

Interpretation

- Editor-in-Chief Hilail Gildin, Dept. of Philosophy, Queens College
Executive Editor Leonard Grey
General Editors Seth G. Benardete • Charles E. Butterworth •
Hilail Gildin • Robert Horwitz (d. 1987) •
Howard B. White (d. 1974)
- Consulting Editors Christopher Bruell • Joseph Cropsey • Ernest L. Fortin •
John Hallowell (d. 1992) • Harry V. Jaffa •
David Lowenthal • Muhsin Mahdi • Harvey C. Mansfield
• Arnaldo Momigliano (d. 1987) • Michael Oakeshott
(d. 1990) • Ellis Sandoz • Leo Strauss (d. 1973) •
Kenneth W. Thompson
- International Editors Terence E. Marshall • Heinrich Meier
Editors Wayne Ambler • Maurice Auerbach • Fred Baumann
• Michael Blaustein • Amy Bonnette • Patrick Coby •
Thomas S. Engeman • Edward J. Erler •
Maureen Feder-Marcus • Pamela K. Jensen •
Ken Masugi • Will Morrissey • Susan Orr •
Charles T. Rubin • Leslie G. Rubin • Susan Shell •
Richard Velkley • Bradford P. Wilson •
Michael Zuckert • Catherine Zuckert
- Manuscript Editor Lucia B. Prochnow
Subscriptions Subscription rates per volume (3 issues):
individuals \$29
libraries and all other institutions \$48
students (four-year limit) \$18
Single copies available.
Postage outside U.S.: Canada \$4.50 extra;
elsewhere \$5.40 extra by surface mail (8 weeks
or longer) or \$11.00 by air.
Payments: in U.S. dollars AND payable by
a financial institution located within the U.S.A.
(or the U.S. Postal Service).

THE JOURNAL WELCOMES MANUSCRIPTS IN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY AS WELL AS THOSE
IN THEOLOGY, LITERATURE, AND JURISPRUDENCE.

CONTRIBUTORS should follow *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 13th ed. or manuals
based on it; double-space their manuscripts, including notes; place references in the
text, in endnotes or follow current journal style in printing references. Words from
languages not rooted in Latin should be transliterated to English. To ensure
impartial judgment of their manuscripts, contributors should omit mention of their
other work; put, on the title page only, their name, any affiliation desired, address
with postal/zip code in full, and telephone. Contributors using computers should, if
possible, provide a character count of the entire manuscript. Please send THREE
clear copies, which will not be returned.

Composition by Eastern Composition, Inc.,
Binghamton, N.Y. 13904 U.S.A.
Printed and bound by Wickersham Printing Co.,
Lancaster, PA 17603 U.S.A.

Inquiries: (Ms.) Susan Chiong, Assistant to the Editor
INTERPRETATION, Queens College, Flushing, N.Y.
11367-1597, U.S.A. (718)997-5542 Fax (718) 997-5565

E Mail: interpretation_journal@qc.edu

Lessons from the Garden: Rousseau's Solitaires and the Limits of Liberalism

MARK S. CLADIS
Vassar College

The narrative of deposed humans attempting to break the gates of Hell and recapture the Garden was employed by Rousseau even as he sabotaged it. In his account, the Garden was never complete, the Fall was not sudden but gradual, and restoration is neither certain nor final. Human history after the fall is not linear but cyclical: the wheel of life turns from bad to worse to bad to worse. The narrative, in the more or less secular hands of Rousseau, is not about a distant past but about the present possibilities for joy and sorrow in solitude and in community. The Garden—if not God's then nature's—allowed Rousseau to portray humans in radical isolation. Social life creeps onto the stage with a fall that unfolds in several phases. Each step away from the Garden takes us further into the social and psychological complexity of the tension between life alone and life together; and with each step we sink deeper into the labyrinths of modern sorrow as well as the possibilities of (ambiguous) moral progress.

In this essay, I argue that an investigation of Rousseau's preoccupation with the drama of decline and ascent casts considerable light on the relation between the public and private life in liberal society. I focus primarily on life in the Garden, for its inhabitants, Rousseau's Solitaires, have as much to tell us about association as about solitude. Rousseau attributed liberal characteristics to the Solitaires, specifically freedom from receiving and inflicting unnecessary harm. Yet Rousseau came to realize that alone, as radical Solitaires, although we are protected from much pain, we can be neither truly happy nor moral. In the company of others, however, even as we seek to do good, we risk inflicting harm. I will argue that this dilemma and Rousseau's response to it illuminate a salient feature of modern liberal society: the more we seek to do good, the more we risk doing evil; or, conversely, the more we avoid such risk, the more we dodge our moral commitments. In order to understand this dilemma better I employ the Solitaire as a (roughly Weberian) ideal type of liberalism, that is, as a conceptually precise liberal exemplar. As an ideal type, the Solitaire accentuates some everyday aspects of moral life in liberal society.

For their support while writing this essay, I would like to express my gratitude to the Franco-American Fulbright Agency, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Vassar Research Committee.

Think of this essay not as a historical inquiry but as a socio-psychological journey, mapping some contours of modern misery and joy. Rousseau was more eager to present us with ourselves and our self-inflicted social wounds than with a primitive species and its painless asocial existence.¹ I call this a psychological voyage because the principal actors are such human powers and proclivities as love, esteem, compassion, and the drive for perfection. I call it sociological because social circumstances move these principal players in often predictable, almost scripted, directions. Rousseau described himself as “the historian of the human heart,” and this perfectly captures his ability to focus psychological and sociological brilliance on a single point: an illumination of the private life in light of the public, and the public in light of the private.²

I. THE GARDEN'S SOLITAIRES

The Garden is a place abundant with wildlife, forests, and streams; a region sparsely populated, not colonized, by primitive humans. Their needs are basic and private: they pertain to the individual alone. Even sex is solitary. Those involved are detached and disinterested. Such physical intercourse—“having nothing to do with the heart”—is void of any social intercourse. After the act “the two sexes knew each other no more.” Even should a child result from this uncoupled coupling, Rousseau was not willing to introduce a meaningful social tie into his Garden. Once weaned, “the offspring was nothing to its mother.”³ There are, then, no tethers between these solitary creatures, and therefore no lashes. Their needs are as simple as their language, private grunts; and as they can easily satisfy their needs, they have no need of each other. Nomadic, but not homeless, for there are many trees under which to sleep; alone, but not lonely, for it has no need of others; speechless, but not muffled, for there are none to silence it; propertyless, but not poor, for all its needs are satisfied; slothful, but not neglectful, for it has no duties: such are the broad strokes of Rousseau's portrait of the Garden's Solitaire.

John Harsanyi has claimed that “people's behavior can largely be explained in terms of two dominant interests: economic and social acceptance.”⁴ Rousseau would agree (although he often subsumed the former under the latter). We can think of Rousseau's Solitaire in nature's Garden, however, as an answer to the question: What would a human look like without either economic or social interests? In the absence of these interests, the Solitaire is a stranger to such traits as vanity, deference, pride, and envy, and to such conflicts as quarrels, property disputes, injustice, and war. There is no jealousy, for example, because there is no love; there are no quarrels, because there is no pride; there is no war, because there is no property. (See *Inequality*, pp. 77–79; *O.c.*, 3:157–60.) Without financial or social worries, the Solitaire neither laments the past nor dreams of a future. “His imagination paints no pictures; his heart makes no demands on

him.” There is as little to regret as there is to hope for. Living entirely in the present, not even the thought of death disturbs the Solitaire, for that would entail missing the past and fearing the future. (See *Inequality*, pp. 61–62; *O.c.*, 3:143–44.)

Such present-mindedness renders impossible common projects that depend on promises in the past and shared goals for the future. Public obligations are as meaningless as private dreams when one lives entirely in the present. The Solitaire, simply put, is incapable of cooperation. Hence agriculture, an occupation that requires memory, foresight, and dependence on others, cannot be found in the Garden (*Inequality*, p. 63; *O.c.* 3:144–45). Rousseau detected a correlation between reliance on others and preoccupation with the past or future. The dependent creature continually reflects on its history of assurances received and assurances given, its assets and debts, and on how to exploit these in the future. The life of Rousseau’s Solitaire, in contrast, manifests the converse correlation, namely, a correlation between self-sufficiency and present-mindedness. The Solitaire enjoys its nap without worrying whether it ought to be fulfilling an obligation; it eats the entire kill without worrying whether it ought to share it and thereby procure a future favor. The Solitaire needs no favors and hence it has no obligations. Dwelling entirely in the present, it dwells there alone.

Except for such physical trials as occasional hunger or contending with a ferocious animal, Rousseau has systematically excluded from his Garden all occasions for unnecessary pain. This is why there can be no social ties: relationships are painful. Moreover, if the Solitaire could imagine wants in addition to its basic needs, that is, conceive of new desires as basic needs, then the Solitaire could abuse itself. It could burden its back with excessive travail and its mind with dissatisfaction. But Rousseau protected his Solitaire from this source of pain by permitting the Solitaire to feel “only his actual necessities.” Minimal needs allow the Solitaire to be self-sufficient, and self-sufficiency, in Rousseau’s view, is all important, for it alone can protect one from association, that cardinal source of injury. Without need of anyone, no one can really hurt the Solitaire. Moreover, immunity to others protects the Solitaire from the desire to injure others, for there are no occasions for it to become angry or resentful of another. The Solitaire, then, “neither standing in need of his fellow-creatures nor having any desire to hurt them,” is free from them, and hence free from heartache and grief (*Inequality*, p. 79; *O.c.*, 3:160).

The Garden is not free of natural inequalities. Some animals are swifter, some are stronger, some are smarter. The same can be said of the Solitaires. Yet because there are so few occasions for making comparisons among them, their inequalities are almost always relative to other animals, not to each other. Rousseau has thereby extracted such stings of inequality as envying the strong or scorning the weak. In the Garden, inequality is not evil. The Solitaire knows only two evils, hunger and pain (*Inequality*, p. 61; *O.c.*, 3:143). Without belittling these, it should be kept in mind that, all things considered, the Solitaire is

a truly excellent “human machine”—“the most advantageously organized of any” of the animals. Most of the time, therefore, the Solitaire is capable of protecting itself from the two evils. Its powers match its limited needs, and hence evil remains restricted. There is a relation between minimal needs, sufficient powers, and confined evil. Should the powers diminish, as with age, the Solitaire will experience more physical evil. Should the needs increase, the powers must be augmented if the Solitaire is to avoid evil. Needs can require expanded powers in two ways: minimal needs can become more difficult to meet, or new needs can be added to the original ones. By definition, however, increased needs cannot occur in the Garden. The equilibrium between minimal needs and sufficient powers is largely what makes the Garden a garden.

Tragically, this balance must be disturbed if the Solitaire is to become fully human. Rousseau endowed the Solitaire with a faculty for development, or what he called the faculty of perfectibility (*la faculté de se perfectionner*). As this faculty is exercised, new needs are created, sociability becomes required, and new evils are felt. In order to unpack these claims, I need to lead us still deeper into the soul of the Solitaire, into the heart of Rousseau’s moral psychology.

II. A MORAL PSYCHOLOGY

The second *Discours* features four human properties: perfectibility and freedom, self-love and compassion. Perfectibility and freedom are intimately related, and it is these two faculties that distinguish humans from beasts. (For Rousseau’s discussion of freedom and perfectibility, see *Inequality*, pp. 59–60; *O.c.*, 3:141–42.) Unlike the other animals, the Solitaires are free to improve themselves variously. In fact, they are driven toward self-improvement. Perfectibility could inspire one to climb the lofty heights of virtue, or, conversely, to venture the depths of vice (as did Milton’s antihero, Satan). When Rousseau described the moral flexibility of perfectibility, its potential to aid or collide with the moral life, he usually highlighted its darker side. At first blush, it may seem odd that an antiprogress theorist like Rousseau would catalog *perfectibilité* as a salient human characteristic. But the oddity looks more like irony once we realize that this faculty leads humans to adopt multifarious and complex ways of life that pave some imaginative avenues to human joy, but mostly to human sorrow. While the Solitaires are free to improve themselves innocuously, those outside the Garden, in contrast, are empowered by freedom and perfectibility—diversely and creatively—to injure themselves, others, and nature. It would seem, then, that a cause of the fall is located in the soul of the Solitaire, for Rousseau placed at the heart of his philosophical anthropology a proclivity for expanded powers, and these, by Rousseau’s lights, are the gifts of misfortune.

This is a rather surprising conclusion. Rousseau is often celebrated or cursed as an exemplar Enlightenment *philosophe* who declared that although humans

are naturally good, society tampers with us and thereby corrupts us. Although Rousseau's complex and even contradictory writings engender disagreement among his interpreters, all seem to agree that Rousseau spurned any notion of original sin, of innate corruption, and that he blamed corrupt, irrational social institutions for our miseries. Jean Starobinski, for example, states categorically that in Rousseau's view "evil is not in human nature but in social structures."⁵ In Rousseau's account of the Garden and the Fall, however, human wickedness springs not solely from social structures but from the human breast. Lodged within the human heart are the faculties of freedom and perfectibility, rendering our failures empirically inevitable, yet not ontologically necessary. Elsewhere I argue that Rousseau positioned himself at the crossroads of Enlightenment optimism and Augustinian pessimism, and that from that awkward position Rousseau developed a vocabulary designed to remind us of both our responsibility for ourselves and our powerlessness to radically transform ourselves.⁶ For our purposes here, I simply want to highlight that in Rousseau's view humans *naturally* gather and court harm.

There is, then, located within the heart of the Solitaire a proclivity for expanded powers, and with expanded powers come such sources of misery as imagination, memory, knowledge of good and evil, complexity, frivolous wants masquerading as needs, technology, property, and inequality. In spite of this baneful ledger, the journey out of the Garden ought to be interpreted as a "blessed fall." Blessed, because had the Solitaires not left the Garden, the world never would have known the warmth and moral achievement of human community. The fall is the necessary price to unleash the splendor of humanity, brandishing all its virtue and vice, its genius and stupidity, its works of art and war, its gentle sociability and destructive associations. Outside the Garden, then, perfectibility and freedom, like fire and ice, cannot be simply loved or hated. In the Garden, however, they function as innocently as the Solitaires themselves are innocent. This is because in the Garden freedom and perfectibility are exercised privately and therefore primitively. Once primitive freedom and perfectibility lead to more complex forms of life, they, by definition, forfeit their innocence. Initially naive, both faculties become guilty of steering the Solitaire out of uncomplicated solitude into tangled associations. Although the chains of society bring a measure of happiness and morality, their weight disfigures the Solitaire's natural frame, even its bent to love itself and its aversion to injure others.

This brings us to the two other elements in Rousseau's moral psychology, namely, self-love (*amour de soi*) and compassion (*pitié*). The former is a pre-reflective, ardent interest in the self's "welfare and preservation"; the latter is a "natural repugnance at seeing any sentient being, and particularly those similar to us, suffer pain or death" (*O.c.*, 3:126; *Inequality*, p. 47). Self-love and compassion, unlike freedom and perfectibility, are unambiguously good. From self-love springs our primal duty to self. Avoiding pain and injury, seeking food and

shelter: these are some of the ways that we love ourselves. Self-love is the basis of our “*passions primitives*, all of which lead to our happiness . . . , and which are entirely sweet and loving in their essence” (*Rousseau juge de Jean Jacques*, *O.c.*, 1:669). Whereas the reformation theologian Martin Luther charged that we are to hate ourselves, “even our own names,” because we are essentially disgraceful creatures worthy of hate, Rousseau insisted that we are essentially graceful creatures worthy of love. That we can effectively bury and lose sight of our original loveliness goes without saying. In the Garden, however, self-love is the principal mandate in the life of the Solitaire. Principal, but not exclusive, for it is occasionally modified by compassion (*pitié*).

If duty to self emanates from *amour de soi*, then duty to others emanates from *pitié*. Compassion, that “innate repugnance at seeing suffering in a fellow creature,” prevents the Solitaire from causing injury to any sentient being, “except in the legitimate case when his own preservation is at stake and he is obliged to give preference to himself” (*O.c.*, 3:154, 126; *Inequality*, pp. 73, 47). *Pitié* is a “pure impulse of nature,” prior to any kind of reflection. It produces anguish in us when we observe suffering in others. Causing us to share, indirectly yet decidedly, the suffering of others, *pitié* connects us to others. It is, to be sure, a painful tie, one that we would rather not have, yet therein lies its ability to deter us from causing unnecessary harm.

In the Garden, identification occurs through observed suffering. In the sufferer the Solitaire sees itself, or at least an aspect of itself, its own experience of pain. Shared suffering, via *pitié*, is a primitive social phenomenon of wide scope. The scope of identification is as wide as the number of creatures that suffer, because compassion is prompted by identification with sentient beings, not only with rational ones. No doubt, identification, and hence compassion, is proportionate to the number of shared characteristics between the observer and the sufferer: the more lines of identification, the more compassion. Solitaires, then, feel greater *pitié* for other Solitaires than for lower animals. Still, when articulating what is definatory of creatures worthy of compassion, Rousseau placed the capacity to suffer above the ability to reason. Although animals “are destitute of intelligence and liberty,” Rousseau insisted that they have rights that humans are obliged to recognize. The capacity to suffer, “being common both to men and beasts, ought to entitle the latter at least to the privilege of not being wantonly ill-treated by the former” (*Inequality*, p. 47; *O.c.*, 3:126).

The recognition of animal rights, then, is related to minimizing the distinction between animals and humans, that is, to maximizing the identity between the two. This line of thought reveals not only Rousseau’s conception of animal rights, but of human nature. Insofar as we view ourselves chiefly as suffering creatures rather than rational creatures, we can identify with animals as mutual sufferers. And for Rousseau, suffering is the worst thing. It is to be avoided and hated more than pleasure is to be sought and loved. Suffering in the Garden, therefore, is to be kept to an absolute minimum. A greater premium is placed

on the absence of suffering than on the presence of pleasure. To understand as much is to understand much of Rousseau. This lone “social” faculty, *pitié*, which itself is painful, functions not to enhance charitable communion, but to curtail cruel interaction.

Compassion itself, then, tends to keep the Solitaire private. The scope of compassion, as I have said, is broad, but its consequences are limited. It does not, for example, motivate acts of altruism. It merely prevents the Solitaire from inflicting unwarranted harm as it pursues the prompting of *amour de soi*, self-love. It thereby fortifies the Solitaire’s isolation, for without the desire to profit from another’s misery, the Solitaire is protected from a conspicuous form of social interaction. It is an open question whether *pitié* would direct the Solitaire to assist a fellow creature that it found in need. Outside the Garden, in contrast, the range of compassion’s activities tends to increase, while its scope narrows. By this I mean that Rousseau understood compassion as a source of such social virtues as generosity, clemency, benevolence, and friendship, and yet he also held that humans increasingly fail to identify not only with lower animals worthy of compassion, but with fellow humans as well.

Again, this is pure tragedy. In order for compassion to deepen, to become more profound, its scope, it would seem, almost by necessity, narrows. In the Garden, there is an easy “agreement and combination” between *pitié* and self-love which establishes a peaceful environment for the Solitaires to pursue their private existence. Duty to self and duty to others are naturally governed by *pitié* and self-love. Yet the agreement between them and the harmony that they establish are as simple as the Solitaires are primitive. Self-love and compassion, in the Garden, are cautious faculties. *Amour de soi*, for example, ensures that the Solitaire feeds itself, but it will not direct the Solitaire, say, to forfeit some meals in order to scale a summit and enjoy the beauty and grace that it offers. *Pitié* ensures that the Solitaire inflicts no unnecessary harm, but it will not lead the Solitaire, say, to jeopardize its own life in an attempt to save another. If self-love and compassion are to become complex and profound, the Solitaire’s simplicity and innocence must be sacrificed.

Rousseau wrote that “love of self [*amour de soi*] is a natural feeling . . . which, guided in man by reason and modified by *pitié*, creates humanity and virtue” (*Inequality*, p. 73; *O.c.*, 3:219). In the Garden, however, there is neither humanity nor virtue, only simple Solitaires and the natural maxim, “Do good to yourself with as little harm as possible to others” (*O.c.*, 3:156; *Inequality*, p. 76). This maxim, which perfectly combines self-love and *pitié*, and which requires neither education nor virtue won by reason, is not as sublime as that maxim of rational justice, “Do to others as you would have them do unto you.” Yet if the maxim of the Solitaires is “indeed much less perfect, . . . it is perhaps more useful.” Some might even claim that this primitive maxim of the natural Solitaires represents the crowning achievement of modern liberalism, namely, societies dedicated to doing minimal harm.

Rousseau himself was quite infatuated with the Solitaires and their maxim. Yet in spite of his allegiance to the natural maxim, he wanted more. He wanted such virtues as courage, wisdom, generosity, and justice; he wanted a robust humanity that understood duty to self to mean more than self-preservation, and duty to others to mean more than doing no harm. He wanted more because he knew that flourishing public and private lives take root not in cautious soils or in isolated gardens, but in individuals and societies willing to embrace risk and cooperation. He wanted more, and yet he well understood that this would require that the Solitaires develop capacities and relationships that would rush them out of the Garden, because the development of complex public and private lives invariably corrupts both compassion and self-love. Public and private virtue and joy must risk at least as much vice and pain. To move from the simple maxim to the virtues, from the Solitaires to humanity, from the Garden to the City, requires that one is committed to things outside the self, and such commitment necessarily entails jeopardy and vulnerability.

III. SOLITAIRES AND LIBERALISM: A QUESTION OF MORAL STATUS

Alone, as radical Solitaires, we are sheltered from pain, yet we can be neither truly happy nor moral; together, in the company of others, we can experience ambiguous moral progress and precarious human joy, yet we hurt each other. These are the twin horns of Rousseau's depiction of our dilemma. This dilemma and Rousseau's response to it highlight a perplexing feature of liberal society: the more we seek to do good, the more we risk inflicting harm; or, conversely, the more we seek to avoid such risk, the more we dodge our moral commitments. To explore this dilemma, I suggest that we use the Solitaire as a liberal ideal type, as a conceptually precise liberal exemplar that accentuates some everyday aspects of moral life in liberal societies. This technique, investigating extremes to better understand more moderate cases, has impressive credentials. We can associate it, for example, with William James's pragmatic religious investigations, or with Wittgenstein's practice of developing imaginary, fanciful scenarios for the sake of illuminating actual forms of life. In a similar fashion, with the help of the Solitaires we can push liberalism to the limit and then return to everyday liberalism to view its features more perspicuously.

Alone, we can't be truly happy or moral; together, we suffer and become corrupt. One response to this dilemma is to attempt to choose the lesser of two "evils." Rousseau's preoccupation with the Solitaires is precisely such a response, and there is, we shall see, a family resemblance between opting for the Solitaires and favoring liberal over communitarian forms of society. Ultimately, however, Rousseau was not satisfied with the Solitaires or with the liberalism that they characterize. To support this claim, I must show that the Garden's Solitaires, in Rousseau's view, were neither genuinely happy nor virtuous; that

is, I must argue that alone, we can't be truly happy or moral. Rousseau himself categorically asserted both that "man is naturally good" and that "men in the state of nature . . . could not be either good or bad" (*Inequality*, pp. 118, 71; *O.c.*, 3:202, 152). I want to see if I can make sense of the apparent contradiction, and to that end I will examine the Solitaires first as moral, then as amoral, creatures. We begin by exploring the ways we can describe the Solitaires as moral beings, for we need to account for Rousseau's attraction to them; we end, however, by concluding that, all things considered, the Solitaires are best understood as fundamentally amoral beings.

Let us begin, then, with the moral status of the Solitaires. Are they moral? We can approach this issue by asking, Moral compared to whom? The inhabitants of Rousseau's Garden certainly look moral when compared to the creatures that populate Hobbes's Wilderness. Rousseau endowed his Solitaires with gentle self-love (*amour de soi*) and uncomplicated compassion (*pitié*) precisely to distinguish them from Hobbes's beastly egoists driven by the anomic pursuit of possession and domination. Rousseau's Garden is not the war against all; it is not nearly that social. Here, then, is one way to take Rousseau's claim that "man is naturally good": Humans are not naturally rapacious, but pacific. The Solitaire is driven not by innate egoism, but by gentle self-love, and this power "is the least prejudicial to that of others." I am suggesting, then, that the Solitaire's peaceful existence looks moral when compared to the stormy and violent existence of Hobbes's natural humans.

This negative argument, that the Solitaire is moral insofar as it does no harm, is supported by Rousseau's more general belief that vice does more harm than virtue does good. Rousseau explicitly criticized Hobbes for implying that because natural "man has no idea of goodness, he must be naturally wicked; that he is vicious because he does not know virtue." Here, then, is another way to take Rousseau's claim that "man is naturally good": Humans, although not naturally equipped with knowledge of virtue, are naturally ignorant of vice; and, given that vice does more harm than virtue does good, ignorance of vice can be considered a morally advantageous condition. (See *Inequality*, p. 72; *O.c.*, 3:154.) This claim is supported by Rousseau's account of evil, for that account suggests that Rousseau hated the cruelty of moral creatures more than he loved their virtuous deeds. Earlier I claimed that in Rousseau's view suffering is the worst thing. I would now like to revise that to read, unnecessary suffering is the worst thing. With respect to physical evil, unavoidable harm, Rousseau's stance was always rather stoic: the happy and virtuous soul recognizes and accepts that life entails natural limits and misfortunes. In contrast, moral evil, unnecessary harm, is to be despised and avoided in every circumstance. The inevitable suffering of the Garden, we saw, was restricted, bounded by nature's limits; the avoidable suffering of the City, in contrast, is unlimited, fueled by boundless desires. As humans become social, their capacity for joy and morality increases in proportion to their chance of encountering and inflicting moral evil. We can

take the natural maxim, “Do good to yourself with as little evil as possible to others,” as a minimal test of our choices. We fail the test rather miserably, in Rousseau’s view, for we injure others unnecessarily, and in the process we neglect to be good to ourselves.

Although ultimately I want to argue that Rousseau was not satisfied with minimal notions of morality, it is worth noting that when he surveyed the corruption and human exploitation of his day, minimal decency, embodied in the natural maxim, do no unnecessary harm, looked quite appealing. His *Solitaires* are remarkably similar to what some would consider the ideal liberal citizenry.⁷ Although they do little good, they commit no cruelty. Although they do not meaningfully associate with each other, they do not disturb each other. The peaceful, morally shallow existence of the *Solitaires* would be destroyed should, let us imagine, a missionary or an emissary from a distant culture attempt to inculcate virtue and shared loves in the *Solitaires*. The simple emotions associated with self-love and pity, loving survival and hating cruelty, would be replaced by a passion for the morally flourishing community and a hatred of the mediocre citizen. Freedom (here, the absence of constraints) would have to be exchanged for “virtue,” since moral repression, outfitting citizens with a standard moral uniform, is often the cost of moral perfection. Moreover, once a premium was placed on virtue, individuals would have to appear to have achieved it. Such pretense inevitably invites a host of vices, from personal hypocrisy to public tyranny. Both the *Solitaire* and the liberal citizen, then, must be protected from missionaries of virtue, lest their peaceful, private existence be shattered by fierce, public crusades.

Such protection, however, is costly. Alone, as *Solitaires*, there is no occasion for moral evil; yet as *Solitaires* we are not truly human. Together, in association with others, psychological and social complexities, a tangle of predictable personal and public actions and reactions, inevitably emerge and catch us in the latticework of moral and physical evil. Social and personal reformation may spare us some harm. Yet the snare of evil is fundamentally inescapable and is therefore radical: it becomes rooted in us as we become social creatures. We cannot escape moral evil, then, unless we cast off our social nature. This, however, would entail forsaking our humanity as well. Here we are again confronted with the tragedy of Rousseau’s thought and the horns of the dilemma that faces liberal society, namely, how to achieve a robust morality while escaping the seemingly inevitable harm that flows from associations. If Rousseau highlighted the moral implications of the ignorance of vice, it was to compare the benefits of amoral creatures who know no virtue to the liabilities of moral creatures who practice vice. The *Solitaires*’ ignorance of vice is what won them the appellation, “naturally good.” Now, however, I want to argue that the Garden, in spite of all its advantages, was no paradise on earth. All things considered, it was not a suitable place for humans to dwell. To be sure, it wasn’t nasty or brutish, *pace* Hobbes, but neither was it ideal or even adequate, because neither genuine happiness nor morality could take root there.

In a gloss on Rousseau, Judith Shklar has written, “morality is born only with an awareness of others.”⁸ Awareness of others, however, is precisely what the Solitaires lack and what gives them their well-deserved name. Are they, then, immoral? Perhaps they are, according to some accounts of immorality. The Christian tradition, for example, counts as immoral sins of commission *and* omission. The Solitaires may do little harm, but they also neglect to do good. From this view, then, it might appear that the Solitaires are immoral. This view is not limited to Christianity: other religious and secular traditions condemn moral inactivity, for example, the passive acceptance of the brutal practices of the German Nazi state. Yet it is not clear that “sins of omission” applies to the Solitaires, because they have not neglected their obligations—they have none. Hence Rousseau, for good reason, contended that they are fundamentally amoral. The Solitaires, “having between them no kind of moral relation or known obligations, could be neither good nor bad, could have neither vices nor virtues” (*O.c.*, 3:152; *Inequality*, p. 71).

Although for the last two hundred years Rousseau has been accused of idealizing the Solitaires, the noble savages, he himself was usually careful not to claim that they were lovely *moral* creatures. Against Hobbes, for example, he argued not that the Solitaires were good and virtuous, but only that they were not wicked and vicious (*Inequality*, pp. 71–72; *O.c.*, 3:153). The Solitaires were neither mean-spirited egoists nor well-intended altruists. Nor did they occupy some moral location between egoism and altruism. Not desiring here to advance a definition of morality, I think we can nevertheless safely assume, as did Rousseau, that morality entails, among other things, some set of duties or obligations. Insofar as the Solitaire did not owe its “neighbor” any moral consideration, the Solitaire cannot be said to have occupied even a pedestrian moral location. It inhabited no moral position, because the Garden permitted no meaningful “awareness of others.” I realize that the qualification, “meaningful,” is playing a large role here in my argument. It is required because, as I have shown, there are in fact at least two relations in the Garden: first, the Solitaire’s relation to itself, which is prompted by self-love (*amour de soi*); and second, the Solitaire’s relation to other sentient creatures, which is prompted by compassion. The Garden did allow, then, some type of duty to self and duty to others. As we have seen, however, the moral consequences of self-love and pity in the Garden are slight. They roughly correspond to what might be our moral praise of one who manages to care for him- or herself without causing others gratuitous pain. Most animals would merit such praise.

We can appreciate why Rousseau and some modern-day liberals would be tempted to prefer passive amorality to active meanness. The Solitaires personify the vision of a society that places the protection of individual pursuits above all else as long as the individual commits no gratuitous harm. Such a society, of course, is not interested in sins of omission. The age-old question about our obligation to act as our brother’s or sister’s “keeper” is addressed in the negative by the extreme liberalism exemplified by Rousseau’s Solitaires. If we en-

force moral care for our neighbor, if we as a society worry about sins of omission, then we as a people chance sins of commission against those whose moral vision differs from our own. We risk becoming the wrong kind of keeper, the kind that entraps “the other” and causes needless pain. The line between guardian and warden is fine, and this frail boundary prompts fears that attract liberals to the Solitaires.⁹ Still, the Solitaires, in spite of their natural gentleness, do not even approximate Rousseau’s vision for individuals in modern societies. As I have said, he set his sights higher than minimal decency. The stillness of the Solitaire’s amoral lives approaches the stillness of death, for in death we escape relationships, obligations, and concerns, moral and otherwise, and we attain the ultimate stillness of the passions: the release from both fear and joy, from disappointment and hope. The Garden is green, but its still life is the portrait of death, because the absence of morality is a mortal wound to genuine human existence. (This is captured by the French expression for still-life paintings, *nature morte*.) This is why I have said that the Garden is not a place for humans to dwell.¹⁰

IV. SOLITAIRES, PRISONERS, AND INTERDEPENDENCY BETWEEN THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

Lessons from the Garden

When Rousseau pushed to the limit the idea of human existence entirely detached from a public life, that is, radically self-sufficient and isolated beings, he created the Solitaires, one of his most instructive thought experiments. In a Weberian fashion, we can think of nature’s Garden as an ideal place, a pristine construct, from which to view the private life, because the Solitaires, in their simplicity and extremity, illustrate some of its most notable positive and negative aspects. The Solitaires were in a perpetual state of retreat from what we know as the anxieties of public life, its onerous responsibilities, commitments, and concerns regarding status and reputation, money and career, future goals and past promises, not to mention crushing bureaucracies and infernal wars. The calm the Solitaires enjoyed is what many seek on vacations to the countryside or on visits to museums or parks, in the music of a concert or the leisure of a long walk, in the brief respite of a coffee break or a short nap. More desperately, our society attempts to attain the tranquility of the Solitaires with the aid of self-help books, New Age videos, sensory deprivation tanks, gravity boots, or even a generous dose of gin or valium at the end of a long day.

The Solitaires, then, dwelling in a perpetual state of retreat, a retreat that keeps them from inflicting gratuitous harm, appear to us as rather alluring creatures. Yet it is the permanence of their withdrawal that illuminates some troubling aspects of the private life and some hazards connected with liberalism. The

Solitaires were alone, radically and perpetually. True, they were not lonely, for they knew no social life, and hence loneliness was as meaningless as gregariousness. Still, we can note what they lacked, even if they were not aware of it. This is not a particularly liberal task, namely, to suggest that some could experience a more joyful, moral, or meaningful life if they were willing, for example, to abandon their present quietude and embrace certain risks. Yet we do this all the time, and often justifiably. If we are courageous, we do not hesitate to tell the truth to a friend whose way of life appears to be increasingly lifeless, remiss, and lacking joy. This is essentially what social critics and prophets do, yet they address not friends but society.

What, then, were the Solitaires lacking? The joys and risks of association, laughing or crying with a friend who is dying, dining with a family which is struggling, enjoying a public fete or religious service that is controversial. The Solitaires also lacked the satisfaction and meaningfulness of public commitments and responsibilities, participating in such institutions as the PTA, the Kids 'n' Cancer program, shelters for the homeless and battered women, local and national elections. Moreover, the Solitaires lacked that which enlivens the young and sustains the old, dreams and memories. These, we have seen, can bring pain, but the hope of a future can also provide moral stamina, and memories of the past can enrich the present and help guide us into the future. The stories and memories which bring joy to the old, for example, are typically not those of private achievement, but of personal relationships and public activities. Such memories, here, are a measure of the fullness of one's life. By this measure, the existence of the Solitaires is empty, because by avoiding association, they lack memories of others. If the Solitaires lack dreams and memories, then a society of Solitaires, an oxymoron only in its extremity, lacks plans for the future and a treasury of traditions from the past. Without traditions, this society, this group of disparate individuals, has no identity as a people, no celebrated historical achievements such as the abolishment of slavery, and no acquired lessons such as the horrors of impossible wars. Without a vision of the future, this society has no shared projects such as universal health care, no public goals such as the eradication of racism, no hope of a better future.

The conceptual purity of the Solitaires allowed them to highlight the potential serenity and emptiness of the private life. That same purity, however, also imposes a limit on the efficacy of employing the Solitaires to illuminate the private life and its relation to public. The limit is this: insofar as the Solitaires' private life cannot be contrasted to a public life, for they have none, it is unclear that they can have a genuine private life. Ironically, by confronting this limit we learn from the Solitaires their most valuable lesson. The public and private life mutually define each other. In the absence of a replete public life, there can be no robust private life. We cannot make sense of perpetual retreat. For example, without the pressing commitments of the public life, one of the chief goods of the private life, that of temporary escape, becomes hollow. With-

out the associations of the public life, one of the chief pleasures of the private life, that of being alone, quickly turns into the pain of loneliness. Solitary confinement could be counted as “cruel and unusual punishment,” because the joy of solitude becomes bitter grief for social creatures, that is, for humans, when solitude ceases to be a retreat from public life, but becomes a way of life.¹¹

Lessons from Prison

Unexpectedly, the Solitaires have taught us about the necessity of a public life. By reflecting briefly now on the life of inmates in contemporary maximum security prisons, we can see that as the Solitaires revealed the necessity of a public life in order to have a private life, prisoners can demonstrate the necessity of a private life in order to have a public life. Ultimately we will see that in the prison, as in the Garden, there are conditions neither for a genuinely private nor public life.

It is rather evident that the modern prison system works systematically against the development of the prisoners’ private life. The essence of prison life is regimentation: when and where to wake, work, eat, walk, and recreate are determined by prison administrators and enforced by guards. A complex language and structure of lines and bells, of orders and regulations ensure that the prisoner’s private life is absorbed effectively by the institutional, bureaucratic milieu of the prison. Insofar as life in the prison is the paradigm of institutional life, it may seem to exemplify public life. Yet it does not, and exactly insofar as the prisoner’s private life is impeded. Since prison life is rigidly and entirely organized without any consultation with the prisoners, prisoners have no opportunity to fashion their daily life. They make no decisions, deliberate on no issues, shoulder no responsibilities, because every aspect and consideration of their lives have been defined and furnished. In the absence of opportunities to shape their public life, the prisoners’ internal resources are not exercised. Autonomy, the prize of the Solitaires, is utterly pared in prison. Rousseau’s notion of inwardness, with all its similarities to Kant’s notion of liberty, namely, to obey the reasonable law that one prescribes for oneself, has no place in prison. One cannot be “true to oneself” when there are no opportunities to be oneself. When enforced routine determines all, there is no autonomy, and hence there is no genuine private life.¹²

Likewise, solitary confinement, a human sentenced to the Garden, cannot enhance the private life as long as such solitude is imposed externally. If it borders on being cruel, it is because each of us already knows that solitude is a place to visit voluntarily, not a condition to be enforced. The difference between voluntary and coerced sex is that of one of the most pleasant unions and one of the most violent crimes; the difference between voluntary and coerced solitude is that of one of the most satisfying retreats and one of the most painful

punishments. It is often reported that a loss of self, that is, a loss of identity, is a common outcome of radical seclusion. Evidently, to know ourselves we need to know others. Without a public context, the private life suffers. The converse, however, is equally true. Without the opportunity to develop and exercise one's private life and internal resources, the public life suffers. Prisoners, then, like the Solitaires, illustrate the intricate and interdependent relation between the public and private.

We used the Garden as an ideal type to highlight features of the private life, including features that we celebrate; can we not use the prisons to illuminate laudable aspects of the public life? Perhaps only this: prisons reveal our capacity to escape ourselves, our private worries and concerns, in the throes of public life. We have noted that in solitude we can temporarily elude the anxieties and worries of the public life; there are times, however, when we want to escape the affairs of the private life, to evade, for example, our preoccupation with a chronic illness, the death of a friend, or a marital problem. A routinized public life can facilitate such a retreat. On occasion, then, we wish to leave behind our private life as we venture into the public, and it is this abandonment that prisons effect methodically, with or without the consent of the prisoner. Blaise Pascal cautioned us against the temptation of averting attention from oneself by dwelling in the distractions of the public world. I want to suggest, however, that his warnings about *divertissement* apply only to those who regularly exist outside themselves. Achieving temporary relief from pressing personal concerns by immersing oneself in public activities should not be dogmatically shunned. We can describe such relief as a retreat into public life. Prisons can highlight for us this form of retreat, but they do not provide it, for retreats into the public, like those into the private, cease to be retreats once they become a way of life, especially a coerced way of life.

We can, then, make no more sense of a permanent retreat into the private life, as illustrated by the Garden, than into the public life, as illustrated by the prison. Lack of a public life thwarts the Solitaire's private life; lack of a private life impedes the prisoner's public life. Like Rousseau's Garden of the past, today's maximum security prison is no place for a human to dwell. Prisons have exemplified for us the worst aspects of public life, and they can thereby serve to highlight those features of public life that frighten and disturb us. Minimally, they elucidate the specter of a bureaucratic society that insidiously strips from its citizens their autonomy, their capacity for public involvement, and the satisfaction that attends such commitment. In the extreme, they incarnate Orwellian nightmares of a totalitarian state in which there is no privacy (not even at the toilet can one be alone with one's thoughts) and in which there is no public ethic of social concern (not being able to vote simply reflects the prisoner's complete helplessness to influence an utterly intractable environment). In either scenario, we find neither personal fulfillment nor public morality, but loneliness and alienation, even amid the company of others.

V. BETWEEN LIBERALISM AND COMMUNITARIANISM:
COMMON GROUND AND INEVITABLE TENSION

These reflective exercises, excursions into solitary gardens and totalitarian prisons, have the merit of placing liberals and communitarians on some common ground. By exploring extreme cases, liberals (champions of the politics of rights) and communitarians (champions of the politics of the common good) can better appreciate each others' fears. Our study of the Garden presents to liberals the dangers of a society excessively dedicated to quests for private fulfillment; our reflections on the prison, in contrast, present to communitarians the dangers of a totalized public existence that truncates citizens' private lives. Moreover, we learned from the *Solitaires* that individual rights lose their significance without a robust public life in which to exercise those rights; and from the prisoners we discovered that a public life loses its distinctive merits if citizens are denied liberties required to pursue that life according to conscience. We have seen, in fact, that the public and private mutually define and depend on each other. The one enhances, or conversely, threatens the other. The private life provides not only negative goods vis-à-vis the public, for example, temporary retreats from public anxieties; the private life also enriches the public life with a sense of renewal, energy, and vision. Likewise, the public life provides not only distractions from our private concerns, but sustains the private life with a sense of purpose, identity, and animation.

I suspect that the current profusion of liberal and communitarian debate in our society suggests that we, as a people, are grappling with the often conflicting values and practices associated with the public and private. It is tempting to lament the polarization between liberals and communitarians; I have done my share of bemoaning.¹³ Yet perhaps the current debate is not a sign of a paralyzing impasse, but of our society's desire to remain committed to both public projects and private fulfillment. If the debate seems intransigent, perhaps that is because there can be no victory here without some loss: no settlement can perfectly capture the merits of both sides. And perhaps this is one debate that ought not to cease, but should continue, albeit in various forms, as we struggle in different contexts with how to express our commitment to both liberal and communitarian goods. This struggle would entail, among other things, deciding when and how to compromise, in one case favoring the private, in another the public, but generally allowing the creative, though sometimes tragic, friction between private fulfillment and social cooperation to remain.

In this struggle I have found Rousseau helpful. His work bears both communitarian and liberal lines of thought: a public track found most notably in *The Social Contract* and *The Government of Poland*; and a private track found most notably in *The New Eloise* and *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. Yet even within these works one can find still another path, one that navigates between the public and private without attempting to fuse them. Of the three, this path is the

most stressful, yet it pervades Rousseau's work. In his characteristically un-systematic fashion, Rousseau depicted various aspects of this tensive path: self-assertion versus renunciation, private perfection versus public compromise, fidelity to one's own spirituality versus loyalty to a provincial civil religion, personal insouciance versus social seriousness. Rousseau recognized the friction between the public and private, yet he refused to surrender either side of the conflict, preferring to keep them together, precariously and in tension. With this he was usually satisfied. Ultimately, his refusal to evade the tension between the public and private, but rather to wrestle with it, is one of his greatest contributions to modern social thought. For to tolerate such tension is a hallmark of modern, democratic societies.

Although contemporary liberal societies such as that of the United States possess both liberal and communitarian characteristics, they seem increasingly, at least for the last two hundred years, to follow the private path. Like Rousseau, we are captivated by the Solitaires, for they are deservedly alluring. For this reason it behooves us to be especially attentive to their lessons. Should we follow the way of the Solitaires too nearly, we risk losing not only a vital public but private existence, for we have seen that the two mutually define each other. Like Aristotle and Montaigne, Rousseau came to understand that to love oneself alone leads to being unable to love anything outside oneself and eventually even one's own self. The self that is whole is both self- and other-regarding, and is willing to cope with this awkward vision. Likewise, the democratic society that is sound both safeguards private pursuits and encourages public projects. The individual, civic minded and free spirited, was Rousseau's cherished ideal, and he wrestled with how this complex ideal could be realized.

In spite of his infatuation with the Solitaires, then, Rousseau was never entirely satisfied with the life they represented. Too much was missing from their safe and innocent existence. Although they committed no cruelty, they failed to love and to be committed to things outside of themselves. They failed as human beings. This failure is by no means an indictment of liberalism. Liberalism has proved to be an impressive social order, establishing individual rights and curbing brutality. If pushed too far, however, if divorced from its opposing communitarian counterpart, the goods of liberalism become threatened. Liberalism would cease to be genuinely human if, like the Solitaires, the safety of the individual were to become not a primary but the sole goal. For liberalism to continue as a promising social order, it must hazard the risks of association: it must remain awkwardly wed to communitarianism.

NOTES

1. Are we to understand humans in Nature's Garden—the state of nature—as a bygone age, an eternal possibility, or a heuristic device? Can we make any sense of Rousseau's natural humans divorced from all social ties? Must we discard this notion as bad epistemology, fallacious meta-

physics, or can we learn something from it about the problems and promises of solitude and society? I do not deal directly with these questions in this essay, because I am not presently concerned with whether Rousseau actually thought that he successfully described a prelinguistic, asocial being. Rather, I use his descriptions of the state of nature to tell us something about his philosophical anthropology, especially as this relates to the relation between the public and private.

2. *Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques*, in *Oeuvres complètes* (henceforth, *O.c.*), edited by Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (Paris: Pléiade, 1959–69), 1:728. In the following citations, I provide reference to a translation whenever possible. When the French reference comes first, the translation is my own.

3. *The Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, translated by G. D. H. Cole, revised by J. H. Brumfitt and John C. Hall (London: Dent, Everyman's Library, 1988), p. 84; *O.c.*, 3: 164.

4. John Harsanyi, "Rational Choice Models of Behavior versus Functionalist and Conformist Theories," *World Politics* 22 (1969): 524.

5. Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 295.

6. See Chapter 6, "Overcoming Moral Evil: Rousseau at the Crossroads," *Politics of the Heart: Rousseau, Religion, and the Relation between the Public and Private Life*, in progress.

7. Richard Rorty, for example, celebrates the "liberal ironist" who "thinks that what unites her with the rest of the species is not a common language but just susceptibility to pain and in particular to that special sort of pain which the brutes do not share with the humans—humiliation. On her conception, human solidarity is not a matter of sharing a common truth or a common goal but of sharing a common selfish hope, the hope that one's world—the little things which one has woven into one's final vocabulary—will not be destroyed" (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989], p. 92).

8. Judith Shklar, *Men and Citizens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 48.

9. Rousseau's own infatuation with the Solitaires is not merely an expression of liberal fear of unnecessary and painful coercion. The Solitaires also represent the individual who, out of self-love and fear of hurting others needlessly, seeks to escape social involvement insofar as that is possible. Hence even such "private" obligations as those that come with friendship, marriage, parenting, religious and political associations are to be dodged.

10. Support for this claim is found in Rousseau's "Lettre à Christophe de Beaumont": "The conscience is non-existent in the man who has made no comparisons and has seen no relationships. In this state the man knows only himself. . . . He neither hates nor loves anything; limited to physical instinct alone, he is no one, he is animal; it is this that I showed in my *Discourse on Inequality*" (*O.c.*, 4:936).

11. In general, we should think of solitude as one form of the private life, and not as being synonymous with it. For the Solitaires, however, the two—solitude and the private life—are one and the same.

12. I write here of how maximum security prisons are designed to affect prisoners, and not of what individual prisoners have managed to accomplish in prisons. Moreover, prison reform in the United States, especially in the aftermath of the Attica riots, has brought prisoners some opportunities to enhance their public and private lives. New religious freedoms granted to Muslim inmates, for example, have allowed them to observe dietary "restrictions" and holy days, to enjoy places designated for public and private prayer, and to form links with religious communities outside the prison.

13. Mark S. Cladis, *A Communitarian Defense of Liberalism: Emile Durkheim and Contemporary Social Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), pp. 3–5.