* culminate in this attack. A brief sketch on the genealogy of religion precedes this challenge of priestly authority. For the interpretation of these best-documented cases of Rousseauan self-censorship and of their meaning for the reading of the *Discours* altogether, I can only refer again to the introduction and commentary of the edition mentioned.

this cleft the decisive formulation of the question, in order to gain theoretical access to the problems of the human condition. In the following, we will call this pattern of thinking “the conception of the anthropological difference,” a proposition that takes its bearings by the optimal possibilities of human nature realized in the history of the species and realizable during the life of an individual; and that conceives the loss, burial, or miscarriage of these possibilities as the deprivation, deformation, or alienation of man.

Contemplating the anthropological difference means taking as one’s point of departure the readiness of human nature to become depraved. At the point where Rousseau for the first time speaks of his “sad and great system, the fruit of a sincere examination of the nature of man, of his faculties and of his destination,” he touches in the same breath on the specific precariousness of man, and emphasizes “how much it is to be feared that by dint of desiring to elevate ourselves above our nature, we may fall back beneath it.”<sup>13</sup> In the *Discours sur l’inégalité*, Rousseau shows that that very faculty that fundamentally distinguishes man from the other living beings, namely perfectibility (which makes possible the historical development of all other faculties that belong to man exclusively), is at the same time the “veritable source of his miseries” (p. 490). Perfectibility is at once the basis for the difference between man and beast and for the anthropological difference. Man’s historical development into man and the process of his deformation, which “in the long run makes him into the tyrant of himself and of nature” (p. 104), have, anthropologically speaking, the same origin. But they are not identical. The critique of depraved existence presupposes the natural possibility of a nondepraved existence of man.

Contemplating the anthropological difference means, therefore, asking about the conditions of fortunate human existence. The significance of this question extends further than it may seem to at first glance: If man’s self-knowledge leads to the insight that the evils that afflict him are his own doing, that “it is not without difficulty that we have succeeded in making ourselves so unhappy”; if it turns out that nature does not bar man from a life in which he is in harmony with himself, that it has not treated him worse than the other living beings; or if the “demonstration” that man is good by nature, succeeds; then nature can be “justified” (p. 300). A key function belongs to the conception of the anthropological difference, both for man’s self-knowledge and for the “justification of nature.” With regard to both, it is necessary that “what man gets from his own stock” be distinguished from “what circumstances and his progress have added to or changed in his primitive state.” Both presuppose that we succeed, “through all the changes that the succession of times and of things must have produced in his original constitution,” in seeing man “as nature

13. *Préface d'une seconde lettre à Bordes*, OCP III, p. 105. Rousseau uses the word *système* there no less than five times in two pages.

formed him.” Both make it necessary to compare the *homme de l'homme* with the *homme naturel* (pp. 42, 490). Contemplating the anthropological difference means to return to the undistorted nature of man.

Rousseau attempts to accomplish this task in the First Part of the *Discours* through a detailed reconstruction of the “veritable,” “first,” “primitive” state of nature of the human species. He strips man “of all supernatural gifts” that he “could have received” and of “all artificial faculties” that he “could have acquired only by long progress,” in order to consider him “as he must have emerged from the hands of nature” (p. 78). The state that he describes is the state of a solitary being that possesses neither language nor reason, that possesses no idea of God or of moral duties nor any concept of right, property, or dominion, and for whom consciousness of death is unknown. The life of natural man that Rousseau describes is consequently the life of a beast. Rousseau for the first time expressly reconstructs the state of nature of the human species as a bestial state, with all the consequences this reconstruction entails.<sup>14</sup> Therewith he not only digs deeper than the philosophers prior to him who, when they investigated the foundations of society, “all felt the necessity of going back to the state of nature” but without ever “reaching” it (p. 68). He not only brings the enterprise of his predecessors radically to an end, in order to turn against them the results that he attains. By beginning his depiction of the development of man with the *condition animale*, he expresses a decisive change of perspectives: Rousseau conceives man in his animality before he conceives him as nonanimal or monster; he sees man in the horizon of the things in common that tie him to the other living beings,<sup>15</sup> and regards from that standpoint the differences that divide him from those beings. Man is part of nature. The danger of arrogance is from the very beginning connected with man’s elevation over nature. He makes himself into the tyrant of himself by making himself into nature’s tyrant. He is conquered by nature by seeking to subdue it.<sup>16</sup> His deprivation is the great wound of nature. Against this background it may appear less “astonishing” when Rousseau no longer seeks to gain the measure for human existence by taking his bearings by what distinguishes man from the other living beings, but by returning to what existed before the start of the difference in man as well as between man and nature. And it may appear less astonishing when he asks about the supporting stratum and, in view of its peril through the progress of human distinctiveness, casts his glance at the overlapping, natural universal.

The same change of perspective that leads Rousseau to reconstruct the state of nature of man as a state of animality causes him to break with the state-of-

14. See particularly pp. 96, 104, 106, 160, 174, 334, 336, 348, 350, 362, 370. Rousseau added the boldest, longest, and central note of the *Discours* to the assertion “Savage man will therefore begin with the purely animal functions” (p. 104).

15. Compare the meaning that Rousseau ascribes to *sensibilité*, sensitivity (p. 58).

16. See *inter alia* pp. 78, 92, 104, 194, 206, 300ff.

nature theories of his predecessors in a second, most fundamental, respect. Rousseau does not conceive the state of nature as the starting point (always necessarily directed toward its overcoming and negatively related to the civil state) of a goal-directed development. Instead, he seeks in the state of nature a state in which man could have remained “eternally” (p. 166). The state of nature that the First Part of the *Discours* describes is self-sufficient. There are no endogenous factors that drive out of it; there is no teleology at work that fixes its end and the final transition to civil society; its static character appears to be of potentially unlimited duration. Accidents, external causes “that could also never have arisen,” were responsible for men’s departing from the *état d’animalité*. Rousseau examines the state of nature as the *natural* state of man. The state of nature becomes the *primitive* state only in the light of the historical development that has occurred. The “conjectures” that Rousseau forms about the state of nature are “drawn solely from the nature of man and the beings surrounding him” (p. 72). Because the state of nature has become a “historical” state through contingent circumstances, knowledge of it does not depend on the “uncertain testimonies of history” (p. 108). Thus, by comparing and contrasting the essentially historical stages and events that join the state of nature and the civil state of the present with one another, Rousseau can immediately juxtapose the state of nature and the civil state and, with a view to both, speak of two “facts given as real” (p. 168).

The central statement of the Notes makes clear how seriously Rousseau means the simultaneity of the unsimultaneous, toward which he aims his presentation of the state of nature and which he supposes methodically. (This statement is central in the literal sense as well as with respect to its significance for the anthropological approach of the *Discours* altogether.) Rousseau lets it be understood there that he expressly regards the continuation of the state of nature in time as possible. After more exact researches, he lets the reader know, it could turn out that various living beings described by travellers as beasts, under the names pongos, mandrills, orangutans, are in truth authentic, savage men, who persist in the state of nature of the species up to the present day (p. 336).<sup>17</sup>

The static character of the state of nature is based on the autarky of natural

17. Rousseau places this assertion exactly in the center of the sixth section of the eleven-paragraph-long Tenth Note, which for its part is the central note of the nineteen Notes of the *Discours*. (Cf. further the reference to the “numeration of the Notes,” p. lxxxviii, and in connection therewith p. 94. On the meaning of the Notes in general, see p. 62 along with FN 73 and p. 170 along with FN 213.) The philosophical radicalness of the enterprise of reconstruction that Rousseau undertakes in the *Discours* is actually illuminated by nothing more than the fact that Rousseau considers it *possible* that the pongos, orangutans, etc., *could be* “in fact veritable savage men,” “whose race, dispersed in the woods in ancient times,” had not “had an opportunity to develop any of its virtual faculties, had not acquired any degree of perfection, and was still found in the primitive state of nature” when it was discovered by the travellers who reported about it (p. 326). Compare in the light of Note X Rousseau’s assertions in the Exordium about the character of his researches (p. 70).

man, whose needs and whose capacity to fulfill them are in a state of balance. This balance is made possible not through a paradisaical abundance but through the fact that the needs of the solitary *homme sauvage* do not exceed the physically necessary. "Fanciful needs" remain unknown to him, because the power of imagination "paints nothing" to his mind's eye. Psychically he is self-sufficient, because he maintains no individualized relationships whatever to his own kind, since the sentiments of preference, love, striving for recognition, or the wish to rule are foreign to him. The animal obtuseness that underlies the self-sufficiency of the individual also insures that on their own the natural inequalities do not set into motion any dynamic on the level of the species: Whatever an individual may invent or discover, whatever he may acquire or collect, perishes again with him. For lack of communication and tradition, there occurs no accumulation of knowledge or stockpiling of material goods worth mentioning. All individuals always begin their efforts, from generation to generation, at the same level. The autarky of the solitary existence thus causes men who are by nature unequal to be treated equally *sub specie naturae* and to be equals in a more fundamental sense, as subordinates of universal laws. All can develop their individual faculties in like manner, but to all the narrow limits apply, that are set to the development of the human faculties as long as that development occurs outside of all communalization. All are, without distinction, subject to the law of the stronger, which is decisive in the "natural order" and regulates the conflicts, but—as long as the natural preconditions for the solitary way of life itself are given—is capable of establishing no relations of rule, and thus keeps all in independence. For all, finally, the strict law of selection has inviolable validity. Nature treats men of the state of nature "precisely as the law of Sparta treated the children of the citizens: it renders strong and robust those who are well constituted, and makes all the others perish" (p. 80).

Man in the state of nature, which is static because autarkic and autarkic because animally obtuse, is good. He is good in the sense of being well-bred—with regard to his biological viability, his vigorous health, and his untorn existence, not ripped by any dissensions, at one with itself as well as with nature. He is, further, good in the sense that he is morally innocent or irresponsible, because he lives, short of good and evil, in a world of natural events in which everything happens according to the "natural order." And finally, he is good because he is not evil. Man's being evil essentially grows out of his weakness, particularly out of that weakness that is implied in his dependence on an alien will, on other persons, on their opinions, intentions, and sentiments. The savage of the solitary state of nature, however, is not weak and dependent, but strong and independent. He is self-sufficient. His desires and his faculties balance the scales. He is just as distant from the spirit of dominion as he is from the spirit of servitude; the *amour-propre*, that sort of love for oneself that is transmitted through comparison to other living beings, "does not speak to his heart"; he knows no *ressentiment*. Because he "regards himself as the sole

spectator to observe him, as the sole being in the universe to take interest in him, as the sole judge of his own merit, it is not possible that a sentiment that has its source in comparisons he is not capable of making, could spring up in his soul.”<sup>18</sup> Hate and the demand for revenge, pride and superciliousness, jealousy and malevolence are foreign to him. His behavior is determined by the immediate *amour de soi*, the natural sentiment of self-love. Thus men in the state of nature can “do each other a great deal of mutual violence when they derive some advantage from it” (p. 370), without reciprocally corrupting one another and without forfeiting their fundamental independence, the being oneself in a self-centered whole, that lets them be good.

The solitary savage is good, but is not a “human” man. Man’s becoming human requires the loss of the immediate autonomous, self-centered wholeness. The development of the faculties that natural man possesses *en puissance*, potentially, is tied to the fact that his physical and psychical self-sufficiency is broken apart in history. In order to “perfect” himself, man must forfeit his natural perfection. Man can become a being that has at its disposal reason, speech, and morality, only through men’s landing in dependence, only through his becoming sociable. Rousseau sketches the genealogy of sociability in the Second Part of the *Discours*, where—with a view to the other “fact given as real,” the civil state of the present, in which “all our faculties” are developed—he attempts to illuminate the historical process in the course of which the *homme naturel* is transformed into the *homme de l’homme*. His “report” leads from the solitary state of nature through the first loose and limited gatherings as a “herd” or a “sort of free association,” the founding and differentiation of families as the result of a “first revolution,” the rise of savage societies, the formation of particular nations united by manners and morals and characters, through the “great revolution” that metallurgy and agriculture brought forth, up to the establishment of political or civil societies, which put an end to the *bellum omnium contra omnes*. The war of all against all resulted from the partition of the land, the division of labor, and the ultimate split of society into the hostile camps of the rich on the one hand and the poor on the other. A “hypothetical history of governments” follows, which ends in a “look” at the rise of despotism. This is not the place to go into Rousseau’s presentation in detail. We limit ourselves to two points that are of special interest for understanding the underlying principles.

The most radical change that man undergoes in the course of his history, namely his development from a solitary to a sociable being, is tightly connected with the ascent of the sentiments of preference. When the solitary savage “prefers” himself and his needs above all else, this happens spontaneously,

18. Note XV, p. 370. Here I cannot go into the wide-ranging theological consequences of Rousseau’s conception of man’s being good or evil, Rousseau’s analysis of *amour-propre*, and his derivation of *ressentiment* from dependence on, or opposition to, an extraneous will. Note XV is suited to induce the reader to think through these matters “himself.”

unreflectively, without a comparative reference to other individuals. Natural man is led by his *amour de soi*; he follows the “simple impulse of nature.” The sentiments of preference, in contrast, presuppose the drawing of comparisons. These sentiments require distinguishing the particular from the universal, becoming conscious of one’s Own in coming to terms with the Other. The sentiments of preference are bound to faculties the development of which requires an “immense space of time” in the history of the species. But with these sentiments, the decisive step in the genesis of sociability is accomplished. The *sentiments de préférence*—Rousseau names in the first place love, and jealousy that “awakens with love”—break up the psychological autarky of the primitive, beastly state of nature. The first individualized relationships are the first personal dependencies. The actions and the reactions of the others no longer appear as mere natural events. They are interpreted and evaluated in the horizon of preference, of one’s own interest and one’s own judgment. Everyone begins “to consider others and to want to be considered himself.” Everyone appreciates others and would like on his part to be appreciated. “As soon as men had begun to appreciate one another mutually, and the idea of consideration was formed in their minds, each claimed to have a right to it, and it was no longer possible with impunity to be lacking in consideration toward anyone” (p. 188). To appreciate means to evaluate; low esteem is supposed along with high esteem. The individualized relationships that emerge from the sentiments of preference, from love and jealousy, from *amour-propre*, from pride and envy, are affectively no longer indifferent and morally no longer innocent. They are mediated through opinion, and the opinion “of the others” in the form of consideration, of public esteem, produces the first moral or social inequality. The striving for prestige, the wish to be respected, to be preferred over others, is the internalization of this inequality, its being taken into the thinking and feeling of man himself. With this striving, the center of man’s existence begins to shift outward, until sociable man, having reached the end of his development, entirely determined by *amour-propre*, and “always outside of himself,” finally “knows how to live only in the opinion of others,” and he “so to speak draws the sentiment of his own existence from their judgment alone” (p. 268).

Sociability shows the same Janus face that the history of man altogether has. It opens up for him possibilities that “lift him far above nature,” and it exposes him just thereby to the risk of falling back beneath nature. Sociability makes the individuals dependent, but it simultaneously helps them to develop their individuality in unprecedented ways. The comparative regard for others and mediation through opinion, both of which define the existence of sociable man, take from him the immediacy and the behavioral security of the solitary savage, but they also allow him to shed the savage’s beastly obtuseness. They establish the possibility of his upbringing and education, but no less the possibility of his being totally outside of himself. The consequences of *amour-propre*, which has the key role in the logic of sociability, are just as two-sided as opinion, by

which *amour propre* takes its bearings, and imagination, through which *amour-propre* is activated. The energy of *amour-propre* can be placed in the service of the highest as well as in that of the lowest affair. We owe to *amour-propre* “what is best and worst among men, our virtues and our vices, our sciences and our errors, our conquerors and our philosophers” (p. 256).

The change of perspectives expressed in his conception of the state of nature enables Rousseau to watch with the greatest penetration the loss and the gain, the new prospects for freedom and the increased risks, progress and decadence in the unfolding of history. The same shift of perspectives gives him the capacity to grasp and analyze, on the basis of his anthropological principles, both sides in their internal connection. In particular, the shift puts Rousseau in a position to point out the repercussions that the “external relationship” of man to nature has for the “internal relationship” of men among themselves. These repercussions nowhere become more conspicuously visible than in the wake of the “great revolution” precipitated by metallurgy and agriculture, which revolution brings about the most important break in the history of the *homme social*, namely the founding of political society: in the place of the cleared forests stood “smiling fields that had to be watered with the sweat of men, and in which slavery and misery were soon seen to germinate and grow with the crops” (pp. 194–96). The dialectic of dominion and servitude begins—in the relationship of man to nature as well as in that of man to man—with the pursuit and pervasion of *préférences*, particular points of view mediated through *goût*, *opinion*, *imagination*. The coercion that men exert on nature by forcing upon it (by means of agriculture, through continual work) the predilections that are most to their taste (p. 194), is reflected in the relationships of possession that arise out of the cultivation of the land. The influence of this coercion continues in the competition of the haves and have-nots and in the “perpetual conflict” that arises between the right of the stronger and the right of the first occupant. Only the process of civilization set off by the Neolithic revolution confers upon the passions and the dependencies of men the material force that makes the erection of civil society unavoidable. Human art must come to the aid of nature in order to put an end to the “most horrible state of war.” The “natural order” in this developmental stage of the human faculties is no longer capable of guaranteeing the survival of the species, no longer capable of preventing the species’ ruin, and must therefore be suspended by a social order of laws. An equality that is established by men and based on convention replaces the equality that existed *sub specie naturae* between the by-nature-unequal men in the natural state. All members of political society are in like manner subjugated to the human law, all bear henceforth the chains of the civil state that destroys natural freedom “irreversibly.” It is possible “to make” this state “legitimate,” but it is impossible to remove the chains themselves from the men who live in it.

Rousseau with his reconstruction of human development and of the history

of civil society seeks neither to regain a lost “ideal” nor to track down a Golden Age of any sort.<sup>19</sup> The state of nature was no idyllic paradise, and no sinful Fall of Man underlies the historic development of the distinctively human out of the natural universal. Rousseau takes pains in the Second Part of the *Discours* “to consider and bring together the different accidents that were able to perfect human reason while deteriorating the species, make a being evil by making him sociable, and from such a distant beginning finally bring man and the world to the point at which we see them” (p. 166). On the level of the philosophic, real analysis, this bold enterprise conduces to an appropriate characterization of the anthropological difference. The two-sidedness of historical change, which in the different aspects respectively appears to be perfection or decay, progress or corruption, is not abridged by Rousseau to a movement of decline. When, in looking at the whole of the historical process from which the “free, perfected, and consequently corrupted man”<sup>20</sup> emerges, he emphasizes loss, miscarriage, and deformation, what is thereby expressed is that these have become “for us” the first, the most urgent, the most oppressive concern.<sup>21</sup> With the broadening of the human possibilities, the danger of the bad reality grows. With the advancing domination of nature and the increasing self-domestication of man, depraved existence is becoming increasingly probable for ever more individuals. It becomes more probable, but it does not necessarily become the universal destiny of everything that bears a human face. Only by becoming sociable do men become evil. When they have become sociable, they are not therefore all together and always or essentially evil. On the other hand, attainments that signify an enormous enrichment for individuals because of their particular faculties and qualities can have fatal consequences for nations and for the species. What is good for Socrates need not be good for Athens or for mankind. While the development of enlightenment among nations goes along with the development of the vices, “always in the same proportion,” this conjunction does not by any means apply to individuals—a distinction that results from the natural inequality of men and that Rousseau, according to his

19. Cf. p. 288, FN 353.

20. Cf. p. 362. Rousseau speaks of *l'homme libre, perfectionné, partant corrompu* in the *Lettre à Voltaire*, CC IV, p. 39.

21. In the *Contrat social*, Rousseau starts from the philosophical principles established in the *Discours sur l'inégalité* in order to provide an answer to the question of how the “chains” of the civil state can be “made legitimate.” Rousseau places the emphasis—in accordance with the subject matter of the work—differently than in the *Discours*, but without making the slightest substantive changes, when he declares: Although man deprives himself in the civil state of several advantages “given him by nature, he gains in return such great ones, his faculties exercise and develop themselves, his ideas expand, his sentiments become nobler, his whole soul elevates itself to such a point that, if the abuses of this new condition did not often degrade him below that from which he has emerged, he ought ceaselessly to bless the happy moment that tore him forever away from it, and that made out of a stupid and obtuse animal an intelligent being and a man.” (C. S. I, 8. Emphasis added.)

own pronouncement, “always carefully made,” whereas “none” of those who attacked him “was ever able to grasp it.”<sup>22</sup>

The historical development triggered by natural events, by changes in the environment of the solitary savage, has destroyed the original balance of the state of nature. But that development has not robbed man of the possibility of achieving a fortunate existence, neither in the epochs before the “first” and before the “great” revolution (epochs in which a new balance arose in the relationship between man and nature), nor after a “fatal accident, which for the common utility ought never to have happened” (pp. 192–94), set off that process that led to the establishment of civil society. The development of the human faculties makes political society, laws, and government into a compelling requirement, from one ascertainable “moment” on, in the history of the species. But political society does not have to devolve, necessarily and hopelessly, upon the despotism in which Rousseau’s “hypothetical history of governments” culminates. Nor must it always and incurably decay into a society of particular interests in which the “slave’s word ‘finance’” provides the tone, being and seeming are two completely different things, the spirit of dominion and servitude impregnates the relationships of men, and conformism and lack of tension cause the paralysis of the political virtues. In such a society, the universal competition of egoisms on the one hand, and the changeability, mediocrity, and merchant mentality that characterize public life on the other hand, prevent citizens from identifying with the whole, with the common cause, with the republic. There are political alternatives to the depraved existence of the bourgeois who, “always in contradiction with himself, always wavering between his inclinations and his duties,” can be good neither for himself nor for others.<sup>23</sup> Civil society can offer its members the eudaemonia of a political existence. In a good commonwealth, civil society can acquire a form that allows the citizen to find himself in the totality of the nation. It can make his *amour-propre* serviceable for the common good, and through love of the fatherland can even transform that *amour-propre* into a “sublime virtue.” Between the citizen and his fellow citizens it can attach the bond of social friendship, and fasten it by means of public education, national festivals, and cultivation of manners and morals and common traditions. Civil society can keep him free of personal domination by subordinating him only to the dominion of the general will, in which he himself shares. In brief, political society can transform man into a *citoyen* who actualizes and experiences his identity as an inseparable member of an unmistakable body politic, who confronts the other *citoyens* as an equal by strict right, and whose rank is measured exclusively “according to the real services” that he renders to the state (p. 382).

22. *Lettre à Christophe de Beaumont*, OCP IV, p. 967. Cf. *Discours*, p. 194 and FN 241.

23. Rousseau introduces the concept of the *bourgeois*, in the full and precise anthropological and political meaning of the term, in Book I of the *Émile* (pp. 249–50).

The good commonwealth is bound to natural and historical preconditions, to the coming together of various favorable circumstances that are not given in every place and at every time and cannot be created by human art at will. Therefore, the good commonwealth remains the exception. Yet Sparta and Rome attest for the past that the good commonwealth not only arises from the world of theoretical schemes, but has taken definite historical shape as the result of political action. The Republic of Geneva indicates that an approximation of the "legitimate institution" is not impossible in the present,<sup>24</sup> and philosophy—itself a result of "progress or corruption in the history of mankind"—can at least prepare the ground for the future realization of a "good edifice."<sup>25</sup>

Nature has not treated man worse than the other living beings. Using the anthropological difference as its guidepost, an examination of the history of the human species shows that for the solitary savage in the primitive state of nature a nondepraved existence was just as possible as it is for the Carib, the Hottentot, or the American Indian living in savage society. In the civil state, a nondepraved existence is attainable for the *citoyen*, who through identification with the *moi commun* achieves a life in which he is in harmony with himself. But a nondepraved existence is no less attainable for lovers, who recognize themselves in one another and find their way, amidst an alienated society, to a new autarky, to a wholeness that bears its own center within itself; or for the philosopher, who actualizes his self-sufficiency in the contemplative existence of a *promeneur solitaire* on the fringes of society. All forms of nondepraved existence have this in common: they all allow—while unfolding faculties that vary markedly—the actualization of identity. The concrete stamp of a particular identity must be different for Socrates and Cato; it must vary for Lycurgus and Diogenes. The possibilities have a wide span, because the "human race of one age is not the human race of another age," and because men are by nature

24. The *Dédicace à la République de Genève* not only has this demonstrative function, in which Geneva, similar to the Sparta of Lycurgus, gives witness to the fact that there was or is an alternative to the process of decline, of progress into despotism. The Dedication has two further functions within the total composition of the *Discours*. For one thing, the address—in which the *Citoyen de Genève* speaks to his Genevan fellow citizens in order to extol the republican maxims of his fatherland before all the world—serves the author as a strategist under the cover of which he can present the politically most explosive principle of the book, the sovereignty of the people. As for the other function, Rousseau pursues with the *Dédicace* the intention of himself influencing politically the relations in his hometown. (Cf. pp. 8–40 and 426–48.) The attempt at exerting political influence has for its part a theoretical significance that extends beyond the immediate historical concern insofar as it shows what task Rousseau assigns to political philosophy with a view to the political practice of a concrete community, and how he conceives the rights and the duties that the philosopher as citizen has vis-à-vis his nation.

25. Rousseau simultaneously intimates, with his hints at the positive political function that can devolve upon philosophy in the future, whence the "boldness" of the *Discours*, measured by the principles of his own political philosophy, derives its justification. Cf. pp. 58, 60, and 224 with pp. 250 and 262.

unequal. The fortunate existence of a Hottentot differs from that of a Spartan, that of a Genevan from that of an “Orangutan.” They coincide, however, in the basic characteristic of being oneself in a self-centered whole. This being oneself is different according to the measure of the respective capacities and circumstances, but is not “lower” or “higher” and does not depend on the development in history of “all our faculties.” In this respect, the historical perfection of the individual is only an apparent perfection.<sup>26</sup> The development from *homme naturel*, who lives in and takes his satisfaction in the immediacy of the sentiment of his present existence, to *homme de l’homme*, who has at his disposal reason, morality, and historical consciousness, does not depend on any sinful Fall of Man. But the development from *homme naturel* to *homme de l’homme* likewise does not redress a “deficiency,” and is by no means a historical necessity on the way to man’s salvation. Nature would also have been “justified” if men had remained in their natural state eternally. The anthropological difference is thus withdrawn—without losing thereby any of its weight for us—*sub specie naturae* into the innocence of becoming.

26. Cf. the opening sentence of p. 206, which refers to the time after the “great revolution,” with the assertion of p. 194. See further Rousseau’s discourse to the savages in Note IX, p. 318. Cf. Rousseau’s advice to the “barbarians and fish-eaters” in C. S. II, 11.