

Interpretation

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Nelson Lund has written a deeply thoughtful and trenchantly argued introduction to Rousseau's political philosophy. It is not an introduction in the usual sense. Beginners who enjoy thinking hard will find the book a good first approach to Rousseau, but long-time readers of Rousseau will find detailed and challenging arguments, intended to reopen the question whether Rousseau "jettisoned important elements of classical thought" and thus ushered in a "crisis of modernity" (2–3). Lund builds a case that Rousseau shared deep underlying agreements with Plato and Aristotle. He admits Plato wrote in such a way as to make it nearly impossible to enlist him as an advocate for a destructive political agenda (5) and that Rousseau appears the opposite in this regard; his writing is "frequently outlandish on its face." But different political situations explain this different rhetoric: unlike in ancient Greece, modern philosophers had become "respectable and politically powerful. In Rousseau's view, this development was a threat to healthy political life." Plato and Rousseau take different paths to protect philosophy and politics from each other. Lund acknowledges debts to Leo Strauss and Straussians for some of his ideas and ways of reading, but he debates both, often with harsh criticisms for misinterpreting Rousseau. If, he thinks, we pay careful attention to how Rousseau made use of Plato (and Aristotle), we can make use of Rousseau in something like the same way (7). By doing so, we can find nature's "guidance" (89) on important issues: women's roles, marriage, and constitutionalism.

Lund postpones these applications in order to build a foundation in nature, spending two full chapters on human evolution and the evolution

of language. He makes the strongest case I have read that man is naturally asocial. He does so with the best of intentions—not to tear down morality but to build it up in a rational way. In the pure state of nature, man was not yet human (31). Our ancestors may have been like orangutans, whose sociality is limited to mother-child relationships: “fathers have no role beyond insemination.” “In most environments, orangutans spend *almost all of their adult lives foraging alone*” (53, emphasis added). “In captivity, they readily form complex social relationships,” but this fact merely serves to show that social behaviors that animals have the ability to perform are not necessarily behaviors they *must* perform or, indeed, are happiest performing. Modern humans may be left with natures acquired during such a solitary stage (of foraging), despite the fact we have changed ourselves, through language acquisition, in remarkable ways that make it difficult to satisfy that original nature anymore.

Lund admits that nothing is proved by orangutans (54): of the “three extant great apes,” others are more social: “gorillas generally live in patriarchal family bands...and chimpanzees are cooperative and contentious hunter-gatherers.” Hence our “fundamental ape nature lent itself to all these possibilities.” Some even conjecture that orangutans’ ancestors were *more* social, and that the species has cycled in and out of sociality (cf. 25–26). Lund seems to confess we know nothing to base “guidance” on: “Modern science has no direct evidence at all about the life followed by our earliest human ancestors” (58). Why then come down so strongly in favor of solitariness? Lund keeps up a trenchant dialogue with Straussians who doubt there ever was such a state of nature, or who wish to uphold natural sociality (15, 55ff.). In his debate with Roger Masters, he points out that *amour propre* requires social interactions, which inevitably trigger it (57). But since the social interactions are not biologically determined, the *amour propre* is not determined either.

Our “perfectibility” was natural in the sense that latent potentiality for huge change was always present in us. But only external accidents—such as environmental changes—caused us to perfect ourselves in the precise ways we did. Perfectibility “involves the acquisition of qualities that *conflict* with our underlying natures.” One thinks of the multiple roles of human society—there are no natural-born financial analysts. No specific way of life is natural in the sense of corresponding “to our natural range of inclinations and powers.” We are not like bees or herd animals where the individual is necessarily “at the end of a few months what it will be for all its life; and its species is after a thousand years what it was in the first year of that thousand” (12, quoting the *Second Discourse*).

If no way of life is natural, is one still naturally best? For Rousseau the naturally best life occurs at the last stage of the state of nature, “nascent society” (13). “Savage society...provided for the optimal, though not ultimate, development of human faculties” (17). Only in primitive society does man’s reach not exceed his grasp (contrast 14–15 with 31). “Unhappiness consists in the disproportion between our desires and our faculties, or in the sum of unsatisfied desires” (157–58). “It might seem to follow that human happiness should be sought in minimizing our desires” but then “a part of our faculties would remain idle, and we would not enjoy all of our being” (quoting *Emile*). This is despite the fact that savage peoples are “frequently at the edge of starvation” (22).

Lund includes a long, fascinating illustration from a primitive society, the Bushmen studied by Elizabeth Marshall Thomas. He admits the Bushmen have only some of the features of Rousseau’s state of nature. But he includes them because the Bushmen were at great pains to overcome the *amour propre* that Rousseau stresses—their durable solution lacks “the rulership and subordination entailed in all forms of political society” (27–28), in particular, female subordination to males. They keep *amour propre* in check, rather than not having it at all. He speculates that women’s subservience to a male provider is a modification of her natural subservience to child (need to nurse, maternal pity). Men’s acceptance of rulership over both was possible, in the absence of *amour propre*, only if he, too, first acquired a subservience to his child (26; cf. Lucretius, *De rerum natura* 5.1017–23).

With a carefulness belying his daring, Lund interprets Aristotle as not believing in the fixity of species, or not necessarily (41–42). Rousseau disagrees not with Aristotle but with a Christianized Aristotle, a disagreement Rousseau signals via allusions; Lund’s Rousseau takes Hobbes’s position, namely, that Aristotle himself may not have believed in “*Entities, and Essences,*” in the words of the *Leviathan*, but “writ it as a thing consonant to...their Religion” (43). Lund notes that Aristotle qualifies his endorsement of the naturalness of the polis with a conditional: “Every city exists by nature, *if indeed the first communities really also do*” (12, emphasis added), meaning husband-wife and master-slave pairings. Rousseau denies that such first communities, “other than mother-child pairs,” exist by nature. Lund is incisive: “The fact that nature permits us to reap benefits from living in cities does not imply that cities exist ‘by nature.’ If it did, one could almost as easily say that Sea World exists by nature if dolphins live longer and more easily when they are protected from predators and cared for by veterinarians” (51).

Yet if dolphins learned to hunt better, or communicate better, in captivity, would not the picture be changed? The ancients tied naturalness to the emergence of the philosophic life. If we read past Aristotle's overstatement (the city is "by nature," *phusei*) we can see that the "very different notion of naturalness" (50) he introduces, that is, teleological nature, may be a weak claim that some social arrangements are "in accordance with nature" (*kata phusin*) because they inculcate good habits or perfections that become second nature. To say that a man of intellectual virtue is more fully natured than a savage is radically contentious, for Rousseau. Lund later says that "rethinking the notion of the beneficence of nature...requires a lot more than allusions to the life of the philosopher or the contemplative life" (257n81). We are thus left with "spontaneously arising on its own" as the only nature to which we can refer. Nature equals compulsion.

The book has postponed playing Rousseau's trump card ("overwhelming evidence," 15) proving asociality: his language argument. Such postponements are a feature of the book, which cuts no slack to readers unwilling to wait. Even in turning to the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, we must first look at Plato's *Cratylus* to see what Rousseau might have seen beneath its surface, before getting to Rousseau's own account—a postponement in keeping with the program announced at the start. Man is the only animal having speech that goes beyond "natural language" (e.g., bird calls) into a compositional and conventional language. Our ability to have such language permits "general ideas" (48; but contrast 80)—on these depends the "perfectibility" that brutes never acquire. Lund later summarizes the argument: "First, because language is acquired rather than natural, there must have been a time when human beings lived without language. And because all human societies...are inseparable from language...our kind is naturally and profoundly non-political" (227). Second, the potential for language must have been there, but "this potential would have been unleashed only as a result of natural accidents (such as earthquakes and droughts) that pushed humans into environments where the isolated existence of the first ages was not practicable" (227–28). One might quibble that an era before language was a nonhuman era; the question would then become how important the genetic legacies are that have been handed down to us from that era.

Chapters 4–6 turn to Rousseau's political and moral guidance, based on his discoveries in human nature. In the *Letter to d'Alembert*, Rousseau uses Plato's *Laws* for a "highly conservative political goal": to preserve the modicum of ancient civic friendship still alive in Geneva and impossible in Paris

given the latter's distorted relations between the sexes. The *Laws* envisions extreme sexual equality only because, in Crete and Sparta, the danger was that women would "be neglected by excessively manly men" (125). Geneva has the opposite danger: that "men will be unmanned by giving women excessive and inappropriate attention." The public glorifying of romantic love is the great enemy to happy marriage (129). Single-sex social gatherings will then become Genevan versions of the Athenian Stranger's common meals and will provide an anchor for modern civic friendship (131–32). The *Letter* undertakes to defend an education we can assume women were already getting in Geneva: namely, the inculcation of expectations that their lives should be "centered around their roles as wives, mothers and caretakers of the household, and to accept this as the natural order of things" (124, emphasis added). Just as Lund doubts the Athenian Stranger's arguments from nature—for instance, that only procreative sex is natural—believing instead that his outlawing homosexuality and some forms of adultery is intended to promote conjugal friendship between husbands and wives (113–14), so he finds Rousseau's own arguments from nature—that shame is natural in sex and especially natural in women—transparently deficient (127). Instead, "Rousseau screams" his real reason: " 'As if all the austere duties of the woman were not derived from this alone, that a child ought to have a father!' " Genevan women must make a real sacrifice (142–43): staying home and letting husbands be heads of household. But this sacrifice is no greater than reason demands. Because humans are solitary animals, we can assume, husbands will not generally wish to undertake the burdens of fatherhood without great cultural attention paid to them in compensation. Failing that, women will continue to have children, but children will not have fathers. This account certainly seems prescient. Hence Rousseau's rhetorical attempt to naturalize the traditional feminine role. In this chapter and the following one—a long and fascinating study of the *Emile* and several letters in comparison to Plato, Locke, and others—Lund argues that Rousseau wants us to believe that Nature points women toward a "kind of marriage in which her share of rulership is largely indirect" (212). Rousseau may have undercut his own rhetoric by saying so plainly (elsewhere) that humans are naturally asocial (even outdoing Hobbes in "provocative amoralism," 227). In modern contexts, such hypocrisy usually delegitimizes. Lund could counter that some belief in asociality was already current owing to Hobbes and Locke. Yet natural sociability cannot have been an entirely lost cause, at least for the precise audiences for whom Rousseau's naturalistic rhetoric was intended. Here one senses a weak teleological argument: children cannot "make use of all their being" (growing up

into rich moral and intellectual beings) without fathers and intact families. Cultural fatherhood could then be said to receive a tincture of naturalness from its relation to children's natures, although such a "second nature" would be a habit in accordance with nature, rather than a natural compulsion. Such a habit might even combat natural compulsions (e.g., sexual desires oriented outside marriage). But the rhetorical situation demanded of Rousseau *both* that he employ naturalistic arguments like the ancients' *and* that he undercut such naturalism in more obvious ways than they did.

The final chapter applies Rousseau's principles of right to American constitutionalism, particularly to the issue of direct democracy. To secure a hearing for Rousseau's principles of right, Lund demolishes theories of natural rights. If correlative duties (to respect the rights) do not coexist with rights naturally, then Lund finds natural rights to be a play on words, adding nothing to understanding (217, 219–220, 222). He is convincing with Hobbes, but the treatment of Locke is less satisfactory. Obligation is up front in Locke (223), but Lund challenges it on the grounds Locke admits people do not always acknowledge obligation. Here again, for something to be natural, it must be bound or compulsory. Locke's state of nature is not bereft of sociality but only of *civil* society: we are not polis animals, but we are social animals. Lockean liberalism thus has it both ways, divesting sociality (e.g., paternity) of its political claims while preserving it in its own, private sphere. As to whether natural rights are vitiated by the lack of correlative duties, how would Lund answer Lincoln's speech on the *Dred Scott* decision? The Founders believed all humans equal in their possession of "certain unalienable rights": "They did not mean to assert the obvious untruth, that all were then actually enjoying that equality, nor yet, that they were about to confer it immediately upon them. In fact they had no power to confer such a boon. They meant simply to declare the right, so that the enforcement of it might follow as fast as circumstances should permit." *Natural* rights have served us well during the two greatest crises: the birth of the nation and the Civil War.

Rousseau's alternative to liberalism (242) is to create unnatural ties of affection among citizens through a thoroughly politicized system of education. "Nature lacks a moral component"—*all* rights stem from property, hence from the defense of rich against poor, that is, justice stems from a usurpation (230). Since there is no going back, the crucial problem is to render "legitimate" something that began as usurpation (231–32; cf. the famous opening of the *Social Contract*). Legitimacy is accomplished through the "general will." Lund interprets the general will as desire for a common interest, something

like a family achieving a pleasant meal together by each suppressing (or being willing to suppress) his first choice of where to eat (234). Legitimacy is not wisdom, and the individual members can be mistaken about their true interests without shaking legitimacy (235). The difficulty is that a sovereign people can never rule directly; they must delegate to a smaller body, a “government” (245), which will have its own small-group general will, often opposing the whole group’s general will, that is, government will be a faction. Rousseau agrees with the *Federalist* about separation and balancing of powers *as expedients* (254), but for the people assembled to have only once settled on the constitution, as ours has, is not conducive to legitimacy (246). Periodic assemblies are required. Lund presents evidence that Rousseau’s insistence on direct democracy is a rhetorical overstatement (249–50). He concludes that we are to see direct democracy as “a desirable possibility, and that real efforts ought to be made to put it into actual practice as a check on the usurpative nature of all governments” (252–53). Rousseau warns us against *excessive* reliance on representation.

Lund moves next to a Supreme Court case that harms direct democracy, the 1995 *U.S. Term Limits, Inc. v. Thornton*, which struck down an Arkansas referendum imposing term limits (258ff.). After three terms in the federal House, or two in the federal Senate, a candidate could no longer appear on the ballot and would have to campaign as a write-in. Justice John Paul Stevens wrote the majority opinion striking down the measure “apparently because of his hostility to direct democracy” (261). Rousseau would see the endpoint of Stevens’s logic as the “abolition of citizen participation” (262). Lund worries that a Court might decide that the representative form is the *only* republican form of government (263). He would like to see Congress, *per impossibile*, impose some obstacles to the Supreme Court, for example, jurisdictional rules making the Court spend more time on ordinary, less glamorous cases and forcing the Court to study the law by preventing the use of law clerks. He does not mention recent ballot initiatives, for example in California, that seem to have done more harm than good by binding the hands of representatives. One wonders if more direct democracy would not set a ball rolling that could shake whatever legitimacy representation still enjoys.

Further cavils: Lund is not above appealing to the authority of “modern science.” I would have called the anthropology on which he mostly relies “social science,” at best, or more accurately, social thought. The scientific method is limited by the ability of its practitioners to generate hypotheses to test; one wonders if the genius of Rousseau is not still remotely supplying

anthropology's best hypotheses—the main ones that get tested (to the detriment of other possibilities). Lund sometimes regards Plutarch's histories of Sparta and Rome as “recorded fact” (225). On the questions of Rousseau's undercutting his own legitimacy and of why his enormous influence was particularly strong among thinkers Lund would regard as cranks (cf. 267), it is perhaps unfair to ask an introduction (even of this special kind) to say more about the reception of his naturalistic rhetoric: how did the *faux* natural arguments separate themselves from true arguments for natural solitariness such that each could find its target audience? Whom did they convince and for how long? Were not the former always destined to be overwhelmed by the latter? Lund with his voluminous reading is well positioned to provide such an account in a future study. What his present study has achieved is remarkable.