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TECHNOLOGY AND MOTHER EARTH: THE ROUSSEAUIAN ROOTS OF THE DEBATE

The idea of "Mother Earth" grows ever more popular as the West opens itself to other cultural traditions and the influence of Christianity wanes. Ironically, as Christianity's power declines, so does the star of modern science. Feminism and environmentalism, for example, now both advocate a new conception of nature and our relationship to it. *Gaia*, worshipped in the pre-Christian era of the West, has today been rediscovered. The search for a new moral imperative is now well under way with the demand that we revalue nature and our relationship to Earth. The idea of "Mother Earth" seems to offer the perfect opportunity for such a revaluation. It brings all cultures together and unites tradition with progressive political ideas. Hence the idea of "Mother Earth" seems to raise the hopeful possibility of an intellectual pathway out of our ever deepening crisis, a crisis of faith in both the old religion and the old science.

What is most curious about the phenomenon of "Mother Earth" is that its main inspiration comes neither from ancient traditions nor from radical new ideas, but from the heart of modernity itself—Romanticism. For the attractiveness of "Mother Earth" is, in large part, an effect of the Romantic view of the goodness of nature. A revaluation of our old values concerning nature and science is thus possible only if we seriously inquire into the "romanticism" of the idea of "Mother Earth." Such a revaluation is possible only if we confront the thought of the philosophical founder of Romanticism, Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Rousseau's political thought inspired the great modern offensive against technological science, and in particular, against the liberal-commercial society it serves. Indeed, it was his attack on science and commerce in the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* that first made his reputation. As Rousseau himself indicated, however, the principles which provided the ultimate foundation of that attack were elaborated only later, in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*. In this second *Discourse*, Rousseau develops his famous account of the state of nature,

in which he subjects previous descriptions of that state to a devastating critique. The conception of the state of nature which Hobbes, Locke and others had presented as a poor and violent condition, is replaced by a new one in which human beings are both happy and good. Nature is no longer the enemy, but a beneficent and wise mistress, and our natural, primitive condition is now seen as the one that was "best for man." It is here that we find the philosophic roots of the current nostalgic longing for "Mother Earth," and, by extension, the opposition to technological society.

I

The thinkers most responsible for laying the moral and political foundations of modern technological society are Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*¹ is best understood as a response to the work of these two political philosophers.² The "First Part" of the *Discourse* is a systematic critique of their accounts of the "state of nature." The "Second Part" is in essence an attack on their conceptions of the principles of the social contract. A brief summary of their position is thus essential for understanding Rousseau's argument.

Hobbes' great ambition was to found a new science of politics, a science that would banish the darkness of Thomistic philosophy. The key to his strategy for doing so was his decision to follow the lead of Machiavelli by jettisoning all concern with moral perfection, with how human beings *ought* to be, and focussing instead on what they really are. To this end, Hobbes embraced the theory of hedonism, postulating man to be a selfish individual concerned only with his own pleasure. Given that different human beings have different physical constitutions, the specific character of pleasure was said to be largely relative.³ Two things, however, are not relative. First, because one always needs power to obtain the things that give one pleasure, the pursuit of "power after power" is essential to all human beings. Second, because one

1. All references to Rousseau's works are from the Pleiade edition of the *Oeuvres completes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964). The *Discourse on Inequality* is in Volume III. The translations used here are ours.
2. Cf. Victor Goldschmidt, *Anthropologie et politique: les principes du système de Rousseau* (Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 1974) p. 748.
3. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapter 6.

can enjoy pleasure only as long as one is alive, death is understood to be an absolute evil. To be sure, this portrait of human nature was not terribly flattering. Yet Hobbes considered this low account of human nature essential to the development of an effective science of politics, reasoning that it would be safer to count on human selfishness than to build one's political system on the hope that man would be able to transcend the selfishness of his hedonist nature.

Having established this hedonist account of human nature, Hobbes then turned to a pre-political condition he called the "state of nature" as a means of deducing effective principles of political right. In essence, his reasoning was this: to see what principles should guide the institutions of government, it is necessary to understand what government is for. To learn what government is for, it suffices to ask what life would be like if we had no government (that is essentially what Hobbes means by the state of nature – any condition in which there is no effective government to regulate human conduct). The answer Hobbes gave to this question is well-known. In brief, he argued that because human beings are by nature selfish seekers of power and pleasure, in the absence of effective government, life would become a horrible state of war. The "incommodities" of such a state were described in the most famous lines of the book:

In such condition, there is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain; and consequently no Culture of the Earth; no Navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by Sea; no commodious Building; no Instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force; no Knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of Time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.⁴

From this conclusion, Hobbes was able to deduce several critical principles of political right. First, it was now evident that the overriding purpose of government is security. All rational human beings must make the avoidance of death their top priority, but life in the state of nature is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short". Government is therefore called in to being in order to remedy this

4. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapter 13.

evil. Second, it was evident that the best means of establishing an effective government was to form a social contract in which each individual renounces his or her freedom, and agrees to submit to whatever rules the sovereign, or government, deems essential to the security of all.

John Locke disagreed with this latter point. In his view, an all-powerful government would constitute an even greater threat to the security of individuals than would a state of nature. For that reason, Locke favoured a social contract which would place certain limitations on the power of the government.⁵ For the most part, however, Locke's theory amounts to a development of Hobbes' notion that the insecurity of the state of nature will leave human beings extremely "poor." In the most famous chapter of the *Second Treatise*, "Of Property," Locke argues emphatically and at great length that Nature has left us in utter misery, in grinding poverty. The raw materials she furnishes us are next to worthless, for almost all real value is created by human labour. What is most essential to human happiness, then, is the establishment and protection of a right to unlimited quantities of private property, so as to provide human beings with the incentive to invest their labour power in nature's raw materials and create the real wealth that is essential to human happiness.

Taken together, the theories of Hobbes and Locke provide the original moral and political foundation for modern technological society. Hobbes and Locke liberate selfish acquisitiveness from the moral limitations placed on it by classical and medieval doctrines. They deny that happiness consists in some *finis ultimus*, or *telos*, and present life instead as the restless pursuit of power after power, for the sake of pleasure after pleasure. The purpose or role of government is therefore significantly altered. While a thinker like Aristotle saw the highest purpose of government to be moral education, Hobbes and Locke argued for a political regime in which the role of government is to provide the material prerequisites for the "pursuit of happiness" - security and prosperity. "Moral" matters were to be consigned to the "private" sphere so that individual citizens would

5. John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, Chapter 11.

be free to do whatever they pleased, provided that their conduct entailed no direct harm to their fellow citizens.

II

The "First Part" of Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality* is a full-scale assault on the Hobbesian-Lockean view of nature. Where Hobbes and Locke see nature as the enemy, as a poor and miserable condition we must work hard to overcome, Rousseau insists that the natural condition was "the best for man" (171), and presents Nature as a wise and beneficent mistress whose greatest concern is to make human beings happy.

A measure of the gulf between Rousseau and his predecessors is his response to the Locke's allegations about natural penury. Rousseau argues that "the earth, left to its natural fertility, and covered by immense forests never yet mutilated by the axe" would actually be more fertile than a cultivated field of wheat.⁶ Moreover, Rousseau insists at length that natural human beings would by force of circumstance be stronger, faster, hardier, and more agile than the weak domesticated specimens of the human race that are to be found in technologically based civil society; and this, he claims, would have made it easier for them to survive and prosper (135-141). By nature, then, economy and environment stood in a happy equilibrium.

More central to his argument, however, is Rousseau's assertion of a natural psychological equilibrium. Hobbes and Locke presented life as a kind of treadmill, a Sisyphean striving for the satisfaction of a never-ending series of needs and wants. Rousseau accepts this as an accurate portrait of humanity in its present state, but he firmly denies that this is true by nature.

According to Rousseau, Hobbes and Locke have badly misunderstood nature because of a fundamental flaw in their methodology. His general point is that the thought of his predecessors pays insufficient attention to the historicity of human nature. In particular, Hobbes and Locke have gone astray in attributing to natural man certain characteristics that man could have acquired only within civil society:

6. Rousseau bases his case on the evidence of the scientist Buffon, and on an experiment he claims to have conducted himself. See p. 135 of the *Discourse*, including Note IV.

The philosophers who have examined the foundations of civil society have all felt the need of going back to the state of nature, but none of them has arrived there . . . Speaking endlessly of need, avarice, oppression, desire, and pride, all of them have introduced into the state of nature ideas that men had developed within society. They spoke of savage man, and they described civilized man (132).

In order to correct this error, Rousseau undertakes "to separate what is original from what is merely artificial in the current nature of man" (123). To this end, he employs what Jean Starobinski has called a "negative anthropology": by stripping man as he currently exists, first, of all characteristics that presuppose a social bond between men, and then, of all characteristics that presuppose any of those already deleted, one finally arrives at a purely natural account of human nature.⁷

The deduction of the true character of natural man thus runs something as follows. Rousseau asserts that speech is not a natural faculty because its development presupposes that human beings live together in a permanent relationship of mutual need (146). And if speech is not natural to human beings, one must draw the same conclusion about reason, the development of which presupposes the existence of speech (149). Furthermore, if natural man has neither reason nor speech, one must strip away another layer of what passes today for human nature: all those passions like ambition, greed, and lust, that are too sophisticated for a being who is not sufficiently rational to understand that his fellow-men can think about him exactly as he thinks about them (219; 174-175).

Contrary to Hobbes and Locke, then, Rousseau concludes that man is by nature happy in that he has no unsatisfied needs:

Stripping this being, thus constituted, of all the supernatural gifts that he might have received, and of all the artificial faculties he could have acquired only by long progress—considering

7. Jean Starobinski, "Rousseau et l'origine des langues" in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: La transparence et l'obstacle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971) p. 361. Cf. Pierre Manent, *Naissances de la politique moderne: Machiavel, Hobbes, Rousseau* (Paris: Payot, 1977) p. 132.

him, in short, as he must have come from the hands of Nature . . . I see him satisfying his hunger under an oak tree, quenching his thirst at the first stream, and finding his bed at the foot of the tree that furnished him his meal. Thus are his needs satisfied (134-135).

Nature has made human beings happy by establishing a careful equilibrium between their needs, and their capacity to satisfy those needs. There is thus originally a natural harmony between the human species and its environment.

Rousseau also affirms that nature intended for there to be harmony between the individual members of the species. Hobbes and Locke asserted that the state of nature would be full of violence and conflict, but this was because they had mistakenly attributed to human beings all kinds of passions of which natural man would know nothing. Rousseau claims that natural man would do no harm to his fellows because he is too simple, even too stupid, to have any reason to:

Hobbes did not see that the same cause which prevents savages from using their reason . . . at the same time prevents them from abusing their faculties, as he claims they do. So that one could say that savages are not wicked precisely because they do not know what it means to be good. For it is neither the development of enlightenment nor the brake of law, but the calm of the passion and the ignorance of vice that prevent them from doing harm (154).

Nature is thus the best state for the human species because in our natural condition, we human beings were both happy and good.

III

The question, of course, is how this beneficent Nature is relevant to our current situation. Some of Rousseau's readers, including Voltaire, took him to be suggesting some kind of "return to nature," in which human beings attempt to recapture the simplicity and happiness of the "noble savage". This is certainly a misreading of Rousseau's position. As he states quite clearly in Note IX, it is impossible "to destroy society, abolish mine and thine, and return to the forests to live like bears" because the evolution of our passions is irreversible (207). Yet if we cannot return to our original condition, in what sense is Rousseau's discussion of Nature of use to us now?

In effect, Rousseau's prescriptions for the ills of human existence emerge not from his consideration of the happy natural state, but from his analysis of humanity's "fall" from that state. This is described in the "Second Part" of the *Discourse*.

The key to Rousseau's account of humanity's corruption is the psychological phenomenon he calls *amour-propre*, our overwhelming concern with what other people think of us. In Note XV of the *Discourse*, Rousseau claims that man's original constitution was not marred by *amour-propre* because *amour-propre* depends on a capacity to make comparisons with others of which natural man would not have been capable. Natural man can see that he is bigger or stronger than another man, but he does not have the intelligence to understand that others compare themselves with him in the same manner that he compares himself with them. He therefore does not perceive that other men are evaluating him, and accordingly, has no reason to care about what they think of him (219). With the development of the human mind, however, man finally acquires this capacity for *amour-propre*, which henceforth becomes a fundamental characteristic of human nature. And unfortunately, Rousseau tells us, this acquisition is "fatal" to the human species for two reasons: it destroys both the happiness and the goodness (or innocence) that were central to our original nature.

We have seen that if natural man is good, it is because he has no motive to do others harm. After the development of *amour-propre*, the motive is no longer missing:

Finally, devouring ambition, the desire to raise one's relative fortune, less out of true need than in order to put oneself above others, inspires in all men a dark inclination to do one another harm, a secret jealousy all the more dangerous in that, in order to strike its blow in greater safety, often assumes the mask of benevolence. In a word, competition and rivalry on the one hand, and opposition of interest on the other; and always the hidden desire to profit at the expense of others (175).

It is because *amour-propre* is the source of all of these desires that Rousseau presents it as that which "inspires in men all the harm they do to one another" (219).

Amour-propre is also the fundamental cause of human misery. Natural man is happy because he can easily satisfy his desires, which are quite simple (153). *Amour-propre* destroys the natural equilibrium between man's desires and his capacity to satisfy them. The man characterized by *amour-propre* lives entirely in the opinion of his fellows, and is therefore happy or unhappy on "on the testimony of others" (193). What he ultimately desires is that his fellow-men love him as much as they love themselves; and the obvious impossibility that such a desire could be satisfied constitutes the deepest source of human misery.

Yet *amour-propre* renders human beings unhappy in a much more direct fashion as well. The fact that humans who are enslaved by *amour-propre* cannot satisfy their desire for universal love and admiration does not at all prevent them from trying to do so, and this creates new sources of misery for them. At the end of the *Discourse*, Rousseau tells us that this man who lives "in the opinion of others" (193) will do anything to satisfy his *amour-propre*:

He sweats, he agitates himself, he torments himself without end in order to seek even more laborious occupations. He works himself almost to death, he even runs toward it, in order to put himself in a condition to live, or he renounces live in order to acquire immortality. He pays court to the powerful, whom he hates, and to the rich, whom he despises (192).

According to Rousseau, then, the development of *amour-propre* is a double disaster for mankind. On the one hand, it transforms an innocent being into a wicked one; on the other, it renders a happy being miserable.

IV

Can the evils caused by *amour-propre* be undone? Is there a way to forestall, if not reverse, its harmful effects?

Ultimately Rousseau believes that the principles of political right he lays down in *The Social Contract* constitute the only general solution to the problem, even if that solution is merely a partial one. To see how Rousseau's strategy is supposed to work, however, it is useful to first consider a point from his other great work *Emile*.

In *Emile*, *amour-propre* is again presented as the great menace to human goodness and happiness. Rousseau admits that it is impossible to forestall the emergence of *amour-propre* in the soul of the young Emile. Yet the tutor has an ingenious plan for minimizing its harmful effects. The core of his plan is to turn *amour-propre* against itself in order to promote freedom from, as opposed to enslavement to, the opinion of others. The key to this reversal is a two-stage plan for establishing freedom itself as the most praiseworthy of qualities. In the first stage, the tutor delays the emergence of *amour-propre* until Emile has reached the age of reason, so that he can impartially observe how men become enslaved to public opinion, and how miserable this makes them. In the second stage, he indoctrinates Emile in the metaphysical theories of the Savoyard Vicar, doctrines which lend an almost mystical significance to our free-will. Now what effect does this extraordinary education have on Emile? To put it briefly, he learns to cherish freedom itself as the most important of human goods and *to take pride above all in his freedom from the opinion of others*. His *amour-propre* thus becomes salutary rather than harmful, for it is now the greatest bulwark of his independence, and thus, of his goodness and happiness.⁸

Rousseau's political project involves making a similar appeal to the dignity of freedom. His hope is to realize on the political plane the same kind of solution to the problem of *amour-propre* suggested in *Emile*.

Amour-propre undermines happiness when it is not satisfied and it undermines goodness when it leads human beings to compete with each other. Rousseau's political solution to the problems engendered by *amour-propre* is to render it less dangerous in both senses by directing it at a more salutary target. If one could convince human beings that the noblest thing in life is the exercise of our freedom through self-government, then membership in a political community where the sovereignty of the "general will" guarantees that one does only what one's own will approves would effect a disarming of *amour-propre* similar to that experienced by Emile. Since the noblest and most dignified of all human qualities would

8. "Emile" in *Oeuvres complètes* IV pp. 522-526; 534-536; 581-588. Cf. John Charvet, *The Social Problem in the Philosophy of Rousseau* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974) pp. 79-85.

automatically characterize each member of that community, its citizens would no longer be afflicted by an unsatisfied *amour-propre*, or at least not to the same degree that they are now. Moreover, they would for the same reason have less of a motive to compete with each other.

Now Rousseau believes that this strategy will work in one type of political community only: the ancient *polis*. The community must be small so that direct self-government will be both possible and meaningful. Like the ancient polis, it must be relatively egalitarian, with sumptuary laws to minimize the extent to which citizens might compete with one another for pre-eminence in wealth and luxury. It must be hostile to the arts and sciences, which foster wealth and luxury, and which constitute yet another field for the excesses of our *amour-propre*. Above all, it must be a non-liberal community in which moral education has the highest public priority. This is because for *amour-propre* to be tied to self-government, the citizens must learn to see themselves primarily as citizens, not as individuals. Their natural individuality must therefore be broken, and this requires an extremely powerful education directed toward the inculcation of patriotic zeal and civic virtue. The political order advocated by Rousseau is thus the very opposite of the liberal-technological regime favoured by Hobbes and Locke and practised in most of the world today.

V

What one learns from considering Rousseau's political thought is that the rhetorical power of the idea of "Mother Earth" derives from a deep-seated desire on the part of human beings not to be separated from nature. Civil society is the product of this separation. We left the state of nature long ago, and are now separated both from nature as a whole and from our own natures. We are thus divided beings, for the natural unity of our human souls was lost almost at the very moment we became social creatures.⁹

Rousseau's account of our relationship to nature, and of the problem of human happiness, contains many arguments that require long and careful consideration. It must here suffice to raise the three most

9. For a more thorough discussion of the problem, see Parts I and II of Arthur Melzer's excellent work *The Natural Goodness of Man: On the System of Rousseau's Thought* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990).

important. First, there is no getting "back to nature" in any more than a superficial way. Here and there, a few solitary human beings may achieve a kind of unity of soul through philosophical contemplation, but for humanity as a whole, there is no universal way to reunite human beings with nature. For at bottom, the problem is that in psychological terms, we have developed into social beings. The fundamental disunity of our souls can never be ameliorated by some new orientation towards nature. To view nature as a mother, or even a mother goddess, may provide some consolation to human beings in their fundamental estrangement, but it can never cure that estrangement.

Secondly, Rousseau's thought suggests that a proper understanding of the way we use and abuse science depends above all on our understanding the psychology of *amour-propre*. The conquest of nature, both human and non-human, cannot be revalued if it is motivated primarily by an ineradicable feature of human beings as social creatures. Thus, while the rhetoric of the goodness of nature, or "Mother Earth," may be politically salutary, its practitioners must understand its limitations. The human drive to conquest, to use nature for whatever ends human beings freely imagine, will not likely disappear if Rousseau's psychology is accurate.

Finally, one would have to think through the connection between Rousseau's account of moral or political virtue and his suggestions about the relationship between *amour-propre* and the human drive for conquest. Does the rhetoric of "Mother Earth" not suggest that there must also be a new moral rhetoric of moral virtue? The logic of Rousseau's argument suggests precisely this, but Rousseau argued that this virtue is the virtue of citizens, of human beings who are committed participants in what are by today's standards tiny political communities. "Mother Earth" thus in no way suggests "spaceship earth" or universal society and government. Far from promoting a new and more liberal universal society, the politics of "Mother Earth" will be the politics of the polis, supplemented by some naturalistic ethics. It thus appears that the re-discovery of the Greek goddess *Gaia* suggests the re-discovery of Greek philosophy, and that the rhetoric of "Mother Earth" points to the philosophy of natural right. Such a fundamental revaluation of values would require us to consider the alternative that even Rousseau rejected: the possible superiority of the ancients to the moderns.