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ELUCIDATING ROUSSEAU'S ACCOUNT OF THE STATE OF NATURE
IN TERMS OF NATURAL FREEDOM AND INEQUALITY

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It is very difficult to reduce to obedience someone who does not seek to command, and the cleverest Politician would never succeed in subjugating men whose only wish was to be Free.

Rousseau, *Second Discourse*.

Whatever may be the case regarding these origins, it is at least clear from how little care Nature has taken to bring Men together though mutual needs and to facilitate their use of speech, how little it prepared their Sociability, and how little of its own it has contributed to all that men have done to establish its bonds.

Rousseau, *Second Discourse*.

Introduction

In the Exordium to the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau declares that the issue of his text is “to mark, in the progress of things, the moment when Right replacing Violence, Nature was subjected to Law”. [E 4]¹ The *Discourse* gives us a complex account of the origin and foundations of civil society “described in terms” of the “qualities” of human Nature, which civilization depraved but “could not destroy”. [E.7] This paper is an attempt to elucidate the first stage of this account, i.e. the state of Nature, by focusing on the relation between freedom and inequality in the state of Nature. In order to clearly state the aim I have pursued in this paper I shall first clarify the notions of “freedom” and “inequality” as they are used in the *Second Discourse*.

In the *Second Discourse* Rousseau uses “freedom” in three different ways and “inequality” two different ways. “Freedom” is used to refer to moral, civil and natural freedom; whereas “inequality” can mean either natural or political inequality.

Moral freedom is briefly discussed by Rousseau in Part I [I 15-17] when he turns to the “Metaphysical or Moral side” of human nature. This kind of freedom is the ability to choose that human beings have as free agents; in the awareness of moral freedom “the

spirituality” of human soul “exhibits itself” [I 16] Rousseau admits that “the difficulties” surrounding this notion leave “room for disagreement”, which is why he ignores it in this text.² Civil freedom is total subjection to legitimate laws. Rousseau uses this sense of “freedom” in the *Epistle Dedicatory* [E. D.4] when he describes the State where he “would have wished to be born”.³ Finally the notion of natural freedom, on which I will mainly focus, refers to the lack of dependence on other human beings. Natural freedom is therefore the independence that humans have in the state of Nature, which is only limited by their individual physical powers.

Natural inequality is “established by Nature” and consists of “the differences of age, health, strengths of Body, and qualities of Mind or Soul” [I 2]. Political inequality “depends on a sort of convention and is established, or at least authorized by Men’s consent”. This latter kind of inequality consists of “the different Privileges which some enjoy to the prejudice of the others, such as to be more wealthy, more honored, more Powerful than they, or even to get themselves obeyed by them.” [I 2] Having clarified the main notions, I shall now describe the objective I have pursued in this essay in more detail.

The aim of this paper is to elucidate Rousseau’s conception of the state of Nature in terms of the relation between natural freedom and natural inequality. In other words, I wish to show that Rousseau’s state of Nature can be characterized as a state where humans were “equal” because they were “free”. More precisely, a state where individual “natural inequalities” were nullified because there was no personal dependence, since humans had natural freedom.

With this objective in mind I have divided this paper into three parts. In the first part I will try to explain the way Rousseau uses the term “natural”, and the consequences of this use when it qualifies “freedom” and “equality”. Adopting Rousseau’s strategy, in the second part I will give an account of the “physical side” of the state of Nature. I will characterize this “side” as being primarily concerned with proving that “physical” preservation is possible without leading to personal dependence, in other words, that “natural freedom” does not threaten the individual’s preservation. I will also show how, from the account of the physical “side”, it follows that *if* men have natural freedom, their natural inequalities are nullified. Finally, in the third part, I will describe the “moral side” as establishing the impossibility of personal dependence in the state of Nature, i.e. as making natural freedom a necessary quality of the natural human constitution. I will also show how natural freedom is essentially related to human beings’ main characteristic: their natural goodness.

I will conclude this paper by suggesting how one could also interpret Rousseau’s account of the successive “revolutions” that lead to civil society in terms of the relation between freedom and inequality. I will also suggest a way of understanding the natural human constitution as a standard.

I. Rousseau's understanding of the term "natural"

The first approach to Rousseau's understanding of the term "natural" in the *Second Discourse* is found in the epigraph: "What is natural has to be investigated not in beings that are depraved, but in those that are good according to nature." By quoting Aristotle, Rousseau is, from the outset, linking his understanding of "what is natural" to the classical dichotomy between "natural" and "depraved". What is natural to human beings is therefore understood in opposition to what depraves them. Furthermore, by opposing "natural" to "depraved" Rousseau suggests, from the beginning of his *Discourse*, that he will restore a certain normative character to "that which is natural" in human beings.

However, Rousseau's conception of "that which is natural" to human beings is not the classical one. He makes this clear by using, while simultaneously inverting, the Platonic image of the statue of Glaucus [P.1].⁴ What one will be left with after reconstructing the disfigured profile of those "that are good according to nature", is not the Platonic immortal soul, nor the Aristotelian virtuous men, but humankind "as Nature formed" it, humankind in its "primitive state".

Knowledge of our "natural" being, "the most useful and the least advanced of all" [P.1] will be obtained by ridding our present depraved constitution of all the alterations that it has suffered "in the lap of society by a thousand forever recurring causes." [P.1]. However, the quest for this knowledge is intrinsically paradoxical; since knowledge is one of the factors that has corrupted our nature, "the more new knowledge we accumulate" the further we will be from our "primitive state" [P.2]. Even if we are never fully able to achieve the knowledge of "that which is natural" to us, it does not mean that we can avoid searching for it. Approaching this knowledge, according to Rousseau, is the only way to begin to understand and assess what we have become. This is the reason why "the Philosophers who have examined the foundations of society have all felt the necessity of going back as far as the state of Nature".⁵ [E.5]

Let us now see what this way of understanding the term "natural" tells us about "natural" freedom and "natural" inequality and how it shapes Rousseau's main criticism of his predecessors' conception of the state of Nature.

Rousseau's understanding of the term "natural" as opposed to whatever might be a product of the "lap of society" establishes the dichotomy between "natural" freedom/inequality and *conventional* freedom/equality. Thus, regardless of its legitimate or illegitimate nature, the kind of inequality/freedom that is established by human convention is by definition unnatural. In particular, any inequality in power is unnatural by definition.

However negative this understanding of "what is natural" may seem, Rousseau believes it brings us closer to the state of Nature than any previous one. It does so by showing that if we wish to depict what is natural to us, we must put aside any element of our present constitution that could only be originated by convention. This is what all the philosophers before Rousseau failed to do: "...[A]ll of them, continually speaking of need, greed, oppression, desires, and pride transferred to the state of Nature ideas they had taken

from society; They spoke of Savage Man and depicted Civil man”⁶ [E.5].

By depicting the qualities of civilized man instead of those of natural man, the other philosophers’ way of investigating the state of Nature “serve rather to provide reasons for existing facts than to ascertain the real existence of these facts” [N. XII]. And in particular, they legitimated certain kinds of conventional inequalities by asserting their necessity in view of our pseudo natural qualities.

But given that the search for our natural qualities is inevitable, how can Rousseau avoid making the same mistake as his predecessors? How can he or anyone engaged in this search proceed?

II. The “physical” side of our constitution in the State of Nature.

For it is no light undertaking to disentangle what is original from what is artificial in man’s present Nature...Whoever might undertake to ascertain exactly the precautions required to make solid observations on this subject would need even more Philosophy than one might suspect; and a good solution of the following problem does not seem to me unworthy of the Aristotles and the Plinys of our century: *What experiments would be needed in order to come to know natural man; and by what means can these experiments be performed in society?*

Rousseau. *Second Discourse*.

In order to avoid repeating his predecessors’ mistakes, Rousseau turns to the teachings of modern natural science to find a better method to grasp, at least in one respect, human’s natural constitution. The problem of what our natural constitution is thereby becomes, to a certain extent, the problem of what our constitution was in the origins; while “to come to know natural man” requires the specification of the proper kind of “experiments” [P.4].⁷

Thus, in his first step towards a more positive account of the original human constitution, Rousseau admits that he “confidently relies” on Buffon, who derives his authority “from a solid and sublime reason” [N.II]. Buffon, in a certain way, embodies the lesson that Rousseau wishes to draw from modern science, since the work of this naturalist demonstrated the possibility of providing a satisfactory account of the origins of the earth and the birth, grow and decay of animals in terms of physical causation.

Therefore, Rousseau's constant efforts to prove that his profile of the "physical side" of natural man coincides with the conclusions of Natural History and the travelers' observations are not merely erudite musings. And his anatomical arguments are more than curious strands of Rousseau's argumentation. The *Second Discourse* can therefore also be read as "an attempt to avoid any possible contradiction between science and philosophy" [Masters. 1968. p.118].⁸

Before turning to the account of the "physical side" of human constitution, it is important to clarify the way in which Rousseau uses the term "physical", since as Masters shows [Masters. 1968 pp.151-157] its meaning in the *Second Discourse* differs from the ordinary meaning. "Physical" as Rousseau explicitly states, refers to that which "harms" or "contributes" to "the preservation of the individual". [I 34] "Physical" in this sense is opposed to "moral" while "moral", as we shall see in the next section, refers to "man in his relation to other men." Thus the "physical" needs of human beings in the state of Nature are those which are indispensable for *individual* preservation: food and sleep. The satisfaction of sexual desire is not a "physical" need since it is necessary for the preservation of the human species, but not for individuals.

Let us now examine Rousseau's account of the "physical side" of human constitution in the state of Nature [I.1-14]. What I wish to prove is first, that one can understand Rousseau's description of the physical side of the state of Nature as an attempt to demonstrate that even in the most extreme scenario, the individual's *natural freedom* did not pose a threat to his or her preservation. In other words, that men's preservation is intelligible without any social ties, even with the radical "hypothesis" of the absence of family. And secondly, that if humans in the state of Nature are not mutually necessary to their individual subsistence, their natural inequalities do not have any significant consequences. If men in the state of Nature are naturally free, if personal dependence is artificial, Rousseau needs to make conceivable a natural man without any ties to others. The picture we obtain of this natural man is that of the "most advantaged animal".

Men do not need each other in the state of Nature since they do not experience any major threat to their preservation. The Earth's natural fertility satisfies their "physical" needs, and by imitation, they are able to acquire the "industry" of any other animal they may need. They have no natural enemies, they are basically healthy, and their long childhood is compensated by a longer life. They can not anticipate their death since they lack foresight. They are not curious. They live solitary lives; they are spread out and rarely meet. They couple without love, and the mother looks after her offspring until they are self-sufficient, after which she stops worrying about them. They only have simple ideas and they have no language. The only sentiment of their souls is the sentiment of their present existence, and their only concern is self-preservation.

Thus, individual preservation is intelligible without any social tie. In other words *natural freedom* is possible in the state of Nature. But if men can lead their lives without needing the help of other human beings, the natural inequalities between individuals are of no consequence. Not only does the "solitary" life of individuals in the state of Nature

prevent them from even noticing them, their inability to formulate complex ideas prevents them from making any comparisons between the qualities of different individuals. Even more importantly, since self-preservation is their only concern, and given that they can fulfill it without requiring ties with others, natural inequalities are not relevant to human life in the state of Nature.

An additional and interesting consequence of this way of approaching human nature is that the only law that can be properly called "Law of Nature" is one to which all living beings are subjected. Human beings are neither rational animals, nor political animals; therefore, for Rousseau, the law that establishes rights and duties for human beings qua *rational* beings, does not emanate from Nature but instead is a product of human convention. "Natural Law" as understood by his predecessors, cannot be properly called "Natural".

But if man is not a rational animal, or a political animal, what distinguishes humans from other animals? Rousseau's conception of the natural human constitution lacks the elements that make human beings unique and distinguish them from the rest of the animals, while at the same time enabling "what is natural" to them to establish a kind of standard. For if one could give a full account of human nature in purely "physical terms", if what is natural to humans were included in the description of their animal features, then human nature could not be established as a standard for civilized man.

So far, we have only proved two things. First, that human beings in the state of Nature did not need social ties for their individual preservation, i.e. that natural freedom is possible in the state of Nature. Second, that *if* human beings are naturally free, then their natural inequalities are of no consequence. Therefore, in the following section, I attempt to show how one can understand the moral side of human constitution (what is properly human), as the condition that make personal dependence impossible, (and natural freedom necessary). I will therefore complete my account of Rousseau's state of Nature as the state where humans were "equal" because they were free; a state where individual "natural inequalities" were eliminated because there was no personal dependence, i.e. because humans enjoyed natural freedom.

III. The Metaphysical or Moral side of account of Human Nature

Rousseau recognizes the limitations of the "physical account". "I see in any animal nothing but an ingenious machine to which nature has given senses in order to wind up and, to a point, protect itself against everything that tends to destroy or to disturb it" [I.15]. This forces us to examine the "moral" or "metaphysical" side of human nature.

What the "physical" conception of human nature can not account for is the fact that men have the ability to choose and that they have moral freedom. Men have the power of willing whereas animals can only follow their instincts. What is specific to man is that he is a free agent. It is "in the consciousness of this [moral] freedom that the spirituality of his soul exhibits itself" [I.16].

However, as we said in the introduction, Rousseau acknowledges that the nature of human freedom is problematic. As we have seen, in the *Second Discourse* Rousseau attempts to describe the natural human constitution in the clearest way possible. For this reason, “perfectibility” replaces “free agency” as the specific quality that distinguishes men from animals.

The faculty of perfecting oneself is defined as “a faculty which, with the aid of circumstances, successively develops all the others, and resides in us, in the species as well as in the individual.” [I.17] Rousseau’s ultimate proof that perfectibility is the specific quality of human beings, is that only they are capable of becoming imbeciles.

To complete Rousseau’s conception of natural human constitution we must incorporate the two “principles” that, prior to reason, move human beings to act. These principles are: the principle of self-preservation, and the principle of pity. The latter interests them intensively in their well being, while the former inspires them with a “natural repugnance to seeing any sentient Being, and especially any being like” themselves suffer or die[I.9].

Thus we can now understand the main characteristic of our original constitution and how it is intrinsically related to the presence of natural freedom. The main characteristic of natural human constitution is men’s “natural goodness”. Men are naturally good because there is nothing in their nature, either in their “physical” or in their “metaphysical” side, that leads them to wish or need to harm others, and this is only possible because they are naturally free.

On the one hand, as we saw in the second part of the paper, in the state of Nature men can satisfy their “physical” needs without having any kind of link with other individuals. In particular the satisfaction of individual needs does not lead men to harm others. On the other hand, as we have just seen, human behavior in the state of Nature is based on two principles: the principle of self-preservation and the principle of pity. Men not only do not wish to harm others but moreover, if their self preservation is not threatened, the principle of pity will prevent them from harming others.

Furthermore, even if men lacked the principle of pity, personal dependence would be impossible in the state of Nature since men lack the power to make other individuals care about their needs or desires. Finally, even if men wanted to establish relations of personal dependence, their lack of speech would make this impossible.

Indeed, it is impossible to imagine why, in that primitive state a man would need his kind, or, assuming this need, to imagine what motives could induce the other to attend to it, or even, if he did, how they might agree on the terms.[I.33]

If personal dependence is impossible in the state of Nature, and given that natural freedom is the absence of personal dependence, then natural freedom is not only a possible quality of men’s natural constitution, but actually a necessary one. Thus, given that in

the second part of the paper we showed that *if* men had natural freedom, their natural inequalities would be nullified, we can conclude that natural inequalities in the state of Nature did not have any significant consequences. In this way we complete our account of Rousseau's state of Nature as the state where humans were "equal" because they were free.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude this paper by suggesting how one could also interpret Rousseau's account of the successive "revolutions" that lead to civil society in terms of the relation between freedom and inequality. This process can be understood as the process whereby individual "physical" inequalities acquired a "moral" and "political" character as a result of the emergence of personal dependence. In other words, one could understand Rousseau's account of the birth of "political inequality" as an effect of the loss of "natural freedom". This account would carefully develop the following process:

The first step towards personal dependence is found in the rise of "nascent societies." Rousseau states that these societies are still in the "state of Nature" because, in the absence of an acknowledged common authority, each individual is still "the sole judge and avenger of the offences he received". However, it is in nascent societies that men begin to examine the natural inequalities of individuals.

However, the fundamental change, the only "great revolution" comes with the "invention" and "perfection" of the "arts" of agriculture and metallurgy that create a new kind of society based on mutual dependence. In nascent societies, the claim of possession was only enforced by the natural strength of each individual. Individual powers and goods were limited. However, the arts of metallurgy and agriculture, i.e. their use in producing a surplus to exchange breaks the natural balance between individual power, individual goods, and individual desires; and gives rise to artificial needs, and disproportionate goods and power of some individuals to the detriment of others. In this way political inequality emerges as a result of the loss of natural freedom.

We have finally reached the point where we are in a position to account for the way in which the natural human constitution can be understood as a standard.

Men in the pre-political state are naturally good in the sense that as long as each person's needs, inclinations and the powers to satisfy them are in balance, each can yield to his spontaneous inclination to self preservation and to pity by attending to his own good without desiring and for the most part needing to harm anyone else
[Gourevitch, 1997, p. xx]

In this way, the natural human constitution establishes the following maxim: *Do your good with the least possible harm to the others* [I.38]. Once men have left the state of

nature, there is no possible return. However, reason needs to achieve a new state where our needs, our inclinations, and our powers find a new balance. In this way, Nature recovers a certain normative character through Rousseau. If human beings are to live in society they must create a new non-natural state that will enable them to live without needing to harm others by eliminating personal dependence. This is the reason why:

If one inquires into precisely what the greatest good of all consists of, which ought to be the end of every system of legislation, one will find that it comes down to these principal objects, *freedom* and *equality*. Freedom, because any individual dependence is that much force taken away from the State; equality, because freedom cannot subsist without it. [S.C. p.78]