

**Freedom, Speech and Inequality in Rousseau's Philosophical Rhetoric.
From the Deconstructive Interpretation to the Foundations
of his Political Thought**

by

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Introduction

The goal of this dissertation is to understand how the rhetoric used by Rousseau in his works about the origin of human language (the *Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality among Men* and the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*) is compatible with the philosophical meaning of these works. This will only sound tautological to readers unfamiliar with the inherent difficulties in Rousseau's writing. The difficulties are rhetorical because the ambiguous character of his writing raises the question of *whom* Rousseau wants to persuade about *what*. Some interpreters have dismissed Rousseau's mode of writing as simply problematic or contradictory, refusing to acknowledge the existence of a double teaching hidden in his rhetoric, probably under the impression that such a thing would be incompatible with his democratic politics. Others have perceived the ambivalent character of his texts, but have taken that ambivalence to be a goal in itself, therefore interpreting Rousseau's rhetoric as a merely diffusive linguistic artifice. The interpretations put forward in this dissertation will show that both these positions are wrong. Our readings will show instead that not only is Rousseau's mode of writing neither accidental nor idiosyncratic, but also that his rhetoric is never diffusive, but always purposeful. We will claim that the ambivalences found in his work are subservient to the different "philosophical" views that he offers to the different types of readers he addresses. The complexity of his rhetoric lies,

therefore, in the *mélange* between what is *persuasion* and what is *argument* in his texts. To unravel this *mélange* is to articulate Rousseau's philosophical discourse or, what we prefer to call, his philosophical rhetoric.

The originality of this thesis lies in the attempt to explain, or better said, illustrate, the logic behind Rousseau's writing strategy, an effort not found in other studies dedicated to Rousseau's mode of writing.¹ The questions that will guide our research are the following: is Rousseau's account of the origin of speech related to his own use of discursive language? And is his discursive language, i.e. his rhetoric, related to the political paradox regarding inequality at stake in the *Second Discourse*? By exposing these relations we should be able to articulate the more fundamental relation between the nature of speech and politics in Rousseau. That, I believe, is the source for the fundamental ambivalences in his thought, namely, the ones between democracy and aristocracy, materialism and dualism, poetry and philosophy. The key to reconciling these apparent oppositions is in the interpretation of the images, the vocabulary, and the enigmatic constructions that constitute Rousseau's rhetorical strategy. This interpretation should allow us, as such, to access what Rousseau "says without saying" about the nature of speech and politics. Through it we shall see that Rousseau's mode of writing is one with his system: his rhetorical strategy echoes his conclusions, on the one hand, about the powers that distinguish human beings from beasts, and on the other, about the inequalities, both natural and contingent, that issue from these powers and that distinguish one human being from another.

¹ Other than the works by Derrida and de Man, the works by R. Masters, R. Wokler, C. Kelly, V. Gourevitch, and R. Velkley to be cited below are among the main sources for this question.

In the first half of this dissertation, we will focus on the question of the origin of languages in Rousseau. In order to contextualize our interpretation and better introduce our subject, we will depart from Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of presence that, as he sees, determines Rousseau's thought. I will show that deconstruction misses the deeper sense of the question of pure presence in Rousseau and the related issue of the origin of languages. Derrida stops at the only apparent essentialism in Rousseau for, among other things, not considering correctly the relation between Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Languages* and the account of that origin in the *Second Discourse*. We will first show how deconstruction is grounded on an interpretation of Rousseau that fails to grasp the complex sense of his rhetoric; we will then see how in the texts on the origin of languages, Rousseau's rhetoric hides the inextricable relation that Derrida – but also Paul de Man, in the critique of his mentor – fails to see, namely, the relation between the powers that distinguish human beings from beasts.

As Rousseau tells us in the *Second Discourse*, these powers are the capacity to form general ideas (the implicit condition for *speech*) and the capacity to be a free agent. But if speech and freedom are, for Rousseau, inextricably related, for Derrida, freedom only seems to be possible as the result of the destruction of speech as presence, i.e. as the result of the endless play between “writing” (“supplementarity”) and speech (presence), and the endless transformations of meanings produced by this play. For Rousseau, however, the tendency of speech to become dogmatic (i.e. to create the illusion of pure presence) does not destroy the common ground for language shared by all human beings. Rousseau's speculations

on this subject imply a subtle notion missed by his critics. It is through the universality of the passions that, through the long transition from an animal to a human state, the communication among the first human individuals became possible. Hence, before becoming victims of the innumerable and inevitable *errors* that appeared with conventional languages – among which are indeed the illusions of self-presence denounced by Derrida – human beings shared at their origins the capacity to form and communicate *ideas* of their passions and of anything that at any given point became part of the external and internal formation of the species. It is through this elementary power to form and communicate these first self-reflective general ideas that the first human beings acquired the capacity to be free agents: “to recognize themselves as free to acquiesce or resist,” as Rousseau says in the *Second Discourse*, to what was previously a purely instinctive and unreflective command. For Rousseau it is thus this individual capacity to reflect on the general sense of their passions and faculties that distinguishes human freedom from animal freedom, and that allows the first human beings to start transforming their world with new meanings, conventions, and generalizations.

Both Derrida’s and de Man’s shortcomings can help put in evidence the relation between Rousseau’s rhetoric and what he has to say about language. While wanting, as the deconstructionists, to expose the artificial nature of reason, Rousseau entices us to go beyond what for many (certainly for Derrida and de Man) stands as the threshold of intelligibility. In order to understand the specificity of human communication, intelligence, and language, he takes an unprecedented approach to “the study of man” by considering the “state of nature” in its most

radical sense; his inquiry on the origin of speech is also a speculation on the mental transformations that might have determined the biological beginning of humankind. The notion that Rousseau's speculation presupposes the evolution, or as he says, "progress," of the species in terms of *both* the external and the internal formation of its individuals, will be crucial for our argument. We will see how his own use of language, i.e. his philosophical rhetoric, is to a great extent dependent on his account of how the basic human faculties, *which cannot be merely considered as the natural response to a concrete need of adaptation*, developed and were perfected.

In the second half of the dissertation, we will show that Rousseau's account of the origins in the *Second Discourse* presents a political problem, which will be the main reason for Rousseau's rhetorical strategy. There we will explore the conclusions of Part One, or better said, the main consequence of Rousseau's discussion of the origin of languages. If the origins of human freedom, speech, and inequality are inter-related, and if Rousseau's evolutionary treatment of the "state of nature" leads us to assume the development of freedom, speech, and inequality as the development of the distinctive human traits, then Rousseau's treatment of the current meaning of these things must be studied accordingly. Rousseau's discourses on what it means to be free and on whether intellectual inequalities are conventional or natural must be articulated by taking into account the imperfection that, as we will argue in Part One, has always characterized human communication. Rousseau's own use of language seems to be predicated on his insights about human language in general. According to him, the more human language developed, the more human beings could agree about their particular experiences; however, the more abstract

language became (i.e. the more *general terms* became necessary), the more dogmatic human beings became. Rousseau assumes in his account of the origin of languages that, at this stage of the human species, abstract notions had to be adopted dogmatically as part of the natural dynamics of human communication, as if the pressure for the dissemination of certain terms were always prevalent over the reflection needed to the understanding of those terms. As Rousseau describes in Part Two of the *Second Discourse*, it was with the appearance of politics that the distance between individuals concerning the intelligibility of certain concepts (such as, for instance, freedom and justice) reached a climax.

Rousseau devises his rhetorical strategy with this political disparity in mind: if humanity starts with and develops itself through an inequality of powers (an inequality which is manifested both physically *and* intellectually, namely, also through the use of language) how can we conciliate the meritocratic or aristocratic politics which would in principle result from these natural inequalities, with the democratic imperative of the general will? We will show how this political riddle permeates the *Second Discourse*, with an interpretation of Rousseau's prelude to the book, his Epistle Dedicatory. It is here where we will find the opposition that conditions Rousseau's philosophical rhetoric and that can dissolve, or place under a different light, what is often perceived as the doctrinarian sense of his political thought. The opposition – to which Rousseau alludes already in the epigraph to the *Second Discourse* taken from Aristotle's *Politics* – is the one between the types of individual wills or dispositions that, in general, mark the difference between human beings who are willing to be ruled and those who desire to rule. A close reading of

the Epistle Dedicatory allows us to explore the question of sovereignty – the undivided sovereignty of the general will – from a different angle than that found in Rousseau’s *Social Contract* (we will also return to this question in the *Appendix* to this work), for allowing us to draw a clear distinction between a political (egalitarian) and a philosophical (non-egalitarian) sense of freedom. These oppositions are, however, far from being explicit in the text and can only appear through an approach to Rousseau’s rhetoric that should become clear in the first part of this work. In a substantial portion of the second part, we will illustrate the political sense of Rousseau’s rhetoric with an analysis of the first note to the book dedicated to Herodotus and of the Machiavellian element in the Epistle Dedicatory.

In our last chapter, we will return to the philosophical principles that coordinate Rousseau’s rhetoric. We will expand on the relation between human freedom and the origin of languages, by focusing on the faculty responsible for human perfectibility and thus responsible for what Rousseau calls the main difference between human beings and other animals. This faculty, imagination, assumes both a productive and cognitive character in Rousseau. This character marks perhaps the greatest theoretical difference between Rousseau and his opponents. We will see that the neglected difference between Rousseau and Condillac on this point becomes emblematic of Rousseau’s revolutionary approach.

We will lastly consider the epigraph to the *Second Discourse*. The political opposition between rulers and ruled – the topic of the discussion from which Aristotle’s passage is taken – is ultimately what determines Rousseau’s odd rhetorical strategy. Thus, even before we start with the Epistle Dedicatory, we find

already in the epigraph the context for Rousseau's discussion of natural inequality and, thus, the context for his discussion, in the main text of the *Second Discourse*, of the principles that ultimately determine his political philosophy. Aristotle's treatment of the natural inequality between rulers and ruled addresses precisely the question of the political necessity of democracy at stake for Rousseau; it also sets the stage for the fundamental relation in the Epistle Dedicatory between speech and politics.

Part One

Origins

Chapter 1

Rousseau's Self-Presence. Derrida on the Origin of Languages.

1. In *Of Grammatology*, Rousseau is used as the paradigm for what Jacques Derrida calls “Western logocentrism.” In Rousseau we would find the culmination of the metaphysics of presence that started with Plato.¹ Derrida wants to reveal what he sees as the main dogma of that tradition, namely, the notion that meaning in general can be derived from a universal account of human nature or nature *tout court*. As Paul de Man puts it, for Derrida,

Rousseau (...) is governed by a tradition that defines Western thought in its entirety: the conception of all negativity (non-being) as absence and hence the possibility of an appropriation or a reappropriation of being (in the form of truth, of authenticity, of nature, etc.) as presence.²

Derrida sees this “appropriation of being” as an egoic utterance of one’s own *voice* (in the literal sense of the word), a voice isolated, as it were, from what is outside

¹ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translation by G. C. Spivak, Johns Hopkins (1976), pp. 97, 162, 167, 246, 301 and 315. Henceforth, *Gramm*.

² De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, Methuen (1983), p.114.

that ego, namely, the externality of what is taken as reality. Still in the words of de Man,

this ontological assumption both conditions and depends on a certain conception of language that favors oral language or voice over written language (*écriture*) in terms of presence and distance: the unmediated presence of the self to its own voice as opposed to the reflective distance that separates this self from the written world.³

The problem, for Derrida, is that it is externality that, ultimately, powers the voice; for him, an individual will is always determined by the context within which the individual exists. For Derrida, the power of reification self-ascribed by one's own voice or speech is the source of all dogmatic conceptualizations that characterize Western thought. This permanent attempt to enact self-presence is nothing but the failure of human beings to start with and be guided by otherness or difference: by what is already there on the canvas of externality.

In his book, Derrida prefaces his account of Rousseau's *Essay on the origin of languages* with a whole chapter dedicated to one of Rousseau's most influential readers of the last century, Claude Lévi-Strauss. He seems to justify his choice of Rousseau by first confronting one possible interpretation of Rousseau and only then Rousseau's text, almost as if Lévi-Strauss' interpretation should serve as *the* introduction to Rousseau's thoughts on language, and not the other way around. It is not clear whether Derrida really believed that Lévi-Strauss' reading was representative of Rousseau to the point that it could be used as an introduction to Rousseau, or whether he forced a pre-conditioned interpretation of Rousseau that would not resist a more serious comparison between the philosopher and the

³ Ibid.

anthropologist. The latter possibility is suggested by the way Derrida ends his book:⁴ what Rousseau gives as “dream,” Lévi-Strauss takes as the truth. Yet in light of what came before in Derrida’s account, his closing remarks cannot be taken very seriously.⁵ Although whether Rousseau would ultimately side with Lévi-Strauss or with him does not change Derrida’s points about language and his deconstructive rhetoric as a whole, the distinction would open a third possibility that apparently was not considered by deconstruction: the possibility that Rousseau would have disagreed with *both* Lévi-Strauss and Derrida on the issues at stake, namely, on the question of human origins.

⁴ *Gramm.*, p.316. Derrida closes his book with a passage of the *Émile* where Rousseau says the following: “You will say I too am a dreamer; I admit it, but I do what others fail to do, I give my dreams as dreams, and leave the reader to discover whether there is anything in them which may prove useful to those who are awake.”

⁵ Given Derrida’s questioning of the paradigm that, as he sees it, founds the Western tradition, Rousseau’s philosophical precision is not a priority. Rousseau commits the same mistakes of the main examples of that tradition, e.g. Plato, Descartes, or Hegel (see p. 160). The possibility of philosophical or conceptual precision is actually implicitly denied by Derrida’s claim that “there is nothing outside of the text” (p. 158) and that there is no such a thing as the author’s intention (there’s no author) (p. 246). Yet a reader unfamiliar with Derrida’s rhetoric could suspect the existence of a second teaching (i.e. an esoteric doctrine) in his work, and therefore that he is ultimately after some form of conceptual precision. This suspicion disappears when one realizes that Derrida simply does not acknowledge this mode of writing, failing to recognize it in the key authors he considers. The only conceptual precision left to deconstruction – and apparently the one that guides the whole effort – concerns a certain “notion” of the work of the negative, as Derrida says, “the play of difference” or “supplementarity”: “It is precisely the play of presence and absence, the opening of this play that no metaphysical or ontological concept can comprehend.” (p. 244) “The supplement is neither a presence nor an absence. No ontology can think its operation” (p. 314). See also pp. 246-7. On the concept of “supplement,” see pp. 163 and 241.

Let us start by stating the “particular motif” that, according to Derrida, links Lévi-Strauss to Rousseau. Derrida’s particular contention is with Rousseau’s alleged belief in the *proper* meaning of things.

Rousseau no doubt believed in the figurative initiation of language, but he believed no less (...) in a progress toward literal (proper) meaning (...). It is to this eschatology of the *proper* (*prope*, *propius*, self-presence, property, own-ness) that we ask the question of *graphein*.⁶

Rousseau’s account of the emergence of proper names is then the condition of his account of nature. We cannot speak of natural characteristics of human beings because

we have not the means of interpreting beyond [the] general conditions of possibility [of a *fact* that we deem natural] (...). This fact bears on (...) the essence or the energy of the *graphein* as the originary effacement of the proper name. From the moment that the proper name is erased in a system, there is writing, there is a ‘subject’ from the moment that this obliteration of the proper is produced, that is to say [there is writing] from the first appearing of the proper and from the first dawn of language. This proposition is universal in essence and can be produced *a priori*. How one passes from this *a priori* to the determination of empirical facts is a question that one cannot answer in general here. First because, by definition, there is no general answer to a question of this form.⁷

“Writing,” in the broad sense of the action implied by Derrida, precedes and determines speech, necessarily. “Writing” is of the movement of “supplementarity”, namely, the substitution of one set of signifiers by another in the process of articulation and formation of words and other signs.⁸ There are two main direct

⁶ *Gramm.*, p. 107.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 245. “It is the *power of substituting one organ for another, of articulating space and time, sight and voice, hand and spirit, it is this faculty of supplementarity* which is the true ‘origin’ – or nonorigin – of languages” (p. 241).

consequences of this doctrine. First, our attempt to understand concepts is always hindered by the arbitrary (metaphorical or mimetic) formation of words: the supposed correspondence between the original voicing and the real object is a chimera. We cannot really speak of an *original* (proper) word because the first words were the product of an on-going articulation – precisely of what Derrida calls “writing” – that pre-determines the articulation of the word itself and, thus, is beyond the will or intention of the subject. Also, there cannot be a logical correspondence between a word and the idea (intended as a sensation or perception) because the real meaning of all speech cannot be retrieved. The original meaning of something is lost forever in what Derrida describes as the true origin of language, namely, this endless process of substitution that started with the language of gestures.⁹ Therefore, no matter how general and consensual a notion becomes, we have no means to take for granted its correspondence to reality – in Derrida’s terms, we have no way to tell whether the name is indeed *proper*. Accordingly, there cannot be knowledge, philosophical or scientific, of the specific nature of man, i.e. of “man,” of “nature,” or of human nature. Not only it is man who makes his own “nature,” but also that “know-how” vanishes in the process. If, as Derrida says, we have no means to pass from the “*a priori* to the determination of empirical facts,” if there is an insurmountable gap between what he describes as “the general conditions of possibility” – i.e. the simple “essence or energy of *graphein*” as the original force behind all language – and the factual or empirical data behind words and concepts,

⁹ Ibid., pp. 234-5, 238-9. “There is never a painting of the thing itself and first of all because there is no thing itself” (p. 292).

then all general notions are mere conventions, that is to say, never general enough.¹⁰ From a philosophical perspective, we should heed the fact that language and reason must be understood and ultimately articulated within the realm of pure rhetoric, a realm whose references are entirely circumstantial and, by definition, never universal.

The second consequence is that “no reality or concept would correspond to the expression ‘society without writing.’”¹¹ Hence it is not speech, as Rousseau says in the first paragraph of the *Essay*, the first social institution, but “writing.” If this is true, speech cannot be the main difference between human beings and other animals: we can conceive of human societies without speech (the first ones), but not without “writing.” Indeed, it is true that for Rousseau the language of gestures (which Derrida assimilates to “writing”), being easier and less dependent on conventions than vocal language, precedes the latter.¹² But Rousseau is not explicit about whether we can already speak of *human beings* in societies where language is gestural. Left on Derrida’s terms, the opening theme of the *Essay*, namely, the difference between human beings and other animals, is irrelevant to Rousseau.¹³

With these two consequences in mind, let us go back to Lévi-Strauss. In the example used by Derrida, the chapter ‘A Writing Lesson’ in *Tristes Tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss narrates his experiences with a South-American tribe. Some of his

¹⁰ Cf. Derrida’s doctrine with Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, mainly Book III, ch. 2 and 3.

¹¹ *Gramm.*, p. 109

¹² Rousseau, *Essai sur l’origine des langues*, Gallimard, *Pléiade* ed. (1995), ch.1, p. 376. Henceforth, EOL.

¹³ We will show that the only way to confront this theme on Rousseau’s own terms is to read the *Essay* in light of the *Second Discourse*.

observations would, as he claims, corroborate Rousseau's theory of the original goodness of man. In a passage quoted by Derrida, Lévi-Strauss tells us of the innate innocence and goodness of the Nambikwara, in a language that could be easily mistaken for Rousseau's:

[Their] misery is enlivened by laughing whispers. Their embraces are those of couples possessed by a longing for a lost oneness; their caresses are in no wise disturbed by the footfall of a stranger. In one and all there may be glimpsed a great sweetness of nature, a profound nonchalance, an animal satisfaction as ingenuous as it is charming, and, beneath all this, something that can be recognized as one of the most moving and authentic manifestations of human tenderness.¹⁴

Yet no matter how Rousseauian the passage might sound, Lévi-Strauss is not Rousseau; indeed one can claim that he "adapts" Rousseau's account of human goodness to justify his own ideology, as Derrida would say, his own anthropological dream. He does it by pinpointing the precise moment – the anthropological fact – that marks the fall of man into the long path of his corruption. This fact is the appearance of writing.

The primary function of writing, Lévi-Strauss says, as a means of communication, was to facilitate the enslavement of other human beings.¹⁵

This is what interests Derrida in 'The Writing Lesson.' Lévi-Strauss claims that the Nambikwara are innocent and good because they are a society without writing.¹⁶ And the lesson which the chapter talks about refers to the experience of the first effects of writing in a society without writing. The *amour-propre* produced by Lévi-

¹⁴ *Gramm.*, p. 117 (Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, translation by J. Russell, New York (1961), p. 285).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 292.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

Strauss' experiments with the Indians confirms his theory that corruption or oppression starts with the written language, and that written languages, as all languages, must have started suddenly in society.¹⁷

However, how can one deny that the "writing lesson," which refers only to Lévi-Strauss' *own* introduction of the written language to the Nambikwara, was an artificial interference? And in this case, why should it be used as a parameter? In spite of Derrida's apparently disproportional critique of the author of *Tristes Tropiques*, he is right to say that it is "the anthropologist who comes to disturb order and natural peace."¹⁸ Conversely, Derrida wants to disturb Lévi-Strauss' romantic dream by denouncing Lévi-Strauss' presence. Writing is not the source of political domination, enslavement, or *amour-propre*, because it denotes a broader action than the one conventionally associated with the term.¹⁹ This broader action, "the play of difference," coordinates the development of language. As such, writing is not an isolated fact that appears suddenly, as an accident in the course of history, but, on the contrary, it is the very mechanism that punctuates the history of languages. Therefore, the oppression and violence that Lévi-Strauss sees as the consequence of the appearance of writing are, for Derrida (albeit in a different and broader context) the mark itself of the continuous obliteration of the proper produced by *graphein*: every "writing" gesture is violent.²⁰ If writing is thought of in this elementary sense,

¹⁷ "[L]anguage could only have been born suddenly. Things could not have begun to signify progressively." Quoted by Derrida, p. 121, from Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction à l'oeuvre de Marcel Mauss*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

¹⁹ "The narrow sense of linear and phonetic notation" (p. 109).

²⁰ Cf. *Gramm.*, pp. 111-112, and 135.

namely, as the production and obliteration of self-presence, of *property*, or of an ego that would be “incapable of appearing to itself except in its own disappearance”²¹ – like the little Indian girl in Lévi-Strauss’ incident of the battle of names²² – then it is simply a mistake to describe the Nambikwara as a society without writing, violence, and a certain consciousness of the proper that their “writing” obliterates.

Lévi-Strauss is guilty of going against the two consequences implied by Derrida’s doctrine of writing, and in this sense, Derrida is correct in his diatribe. Lévi-Strauss must have language and writing start discretely, in different moments, as accidents, in order “to restore the status of authentic language, human and fully signifying language, to all languages practiced by *peoples whom one nevertheless continues to describe as ‘without writing.’*”²³ He must identify the precise moment of change in order to justify the precise meaning of concepts attributed to the *original* state of human beings such as, mainly, the natural sweetness, tenderness, or goodness of savage man. Finally, he must also reduce the complex task of explaining the origin of evil in human society by identifying writing as its singular cause. All this is denounced by Derrida as evidence of Lévi-Strauss’ essentialism. By praising “the range of the voice” while discrediting “writing,” Lévi-Strauss endorses a metaphysics of presence that, in the terms of deconstruction, is ultimately the image of his own voice (of the self-presence of his speech) and his own romantic dogmas about human nature.²⁴

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

²² *Tristes Tropiques*, p. 270.

²³ *Gramm.*, p. 120 (italics in the original).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

Lévi-Strauss is just Derrida's long introduction to Rousseau, whom he believed engaged in the same sort of essentialism.²⁵ Rousseau's literary language and mistrust of the speech of the *Philosophes* (hence his alleged mistrust of living presence) might lead one to think, erroneously according to Derrida, that he had broken with the philosophical tradition to which he belongs.

Rousseau condemns writing as destruction of presence and disease of speech (...) [*but,*] he rehabilitates it to the extent that it promises the reappropriation of that of which speech allowed itself to be dispossessed.²⁶

Derrida uses Rousseau as a foil for his theory of writing, a use that, in our view, pre-determines his reading and compromises his appreciation of Rousseau's philosophy as a whole. That said, both Derrida's and de Man's critiques raise crucial questions and can therefore be used as introduction to the origin of human languages in Rousseau.

There is a tension within deconstruction (more precisely, between Derrida and de Man) about the status of the written language used by Rousseau. It concerns whether Rousseau's writings were meant, as Derrida wants, as a sort of revelation of unmediated presence, "the reappropriation of that of which speech allowed itself to be dispossessed;" or whether Rousseau would actually concur with Derrida about the merely poetic (i.e. conventional) character of any writing, his own included, the position defended by de Man. We must note that the question refers *only* to whether or not Rousseau was aware of the conventionality of the concepts that he employs and of the ambiguities related to these concepts. Deconstruction does not consider

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 301.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

the possibility of whether Rousseau was not only aware of the ambiguities, but could also justify them without subscribing to a metaphysics of presence.²⁷

In the next paragraphs we will introduce the main difficulties with Derrida's interpretation. First, we will consider the fact that Rousseau's philosophical rhetoric is not taken into account by Derrida, and thus that Rousseau's texts are not examined accordingly. Then, we will consider Derrida's problematic interpretation of the metaphorical origin of speech in Rousseau. We will also introduce the relation between consciousness, language and knowledge, central in our next chapters, and illustrate a more general but fundamental claim: the doctrinarian monism of Derrida's theory of the infinite chain of supplementarity is simply incompatible with a thought that presupposes human beings having the principle of their action in themselves, and their freedom as what makes them different from other animals.

2. The way in which deconstruction thinks of both language and the human faculties related to language prohibits from the outset a serious consideration of how we can know and give meaning to things: if, as *the* instruments of philosophy, human language and reason fall apart when confronted with the ultimate questions (e.g. the original meaning of human things), then "meanings" must be explained as having an arbitrary instead of a natural foundation. All philosophy is poetry.²⁸

²⁷ We will illustrate how this happens in chapter 2.

²⁸ This is different from the affirmation that philosophy should or must be poetical. If all philosophy is poetry, there are no truths, only dreams.

Derrida's main claims are built upon this assumption, which apparently no experience, evidence or intuition was enough to shake.²⁹

With such a starting point, Derrida seems to forget that the opinion that philosophy is a mistake, and that only poetry (or "difference") can keep us honest, is the very tissue of the first philosophical debates. Let us just advance one point about this basic opposition. Western philosophy (understood here in its Socratic tradition) also seems to start with certain assumptions or hypotheses. We must first believe in the possibility of philosophy, despite what appearances might tell us; if philosophy is possible, in order to become possible we have to turn the *whole* of our faculties towards it; and in order for it to be possible for one individual, it must be tested with and ultimately be possible for other individuals as well. Without expanding on this generality, it seems safe to affirm the following. Contrary to the point of departure adopted by deconstruction³⁰ (indeed, contrary to all radical empiricist inspiration), these hypotheses are not limited by a purely epistemological definition of knowledge, i.e. the possibility to articulate knowledge in a universal rational language. Instead, the hypotheses presuppose the suspension of judgment about the extent of the power of the very instrument that is usually taken for granted in both our thinking and our communication of ideas, i.e. discursive rationality. In their quest for the best, philosophers are always in the precarious situation of having to deal, on the one hand, with the insufficiency of language and reason (our dianoetic powers), and on the other, with their necessity to test their insights and doubts. It is at this juncture that the question of how to write philosophy appears, i.e. of how to

²⁹ Cf. *Gramm.*, p. 108.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.162.

have an efficient method and a safe rhetoric on discourses of this kind. It is in light of this initial situation that Rousseau's critique of writing in his *Essay on the Origin of Languages* – a critique denounced by Derrida as absurd – should be interpreted.³¹

Derrida conditions all his discourse to his conviction – deduced probably from his assumptions about human intelligence and understanding – that no philosophical knowledge is possible. For him, the question of “how to write philosophy” has been, since Plato, a mask to the question of “how to write the ‘philosopher’s self-presence.’”³² Writing only becomes evil as philosophical writing, the sort that Rousseau allegedly attacks and perpetrates at the same time, the contradiction pointed out by Derrida.³³ Philosophy is vanity and Rousseau should have known better.

Derrida reduces or equates Western philosophy to dogmatism without considering whether what he perceived as blind essentialism should be assessed *after* a contemplation of the philosophical hypotheses and the ensuing questions of method and rhetoric dismissed by him. In order to better explain this claim, we need to go over the main assumption behind Derrida's thesis that “writing” undercuts all forms of identity, including the alleged identities (intentions) of philosophical

³¹ Rousseau stresses the potential of writing of “glorifying” the errors implicit in human communication. What Rousseau sees as error, Derrida sees the unstoppable work of supplementarity, or simply, *difference*.

³² “Philosophy is, within writing, nothing but this movement of writing as effacement of the signifier and the desire of presence restored, of being, signified in its brilliance and glory. The evolution and properly philosophic economy of writing go therefore in the direction of the effacing of the signifier, whether it take the form of forgetting or repression. (...) The concept of repression is thus, at least as much as that of forgetting, the product of a philosophy (of meaning)” (p. 286). See also p. 160.

³³ Cf. *Gramm.*, pp. 144 ff.

writers.³⁴ Echoing the erosion of consciousness and the valorization of the unconscious as the “real” seat of knowledge started by Nietzsche, Derrida’s critique of the philosopher’s self-presence can be seen, first and foremost, as nothing but that, namely, a critique of “the myth of consciousness”:

Speech and the consciousness of speech – that is to say, consciousness simply as self-presence – are the phenomenon of an auto-affection lived as suppression of difference. That *phenomenon*, that presumed suppression of difference, that lived reduction of the opacity of the signifier, are the origin of what is called *present*. That which is not subjected to the process of difference is *present*.³⁵

Rousseau is Derrida’s main target because he was the representative of the Western tradition who had apparently tried harder to overcome the metaphysics of presence. Yet, Derrida seems to believe that it was impossible for Rousseau to achieve such a feat without having access to the linguistic revolution started by Nietzsche. Hence, Rousseau’s position is necessarily ambivalent; although without great conviction, he participates in the metaphysics of presence to the extent that he worships its central dogma: the “myth of consciousness.”

By not confronting Rousseau’s rhetoric, particularly in the analyses of *The Essay on the Origin of Languages* and the *Second Discourse*, Derrida misses the peculiar sense in which consciousness is the distinctive human trait for Rousseau. According to him, to inquire about the origin of (human) language is to inquire about the origin of humanity, an inquiry that is already as a project a manifestation of self-presence. Derrida takes to the limit the notion that to question continuity is to fall in the trap of essentialism, and in the manner of the materialists in

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 160, 246, and 286.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

Rousseau's time, Condillac in particular, in Derrida human beings differ from beasts only by degree.

For Derrida, the development of human language occurs with the needs imposed by various circumstances; nothing inherently human – namely, a unique human capacity – would have worked as the motor of that development. He suggests that, on this matter, Rousseau stands in permanent contradiction for saying what he did not wish to say.³⁶ Rousseau says that language starts with the passions (thus that it had an inherently human origin) for being blinded by the desire to affirm his own self-presence and to efface the unbearable fact of the “always-already.”³⁷ Indeed Rousseau says in the *Essay* that “it seems that need dictated the first gestures, while the passions wrung forth the first words.”³⁸ The apparent contradiction of this quote is at the crux of Derrida's thesis that writing precedes speech. He cannot reconcile this sentence with the opening line of the book: “Speech distinguishes man among animals.”³⁹ Thus, for Derrida, it makes no sense that the difference between gestural

³⁶ *Gramm.*, pp. 200-1, 215.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 201, 215, 245.

³⁸ EOL, ch. 2, p.380.

³⁹ As in Rousseau's *Discours sur l'origine et les fondemens de l'inegalité parmi les hommes*, or the *Second Discourse* (Henceforth, SD. We will refer to the translation by V. Gourevitch, in *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, Cambridge, 1997, followed by the page number in parenthesis of the *Pléiade* edition, Gallimard, 1964), the first impression in Rousseau's *Essay* is that he follows Locke, who says that human beings differ from animals by having the power of abstraction and of general ideas (cf. Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, II, 11, §11). However, because Locke commits Hobbes' mistake, namely, the supposition of “some sort of society already established among the inventors of language” (SD, p. 145 (146)), his argument about how human beings pass from particular to general ideas is contradictory, “since this unanimous agreement must have been motivated, and since speech seems to have been very necessary in order to establish the use of speech” (SD p. 147 (148-9)). For Locke, human beings are

and vocal language amounts to the difference between animal and human life. Rousseau's correlation between, on the one hand, needs and gesture, and on the other, passion and speech must be wrong, for the supplementarity of speech does not denote a different movement than the one that made the first gestures appear within the species. Language appears as supplement, difference, articulation, or "writing;" speech is simply a phase in a more extensive and continuous flux.

Rousseau apparently accepts and denies, at the same time, that speech has a metaphorical origin:

As man's first motives for speaking were of the passions, his first expressions were tropes. Figurative language was the first to be born. Proper meaning was discovered last. One calls things by their true name only when one sees them in their true form. At first only poetry was spoken; there was no hint of reasoning until much later.

But then, he immediately gives us a counterexample:

However, I sense the reader stopping me at this point to ask how an expression can be figurative before it has a proper meaning, since the figure consists only of a transference of meaning. I agree with that. But in order to understand what I mean, it is necessary to substitute

superior to beasts because their capacity to generalize ideas conduces to the advancement of knowledge and the progress of the species. However, if one questions this progress achieved through the development of human languages, i.e. if one eliminates the optimism about both reason and the consequences of the advancement of knowledge, the relation of superiority is inverted (see SD, Note 13, originally marked "*b."). This is the situation faced by both Rousseau and Derrida. But different than Derrida, Rousseau questions, as we will see below, Locke's doctrine that *all* languages, animal and human, start with *particular ideas* received from the senses. Speech is what distinguishes human beings from other animals – and as such it is the mark of human language – because, as Locke points out (*Essay*, II, 11, §§9, 10, 11), the human voice is the organ through which we start to express general ideas or abstractions. But if human and animal languages had the same source, i.e. sensation, what would have made human beings leave their animal condition? Rousseau must explain how the *first words* of the first individuals of the species expressed already *general ideas*, namely, how human language *starts with* assumptions (or knowledge) about the general.

the *idea* which the passion presents to us for the word which we transpose. For one only transposes words because one also transposes ideas. *Otherwise figurative language would signify nothing.*⁴⁰

Rousseau says that speech is engendered by passions and that reason only appeared much later. But then he says that our passions express ideas, and thus that the capacity to have ideas must be prior (or immediately prior) to speech. What Rousseau says here is that speech is engendered by ideas. The question then is about the formation and the status of such ideas.⁴¹

Rousseau illustrates what he means by saying that in that initial situation a savage man's first naming acts depended on a triangular relation between a passion (e.g. fear), the idea of the passion, and the idea of the object arousing the passion

⁴⁰ EOL, ch. 3, p. 381 (my italics).

⁴¹ Again, Rousseau is not simply following Locke's doctrine that the original of all ideas comes from either "SENSATION" or from the "*Perception of the Operations of our own Minds*," which Locke calls "internal Sense" or "REFLECTION" (*Essay*, II, 1, mainly §4, and III, 1 and 2). Whereas what Locke says about the original of ideas presupposes human beings as always having the capacity for these operations, Rousseau dares to inquire, albeit rather indirectly, about the origin of the very idea of reflection and of the operations of the mind related to that power, of which the passion of fear is one example. Discovering what this "internal sense" is and how it became a power in human beings, is tantamount to the quest indicated in the Preface of the *Second Discourse*, namely, self-knowledge (see Rousseau's second note to his book at the beginning of his Preface, where he quotes the Lockean Buffon on the importance of our "internal sense"). Rousseau's conceptual difference with Locke and the Lockean Buffon is the following. For Locke the operations of the mind can *only* be employed upon "Impressions made on our Senses by outward Objects" (II, 1, §23); there is no thinking *before* these stimuli from outside, and on this regard, "*Understanding is merely passive*" (II, 1, §25). For Rousseau, who, as we will see below, adopts a different starting point than Locke, the first object of reflection of the first individuals of the species did not come from outside. The first human beings left the state of animality *on their own*: their own selves were their first object of contemplation. This capacity of the first human beings to have ideas of their own implies that their understanding was not merely passive, i.e. at the mercy of externality, and that their choices were not necessarily pre-determined by circumstances. Cf. also what Rousseau says about the "operations of the Mind" in the SD, p. 144 (146).

(e.g. another individual perceived as bigger and stronger). The first name (*nom*) or sound *chosen* to denote the object expressed actually the passion aroused by the object. In the *Second Discourse* Rousseau says:

the first words (*mots*) used by men (*les hommes*) had in their Mind (*Esprit*) (...) the meaning (*sens*) of an entire proposition.

The word (*mot*) “giants” was therefore more than a mere name (*nom*). It meant *fear* to its inventor (fear of other individuals perceived as bigger and stronger). In a second moment,⁴² the object previously named “giant” is recognized as another man simply, and another name is invented to denote their resemblance, for instance, the name “man;” similarly, the first meaning of “giant” is dropped and the word is finally used as an adjective to denote an actual bigger and stronger individual.⁴³

The enigmatic character of this passage of the *Essay*, as well as of the related one in the *Second Discourse*, is clearly deliberate. Let us try to assess what is at stake. If we have ideas before we have words, and if the first words are expressions of those ideas, then there is at least one sense in which proper names would have existed before or in contiguity with the first figurative words. In Rousseau’s example, “giant” is a *figurative* name for the false impression caused by the stranger, but, at the same time, it refers to the idea of fear felt by its author and, in this sense, it is the proper name of that idea. Therefore, we can affirm, as Rousseau does, that the first language was figurative *only if* we accept his caveat about ideas preceding and putting in motion the whole thing. However, and this is the point distorted by Derrida, it is not the coordination between ideas and words that is at

⁴² “after many experiences” refers here to the experiences along the course of the long history of the species.

⁴³ Cf. SD, p. 147 (149).

stake here, a blunder that any reader of Locke would have avoided.⁴⁴ What is at stake for Rousseau is instead something apparently inconceivable for Derrida: if consciousness became an innate power to human beings, so did their capacity to compare, acknowledge, and refer to their passions and faculties – in other words, their capacity to have ideas about these things.

On this matter, let us broach an interpretation that will find support in the next chapters. Rousseau must have thought of the formation of the first ideas (the ideas preceding speech) in two ways: one, as the result of the distancing from the oneness with nature (animal state) and the transformations of self-love in the first individuals; the other, as the immediate unfolding of elementary self-awareness (or reflection) into the individual's awareness of his instincts. One is the result of how the first individuals perceived themselves in relation to others and, as such, it is related to the sense of the imagination described by Derrida,⁴⁵ the other relates to the growing awareness or *acknowledgement* of not only their limited existence, but also of their bodily and mental powers previously enacted as pure animal instincts;

⁴⁴ This initial correspondence (or relation of property) between the idea and its expression disappears with the first developments of language, which were characterized by errors in the communication of the ideas. In this sense, to affirm that Rousseau defends the notion of a correspondence between ideas and words is to misunderstand his point.

⁴⁵ Derrida acknowledges that Rousseau speaks of imagination as the active faculty and the passage on imagination (*Gramm.*, pp. 182 ff.) is perhaps the most interesting in his book. However, he describes imagination in terms of a mechanistic logic of desire: "If we desire beyond our power of satisfaction, the origin of that surplus and of that difference is named imagination" (p. 185). "(...) all language in general springs forth when passionate desire exceeds physical need, when imagination is *awakened*, which awakens pity and gives movement to the supplementary chain" (p. 217). See also in p. 187 how for Derrida "the entire problematic of power and the act" is subsumed under his "logic of the supplement." Cf. with SD, 140-1 (141-2).

here, imagination becomes the active faculty of *foresight*, intuition or, simply, intelligence. Thus, through imagination human beings changed their instincts, by corrupting them in one sense and perfecting them in another.

Due to the profound influence of Lockean empiricism on Eighteenth century thought, the notion that some faculties and ideas are innate to human beings was not seriously considered by most representatives of the French Enlightenment. Locke uses children, namely, human beings in their current constitution, as the paradigm for his arguments.⁴⁶ For Rousseau, however, children are a bad starting point because they represent human beings already having been profoundly altered with respect to the situation of the first individuals of the species. For Locke, that no ideas are innate to human beings is shown by the incapacity of infants to enact their potentialities, needing for that the external stimulus of society. Rousseau sees this incapacity rather as an effect of the corruption of the senses produced by the “progress” of the species, although he states that, for obvious reasons, there cannot be an empirical proof for this argument.

A good deal of uncertainty surrounds the *main fact* which serves as the basis for Mr. Locke’s entire reasoning; For in order to know whether, as he claims, in the pure state of Nature the woman is commonly with child again and brings forth too a new birth long before the former is able to shift for himself, would require experiments which Locke has surely not performed and which no one is in a position to perform. (...) Regarding Children, there are good many reasons to believe that their strength and their organs develop later among us than they did in the primitive state of which I speak. The original weakness they owe to their Parents’ constitution, the care taken to swaddle and cramp all their limbs, the softness in which they are reared, perhaps the use of another milk than their Mother’s, everything thwarts and delays in them the first progress of Nature. (...) Locke’s reasoning therefore collapses, and all of that

⁴⁶ Cf. Locke’s *Essay*, II, 1 and III, 3.

Philosopher's Dialectic has not protected him against the error Hobbes and others committed [i.e. the presupposition of 'some sort of society already established among the inventors of language', p. 145 (146)]. They had to explain a fact of the state of Nature, that is to say of a state where men lived isolated, and where a given man had no *motive* whatsoever to stay by some other given man, nor perhaps did men have any *motive* to stay by one another, which is far worse.⁴⁷

Understanding Rousseau's questioning of "the main fact which serves as the basis for Locke's entire reasoning" is the key to the *Second Discourse*. Without ever making it entirely explicit, Rousseau superimposes the two ways in which we can understand human beings at their origins: the individual as an infant and the pre-rational situation of our pre-human ancestors. Although (or because) this distinction holds the key to Rousseau's most basic metaphysical assumptions, he left entirely to the reader the task of sorting out its consequences, the most important of which being the opposition between a state in which the human faculties are from the outset present structurally or instinctively in the individual (infant); and a state in which consciousness and the faculties that ensue from it are only nascent in the species. The main difficulty in the *Second Discourse* is to understand how these new "instincts" (if we can speak of consciousness and the new faculties in this manner), which cannot, as Derrida suggests, be considered as merely the natural response to a concrete need of adaptation, develop and are perfected.

We can only speculate about whether Rousseau's cryptic treatment of this matter reflects the caution of not being immediately dismissed for dualism, idealism, or mysticism by those of whom he thought as his main readers. How to confront the principles established in Locke's *Essay* without either being ridiculed

⁴⁷ SD, note 12, originally marked "10", third remark (my italics). On the original marking of the notes, see the English edition, p. 370.

by or engaging in an endless and fruitless debate against these readers? Whatever Rousseau's reasons were, when we take into account the aforementioned distinction, there is nothing in his thought that situates him in "an entire naive philosophy of the idea-sign."⁴⁸ Thus, lest we completely misunderstand what Rousseau "says without saying" about our origins, the distinction in question – which is not taken into account by Derrida or, for that matter, by most commentators of Rousseau – needs to be considered in every step of both the *Second Discourse* and the *Essay*. To confront the apparent ambivalences concerning the origin of languages, we must have in mind the full extent of what Rousseau means by the different constitutions (interior and exterior) that the first individuals of the human species had in comparison to human beings in their current internal and external constitution.⁴⁹

With this in mind, let us turn to a text that lies at the heart of Derrida's argument, the third chapter of *Essay*, entitled 'That the First Language Must Have Been Figurative.' Rousseau ends this chapter with the following statement:

Since the illusory image presented by passion showed itself first, the language answering to it was invented first; subsequently it became metaphorical when the enlightened mind recognized its original error

⁴⁸ By following Rousseau's hints we easily realize that his ideas must not be confounded with those of Lévi-Strauss. On this matter of the value of signs we should wonder whether it is not actually Derrida who is situated by the inverted version of the dogma with which he charges Rousseau: a naive philosophy of the *sign-idea*. See *Gramm.*, p. 277.

⁴⁹ We must have in mind *evolution*. See Rousseau's subtle introduction to this question in SD, pp. 124-5 (122-3) and 134-5 (134-5). On the concept of evolution in Rousseau, consult mainly R. Wokler, *Rousseau on Society, Politics, Music and Language*, chapter 3 ('The *Discours sur l'inégalité* and its sources'), New York (1987); and R.D. Masters, *The Political Philosophy of Rousseau*, ch. 3-4, Princeton (1976).

and came to use expressions of that first language only when moved by the same passions as had produced it.⁵⁰

Technically, or from a grammatological point of view, there is absolutely no difference between the illusory image and a metaphor. The difference implied by Rousseau consists instead in a different state of consciousness regarding the two naming acts implied in the chapter. The naming act of the primitive human being (an individual at the inception of the human species) consisted of the error or the illusion of transposing his idea of fear to the idea of the object that triggered his fear. Rousseau does not call the first language metaphorical because a transposition (metaphor) of ideas is, when seen from outside, literally an error. Again, the naming act itself is the direct vocal expression of the idea of the passion and *as such* it has a proper sense; at the same time, the transposition of the idea of fear was not intentional and can be known as an error only retrospectively. Thus although the first words were not metaphors in the way we, enlightened minds, generally understand the concept, they still had a figurative or metaphorical quality.

Language becomes *assumedly* metaphorical only when the newly enlightened mind has learned about the error of mistaking one idea for another, and has found a way to refer to the idea of his passion without making that mistake, namely, by *consciously* using a metaphor *of words*. From the point of view of consciousness, it is the reversal of the original situation. This is what we believe to be condensed in the last sentence of Rousseau's chapter. After many experiences – which should be considered *errors* only from the point of view of the imperfect communication

⁵⁰ EOL, ch. 3, p. 254 (382). Whenever reference also in parenthesis (*Pléiade*), translation by V. Gourevitch, in *The Discourses and Other Political Writings*,

attempted by the first inventors – and a very long time into the development of the human species, the idea of fear stops being simply transposed to the ideas of the objects that can trigger the passion (such as a stranger, a beast or a thunder). The awareness that the passion in question is different from the object associated with it makes a direct reference to the passion problematic. The idea of the passion stops obeying the order of particular references: it becomes abstract and nameless. It becomes a general idea, namely, an idea believed to exist to all the participants of the linguistic community. Expressions regarded as having been originally associated with fear (such as e.g. “stranger,” “beast” or “thunder”) are now used to refer indirectly, or metaphorically, to the passion. Thus, language becomes *metaphorical* only when human beings become *conscious* of the general nature of their passions, a situation that according to Rousseau must have been separated from that of the first inventors by “thousands of Centuries.”⁵¹

Derrida’s demotion of consciousness, his notion that “writing” (as the constant movement of the chain of supplementarity) precedes both speech *and* consciousness,⁵² and that for this reason we can never know the true intention of an author, blind him to the irony in Rousseau’s text, especially in what concerns the perspective of the “enlightened mind.” We will see that what opposes Rousseau and Derrida is not fundamentally different from what opposes Rousseau and Condillac – even if Derrida takes his distance from Condillac as well. According to Derrida’s

⁵¹ “milliers de Siécles” (“incorrect” accentuation and caps in the original). SD, p. 144 (146). Rousseau’s distinction in this chapter between “figurative” and “metaphorical” language should help us understand later the puzzling passage in the *Second Discourse* about proper names and general ideas.

⁵² *Gramm.*, p. 166.

view, namely, that figurative language signifies nothing, we can only say that the passions might have “wrung forth the first words” if we have no illusions regarding the intentions and self-awareness of the subject of these passions. Needs, modified by the nascent imagination and ensuing passions, become *desires*. But the motivation behind desire (i.e. its meaning) obeys a chaotic, unconscious, and as such, metaphorical process. Hence, whatever originates with the passions is still, for Derrida, within the order of external necessities. This is precisely what Rousseau denies when in a crucial passage of the *Second Discourse* he says that the specific trait of man is his capacity to *act freely* and to recognize this freedom.⁵³ While Rousseau depicts the *cognitive power* associated to consciousness as the mark of humanity, Derrida moves in the opposite direction and demotes consciousness to a fundamentally negative position, whereby any cognitive process associated with it is seen under the sign of myth and self-deception.

[T]here has never been anything but writing; there have never been anything but supplements, substitute significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the ‘real’ supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace and from an invocation of the supplement, etc. And thus to infinity, for we have read, *in the text*, that the absolute present, Nature, that which words like ‘real mother’ name, have always already escaped, have never

⁵³ “It is, then, not so much the understanding that constitutes the specific difference between man and other animals, as it is his property of being a free agent. Nature commands every animal and the Beast obeys. Man experiences the same impression, but recognizes himself free to acquiesce or to resist; and it is mainly in the consciousness of this freedom that the spirituality of his soul exhibits itself.” SD, pp. 140-1 (141-2).

existed; that what opens meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence.⁵⁴

Derrida's doctrines that consciousness is a myth and that therefore "there is nothing outside the text"⁵⁵ stop him from realizing that in spite of what an isolated passage might indicate, for Rousseau, neither *need* nor *passion* can explain what brought mankind out of the natural state of dispersion. In and of themselves, need and passion can only explain individual actions *qua* re-actions to externality or to ("actions" by) other individuals; and human beings are not, like other animals, purely passive or re-active creatures. The experiences and circumstances that helped trigger the rudiments of reflection in the first individuals of the species helped them also to break with their previously pre-conditioned instinctive commands: it was consciousness that powered the first *individual* human actions.

3.

Rousseau could not think this writing, that takes place *before* and *within* speech. To the extent that he belonged to the metaphysics of presence, he *dreamed* of the simple exteriority of death to life, evil to good, representation to presence, signifier to signified, representer to represented, mask to face, writing to speech. But all such oppositions are irreducibly rooted in that metaphysics. Using them, one can only operate by reversals, that is to say by confirmations. The supplement is none of these terms. It is especially not more a signifier than a

⁵⁴ *Gramm.*, p. 159. "Even if there is never a pure signified, there are different relationships as to that which, from the signifier, is *presented* as the irreducible stratum of the signified. For example, the philosophical text, although it is in fact always written, includes, precisely as its philosophical specificity, the project of effacing itself in the face of the signified content which it transports and in general teaches. Reading should be aware of this project, even if, in last analysis, it intends to expose the project's failure. The entire history of texts, and within it the history of literary forms in the West, should be studied from this point of view" (p. 160).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

signified, a representer than a presence, a writing than a speech. None of the terms in this series can, being comprehended within it, dominate the economy of difference or supplementarity. Rousseau's *dream* consisted of making the supplement enter metaphysics by force.⁵⁶

At the end of his book, Derrida does not include *consciousness* in the terms of his series; he leaves out the crucial opposition. Is it not the demotion of consciousness that makes possible the argument that “writing” precedes speech? When Rousseau says that “speech distinguishes man among other animals” he means that a specifically human language did not exist before the appearance of consciousness and the capacities that for him define human nature:

It would seem (...) that the invention of *the art of communicating our ideas* is a function no so much of the organs we use in such communication as of a faculty peculiar to man (...).⁵⁷

For Rousseau, the development of human languages started *with* the development of consciousness, the conventionality of the first properly human signs (speech) appeared with the *intentional* act of the first reflective beings, and it is this intention or the reflected idea behind the intention that is at stake, *regardless of the flawed communication* that, as we saw, issues from those first attempts to communicate ideas vocally. Rousseau acknowledges that the language of gestures precedes vocal language by being “easier and less dependent on conventions;” however, although gestures might be sufficient for a communication based on the immediacy of needs – whereby they can serve as means for an un-reflected and instinctive response to a situation – they were not sufficient as a means to express the ideas that appeared

⁵⁶ *Gramm.*, p. 315.

⁵⁷ EOL, p. 251 (379). My italics.

with reflection: “our gestures signify nothing but our natural restlessness.”⁵⁸ Whereas pre-human or animal language depends on the organs employed in the communication, the art of communicating ideas depends solely on the faculty responsible for the existence of those ideas in the first place. Speech is the mark of human beings because the voice is the first organ used by that faculty. It is the organ through which the first individuals of the species expressed their first ideas by transposing, albeit inadvertently, the idea they had of a passion to the idea of an external object.

For Rousseau, it is not “consonants and articulation” that mainly distinguishes words from random sounds.⁵⁹ Consonants and articulation (“writing”) are just the face or the form of the flawed communication that takes place with the first ideas. Phenomenologically, they might seem like the main elements of speech, but like speech they cannot precede what causes them. It is here that, at least from a Rousseauian perspective, Derrida’s law of supplementarity falls apart. Supplementarity is not “the true ‘origin’ – or nonorigin – of languages,”⁶⁰ because for Rousseau “the faculty peculiar to man”⁶¹ does not consist of “the power of substituting one organ for another,”⁶² but of substituting one idea for another by means of the different organs at the individual’s disposal. The consideration of the cognitive nature of these ideas and of the individual’s relation to himself escapes Derrida’s logic of supplementarity (or “play of difference”), which is focused only

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 249 (376). See also SD, 146-7 (148-9).

⁵⁹ *Gramm.*, p. 315.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

⁶¹ EOL, p. 251 (379).

⁶² *Gramm.*, p. 241.

on linguistics and which responds to the stern belief that there cannot be anything outside language (or outside the “play of difference”) such as the knowledge of what one wants, feels, or thinks.

Derrida’s *true* thesis is not about the precedence of “writing” or supplementarity over speech, but about “the myth of consciousness” and the view that we cannot speak of human origins or nature because we have no means to discourse about the ontological difference between human beings and brutes.⁶³ Derrida misses the extent of the questions behind the philosophical rhetoric used in the *Second Discourse*; in particular, he misses the meaning of the ambiguity in Rousseau’s account of the origin of languages: on the one hand, the fact that human beings start, through elementary reflection, with the intuitive or instinctive knowledge of the ideas they form of themselves, their passions and their powers; on the other, that the same awareness that kindles these ideas leads to a communication with others (sociability) that is from the outset marred by error.⁶⁴

To sum up and conclude, against what Derrida thinks, the ambivalences in Rousseau’s text always have a purpose. It is true that Rousseau’s discourses are about “origins,” “nature,” “being” and other metaphysical subjects; and it is also true that he often gives us the impression of treating these subjects in line with at

⁶³ At the same time, even if Derrida were correct in his metaphysical assumptions, the precedence of “writing” over speech would not be a matter of contention and, as a thesis, would have a questionable originality. From that angle, his argument would be a sort of Thrasymachian description of the inevitably self-deceptive and dreamy character of human existence.

⁶⁴ On the fact that human logos can err as the difference between human beings and other animals, see Plutarch’s text, *Que les bêtes usent de la raison*, quoted without being named in the SD (p. 138-9 (138)) and named without being quoted in the *Social Contract* (I, 2). For an interpretation of this text, see chapter 6 below.

least part of the metaphysical tradition questioned by Derrida; but Rousseau is too elusive in his language to be judged on the basis of isolated passages and literal readings, as Derrida systematically does.⁶⁵ Instead, particularly when it comes to metaphysical concepts, Rousseau should never be taken at face value. Although he is not, like Derrida, in a crusade against the property of presence, he saw as part of his challenge the task of calling the attention of his readers (or at least some of them) to the trap of dogmatism, Derrida's main concern. That said, Rousseau's understanding of human intelligence and language takes him in a completely different direction from the one chosen by Derrida: from a philosophical perspective, for Rousseau, skepticism and materialism can also become dogmas and, as such, the mere manifestation of self-presence; from a psychological perspective, he takes the desire or necessity for self-presence as an inevitable trait in human beings, which he illustrates with his well-known passages on *amour propre*. This latter consideration also conditions his writing. The philosophical search for the truth and the best must be done in a language that takes this political-psychological trait of human character into account and that, at the same time, leaves the road open for free thinking.

For Rousseau, the relation of truth in what concerns the origin of human language is in the single capacity of the first individuals of the species to have ideas (general ideas), and to have about these ideas a sure truth of the sort of the Cartesian sensible cogito.⁶⁶ It is not about the property of names, as Derrida insists, but about the consciousness of a feeling – if we want, the property of a perception – and the

⁶⁵ Cf. *Gramm.*, pp. 174, 196-7, 203-4, 301-2.

⁶⁶ Cf. *Gramm.*, p. 276

intuitive supposition of the same consciousness in others. Again, the fact that intelligibility cannot depend on or be put to proof in a mathematical-logical manner does not prevent its possibility. It is this simple notion, namely, that human intelligence is not a value but a fact, that, due to the reasons indicated, cannot be accepted by Derrida without damage to his basic assumptions. Derrida must, then, denounce the “myth of consciousness” in order for his own writing to exist. By doing so, he simplifies the human complexity implied in Rousseau’s texts: consciousness becomes limited to a sort of blunt self-awareness ready to be distorted by infinite “writing.” Derrida’s deconstruction has, as we have been arguing, a hard core, which when exposed places his indictment of philosophy and his treatment of *presence* under a completely different light.⁶⁷ In Rousseau, the question is not about mastering complexity or describing the work of the negative; it is about the possibility of knowledge in spite of the imperfection of human languages. Why can we not think the chaotic building up of our unconscious desires without canceling the validity of a parallel development of the thought processes and cognitive faculties related to consciousness? Albeit in his own peculiar manner, Rousseau gives us evidence that not only can we perceive this duality in ourselves, but also that we can imagine it in the first individuals of the species.

⁶⁷ Unless we refuse to challenge Derrida’s strictly nominalist understanding of language, a proper consideration of Rousseau reverts the order suggested by deconstruction and makes us wonder whether absolute supplementarity is not a greater dogma (certainly a more abstract one) than the cognitive elements of reflection challenged by Derrida.

Chapter 2

Rousseau's "Poetics" and Deconstruction. On the Positive Ambivalence of his Rhetoric.

Any speech about *nature* is, for Derrida, a delusion of self-presence. Nature also is a lie: "[It] (...) has always already escaped, (...) never existed;"¹ "[it] is nothing but the myth of addition."² Self-consciousness fools us, making us believe in an origin or nature of the human race and therefore in a break with the (natural?) "chain of differential references." Because there was no identifiable break, there is no way we can determine the origins of what clearly distinguishes our species from the previous one.³

In his analysis of *mimesis*, Derrida interprets Rousseau's use of the expression "the voice of nature" as another evidence of Rousseau's dogmatism:

What does Rousseau say without saying, see without seeing? That substitution has always already begun; that imitation, principle of art, has always already interrupted natural plenitude; that, having to be a *discourse*, it has always already broached presence in difference; that in Nature it is always that which supplies Nature's lack, a voice that is substituted for the voice of Nature.⁴

¹ *Gramm.*, p. 161.

² *Ibid.*, p.167.

³ Like consciousness, *nature* is also not included in Derrida's series at the end of his book. We wonder, how would Derrida define the exteriority of "nature"?

⁴ *Gramm.*, p. 215.

“Rousseau is sure that the essence of art is *mimesis*,”⁵ says Derrida, who calls this imitative character at the origin of languages “the archeo-teleologic definition of nature”⁶ in Rousseau.

Derrida suggests that Rousseau is embarrassed by his claim that speech and song had a common origin and that he uses the notion of imitation to efface his own blunder.⁷ As in the question of the figurative origin of languages opposed to a later awareness and active use of metaphors, here too we must have in mind the vast period of time dividing the two moments at stake. Let us consider first Rousseau’s alleged blunder.

In chapter 12 of the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, ‘The Origin of Music,’ Rousseau says the following:

Together with the first voices were formed either the first articulations or the first sounds, depending on the kind of passion that dictated them. Anger wrests from us threatening cries, which the tongue and the palate articulate; but the voice of tenderness is gentler, it is modulated by the glottis, and this voice becomes a sound. However, its accents are more or less frequent, its inflections more or less acute depending on the sentiment that accompanies it. Thus cadence and sounds are born together with syllables: passion rouses all the organs to speech, and adorns the voice with their full brilliance; *thus verse, song, speech have a common origin.*⁸

But this is what he says in the article ‘Song’ of his *Dictionary of Music* quoted by Derrida:

The *Song* does not seem natural to man. (...) The first expressions of nature have nothing in them melodious or sonorous. (...) The

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

⁷ Cf. Gramm., pp. 196 ff. with EOL, ch. 12.

⁸ EOL, pp. 281-2 (410) my italics.

melodious and appreciable *Song* is nothing but a peaceful and artificial imitation of the accents in the speaking or passionate Voice; we cry and lament without singing: but singing, we imitate cries and laments; and as, of all imitations, the most interesting is that of the human passions, of all manners of imitating the most agreeable is the *Song*.⁹

For Derrida, the notion of *imitation* cancels the need to explain the logical necessity of, as he puts, a genetic order between the origin of the first words and that of the first songs. Imitation unites speech and song and, as such, it is what keeps together Rousseau's ideal of the melodious origin of language.

The archeoteleological concept of nature annuls the structural point of view. In the beginning or in the ideal of the all-harmonious voice, the modification [(song)] becomes one with the substance [(speech)] that it modifies. (...) Since the first speech must be good, since 'the voice of nature' [dictates to us] that the original and ideal essence of speech is song itself, one cannot treat the two origins separately.¹⁰

It is true that if one merely cross-examines the passages in question, the contradiction remains. If one wants to distinguish the different levels of the argument in Rousseau's treatment of the origins, one must do it in light of the work that holds the key to these contradictions.¹¹ The interpretation of the *Second Discourse* will show that the origins of *speech* and *music* must have been kept separated by a very long period, and thus that these terms must be parsed accordingly:

First words.....Grammar

⁹ Rousseau, *Dictionnaire de Musique*, Gallimard, *Pléiade* ed. (1995), p. 695. *Gramm.*, p. 197.

¹⁰ *Gramm.*, p. 198.

¹¹ The logical problem noticed by Derrida is too obvious. His suspicion that Rousseau was either unaware of or dishonest about it is hasty and absurd. "Rousseau *hesitates* (...) between two necessities. (...) The notion of imitation reconciles these two exigencies within ambiguity" (*Gramm.*, p. 196, my italics).

First inflections.....Music

There is no magical trick or mystical inspiration in Rousseau's account of the origins. The expression "the voice of nature" should be taken *first* for what it literally is: the first *human* cries were not, in this sense, utterances of "the voice of nature" but, precisely, of human voice, that is to say, of a voice that was *already* a modification of what came before it. "The voice of nature" is, in this most basic sense, the pure animal (or pre-human) expression of a want before being modified by consciousness; as such, it is not what defines human beings in their origin, but, on the contrary, what separates them from other animals:

Voice of nature.....First human voice

Thinking always at the initial situation of the human species, when we read in the *Essay* that "at first there was no music other than melody, nor any other melody than the varied sound of speech,"¹² we must remember that in the same way that the first words were expressions of the *idea* of a passion, the first inflections ("melodies") were expressions of the intensity of a passion or the modification of one passion by another. This is what Rousseau meant about the origin of "music." ("The accents [of the voice] are more or less frequent, its inflections more or less acute depending on the sentiment that accompanies it. (...) [P]assion rouses all the organs to speech, and adorns the voice with their full brilliance.") And this is also what he must have meant by "cadence and sounds [being] born together with syllables, (...) verse, song, speech [having] a common origin." As Rousseau affirms in his *Dictionary*, *music*, as we understand it, is not natural to human beings. What

¹² EOL, p. 282 (411).

is natural is, precisely, this use of inflections (“cadence and sounds”) to communicate the modification of a passion. (Like metaphors, music is a much later development in the history of languages.) Here again the communication attempted with these proto “melodies” was probably, as with the first words, marred by errors and idiosyncrasies. For this reason, Rousseau could never have seriously affirmed, and indeed he never did, that our passions are universally attached to certain sounds, even if the form in which he presents his ideas might suggest the opposite conclusion. At any rate, two things, tacitly denied by Derrida, seem to have been essential for Rousseau on this regard. First, that these primitive variations of sounds were only possible because of an awareness, by the individual, of the passions at stake; and therefore that these sounds were, regardless of their communicative effectiveness, *meaningful to that individual*. Secondly, that even if we think of these primitive sounds as having been both established and altered as conventions, later when musical intervals became fixed and music was invented, the inflections of speech must have been used as natural references. Different than with grammar, there was no semantic crisis in the way the elements of music developed: whereas with metaphorical language human beings had realized their blunders (i.e. the merely conventional value of their words), the first intervals, rhythms and modes of music were still seen, after all the transformations suffered by those first inflections, as representations of the human passions.

Hence, one can speculate that, for Rousseau, the first inflections of the human voice were, at least in one sense, natural: as the first human makings, they shaped the development of the human passions, becoming at a later stage a “natural”

reference for the musical expression of a people. To this we can add the more trivial observation that many sounds associated with the human passions can be traced back to a more identifiable primitive (animal) origin. That said, regardless of these speculations and contrary to what Derrida defends, it should become clear that there is no “ideal of the all-harmonious voice” in Rousseau, at least not as a philosophical concept.¹³

To consider what mainly interests Rousseau about the relation between music and nature, we must distinguish between two senses of nature that are deliberately blurred in his work. One is nature in its continuous, pre-human, ineffable sense, which, according to Derrida, Rousseau “say[s] without saying, see[s] without seeing.” The other is human nature. The distinction is obviously vital. Rousseau would agree with Derrida that human beings start *already* “outside” of the first sense of nature and that, from the beginning, human language is made of arbitrary conventions; in this sense the concept of “human nature” would be contradictory: man is and has always been a product of his own “writings.” However, as we have seen, for Rousseau there is more than one side to these arbitrary conventions. For him, the deceptions that from the start characterize the human condition do not preclude what we can call elementary self-knowledge; neither do they preclude the understanding of the intellectual development of the human species that starts with this elementary self-knowledge.

The consideration of the origin of languages in terms of the first human faculties such as consciousness and the imagination is central to the main challenge

¹³ *Gramm.*, p.198.

in Rousseau's work, namely, to understand the "logic" that develops with the characteristically human sensing (*sentiment*) of one's own existence. We can say that this "logic of self-presence" (and the role it had in the history of mankind) is another way of referring to Rousseau's political-psychology. It escapes Derrida's logic of supplementarity because it articulates *presence* – which deconstruction depicts as the source of all our evils – as something inextricable from human life. This notion of the inextricability of presence can be associated with the "doctrinarian" sense of Rousseau's work, that is to say, with what Derrida and others take to be his *theory* of the natural goodness of man.

Let us state this succinctly: it is not goodness that is natural for Rousseau, but the necessity of goodness as a value – not *presence*, but the necessity of it. Again, we must have in mind the fundamental distinction: the "nature" or "(con)formation" of the first individuals of the species must not be confounded with that of human beings as we see them today. Rousseau's doctrine of the natural goodness of man is a moral-political doctrine that refers to human beings *as he sees them in their current state*; it is not a metaphysical position and it is not, in spite of his intention of allowing such an impression to his readers, a theory about our distant origins. Thus returning to our point about music, the difficulty, here too, is with what is left behind by Derrida's consideration of "the voice of nature." The relation between music and nature is not derived from what Rousseau teaches us about the original differences between human beings and other animals, for music implies a sense of order that only appears at a much later stage of human life; what Rousseau "says without saying" is that the elements of music (melody in particular)

were natural developments from the cadences and sounds that *at that later stage* were directly associated with the various human passions. It is only when taken in isolation, namely, without the consideration of the vast distance separating the moments in question, that “the voice of nature” can be confounded with an “ideal of the all-harmonious voice.”¹⁴

The allegation that regardless of how we put it, the relation between music and nature would still denote an allegiance to the metaphysics of presence can be in principle dismissed by what Paul de Man says on the matter:

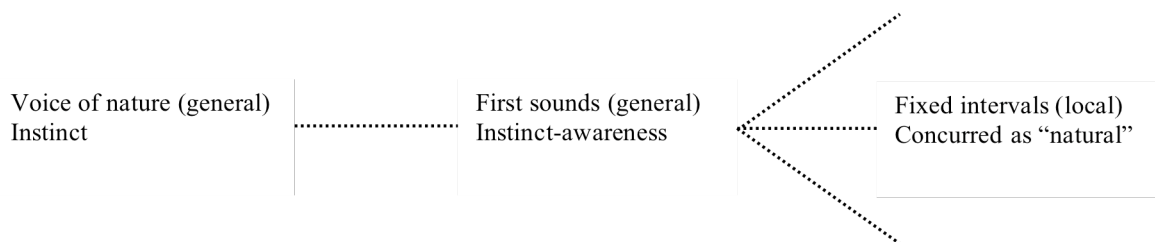
[Rousseau’s] text (...) accounts for its own mode of writing, it states at the same time the necessity of making this statement itself in an indirect, figural way that knows it will be misunderstood by being taken literally.¹⁵

For de Man,

what happens in Rousseau is exactly what happens in Derrida: a vocabulary of substance and of presence is no longer used declaratively, but rhetorically, for the very reasons that are being (metaphorically) stated.¹⁶

Hence, far from becoming prey to *presence*, de Man presents Rousseau as a master on the subject. Unfortunately, de Man goes too far with his claim that Rousseau’s understanding of language coincides with Derrida’s. It is true that Rousseau’s

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¹⁵ De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, p. 136. Henceforth, *Blindness*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 138-9.

arguments on music and morality are, to a great extent, contingent on his times,¹⁷ but they are also inspired by his understanding of what separates human beings from other animals; in this sense, they respect a logical principle. Certainly, Rousseau's rhetoric is not aimed at a theological understanding of nature, as affirms Derrida.¹⁸ Yet, de Man moves to the other extreme and defends that Rousseau's rhetoric is about the "hollowness" of human language, or the mere "prefigur[ation of the text's] own misunderstanding as the correlative of its rhetorical nature."¹⁹ De Man maintains that Rousseau's language was purely literary and that all the ambivalences present in his work were nothing but the very tissue of what one can call his philosophy:

Despite the apparent alacrity with which one is willing to assent in principle to the notion that all literary and some philosophical language is essentially *ambivalent*, the implied function of most critical commentaries and some literary influences is still to do away at all costs with these *ambivalences*; by reducing them to *contradictions*, blotting out the disturbing parts of the work or, more subtly, by manipulating the systems of valorization that are operating within the texts. When, especially as in the case of Rousseau, the *ambivalence* is itself a part of the philosophical statement, this is very likely to happen.²⁰

¹⁷ See Rousseau's *First Discourse*, where he identifies modern life as the motivation for his action, giving us reasons to believe that his critique is contingent on the historical situation.

¹⁸ Derrida entirely misconstrues Rousseau's references to religion and to providence as a serious attempt on Rousseau's part to infer his philosophy from a theological doctrine. See *Gramm.*, pp. 256, 257, 259, 260, 298-9.

¹⁹ *Blindness*, p.136.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 111-2 (my italics).

Against Derrida – who misses the ultimately literary character (intention?) of Rousseau’s rhetoric and thus the distinction indicated by de Man between *ambiguities* and *contradictions*²¹ – de Man argues that Rousseau’s

description of oral speech or of music can be shown to possess, from the start, all the elements of distance and negation that prevent written language from ever achieving a condition of unmediated presence.²²

However, like Derrida, his departing point is Rousseau’s *Essay*, not the *Second Discourse*. He uses the same problematic interpretative strategies to arrive at his anticlimactic conclusion, according to which, for Rousseau, both vocal language and music respect a *diachronic* rather than a synchronic structure. Chapter 16 of the *Essay*, ‘False Analogy between Colors and Sounds,’ holds, according to de Man, sufficient and unambiguous evidence for his main claim, namely, that “contrary to Derrida’s assertion, Rousseau’s theory of representation is not directed toward meaning as presence and plenitude but toward meaning as void.”²³

De Man grounds his interpretation on a passage from that chapter where Rousseau affirms that sounds are not natural but always determined by relations that have no referent in nature. He disregards the fact that Rousseau’s discussion of music and valorization of melody over harmony address primarily a cultural and

²¹ De Man avoids a direct attack on his mentor; on the question of Rousseau’s ambivalence, he says “the text of *De La Grammatologie* necessarily fluctuates.” According to him, Derrida’s critique of Rousseau can be summarized as follows: “[Rousseau] ‘knew’, in a sense, that his doctrine disguised his insight into something closely resembling its opposite, but he chose to remain blind to this knowledge.” That said, “having deliberately bracketed the question of the author’s knowledge of his own ambivalence, Derrida proceeds as if Rousseau’s blindness did not require any further qualification. This leads to simplifications in the description of Rousseau’s stated positions on matters of ethics and history” (*Blindness*, pp. 116 and 119).

²² *Blindness*, p. 115.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

musicological concern. As does Derrida, he also misses the fact that in order to consider the relation between music and nature, one must take into account the different moments in the development of the species implied by Rousseau. Consequently, de Man also fails to appreciate the logical relation between the layers contained in Rousseau's rhetoric. By interpreting the ambiguities in the text as "correlative to its rhetorical nature," he does not see that Rousseau's writing strategy is a necessity imposed by the nature of politics (in the large sense of the term), not of language.²⁴ Rousseau rhetoric is a necessary evil that appears with the natural contrast between philosophy and politics. This is the sense in which he can be associated to the Western philosophical tradition and this is the reason why his "doctrines" must be separated from his metaphysical views. A merely literary approach to Rousseau's texts is incompatible with his greater philosophical arguments, which, unfortunately, we can only access obliquely.

De Man's mistake is not so much in the fact that he reads passages such as "in a harmonic system, a given sound is nothing by natural right" or "the field of music is time, that of painting space" as evidence of the *diachronicity* of music, but the fact that he takes this diachronicity to be the heart of the matter for Rousseau. That music and language are formed diachronically, namely, that sounds have no absolute (synchronic) reference in *nature*, would not indeed (as should have become clear from our previous discussion) have been a matter of contention for Rousseau.

²⁴ Cf. de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, Yale (1979), p. 156. Henceforth, *Allegories*. We note, however, that Rousseau's decision to be elliptic about crucial points and to organize his text in the way he did was unrelated to his acknowledgement of the limitations of discursive reason. The political reasons for his rhetorical strategy will be treated in the second part of this dissertation.

However, to affirm that the “rhetoricity” or the deliberate ambiguity of his language is a goal in itself, or that music and language are, for him, “hollow at the core,”²⁵ is simply to ignore all his fundamental hypotheses about human origins and the different “states of nature” that punctuate the *Second Discourse*.

De Man’s trick to free Rousseau from Derrida’s indictment is to transform him into a deconstructionist *avant la lettre*.²⁶ If Rousseau’s language is, like Derrida’s, *allegorical*,²⁷ then a certain coherence of such “allegoricity” should be found throughout his texts. Rousseau’s rhetoric or literary language would have followed strictly, like Derrida’s, the motto “the only literal statement that says what it means to say is the assertion that there can be no literal statements,”²⁸ if one accepts this, his work could be studied unsystematically or aphoristically, namely, any isolated passage would illustrate the natural ambivalence of language expressed by that motto, either by confirming or questioning it.

We do not have to leave the chapter of the *Essay* used by de Man to see how his claim does not do justice to what Rousseau is telling us. Consider for instance the following passage:

the voice proclaims a being endowed with sense (*un être sensible*); only *animate* bodies sing. It is not the mechanical flutist that plays the flute, but the engineer who measured the flow of air and made the fingers move.²⁹

²⁵ “Music becomes a mere structure because it is hollow at the core, because it ‘means’ the negation of all presence.” *Blindness*, p. 128.

²⁶ *Allegories*, p. 141.

²⁷ “The allegorical mode is accounted for in the description of all language as figural and in the necessarily diachronic structure of the reflection that reveals this insight.” *Blindness*, p. 135.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

²⁹ EOL, p. 291 (420). My italics.

Following de Man's argument, if language – “[whose] structural characteristics (...) are exactly the same as those attributed to music”³⁰ – is hollow at the core or devoid of meaning, is because it is the result of a process of interaction that starts and ends before the single individuals can account for it; it is not the individual who invents language, but language who invents the individual.³¹ And if we are all prisoners of a fiction, then the notion of a free action, at least in the sense intended by Rousseau, is a chimera. Yet here, as well as in other more crucial passages, Rousseau clearly implies that human beings are not passive or merely mechanical beings, and that they have the principle of their action (*anima*) in themselves. Would de Man suggest that Rousseau's notion of free action is just another side of the intended ambivalence in his text? Can one really be persuaded, even if we leave it to terms of this chapter of the *Essay*, that Rousseau is more serious about the “rhetoricity” of language than about the human capacity of free agency?

De Man does not *openly* contradict Rousseau's notion of freedom or free will; instead, he sets aside what he perceives as being ambiguous and affirms that Rousseau's notion of freedom is “Nietzschean:”

From the start, freedom appears as an act of the will (...) pitted against the ever-present obstacle of a limitation which it tries to transgress. It is a consequence, or another version, of the statement at the beginning of the *Second Discourse*, that the specificity of man forever escapes our grasp since ‘the more we study man . . . the less we are in a position to know him’ (3:123). Any confinement within the boundaries of an anthropological self-definition is therefore felt to be a restriction beyond which man, as a being devoid of natural specificity, will have to transgress. This will to transgress, in a pre-Nietzschean passage, is held by Rousseau to be the very definition of the Spirit: ‘the power to will or, rather, the power to choose, as well

³⁰ *Blindness*, p. 131.

³¹ *Allegories*, p. 160.

as the feeling of this power is a purely spiritual act' (3:142). Very little distinguishes power to will, or willpower (*puissance de vouloir*) from 'will to power,' since the power to choose is precisely the power to transgress whatever in nature would entail the end of human power.³²

De Man seems to maintain the very practice he denounces. Is the passage from the Preface of the *Second Discours* – in his free translation, “the more we study man . . . the less we are in a position to know him” – enough evidence that, for Rousseau, no knowledge about our origins is possible? Let us first underline that what de Man means by knowledge here is “confine[d] within the boundaries of an *anthropological self-definition*.” He is clear throughout his text that the target of deconstruction is *epistemology*, the alternative being the infinite openness of literature, not wisdom. The attack on “Western logocentrism” seems to ignore the difference between epistemology and philosophy, namely, between scientific discourse and philosophical rhetoric, and therefore between the latter and literature.³³ The ambivalence dismissed by de Man about the passage from Rousseau’s Preface is in the possibility of more than one approach to the study of man. This is better appreciated if we consider the full passage:

What is more cruel still is that every progress (*progrés*) of the human Species (*Espèce*) removes it increasingly farther from its primitive

³² *Allegories*, pp. 139-40.

³³ “The impossibility of reaching a rationally enlightened anthropology also accounts for the necessary leap into fiction, since no past or present human action can coincide with or be under way towards the nature of man” (ibid., p. 141). De Man does not see that Rousseau’s philosophical rhetoric is less a response to a theoretical than to a political necessity. Rousseau “leaps into fiction” because of the limitation of discursive reason and the natural difficulty of human communication, *not* because he sees communication and knowledge as impossible. See *Allegories*, pp. 137, 142, 155 and 158. Also, it is not the nature of literature that makes it political, but politics that commands the necessity of a certain kind of writing (cf. with pp. 156-9).

state – the more new knowledge we accumulate, the more we deprive ourselves of the means of acquiring the most important knowledge of all – *and* that, in a sense, it is for studying man so much that we were put out of a position to know him.³⁴

Rousseau indicates a difficulty, not necessarily an impossibility. The difficulty regards both the object and the method of approaching it. But again, he speaks of two objects as if they were one. In the first part of the sentence, the object is our primitive condition which was lost in the night of times due to all the transformations of the human constitution produced by the “progress of the species;” in the second part, the object must be “man as [we] see him today,”³⁵ of whom knowledge is blocked because of *a certain sense* in which he has been continuously studied. There are two ways in which we can understand the study of man here: the study of man as body and the study of man as soul. If this distinction is indeed presupposed by Rousseau, then one perspective must be examined in light of the other. But whereas the study of man *as body* can be associated with the epistemological effort of the tradition attacked by de Man, and can indeed be the sense of the study of man that according to Rousseau crippled our chances to know ourselves, it was responsible, at the same time, for the emancipation of passions and the explosion of desires that fuel the notion of freedom mistakenly attributed to Rousseau by de Man. De Man’s radically modern definition of freedom – “the power to transgress whatever in nature would entail the end of human power” – is radically dependent on the sense of the study of man that he condemns.³⁶

³⁴ SD, p. 124 (122-3). My italics.

³⁵ SD, p. 134 (134).

³⁶ That de Man’s freedom does not correspond to Rousseau’s philosophical understanding of freedom or free action and that it is fully incompatible with Rousseauian freedom in its political-

Having said that, if Rousseau merely considered the possibility of the study of man as soul (namely, the alternative to the study of man stressed by de Man), then he must have at least conjectured the possibility to acquire “the most important knowledge of all.” Two reasons indicate that he considers this possibility. First, the study of man implied by “the inscription on the Temple at Delphi,” “Know Thyself,” is the theme of the book;³⁷ the denial of the possibility of self-knowledge not only would make the whole project absurd, but also would amount to the adoption of a dogmatic starting point, precisely what Rousseau wants to reject. Secondly, right before the passage in question, Rousseau compares the subject of his discourse to an image taken from Plato.³⁸ As Socrates in the *Republic*, he compares the current state of the human soul to a statue of the sea-god Glaucus.

Before we return and conclude with de Man, let us examine this second point in detail. According to Ovid’s account in the *Metamorphoses* (13,900 – 14,74), a book also deeply familiar to Rousseau, before becoming a god, Glaucus was a fisherman. Glaucus relates that he once sat on a meadow on the border of the

psychological sense does not mean that one should uncritically endorse the traditional view cynically rejected by him: “Should we infer with the traditional interpreters of Rousseau, that the intersubjective, reflective situation of self-encounter, as in the specular self-fascination of Narcissus, is indeed for Rousseau the paradigmatic experience from which all other experiences are derived?” *Allegories*, p. 152.

³⁷ Note how Rousseau starts the Preface: “The most useful and the least advanced of all human knowledge seems to me to be that of man (...), and I dare say that the inscription on the Temple of Delphi alone contained a more important and more difficult Precept than all the big Books of the Moralists. I therefore consider the subject of this Discourse to be one of the most interesting questions Philosophy might raise (...)” SD, p. 124 (122). See also how he starts the Exordium and Part One, and the contrast right at the outset between two understandings of man: *l’homme* and *l’Homme*.

³⁸ *Rep.* 611b-d.

sea to fish. He was the first to have set foot on that meadow, which had never been spoiled or cropped by cows and goats, and whose flowers had never been visited by bees. After laying his catch on that perfect grass he saw something miraculous happen. In contact with the grass, the catch was brought back to life and fled back to the sea while Glaucus watched awestruck. He wondered, “Had some god done it or was it the juice of the herb?” Glaucus decides to eat the herb but agonizes with the reaction and throws himself in the sea. There, he was received by the sea-gods, purged of what was mortal in him, and altered in his physical and mental constitution.

The ancients represented the sea-god Glaucus by a human figure with all sorts of sea-bred accretions grafted onto his body and face. Rousseau compares the current state of the human soul to a *statue* of Glaucus (namely, a statue of a monstrous image) that was disfigured by the action of time, i.e. by storms and by the sea, having acquired, therefore, *actual* sea-bred accretions.

The image has puzzling features. The purely natural is represented by an artifact, a sculpted image of a god, and the god himself is a peculiar one. (...) We are enjoined to remove the natural sea-bred accretions to have a better view of a mere artifact representing a god who originally was human, and whose divine shape was grotesquely distorted by an apparel of mythical sea monsters.³⁹

How can the original of the disfigured copy of Glaucus represent the natural state of the human soul? How can it represent the soul of the first individuals of the species? On a first sight, the image is indeed puzzling: “Is Rousseau’s natural man

³⁹ R. Velkley, *Being after Rousseau*, Chicago (2002), p. 37.

also only something of common human origin that has been deified, and perfected, by a poetic fiction?”⁴⁰

With relation to the premise on the surface level of the Preface – i.e. that the study of man as soul is possible – the image can be seen as a metaphor for the immense distance that we need to account for in order to contemplate our origins. At the same time, it suggests the impossibility of knowing our origins, for how can we know the original of the being that the statue represents? If this is the crucial opposition posed by the image, then the key to the Delphic injunction is already present in the Preface of the *Second Discourse*. As Velkley puts it,

Rousseau seems to follow some aspects of the Platonic account of knowing: knowing must proceed through images. (...) The Glaucus analogy is a prime example of Rousseau’s mastery of the Platonic art of educating through images, which he employs in every writing as part of his philosophical rhetoric.⁴¹

There is, however, another ambivalence that is not related to the sheer incongruence or oddness of the Glaucus analogy.⁴² The incongruence fades away and the ambiguity becomes a positive one when we turn to the hypothesis that Ovid’s image of Glaucus is also playing a role for Rousseau. Glaucus, the original of the copy that represents our soul, was initially a man. But the symbolism used by Ovid to present the man Glaucus is rather particular. It might have struck Rousseau for its parallel with the Biblical account of the fall⁴³ or, more interestingly, as the inversion of the

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-8.

⁴² The relevance of this other ambivalence depends on whether Rousseau actually meant the expanded signification of his image and its context. This same question will be crucial in our consideration, later in this work, of Rousseau’s first note to the *Second Discourse*.

⁴³ Whether that symbolism was Ovid’s or actually belonged to an older tradition is irrelevant here.

Biblical fall: Glaucus is a mortal who by eating the virgin herb becomes immortal. Rousseau might have thought of Glaucus' fall as a metaphor for the birth of the human soul and for the passage from a pre-reflective to a reflective state. But whereas according to the Biblical account the human soul falls from the heavens, here it is created on Earth. Glaucus' choice between attributing, *unreflectively*, the incident of the re-birth of the fish to the will of the gods or *reflecting* about its possible physical causes⁴⁴ denotes, on the one hand, the original awareness of death, and on the other, the ensuing initiative (action) on the individual's part to avoid death, namely, the idea that the virgin herb would make him immortal.

Thus, by taking Ovid's tale into account, the image of the disfigured statue of Glaucus points to three "originals." One is the statue itself in its original unaltered shape, which can be associated with the idealized account of the nature of human beings as seen today, namely, *as already altered in their physical and mental constitution*;⁴⁵ in the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau refers to this sense when he writes "*l'Homme*." The second is the god that the original statue represents, which can be associated with the elusive sense of a being in metamorphosis, "*l'homme*." The third is the man Glaucus, whose fundamental spiritual elements (awareness of death, elementary self-consciousness, and freedom of choice) can be associated with the first beings of the species. Rousseau refers to this third sense when he writes "*l'homme Sauvage*."⁴⁶

⁴⁴ "Had some god done it or was it the juice of the herb?" *Metam.* 13.940.

⁴⁵ *Metam.* 13.955

⁴⁶ In chapter 3, we will return to the question of the different spellings of crucial terms in the *Second Discourse*, but one can anticipate Rousseau's procedure by reading his note to *Émile*,

De Man's claim that "the ambivalence [in Rousseau's text] is itself a part of the philosophical statement"⁴⁷ – in other words, that Rousseau's understanding of language and knowledge is naturally ambiguous and always contextual – shows that his interpretation was limited to the surface narrative of the text. The image of Glaucus is just one of the many examples of how, contrary to de Man's perception, Rousseau uses a subterranean narrative when discussing his most complex subjects. Rousseau's rhetoric is never merely diffusive, although in order to make sense of his texts we often need to explore the full content of his images and push them to the limit of their signification. This is why the claim that "there is nothing outside the text" is, at least insofar as Rousseau is concerned, a stultifying thesis: the main things are kept precisely "outside" and can only be articulated through a consideration of what is anathema to the deconstructionists, namely, the intention of the author. De Man does not even mention the image of Glaucus. One can suspect that because for him this sort of interpretation would compromise his thesis that Rousseau's "rhetoricity" is an end in itself, his views about language, as in Derrida, pre-conditioned his whole interpretation – or the extent of it.

The Glaucus image points us in another direction. It sorts out the contradiction on the surface level of the text, namely, the contradiction between the injunction to self-knowledge and the notion "that the specificity of man *forever* escapes our grasp."⁴⁸ The positive ambivalence contained in the image shows that,

Pléiade ed., vol. 4, p. 345: "I have a hundred times in writing made the reflection that it is impossible in a long work always to give the same meanings to the same words."

⁴⁷ *Blindness*, p. 111.

⁴⁸ I.e. that "the more we study man . . . the less we are in a position to know him." *Allegories*, pp. 139-40. My emphasis.

for Rousseau, there is a way in which both self-knowledge and knowledge about our origins are possible, even though de Man would be right to claim that the knowledge here would not be epistemological or immediate.⁴⁹ Let us be clear about this point. The mere fact that on the surface narrative of his text Rousseau incurs the ambivalences or contradictions pointed out by his commentators shows that, for him, self-knowledge and knowledge about our origins (the study of man as soul) cannot, in principle, be *immediate* objects of discursive reason. De Man is correct in pointing out that Rousseau's rhetoric should be sufficient evidence that he does not intend to convey any sort of immediate presence with his writings; but it should be clear by now that a denial of "presence" does not imply an endorsement of "difference." For Rousseau, the communication of philosophical ideas (philosophical knowledge) such as the ones of the *Second Discourse* must be done indirectly: "knowing must proceed through images."⁵⁰ Perhaps we can infer by

⁴⁹ If philosophical self-knowledge is possible for Rousseau, it is possible, clearly, only at the end of a very long journey. Not only does Rousseau make no promises, but also the use of a thick rhetorical layer to protect whatever in his work can help in that journey denotes his pessimism regarding that possibility. Richard Velkley notes that Rousseau's pessimism is double. On the one hand, Rousseau's rhetorical strategy and "doctrines" attest his lack of faith in human self-determination; on the other, the possibility of self-knowledge, philosophy and philosophical freedom is not equivalent to the possibility of happiness or self-fulfillment, for the liberation of philosophy leads also to the awareness of "the inescapable bondage of human nature" (op. cit., p. 35).

⁵⁰ Velkley, op. cit., p. 37. The passage from the note in *Émile* with which Derrida ends his *Of Grammatology* should be understood exactly in these terms. "Most learned men are learned in the way of children. Vast erudition results less from a multitude of ideas than from a multitude of images. Dates, proper names, places, all objects isolated or devoid of ideas are retained solely by memory of signs; and rarely does one recall some one of these things without at the same time seeing the page on the right- or the left-hand side where it was read or the form in which it was seen the first time. Pretty nearly such was the science fashionable in the last ages. That of our age is

analogy that the communication of philosophical ideas suffers, from Rousseau's perspective, from the same deficiency of the elementary communication of ideas of the first human beings. Language provides only a limited (metaphorical) reference to the abstract objects of philosophy (e.g. the states of the soul, being, etc), which can only be generalized indirectly or intuitively. Hence the necessity to consider, in spite of all the risks of failure, the *intention* of the (philosophical) author. The main thing missed by the deconstructionists in their analysis of Rousseau is this implicit, but nonetheless fundamental, distinction between "language" and "the art of communicating ideas."

De Man attempts to correct Derrida's interpretation by calling our attention to the rhetorical importance of Rousseau's language and by rightly assessing that Rousseau's text "postulates the necessity of its own misreading."⁵¹ He stresses the centrality of the *Second Discourse* in Rousseau's works and the importance of the neglected passage on the origin of languages in that book.⁵² However, as Derrida, he seems to approach Rousseau looking for confirmations, not for answers. Even if de Man presents Rousseau in an apparently more positive way than does Derrida, Rousseau remains for him a deceitful paradigm – a statue of Glaucus disfigured by the action of time. This is flagrant in de Man's treatment (or non-treatment) of

something else. One no longer studies, one no longer observes, one dreams; and we are gravely presented with the dreams of some bad nights as philosophy. I will be told that I, too, dream. I agree; but I give my dreams as dreams, which others are not careful to do, leaving it to the reader to find out whether they contain something useful for people who are awake" (book 2, p. 112 (in the *Pléiade* ed., vol. 4, pp. 350-1)). Translation by A. Bloom, Basic Books (1979). See also p. 108 (345).

⁵¹ *Blindness*, p.136.

⁵² *Allegories*, pp. 143 and 159.

freedom in Rousseau. He distorts one of the most crucial passages in the *Second Discourse* in order to equate Rousseau's notion of freedom to his own: freedom as the power to choose or to will, and as such, the power to transgress.⁵³ Rousseau is clear that the *will* is not the essence but the means of freedom. Choice presupposes a reference within oneself, a certain knowledge or, in his words, a *recognition* of that power. If we abstract from this knowledge, the fundamental difference between human beings and beasts disappears – it becomes, as wanted Condillac, a difference of degree, not of quality. With the chaotic emancipation of their passions, human beings would be in the ever-inferior situation of having to depend on the artificiality of their languages and reason: perfectibility would be always a curse, never a blessing. Accordingly, the order brought about by artificial reason would have the merely utilitarian function of allowing human beings a peaceful or bearable existence, at best.

Rousseau is explicit that it is not *understanding* – therefore, not *language* – that separates human beings from other animals, but de Man's interpretation tacitly denies this fundamental point. Supposing freedom as the power to transgress, we transgress in the name of what? If freedom is either the power to manifest our individual *amour-propre* or, at best, the *amour-propre* of the human race,⁵⁴ then human beings are, in the first case, not different than other animals, and in the second, entirely dependent on the faculty that Rousseau affirms after all not to be the specific difference between human beings and other animals, namely,

⁵³ *Allegories*, p. 140.

⁵⁴ “The power to choose is precisely the power to transgress whatever in nature would entail the end of human power” (ibid.).

understanding. Rousseau's thinking about our origins is, therefore, the exact opposite of that of de Man and Derrida.⁵⁵ His re-ordering of the human passions must be studied in light of his *philosophical*, not anthropological, understanding of human beings, because the germ of philosophy is, for him, prior to the germ of poetry, because philosophy is more natural than poetry.

Every animal has ideas, since it has senses; up to a point it even combines its ideas, and in this respect man differs from the Beast only as more does from less: Some Philosophers have even suggested that there is a greater difference between one given man and another than there is between a given man and a given beast; It is, then, not so much the understanding that constitutes the specific difference between man and the other animals, as it is his property of being a free agent. *Nature commands every animal, and the Beast obeys*. Man experiences the same impression, but he *recognizes* himself free to acquiesce or to resist; and it is mainly in the *consciousness of this freedom* that the spirituality of his soul exhibits itself: for Physics in a way explains the mechanism of the senses and the formation of ideas; but in the power of willing, or rather of choosing, and in the sentiment of this power, are found purely spiritual acts about which nothing is explained by the Laws of Mechanics.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Derrida's interpretation is, in this regard, less problematic than de Man's.

⁵⁶ "Tout animal a des idées puis qu'il a des sens, il combine même ses idées jusqu'à un certain point, et l'homme ne diffère à cet égard de la Bête que du plus au moins: Quelques Philosophes ont même avancé qu'il y a plus de différence de tel homme à tel homme que de tel homme à telle bête; Ce n'est donc pas tant l'entendement qui fait parmi les animaux la distinction spécifique de l'homme que sa qualité d'agent libre. La Nature commande à tout animal, et la Bête obéit. L'homme éprouve la même impression, mais il se reconnoît libre d'acquiescer, ou de résister; et c'est surtout dans la conscience de cette liberté que se montre la spiritualité de son âme: car la Physique explique en quelque manière le mécanisme des sens et la formation des idées; mais dans la puissance de vouloir ou plutôt de choisir, et dans le sentiment de cette puissance on ne trouve que des actes purement spirituels, dont on n'explique rien par les Loix de la Mécanique." SD, pp. 140-1 (141-2).

Chapter 3

The Difference between Human Beings and Beasts

Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, deconstruction's paradigmatic text, must be read in light of the *Second Discourse*. The relation between the two texts is at the same time evident and elusive; it is evident because of the common archeological theme of both works; it is elusive because much of what is said in one text seems to muddle what is said in the other. Clearly, it was not Rousseau's intention to make the true relation between his texts readily accessible. In order to understand the logic of this relation we must take into account and correctly assess Rousseau's rhetorical strategy. The *Second Discourse* only reveals its propaedeutic function when we fully confront that strategy. We must resist approaching the text in the manner of the deconstructionists, for that would inevitably lead, right at the outset, to a misunderstanding of the plan of the book and of the fundamental distinctions presupposed by Rousseau.

Derrida's and de Man's respective literal and literary readings are incompatible with a positive approach to Rousseau's rhetoric, an approach that needs to start with the presupposition that Rousseau's rhetoric is philosophical and not merely diffusive. Derrida starts with an *a priori* view of Rousseau's general

understanding of language, which he denounces as dogmatic. De Man starts in the right direction by claiming that Rousseau's rhetoric is the evidence of how he understood language, but his Derridean conception of language limits his interpretation and makes him twist Rousseau's central point about human freedom. According to deconstruction, we cannot meet Rousseau's challenge of thinking the origin of languages because we cannot go, as it were, beyond language. With de Man, the claim is that Rousseau is fully aware of the impossibility of discoursing about our nature and therefore that he is not serious when he does it. De Man goes to the extreme of calling Rousseau's "rhetoricity" the ultimate goal of his whole effort. Yet, as we have suggested in the last chapter, the "rhetoricity" that de Man brings to the center of things reflects nothing but his own incapacity to make sense of Rousseau's rhetoric and to find the meaning of Rousseau's texts.

In their allegorical-aphorismatic approach, the deconstructionists do not address the real question in Rousseau's study of the human origins: *what makes human beings fundamentally different than other animals?* Their failure, however, is not only due to their specific approach. It has deeper roots. In the next pages we will examine the passage in the *Second Discourse* that is at the heart of the debate that deconstruction did not articulate.

Like the third chapter of the *Essay* and, unfortunately, not in a less enigmatic manner, the passage of the *Second Discourse* in question addresses the dilemma about the origin of *general ideas*.¹ It is here where Rousseau marks his main difference (on the related questions of the origin of languages and the difference

¹ We will focus on four paragraphs, from the one starting with "Man's first language..." to the one ending in "... anything but proper names" (SD, pp. 146-8 (148-50)).

between human beings and other animals) with the Lockean tradition represented by Condillac, who is mistakenly seen by some as Rousseau's main source for the passage.² Let us move in steps.

When men's ideas began to expand and to multiply, and closer communication was established among them, they sought more numerous signs and a more extended language: They multiplied the inflections of the voice and added gestures which are by their Nature more expressive, an less dependent for their meaning on prior agreement. Thus they expressed visible and moving objects by means of gestures, and objects that strike the ear by imitative sounds: but because gesture indicates almost only present or easily described objects and visible actions; because it is not universally serviceable since darkness or an interfering body render it useless, and because it requires attention rather than exciting it; it finally occurred to men to substitute for it the articulations of the voice which, although they do not stand in the same relation to some ideas, are better suited (*plus propres*) to represent them all, inasmuch as they are instituted signs; a substitution which can only have been made by *common consent*, and which must have been rather difficult to be implemented by men whose crude vocal apparatus (*dont les organes grossiers*) had as yet had no practice, *and which is even more difficult to conceive of in itself, since this unanimous agreement must have been motivated, and since speech seems to have been very necessary in order to establish the use of speech.*³

Rousseau's riddle at the end of this paragraph can be summarized as follows: how was the transition from the merely mimetic language based on gestures and on the voice of nature to a language based on sounds agreed to represent common ideas of the participants of that language (namely, to a language based on *words*) possible? If the first words referred to objects that were perceived by each

² We will not examine the differences between Locke and Condillac, or the debate between the latter and Buffon. From Rousseau's point of view, it is clear that their common epistemological paradigm outweighs their differences, at least in what concerns the subject matter of the *Second Discourse*. We should remember that the empiricist epistemological paradigm is also shared by Derrida. See *Gramm.*, p.162.

³ SD, pp. 146-7 (148-9). My italics.

individual in a different manner – which can be inferred from what Rousseau says a few lines later – then what was the object of the common consent regarding the relation between a word and the idea of that object? And how can an idea become common or general to those first human individuals before the existence of the vocabulary and the articulation of propositions necessarily presupposed – as Rousseau also says later in the passage – for the introduction of general ideas in the mind? The apparent contradiction is stated by Rousseau himself, for “the common consent must have been motivated.” All individuals must have been aware of the necessity of the convention, which in itself presupposes the pre-existence of a communication based on other conventions, that is to say, based on other general agreements regarding words or, put differently, on the relation between a word and an idea common (*general*) to the participants of the agreement: “speech (*la parole*) seems to have been very necessary in order to establish the use of speech.” Although the solution to the problem is far from being obvious, it is implicit in Rousseau that we must be able to explain the appearance of the first conventional words without incurring the vicious cycle. The contradiction must be an illusion.⁴

⁴ Locke describes this situation without seeing any contradiction whatsoever. “Thus we may conceive how *Words*, which were by Nature so well adapted to that purpose, came to be made use of by Men, as *the Signs of their Ideas*; not by any natural connexion that there is between particular articulate Sounds and certain *Ideas*, for then there would be but one Language amongst all Men; but by a voluntary Imposition, whereby such a Word is made arbitrarily the Mark of such an *Idea*. The use, then, of Words, is to be sensible Marks of *Ideas*; and the *Ideas* they stand for, are their proper and immediate Signification. (...) But though Words, as they are used by Men, can properly and immediately signify nothing but *Ideas*, that are in the Mind of the Speaker; yet they in their Thoughts give them a secret reference to two other things./ *First, they suppose their Words to be Marks of the Ideas in the Minds also of other Men, with whom they communicate (...)*/ *Secondly*, because *Men* would not be thought to talk *barely* of their own Imagination, but of Things as really

Rousseau continues:

the first words (*mots*) used by men (*les hommes*) had in the Mind (*Esprit*) (...) the meaning (*sens*) of an entire proposition.

If the first words had the meaning of entire propositions, then, obviously, the first inventors abstracted from the elements that in a grammatical sense compose a proposition. One can think that the first words were names as in the example of the word “giants” as the first name to indicate other human beings in general. We have already seen the difference between the figurative and proper sense of that word; however, although in the text of the *Essay* Rousseau uses the word in the plural (*Géans*), it is only in the *Second Discourse* that he allows us to infer what he means about the main question regarding the origin of languages, namely, the sense in which those first words referred *already* to *general ideas*. If the word “giants” represented also the idea of the passion (fear), and if we can think of that representation in terms of a proposition (for instance, “Beware the giant, for he might come kill us!”), then in spite of not being *conscious* of the categories involved (which Rousseau indicates to be an obvious impossibility), the individual must have used the word to communicate the implied generality of the idea, the order, and the action. It is the efficiency of this communication,⁵ a sort of intuitive capacity for elementary abstractions, that if demonstrated would attest that the idea and its implications were not only *proper* to that individual, but also to others as

they are; therefore they *often suppose their Words to stand for the reality of Things.*” (*Essay*, III, 2, §§ 1-2).

⁵ Not to be confounded with the semantic mistake of calling men “giants.”

well: that it was a *general idea*.⁶ General ideas must have been implied in the propositions meant by the first words.

When Rousseau says that “(...) abstractions [e.g. metaphors] are difficult and not particularly natural Operations,” he has already shifted the context and adapted his terms. The first words represented the abstraction of movement and actions that *later* will be associated with special words called verbs.

When [later] they began to distinguish between subject and predicate, and verb and noun (...), *substantives* were at first just so many *proper names*.⁷

It should be clear by now that Rousseau means different things by “word,” “name,” and “substantive.” He says here that when substantives were distinguished from verbs, namely, when separate words were invented to parse the propositions initially implied in the first words, substantives referred first to *particular* ideas. Rousseau specifies later that by substantives he means “Physical substantives alone, that is to say (...) the most easily found part of Language (*de la Langue*).”⁸ At this stage of the development of languages, he says,

[e]ach object was at first given a particular name; (...) and all particulars (*tous les individus*) presented themselves to the mind (*esprit*) [of the first Instituters] in isolation, just as they are in the picture (*tableau*) of Nature. If one Oak was called A, another Oak was called B.⁹

⁶ The fact that this cannot be demonstrated, as premised in the book, must have been one of the reasons for Rousseau’s enigmatic presentation of something “found in purely spiritual acts about which nothing is explained by the Laws (*Loix*) of Mechanics” (SD, p. 141 (142)). Cf. also Locke’s *Essay*, III, 1, §1 and III, 3, §§ 1,6,7 and 8.

⁷ SD, p. 147 (149).

⁸ SD, p. 149 (151). He means, for instance, the substantive for *tree*, as opposed to a substantive for an abstract concept such as matter, the mind, or movement.

⁹ SD, p. 147 (149).

What is striking here is that Rousseau closes the paragraph by invoking again the riddle suggested above *as if* he had not just given us the clue regarding the abstractions implied by the first words. He reiterates the embarrassment which characterizes those who confronted the problem: how did these particular substantives become general? What was the motivation? Etc.

Rousseau says that the capacity to form general ideas is the difference between animals and human beings:

Animals [can] not form [general ideas], nor ever acquire the perfectibility that depends on them. When a Monkey unhesitatingly goes from one nut to another, are we to think that he has the general idea of this sort of fruit and compares its archetype with these two particulars? Surely not; but the sight of one of these fruits recalls to his memory the sensations he received from the other, and his eyes, modified in a certain way, announce to his taste how it is about to be modified.¹⁰

The same notion is in Locke:

I think, Beasts compare not their Ideas, farther than some sensible Circumstances annexed to the Objects themselves. The other power of Comparing, which may be observed in Men, belonging to general Ideas, and useful only to abstract Reasonings, we may probably conjecture Beasts have not.¹¹

Having said that, the problem in Rousseau is completely different than in Locke, who arrives at his conclusions by comparing human beings in their current mental and physical constitution (again, Locke's paradigm is children) to other animals. For Rousseau, to say that only human beings are capable of abstractions or general ideas

¹⁰ SD, p. 148 (149-150).

¹¹ *Essay*, II, 11, §5.

begs the question (according to him impossible to address in a purely analytical manner) of *how* and *why* that capacity first appeared.¹²

Earlier in the text Rousseau reminds us of the evident fact that, “since [they have] senses,” monkeys and other animals have (particular) ideas;

“up to a point [they] even combine [their] ideas, and *in this respect* man differs from the Beast only as more does from less.”¹³

It is true that Rousseau seems to want some of his readers to identify his view on the matter with both Condillac and Locke;¹⁴ however, his endorsement of Condillac’s doctrine that the difference between man and beast is only gradual is not serious. The difference between both thinkers becomes blatant with Condillac’s *Treatise on Animals* published in 1755.¹⁵ While exposed in a more concise manner, the doctrines defended by Condillac in that book are not different than in his previous *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*. With the latter work in mind, Rousseau mentions

¹² Two difficulties direct the passage on the origin of languages in the *Second Discourse*: “The first (...) is to imagine how languages could have become necessary. (...) / [And], [s]upposing this first difficulty overcome (...), how they might have begun to get established” (SD, p. 145 (146-7)).

¹³ SD, p.140 (141). My italics.

¹⁴ Rousseau reminds us of this notion in a crucial paragraph of the *Second Discourse*: “Some Philosophers have even suggested that there is a greater difference between a given man and another than there is between a given man and a given beast.” (SD, p. 140-1 (141)). The sentence is found practically verbatim in Montaigne’s essay *De l’inégalité qui est entre nous* (*Essais*, I, 42) and Locke, *Essay*, IV, 20, §5. (Note Locke’s distance (“as some think...”) regarding what was the main cause of inequality for the tradition here at stake.) Montaigne bases his text on a passage from Plutarch mentioned by Rousseau a few paragraphs before in the *Second Discourse* (SD, pp. 138-9 (139)); the passage belongs to a text by Plutarch to be named in a footnote to a direct reference to Aristotle in the *Social Contract*. For an analysis of this relation, see chapter 6.

¹⁵ “[I]f beasts think, if they acknowledge some of their feelings, and if some beasts even understand the rudiments of our language, then in what are they different than man? Isn’t it only as more does from less?” Condillac, *Traité des animaux*, ed. 1796, p. 486.

Condillac at the beginning of his section on language in a rather specious fashion. He notes, in the midst of what otherwise appears to be mere praise, that also

“this Philosopher (...) assumed what I question, namely some sort of society already established among the inventors of language.”¹⁶

The differences between the two authors go well beyond the fundamental mistake that Rousseau also attributes to Hobbes and Locke. For Condillac, all animals are capable of having general ideas and the complexity of these ideas is proportional to the nature of their *needs*.¹⁷ The notions of *instinct* and *reason* describe, for Condillac, the same process of knowledge but in different degrees.¹⁸ What we call *instinct* is the capacity that all animals have, according to the “number of senses and needs, (...) to make comparisons and judge.”¹⁹ It is thus through *habit* that, for Condillac, all animals learn and know what they do.

¹⁶ Here is the whole passage: “I could leave it at here quoting or restating the Abbé de Condillac’s investigations of this matter, all of which fully confirm my sentiment, and which perhaps suggested my first idea about it. But since the manner in which this Philosopher resolves the difficulties he himself raises regarding the origin of instituted signs shows that he assumed what I question, namely some sort of society already established among the inventors of language, I believe that I ought to supplement the reference to his reflections with reflections of my own, in order to exhibit these same difficulties in the light best suited to my subject” (SD, p. 145 (146)).

¹⁷ “[E]ach species has pleasures and pains that are not the pleasures and pains of other species. Each has, therefore, different needs; each makes, separately, the necessary studies to its own preservation, having more or less needs, more or less habits, more or less intelligence./ It is in man that the pleasures and pains are greatly multiplied. To the physical qualities of objects he adds moral qualities and finds in things an infinite number of relations that do not exist to other animals. Thus his interests are vast and many; he studies them all, he produces his needs and passions of all sorts, and in both his habits and his reason he is superior to beasts” (Condillac, op. cit., p. 530). “Sensation, need, association of ideas: here’s the system to which all operations of [all] animals must be related” (ibid., p. 531).

¹⁸ Ibid. pp. 487 ff.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 488.

“If to *invent* is the same as to judge, compare, discover, then beasts invent. They invent, even if by that we mean to represent in advance what one will make. The squirrel imagines (*peint*) the hut he wants to build; the bird, the nest he wants to construct. These animals would not make these works if the imagination had not given them the model.”²⁰

Clearly, Condillac’s doctrines depend entirely on the notion that animals are fixed entities; different than Rousseau, Condillac substantiates the Biblical account of our origins suggested at the beginning of the second part of his *Essay*.²¹ Thus, it is clear that, for this and the other reasons just mentioned, Rousseau could not have been more at odds with Condillac’s investigations of the origin of languages. For Rousseau, the difference between human beings and beasts is gradual *only* insofar as all animals are endowed with senses, perception,²² and, in this sense, ideas; in other words, only inasmuch as the *body* is concerned. The difference with the empiricists on this point calls for a further digression that should help us understand how the capacity to be a free agent and the capacity to have general ideas – the things that

²⁰ Ibid. p. 476. “Beasts learn to touch, see, walk, feed and defend themselves, and watch for their own preservation. Thus they make discoveries, but only because they compare: they therefore invent; they even improve [*perfectionnent*]: for in the beginning they did not know all these things as they do once they have more experience” (p. 477).

²¹ Condillac, *Essai sur l’origine des connaissances humaines*, II, 1, Exordium. See also *Traité des animaux*, p. 508-9, where Condillac’s argument for the difference between human beings and other animals concerning the immortality of the soul simply follows the Augustinian tradition and appeals to the divine providence: “[the] soul is not material and we should conclude, without a doubt, that the dissolution of the body does not entail the annihilation of the soul. Indeed, these two substances can exist one without the other; their mutual dependence happens only because God wants, and as long as he wants. But immortality is not natural to either and if God does not attribute it to the soul of beats it is solely because he does not have to.” Divine providence seems to be the only thing separating Condillac’s thought, like Locke’s, from sheer materialism.

²² Cf. with Locke: “The power of Perception is that which we call the *Understanding*” (*Essay*, II, 21, §5).

according to Rousseau mark the determinant difference between human beings and other animals – are related.

Taken in isolation, Rousseau’s sentence that “it is not the understanding that constitutes the specific difference between man and other animals, as it is his property of being a free agent”²³ is in full agreement with both Locke and Condillac. It is, however, in terms of what this property really means that they would have profoundly disagreed. For Rousseau, the main metaphysical problem with the empiricist doctrine (perhaps the problem that motivates his whole effort) is the account of human freedom found in that doctrine, which according to Locke’s chapter ‘On Power,’ the crucial text for this matter, can be summarized as follows.

The power of being a free agent is the power to act according to one’s will or to one’s mind.²⁴ Because both will and freedom are powers, it makes no sense to question whether the will has freedom;²⁵ human beings are not free in their wills, because the will is “nothing but a power in the Mind to direct the operative Faculties of a Man to motion or rest, as far as they depend on such direction.”²⁶ The answer to the question “*what determines the Will?*” is *desire*; the will is the particular determination of an action, whereas desire is what pre-determines the direction of the will.²⁷ In order to achieve its goal, i.e. *happiness*,²⁸ desire must be

²³ SD, p. 141 (141).

²⁴ *Essay*, II, 21, §12.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, §§ 15,16 and 21.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, § 29.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, § 31.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, § 41, 42.

guided towards the good, or the greatest good, as the Scriptures teach us;²⁹ however, even when one is morally guided to recognize “the greatest apparent good,” one is constantly distracted by “the ordinary necessities of our lives.”³⁰ The greatest expression of our freedom is to be found in the mind’s capacity to *examine* (judge) all the “*uneasinesses*” that affect us and “*suspend* the execution and satisfaction of any of its desires.”³¹

“Examination is *consulting a guide*. The determination of the *will* upon enquiry is *following the direction of that Guide*: and he that has a power to act, or not to act according as such determination directs, is a *free Agent*.”³²

For Locke, the cause of unhappiness – lack of freedom or the impediment of the enjoyment of pleasure – can *only* be attributed to *wrong judgment*.³³ Therefore, to be free is to act according to reason, for it is only through the accurate (*viz.*

²⁹ Ibid., § 33, 34, 35, 60 and 70.

³⁰ “[A]ll good, even seen, and confessed to be so, does not necessarily move every particular Man’s desire, but only that part (...) taken to make a necessary part of his happiness” (*Essay*, II, 21, §43). “The ordinary necessities of our lives, fill a great part of them with the *uneasiness* of *Hunger, Thirst, Heat, Cold, Weariness* with labor, and *Sleepiness* in their constant returns, etc. To which, if besides accidental harms, we add the fantastical *uneasiness*, (as itch after *Honor, Power, or Riches*, etc.) which acquired habits by Fashion, Example, and Education have settled in us, and a thousand other irregular desires, which custom has made natural to us, we shall find, that a very little part of our life is so vacant from these *uneasinesses*, as to leave us free to the attraction of remoter absent good” (*Essay*, II, 21, §45). Cf. *ibid.*, §§44 and 51.

³¹ “This seems to me the source of all liberty; in this seems to consist that, which is (as I think improperly) called *Free will*” (*ibid.*, §47).

³² *Ibid.*, §50

³³ “For since I lay it for a certain ground, that every intelligent Being really seeks Happiness, which consists in the enjoyment of Pleasure, without any considerable mixture of uneasiness; ’tis impossible any one should willingly put into his own draught any bitter ingredient, or leave out any thing in his power, that would tend to his satisfaction, and the completing of his Happiness, but only by a *wrong Judgment*” (*ibid.*, §62).

rational) examination of our actions that we can avoid the errors produced by ignorance, inadvertency, and precipitancy.³⁴ For Rousseau, however, free agency has an entirely different signification. By denouncing the flawed paradigm of the state of nature used by Condillac, Locke and others, he also denounces the explanation of freedom as the *rational capacity* to make desire and pleasure, or desire and happiness, correspond. The power of freedom and the awareness of this power are “purely spiritual acts” in that they must be explained *before* language (and, thus, before reason), for they are the very conditions that make the *speech* of the first individuals of the species possible. The *desire* that motivates the *will* is, at this stage, purely introspective, *intellectual*. As in Locke, freedom for Rousseau is also dependent on a certain knowledge of things, but at the dawn of the human species, the knowledge is necessarily pre-rational.

Rousseau says that the difference between human beings and other animals is in the capacity of being a free agent, namely, in the recognition of one’s power to challenge nature or instinct; but he also says that the difference is the capacity to have general ideas. Human freedom is thus somehow related to the human capacity to have general ideas. Rousseau questions the *motives* for what in Locke is taken for granted: the invention of general terms.³⁵ He refuses Locke’s static argument that human beings simply “suppose their words to be marks of the ideas in the minds

³⁴ “The first therefore and great use of Liberty, is to hinder blind Precipitancy; the principal exercise of Freedom is to stand still, open the eyes, look about, and take a view of the consequence of what we are going to do, as much as the weight of the matter requires” (ibid. §67). Cf. with SD note 13, marked originally “*b.”.

³⁵ *Essay*, III, 2 and 3.

also of other men”³⁶ and inquires into what separates human thought from the thought of a monkey in the first stages of human development, that is to say, when the being is no longer a mere beast and not yet quite human. According to the *Second Discourse*, Locke’s mere *supposition* does not explain anything: the common agreement about these general ideas “must have been motivated.”

Rousseau does not spell out what the motivation was, but from what he says we can infer the following. Human language is, from its outset, split by the complex task faced by the first human beings of having to refer to different things – namely, the external objects of sense-perception and the internal objects of reflection – with one word. The elementary self-knowledge of the first human beings started with their capacity to have ideas of their passions, the first of which was the idea of the fear of death. The naming of a passion or of a sensation could only occur because the sensation, or the association between a sensation and an external object of sense-perception (as in Rousseau’s example of “Giants”), was, to a certain extent, common to other individuals. This common ground is what allowed the individual sensation to be reflected on and identified with the same sensation in others. Putting aside the complexity of what was actually being communicated, the name was, in this manner, confirmed and established. Thus, from the beginning, human beings have had the capacity for a kind of “general knowledge” about themselves and their genre as a whole. This is the main thing that Rousseau “says without saying.” What we called elementary self-knowledge was only made possible because individuals could somehow communicate and confirm their ideas before having the means (that

³⁶ *Essay*, III, 2, §4.

is, a “Logic of Discourse”) that traditionally we deem necessary for a communication of ideas. The effective communication of these ideas was precisely the confirmation of the common ground; and this confirmation was, in turn, what allowed the first individuals to recognize their power over the passions, and eventually over the faculties, that those ideas represented.

The motivation for this elementary naming act of the first individuals was in the process itself. It cannot be explained as a simple, instinctive reaction to a need because we must presuppose a commencement of self-knowledge (awareness of death) in the first individuals of the species. At the same time, it cannot be explained merely in the terms of this incipient self-knowledge. We must understand the motivation for speech as the movement or tension created between the sensation of needs and the incipient self-awareness of the first individuals. Thus, the difference between human and animal passion lies in this dialectical character of human desire (hence the pressing necessity to test the internal object of one’s reflection), which Rousseau captures with the notion of perfectibility.

Regardless of what the Moralists may say about it, the human understanding owes much to the Passions which, as is commonly admitted, also owe much to it: it is by their activity that our reason perfects itself; we seek to know only because we desire to enjoy, and it is not possible to conceive why someone who had neither desires nor fears would take the trouble to reason. The Passions, in turn, owe their origin to our needs, and their progress to our knowledge; for one can only desire or fear things in terms of the ideas one can have of them, or by the simple impulsion of Nature; and Savage man, deprived of every sort of enlightenment, experiences only the Passions of this latter kind; his desires do not exceed his Physical needs (...); the only goods he knows in the universe are food, a female, and rest; the only evils he fears are pain and hunger; I say pain, and not death; for an animal will never know what it is to die,

and the knowledge of death, and of its terrors, is one of man's first acquisitions on moving away from the animal condition.³⁷

Let us gather what has been said so far. To study the origin of human beings is to study the origin of speech, for, as Rousseau affirms in the opening line of his *Essay*, “speech (*la parole*) distinguishes man among other animals.” In the *Second Discourse* he states that speech is characterized by the use of general ideas, and that it is this capacity to have general ideas that distinguishes man from other animals. Rousseau also notes that it is not understanding, but the capacity of being a free agent that separates the two realms. For Locke, the superior degree of human understanding in relation to beasts allows human beings to live happily and free: the human capacity for abstractions is, therefore, an undeniably positive thing. From Rousseau's perspective, however, it is not through reason and understanding that man can be free. For him, the notion that human beings start *tabula rasa* and that all their ideas come from the effects of externality upon the senses would be a final blow to our already slim chance of freedom. Lockean freedom is, in Rousseau's eyes, sufficient to satisfy only our bodily existence and, as such, it does not break, philosophically, with determinism. For Rousseau, freedom is a power that coincides with the elementary consciousness at the birth of humanity, “for it is mainly in the consciousness of this freedom that the spirituality of the [human] soul exhibits itself.³⁸” It was, then, through this elementary consciousness that the first individuals acquired the power to concede to or resist their own instincts; for they

³⁷ SD, p. 142 (143).

³⁸ SD, p. 141 (142).

could only have done it *after* having started to recognize these instincts, i.e. after having started to realize that they had the power to challenge the impulses of nature.

We should not forget, however, the gloomy consequences that Rousseau associates with all this. Human perfectibility implies that the more capable we are, as a species, to become aware of our existence as individuals and of our differences with others, i.e. the more perfected or sophisticated are our languages and our human faculties, the greater the distance between ourselves, i.e. the more distant we become from the unity of the species, from the “original” situation when all individuals knew almost instinctively what they wanted. The more “perfected” we become, the less we know how to give meaning to our lives, and the more vulnerable and lost we, as individuals, become. In other words, the more we suffer with this progress, the more we seem to need, and thus to develop, the very things that make us suffer.³⁹ Philosophy appears as the attempt to overcome, intellectually, this degenerative process. In spite of the pessimistic prospects of freedom – i.e. in spite of the fact that freedom became less and less likely with the “progress” of mankind – Rousseau’s whole effort was made in the name of this unlikely freedom and against the deterministic direction adopted by the empiricists or the materialists. The first step towards the right direction is to rectify what, in any case, remains a paradox for the empiricist doctrine, namely, the explanation of how the first individuals of the species moved from particular to general ideas. The solution to this paradox lies in our passage on the origin of languages in the *Second Discourse*,

³⁹ Ibid.

the same passage in which Rousseau seems to affirm having no answer to the problem. Let us then return to that text.

In the last paragraph of our section,⁴⁰ Rousseau uses two apparently unrelated examples, the images of a tree and of a triangle, in order to illustrate the difficulty. We say “apparently unrelated” because one can think that Rousseau uses in reality only one image throughout the entire passage. The idea of *tree* had already appeared in the examples of *Oak* (“If one Oak was called A, another Oak was called B”) and, indirectly, of *fruit* (“When a Monkey unhesitatingly goes from one nut to another, are we to think that he has the general idea of this sort of fruit...”). We can also speculate about whether the example of the triangle is related to the idea of tree, perhaps as the first graphic representation of the general idea of that object.⁴¹ This would mean that, as with the Glaucus image, Rousseau would again be disguising his text with an optical illusion, by not revealing the different moments of the development of languages implied by the example(s). From this angle, what changes in the passage is not the object, but the perception and the communication of the ideas associated with this object (i.e. a tree), throughout the different moments implied by the apparently different examples.

We should examine the examples in light of what was established before. We saw that if the first words had the meaning of an entire proposition, they necessarily implied general ideas. If speech (*la parole*) is what distinguished the first human beings from beasts, and if the first words (*mots*) implied general ideas, then the

⁴⁰ SD, p. 148 (149-150).

⁴¹ Conversely, certain trees would have been seen as the first instances of objects perceived in *particular* triangular shapes.

capacity of forming or perceiving general ideas is what distinguished the first human beings from beasts.⁴² Moreover, if, as Rousseau affirms when he describes the perception of monkeys, the lack of this capacity is what stops other animals from modifying (“perfecting”) their language, it is clear that it must have characterized human beings since the inception of the species.⁴³ Regarding the image in the passage, we should therefore ask what was the *motivation* of the first individuals of the species to name a *tree*: what was the general idea that triggered that necessity?⁴⁴

⁴² In Locke, to have an idea, is to perceive something. Animals have senses, thus they have ideas. But all their ideas are perceived as particular ideas. Instincts and the instinctual language of animals obviously refer to “ideas” or actions that are common or general to the species. However, animals do not perceive these general ideas as humans do, because they do not perceive their instincts as objects; in Locke’s view, animals do not compare ideas or discern the operations of their minds (cf. *Essay*, II, 11 §5, and II, 9). The first human beings can be seen, in this sense, as the first animals that start perceiving their own instincts.

⁴³ Recent observations have shown that some monkeys (specifically, vervet monkeys) do have an elementary conventional language that approaches that described by Rousseau of the first human individuals. In light of these observations, Rousseau’s speculation about the commencement of specifically human traits in apes would have to be extended to a few other animals. Conversely, in light of Rousseau’s account, these animals would have already started their own humanization. Probably the most interesting case reported so far is that of prairie-dogs. Cf. C. N. Slobodchikoff, ‘Cognition and communication in prairie dogs,’ in *The Cognitive Animal*, pp. 257-264, MIT Press (2002).

⁴⁴ We should contrast this with Rousseau’s sentence earlier in the passage: “Each object was at first given a particular name without regard to kinds and Species (*Espèces*), which these first Institutors were not in a position to distinguish (...). [However], in order to subsume the beings under common and generic designations, their properties and differences had to be known.” Again, Locke’s imperfect paradigm of the origins creates the contradiction echoed here by Rousseau: “*Words*, says Locke, *in their primary or immediate Signification, stand for nothing, but the Ideas in the Mind of him that uses them*, how imperfectly soever, or carelessly those *Ideas* are collected from the [particular] Things” (*Essay*, III, 2, §2; see also III, 3, §§ 1-5). The contradiction should be obvious now: if the first *words* were particular names, i.e. represented merely the particular idea in the mind

Let us first remember that, in the passage from Rousseau's *Essay*, the word "Giants" had both an external and an internal referent: the object of another individual perceived as bigger and stronger, and the idea of the passion (fear) produced in the first individual by that perception. The external object is perceived by the senses, the internal by reflection. Different than Locke, Rousseau sees the appearance of human language in the full complexity of the phenomenon; for him, external and internal cannot (must not) be dissociated in order to be understood. Thus, on the one hand, the *word* is the representation of the *particular* idea of the external object perceived by the individual, and as such it is the *proper name* of that object *to the individual*; on the other, in order to be adopted by other individuals, namely, in order to become conventional, the word must, at the same time, be referring (as an unreflective metaphor) to an idea shared by others; the internal idea of the passion (fear), which was produced by the individual perception and expressed by the word "Giants," works, then, as this common ground (general idea) that will allow the imperfect but efficient communication to take place. The passage from the *Essay* implies, therefore, Rousseau's notion that the first words carried the meaning of an entire proposition.

The thought experiment in *Essay* with the idea of *man* is reproduced, albeit in a more obscure form, in the *Second Discourse* with the idea of *tree*. What was the general idea of a *fruit* (e.g. acorns) that the first individuals of the species had and

of the individual naming the object, and if general ideas only appeared later, then *how* and *why* were these supposed first individuals of the human species naming their perceptions? If we eliminate the faculties and the motives presupposed by Locke, what would make these individuals different than other animals?

monkeys had not? The external object must have been correlated to an internal sensation, and the idea of that sensation (the internal object of reflection) must have become the ground, as in the example of *fear*, for the communication between individuals. In an analogy with the example of “Giants,” the sensation or “passion” here is *hunger* and we can think of a word such as the word “Food” as the one invented to designate both the internal sensation of hunger and the external objects of oak’s acorns. The first general idea of a *tree* was in what the first individuals of the species “saw to be part of every tree,” namely, nourishment. After centuries of experiences and errors, the individuals would have recognized that the name “Food” was not adequate to express the idea of *tree*, for in the same way that not all men are “giants,” not all trees have edible fruits.⁴⁵

Thus, ideas start as general ideas and *later* become particular:

“Every general idea is purely intellectual; if the imagination is at all involved, the idea immediately becomes particular.”⁴⁶

In the same way that, at this later stage, human beings started to be perceived in their differences (some as stronger than others, some as bigger than others, etc.), in other words, in the same way that the physical differences between individuals started to strike the imagination as attributes and not as the essence of *man*, also the physical differences between trees, namely, whether or not they bear edible fruits, and whether those that do are “small or large, bare or leafy, light or dark,” started to strike the imagination as attributes and not as the essence of *trees*.

⁴⁵ Cf. EOL, ch. 3.

⁴⁶ SD, p. 148 (150).

But, Rousseau continues, “as soon as the imagination stops, the mind (*esprit*) can proceed only by means of discourse.” The sequence is, therefore, the following: once the objects to which our first abstract and general ideas were associated with started to be imagined in their differences, these first ideas gave place to particular ideas (“Every general idea is purely intellectual; if the imagination is at all involved, the idea immediately becomes particular”); in turn, through the formation of the “Logic of Discourse,”⁴⁷ these particular ideas gave place to general ideas (“as soon as the imagination stops, the mind (*esprit*) can proceed only by means of discourse”). The difference between the general ideas at the beginning and the ones at the end of this sequence is the difference between the general idea of the sensation (hunger) that the object of a *tree* represented to the first individuals, and the general idea of a *triangle*, which can only exist through the enunciation of the definition of the triangle and, therefore, which can only have appeared after the development of the various elements of the “Logic of Discourse.” Thus,

“[p]urely abstract beings are either seen in this way [e.g. a tree seen as only what there is in every tree], or conceived of only by means of discourse.”⁴⁸

Obviously, the general idea of triangles, which can be “conceived of only by means of discourse,” refers back to previous *particular* instances of triangular forms perceived in nature. At the same time, the discrimination of *particular* trees

⁴⁷ SD, p. 149 (151).

⁴⁸ “Every general idea is purely intellectual; if the imagination is at all involved, the idea immediately becomes particular. Try to outline the idea of a tree in general to yourself, you will never succeed; in spite of yourself, it will have to be seen as small or large, bare or leafy, light or dark, and if you could see in it only what there is in every tree, the image would no longer resemble a tree. Purely abstract beings are either seen in this same way, or conceived of only by means of discourse” (SD, p. 148 (150)).

preceded the *definition*, through the logic of discourse, of the general idea of *tree*. How, then, did those now called by Rousseau “new Grammarians” pass from particular to general names at this second birth of human language?

“[W]hen by means which I cannot conceive, our new Grammarians began to expand their ideas and to generalize their words, the Inventors’ ignorance must have restricted this method to within very narrow bounds; and *as they had at first* gone too far in multiplying the names of particulars because they did not know kinds and species, they subsequently made too few species and kinds because they had not considered the Beings in all their differences.”⁴⁹

The means, as Rousseau indicated before, was *discourse*. In the passage Rousseau seems to imply that because a *discourse* can be either spoken *or* written, a spoken discourse must *necessarily* entail the possibility of its being written. Hence, the solution to the apparent paradox of how particular names became general is in the possible historical relation between the examples given by Rousseau of *tree* and *triangle*, whereby the latter would have become the *written* representation of the general idea of the former, a plausible hypothesis that, as the highly hermetic rhetoric of the text suggests, must have been considered by Rousseau. If it is true that general ideas need the help of (written) discourse to enter the mind (*esprit*),⁵⁰ then the written representation of trees would explain everything: “In writing one is forced to use every word in its general meaning.”⁵¹

It is thus in the perspective open by the distance in time between the first individuals of the species and the *first grammarians*⁵² – a distance that almost

⁴⁹ Ibid. (my italics).

⁵⁰ Note that in the beginning of the paragraph Rousseau capitalizes the word. First, general ideas can only enter the *Mind* aided by words (*mots*); then they can enter the *mind* only aided by discourse.

⁵¹ EOL, ch.5, p. 260 (388).

⁵² The “enlightened minds” of chapter 3 of the EOL.

invisibly traverses the *Second Discourse* – where we should find the solution for the “embarrassment” caused by the question of the origin of languages.

In sum, it was not language or externality that brought the first individuals of the species out of their natural state of dispersion, but a reflective process that gradually became instinctive (i.e. inscribed in the species) and that made possible the individual utterances of general ideas. Human beings started to have general ideas before knowing how to articulate them. The first names were expressions of these ideas (e.g. the idea of *fear*). The names were *proper* insofar as the subject was not aware of the false identity between the word and the object identified with the idea of the passion. Due to the complexity of the process indicated above, despite this false identity, communication was effective, although imperfect. It is only from our privileged position in time that we realize what the first individuals of the species could not: that at all stages of its complex development, language is marred by the transpositions of ideas, illusions, or errors that issue from the necessity to split the mind. The irony of all this, which, we tried to show, was second nature to Rousseau, is that with all the errors of the first development of human communication, individuals then were closer to knowing themselves than they were after they started to both become aware and “address” those errors.⁵³ The formation of the “Logic of Discourse” allowed human beings to organize externality and make their lives more predictable, but only where externality is concerned,. In the sense intended by Rousseau, a *discourse* is based on the notion that knowledge proceeds from particular to general ideas. This is the logical principle on the base of almost

⁵³ Cf. SD, note 13 (“*b.”) and note 10 (originally marked “8”).

all human institutions, a principle assumed and described in detail by the empiricists, but which is philosophically inadequate for a discourse on a question that empiricism, in all its power, cannot grasp.

We will argue in the second part of this dissertation that there is a sort of political interdiction inscribed in the *Second Discourse* that conditions Rousseau's enigmatic and, in a certain way, purposefully deceitful account of the origin of languages and inequality. The interdiction concerns the negative consequences that the natural inequality implied by Rousseau would have, in principle, over his moral-political doctrine. We will see that, in this regard, the first peculiarity of the *Second Discourse* concerns its addressees. Although the book addresses primarily a privileged group of readers – the scholars of Dijon, on one side, and the Magistrates of Geneva, on the other – Rousseau does not address the potential philosophical readers of his book as potential *philosophers*, but as potential legislators of his natural morality and political doctrines. His whole system seems to hinge on this precondition. Apparently, no one but Rousseau was meant to have access to the incompatible reality between philosophy and politics inscribed in his discourse.

The intention in the second part of this dissertation will be to expose this hidden ambivalence in detail with an analysis of the *Second Discourse*'s Epistle Dedicatory, the text that contains the introduction to the central topic of the book, natural inequality. The intention will also be to better substantiate our interpretation so far, as well as the assumption, necessary for this interpretation, that Rousseau

wrote in the manner he did intentionally⁵⁴ – not an easy assumption, at least not before the whole picture becomes clear.

⁵⁴ In a letter written in the same years of the composition of the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau confesses his extraordinary precautions. The whole text should be considered, but here is a revealing passage: “I therefore had to take some precautions at first, and I did not want to say everything in order to make sure that everything got a hearing. I developed my ideas only successively and always to but a small number of Readers. I spared not myself, but the truth, in order to have it get through more readily and to make it more useful. Often I went to great trouble to try and condense into a single Sentence, a single line, a single word tossed off as if by chance, the result of a long chain of reflections. The majority of my Readers must often have found my discourses poorly structured and almost entirely disjointed, for want of perceiving the trunk of which I showed them only the branches. But that was enough for those capable of understanding, and I never wanted to speak to the others” (*Preface of a Second Letter to Bordes*, translation by V. Gourevitch, in *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, p. 110 (103)). Thus in Rousseau’s texts too, single words can have the meaning of an entire proposition (SD, p. 147 (149)). Consider also in its entirety this note from *Émile* already mentioned: “I have a hundred times in writing made the reflection that it is impossible in a long work always to give the same meanings to the same words. There is no language rich enough to furnish as many terms, turns, and phrases as our ideas can have modifications. The method of defining all the terms and constantly substituting the definition in the place of the defined is fine but impracticable, for how can a circle be avoided? Definitions could be good if words were not used to make them. In spite of that, I am persuaded that one can be clear, even in the poverty of our language, not by always giving the same meanings to the same words, *but by arranging it so that as often as each word is used, the meaning given it be sufficiently determined by the ideas related to it and that each period where the word is found serves it, so to speak, as a definition.* One time I say children are incapable of reasoning; another time I make them reason quite keenly. I do not believe that with that I contradict myself in my ideas; but I cannot gainsay that I often contradict myself in my expressions.” *Émile*, p. 108 (345). My italics.

Part Two

Inequality

Chapter 4

Passive and Active Sovereigns in the Epistle Dedicatory to the *Discourse of Inequality*.

1. In the first half of this dissertation we have focused on the question of the origin of languages in Rousseau. We have showed how deconstruction is grounded on an interpretation of Rousseau that fails to grasp the dual sense of his rhetoric; and we have argued that in the passages on the origin of languages, in both the *Essay on the Origin of Languages* and the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau's rhetoric hides a inextricable relation between the things that, as he says, distinguish human beings from beasts, namely, the capacity to form general ideas (the implicit condition for *speech*) and the capacity to be a free agent. In the second half of this work we will show how the account of the human origins contained within the complex rhetoric of the *Second Discourse* presents a political problem for Rousseau.

If humanity starts off with and through an inequality of powers, how can Rousseau reconcile the meritocratic or aristocratic politics that would in principle result from these natural inequalities with the democratic imperative of the general will? We will see how this problem figures in the background of the *Second*

Discourse with an interpretation of Rousseau's prelude to the book, the Epistle Dedicatory. In that text we find Rousseau's opposition between the political and the philosophical senses of freedom, and between the types of individual wills or dispositions that *generally* separate human beings between those who are willing to be ruled and those who desire to rule. Rousseau's central political notion of the unity of sovereignty is already present in the Epistle Dedicatory. However, the question of rulers and ruled in that text allows us to consider the general will – the seat of sovereignty in the *Social Contract* – under a new light. As such, the Epistle Dedicatory allows us to contemplate the problem of sovereignty from a perspective not entirely available in the *Social Contract*, i.e. from a psychological perspective. However, this opposition between rulers and ruled – to which Rousseau alludes already in the epigraph to the *Second Discourse* taken from Aristotle's *Politics* – is far from being explicit in the text and can only be revealed through the approach suggested in our previous chapters. This will be particularly true when confronting Rousseau's notes to the *Second Discourse*, as should become evident in our analysis of the first note to the book.

In our final chapter (chapter 6), we will expand on the relation between human freedom and the origin of languages, by focusing on the faculty responsible for human perfectibility, i.e. for what Rousseau calls the main difference between human beings and other animals. We will then consider the epigraph to the *Second Discourse*. Even before we start with the Epistle Dedicatory, the epigraph introduces the context for Rousseau's discussion of natural inequality. Aristotle's treatment of the natural inequality between rulers and ruled addresses precisely the

question of the political necessity of democracy at stake for Rousseau; it also sets the stage for the fundamental relation in the Epistle Dedicatory between speech and politics.

2. Rousseau's doctrine of popular sovereignty depends on a principle that, in and of itself, is the logical negation of democratic rule. The principle, which in a rather cryptic form is enunciated both at the beginning and the end of the main text of the *Second Discourse*, affirms that natural inequalities among men – both physical and intellectual – should ideally reflect a proportional moral and political inequality in the city.¹ The principle implies, in this way, the reversal of what an initial reading of the *Second Discourse* might suggest, namely, that inequalities among men only appear with civil society, that they would be negligible or inexistent were human beings (in their current constitution) dispersed and left abandoned to themselves, and thus that inequalities are fundamentally unjust.² In

¹ SD, pp. 131-2 (idem) and p. 188 (193-4). Few commentators explore Rousseau's views on natural inequalities and when they do they generally base their arguments on what Rousseau tells us about the figure of the great Legislator in the *Social Contract* as well as the many references in his work to the inevitable intellectual differences between human beings and the importance that they be somehow respected. In the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau goes beyond the merely empirical fact of human inequality; he considers natural inequalities, physical and intellectual, as being intimately related to the appearance of human freedom and, as such, as intrinsic to the development of humanity. For a consideration of Rousseau's inegalitarianism see Arthur Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man*, Chicago (1990), pp. 127-8, 155-9, 158 n. 16, 237-8, and 249 n. 19.

² Two questions disorient the reader: are we to think of natural inequalities as genetic acquisitions, as transformations that occur through education in the child already in society, or as a mix of both? Secondly, when Rousseau says that natural inequalities appear with society, does he mean society as we think of it today or society in its most remote sense, literally, the beginning of human communication (i.e. sociability)?

order to grasp what Rousseau is saying, it is necessary to make a distinction without which the *Second Discourse* makes no sense. Moral inequalities can be understood in two essentially different ways: as a difference of power based on individual constitutions (i.e. as psychological and intellectual inequalities) and as a difference of power based on circumstances (i.e. as the result of social and economic inequalities).³

To confound both sorts of inequality leads to the assumption that all moral and intellectual inequalities are consequences of externalities and, therefore, are developed with conventions and society. If we take this view to the extreme, human beings would, then, like other animals, be *equal* by nature concerning their intellectual potentials writ large, or their so-called souls.⁴ Our study of the Epistle Dedicatory will show that Rousseau starts actually with the opposite view: the underlying argument in that text points to an inevitable inequality among human beings concerning their basic disposition to rule and be ruled by others. We will

³ SD, pp. 131-2 (idem). “*Puissance*” and “*Richesse*” are naturally different concepts and their strict opposition illustrates our point here. In the text, however, one might think that they are used synonymously.

⁴ Starting conditions being the same for all, justice would need to be measured in terms of the individual’s industriousness and, at the limit, luck (or grace). Rousseau writes against the Lockean notion of private property as the crucial natural right. Locke’s moralization of labor apparently only exacerbates the disproportion between natural and conventional inequalities. Rousseau means specifically land property or any property that serves as ground for economic relations in a community. There is no property if the land in question is not part of a larger context and if the dominion over such a land has no political and economic implications of some kind for this larger context. Thus, for Rousseau, the first right to property only appears with the first political pact: no right and no morality are intrinsic to individual labor. The extension of the whole land delimits and, in a certain way, becomes the matter of the sovereign power in the state. With this in mind, if we think of the people as the sovereign, the whole land belonged originally to the whole people before it was divided among individuals, hence the natural thrust of republics.

approach the Epistle Dedicatory as the introduction to the philosophical premises to the *Second Discourse*, namely to the discussion of the difference between human beings and other animals and of the origin of inequality in the species. We will, thus, show that the Epistle Dedicatory should not be considered a merely political tract,⁵ but an integral part of the argument in the *Second Discourse*.

Before we turn to the text, let us make two further remarks about Rousseau's rhetorical strategy. First, as we have argued in the previous chapters, we must presuppose different lines of argument working alongside in the text. By not proceeding in this fashion, most of Rousseau's interpreters end up dividing the text between what is seen as the argument and mere rhetoric. The main difficulty with this assumption is in the fact that the analysis of the composition of the text (divisions, notes, wording, etc.) presupposes from the start a familiarity with Rousseau's hidden strategy. The analysis of Rousseau's first note to the *Second Discourse* – placed at the beginning of the Epistle Dedicatory – will be an example of this: his argument can only be articulated through an interpretation that has first taken into account his overarching strategy about his readers.⁶ Indeed, in the *Notice*

⁵ Cf. editor's notes to the Epistle Dedicatory, Gallimard, *Pléiade* ed. (1964), pp. 1286 – 1293; and H. Meier's notes to his edition of the *Second Discourse* (UTB, 1984), pp. 8 – 40. Both commentators take too seriously, in my view, what Rousseau says in a letter to Father Jean Perdriau (Nov. 28th, 1754) about the predominantly political intentions of the Epistle Dedicatory (for a new edition of this letter, see Meier, *op. cit.*, mainly pp. 438, 440, 444).

⁶ The fact that the Epistle Dedicatory and the Preface – and thus the first two notes of the *Second Discourse* – are placed before the Notice about the Notes (*Avertissement sur les notes*) suggests an oblique and, as we will see, deeper relation between the two texts and the rest of the work.

*about the Notes*⁷ Rousseau comes close to telling the attentive reader that it will be impossible to understand the parts before grasping the whole of his work, namely, that the argument of the notes can only be grasped after and in light of an understanding of the text as a whole.⁸

Secondly, all the sources directly or indirectly mentioned by Rousseau should be interpreted in this same spirit. It is true that the initial impression is that

⁷ “J’ai ajoûté quelques notes à cet ouvrage selon ma coutume paresseuse de travailler à bâton rompu. Ces notes s’écartent quelquefois assés du sujet pour n être pas bonnes à lire avec le texte. Je les ai donc rejettées à la fin du Discours, dans lequel j’ai tâché de suivre de mon mieux le plus droit chemin. Ceux qui auront le courage de recommencer, pourront s’amuser la seconde fois à battre les buissons, et tenter de parcourir les notes; il y aura peu de mal que les autres ne les lisent point du tout” (SD, p. 128).

⁸ In light of the method suggested in the *Avertissement*, a deconstructive analysis of the *Second Discourse* would be absurd. Rousseau presents his notes as deviations from the “straightest path” attempted in the main text. As any attentive reader of the *Second Discourse* knows, the notes are not glossing; instead they put the main text in a different perspective: they force the more courageous readers, as Rousseau says, to take the longer road and re-examine parts and whole. (Cf. the *Avertissement* with the sharp distinction made by Rousseau between those among his readers who can and who cannot judge in the Exordium, p. 132-3 (133), and pp. 159-160 (162-163). That said, the opposition between the philosophical and non-philosophical readers of the text cannot be resolved, as has been suggested by others, by an unreflective obedience to what Rousseau commends in the *Avertissement* – i.e. by a judicious reading of the notes – as if the notes contained a separated doctrine (the true teaching of the *Second Discourse*) and, more importantly, as if the text of the *Avertissement* were, different than the other parts of the *Second Discourse*, liable to be taken at its face value. The position of the *Avertissement* in the book should already raise the suspicion of the reader, as well as the fact that an appeal to courage is also an appeal to the vanity of the readers. The opposition in question can only be resolved by the less apparent and much neglected task of understanding how the notes, each in its own way, complete the whole philosophical enterprise of the *Discourse* as conceived by Rousseau, in the integrality of the text. Cf. with Michel Davis, *The Autobiography of Philosophy* (1999), pp. 89-92, particularly notes 9 and 14.

the *Second Discourse* was conceived and composed as a mosaic of ideas.⁹ However, Rousseau's use of the literature at his disposal is far from being merely referential; Rousseau is anything but a derivative thinker and, in fact, the originality of his thought includes the way he makes use of the philosophical tradition to which he belongs. Instead of considering his sources as influences, we should presuppose that he knows what he has to say before deciding how to say it, i.e. before applying his examples. We should presuppose that the way he employs them is part of his rhetorical strategy, that is to say, that the strategy conditions the sources, not the other way around. Although our approach to Rousseau's sources might strike some readers as unusual, we do not deviate from his own clues. As he explains somewhere else, he proceeds synthetically, not analytically.¹⁰ The main difficulty with his procedure – which will prove to be particularly revealing regarding

⁹ On the sources of the *Second Discourse* see mainly Robert Wokler, *Rousseau on Society, Politics, Music and Language*, ch. 2 and 3; and Jean Morel, *Recherches sur les sources du Discours de J.J. Rousseau sur l'origine et les fondements de l'Inégalité parmi les hommes* (1910).

¹⁰ "In giving examples, one has to know what one is doing; giving examples simply for the sake of doing so is a Pedant's occupation: I find it laughable when in so many books and in almost all conversations I find a few particular facts adduced in proof of general propositions. That is a Schoolboy's sophism to which a judicious writer may not stoop." Rousseau, *Idée de la méthode dans la composition d'un livre*, in *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, p. 303 (1246 in the *Pléiade* ed. Vol. II). Above in this same text he says: "It is difficult to form a good working plan unless one has an exact Mind and a perfect knowledge of one's material. On the other hand, with these two qualities it is difficult to make a bad one, provided one devotes to it all the attention which it requires. With the first, one takes all the parts of one's subject into account; with the other, one places them in the order that shows them to best advantage and that is best suited to set them off and to support one another" (p. 300 (1242)). "The choice of these proofs, how they are organized, and the light in which they are shown is what, above all, marks out the judicious Writer and the skillful Dialectician" (p. 301 (1243)). Cf. the translator's note on pp. 407-8. Compare these passages with *Émile*, p. 345.

references that are left either unidentified (such as Lucretius and Machiavelli) or in an enigmatic form (the quote from Aristotle's *Politics* as epigraph to the book) – is in the double task that it entails. It forces us to confront the source in question both historically and in the context of his strategy, the latter being generally characterized by the introduction of a subversive view through a language that dissipates the tension with his opponents. Rousseau's strategy includes, then, inducing his readers to hold their judgment about whether he is siding with or attacking the author he refers to. This procedure – the *modus operandi* in the *Second Discourse* – receives its clearest formulation in the following passage of his *Idea of a Method*:

I would begin my subject by presenting what I would like to prove in a manner that would make me appear conceding to my opponent far more things than I would concede in reality, leaving to the force of my arguments the right to eventually claim those factitious

concessions made in the beginning. This scheme still proves to be very effective in snaring the esteem of the Reader.¹¹

In sum, to confront the Epistle Dedicatory, we must start by presupposing the distinction implied by Rousseau between, on the one hand, his use of sources and the general arrangement of the book (the aspect that “determines the success of the work and the reputation of the Author”¹²) and, on the other, the fundamental arguments and the philosophical sense of that book. Put simply, we must presuppose a permanent detachment between what is said and what is meant: between words and concepts that on different levels compose his text. To start otherwise is to stop at every contradiction left on the surface of the text, something that can lead to the assumption that Rousseau was not up to the task he set for himself. Whether or not that was the case, his writing strategy must not be used as an excuse for an *a priori* dismissal of coherence in his work.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 301 (1243). The appeal to the unity of our cognitive faculties as the condition for operating through this method appears already *in nuce* in this early text: “A subtle analogy runs through most of the propositions one can make about one and the same subject, a hidden connection which escapes the vulgar Mind but which the true genius always grasps” (ibid.). An echo of this procedure can be heard in an exchange between two thinkers most admired by Rousseau, which regardless of whether or not he had access to, underlines the spirit of his method. The passage is from a letter by Fénelon to Bernard Lamy and refers to the dogma held by the establishment (the Church) about the infallibility of its judgment concerning the meaning of a text: “You know better than me, my reverend father, that there is no tangible common ground between the true sense of a text, considered only in itself, and the personal sense of the author. (...) The author might have changed his heart many times while composing his text. He might have wanted to hide his thought to render it impenetrable. (...) All that is part of [his] text works to shape the very sense of it. These things can often be signs of the personal thought of the author; but they are ambiguous signs, for the author might either have wanted to trick [his readers], or have tricked himself.” Fénelon, *Oeuvres*, p. 593, vol. 7, Paris, 1850. On Rousseau and the “*doctrine intérieure*” and his strategy regarding his readers in general, see mainly C. Kelly, *Rousseau as Author*, chapters 1 and 6, Chicago (2003).

¹² *Idée de la méthode*, p. 300 (1242).

3. Rousseau's Dedicatory to the Genevans has two parts or levels: the discourse itself and a discourse inside the discourse (§§14 – 21). These two discourses can be read as separate and independent from each other. The division reflects the difference between an action performed from within and one performed from outside the city: whereas in the main discourse (§§1 – 13, and §22) Rousseau addresses his public from the position of an active citizen – as it were, from within the city – in the parenthetical discourse (§§14 – 21) he speaks from the position of a citizen who, because of whatever accident, is outside.

If, less happy or too late grown wise, I saw myself reduced to ending a lame and languishing career in other Climes, in vain regretting the quiet and the Peace of which a youthful want of prudence would have deprived me; I would at least have fostered in my soul these same sentiments which I could not put to use in my country, and, imbued with tender and selfless affection for my distant Fellow-Citizens, I would from the bottom of my heart have addressed to them approximately the following discourse./ My dear Fellow-Citizens or rather my brothers...¹³

Moreover, the contents of the two discourses are different. Whereas in the main discourse Rousseau gives us a general, institutional, and idealized account of what would be for him the most just and free of republics, in the parenthetical discourse, the idealization of the Genevan republic assumes the form of practical advice to, and moral exhortation of, specific segments of that society. The dual character of the Epistle Dedicatory allows Rousseau to address his fellow citizens as if their country were, at the same time, a model for all times and peoples, and a historical reality.

¹³ SDED, §13. We will refer to the ED by paragraph number, since for that text the paragraphs in both the Gallimard (*Pléiade*) and the Cambridge editions coincide.

Right at the outset of the Epistle Dedicatory, Geneva is portrayed as an example of a city for all peoples.¹⁴ Addressing the sovereign citizens of the republic,

Rousseau says:

In looking for the best maxims which good sense might dictate regarding the constitution of a government, I was so struck to see them all implemented in yours that, even if I had not been born within your walls, I would have believed myself unable to refrain from offering this picture of human society to the one People which seems to me to possess its greatest advantages and to have best forestalled its abuses.¹⁵

To the characteristics that would make the virtues of his motherland universal or eternal, one must add, as just mentioned, its historical reality.¹⁶ Geneva cannot be seen simply as Rousseau's Kallipolis; it cannot reflect, in principle, an image of human nature in the way the paradigm in Plato's *Republic* purportedly does, due to the obvious implications of deducing human nature (universals) from a historical example (particulars).¹⁷ At the same time, in order to present his Geneva as *the* just city, Rousseau must inevitably depart from an idea of human nature, a necessary presupposition for a social order claimed to be valid for all times and all peoples. Geneva is eternalized only because it reflects something supposed to be eternal. Its political institutions would thus best contribute to the development of man's natural potentialities, and reflect, in opposition to any other example, a picture (*tableau*) of human nature. Whether the "eternal" here is a creation of God or of a human being remains to be seen.

¹⁴ Geneva is only mentioned by name towards the end of the text, namely, in the discourse inside the discourse.

¹⁵ SDED, §1. Cf. also SDED §12 and §15; and SD, pp. 147 (149) and 157 (160).

¹⁶ SDED §11 and §15.

¹⁷ Cf. *Rep.*, 458b, 466d-e, 487d-e, 499b-d, and 541a.

The contradiction between the *ideal* and the *actual* Geneva disappears if one considers as merely diffusive rhetoric Rousseau's injunction to the citizens to preserve eternally their present condition. It is, then, the imagination and the beliefs of the citizens that are at stake. If we do not take Rousseau's image seriously, Geneva would be the most just city only accidentally, namely, only when compared to other contemporary examples, and for being, in its historical context, the city where the freedom of its citizens is, by approximation, the closest to natural freedom. In other words, if we think of the freedom of its citizens as an imperfect freedom – if we believe that the image of freedom that Rousseau depicts in the Epistle Dedicatory does not represent, *from the perspective of the sovereign citizens*, the image of the highest possibility of human freedom, and that it does not correspond to their own projected perception of freedom – then we would have to ascribe to those citizens a consciousness about that imperfection. And if the citizens of the most just republic do not see themselves as perfectly free, Geneva cannot be seriously portrayed to them as a timelessly just city, only as a positive accident of the historical process exposed in the *Second Discourse*. In that case, its citizens would be aware of the limitation that the artificiality of laws, made to correct their deprived nature, imposes upon their will. The situation of the Genevan citizens would reflect the deterministic view of the human will defended by the “*Philosophes*” attacked by Rousseau.

If the latter view were true, the Epistle Dedicatory would be irrelevant to the main discussion of the *Second Discourse*. But if we assume that the freedom of the citizens is, or should be, actually perceived by them as freedom in its most absolute

sense (i.e. as the *full* accomplishment of their will), then we have to hold judgment about the aforementioned ambiguity of the text, and think of freedom from at least two perspectives: the perspective of those who perceive the law as natural due to its coincidence with their will; and the perspective of those who perceive the law in its sheer artificiality. With this distinction in mind, Geneva in the Epistle Dedicatory can be seen as not only the historical culmination of the process described in the *Second Discourse*, but also as the point of departure of that process: as artificial and natural at the same time.

The fact that the *Second Discourse* starts with the idealization of the city should not be underemphasized. It might indeed corroborate the possibility that Rousseau actually departs from the general psychological structure implied in the idealization of Geneva in order to formulate his account of the principles of natural morality in Part One of the *Second Discourse*. In order to examine the possibility of what one can think of as an idealistic sense of “historicism” in the book, one must reflect on the relation between will and law – in other words, on the legitimacy of political power – from the two perspectives on freedom just mentioned.

4. Most readers of the Epistle Dedicatory tend to assume, justifiably, that the text is generally addressed to the formal rulers of Geneva, referred to by Rousseau with the formal epithet, “MAGNIFIQUES, TRÈS HONORÉS, ET SOUVERAINS SEIGNEURS.”¹⁸ But to accept the assumption that the addressees of the Epistle Dedicatory are indeed the formal rulers of the city is to set aside another major

¹⁸ Cf. the English edition of the *Second Discourse*, p. 352 and Meier’s, notes 23, 25, and 33 (pp. 20-23, and p. 30).

consideration about the text. Seen from the perspective of their addressees, the two discourses that, as noted, constitute the Epistle Dedicatory create the following political problem. Whereas in the main discourse (§1 – 13, and 22) Rousseau speaks about the general, or ideal, character of the law in his imaginary city, in the parenthetical discourse he exhorts his fellow citizens to obey and respect the law in its specificity; the reflection on the law in the main discourse becomes, in the parenthetical discourse, a sort of unreflective wisdom about the law (“*la sagesse du Peuple*”¹⁹). If this is correct, the political problem is evident: the addressees of the main discourse are supposed to have a freedom, or a power, about the law in general that the addressees of the parenthetical discourse do not necessarily have. For this reason, the duality implied by Rousseau between the idealized and historical Geneva depends, in order to make sense and have more than a rhetorical function, on the possibility that the addressees of one discourse are not the same as the addressees of the other, and that the different epithets used in both discourses were not casually chosen by Rousseau. In other words, a clear distinction between the ideal and the historical in the Epistle Dedicatory depends on the hypothesis that the two discourses that constitute the text are different not only in their content, but also in their scope.

To say that the addressees of the two discourses differ in their presumed freedom regarding the law in general is to say that they differ in their individual potential for political power writ large – to be more precise, it is to say that they differ in the consciousness of freedom regarding their private and public *actions*.

¹⁹ SDED, §11.

The notion that the addressees of the Epistle Dedicatory are intended at once in their unity as people *and* in their different individual power, foreshadows the true topic of the Epistle Dedicatory, namely, the psychological-political relation of rulers and ruled in republics. This relation turns around the following fact: *when taken to the limit*, the freedom of rulers and the freedom of ruled become *essentially* or qualitative different. This is the conclusion that will follow from a careful reading of the Epistle Dedicatory and that produces embarrassment when weighed against Rousseau's subsequent democratic formulae. For if there is an essential difference between the freedom of rulers (understood in the highest sense of the term as those who have the power to interpret, change, and make the most fundamental laws in society) and the freedom of the people, then there must be also an essential difference between the *sovereignty* of these rulers and that of the people, at least when we think of sovereignty in its *active sense*, namely, as the political and legislative power that both affects and responds to the general will of the people.

In this sense, the whole question of sovereignty in the state – or of who are indeed the *Souverains Seigneurs* in the Epistle Dedicatory – must be approached through a psychological consideration of freedom. That is to say, the question must be considered in light of the several possibilities of freedom that issue from the ways in which the individual imagination is affected by laws in general, but specifically by the laws on which the general will is, so to speak, anchored. The problem with this view is that Rousseau's democratic theory is predicated on the idea that a republican sovereignty must lie *undivided* in the general will of the

people. The question broached by the Epistle Dedicatory leads us, then, to a paradox regarding Rousseau's doctrine of undivided sovereignty.²⁰

The difference regarding the freedoms of rulers and ruled only becomes *essential* or qualitative when the general will itself becomes the object of an action. But before we turn to this qualitative difference, we should briefly re-create the structure of what will later become the argument in the *Social Contract*, and consider the difference from within the framework of the general will. Let us initially put aside the problematic figure of the Legislator in Rousseau and consider the question of the merely *gradual* (quantitative) difference among the members of the republic regarding their consciousness of freedom about public and private actions.

Depicting the *tableau* of his country, Rousseau says the following:

I should have wished to be born in a country where the Sovereign and the *people* could have had only one and the same interest, so that all the motions of the machine might always tend only to the common happiness; since this is impossible unless the *People* and the Sovereign are the same *person*, it follows that I should have wished to be born under a democratic government wisely tempered.²¹

We must ask, before anything, why a wisely temperate democratic government would necessarily follow from an indiscriminate identity between sovereignty and

²⁰ The Epistle Dedicatory opens a different, and in my view more revealing, perspective on sovereignty than the one found in the *Social Contract*. This possibility has been largely overlooked. For instance, Derathé speaks of the Epistle Dedicatory as a “*panégyrique ingénu*” and dismisses the difference between that text and other texts such as the *Social Contract* and the *Letters Written from the Mountain* (“*écrits à dix ans de distance*”) as a result of Rousseau's inconsistency or “change of mind” on the matters at issue. See *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et la science politique de son temps*, Vrin (1979), pp. 10-11, On the question of sovereignty, see the *Appendix* to this work.

²¹ SDED §3. My italics.

the (will of the) people. Can a democracy be temperate without at least some compromise of the identity between sovereignty and the people? The answer depends, naturally, on what one means by this power called sovereignty and by its coincidence with the will of the people. Without pushing the argument too far, we will start with the premise that Rousseau intentionally refers to two senses of “people” in the passage (people, People). The ambiguity implied in the unqualified identity between sovereignty and people would be represented by the two spellings of the word (as a general and as a proper name), which we see as a first sign to a more crucial distinction to be found a few lines down the text.²²

We can interpret the passage as follows. The fact that the interest (or will) of the *people* (understood as the collective imagination that passively expresses a general desire) must be the same as the interest of the sovereign, does not mean that the *People* (understood as the sum of individual *agents* of particular desires) is able to positively act, as if it were an autonomous body, in its own interest – an interest which the people only knows, *in its unity as people*, as an unreflective feeling or instinct. The distinction should become clearer towards the end of this analysis, but in sum it simply means that our unity as a people is based on our capacity to agree about *what* we want, not on a capacity to rationally know, as a body, *how* to achieve our common goals. Accordingly, the two senses of “people” (people, People) can be thought to denote, respectively, a passive and an active sense of their will. To think of a passive and an active sense of the will is also to think of a passive and an active

²² Cf. section on the origin of languages in the SD with the passage from *Émile* quoted above, p. 345.

sense of the power of sovereignty, a power which would, then, vary among individuals according to the lesser or greater degree of awareness of one's own general will, i.e. of the extent to which that individual recognizes himself (his will) as the locus of the general will. Let us bracket for the moment the distinction drawn in the *Social Contract* – which, at any rate, should not be taken at face value – between the action of government and the action of the sovereign.²³ What the Epistle Dedicatory allows us to conjecture is that the republic is only temperate when the interests of the *people* (as the collective imagination that passively expresses the general desire), not being an object of a direct action by the *People* (as the sum of individual agents of particular desires), are ordered by the *person* of their representatives. Would then the legislative actions of these representatives have, as actions, a more sovereign character than whatever action the united general will is capable of? Rousseau's answer is clear:

In order to forestall the self-seeking and ill-conceived projects and dangerous innovations which finally ruined the Athenians, I should have wished that not everyone have the power to propose new Laws (*Loix*) according to his fancy; that this right belong to the Magistrates alone; even that they exercise it so circumspectly that the People, for its part, be so guarded in granting its consent to these Laws, and that their promulgation require so much solemnity that, before the constitution became unstable, there had been time to realize that it is above all the great antiquity of the Laws that renders them sacred and venerable, that the People soon scorn those they see change every day, and that, by getting used to neglecting ancient ways on the pretext of doing better, great evils are often introduced to correct lesser ones./ I should above all have fled as necessarily ill-governed a Republic where the People, believing it could do without its Magistrates or leave them no more than a precarious authority, had imprudently

²³ *Du Contract Social*, III, 1. Henceforth, SC.

retained in its own hands the administration of Civil affairs and the execution of its own Laws (...).²⁴

The Epistle Dedicatory anticipates the question – only partially resolved in the *Social Contract* – of whether the undivided and inalienable sovereignty of the people is ultimately predicated on the condition that the *active* side of this sovereignty be not in the hands of the people, but in the hands of their single representatives; differently put, it anticipates the question of whether the legislative “action” ascribed to the people – i.e. their consent to the laws – is generally pre-conditioned by other actions of a more sovereign nature.²⁵

Let us move by steps. First, the *idealized* version of Geneva in the Epistle Dedicatory might lead some readers to inadvertently absorb sovereignty into

²⁴ SDED § 9-10.

²⁵ Part of the reason for Rousseau’s oblique treatment of this question can be explained as follows. The doctrine of the sovereign will of the people naturally requires that the people believe in the face value implication of the identity, namely in their power to act indeed as a sovereign body. In the *Social Contract*, Rousseau “solves” the difficulty by suggesting that “*la sanction aux Loix*” (SDED, §11) is the fundamental *activity* of the sovereign (SC, II, 6). However, this should not be interpreted as a trick on his part. The *Second Discourse* shows that, for Rousseau, philosophy is not about insurmountable extremes, but about the permanent possibility of movement and change. What can be thought of as a strong element of conservatism in his politics is merely the expression of the character of the general will. We believe that, ultimately, Rousseau’s goal was to stimulate one’s sense of belonging to the state, as well as a possible ascent from what can be seen as an initially naïve situation to one of effective political action – an action that transcends one’s own immediate interests. This is one of the main issues that separates him from liberalism and from some of the fundamental principles of the republicanism that starts, arguably, with Machiavelli. If we openly ascribe to the people a predominantly, not to say exclusive, private existence in the state, they would not only be excused to start with the assumption that they are ignorant about *how* to achieve their common goals (general will) – i.e. that they are ignorant about political action simply – but also, as the main consequence of that posture, they would tend to lose sight of those very common goals (general will), and through political indifference and self-absorption enter a perpetual cycle of dissatisfactions.

government, believing to preserve, at the same time, Rousseau's precept of undivided sovereignty: they would see the authority responsible for "the administration of Civil affairs and the execution of its own Laws" (i.e. government) as the *active* side of sovereignty, and the power of consent of the people as a *passive* sovereignty. That this schematic division is invalid can be attested by the *Social Contract*, where government is not assimilated to, but appears as an emanation, and thus an instrument, of the sovereign authority.²⁶ But to better understand why sovereignty cannot split up, we should consider Rousseau's analogy, in his article *On Political Economy*, between the constitution of the republic and that of a human being.

The sovereign power represents the head; the laws and customs are the brain, principle of nerves and seat of the understanding, the will, and the senses, of which the judges and the magistrates are the organs.²⁷

The will (*volonté*) in question is, therefore, a function of pre-existing laws and customs; the will of those who create the laws and modify the customs is not mentioned. The analogy must take into account the fact that *most* human beings cannot clearly differentiate between what part of their individual will is passive and what part is active, and that free individuals tend to believe in their own self-determination. For this reason, the free individuals in the state would also believe in the freedom or self-determination of the political body of which they are part. If the individuals believe in the autonomy of their political body – i.e. of their general will – it would make no sense for them to locate the principle of action of this will in the

²⁶ SC, II, 2.

²⁷ *Sur l'économie politique*, Pléiade edition vol. III, p. 244.

persons of judges and magistrates, i.e. government, which Rousseau associates with the organs of the senses.

Thus the *sovereign general will* cannot be divided and the political representatives cannot represent the general will. The analogy between the political and the psychological constitution²⁸ makes no sense, at least not from the perspective of the single human being, if we attempt to classify the different parts of the political body in terms of what is passive and what is active in the regime, for there would be no correspondence to the way things happen or are organized in the individual. The action of the sovereign power cannot be institutionalized and must be found necessarily disseminated among the citizens; it is in our human constitution that we all, albeit in different degrees, want to participate in the action.²⁹

²⁸ Which can also be seen as an analogy between the freedom of a particular will and the freedom of the general will (i.e. the will of the political body). Ibid., p. 245.

²⁹ One should wonder whether also here Rousseau would differ from the reductionist view of the time. For men like Condillac or Helvetius, for whom human beings are virtually equal by nature, and for whom the will is nothing but a re-active expression of the organs of sense-perception, the idea of a merely formal definition of (active) sovereignty as government might have been unproblematic, or simply a matter of indifference. When all action is theoretically pre-determined and part of an endless chain of cause and effect, political action becomes the matter of a positive ordering of the objects of sense-perception; politics becomes economics. From this perspective, the concept of a sovereign action can be formalized (institutionalized) through a rational-empiricist approach to law and government. Sovereignty would not be in the general will any longer, but, as it were, in the rationality behind a political action that takes for granted what the general will always wants. The right to property and the quest for security and comfort become political principles based on universal reason and thus applicable to any human society. The political action here is limited to a private and public economic optimization, in a shallow sense of these notions.

It is true that because the human mind is both active and passive, productive and reproductive, both sides of the sovereign will are present in every citizen. However, the predominance of passivity or activity varies, for several reasons, from person to person. Let us think of citizens in their greater or lesser disposition to debate and interpret laws in general. Supposing the situation described by Rousseau, in which the formal rulers of the state are chosen according to their acknowledged merits, the *unity of the general will* at stake in the analogy between individual and state can be reiterated in the following manner. The predominantly passive will of the people and the predominantly active will of their representatives would be complementary sides of the same thing when the actions of the representatives *slavishly* reflect the general will of the people. As such, the general will of these representatives, although better articulated, would not be *essentially* different from the general will of the people. In other words, were representatives and people under exactly the same *moral commands*, then the undivided sovereignty of the general will (as both an active and passive will) would remain intact. The identity between sovereignty and people indicated in the Epistle Dedicatory would be preserved and the freedom of both rulers and ruled would be equally defined by the “*honorable joug (...), salubre et doux*” that only the eternity of a law of laws – a law that unifies the desires of both rulers and ruled – can provide.³⁰ This would come as no surprise, especially in light of what Rousseau says about religion in the Epistle Dedicatory³¹ – although whether those moral commands come from religion or from what is believed to be a rational inquiry concerning human nature does not change

³⁰ SDED §4.

³¹ Cf. SDED §19.

the fact that, in the end, they can become laws obeyed with equal obstinacy. In a state where the highest legislators are seen as the advocates of a practical harmony between the general will and the supreme moral principles of which they themselves are followers, it is, therefore, not contradictory to affirm that the general will is the seat of an undivided sovereignty.

From this point of view, the unity of sovereignty depends, to a great extent, on the *pre-conditioning* of all wills involved in the social pact. In order for the general will to be sovereign, the fundamental laws in the state must be perceived as *natural* limits to one's will. There is no place in Rousseau's analogy for a will that is independent from the law, namely, that perceives the law in its artificiality. Yet, obviously, both postures exist in any society.³²

These different perceptions of freedom in relation to the laws in a republic is precisely what creates a problem for the sovereignty of the general will. This is the question that ultimately conditions the rhetorical strategy in the Epistle Dedicatory. Unfortunately, the supposition that the maximum rulers of the state (should) legislate in *blind obedience* to the supreme laws of the country makes the *action* of these rulers pre-conditioned by the logic behind those supreme laws. In a word, the highest citizens of the state would never be able to enjoy, in that case, the highest possible freedom. Is it not the case, however, that if the people should not be expected to be philosophically aware of the conventional character of the laws that

³² We should focus here on the moral laws that, in a state where the general will is sovereign, give, in principle, the direction for both public or private actions. Let us note that as a function of the different consciousness of freedom that each individual has regarding public and private actions, this distinction is inscribed in Rousseau's strategy regarding his addressees.

rule their lives, the highest rulers of the republic should not be expected to be enslaved by their own rules? This apparent contradiction implies that the highest rulers are not the highest citizens, i.e. the governors (judges and magistrates), of the state.

If there are supreme laws that guide both the actions of statesmen and the expectations (will) of the people, the true *active* sovereigns of society are those who interpret, change, and above all make those supreme laws. Therefore, if, at any given moment, a truly independent (free) will starts to have a determinant changing power over all other wills put together – i.e. a sovereign power over the very laws that unite the general will³³ – then *that* is the highest sense of the sovereign will. When a truly free will appears in the state, the political freedom of the individual citizens is threatened, for the laws that guarantee that freedom (i.e. their general will) can be challenged.

5. Right before he introduces, with his first note to the text, the paradigm for this paradoxical and dangerous political situation, Rousseau reiterates, in the main text of the Epistle Dedicatory, the idealized version of his State:

I should have wished, then, that no one (*personne*) inside the State could have declared himself to be above the law (*loi*), and that no one (*Personne*) outside it could have imposed any [law] which the State was obliged to recognize. For, regardless of how a government is constituted, if there is a single individual in it who is not subject to the law, all the others are necessarily at his discretion.³⁴

³³ Cf. SC, III, 10.

³⁴ SDED §5. The first note to the *Second Discourse* is given right after this text. Its content, to be treated in the next chapter, must be interpreted in light of the question here at stake.

The analogy between individual and state is only possible when the *will* of both beings perfectly coincide. Only in this ideal case the image of the republic will perfectly mirror the image of the single human being. In order for that to happen, any action over the general will (the most sovereign sort of action) must be done in a way whereby the unity of the wills in question is not disturbed. The perfect state, a state where the particular wills perfectly coincide with the general will, can only exist if its true *masters* (those responsible for the unification of the wills) stay out or are invisible in the state. Rousseau's analogy shows us how, in the extreme case, the political freedom of the individual citizens is incompatible with free will understood in a philosophical sense, namely, as a will free or completely independent from the other wills. The main reason for this incompatibility is in the fact that whereas the political freedom of the citizens – understood either as a negative “limitation of the general will” or as a positive “obedience to the law that one prescribes to oneself”³⁵ – is egalitarian, the philosophical freedom of this potential sovereign actor, being characterized precisely by the absence of any submission to either the law or the general will, is by definition non-egalitarian.

That said, if the existence in the community of a truly independent will is, ultimately, incompatible with the doctrine of the undivided sovereignty, it does not invalidate the psychological necessity of that doctrine. A radically free mind would be the extreme case of the various degrees of consciousness of freedom found among the members of a society. Rousseau does not explicitly consider this extreme case because of the potential threat that such an individual would pose to the laws

³⁵ Cf. *Social Contract*, I, 8.

that establish the ethical boundaries of political freedom. This is why the extreme case must not appear in a discourse about the sovereignty of the general will *made from within the framework of that general will*.

Since, as a concept, the *active* sovereignty of the general will escapes the logic of democratic public institutions – namely, since it cannot simply coincide with (or be reduced to) the political power of the formal rulers of the republic (much as such a coincidence is desired) – it must be considered as a power that certain individual actors acquire, regardless of their position in the state. The perspective here is that of someone who knows the motives behind individual wills in general better than the individuals themselves. Provided that the psychological advantage of these single individuals is used wisely, there is no contradiction between Rousseau’s principle of the unity of sovereignty and their potential sovereign action, even if, in theory, one thing will always exclude the other.

Before the extreme case of the radically free mind appears in the text, the Epistle Dedicatory invites us to consider the intermediate cases, anticipating the meritocratic scheme indicated at the end of the *Second Discourse*.³⁶ The rank order implied by Rousseau points precisely to the gradual difference regarding the political action writ large of the individual members of society. In his last note to the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau calls for an awareness by the citizens about these differences.

³⁶ Cf. SD, note 19 (originally marked “15”).

[A]s all the members of the State owe it services proportionate to their talents and forces, Citizens ought, in return, to be distinguished and favored in proportion to their services.³⁷

We must distinguish here between an awareness regarding our individual actions (*services*), i.e. regarding our capacity to accomplish these actions, and an awareness regarding the actions of others, i.e. regarding the value of the action itself and the honors associated with it. One is the awareness of our duty, the other of the rewards proportional with that duty. In one case, the action is independent from the opinion of others; in the other, the action views recognition.³⁸ Therefore, the greater or lesser sovereign character of an action, i.e. the degree to which it issues from the general will, depends on two completely different assessments. The correct estimation of one's own talents and strengths, and consequently of the actions to be performed by that individual, has no relation with the correct estimation of the actions of others and of the honors given in recognition to those deeds. That the people recognize the merits of an action does not mean that they correctly evaluate the talents and strengths behind the action. In other words, the people might "recognize" and reward the action of someone not really responsible for that action, or whose talents and strengths are not proportional with the action rewarded.

Hence, honors are important to stimulate the right actions, but it is one's sense of duty that concentrates the general will in a republic. In this sense, knowing one's realm of action is more fundamental than knowing what reward would be

³⁷ "It is to public esteem to draw the distinction between wicked and good individuals (*entre les méchants et les gens de bien*).” Ibid.

³⁸ We mean here citizens in general; as we shall see, not all actions that receive public recognition are necessarily fueled by vanity.

proportional to a given action. In spite of the necessity of honors in the state, no action can be sovereign if performed in view of the opinion of others. Instead, the more the action depends on the knowledge of one's talents and strengths, the more it is sovereign, i.e. the more authentically and coherently it unifies the general will: I do what I do because, in proportion to my talents and strengths, this is *the best way* I can serve the general interest. This is the principle upon which the sovereignty of the general will depends.

It is not the psychological *coherence* between one's capacities and one's actions that varies in the idealized example of Geneva depicted in the Epistle Dedicatory; what varies is the capacities themselves, i.e. the different talents and strengths of the different citizens. To the extent that an identity between sovereignty and people is possible in the text, it will depend on the hierarchy of action established through the principle of distributive justice, "to each his own."

6. The manner in which Rousseau treats his addressees in the Epistle Dedicatory suggests this hierarchy of action, which is indeed a hierarchy of *sovereign* action. The distribution in the state between greater or lesser active sovereignty, or simply between the activity and passivity of its members, obeys a broader scheme than the formal rulers of the state addressed by Rousseau would, in principle, be willing to concede.

Rousseau alters throughout the text the epithet with which he addresses his public. The main difference between these forms is, precisely, in the use or omission of the word *Souverains*. Of the two discourses that compound the Epistle

Dedicatory, one is addressed to the “*MAGNIFIQUES, TRÈS HONORÉS, ET SOUVERAINS SEIGNEURS*,” and the other (the parenthetical discourse) to different parts of society *not* specifically referred to as “*SOUVERAINS*.” There are usually two apparent explanations for these different epithets. One is that Rousseau simply follows the protocol, as it were, and addresses first the citizens, members of the *Conseil Général* of the state, and then, in the parenthetical discourse, the single Magistrates.³⁹ However, the *Conseil Général* is clearly not the seat of sovereignty understood in its passive sense; its members are not *the people*. Neither is it the seat of active sovereignty, for even if it were taken as the government (which it was not), the concept of sovereignty resists being institutionalized, as we have shown, for not being a merely political category. This interpretation is thus untenable.

Secondly, one could try to by-pass the difficulty and claim that Rousseau is actually evoking the whole people by generally addressing them as “*SOUVERAINS SEIGNEURS*.”⁴⁰ In that case, we would have to dismiss the difference between the two discourses that compound the Epistle Dedicatory, a difficult step if we accept the hypothesis that both the main discourse and the parenthetical discourse are intentionally directed to different addressees. We would also have to presuppose that, at the limit, by addressing the people *as one body* Rousseau would expect them, as a body, to respond to the implicit argument and the dialectical nature of his discourse, an even more unlikely hypothesis. One thing is to see the people, *in the passive sense of their will*, as the seat of sovereignty; another is to address a text

³⁹ This view is defended by Gourevitch and Meier (see note above).

⁴⁰ Note, however, that the most generic epithet in the Epistle Dedicatory, “*Mes chers Concitoyens ou plutôt mes frères*,” opens the parenthetical discourse, i.e., §14.

such as the Epistle Dedicatory to the people as sovereign masters. The difference here between passive and active sovereignty is crucial.

Rather, we should consider the logic that makes the parenthetical discourse necessary. In light of what Rousseau tells us in his closing note to the *Second Discourse*, if we examine the Epistle Dedicatory obliquely we see that the “SOVEREIGN MASTERS” can be understood as potentially the individuals who – regardless of their political and social status, and opposed to the conformity or passivity of the majority – end up carrying out, in the most conscious and measured way, their own free will. As such, Rousseau’s epithets would refer to different psychological dispositions. The terminology and the manner in which he addresses his public in the Epistle Dedicatory would be, then, consistent with the rank order that, as we have been suggesting, tacitly characterizes his republic.

Epithets are used eight times in the text: in the parenthetical discourse, the epithets “*Mes chers Concitoyens ou plutôt mes frères,*” “*Aimables et vertueuses Citoyennes,*” and “*MAGNIFIQUES ET TRÈS HONORÉS SEIGNEURS*” (twice); and in the main discourse, the epithet “*MAGNIFIQUES, TRÈS HONORÉS, ET SOUVERAINS SEIGNEURS*” (twice in the main text, and twice, as the opening and closing epithets framing the text). The mere comparison between these forms should, by now, illustrate our point. We can tentatively order the epithets as follows: the first pair would refer to law-abiding citizens and most women; the second pair to law-abiding magistrates and clergy, i.e. the formal rulers of the state; and the third pair to those among citizens *and* formal rulers who, being more conscious of their freedom, have the will to act in the name of all, in spite of, in

principle, individual ambitions and the established conventions exemplified in the content of the parenthetical discourse.

↑ Free agency	MOST ACTIVE INDIVIDUALS (LEGISLATORS OF THE GENERAL WILL)	ACTIVE CITIZENS (“ <i>MAGNIFIQUES, TRÈS HONORÉS, ET SOUVERAINS SEIGNEURS</i> ”)	ACTIVE FORMAL RULERS (“ <i>MAGNIFIQUES, TRÈS HONORÉS, ET SOUVERAINS SEIGNEURS</i> ”)
	FORMAL OR PUBLICLY RECOGNIZED RULERS (MAKERS OF CONVENTIONAL LAWS)	CLERGY (“ <i>MAGNIFIQUES ET TRÈS HONORÉS SEIGNEURS</i> ”)	MAGISTRATES (“ <i>MAGNIFIQUES ET TRÈS HONORÉS SEIGNEURS</i> ”)
	PREDOMINANTLY PASSIVE MAJORITY (LAW KEEPERS)	MOST WOMEN (“ <i>Aimables et vertueuses Citoyennes</i> ”)	PASSIVE CITIZENS (“ <i>Mes chers Concitoyens</i> ”)

We are left with the two epithets framing the text, which would represent the two most abstract realms of sovereignty: the aforementioned passive wisdom of the whole people (the will of the political body), and, as we shall see in the next chapter, the philosophical action of outsiders.⁴¹

⁴¹ One should suspect whether some of these “SOVEREIGN MASTERS” are potentially those whose “sinister interpretations and venomous discourses” must not, in principle, be heard by the citizens; those like Rousseau, whose “secret motives” place them necessarily outside the official order. In the parenthetical discourse of the Epistle Dedicatory, Rousseau casts the words of those invisible potential rulers or outsiders as always evil and dangerous for the public repose: “beware [my dear Fellow-Citizens] of ever heeding sinister interpretations and venomous discourses, the secret motives of which are often more dangerous than are the actions they are about” (§15). (Rousseau follows these words by affirming that a “good and loyal Guardian (...) barks only when Thieves draw near.”) A few lines below, any suspicion one could have about Rousseau’s own venom or secret motives innocently disappears through his forceful depiction of his father as the ideal citizen, and hence through his own natural inheritance of, and participation in, the honors of Genevan citizenry (§17-18). Note again that the parenthetical discourse is pronounced from an

There is a final reference in the text that can help us to illustrate the movement between the positions in this hypothetical rank order. In the final paragraphs of the parenthetical discourse Rousseau refers to those who have in themselves the potential, due to greater talents and strengths, either to be given the highest honors in the state, or to conduct, within the framework of the general will, the most sovereign actions in the state.⁴² Rousseau speaks here specifically of the general education of the people, and, consequently, of the customs and laws that constitute that education. He anticipates his endless discussions about the morality between the sexes, women as the matrix of moral understanding and rule in society,⁴³ as well as his permanent concern with the fate of the young, victims of the corruption of taste brought about by cosmopolitan arts, spectacles, and luxury.⁴⁴

The main issue in the three paragraphs on customs and education that conclude the parenthetical discourse concerns the implicit addressees in that section of the text. Rousseau silently changes his terminology here. He equates the main receivers of that education to those with the *potential* to be the future preceptors of morality in the society. In these paragraphs, the reference to the “people” (*peuple*)

outside perspective (see §13). Rousseau’s rather guarded exhortations of the philosophical life, as the highest step in our hypothetical ladder of sovereignty are expressed in the following passages: *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*, Pléiade edition vol. III, p. 29; SD, p. 132-3 (133), 153-4 (156), p. 157-9 (160-2), note 9 (marked originally “7”), §13, p. 203 (207). See also SC, II, 7, pp. 381-384 and Machiavelli, *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio (Discourses on Livy)*, I, 9, 2 and I, 17, 3.

⁴² SDED, §19-21.

⁴³ Cf. SDED §20, with SD, p. 155-6 (158).

⁴⁴ “..le puerile et funeste goût est le plus mortel ennemi du bonheur et de la liberté” (SDED §21). The final section of the Epistle Dedicatory represents in a way the conclusion of the diagnosis conducted in the *Second Discourse* and it can be seen as a link to Rousseau’s subsequent works.

disappears; instead Rousseau speaks of “*Gens*” (or “*gens*”) in four instances: “*peu de Gens*,” “*Gens de Lettres*,” “*jeunes Gens*,” and “*les prétendus gens de goût*.” The interest here is clearly less with the etymological difference of the terms (*peuple*, *gens*) than with the clear allusion to those among the citizens who will eventually occupy the higher ranks of sovereignty. Education is the vehicle to active sovereignty, but *as such* it is only effective with those naturally predisposed for the action in question. The principle of distributive justice is a result of the natural inequality thesis whereby individuals are *not exclusively* the product of experience and education. As far as talents and strengths go, individuals are unequal by nature; hence, the greater potential of these future guardians of society addressed by Rousseau might have been due to their superior natural disposition.

If, among other things, we consider the pervasiveness of this aristocratic principle throughout the text of the *Second Discourse*, we can conclude that Rousseau’s first concern in the Epistle Dedicatory is not with the will of the people as a whole, but with that of these potential guardians of the general will who, due to young age or other inconveniences, must wait in the limbo, as it were, between rulers and ruled. This is why the text here represents a transition between the two discourses that constitute the Epistle Dedicatory. “*Les Gens*” can be seen as the present and future bearers of the moral bond between the laws of the city and the imagination of the people. And if it is possible that a magistrate be one of “*les Gens*”, it is not a necessity that “*les Gens*” get involved in politics.

The *Second Discourse* is a special chapter of Rousseau’s pedagogy. In the Epistle Dedicatory, the invisibility of his educational action can be justified by the

ambiguous sense of Rousseau's confessed patriotism. There is a tension between the interest or reasons (humanity, friendship, and the moral virtues in general) that animates the "virtuous Patriot,"⁴⁵ and the "tender affection" that animates the "true Patriot."⁴⁶ There is also a contrast between the zeal (*zèle*) behind the "love for the Fatherland," and the zeal (*zèle*) of the "virtuous Citizen" with whom Rousseau identifies himself in the beginning of §1.⁴⁷ The virtue of the "true Patriot" is, in this way, not evident, and if his "tender affection" is simply an affection for mankind,⁴⁸ his "respect" for the laws and conventions in general might be just a façade for an action that must be covert in order to be effective. Hence, the educational action of the "true Patriot" might collide with the "salutary trust which reason owes to virtue," that is to say, with "the secret voice of conscience" and "the most respectful firmness" of the citizens.⁴⁹ To avoid strain, his motives must be more secret to the people than the secret voice of their conscience; but his action must resemble that of a "good and faithful Guardian who only barks when Thiefs draw near." Even in the idealized Geneva, "the Laws", says Rousseau, "unite *almost* all of us."⁵⁰

In conclusion, we should also add that the general importance of the religious and moral education of the people established in the Epistle Dedicatory does not contradict the principles of natural morality introduced in the main text of the *Second Discourse*. On the contrary, the Geneva of the Epistle Dedicatory can be

⁴⁵ SDED §12.

⁴⁶ SDED §13 and §22.

⁴⁷ Cf. also note 9 ("7"), §13, p. 203 (207).

⁴⁸ See end of SDED §22.

⁴⁹ SDED §15.

⁵⁰ SDED §14, my italics. Cf. with §5 and with the one-sidedness of the patriotism depicted in §2.

seen as the historical surrogate for the political order that should eventually result from Rousseau's new morality. The society described in the Epistle Dedicatory can be interpreted as a society where freedom best resounds with the unity of the golden age of mankind celebrated in Part Two of the *Second Discourse*.⁵¹ The harmonizing function of Genevan religion and morals must be understood accordingly. By idealizing the political role of Christianity, Rousseau generalizes the political role of religion *tout court*. He praises Geneva⁵² for having preserved the spirit of Christianity in which the "sacred dogmas authorized by the laws (*loix*)" guarantee, through the "zealous (...) and venerable Pastors of souls," the hopefully eternal "repose of men."⁵³ Thus, by contrasting the religion of Geneva with "the frightful maxims of those holy and barbarous men of whom History provides more than one example,"⁵⁴ Rousseau anticipates, even if only in its basic elements,⁵⁵ the natural religion or morality of pre-civil society described in the *Second Discourse*.

⁵¹ Cf. SDED §14 with note 9 ("7"), p. 202 (206); and SD pp. 166-7 (170-171), 186-7 (191-3); and SD note 16 (originally marked "13"), pp. 219-220 (220-221).

⁵² Geneva is only mentioned by name in the discourse inside the discourse (SDED §14-21) in the paragraphs on the themes of morality, i.e., religion, women, and the arts (SDED §19-21).

⁵³ Cf. with SD, pp. 187-8 (193).

⁵⁴ "and who, in order to uphold the supposed rights of God, that is to say, their own interest, were all the less sparing of human blood as they flattered themselves that their own would always be respected" (SDED §19). Cf. SD, pp. 171-3 (176-177).

⁵⁵ "La sainteté des mœurs, la sévérité pour soi-même et la douceur pour autrui" (SDED §19).

Chapter 5

The Argument of the References behind the Epistle Dedicatory

1. The Epistle Dedicatory is crucial to the understanding of the *Second Discourse* because it introduces, through the hidden ambiguity of the sovereign will, the permanent tension that permeates the book, the tension, broadly speaking, of the psychological *in* the political.¹ In a democratic republic, the ambiguity of the psychological and political dimensions of sovereignty tends to be either forgotten or dismissed as contradictory by a more geometrical approach to politics. Rousseau's use of Herodotus' Otanes in his first note to the text is an illustration of this question.

In the Epistle Dedicatory we have, then, an a priori inversion (or subversion) of Rousseau's own doctrine of the sovereignty of the general will. As in the main text of the *Second Discourse*, the general will (the presumed seat of sovereignty) is

¹ Certainly, there are different ways of stating this tension in Rousseau, the most common of them being perhaps the pair "particular will," "general will." Again, the tension is irreconcilable if left on the terms of the *Social Contract*, where the extreme possibility of those wills is left out. It must be considered through the more profound investigation of the human will opened by the *Second Discourse*.

not a point of departure but a goal.² The interest in the Epistle Dedicatory is that it lets us consider sovereignty not simply as a one-sided, static, political attribute, but that it can be read as Rousseau's silent derision of what later will be seen as the very core of his political theory, namely, the "logical necessity" of this one-sided sovereignty in democracies. By inviting us to inquire about the origins of the unity of the general will, Rousseau makes us consider the values and "truths" that unite the will of the people as the product of another, independent, will.³

In the Epistle Dedicatory the will of the people is not a transcendental concept. In fact, its artificiality can be seen as the central issue in the text. Let us reiterate the question by briefly considering *consent*, the "action" which Rousseau officially attributes to the people thought of as one body.

We must first reflect on the primary intention behind the consent of most citizens. It seems safe to assume that, in practice, most citizens will only wholeheartedly consent to public actions and laws that they perceive as immediately related to (or at least in harmony with) their individual interest. However, the more

² There is an inverted strategy regarding the general will to the strategy in both the article *On Political Economy* and in the *Social Contract*.

³ The necessity to cover up the differences between the various addressees of the Epistle Dedicatory (or the readers of the *Second Discourse*) mirrors the necessity to protect the psychological principle of popular sovereignty (the principle that founds democratic rule) *as if it were* a transcendental principle of justice – namely, as if the general will were conceivable as the spontaneous expression of the free will of each and every individual. The inconsistency of the unqualified identity between sovereignty and the people appears when one considers the general will from outside – i.e. when one considers the whole spectrum that begins with the genesis of that will – and when one reflects on the two perhaps most elementary modes of human desire: one, conditioned by predispositions, habits, and a primary concern with oneself; the other, reflective of a general concern with the desires and expectations of others.

elusive the subject matter of these actions and laws (for instance, actions that appeal to beliefs about human nature and morality), the more unreflective will be their approval: consent will be more homogeneous, and thus *general*, about matters that require trust and faith instead of reason.⁴

This initial asymmetry between the individual's will and the general will of the people is neutralized, on this more elusive level, by the "coincidence" between individual and general beliefs, a coincidence that, on that level (and only on that level), makes the sum of particular wills (*la volonté de tous*) the same as the general will. For Rousseau, general consent must *not* depend, in principle, on a sacrifice or even a compromise of the individual will, but on the process that leads to that coincidence.⁵

Consent in general should be the natural outcome of an education in the traditional values of the fatherland and in "the sacred dogmas authorized by the laws (*loix*)."⁶ It should be the outcome of a legislation that favors frugality over excess and autonomy over dependence. Ultimately, it should be the outcome of a society in which the reasonable number of inhabitants would encourage a life of dedication to the community over selfishness:

⁴ Cf. SDED, §15; and SD, p. 183 (188).

⁵ This naturally does not mean that Rousseau imagines a society with no strife and individual sacrifice; it means that in his understanding of happiness, the gap between private and public interests should be brought to a minimum. To base a regime on individual self-sacrifice – either by contrition or by the force of the law – is to end up with different families of dissatisfactions: in a word, factions. Rousseau's distance from Lockean liberalism is in his different understanding of the psychology of freedom. He wants to maximize freedom by minimizing oppression while preserving, throughout the whole spectrum of society, the theoretical possibility that the best minds can ascend to the highest forms of human excellence.

⁶ SDED, §19.

A State where, since all individuals know one another, neither the shady stratagems of vice nor the modesty of virtue could have escaped the Public's gaze and judgment, and where this gentle habit of seeing and knowing one another would have made the love of one's Fatherland a love of the Citizens rather than of the soil (*terre*).⁷

As the general will, general consent depends, at the limit, on the minimal condition for such a just republic: a city small enough so that each individual knows the others, and where each one has a business that does not depend on the work of others and that corresponds to his natural potentialities, i.e. to his talents and strengths. In theory, this condition guarantees that the ambitions of certain individuals do not extend beyond the realm of their own activity, preserving them from the economy of domination created with the division of labor, while preserving the natural attachment to the other citizens as the only meaning of patriotism. People are free to the extent that they know what they want, and what they want does not create any relation of dependence or domination for them. Because knowing what they want corresponds *ideally* to knowing what they are able to do, it would also mean knowing, or simply intuiting, the limits of their freedom. Yet freedom is also the sensation resultant from the love for the things that one shares with other citizens: one cares for the other citizens to the extent that they love the same laws and values that give meaning to one's life, their imagination having been educated to project those laws and values as natural and eternal. The problem here is that, when taken to the extreme, this understanding of freedom can be seen as the

⁷ SDED §2. Cf. also SD, p. 165 (169). The use of the word "*terre*" / "*Terre*" is explored by Rousseau throughout the main text and the notes – see e.g. note 4 (marked originally "*a"), p. 192-3 (198) – in the ambiguity between "the planet" and "soil." See also the passages referring to the division of labor and political domination in *Second Discourse* Part Two.

expression of a dehumanized version of the general will: a general will of individuals taken as a herd, whose desires and consent simply coincide, on the various levels of their existence, as if *communication* did not naturally presuppose any need for *consideration*, as if humans were, like beasts, purely passive beings.⁸

In the beginning of the Epistle Dedicatory, freedom is indeed described in terms of this one-dimensional desire, and thus, paradoxically, in terms of artificial limits to the individual's imagination. Rousseau summarizes here the central problem of Part Two of the *Second Discourse* – that is to say, the relation between freedom and human desire in nascent society – by depicting, precisely, a relation between freedom and an unambiguous desire from which *amour propre* is strategically absent (or just inconspicuous): in a state where “neither the shady stratagems of vice nor the modesty of virtue could have escaped the Public's gaze and judgment,”⁹ all human passions that can lead to the deviation from the rule will be, hopefully, in check. Rousseau departs from this unconditional desire unstained by *amour propre* in order to introduce the identity between sovereignty and people.¹⁰

⁸ On this issue, see SD, pp.164-6 (168-170). See also M. Davis, op. cit., pp. 90 and 108 (n.9).

⁹ SDED, §2. Cf. also the *Pléiade* editor's note 1 on p. 112.

¹⁰ This one-dimensional desire makes us think indeed of Rousseau's description of the golden age in Part Two of the *Second Discourse*. The suggestion of a society without *amour propre* precedes Rousseau's critique of the sort of private property that appears with the division of labor, i.e. land property. One is led to believe that, in a way, *amour propre* appears with land property, for we are told that it is the emergence of *amour propre* as the conspicuous characteristic of human beings that creates the necessity and the conditions for the pact which artificially *re-unites* the will of the people (cf. SD, pp. 169 ff. (174 ff.)). In the Epistle Dedicatory, the initial abstraction from the *amour propre* of the citizens also seems to serve Rousseau's depiction of a foundational moment of civil society; there, however, he deals specifically – though disguisedly – with the question of the

That said, from a philosophical point of view, *patriotism* is not entirely different than vanity or self-absorption; in fact, one thing might be considered as just another mode of the other. The fact that we can think of a general will that unifies, on the more elusive level, all individuals, does not mean that the main motivation behind most particular wills (i.e. behind their “consenting action”) remains essentially anything but selfish. That is to say, if, on the one hand, the will of the people as a whole can be seen as the result of common values and beliefs, on the other, individual actions are, by and large, prompted by selfishness. Individual action starts becoming sovereign (or sovereignty starts becoming active) when it *intentionally*, and not only coincidentally, reflects the general will, i.e. when it stops being predominantly self-referential. The education of the will of those who are naturally more prone to action (the most ambitious) is the most important in the state because, left to their natural inclination, the harm to the state, or to the general will, can be proportional to their appetite. With that in mind, it should be clear that patriotism, in itself, does not necessarily entail what we have been calling a sovereign action. The political action of law-abiding citizens is, from a philosophical point of view, pre-conditioned by the laws respected by those citizens. Thus within the framework of the general will, the freedom of individual wills is never absolute, but always relative or contextual: within that framework there is no free will.¹¹ It is in this sense that, according to Rousseau, the general will originally did not simply emanate from an objective debate among the people, but appeared

natural ambiguity of sovereignty, an ambiguity that must have started, in reality, precisely with the artificiality of the original pact (cf. SD, pp. 171-4 (176-178)).

¹¹ Or philosophical freedom.

only *after* the foreign and much longer process of binding together the particular wills regarding the most elusive laws and “truths.”¹²

This process was set in motion by a “pact.” The mysterious character of the general will disappears when we learn that, in its origins, the pact – “the most well-considered (*le plus réfléchi*) project ever to enter the human mind”¹³ – was not the product of a rational deliberation of the particular wills, but, as Rousseau says, of the “specious reasons” of one man. The pact is by definition fraudulent. It consists precisely of making individuals believe – through an appeal to the “universal justice” brought about by the new laws – that the will it affirms is *genuinely* (or naturally) their own.¹⁴ From this perspective, the most fundamental action in the state, namely, that of the forging of its unity, is the most illegitimate. The general will only seems to become effectively united, and to reflect the happiness and tranquility of the state, when the very origins of the pact are somehow “lost (...) in the night of time.”¹⁵ For this and other reasons, any power or action aimed at (re)shaping the public imagination by bringing together, on the most elusive matters, individual and general interests, would need to be as hard to pin down as the ultimate meaning of the new relations and laws it wants to establish, and as the

¹² Cf. SDED, §15; SD, pp. 171-4 (176-8); and SC, II, 7, §1, p. 380.

¹³ SD, p. 172-3 (177).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ SDED, §6; cf. also SC, II, 8, p. 385, on the memory of peoples. To use Rousseau’s formula, the general will is “the effect becoming the cause” (cf. SC, II, 7, p. 383); it is the transformation of “force in right and [of] obedience in duty” (I, 3). See also R. Masters interpretation of Rousseau’s epigraph to the *Social Contract*, in op. cit., pp. 301-6. Masters points out that the passage taken from Virgil’s *Aeneid* refers to the “[possibility] that political right was historically or factually founded on force;” he does not seem to appreciate, however, the seriousness in which Rousseau considers the law of the stronger and the extent to which Rousseau’s political doctrine hinges on it.

origins of the previous laws had become. Rousseau leaves in the background of his Epistle Dedicatory this forbidden parallel between the illegitimate action at the origins of civil society and the “divine” legislative action of founders. He addresses it only indirectly through his deceitfully passing references to Herodotus and Machiavelli.

2.

I should have wished, then, that no one (*personne*) inside the State could have declared himself to be above the law (*loi*), and that no one (*Personne*) outside it could have imposed any [law] which the State was obliged to recognize. For, regardless of how a government is constituted, if there is a single individual in it who is not subject to the law, all the others are necessarily at his discretion.

Rousseau’s first note to the *Second Discourse* (originally marked “(*)”) appears right after this passage and therefore in the context of our current discussion.¹⁶ In a certain way, our discussion of the Epistle Dedicatory so far can be seen as the

¹⁶ “Hérodote raconte qu’après le meurtre du faux Smerdis, les sept libérateurs de la Perse s’étant assemblés pour délibérer sur la forme de Gouvernement qu’ils donneroient à l’Etat, Otanes opina fortement pour la république; avis d’autant plus extraordinaire dans la bouche d’un Satrape, qu’outre la prétention qu’il pouvoit avoir à l’empire, les grands craignent plus que la mort une sorte de Gouvernement qui les force à respecter les hommes. Otanes, comme on peut bien croire, ne fut point écouté, et voyant qu’on alloit procéder à l’élection d’un Monarque, lui qui ne vouloit ni obéir ni commander, céda volontairement aux autres Concurrents son droit à la couronne, demandant pour tout dédommagement d’être libre et indépendant, lui et sa postérité, ce qui lui fut accordé. Quand Hérodote ne nous apprendroit pas la restriction qui fut mise à ce Privilège, il faudroit nécessairement la supposer; autrement Otanes, ne reconnaissant aucune sorte de Loi, et n’ayant de compte à rendre à personne, auroit été tout-puissant dans l’Etat, et plus puissant que le Roi-même. Mais il n’y avoit gueres d’apparence qu’un homme capable de se contenter en pareil cas d’un tel privilege, fut capable d’en abuser. En effet, on ne voit pas que ce droit ait jamais causé le moindre trouble dans le Royaume, ni par le sage Otanes, ni par aucun de ses descendants.” SDED note 1 (originally marked “(*)”).

introduction to the issues represented by this note. Rousseau borrows an example from Herodotus to tell us about a man who, having the right to be the king, did not want to command, but did not want to obey either. All that man desired was for him and his descendents to be free from any submission to the ruling power, which was granted them *provided that the laws were always observed*.

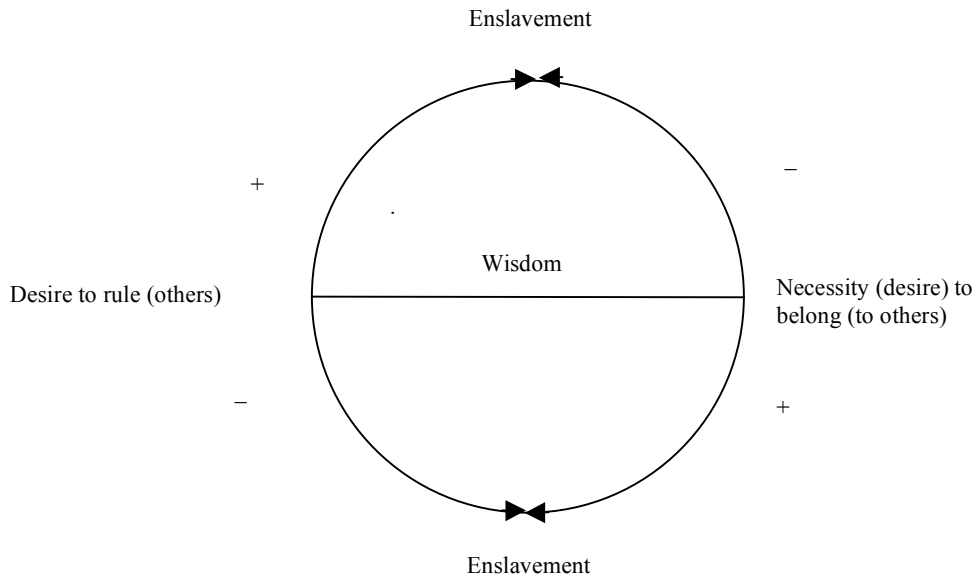
Even if Herodotus did not tell us the restriction placed on the Privilege, it would necessarily have to be assumed; otherwise Otanes, not recognizing any sort of Law (*Loi*) and not having to account to anyone, would have been all-powerful in the State, and more powerful than the King himself.¹⁷

Rousseau implies a radical distinction between absolute and relative freedom. The distinction here is between a *privilege* that would give one man power over all the others, regardless of their desires and their common laws; and a *privilege* that would give a man power over all the others (including rulers), but *only in so far as their desires and their common laws would allow*. Considering that the “restriction” imposed on Otanes is not perceived by him as oppressive to his freedom (as Rousseau suggests in the note), we can think of the two privileges just mentioned as representative of, respectively, the freedom of the tyrannical soul and the freedom of the democratic or law-abiding soul.

It is not hard to see that the types of person that these two senses of freedom characterize become inhuman in their extreme versions. In each of these extreme positions we would have a complete psychological enslavement resultant, if nothing else, from the impossibility of communication or dialogue: in one, through the radical isolation of an absolute, despotic will; in the other, through the complete

¹⁷ SDED note 1 (“*”).

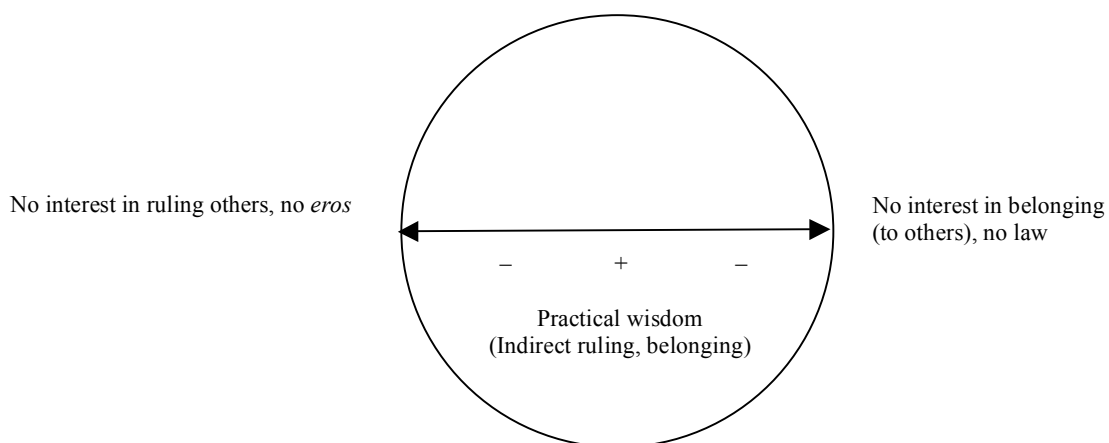
indistinguishableness in a community of equals. Rousseau situates “the wise Otanes” on the axis between these two poles. Hence, by calling the intermediate position *wisdom*, we can draw the following scheme: on the upper half, we have those who predominantly tend to impose their desire (the predominance of the “rule of desire”); on the lower, those who, under a blind allegiance to the law, predominantly tend to defend their equality (the predominance of the “rule of law”). Put simply, whereas here the desire of the individual is the law, there the law becomes the desire of the individual.



We can also say that while the absolute freedom of the tyrannical soul expresses a natural inequality between human beings, the relative freedom of the law-abiding soul expresses their equality, or the need thereof. Far from excluding each other, the two types show how a study of the situation illustrated in note “(*)” should consist

of looking at one extreme in the light of the other and at the various situations that can emerge in between them.

What is, then, this wisdom that Otanes seems to incarnate? How can someone, at the same time, observe a law that unites the general will and be free to change that law without contradicting that will? There only seems to be a balance when the problems with one position are seen from the perspective of the other. But this is not enough. The intermediate position can also mean a privation of freedom when, at the limit, one's relations to others become a matter of complete indifference, either as a lack of desire for any sort of ascendancy over others, or as a lack of desire to belong, in whatever way, to the community (i.e. to submit with others to a common set of conventions). The wisdom represented by Otanes is simply not compatible with radical isolation, with any sort of asceticism,¹⁸ or even with a purely contemplative life. It requires a distance from the extreme possibilities at stake also in the intermediate position:



¹⁸ Certainly not if we follow Herodotus. Cf. *Histories*, 3.84.1.

Due to the essentially political character of Otanes' activity, the wisdom represented by him can only be linked to freedom if it becomes *practical*, i.e. if in some way it is translated into the sort of action with which it is concerned, even if this action would need to occur as an *indirect* form of ruling and belonging. To say that the belonging is indirect, is to say that the practical interest in others implied by Otanes' wisdom is only *in appearance* pre-determined by the laws and powers of others. The interest (will) here is, at least in theory, as free as it can be. Otanes would be, therefore, in a sort of synoptic position in the state, namely, in the privileged position from which he would see all other positions without himself being seen.

If we turn to Herodotus, we learn that for both Otanes and Darius the political power of the king is absolute and can affect the customs and ancient laws of the country (*nomaia patria*).¹⁹ Thus, the privilege given to Otanes and his descendents – to be free and independent from the king – can in principle be seen also as a privilege that concerns the laws in general. This is, at least in one way, in contradiction with the “restriction” imposed on Otanes that he and his descendents observe the laws.²⁰ Rousseau says in the note that the acknowledgement of law and public institutions should be taken as an obvious restriction to the privilege conferred to Otanes, even if Herodotus had not mentioned it. He explores the ambiguity of Herodotus' text by suggesting that the “acknowledgement” by Otanes

¹⁹ *Hist.*, 3.80.5 and 3.82.5. Cf. also the implications of Darius' discourse in 3.72 (see below).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.83.6.

is of a completely different sort than the acknowledgement by the other citizens.²¹ The restriction is obvious because it would be absurd to *openly* give a man absolute independence in the state without making him the king. Yet, the privilege conferred on Otanes ultimately amounts to that. (Let us not forget that the problem of a divided sovereignty is precisely the context in which note “(*)” is inserted.) Hence, now the question of sovereignty re-appears in another light: to a man in Otanes’ situation, who holds the sovereign power? As his will is not contingent on any other will, he is the one who creates the conditions for his and his descendents’ freedom. The sovereign power is on his hands.

If we superimpose this situation with the sovereign will of the Genevan people, we see how the submission to the law – a law which, in Otanes’ case, is at his mercy – can be proclaimed tongue in cheek. Rousseau assures us that a man to whom such a freedom is awarded would not, in principle, have any interest in abusing it. If indeed this man has no desire to act and rule directly through politics – and if he has a clear understanding of the necessity to observe both the sacred dogmas of the state and the authority of the sovereign, while being aware, at the same time, of their conventionality – then both the “privilege” (formal freedom) and the “restriction” (observance of the laws) in question would certainly be redundant for him. In other words, there would be no privilege and no restriction at all. In fact, Rousseau suggests that a person can only be awarded such a privilege when the privilege is indeed known by the community to be redundant for that person,

²¹ “But it was scarcely likely that a man capable in a case like this of being satisfied with such a prerogative (*d’un tel privilège*) was capable of abusing it.” SD note 1 (“*”). Cf. also SD, pp. 153-4 (156).

namely, when the person is known for her “wisdom.” But he leaves completely to the reader the implication that Otanes’ wisdom does not cancel his power or the responsibilities that come with it, not to mention the implication of the possibility that a man in Otanes’ position might end up being less wise than Otanes was said to be.

Rousseau uses the example of Otanes to present a third, rarer and less tangible, prospect of freedom. The manner in which he tells us about Otanes should not make us overlook that a man in his condition would be conscious of his freedom and power to act upon the customs and ancient laws of the country without being noticed. In sum, he is free from the beliefs in the values and “truths” that make political life possible and meaningful; he is fully conscious about the illusions that drive most people’s desires and about the natural necessity of conventions for civil life. Rousseau’s Otanes is outside the laws while, at the same time, submitted to them. In his sovereign power, he would only act indirectly and for the benefit of his posterity. His freedom is as absolute as the freedom of a tyrant and as lawful as that of the most law-abiding citizens.

That said, we must turn again to Herodotus’ text to find that, there, Otanes appears actually as the incarnation of the republican spirit in its unqualified form (radical egalitarianism) and, for that reason, as the representative of a position incompatible with the “temperate” republicanism advocated by Rousseau.²² There is a silent criticism by Rousseau of Otanes’ politics in Herodotus, which is indicative

²² Cf. *Hist.*, 3.80.1 ff. with SDED §6; for the problem of innovation and the criticism of Athenian democracy, cf. §9 with Machiavelli’s *Discourses on Livy*, I, 25.

of Rousseau's reluctance to expose the main weakness of the regime he defends and to confront in an explicit manner the main question of the passage at stake, namely, the nature of sovereign power in republics.²³ What follows is an attempt to understand Rousseau's "criticism" of Otanes' position in Herodotus.

Otanes' defense of democracy appears as a reaction to his own experience of the unjust rule of absolute power under men like Cambyses and Smerdis the Magus. For Otanes, there is no distinction between monarchy (or tyranny understood as absolute sovereignty of one man) and despotism.²⁴ He does not believe that a man can be a king without becoming envious and proud: a king is always going to be a despot because all men, regardless of their different qualities, are equally corruptible. Otanes would agree with Hobbes that it is in man's nature to be at war with all the others when abandoned to himself and left in a state in which his immediate desires are the source of the only absolute and sovereign power. Yet, Otanes differs and in a way is more modern than Hobbes in one fundamental point. He accuses monarchs of changing the customs and ancient laws of the country.²⁵ He does it, however, without seeing that his radical republicanism would also bring

²³ Rousseau's criticism of Athenian democracy and his open preference for Sparta in the *Second Discourse* (as well as in other works) should be a sign that the "wisely temperate democracy" he defends is more temperate than one might initially think (cf. SDED §20; SD p. 134-5 (135); SD, pp. 175-6 (180-1) and p. 182 (187)). The challenge for Rousseau is in how to endorse the general opinion that the political regime based on equality is the one closest to nature, and at the same time "expose" the artificial core of this idea.

²⁴ *Hist.*, 3.80.2. Cf. with Rousseau's distinction between "legislator," "tyrant," "despot," and "king" in SC, II, 10, p. 390 and III, 10, p. 423.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.80.5.

changes, and perhaps the most profound changes, to these customs and laws.²⁶ By understanding that the people should possess the sovereign power in a literal sense,²⁷ Otnes defends a government that, having reason or open debate as the unifying principle of ruling, would ultimately dissolve traditional beliefs through the new belief that all political deliberation (*qua* articulation of the supreme political power or sovereignty) can and must obey a rational or dialogical process.²⁸ If reason is the only unifying principle, desires become epiphenomena that pertain exclusively to the individual or private realm; for all political purposes, for Otnes, the maxim “*Fais à autrui comme tu veux qu’on te fasse*” would suffice.²⁹

²⁶ Reminded by Darius in 3.82.5. Cf. with SDED §9.

²⁷ “*hen gar toi polloi heni ta panta*” (3.80.6).

²⁸ The impossibility of a rational-philosophical state is explored by Rousseau in SD, pp. 179-181 (184 – 186). “The frightful dissensions, the infinite disorders which this dangerous power would necessarily entail, show more than anything else does how much human Governments needed a more solid base than reason alone.” This seems also to be the opinion of Herodotus after his contrast between the geometrical thinking of Otnes and the more practical or efficient Darius; see *Hist.* 3.72, 3.80, and 3.85-86.

²⁹ In Part One of the *Second Discourse* (SD, p. 154 (156)), Rousseau contrasts the Christian maxim (“*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*”), “this sublime maxim of reasoned justice,” with “this other maxim of natural goodness, much less perfect but perhaps more useful than the first: *Do your good with the least possible harm to others.*” According to the first maxim (“*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*”), individual desires that deviate from the rule appear, in principle, under the sign of evil (or, at least, selfishness) and must be tamed by the geometric rationality of egalitarian justice; the maxim is focused on the limitation of one’s desire (i.e. the desire of the other) without which anything appears to be permissible; it denotes thus a sharp opposition between freedom (or what Rousseau would probably call the superficial impression of its possibility) and repression. The second maxim (“*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*”) is focused on one’s good, which can be thought to be equated to a truer sense of one’s freedom; and because the only limitation to the pursuit of one’s good comes from the possibility of a concern with others that would arise with natural compassion, there is no repression. But the superiority of the second maxim is not only psychological. The “maxim of natural goodness”

The attempt to resolve the political problem with a simple equation between the people and the state (*hen gar toi polloi heni ta panta*) would fail precisely for disregarding the necessity to preserve the ambiguity of popular sovereignty implicit in Rousseau's Epistle Dedicatory. The blind allegiance to the rule of equality (*isonomia*) – a value that on its surface appears to the people as a good beyond reproach – together with the vulgarization of the political debate, produce a false sense of unity in the community (a false consensus) which ends up going against the interest of the people and corrupting the common structure of their desire.³⁰ No matter how fine and noble Otanes wants the concept of *isonomia* to be, it must not become *the* moral reference.³¹ It cannot replace, as it were, the supposedly less fine and certainly less geometrical conventionality of customs and ancient laws, for the mere fact that these things are generally not perceived as contingent, but as natural laws.³² In Otanes' radical republicanism, all laws would become, in the end, extensions of the fundamental law of equality. Laws would become representative of the human functions and faculties that are identical to all men (i.e. bodily

accounts for the action of those few human beings who make the common good the uncompromising object of their desire; those like Otanes who would only act for the benefit of their posterity. The difference between the two maxims is ultimately in the existence of a higher principle of human action than one's personal designs. This difference condenses Rousseau's attack, on the one hand, on the simplistic and insufficient morality of the Church and, on the other, on the "moral individualism" predicated on liberalism. On Rousseau's maxim of natural goodness, see the note in *Émile*, pp. 340-1.

³⁰ To advance the context of the discussion below, see Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy*, I, 16, 3, on the impossibility of friendship in new republics. Henceforth, DL.

³¹ *Hist.*, 3.80.6.

³² For Rousseau, these are the things that unite the will of the people. SDED §4 and §15.

necessities by and large) and individual desires would become nothing but residues of the main political process.

We can sum up Rousseau's position against radical republicanism (or, for that matter, against radical Enlightenment) as follows. If the realm of desires is simply identified with the unrestrainedness of the private realm, an excessive need for freedom becomes tantamount to the excessive demand for different objects of desire caused by the explosion of individual desires in the society; this need for freedom would be excessive in that it would fragment, instead of unite, the will of the people, creating an insurmountable gap, so feared by Rousseau, between the laws of the country and the individual desires of the citizens, and resulting in psychological oppression rather than in actual freedom for the citizens.³³ Rousseau is perhaps the greatest thinker and defender of democracy, but only by being its greatest critic. The notion that, from a political-psychological point of view, equality and freedom in excess lead to oppressive enslavement is central to, albeit in apparent contradiction with, the main argument of the *Second Discourse*. Rousseau's struggle against the morals and politics of the Enlightenment – in both senses of what would become the right and the left – as well as anything that in him can appear as a nostalgic defense of ancient virtue, meritocracy, and sumptuary laws, must be understood through this notion.

Therefore, by not seeing that the ruler must not think of sovereignty as an absolute concept in order for the state to be well governed – that is to say, by not seeing that sovereignty must always consist of a hidden negotiation between the

³³ Cf. also DL, I, 3, 2.

passive will of the people and the active mind of the ruler, and never of a reduction to one or the other – Otanes misses the fact that there are not only good and bad monarchies, but good and bad democracies as well.³⁴ He does not see that even excessive prudence in political deliberations can be detrimental to the general interest.³⁵ His own system, taken at face value, could have been in the end more oppressive to the people and more disturbing to the customs and laws of the country than the tyrannies he condemns. The sovereignty of the people is not *necessarily* a quality of democracies because a democracy easily becomes a *tyranny of the multitude* when its laws are generally perceived as excessive, artificial, and oppressive. For Rousseau, the will of the people can be sovereign regardless of the official form of government.³⁶ The difference between a nominal (theoretical) and an actual sovereignty of the people is, again, crucial. The idea here is that some monarchies are more democratic than some “democracies.” The good ruler must know that the difference between good and bad government is, before anything, a difference that regards the general principles of ruling. And in addition to knowing that the unity of the general will lies in the customs and ancient laws of the country, he must also know *how* to preserve that unity in the course of his actions.³⁷

³⁴ *Hist.*, 3.80.3.

³⁵ *Hist.*, 3.72.3.

³⁶ For Rousseau’s discussion about the natural source of political authority as well as the difference between despotism and kingship, see SD, pp. 175-182 (180 – 187); cf. with pp. 164-5 (168). See also SC, III, 10, p. 423, and ch.6 below.

³⁷ See *Hist.*, 3.82.

It is in Darius where we find the correction to Otanes as well as the principle of ruling which, in spite of its crudeness, must be observed by those who hold the highest sovereign power.

There are many things, says Darius, that cannot be demonstrated in words, but only in actions; and there are other things that can be put into words, but without anything [immediately] evident [to most people] arising from them. (...) [So] if it is necessary to lie, then lie. We are all after the same thing, whether we lie or speak the truth. Some win credence and advantage by lies, while others obtain advantage and become more trusted by telling the truth. Thus we approach the same ends by different means; and if the hope of advantage were taken away, he who tells the truth would be as ready to lie as the liar to tell the truth.³⁸

The passage must be interpreted in the large context of what a political action means. The principle pronounced by Darius states that actions about the fundamental things are not up for debate, because the argument of actions that regard the fundamental things is not always translatable into an intelligible discourse, and is rarely straightforward. Thus, the action and authority of the highest sovereign power – again, understood as the power over the customs and ancient laws of the country – cannot depend on a consensus that might presumably result from rational debate, precisely because the unity and efficiency of the action reside in a foresight that is hardly passive of being debated.³⁹ In order to, as it were, avoid the debate, it is necessary to neutralize the questions or convince the other parties in the fastest and most efficient way. It is in this sense that deception can be beneficial

³⁸ *Hist.*, 3.72.2-5. Cf. with SC, II, 7, p. 383.

³⁹ It can neither depend on discursive reason nor on the wish of the gods (fortune). See *Hist.*, 3.85-86.

when needed for the completion of a just action.⁴⁰ Darius' principle becomes central for our discussion when we think of the action of the sovereign power as the action of those who, regardless of their direct involvement in government, transform "lies" into "truths," and move, in the most fundamental sense, the customs and laws of a people – those who, through the new morals and values engendered by the stories they tell us, unite (or divide) the trust and beliefs of their posterity.

Thus, if Rousseau presents Otanes as the initiator of a new order of freedom for his posterity, he does it against Otanes' own terms. Although on the surface level of his example Rousseau makes Otanes' lawfulness the embodiment of republican freedom, he offers to the more attentive reader the possibility to consider all the issues at stake here in a completely different light.⁴¹ In Herodotus, the limits of Otanes' politics – the reason why Otanes must stand outside the official order – is given by his failure to perceive the impossibility to democratize his own consciousness of freedom and to found a *new* republican government purely on the basis of that consciousness and rationality.

It is in this sense that when we read Rousseau's use of Otanes through Herodotus, the temperate element of the republicanism that he (Rousseau) makes Otanes represent appears, unexpectedly and quite ironically, in the outrageous Darius. We can say, then, that Rousseau's rhetorical strategy in the Epistle

⁴⁰ Cf. DL, II,15.

⁴¹ Note that the text of note "(*)" differs from the text of the main discourse. It is not declamatory and its impersonal indirect discourse puts it outside the rhetorical frame of the main text. The question of the addressees re-emerges here. Is this first note to the *Second Discourse* "addressed" yet to another kind of *Souverains Seigneurs*? Can it be addressed to the *Souverains Seigneurs* that are outside our suggested ladder of sovereignty?

Dedicatory is devised in the spirit of Darius, not of Otanes. His *artifice* to reform or temper Otanes' rationalism anticipates what is still to come in the *Second Discourse*. Rousseau's Otanes can be thought of as the prototype of the man of the Enlightenment whom he would ultimately like to reform. The manner in which he presents Otanes – by patronizing him, on the one hand, and (indirectly) exposing his failure, on the other – foreshadows his strategy regarding his highest readers. The problem of the “*Philosophes*” perceiving the limits of discursive reason, and the political implications of their failure, is indeed one of the recurring themes in the *Second Discourse* and certainly the one that receives Rousseau's most subversive treatment.⁴²

3. Again, Rousseau is perhaps the greatest defender of democracy only because he is its greatest critic. Otanes' democratic dream was sheer madness; it missed the fundamental political principles of true republicanism. We should also say that, from a metaphysical point of view, Rousseau's critique of Otanes' excessive rationalism approaches his silent rebuke of Lockean or Montesquieuan liberalism. In both cases, the highest sense of freedom is reached by the exercise of what we can think of as the vulgar understanding of reason (in politics, by the attempt of a collective deliberative action⁴³). When individuals are seen as the sole masters of their will – when they are measured by their power to determine their individual good and to calculate the means to achieve it – all human enslavement

⁴² Cf. SD, pp. 143-4 (145); 148-9 (150-151); 183-4 (188-189); 186-7 (192-193); 189-190 (195-196); 209-210 (212-213); 215-6 (217-218); 216-7 (218). See also R. Velkley, *op. cit.*; note 22, p. 164.

⁴³ *Hist.*, 3.80.6.

(understood roughly as any repression of those powers) is seen as unnatural and unjust, for going *a priori* against the interest of the individual. Thus in both Herodotus' Otanes and the liberal thinkers the freest regime is seen ultimately as a republic ruled by a rational and pragmatic legislation that optimizes the power (right) of its citizens to express their individual wills. From such a perspective, democracy is natural due to the supposed natural right of individuals to equally pursue their own interest and preserve their "free will." In Otanes, this is represented by his unqualified endorsement of direct democracy and the rule of equality under law (*isonomia*), whereas Locke settles the issue through his argument of the natural freedom and equality of man, as well as the ensuing transformation of Hobbes' natural right of self-preservation (Locke's doctrine of private property).⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Politically speaking, Locke is certainly very far from Otanes. However, in spite of his low opinion of direct democracies, Locke's political theory depends on the notion of democratic consent as *the* original act of civil society. See Locke's *Second Treatise on Government* §§58, 61, 63, 74; 87; cf. §91 with Otanes' speech; and §§95, 96, 99 with §§105, 106, 110. Regardless of what is said in §112 of the *Second Treatise*, Locke is not, in the end, that far from Filmer – his target in the first of the *Two Treatises of Government* – on the issue of consent. As with Rousseau, the main difference between Locke and Filmer occurs on a more profound stratum and it is not made entirely clear in Locke's *Treatises*. Indeed, any reader of the *Patriarcha* can see that Filmer's defense of monarchy is nothing but a condemnation of despotism. "Albeit Kings, who make the Laws, be (...) above the Laws, yet will they Rule their Subjects by the Law; and a King, governing in a settled Kingdom, leaves to be a King, and degenerates into a Tyrant, so soon as he seems to Rule according to his Laws; yet where he sees the Laws Rigorous or Doubtful, he may mitigate and interpret. (...) And although a King do frame all his Actions to be according to the Laws, yet he is not bound thereto, but at his good Will, and for good Example: Or so far forth as the General Law of the Safety of the Common-weal doth naturally bind him" (*Patriarcha*, ch. III, 6; London (1680)). Filmer suggests in this and other passages that a wisely ruled state is monarchy with a republican spirit and with the sovereign power remaining always indivisible in the hands of one. Cf. II, 1; II, 6 – 7; II, 9; II, 14; II, 15; II, 16; III, 1; III, 10 – 14;. Cf. also I, 1 ("all other shews and pretexts of Liberty, are but several degrees of *Slavery*, and a *Liberty* only to destroy *Liberty*") as well as

All this, one might claim, is very similar to what Rousseau says. For him, however, the different wills of individuals in the original position implied by Otanes reveal a scale of the freedom, power, and consciousness that they enjoy, something that must be the matter of philosophical and political consideration. Let us briefly focus on this digression about Rousseau and Liberalism before we turn to the reference to Machiavelli in the Epistle Dedicatory. In order to understand Rousseau's distance from both Otanes and Locke, we need to presuppose the general distinction advanced above between passive and active will, i.e. between a will simply and its enactment. In the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau speaks of natural right in its broadest and most elementary sense, as a right of *beings* to the fulfillment of their own sensations and desires (in a word, of their *sensibilité*); or still as a right of beings to the experience of their own freedom and existence. The main consequence of this view is not so much, as announced in the Preface to the *Second Discourse*, that animals also participate in natural right, but that human beings participate in natural right *only qua* animals – namely, only in their sentient, instinctive, or passive (re-active) capacity.⁴⁵ Differently from other animals, the fact

Lucan's epigraph on the opening page of the *Patriarcha* with Locke's *First Treatise*, ch. I and II. For the different editions of Filmer's works see the introduction to '*Patriarcha*' and *Other Writings*, in *Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought*, ed. J. P. Sommerville (1991). See also *Patriarcha*, ch. III, 4 and Aristotle's *Politics* 1314a 40. Locke's account of the origins of government should not be simply merged, as seems to have been his intention, with his critique of hereditary monarchies.

⁴⁵ SD, pp. 127-8 (126). This radical idea is present throughout the book: natural right must include animals in order to include most human beings, for most human beings are, in a certain way, in an equivalent or even inferior condition to other animals. See SD, pp. 138-9 (139); pp. 140-142 (141-3, section on perfectibility); and pp. 206-7 (210). (Rousseau contrasts the words "*bête*" (or "*Bête*") and "*animal*;" *bête* in French can also mean a stupid person or someone without "*esprit*.") See also in

that we humans have desires does not naturally endow us with a right to act in the name of these desires, for the same reason that it does not naturally endow us with the knowledge about the general conditions necessary to make our individual pursuits meaningful and good. If human beings, as we see them today, are for Rousseau unequal by nature regarding their potential for action writ large, they will also be unequal regarding the right to those actions. This makes us think that, for Rousseau, human beings (*qua* rational and social beings) have ultimately no natural or universal right of any kind to their individual action. For it would be absurd to grant the same right to all individuals as if they had the same potentialities, the same criteria for choice, and as if the product of their individual choices had, from a political point of view, a merely economic value. It is only through the abstraction of the general will as the unity of sovereignty that individuals who share in that will, participate in a right seen by them as a right of the whole species – in *that* sense, a "natural" right.⁴⁶

the *Pléiade* edition, the editor's note 3, pp. 1296-7, for a partial bibliography on natural right and Rousseau.

⁴⁶ Cf. with L. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, Chicago (1953), p. 286. Strauss regrets the fact that Rousseau ultimately fosters historicism and political extremism by keeping together the foundations of science (modern natural science) and philosophy (pp. 263, 277). According to Strauss, Rousseau's appeal to ancient thought (e.g. Plato, Plutarch, Epicurus) is a palliative to his final dissolution, through the implacable historicism in his thought, of the idealistic basis of natural right: "In Rousseau's doctrine of the state of nature, the modern natural right teaching reaches its critical stage. (...) [For him,] man's humanity is the product of the historical process" (pp. 273-4). Rousseau breaks, as is well known, with Hobbes and Locke who predicated natural right on calculative reason; for him the action that guides self-preservation is instinctive well before being reflective. Reason is not an attribute of *l'homme Sauvage*, thus it cannot be the basis for natural right. (Strauss says that "in Hobbes, reason, using her authority, had emancipated passion; passion acquired the status of a freed woman; [but, different than in Rousseau, in Hobbes at least] reason

Rousseau conveys the idea, central to his political theory, that the original pact was based on an appeal to the equality of all participants and effected through their consent, and thus that the original or most natural form of government is, in that sense, democracy. Yet in Rousseau's account of both the beginning of sociability ("the first developments of the heart") and the beginning of political societies, *consent* or the mere recognition of authority is much less a matter of reasoning (freedom of choice) than of the "heart." "Natural democracy" must be "tempered" because, by nature, governments need a more solid ground than the rationality of their participants. The relation to authority in nascent political societies needed to be equivalent to (not to say a natural continuation of) the sweetest human feeling, i.e., paternal love. The original democracy is less a form of government than, as Rousseau shows in Part Two of the *Second Discourse*, the spirit of association engendered by the sovereign *will of one*. As a form of government, democracy is not natural, and thus, in itself, not more just than the other forms. In other words, *justice* and *freedom* do not necessarily depend on the form of

continued to rule, if only by remote control." P. 252.) It can be argued, however, that Rousseau understands that he cannot confront the pervasive view of his time by constructing his political doctrine upon, so to speak, ancient principles of aristocratic natural right. I believe that his overall strategy is motivated by his view of the current state of European culture – namely, by what he probably saw as the unstoppable forces driving the Enlightenment and thus the inevitability of historicism (the basis of which had, in any event, already been established by Montesquieu) – and that these principles of aristocratic natural right are preserved, as is his separation between wisdom and science, at a higher level of his thought. The discussion about sovereignty in the Epistle Dedicatory is the introduction to – and to a great extent an attempt to elucidate – this apparent paradox. (See also Strauss, op. cit., pp. 262, 276, 293-4.) Note also that Rousseau leaves out of his title the part of the question proposed by the *Academie de Dijon* regarding natural law. For an alternative, though not less problematic, interpretation of Rousseau's state of nature see V. Gourevitch's article 'Rousseau's Pure State of Nature,' *Interpretation*, 1988, vol. 16, n.1.

government, but on how well the indivisible unity of the active sovereign power mirrors the unity of the people.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Cf. SD, p. 171-4 (176-8); and p. 164 (168) with 177-181 (182-6). Cf. what Rousseau says about Athenian democracy in SDED §10 (“such must have been the rude constitution of the first governments arising immediately from the state of Nature”) with the notes below. Unlike Locke, Rousseau’s necessity to blur the discussion of whether the first governments were monarchic or democratic also pertains to his strategy regarding his addressees. The difference between the two thinkers on this issue can be thus stated. Locke treats *consent* as a fixed category and the hallmark of political freedom. Rousseau does not contradict the general sense of Locke’s consent theory and to a certain extent he subscribes to it; but whereas for Locke the expression of the will behind the individual’s consent reflects the highest degree of freedom, for Rousseau, the different conditioning and predisposition of individual wills reflect different degrees and kinds of freedom. For Rousseau, the democratic principle at the outset of political societies is not in the consent of the majority (a consent that presupposes open debate and deliberation), but in the action that unites the general consent, as it were, from outside – an action that receives the “express and unanimous consent of humanKind.” Political society does not result from a spontaneous collective agreement, but from “the most thoughtful project ever to have entered the human mind.” (Cf. SD, pp. 171-2 (176)) with Locke’s *Second Treatise*, Ch. VIII.) Also, for Locke, property is by definition prior to government, which allows him to locate the true beginning of political societies (i.e. government) in the collective agreement of all men “to joyn and unite into a Community, for their comfortable, safe, and peaceable living one amongst another, in a secure Enjoyment of their Properties, and a greater Security against any that are not of it.” (*Second Treatise*, § 95; compare §§ 105 and 106 for the distinction between “the *Original of Common-wealths*” and “the *beginning of Politick Society*.”) For Locke, it is clear that adult human beings generally know what they want; the active consent of the people is driven by their rational concern with the preservation (security) of their properties (or simply, their self-preservation) and contrasts with the “tacit Consent” conferred to single rulers in the patriarchal “*Golden Age*” of pre-civil society (ibid., §§ 94, 111). For Rousseau, the original goal of civil society was not to secure the natural right to property, but to secure the property and authority of the most powerful men; the general consent concerning the fundamental things is, for him, always “tacit.”

This whole question can be articulated in light of their views on education, that is to say, their different conceptions of freedom can also be explained by their opposed understanding of child psychology; already in the *Second Discourse* Rousseau treats freedom as primarily an attribute of children’s, not adults’ minds. Cf. SD, pp. 178-9 (183-4) and 182 (187).

Rousseau's eulogy of freedom in the Epistle Dedicatory as a good enslavement to the law ("the salutary and gentle yoke")⁴⁸ announces what will be his response in the *Second Discourse*, and throughout his works, to the explosion of passions and the predominance of body over soul, that is to say, to the bad enslavement produced by the soft moral principles of liberal thought. It is true that the moral and political importance of the unity of sovereignty had already been attested by practically all major political thinkers since Jean Bodin, even if Rousseau takes a radical step by seemingly merging moral and political power in a same body, and by officially attributing this unified sovereign power to the will of the people. It is also true that, in a certain way, the importance given to the moral or psychological sense of sovereignty allows us to find greater affinities between Rousseau and theorists of absolute monarchy than with the fathers of liberal society. This is why one must be suspicious when in Part Two of the *Second Discourse* Rousseau evokes "the proofs of Locke and Sydney" in his condemnation of despotism, which is usually read as an outright condemnation of Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha*.⁴⁹ Filmer's book, as Rousseau's, is also an attempt to articulate the

⁴⁸ SDED, §4.

⁴⁹ SD, pp. 177-8 (182). We should also beware of Rousseau's direct attack on Filmer in his article *On Political Economy*, of the same year of the *Second Discourse* (*Pléiade* ed., p. 244). A special attention to Rousseau's wording in these passages is crucial. Two main reasons should raise our suspicion. The first one has already been stated; Rousseau's insistence on the moral unity of sovereignty is clearly incompatible with the liberalism of Locke and Montesquieu. When obedience to the law becomes a function of the instinct of self-preservation, the unity of sovereignty becomes a problematic if not obsolete philosophical notion. The second reason is Rousseau's treatment of the origin of government. In this section of the *Second Discourse* (p. 177-9 (182-4)), Rousseau muddles the distinction between paternal authority and arbitrary power. This happens after we are told that "nothing in the world is more distant from the fierce spirit of Despotism than the sweetness of this

difficulty regarding sovereignty. Filmer follows the tradition of the divine right of kings and defends monarchy as the natural form of government for being the only coherent way to preserve the unity of sovereignty. Rousseau's republican (democratic) solution to Filmer's argument against the fragmentation of sovereignty is radically different from the solutions proposed by Locke and Sidney, which he apparently endorses in the *Second Discourse*. Instead, he confronts the problem posed by Filmer on Filmer's own terms; for both thinkers the tension between the passive and active senses of sovereignty cannot be undone without injury to the system.

To conclude our digression, let us also say that Rousseau's attack on classical democracy and "the dangerous innovations which ruined the Athenians," as well as his insistent tribute to Spartan institutions corroborate our point: the

authority [i.e. Paternal authority]". Rousseau seems to side with Locke and Sidney (named in the passage in the *Second Discourse*, but not in that in the article *On Political Economy*) for their alleged proofs against those who derived government (Rousseau says "*Gouvernement absolu et toute la Société*") from paternal authority. In the article *On Political Economy*, Rousseau calls Filmer's *Patriarcha* a "hateful system" (Filmer is mentioned by name there, but not in the *Second Discourse*) for not making explicit the distinction between "*économie publique*" and "*économie particuliere*;" but he does not decry Filmer for his defense of paternal authority as the source of government. In the same passage, Rousseau opposes Filmer to Aristotle, who dedicated Book One of the *Politics* to the elucidation of precisely that distinction – in Aristotle's terms, the difference between *despotikos* (rule of particulars) and *politikos* (public rule). But on the question of the origins of government, Aristotle was of Filmer's opinion! (*Politics*, 1252b18). For these reasons, one must hold judgment on both Rousseau's praise of Locke and Sidney in the *Second Discourse*, and his attack on Filmer in *On Political Economy*. Note also that Rousseau apparently defends the "common opinion" (SD, p. 179 (184)) attacked by Filmer right at the outset of the *Patriarcha* (I,1), before and after having shown its impossibility. All this, however, does not invalidate Rousseau's critique of the hereditary monarchy defended by Filmer. Cf. also Filmer, *Patriarcha*, I, 4-5; I, 8-10; II, 1; II, 4; II, 13-4.

example of Sparta is relevant insofar as we perceive the elements that, in Rousseau's terms, made Sparta (an *elective* monarchy) more democratic than Athens.⁵⁰ The mistake of the Athenians was to believe, like Otanes, that the people can legislate in an active way, by proposing and making new laws; they believed that the active sovereignty could in fact be attributed to the people, and thus that it could be fragmented in all particular wills without injury to the state.⁵¹

4. Rousseau's example of the expulsion of the Tarquins in the Epistle Dedicatory is a reference to Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy*, the founding book of

⁵⁰ SDED §9. See also SDED §6, SD, p. 132-3 (133) and p. 142 (143); and *First Discourse*, pp. 12-13 (*Pléiade* ed.). Cf. in the *Second Discourse* Rousseau's use of the terms progress (*progrès/progrès*) and change (*changement*); see SD note 9 ("7") pp. 197-9 (202-203) and 202 (206); on the question of political innovations, see also Machiavelli, DL, I, 7, 3; I, 9, 4; I, 18, 2.

⁵¹ As in the Epistle Dedicatory, it is not Athens, but Sparta and Rome that are the republican models in Machiavelli's *Discourses*, the other fundamental reference in Rousseau's text. Cf. DL, I, 2, 1; I, 2, 6; I, 5, 1 – 2; I, 6, 1 – 4; see also Rousseau's *Political Fragments*, in the *Pléiade* edition, vol. III, pp. 538 ff.. Sparta is praised in the Epistle Dedicatory in the paragraph about women, for being a state where the women were the bearers of morality and, in this sense, the seat of reason(ability). SDED §20. In Rousseau's idealized republic, the rational "love of the laws in the State and Concord among Citizens" taught by the (spartan) women of Geneva tames the private dimension of *amour-propre*, taking precedence over natural family bonds. For Sparta and Rome as models that depended on deception and forgetfulness, see Machiavelli, DL, I, 9, 4, and I, 25, 2, with Rousseau's *First Discourse*, p. 12. In respect to Rousseau's defense of Spartan institutions it is enough to say that for the same reasons that the idea of a literal return to nature is for him absurd (see SD, p. 203 (207)), a return to those ancient institutions would be too. To read Rousseau as a nostalgist is not to read him as a thinker of his times, and to miss his emphasis on the necessities caused by history. Cf. SDED §20; and SD, pp. 134-5 (135), 175-6 (180-1) and 182 (187).

modern republicanism.⁵² Machiavelli's *Discourses* can also be interpreted as an articulation of the paradoxical problem of political power in republics. For both Machiavelli and Rousseau, the main question concerns the psychological results of politics rather than the different forms of government, although, different from Machiavelli, Rousseau does not leave a place for the randomness of *hereditary* monarchy.⁵³ That said, both thinkers agree that democracy is, in its psychological results, superior in principle to the other classical forms of government, for being the form that, through the rejection of the artificial hereditary system, potentially optimizes freedom in the state. They also agree about danger of the idealization of republicanism (radical republicanism) and that the adoption of egalitarianism as a "sacred cause" would give rise to an unprecedented amount of difficulties (for which the *Second Discourse* as well as Rousseau's other political writings stand, perhaps paradoxically, as remedy).

In a note to the *Social Contract*, Rousseau affirms that "the expulsion of the Tarquins was the true period of the birth of the Republic."⁵⁴ He speaks of a natural progression from democracy to aristocracy, and from aristocracy to monarchy, from within that (republican) period, which came to an end with the dissolution of the State under the despotism of Tiberius. Rousseau dedicates a good part of Book IV of the *Social Contract* to the post-Tarquian institutions of the Roman republic. His

⁵² SDED, §6; DL, I, 16,1; see also I, 3, 2; I, 4, 1; I, 9, 2. Rousseau assesses Machiavelli's "secret intention" and the philosophical prominence of the *Discourses* over the *Prince* in a passage added to the 1782 edition of the *Social Contract*. See in the *Pléiade* edition, p. 1480 (note "a" to p. 409).

⁵³ The order that emerges with the *Second Discourse* is not anymore an offshoot of traditional religion and finds its moral rudiments in "nature."

⁵⁴ SC, III, 10, p. 421-2.

remedy is directed not only against sectarianism,⁵⁵ but also against the dissolution of a unified sovereignty that can result from, as it were, excessively mixed regimes. In the chapters on mixed governments of the *Social Contract*, Rousseau defends *temperate* governments that are simple in form.⁵⁶

In the Epistle Dedicatory, Rousseau mentions the expulsion of the Tarquins after affirming that freedom is a function of habit or education, and that what can be initially interpreted as liberation can become a yoke heavier than the one removed a little before.

Once the Peoples get used to Masters, they can no longer live without them. If they try to shake off the yoke, they end up even farther away from freedom: by taking freedom for a boundless license, which is actually its opposite, their revolutions almost always deliver them to seducers who only make their shackles heavier.⁵⁷

This is almost exactly what Machiavelli says in chapter 16 of his *Discourses*, entitled ‘A People Used to Living Under a Prince Maintains its Freedom with Difficulty if by Some Accident it Becomes Free:’

Infinite examples read in the memories of ancient history demonstrate how difficult it is for a people used to living under a prince to preserve its freedom after, for whatever accident, that people acquires freedom, as Rome acquired it after the expulsion of the Tarquins. Such a difficulty is reasonable, for that people is nothing but a brute animal that, although of a ferocious and savage nature, has always been nourished in prison and servitude; [an animal] that after having been freed in a pasture and abandoned to its fate, becomes prey of the first one who tries to re-shackle it, for neither being accustomed to

⁵⁵ Cf. his note on SC, II, 3, p. 372.

⁵⁶ SC, III, 7, 8, 9, pp. 413-420. These chapters should be read as a correction of Montesquieu and in light of Rousseau’s doctrine of sovereignty. Therefore, they are not a mere endorsement of *De l’esprit des lois*. Cf. *Émile*, V (*Pléiade* edition, vol. 4, p. 836) with the conclusion to the *Social Contract*, IV, 9, p. 470. See also Machiavelli, DL, I, 3 and I, 4.

⁵⁷ SDED, §6.

feed itself, nor knowing the places where to hide./ The same happens to a people that, being used to living under the government of others, not knowing how to judge whether a public action is defensible or offensive, not knowing princes nor being know by them, returns quickly under a yoke generally heavier than the one it had removed a little earlier from its neck.⁵⁸

Machiavelli argues that the rulers of *either* republics or monarchies must obey the same principle of ruling. The principle consists of taming the multitude, or, as he says, making the people friendly to oneself.⁵⁹ In order to do that, the ruler must know, first and foremost, the difference between the general nature of the desire of two kinds of person, particularly in relation to freedom. Machiavelli explores in this chapter a difference that he establishes in the beginning of the book between those who desire to be free to command (the desire of others), and those who desire to have a secure life and be free from the oppression of others.⁶⁰ However, unlike in the earlier chapters of the *Discourses*, in chapter 16 Machiavelli explicitly states this difference from the perspective of the ruler, namely, from the perspective of someone who needs to “befriend” or satisfy, in principle, all parts. Yet the radical detachment of the extraordinary ruler, from whose perspective Machiavelli here speaks, does not allow him to truly befriend anybody; he must seduce his people and unite their imagination through the trust acquired by his apparent reverence for, and wholehearted endorsement of, the customs and laws he promotes. In this sense, the ruler might make use of religion and the name of God,

⁵⁸ DL, I, 16, 1-2. Cf. also with DL, I, 47, 3.

⁵⁹ DL, I, 16, 4.

⁶⁰ Cf. DL, I, 4, 1; I, 5, 1-2; see also Machiavelli’s Dedicatory Letter to the *Discourses*. Cf. also Barbeyrac’s *Epître Dédicatoire* to his edition of Pufendorf’s *Les Droit de la nature et des gens* (another permanent reference for Rousseau), pp. iv – v, ed. 1732. Cf. with Darius’ discourse in Herodotus quoted above.

but only in order to uphold religion and unite the people.⁶¹ Machiavelli is very clear that even if the ruler's deceptive and ambiguous actions, as well as the constant revision thereof, might cause a reordering of certain aspects of religion (i.e. of the customs and ancient laws of the people), they should never be simply *against* religion. On the contrary, as the product of the highest understanding in his hierarchy of power, the action of the highest kind of ruler is aimed exactly against what Machiavelli sees as the main cause of corruption in the state, namely, the dissolution of religious values and the oppressive situation created by an excessive fragmentation of the general desire.⁶²

In the *Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli gives us a hierarchy of human power in terms of the meaning, intensity, and extent of one's action upon the customs and ancient laws of one's country. The unity of sovereignty in the state depends on the collective effort to secure these customs and laws, and the portion of each citizens' merit regarding this effort is always proportional to each one's business and strength.⁶³ On the top of the pyramid, Machiavelli places the heads and orders (*ordinatori*) of religions, followed by the founders of either republics or kingdoms. Their difference is stated in this passage:

if one who wishes to order a city well had of necessity to lay down the kingdom, he would deserve some excuse if he did not order [that city] so as not to fall from that rank [i.e. so as not to destroy the kingdom]; but if he is able to both hold the kingdom and order the city, he does not merit any excuse. In sum, *those whom the heavens give such an opportunity may consider that two ways have been placed before*

⁶¹ Cf. DL, I, 10, 1; I, 11, 3-5; I, 12, 1; I, 15, 1; I, 55; I, 58, 3; II, 19.

⁶² Cf. DL, I, 2, 3; I, 9, 2; I, 16, 5; I, 18, 3; I, 25; I, 57; I, 58, 4; III, 27; III, 29. Cf. with Rousseau's Preface to *Narcisse* in *Pléiade* edition, vol. 2, p. 971.

⁶³ DL, I, 10, 1.

them: one that makes them live secure and after death renders them glorious; the other that makes them live in permanent anxiety, and after death leaves them a sempiternal infamy.⁶⁴

The expediency and power (“opportunity”) of men like Numa and Romulus, the founders of the Roman republic, is rare and not heritable. To take literally the political problems in one’s own hands is to make the success of one’s actions dependent upon the continual renewal of one’s public recognition as the ruler, which, due to the principles of ruling needed to order a city, becomes a source of continual anxieties and sempiternal infamy for that person.⁶⁵ Numa is not superior to Romulus for being more naturally gifted, but for having chosen to secure the fundamental laws of the Romans through measures that did not depend on the political process *tout court*, and whose effect lasted well beyond his existence as a man.⁶⁶ Indeed, Machiavelli presents the two strategies as if they were a matter of choice for the ruler, and as if the choice for a secure life and a glorious death were obviously the best one. That said, the obvious choice here hides the true reason of its superiority, namely, the fact that a city only effectively becomes a republic – in the precise sense of the term, i.e. the people as the seat of the undivided sovereign power – when it is actively ruled from *outside* the ordinary political process.

⁶⁴ DL, I, 10, 6. My italics.

⁶⁵ Note in particular the sequence of Machiavelli’s argument from DL, I, 8 to I, 12; the chapters about the founders (I, 9 and I, 10) are preceded by a chapter that condemns lies in republics, and followed by chapters on the political importance of religions, *regardless of whether they are true or false* (see mainly I, 12, 1 – a chapter in which Machiavelli also curiously praises the Swiss for their ancient virtue as opposed to the bad customs brought about by the Church). On the principles of ruling, see also DL, I, 9, 2; 11, 3; 18, 4; 25; 48; II, 15; III, 40; 41; 44; 48; 49.

⁶⁶ DL, I, 11, 5.

The notion that to live and die free in a republic is, as Rousseau suggests, to be subjected to the honorable, salutary, and gentle (*doux*) yoke of the laws⁶⁷ – in other words, the notion that political freedom is a function of the coherence between the general desire of the people (the collective expression of their customs and ancient laws) and the *actual* legislation of the city – is enunciated throughout Machiavelli’s *Discourses*.⁶⁸ Again, both thinkers speak of the corruption of the city in terms of the psychological effects caused by the disharmony between the laws that limit the scope of one’s action, and the laws that limit the designs of one’s imagination. This idea appears with all its force in the following passage of Machiavelli’s *Discourses*.

[A]s good customs have need of laws to maintain themselves, so laws have need of good customs to be observed. Besides this, orders and laws made in a republic at its birth, when men were good, have no purpose later, when they have become wicked. If laws vary according to the accidents in a city, its orders never, or rarely, vary; this makes new laws insufficient because the orders, which remain fixed, corrupt them./ (...) If Rome wished to maintain itself free in corruption, it was necessary that it should have made new orders, as in the course of its life it had made new laws.⁶⁹

Rousseau is not explicit about the distinction made here by Machiavelli between “law” and “order” (i.e. between political legislation, or political action simply, and the customs and ancient laws of the country – *nomaia patria*).⁷⁰ Evidently, the unity of the citizens and their love for the fatherland, to which Rousseau refers in the

⁶⁷ SDED, §4.

⁶⁸ See, in addition to DL, I, 16, 1, also I, 1, 5; I, 3, 2; I, 57; I, 58, 4.

⁶⁹ DL, I, 18, 1-3. Cf. also DL, I, 3.

⁷⁰ Again, Rousseau seems to limit this fundamental distinction to the almost negligible difference between an old and a new spelling of the word (Loy/loi). In the *Second Discourse* we find the following spellings of law/laws: *loi*, *Loi*, *loy*, *Loy*, and *Loix*.

Epistle Dedicatory, depend on laws that transcend, in both the extent and depth of their effects, the ordinary legislation of the magistrates. In other words, they depend on laws that transcend the sort of legislative action which, being immediately associated with certain individuals, is as vulnerable to “accidents” as are the lives of those individuals.⁷¹ The difference between the two senses of law (*leggi* and *ordini*) is left *in nuce* at the beginning of §6 of the Epistle Dedicatory: the good laws (*bonnes loix*) that a new republic might have – i.e. the customs and laws that shape the imagination and direct the interest of the citizens – might stand in the way of the new laws made by a new government:

I should not have wished to live in a newly established Republic, regardless of how good its laws (*loix*) might be, for fear that, if the government were perhaps constituted differently than it should have been under the circumstances, either by being ill-suited to the new Citizens or by the Citizens’ being ill-suited to the new government, the State might be liable to be upset and destroyed almost from birth.⁷²

For both Machiavelli and Rousseau the relation between these two senses of law is what determines the degree of either freedom (well-being) or oppression in the State. In Part Two of the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau’s critique of the artificial division of labor and of the disrespect for natural inequalities that appears with the economy of land property is based precisely on the disproportion between these two senses of the law. The core meaning of his critique of the substitution of a succession by merit or virtue for a succession (made possible by economic power)

⁷¹ One must keep in mind not only the distinction between the general “action” of the sovereign body, the particular action of government, and the general action of the legislator, but also the different actions of different kinds of legislators.

⁷² SDED §6.

by mere blood relation is that the latter breeds a dissension between rulers and ruled that can ultimately lead to a state of license and extreme individualism (alienation). When later, through this process, freedom and democracy become mere slogans in the state, they become corrupted versions of the notions that those words represent; they become, ultimately and paradoxically, instruments used for manipulation and oppression of the many.⁷³

At the end of §6, Rousseau says that the independence of the citizens in a republic must be wise (*sage*) if they are to be truly free, i.e. if they are to have full conscience of themselves and thus of the limits of their freedom. Freedom is a condition made possible by an education that conducts all citizens into seeing themselves in light of the morals and myths that shaped their common past; it is the condition that gives them the right to legislate and, therefore, that legitimates their sovereign power: “who better than them can know the [most] convenient conditions under which to live together in the same society?”⁷⁴ Then again, to know the conditions under which one wants to live is not the same as to know how to achieve them.⁷⁵ In the first part of the Epistle Dedicatory, Rousseau affirms that he

⁷³ In the *Second Discourse*, the economy of land property is the source of the first contract (political law), and thus the beginning of the distinction between the two senses of law here at stake. See SD, pp. 169-174 (174-178). For corruption by hereditary succession see pp. 181-2 (186-7) and 184-6 (190-1); and Machiavelli’s DL, I, 2, 3; I, 18, 3; I, 47, 3. Cf. also Machiavelli’s discussion of the agrarian laws and the necessity to limit property of land in the state: DL, I, 1, 5; I, 5, 2; I, 6, 1-2; I, 7, 3; I, 16, 5; I, 17, 1; I, 37.

⁷⁴ SDED §8, p. 114.

⁷⁵ “*De lui-même le peuple veut toujours le bien, mais de lui-même il ne le voit pas toujours.*” SC, II, 6, p. 380.

should above *all* have fled a necessarily ill-governed Republic where the People, believing it could do without its Magistrates, or leave them no more than a precarious authority, had imprudently retained in its own hands the administration of Civil affairs and the execution of its own Laws (*Loix*).⁷⁶

The knowledge of the conditions implied here seems to be closer to knowing what one *does not* want rather than what one positively desires. The legislation of the citizens consists, then, of a sort of “negative action.” The legislative power of the people consists, for Rousseau, of only the “actions” that can be coherently performed by the people as a body: the sanctioning of the laws. Legislation here means the tacit or expressed consent that emanates from the people as a body and the observation of the *orders* that make that body one.

Rousseau condenses the ambiguity regarding the absolute and limited character of the knowledge of the people in a flagrant Machiavellian expression. He speaks of the “wisdom of the People” (*la sagesse du Peuple*).⁷⁷ The notion is meant as a power that the people can express as one body, not as individuals. As such, one must first speak of the wisdom of the people from the perspective of the rulers of such people, i.e. the rulers of the body. Also in Machiavelli, the people is seen as the body of a being whose head or reflective mind lies elsewhere.⁷⁸ Again, if one literally imagines the people as a living body, one must grant that, as a body, it is not conscious of its actions. Hence, the wisdom of the people, from which the unity

⁷⁶ SDED §10. My italics.

⁷⁷ In the text of the Epistle Dedicatory, the words *sage* (or *sagesse*) and *peuple* appear 16 times each, the number of Machiavelli’s chapter to which Rousseau refers with the example of the Tarquins. SDED §11 and Machiavelli’s DL, I, 58.

⁷⁸ Cf. the references to the *Social Contract* and *On Political Economy* above with DL, I, 44; I, 57; I, 58, 4.

of their sovereignty depends, is not acted out as a discursive or deliberative process, but as the reactive expression of the moral elements that, broadly speaking, unite the people. As such, the ruling power of the people is not the expression of their ability to communicate individual opinions, but of their collective response to the laws that are presented to them. The will of the people should only “rule” as a compass for those responsible for making and advancing those laws.⁷⁹ If this is true, we should consider – thinking of Machiavelli’s well-known adage – in what sense the people are “wiser and more constant than the prince.”⁸⁰ In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli says that the desire or will of the people – thinking of the people’s immediate or “instinctive” expression as a living body – is more predictable (varies less) than the passions of a single human being; moreover, the rule of the people in a republic can be criticized without fear, whereas “princes are always spoken of with a thousand fears and a thousand hesitations.”⁸¹

Democracy is nominally superior to monarchy for being psychologically more effective, namely, because it more effectively promotes stability and freedom

⁷⁹ For the same reason that the people, united in their general will, have the sovereign power in the state, they have the legislative power; however, their legislative power is as passive as is their sovereignty. The legislative “action” of the people is not the action that harmonizes the two senses of law mentioned above. The latter is the art of the legislator described in the *Social Contract*. Note, however, that the art of bringing together the two senses of law – an essentially political activity – is entirely different than the production of the laws in the highest of those two senses. Cf. SC, I, Introduction, p. 351.

⁸⁰ DL, I, 58.

⁸¹ DL, I, 58, 4. The political use of fear is, of course, extensively explored by Machiavelli; however, in the more general psychological implications of their politics, he seems to be much closer to Rousseau than to Hobbes. See DL, I, 6, 2 (“Since the plebs neither had nor feared rule they could live united a long time”); cf. also DL I, 8, 2.

for the members of the republic. I say “nominally” because, as already indicated, in both Machiavelli and Rousseau the polemic concerns less the simple forms of government than whether the locus of the political power in the state (i.e. sovereignty) is in the general will of the people or in the will of single individuals. As in the discussions about Otares, the opposition in question is not about how many should officially have the ruling power; it is not between the more technical distinctions of democracy, aristocracy, and monarchy, but rather between the more complex notions of political or republican rule (*politikos*) and despotism.⁸²

The irony with the expression “the wisdom of the people” is in the fact that the people, thought of as a body, is not capable of the general or abstract thinking implied in principle by the notion of wisdom. The action of the people is limited to identifying the surface of what is offered to them as good or evil, in a similar instinctive way that the various animals of a species are drawn to one kind of nourishment rather than another.⁸³ The autonomy of the people as a whole can be seen as equivalent to the (unreflective) autonomy of the “Savage man” (*l’homme Sauvage*), or simply of a beast, when we think of the laws that guide the people as being *as natural* as the laws that guide that being.⁸⁴ Therefore, the people in its

⁸² We will go back to this distinction in our discussion of the epigraph to the *Second Discourse* in chapter 6. Cf. DL, I, 2, 2, with the way Machiavelli generally opposes republics to principalities in the book. DL, I, 4, 1; I, 54; I, 59.

⁸³ Cf. DL, I, 16, 1.

⁸⁴ Yet, if a beast can serve as metaphor for the multitude, the only animal that can serve as metaphor for the whole state is the animal that compounds the state, namely, man (*l’Homme*). If the analogy is correct, the difference between the interest of the people and the interest of the whole state is equivalent to the different constitutions of animal and human desires, which, at the top of their potentialities can be stated as the difference between the instinctive desire to be secure and free

unity is wise only in the sense that beasts (or men in their unreflective, most primitive state) are wise: for knowing instinctively what their good is. In that sense, the wisdom of the people is absolute knowledge.

Naturally, however, from the perspective of the individual, the wisdom of the people is always partial, and thus never true wisdom, simply because it is not a quality of a reflective being. For both Machiavelli and Rousseau, the vulnerability of the wisdom of the people appears precisely when, in the confusion between private and public interests, individuals start acting as if they were, in their unity as people, such a reflective being. That happens whenever laws stop being respected and individuals start believing in the possibility of *actually* ruling themselves “as a people.”⁸⁵ This is why Rousseau blurs the difference between a characteristic of the people taken as a body and a characteristic of single individuals: the vast majority of individuals will never be morally autonomous, because the principle of the action (i.e. the rule) regarding the fundamental notions that unite them – an action that engages, commits, but also frees them – lies elsewhere.

That said, the wisdom of the people depends on a strong ethical component. In order for a people to be both united and capable of enjoying freedom, the single individuals must have a fair idea of their situation in relation to others; namely, not from oppression of others, and the intellectual desire to be free to command others for the benefit of the whole. Ultimately, the parallel between a living being and the state must take into account the quality that separates the living being that compounds the state (human being), taken in its highest form, and other living beings – it must take into account philosophical freedom. However, within the boundaries of Rousseau’s idealized republic – the republic described in the first part of the Epistle Dedicatory – freedom is merely political: it is the sweet submission to the laws.

⁸⁵ Cf. SDED §9-10 with DL, I, 47. Cf. also DL, I, 2, 3; I, 18, 3; I, 53; I, 58, 3; and I, 58, 4: “[A] prince that can do what he wishes is crazy; a people that can do what it wishes is not wise.”

only must they know in what sense they are equal to others, but also, perhaps more crucially, in what sense they differ from others. This eventually will endow them with a “robust temperament” and the capacity to live a “wise independence.”⁸⁶ This “intuitive wisdom” of the citizens has, for the republic, far greater weight than the “practical wisdom” that the individual magistrates might have.⁸⁷ Republicanism is not only defined by the sovereignty of the will of the people, but also, as seen above, by one’s awareness about his or her limitations concerning certain actions. It is defined by a qualified respect for inequalities and for the power and esteem that these inequalities entail.

Still from the perspective of the individual, for both Machiavelli and Rousseau, the main difference at stake on the matter of popular wisdom is not the difference between the autonomies of rulers and ruled, but about the energy that fuels the different wills of the individuals.⁸⁸ A good republican education would consist of preparing the citizens to choose according to their talents, strengths, and the constitution of their desire. Naturally, those who want more, tend to end by having more, and in the process of their education this difference ends up being determinant for their greater or lesser intellectual power, regardless of the realm of their action. These inequalities, whether they are natural or acquired, do not have to

⁸⁶ SDED §6.

⁸⁷ The virtue of the magistrates must simply (slavishly) reflect the wisdom of the people. SDED §11. There is no place for true individual wisdom in the idealized Geneva.

⁸⁸ In SDED §18, Rousseau addresses specifically the magistrates of the city, referring to the remaining citizens “*et même les simples habitans*” as their “*égaux par éducation, (...) inférieurs par leur volonté.*”

become sources of tension among the citizens.⁸⁹ Feelings of honor, admiration, pride, or envy, always present in political societies, would not undermine the republicanism here at stake, unless they become, in a major sense, dominant in the state. The problem for our two philosophers – perhaps the source of most political problems – happens when a minority of individuals, whose desire is by far more active than the average, receives either no or “too much” education. By becoming either tyrannical or inquisitive in their souls, these individuals become potentially a threat, in one case, to the *laws* of the state, in the other, to its *orders*. These are the extreme cases where an initial difference in the intensity of erotic energy can lead to a struggle between the absolute freedom of some and the relative freedom of others.

Rousseau’s explicit invocations of Machiavelli in the *Social Contract* should be enough to demonstrate the affinities between the two thinkers. But the particular character of the *Second Discourse* transforms the relation between them. It is not an accident that Machiavelli is not mentioned by name in the *Second Discourse*. Together with the reference to Herodotus, the reference to Machiavelli illustrates the hidden argument of the Epistle Dedicatory and places the main text of the *Second Discourse* in an unexpected context. The opposition between the absolute freedom of some and the relative freedom of others sets the ground for the consideration of the sense of freedom left out in the *Social Contract*: the quasi-sacred unity of sovereignty and the ensuing distinction between sovereignty and

⁸⁹ At least not when the predominant religion in the state does not become a cover-up for the open cult of materialism, as feared by Rousseau. In a world where we are all equal by nature (at birth and in death), inequalities become inevitably the source of injustice, oppression, and resentment unless they are seen as the result of labor and industriousness.

government in the *Social Contract* leave no space for the philosophical sense of freedom.⁹⁰

If we leave it to the political doctrine of the *Social Contract*, we must presuppose that even Rousseau's "great Legislator" is expected to subscribe to the natural morality preached in the *Second Discourse*.⁹¹ This is precisely the riddle that frames the rhetoric used in the *Second Discourse*, of which the Epistle Dedicatory is the introduction. Moreover, the perspective opened by the Epistle Dedicatory transcends the more predominantly political dimension of ruling and being ruled of

⁹⁰ "The philosophical sense of the word *freedom* is not my subject here." Cf. SC, I, 8, p.365.

⁹¹ In the chapter 'On the Legislator' (SC, II, 7), Rousseau says that "he who dares to carry out the institution of a people should feel capable of changing, so to speak, human nature." He leaves the possibility that the action of the legislator (or at least a certain kind of legislator) be interpreted as philosophical action, thus as an action issued from philosophical freedom. However, the *Social Contract* does not allow us to articulate, even on its more subterranean level, this fundamental question. We must at least conjecture the possibility that, given the great differences as texts between the *Social Contract* and the *Second Discourse*, the "great Legislator" refers primarily to the potential legislators of the human heart who, in theory, will have adopted the principles of natural morality taught in the *Second Discourse* (e.g. the natural goodness of man). We have attempted to show that the *Second Discourse* offers us a more profound account of the question of philosophical ruling or legislation than does the *Social Contract*. The chapter 'On the Legislator' in the *Social Contract* is, naturally, addressed primarily to the readers of that book, not of the *Second Discourse*. Thus, the main goal of that chapter must be to inspire, insofar as the figure of the Legislator is concerned, readers contemplating the philosophical possibilities contained in the *Social Contract*, not in the *Second Discourse*. Following a different interpretation, R. Masters believes that Rousseau develops a "science of the legislator." Masters claims that Rousseau dogmatically endorses and departs from the precepts of modern physics to establish his system. He attributes to Rousseau a seriousness about the more positivist passages in his work that simply cannot be the case if the dialectical sense of Rousseau's overall strategy is taken into account. In our view, Masters fails to see that there are different types of legislators and legislations implied by Rousseau, and that the difference between Rousseau and Machiavelli on this matter cannot be established by a simple parallel of the "category" "legislator" in the two thinkers. Cf. R. Masters, op. cit., pp. 354-368; 421-5.

the *Social Contract*. Rousseau's goal in the *Second Discourse* is vastly more ambitious than in any of his works. There, the opposition master-slave is intellectualized; it refers to the different, though not necessarily contrasting, sorts of lawmakers that constitute a state: the philosophical and the dogmatic rulers of the human heart. The Epistle Dedicatory makes us consider the action of rulers in general from a philosophical perspective. It makes us consider sovereignty through the philosophical sense of freedom and, as such, it introduces the metaphysical question of free action (or of the action of a free will), which orients Rousseau's thought as a whole.

Chapter 6

On the Principles of Rousseau's Discourse: Perfectibility and Inequality.

1. Due to the comparatively little space dedicated to explicit metaphysical questions in his works and to the elusive language used in those discussions, the attempt to comment on Rousseau's metaphysics might be regarded as a fruitless task. As we have shown above, if we want to grasp the conceptual articulation of his philosophical thinking, we must bracket his apparent contradictions and proceed as he does in the *Second Discourse*, i.e. by drawing hypotheses about how to connect the contrasting arguments, and by testing these hypotheses at the end of the whole discussion.¹ It is, then, with this precaution in mind that we should approach the core notion of what we can call Rousseau's negative metaphysics, namely, the notion that human beings are essentially unequal in their ambitions and powers.²

¹ Rousseau ends Part One of the *Second Discourse* with the idea that to philosophize is to move beyond the facts and to conjecture about the general ideas that unite them (pp. 159-160 (162-3)). On the question of philosophical method, see also Diderot, *Pensées sur l'interprétation de la nature* (1754), III and L.

² Apart from the passages in *Émile* mentioned below, see also Rousseau's *Letter to M. de Franquières* (*Pléiade* ed., vol. 4, pp. 1135-6) for the theoretical impossibility of a purely analytical metaphysics. The language of metaphysics must always pass by "the political", or by what Rousseau calls "the most useful and the least advanced of all human knowledge seems to me to be that of man." (SD, p. 124 (122)).

The individualism attacked by Rousseau is predicated on the idea of a spiritual (metaphysical) equality among human beings. According to this view, a fully developed education in reason, an education, in principle, open to all, leads to the highest form of human existence. But to perceive and compare our differences with others is rarely to judge these differences correctly, and to account for natural inequalities under the obligation of isonomia is an even harder challenge. How can the true rulers of society (the active sovereign wills in the society) make the situation fair and desirable to all, without ending up themselves seduced, directly or indirectly, by the softness of an egalitarian metaphysics? This is the dilemma of republicanism. Rousseau's necessity to cover up the ambiguities about the addressees of the Epistle Dedicatory – or the readers of the *Second Discourse* in general – mirrors the necessity to state the psychological principle of popular sovereignty (democratic rule) *as if it were* a metaphysical principle of justice, in other words, as if it were a pure principle of politics.

Yet, the metaphysical principle that commands Rousseau's thought is the antithesis of what became the commanding principle in liberal democracies. In this chapter, we will consider Rousseau's principle of natural inequality in two steps. First, we will go back to the question of perfectibility and the origin of human faculties in Part One of the *Second Discourse*. Rousseau's depiction of perfectibility as "the source of all human miseries"³ is directly related to the unbalances caused, from the beginning of the species, by the natural inequalities among individuals. The artificiality, conventions, and deceptions, namely, the progressive estrangement

³ SD, p. 141 (142).

from nature produced through the new human powers⁴ did not appear because of an inherent failure or ambiguity in those powers, but because of the *effect* that the asymmetric development of those powers had eventually on the species as a whole, i.e. because of inequality.

We will conclude our analysis of natural inequality by considering Rousseau's epigraph to the *Second Discourse*. The epigraph is taken from a discussion of how private ruling differs from public (political) ruling, from Book One of Aristotle's *Politics*. Our analysis will show that the passage situates the context for the discussion that Rousseau's rhetoric dissimulates. Aristotle's treatment of the natural inequality between rulers and ruled addresses precisely the question of the political necessity of democracy at stake for Rousseau.

2. What is original and what is artificial in the current nature of human beings?⁵ In the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau criticizes his predecessors for attributing to human beings in the hypothetical state of nature moral faculties and feelings that were only acquired with society and which are, therefore, potential characteristics of the current nature of human beings.⁶ As we have already seen, Rousseau criticizes Hobbes, Locke, and others for depicting human beings in the state of nature *as if* those human beings had always been formed, *internally and*

⁴ The means through which human beings eventually "relapsed lower than the Beast itself." Ibid.

⁵ "[I]t is no light undertaking to disentangle what is original from what is artificial in man's present Nature" (SD, p. 125 (123)).

⁶ SD, pp. 131-2 (132).

externally, as we see ourselves today.⁷ In order to think of what is *original* in the current nature of human beings – namely, of what has not changed since the beginning of the species – we must imagine a being that lacks all the acquired potentialities of human beings as we see them today, with one exception: the capacity of *both* the species and the individual to develop those potentialities.

[E]ven if the difficulties surrounding all these questions left some room for disagreement about this difference between man and animal, there is another very specific property that distinguishes between them, and about which there can be no argument, namely the faculty of perfecting oneself; 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, whereas an animal is at the end of several months what it will be for the rest of its life, and its species is after a thousand years what it was in the first year of those thousand.⁸

The opposition between the current nature of human beings and the moment in time when the individuals of the human species were still, as in other species, virtually undifferentiated – i.e. equal in their potentialities – is not a matter of mere speculation for Rousseau. The different examples given in the notes to the *Second Discourse* attest to the unlikelihood of “the experiments that would be necessary to know the man of nature.”⁹ One thing would be to study an individual born in civil society but abandoned as an infant in the woods and fed by wolves; another, would be to find in nature, and study, the first individuals of the species. Rousseau speculates that the latter could have been the case in his account, in note 10

⁷ SD, p. 134 (134). Rousseau here is certainly far from following Descartes’ purely physiological understanding of external and internal conformations (“the external shape of the members and in the internal conformation of the organs”) in *Discourse on Method*, Part Five, §3. Noted by translator of English edition, p. 356.

⁸ SD, p. 141 (142).

⁹ SD, p. 125 (123-124).

(originally marked “8”),¹⁰ of the descriptions of apes by European explorers. Indeed, he opens Part One of the *Second Discourse*¹¹ by attributing to Aristotle the view that human beings must have suffered profound physical transformation in the course of their progress or evolution. Although Rousseau affirms that we can only draw *conjectures* about what was “the first Embryo of the species (*espèce*)” and *how* it has evolved, he does not question, or conjecture, the idea that this first Embryo of the species was a being with a different constitution than that of human beings as we see them today.¹² This is a crucial point that has been generally overlooked. Rousseau’s note to this passage in the text (note 3, originally marked “*3.”) makes things even more ambiguous. In it, he speaks of man (*l’homme*) already in his current nature; he adopts an empiricist perspective to corroborate the traditional view that human beings are by nature bipeds.¹³ However, by merely alluding to the initial difficulty with the evolutionary thesis, Rousseau establishes that thesis as a more fundamental paradigm than the one used by tradition. The speculation on the apes in note 10 (“8”) takes into account these two senses of the state of nature.

To the objection that in view of the temporal gap that separates the two moments Rousseau would not have meant with his example in note 10 (“8”) the thesis that the first human beings were ape-like, it should be sufficient to indicate the following. If, as Rousseau affirms, there must have been, through the long progress of the species, internal and external transformations in its individuals, these

¹⁰ SD, pp. 204 ff. (208 ff).

¹¹ SD, p. 134 (134)

¹² Cf. with SD, p. 159 (162).

¹³ Cf. with Aristotle’s *Parts of Animals* IV, 10 – noted by translator in the English edition of the SD.

transformations must not have occurred homogeneously across the board. To presuppose an evolution of the species is evidently to presuppose also various degrees of transformations determined by different circumstances; it is also to presuppose different constitutions for different groups of individuals originating from the same mother species. That individuals that somehow remained at the threshold of this chain of events – or, at any rate, at an earlier stage of the process of human perfectibility – could still exist in nature, was then a theoretical possibility. Hence, Rousseau’s suggestion that the orangutans reported by the voyagers might have been those individuals is not absurd. In addition to this possible but unlikely hypothesis, Rousseau notes the importance of an even more unlikely experiment (stated in a rather indirect form due perhaps to its outrageous character), necessary to attest that, regardless of its internal and external difference with the current nature of human beings, the being in question would have belonged to our species. The experiment suggested by Rousseau would be equivalent today to the following thought experiment: imagine different beings believed to belong to late stages of the species that immediately pre-dated *homo sapiens*, such as *homo erectus*, were found in nature; one way to confirm or exclude the thesis that these are actually the first individuals of the human (*homo*) species would be to somehow mate them with women and see if they breed. Rousseau alludes here, not without some irony, to both the biological and cultural obstacles to such an experiment.¹⁴

¹⁴ Cf. SD, p. 208 (211). Note that Rousseau follows Buffon in what the latter calls “the most solid point of Natural History,” namely the notion that the unity of the species is given by the individuals’ capacity of reproduction: “*C’est donc dans la diversité caractéristique des espèces que les intervalles des nuances de la Nature sont le plus sensibles et le mieux marqués, on pourroit même dire que ces intervalles entre les espèces sont les plus égaux et les moins variables de tous,*

The least we can say about all this is that the state of (proto-) human beings right before the development of specifically human powers such as elementary self-awareness and awareness of death (“the pure state of nature”) is as conjectural as the capacity of perfectibility attributed by Rousseau to the first human beings, again as both species and individuals.¹⁵ If we cannot speculate or imagine the progress from beast to human, our individual capacity to perfect ourselves can only be understood as having been sent from the Heavens. This seems to be a logical necessity and it is up to the reader to decide which position Rousseau has seriously adopted.

puisqu'on peut toujours tirer une ligne de séparation entre deux espèces, c'est-à-dire, entre deux successions d'individus qui se reproduisent et ne peuvent se mêler, comme l'on peut aussi réunir en une seule espèce deux successions d'individus qui se reproduisent en se mêlant : ce point est le plus fixe que nous ayons en Histoire Naturelle, toutes les autres ressemblances et toutes les autres différences que l'on pourroit saisir dans la comparaison des êtres, ne seroient, ni si constantes, ni si réelles, ni si certaine.” Buffon, *Histoire Naturelle*, article ‘*L’asne*,’ t. IV, ed. 1753, p. 385-6. See also *Émile*, pp. 579-580, and Rousseau’s comment about Buffon, “*le Plin de notre siècle*,” in *Lettres Morales, Lettre 3, Pléiade* ed., vol. 4, p. 1096, with SD Preface, p. 125 (123-4). For a contrasting view on this crucial issue, see V. Gourevitch, ‘Rousseau’s Pure State of Nature,’ *Interpretation*, 1988, vol. 16, n.1, pp. 23-59; Gourevitch’s argument is corrected by R. Velkley in op. cit., p.38, note 22. For a defense of the notion of evolution from apes to human beings in Rousseau, one can refer, in addition to his other work cited above, to R. Wokler’s article on the subject, ‘From the Orang-utan to the Vampire: towards an Anthropology of Rousseau,’ in *Rousseau after two hundred years*, ed. R. Leigh (1982), pp. 109-115. Wokler claims that “Rousseau’s *homme sauvage* was really an orang-utan,” but unfortunately he did not consider Rousseau’s intended ambiguity on the matter. The same can be affirmed of Roger Masters’ treatment of the state of nature and human perfectibility in op. cit., pp. 106-204 and 430-3. See also Buffon’s article ‘*Les orang-outangs ou le pongo et le jocko*,’ in *Histoire naturelle*, t. XIV, ed. 1766, pp. 43 ff. For the idea of succession in nature, see the questions raised by Diderot, op. cit., LVII and LVIII. See also *Émile*, p. 830.

¹⁵ Cf. also SD, p.134 (134) with p. 159 (162).

We can explain the relation between the two main senses of the state of nature in the *Second Discourse* (the state of “the first Embryo of the species” and the current natural constitution of human beings) in the following manner: any “virtual faculty”¹⁶ (or potentiality) seen as a characteristic of the first human beings must have been previously developed and acquired by the whole species. The expression hides the ambiguity: a faculty must be developed before it becomes virtual. Hence, one must also speculate about the development of perfectibility itself as a characteristic of the species *before* it became a potentiality in single individuals – therefore as a characteristic of nature *tout court*. In this sense, perfectibility can be seen from two perspectives: as a dialectical principle of adaptation present within the code of all species; and as the capacity to choose that is motivated by the particular passions and experiences of one individual, a capacity specific of human beings.

Thus if, from the perspective of the single individual, reflection can be seen as the faculty employed by that individual in order to perfect his own condition, from the perspective of the human species, the appearance of that faculty can be seen as a transformation of an instinct that eventually “backfired” for having caused, ultimately, the liberation of the individuals from their previous animal instincts and the substitution of those instincts with conventions. Thought of as a unique human capacity, perfectibility ends up deviating the interest of particular wills from the, so to speak, general will of the species. By hesitating about what was

¹⁶ A faculty that, depending on the necessity and the will of the individual, can either stay latent or be actualized in different degrees. See SD, pp. 204-5 (208). Note also the contrast between “*facultés naturelles*” and “*facultés artificielles*,” in pp. 128 (127) and 134 (134).

once an innate or instinctive idea of an object, the individual human being opens the infinite road to his own perfectibility. But, unfortunately, individual perfectibility does not mean perfectibility of the sum of individuals, i.e. it does not mean (anymore) the perfectibility of the species. Instead, the fragmentation of the mental unity of the species (i.e. of the unreflective unity of desires and designs) caused by the development of perfectibility, the longing for the non-present, and the ensuing engendering of *amour propre*, ends up compromising the very freedom that it creates, by transforming human beings into imbeciles.¹⁷ Perfectibility is, ironically, the principle of corruption of the very things it makes possible: the idea and the quest for happiness.

The relation between the two moments in question is, therefore, crucial: in order to reflect on the current nature of human beings¹⁸ one must conjecture a state of nature that stages the transition, as it were, from non-human to human beings. By preserving these two moments, Rousseau alternates between an idealized treatment of human nature and a dialectical speculation about the origin of the human species. Rousseau's interest in the genesis of human inequality is ultimately an interest in the unique formation of the human soul as opposed to the (soul of) other species. This is what guides his moral teaching in the *Émile*. Thus, a philosophical inquiry into freedom and imagination depends on the question of what is original and artificial about these powers in the two senses of the state of nature. The freedom of a being whose awareness was entirely limited to the perception of his present

¹⁷ SD, p. 141 (142).

¹⁸ The current nature of human beings as species encompasses – without canceling – the historical or cultural differences between say Europeans and Native Americans (“savages”).

existence¹⁹ – the freedom of living in the pure instinct of the species – is slowly replaced by the necessity to confront the element of unpredictability introduced by the new inequalities within the species, whereby each individual tends to become a world within itself.²⁰ This was a slow and subtle process, and the inequalities in the first stages of these modifications must have been, as Rousseau tells us, negligible. Yet, if we compress the immense period of time in question, we realize that individuals had eventually to develop a new sort of cognitive ability regarding the actions of others. Fear of the unknown now also characterizing how some individuals perceive their kin, the new ability will consist of an expansion of the faculty that had started to make these individuals aware of their limited existence, i.e. of externality and their difference with others. As we saw in Part One, for Rousseau, this new cognitive faculty precedes the appearance of instituted languages and thus cannot be identified with reason, at least not reason understood in its narrow relation to instituted languages. We will treat foresight (*prévoyance*), the intuitive power to anticipate the non-present and devise future situations, as the human capacity to *imagine* actively, in both a productive and a cognitive sense.

Confronting the materialist claim that all intellectual faculties can be mapped down to sensations, in the *Émile*, Rousseau gives us his most important, albeit concise, treatment of this fundamental faculty: to compare or to judge is to imagine

¹⁹ Cf. SD, p. 143 (144).

²⁰ The capacity of elementary abstraction of the first human beings coincides, thus, with the beginning of the inequalities in the species. The first intellectual inequalities, Rousseau seems to suggest, appear in the contrast between young and old; the anticipation of one's fateful future appears first with the ancient. Cf. SD, p. 136-7 (137).

one object over the other.²¹ Following Rousseau's reasoning, this *active* sense of the imagination only gradually became a power characteristic of the whole species, and thus the name we give to this power leads almost inevitably to misunderstanding. What we call it, then, is actually irrelevant; what matters is to understand what is at stake: a power that allows the individual to perceive other individuals and things in general as being outside of himself,²² and to compare and judge these other individuals and things in their *relation* to himself, i.e. in light of the whole of his experiences, though primarily in light of this fundamental experience of individuality, i.e. of the *self*.

Through my intelligence, I am the only one who can inspect the whole. What being down here other than man knows how to observe the others, measure, calculate and predict their movements, their effects, and combine, so to speak, the sentiment of common existence with that of his individual existence?²³

In this rather comprehensive sense, imagination can be seen as the human ability that stretches the perception of existence (*sentiment d'existence*), an expansion that allows human beings to move from a general to a particular situation or idea.²⁴

²¹ Cf. *Émile*, p. 571. Our terminology here is not in contradiction with what Rousseau says. On the contrary, by distinguishing between active and passive imagination one can overcome the ambiguity implied in the generality of the concept.

²² *Émile*, pp. 571 and 573.

²³ *Émile*, p. 582.

²⁴ Rousseau describes his writing procedure, namely, his own cognitive use of imagination, as being equivalent in form to that of the first human individuals. He too uses single words with the meaning of full propositions; he too moves from general images to a particular knowledge: "by arranging [language] so that as often as each word is used, the meaning given it be sufficiently determined by the ideas related to it and that each period where the word is found serves it, so to speak, as a definition." *Émile*, p. 108 (345). Cf. also the passages from his *Preface to the Second Letter to Bordes* and his *Idea of a Method* cited above.

To better grasp the cognitive character that Rousseau ascribes to imagination, let us reconsider the place of Condillac in the passage on the origin of languages of the *Second Discourse*. As we saw in chapter 3, Rousseau evokes Condillac's work in a rather positive tone. However, for Rousseau, Condillac's solution far from avoiding determinism, makes it more absolute. Rousseau's discussion of the origin of languages touches the heart of a lifelong quarrel with the advocates of what he generally calls materialism. It is thus in a negative or ironic sense that we should read the opening lines to the passage:

I could leave it at here quoting or restating the Abbé de Condillac's investigations of this matter, all of which fully confirm my sentiment, and which perhaps suggested its first idea to me.²⁵

For Condillac, as for Locke,²⁶ the unity of being is the body. Humans are higher beings because of the unique constitution of their bodies, which allows them to explore their unique sense of touch. Indeed, Condillac criticizes Locke for not being radical enough, i.e. for not extending to human faculties his attack on innate ideas. Whereas Locke keeps apart sensation and reflection, Condillac takes to the

²⁵ SD, p. 145 (146). In the years that preceded the *Second Discourse*, there was an obscure dispute between Condillac and Buffon about the differences between human beings and beasts, which became more explicit with the publication of Condillac's *Traité des animaux*, in 1755. In the second note to the *Second Discourse* (note 2, originally marked “*2.”), Rousseau had already evoked Buffon by quoting an inspired passage on the “*sens intérieur*” that separates human beings from beasts. Although in the *Second Discourse* he seems indeed to praise Buffon for his notion of a “*sens intérieur*” in human beings – the basic idea rejected by Condillac, in the first part of the work mentioned, due to the dualism that it implies (*homo duplex*) – in a later, private note to a book that sums up the materialist claim (Helvétius' *De l'esprit*), Rousseau derogatorily indicates that there is no philosophical difference between the two authors. See *Notes sur 'De l'esprit' d'Helvétius*, Pléiade ed., vol. 4, p. 1129.

²⁶ *Essay*, II, 27, §6

extreme the notion that all knowledge arises from experience. More importantly, for him our *capacity to think* can be deduced from the particular constitution of the human body. Touching is experimenting, erring, and therefore acquiring knowledge; thus, reflection itself can be traced back to our unique sense of touch. Condillac's turn from Locke on this point has one particularly significant consequence: it allows materialism to be paired with the notion that, from an intellectual point of view, all men are created virtually equal, something inconceivable not only for Locke, but also for someone like Diderot.²⁷ For Condillac, in their natural state, human beings are virtually equal regarding their intellectual capacities.

Condillac traces the origins of human languages back to a “language of action” that appears through the *necessity* (although he speaks of compassion) to share the experiences acquired individually.²⁸ Yet, as in Rousseau, it is only with the institution of a language capable of representing particular objects with signs, that humans take the decisive step away from an otherwise predominantly animal condition. Language thus understood allows human beings to reason among themselves, acquire more complex and lasting knowledge, and therefore perfect their cognitive faculties. Reason, for Condillac, is the highest human faculty, for being the faculty through which human beings become active and free from the more predictable life of beasts.

In contrast to his praise of reason, Condillac treats imagination as the crucial human faculty at the source of both our misery and our improvement. To the dangers of imagination noted by Locke – for whom imagination (“Invention,

²⁷ Diderot, *op. cit.*, LIV and LV.

²⁸ Cf. Condillac, *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines*, Second Part, ch. 1, §1-2.

Fancy”) is not related to freedom and certainly not to cognition, but is associated with, not to say reduced to, our use of memory²⁹ – Condillac opposes a higher, cognitive sense of that faculty. For him, we can use our imagination in a voluntary way in order to associate ideas, and “[l]anguage is the most evident example of associations that we form voluntarily.”³⁰ Rousseau was clearly invested in much of what Condillac had to say on this matter, but for him Condillac’s correction of Locke was plainly insufficient. The cognitive function attributed by Condillac to imagination respected a scheme whereby human beings and other animals differed in their intellectual powers only by degree. In its highest capacity, imagination can only awaken (re-produce) our ideas and give its assent to the truth, which, in turn, is properly grasped only by empirical analysis.³¹

Condillac’s determinism put him in the same predicament as Locke’s. In the *Émile*, Rousseau shows that human beings err because their judgment is mixed with conventions and prejudices that distort their perception of things, namely, the artificial languages they are forced to adopt, the image they make of themselves, and their opinions.³² While for Condillac, reason and instituted signs are potentially the remedy for the mistakes that originally arise with the exploration of touch, for Rousseau, human error appears, as we saw in our treatment of the origin of speech, as the results of those very conventions, i.e. of reason and its instituted signs. It is not understanding, as Locke affirms in the very first sentence of his *Essay*, nor is it

²⁹ Locke, *Essay*, II, 10, §8.

³⁰ Condillac, *Essai*, I, ch. 9.

³¹ *Ibid.*, I, 4; I, 10-11.

³² *Émile*, pp. 572-3.

language (reason), as wants Condillac, that marks the difference between human beings and beasts, but again the capacity to be a free agent and the progressive awareness of this freedom.³³ The *ego* is the transformative experience based on which freedom and human cognition (self-knowledge) become possible:

It is necessary (...) that I first examine myself to know the instrument that I want to use and to what point I can trust that usage.³⁴

Judgment naturally presupposes the senses, but it is not, as Condillac would have it, a mere mode of the senses. For Rousseau, to judge is “to give a sense to this word *is*;” it is to actively compare, to imagine “one object over another;” it is an activity or a movement in us that finds its source and energy nowhere else but in ourselves; finally, judgment is the act of “an intelligent force that superposes and *then* pronounces itself.”³⁵ It is true that, in a way, we are enslaved by our senses, for we are not free to feel or refrain from feeling. However, it is also true, at least for Rousseau, that this enslavement is not necessarily absolute. The origin of languages and reason lies in a more fundamental capacity that starts to take shape with the appearance, in our distant ancestors, of elementary self-reflection. The capacity to be free agents means that we are, in principle, free to decide whether, and up to what point, we want to examine, act upon, and transform our experiences *in their relation to each other*. This capacity became inherent to the disposition of human beings or to the way their wills are enacted; it does not depend on education in order to exist, albeit without education it will likely remain dormant in the individual.

³³ SD, pp. 140-1 (141-2).

³⁴ “*Il faut (...) tourner d’abord mes regards sur moi pour connoître l’instrument dont je veux me servir, et jusqu’à quel point je puis me fier à son usage.*” *Émile*, p. 570.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 571 (my italics).

Hence, together with our *original* capacity to produce our own ideas, human freedom precedes the institution of signs: it precedes what is artificial in the current nature of human beings.

For Rousseau, human beings have established conventional languages (of which *reason*, as understood by Condillac, is one of them) *because* they could judge what they imagined, that is to say, because the first ideas that started to distinguish them from beasts were not direct outcomes of their senses, like in beasts, but of the passions that their elementary reflection produced.³⁶ Rousseau's attack on the doctrine that "to judge is to feel" (i.e. that we are ultimately passive or re-active beings) confronts his opponents on the deepest implications of their thought. Although in part he does it in the manner of his opponents – namely, by presenting evidence from experience or by recurring to equivalent experiments of thought³⁷ – he defends, against them, the existence of innate faculties and ideas in living beings.³⁸ Rousseau is naturally aware of the unpalatable character, from the

³⁶ Ibid., p. 573; cf. also pp. 581-2 and 586-7. See SD, p. 142 (143) and our discussion in chapter 3.

³⁷ Cf. *Émile*, p. 585.

³⁸ Rousseau leaves to his readers the crucial distinction between the general active principle in living beings and the active intelligence of human individuals. See on this regard *Émile*, pp. 574 with 576. It is true that it is harder to conceive of innate ideas in human beings than it is to conceive them in beasts. What would be the equivalent in us to the idea of a spider net to a spider? Yet the difficulty should not make us dismiss the question. We saw how, for Rousseau, man's capacity to perfect his own life as an individual is what distinguishes him from beasts. This specific human capacity becomes innate to the species, but it also becomes dependent on society in order to be activated. Hence perfectibility becomes dependent on, or intrinsically linked to, the conventions that it helps to create. The cyclical process is gradual: the more human beings advance through their perfectibility, the more the faculty becomes conditioned by those advancements in order to be triggered. That said, to say that perfectibility becomes innate is to say that at least part of the *motivation* behind it must also be innate. Its triggering was and is only possible because the

perspective of the dominant radical empiricism, of the dualist hypothesis regarding the principle of movement in living beings (soul and body as different substances). However, his arguments about these things are aporetic. They are limited to exposing what cannot be the case, such as the application of Cartesian method and Newton's laws of movement to entirely philosophical and metaphysical questions.³⁹

individual has *in himself* part of the motivation for doing it. As we saw in Part One, the motivation is in the innate passions, in the ideas of these passions – or, more precisely, in the dialectical process that presents these passions to us as ours – that became the first objects of reflection and, as such, the first triggers of individual perfectibility. It is in this sense that the motivation for individual perfectibility, and for the communication of its findings, is related to self-knowledge: it is the desire to know how to comply with the demands of the new passions. “We seek to know only because we desire to enjoy. (...) The Passions, in turn, owe their origin to our needs, and their progress to our knowledge; for one can only desire or fear things in terms of the ideas one can have of them, or by the simple impulsion of Nature.” SD, p. 142 (143).

³⁹ “Experience and observation made us know the laws of movement; these laws determine the effect without showing the causes; they are not sufficient to explain the system of the world and the march of the universe” (*Émile*, p. 575). Roger Masters misses Rousseau's point in his critical assessments to his exhaustive work (op. cit., pp. 428-30); he also provides an inadequate account, in our view, of the relation between the Vicar's metaphysics in *Émile* and the *Second Discourse* (pp. 66-74). Masters follows Leo Strauss's well-known account in *Natural Right and History*. He claims that Rousseau's arguments in the *Profession of Faith* (mainly, pp. 573-595), particularly Rousseau's treatment of communicated and spontaneous motion, “have been rendered not merely dubious, but simply ridiculous by the subsequent developments in the natural sciences” (p. 429). Masters either disregards or cannot see that what Rousseau says about spontaneous movement concerns the question of free will specifically, and has, as we have said, an aporetic character. Rousseau's central claim in the passage is that there his arguments are not really scientific and that the question at stake cannot be properly addressed by the methods or language of modern science; in other words, a speculation of purely metaphysical character such as the one regarding the nature of movement, both in living beings and in general, cannot be contradicted nor corroborated by scientific theories. Masters not only misses the dialectical sense of the discussion, but also he bases his argument on scientific facts – such as the assumption by modern physics of the internal motion common to all atoms – that are both considered and set aside as irrelevant to the subject by Rousseau himself (*Émile*, pp. 577-8). See also on this matter Diderot's critique of Maupertius in op. cit., L and LI; and LVI.

Rousseau's goal was to subvert the current situation. He wanted to show primarily that the true philosophically unpalatable, rather, unintelligible, hypothesis lay in the principle of the self-moving matter, the cornerstone of the sensationalist doctrine.⁴⁰

Rousseau concludes the section on the origin of languages in the *Second Discourse* by affirming the impossibility that languages would have been born and established through purely human means.⁴¹ There are two ways of interpreting his conclusion: either languages were sent from the Heavens or their development coincided with the development of the human species out of an initially non-human situation. Rousseau indicates that, as Hobbes and Locke, Condillac's account of human nature presupposes that human beings have *always* existed in their current constitution.⁴² Radical empiricism seems to force us to start with an image of paradise whereby human beings are all potentially equal in the capacity that distinguishes them from beasts, namely, the capacity to reason through instituted signs. If we follow Condillac, we have to conclude that language and reason were a gift from the Heavens, one of the "hypotheses" that Rousseau, for strategic reasons, wants to preserve in the *Second Discourse*.⁴³

Rousseau is rather interested in the untold story to which he alludes in the passage, a story less compatible with the empiricist dogma, due to the purely speculative or conjectural element that its articulation would imply. By that we

⁴⁰ *Émile*, pp. 574-6 and 584-5; on innate ideas in human beings see pp. 584 and 598; on *instinct*, see the note on p. 595 with the passage that precedes it on p. 593, where God is described as a "purely intuitive" being.

⁴¹ SD, p. 149 (151).

⁴² SD, p. 144 (146).

⁴³ See note on the immortality of the soul for Condillac in chapter 3.

mean the transition from non-human to human beings, i.e. the gradual and uneven appearance of self-awareness, active imagination, and perfectibility, the different aspects of the process of development, in the human species, of the individual capacity to stretch the perception of one's existence and anticipate the non-present by either fearing it or desiring it. These things were either denied or inadequately explained by the materialists. Rousseau's speculation, being the product of the very faculty that it wants to grasp – a cognitive faculty that moves from general to particular ideas – resists by definition being translated into the more straightforward analytical language characteristic of Condillac and, in general, Eighteenth century followers of Locke and Newton. It is true that, as in Condillac, for Rousseau too the origin of human language must be studied as the origin of human cognition, but their understanding of what is ultimately implied by this notion of cognition differs profoundly. Rousseau's correction of Condillac's dogmatic rationalism gives us the key to understanding what is, at the same time, the *what* and the *how* of the inquiry in the *Second Discourse*. Rousseau conjectures, indeed, as Diderot,⁴⁴ a continuity or progression between beast and man; yet, for him, the break between the “essentially” animal and the “essentially” human was far more profound than it was for any of his opponents and friends. The essential difference is, precisely, in the unique character of human cognition.

3. In its cognitive connotation, imagination is the faculty that allows Rousseau to superimpose the ambiguities that appear through his inquiry, and to

⁴⁴ Cf. Diderot, op. cit., LVII.

confront subjects that, by their nature, resist straightforward analysis. The cognitive sense of imagination delimits not so much discursive reason, but the general conditions or the common ground for the eventual analytical discussions of these subject-matters. We can think of Rousseau's understanding of this faculty as the retrieval of the *daimonic* element in philosophical thinking, or in thinking *tout court*. The place that Rousseau attributes to imagination in his archeology is entirely coordinated with the necessity to articulate a philosophical, and not only a political, sense of freedom – that is to say, to give a philosophical account of human free will.⁴⁵ Rousseau's philosophical freedom goes against the belief that the human will is necessarily pre-determined either by bodily passions or by applied reason, i.e. by relations that through reason can be deduced from bodies in general. This philosophical sense of freedom becomes viable again when we see that the fundamental principle of human action – the power that makes such freedom possible – cannot be explained through observation or experience of bodies *qua* bodies.

The great irony in Rousseau's account of our origins, especially when considered from the point of view of his opponents, is precisely in the ambiguous character of perfectibility, the faculty that, in principle, set human will free. The first important cultural consequence of freedom was not philosophy, but dependence. With the expansion of inequalities, freedom did not beget more freedom, but enslavement. "Why, asks Rousseau, is man alone liable to become

⁴⁵ The opposition between political (egalitarian) and philosophical (non-egalitarian) freedom is established, as we have showed, in the introduction to the *Second Discourse*, i.e. the Epistle Dedicatory.

imbecile?”⁴⁶ Rousseau describes in the Second Part of the *Second Discourse* how this relation between freedom and imbecility reaches its climax when politics is invented. The conflicts and the consequent enslavement implied in that relation made some human beings, at this advanced stage of human development, realize that in order for freedom to be associated with justice and peace, the individual freedom of one must be thought through the collective freedom of all.⁴⁷ The “wise Laws” that will now assure the political freedom of the majority were the creation of the political thought of these human beings. As such, the philosophical sense of freedom of these first rulers starts with their incipient political concerns. Philosophy starts as political philosophy.

For Rousseau, the ethics offered by his opponents is plainly insufficient in its political-psychological implications, for they miss, precisely, the principles behind Rousseau’s account of the emergence of politics. Instead, the politics resulting from their bad point of departure favors, ultimately, a separation of the individual from a true sense of belonging to the community. The excess of individual desires and the ensuing dependencies engendered by the economy of constant innovations, characteristic of the new liberal ethos, renders impossible a real autonomy of both citizen and state.⁴⁸ We will see next how the fact that Rousseau opens the *Discourse on Inequality* with a sentence, in epigraph, taken from Aristotle’s *Politics* is not a coincidence with what we have just suggested, namely, that the philosophical

⁴⁶ SD, p. 141 (142).

⁴⁷ SD, pp. 172-3 (177).

⁴⁸ Accordingly, liberalism would favor further enslavement and an ephemeral sense of freedom at best.

exercise of our free agency starts, for him, as political thought. The passage from the *Politics* not only focuses on the question that Rousseau's opponents had failed to address – namely, the question of the autonomy of both citizens and state – but also it situates the context for Rousseau's discussion of natural inequality before he starts with the Epistle Dedicatory:

An *animal* [or living being] consists primarily of soul and body, of which the former is by nature the ruling and the latter the ruled factor. *And to discover what is natural we must study it preferably in things that are in a natural state, and not in things that are degenerate.* Hence, in studying the *human being* we must consider one who is in the best possible condition concerning both body and soul, (...) for in those who are corrupt or in a corrupt condition, it might be said that the body often rules the soul due to their bad and unnatural state.⁴⁹

The passage refers to Aristotle's treatment of the natural inequality between rulers and ruled, the fundamental relation in the Epistle Dedicatory. Rousseau uses only the second sentence of this passage as epigraph to the book. It occurs right at the first pages of Book One of the *Politics*, in a discussion about how private ruling differs from public (political) ruling.⁵⁰ More precisely, it occurs within a discussion about whether a certain kind of slavery is natural, namely, about whether some human beings are more naturally disposed to being ruled than others, and thus whether that condition is for those human beings desirable and advantageous.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1254a34 – 1254b1.

⁵⁰ This is exactly how Rousseau describes the subject of Aristotle's book in the article *On Political Economy*, p. 244. See our note in ch. 5 on the use of Filmer and Aristotle in Rousseau's article.

⁵¹ In a footnote to his interpretation of the epigraph used in the *Social Contract*, R. Masters calls our attention to "the importance that Rousseau attaches to the epigraph of a work" ('The Structure of Rousseau's Political Thought,' in *Hobbes and Rousseau*, New York, 1972, p. 408). According to this principle, Rousseau must have used all his epigraphs in a coherent way. Thus if the epigraphs of *Émile* and the *Social Contract* condense ultimately the overall intention in those books, so should that of the *Second Discourse*. However, Masters seems to contradict his own principle when he

The best condition for any living being is the natural one, and the natural condition of any living being is one in which the soul (the principle of life) rules over the body. Perhaps the full sense of the Aristotelian notion would require a longer investigation into what Aristotle means by *soul* and *being*; nonetheless, the text of the *Politics* gives us sufficient elements to understand the political teleology that emerges from this principle.⁵² Aristotle notably tells us that *human* life can only exist in the state (*polis*),⁵³ i.e. that the humanity of the single individual is predicated upon his community with others. The reason why the human soul should rule the body must be found, then, in the very definition of man (*anthropos*). In order for it to achieve its best possible condition, the soul needs to be *in the city* and exercise the faculties that, by allowing individuals to establish relations of comparison and pronounce judgments about what they find useful, just, and good, make them different from other animals.⁵⁴ But Aristotle also says that a part cannot logically have a different end (*telos*) than the end of the whole to which it belongs.

interprets Rousseau's epigraph to the *Second Discourse*, or at least the context from which the sentence is drawn, as the standpoint that Rousseau denies, rather than elucidates, in that book (R. Masters, *The Political Philosophy of Rousseau*, pp. 111-8). The passage by Aristotle appears in Grotius's discussion of the difference between human beings and other animals regarding natural right. (*De jure belli ac pacis*, I, 1, 12, 3; noted by both Gourevitch and Meier). Grotius uses the sentence, which in Aristotle precedes the famous passage about the political nature of man, in order to illustrate his thesis that in the state of nature man is a sociable being.

⁵² We cannot give here a competent discussion of free will and the productive sense of imagination in Aristotle. As an introductory text to these notions see *Metaphysics*, 982a1 - 983a24, particularly in relation to Book One of the *Politics*.

⁵³ *Pol.*, 1253a26-28

⁵⁴ *Pol.*, 1253a2-20. In the *Politics*, Aristotle speaks of the nature of human beings *as we see them today*, not from an evolutionary perspective, as Rousseau suggests he does in the beginning of the *Second Discourse* (SD, p. 134 (134)).

The best possible condition for the individual soul is, therefore, defined by the best possible condition for the whole of which it is a part (i.e. the state); it is defined by the independence or self-sufficiency (*autarcheia*) of that whole.⁵⁵ The best individual condition is given by “that for the sake of which the individual exists,” but such a capacity only makes sense in the political context of the individual’s life. Thus a life dedicated to the search and enjoyment of essentially private goods becomes “impossible” or, according to Aristotle, sub-human. Because there cannot be a full individual self-sufficiency *in the city*, freedom is always tied to demands of the general interest (common good) and never absolute.⁵⁶ We can say that, for Aristotle, human nature is defined by a certain kind of enslavement or dependence, without which we simply stop being human. If an absolute freedom can only be conceived from the perspective of either beasts or gods, freedom only exists to the extent that we remain bestial or become divine. Thus if we think of the best regime as a regime that optimizes freedom, we can see that the main problem at the beginning of Aristotle’s *Politics* is the same as in Rousseau’s *Second Discourse*, i.e. the coordination of this unity or self-sufficiency of the state with the particular freedom or will of its members. If our interpretation of the Epistle Dedicatory is sound, the parallel between the two texts is striking. And if that is the case, we must

⁵⁵ Put differently, if the end of the whole is self-sufficiency, the end of the part cannot be its own self-sufficiency, but something that contributes to the self-sufficiency of the whole. See *Pol.*, 1252b35.

⁵⁶ “It is evident that the city is natural and prior to individuals; for if one is not self-sufficient when existing on one’s own [i.e. independent from the city], one holds the same relation to the whole as do the other parts. An individual who is either not *capable* of taking part in the community, or who is self-sufficient to the point of not needing anything, is not a part of the city: he is either a beast or a god.” *Pol.*, 1253a24-29.

consider the possibility that Rousseau's interpretation of the *Politics* – namely, of the discussion in Book One framing the passage he quotes – resonates with his own views about inequality and the difference between man and beast.⁵⁷

Before anything, one must realize that Aristotle's discussion of slavery is not limited to the usual sense of the notion, i.e. the "institution of slavery." He admits that slavery can be understood in two fundamental ways: natural slavery and slavery by law or convention. Hence, in the *Politics*, the term (*to douleuein*) refers to two completely different states.⁵⁸ Aristotle agrees that "institutionalized slavery" (established by law) creates, in principle, a relation of oppression that cannot in itself be advantageous or just; but against those who believe that all slavery is against nature, and that human beings are essentially equal, he shows that the notion can denote a general condition which, in different degrees, is natural to many if not most people.⁵⁹ Let us focus on what he means by natural slavery.

Aristotle treats the relation between ruler and ruled as a natural outcome of the natural inequalities among human beings.⁶⁰ Human beings are different among themselves in the qualities of body and soul, but they are also different – *as opposed*

⁵⁷ What follows is less an attempt to understand Aristotle than to understand what might have been Rousseau's interpretation and use of the *Politics*.

⁵⁸ *Pol.*, 1253b20 and 1255a4.

⁵⁹ Cf. *Pol.*, 1252a31, 1252b1, 1254a21, 1254b16, 1255b20 with 1255a4 ff. In a section on friendship in *N. Ethics*, 1161b5, Aristotle distinguishes between "slave" and "human being" in the same person. To befriend a slave *qua* a human being is, necessarily, to befriend someone who is either not aware of his condition of being a slave or who is not aware that he is seen as such by the person befriend him.

⁶⁰ Contrast the references in the previous note with Rousseau's SD, p. 138 (139), and with Locke's *Second Treatise*, §22-23, and § 61-63. See also R. Velkley's treatment of the passage in *op. cit.*, ch. 2, pp. 32-5.

to other animals – in the way and degree in which their bodily passions respond to their intellects, regardless of the potentialities that they might possess. Aristotle distinguishes between despotic and non-despotic rule through an analogy between an animal and the state. He distinguishes between the absolute (despotic) rule over the being as a body and the non-despotic rule over its particular appetites.

It is in an animal that it is first possible to discern the rule of a master and that of a statesman: the soul rules the body in the manner of a master, and the intellect (*nous*) rules the appetites in that of a statesman or a king.⁶¹

To affirm that, in animals in general, *nous* (intelligence) rules *orexis* (appetite) in a political and kingly way is to indicate the standard – a sort of instinctive command in animals – that human beings tend to deviate from, both in their relations towards others and in their self-ruling. The difference between man and beast is *logos* (speech), which is what allows the intelligence of one individual to affect the way others deal with their desires. The heart of the matter here is not the inevitable enslavement of mankind, i.e. the inevitable conflict between our desires and our mind, but the different kinds of enslavement, and thus of political situations, determined by this relation between *nous* and *orexis*. For both Aristotle and Rousseau, the heart of the matter is in the general relation between ruler and ruled.

Slavery, Aristotle says, is a condition caused by a natural disposition of individuals who – due to nature, education, or both – have the rule of their action dictated predominantly by their passions and not by their intellect and reason.⁶² In order to effectively become a part of the state, or, as Aristotle suggests, in order to

⁶¹ *Pol.*, 1254b4

⁶² See *Pol.*, 1254b16-19.

behave humanly, these individuals find the direction and the limits to such a rule outside of themselves. For them, slavery is natural.

For one is a slave by nature who is *capable* of belonging to another (*given that one belongs to another only if one has this capacity* [of belonging to another]) and who participates in reason by feeling without having it.⁶³

Aristotle suggests that, at least in one way, this condition places such human beings closer to beasts than to other human beings who, not being capable of passively adopting the discourse of others, are guided primarily by their own intellectual activity. Yet, this radical opposition hides more than what it shows: the capacity of belonging to another is in a way something natural to all human beings and participation in reason is, evidently, a relative, not an absolute thing. Aristotle also indicates that psychological or intellectual differences among human beings are not less frequent and less natural than bodily differences, reminding us that to see the beauty of a soul is not as easy as to see the beauty of a body.⁶⁴ Hence, if the difference between the slave by nature and the free (or beautiful) soul is so neat, and if the free soul is, as one is led to think, an unusual phenomenon in the state, how should one interpret the situation of the vast majority of citizens? If what Aristotle says is that slaves are as distant from non-slaves (i.e. free souls or human beings at their best) as the body is from the soul and as a beast is from a man, then the radical opposition would leave us with the problem of the cases in the middle. Cases in the middle between slavery and freedom are logically cases of a certain kind of slavery, or of an imperfect freedom, be it of the body, be it of the mind. Because these cases

⁶³ My italics. See the entire passage in *Pol.*, 1254b16-26. See also 1254a14-17.

⁶⁴ *Pol.*, 1254b27 ff.

represent the condition of the majority of people, then, according to Aristotle's "psychological definition" of slavery, the majority of the people is, to some extent, necessarily enslaved by nature, not only in general – i.e. with respect to their bodily necessities – but, in different degrees, with respect to their minds. Human freedom should be understood not so much from the difference between man and beast, but from the difference between the freedom of beasts and the freedom of gods.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ "Those who [in comparison with other men] are as different as the soul is from the body and as man is from beast (...) are slaves by nature; for them, it is advantageous to be ruled by this kind of ruler." See also 1254a21-26. We can read Aristotle's premise as follows. The difference between two human beings is either the same or greater than the difference between one of these human beings and a beast when the life of the human being in question is determined by his *bodily* passions and capacities. Rousseau reminds us of this notion in a crucial paragraph of the *Second Discourse*: "Some Philosophers have even suggested that there is a greater difference between a given man and another than there is between a given man and a given beast." (SD, p. 140-1 (141)). The sentence is found practically verbatim in Montaigne's essay *De l'inégalité qui est entre nous* (*Essais*, I, 42) and Locke, *Essay*, IV, 20, §5. (Note Locke's distance ("as some think...") regarding what was the main cause of inequality for the tradition here at stake.) Montaigne bases his text on a passage from Plutarch mentioned by Rousseau a few paragraphs before in the *Second Discourse* (SD, pp. 138-9 (139)); the passage belongs to a text by Plutarch to be named in a footnote to a direct reference to Aristotle in the *Social Contract*: "*Aristote (...) avoit dit aussi que les hommes ne sont point naturellement égaux, mais que les uns naissent pour l'esclavage et les autres pour la domination./ Aristote avoit raison, mais il prenoit l'effet pour la cause. Tout homme né dans l'esclavage nait pour l'esclavage, rien n'est plus certain. Les esclaves perdent tout dans leur fers, jusqu'au désir d'en sortir; ils aiment leur servitude comme les compagnons d'Ulysse aimoient leur abrutissement.*" (SC, I, 2, p. 353). We must bracket for the moment Rousseau's theoretical necessity in the *Social Contract* to affirm his doctrine of natural freedom and criticize those who have taken the effect (slavery) for the cause (society), like Aristotle and Hobbes (see also, in the same volume, *Social Contract*, 1^o version, p. 288), even if the criticism does not touch the main premise defended by Aristotle and confirmed by Rousseau ("*Aristote avoit raison*"), namely natural inequality. We can and should abstract from society when inquiring about the origins; however, in the *Social Contract* Rousseau departs from an understanding of human beings as we currently perceive them, not in their pre-human indistinguishableness. Hence if we must start with natural inequalities, we must

The political difficulty with all this is the following. To the extent that human beings are enslaved (i.e. to the extent that their disposition towards some form of physical or mental enslavement is natural), they must be ruled by an

presume that a certain degree of slavery and domination is also natural. Rousseau's natural morality is the universal substitute for this natural tension in the human species.

With the references to Plutarch's passage, Rousseau does more than just confirm the notion that those to whom slavery becomes natural are closer to beasts than to man; he also points to the qualitative difference between the two states. In Plutarch's text, entitled in French *Que les bêtes usent de la raison*, Ulysses' companions, now transformed into various animals by Circe, are shown to prefer their new condition to their previous one. Circe challenges Ulysses to change his companions' will to remain beasts; she confers one of them – made into a pig (Gryllus) – with the capacity of both understanding and using human language, so that he can explain to Ulysses why their new condition is superior to that of human beings. In sum, Gryllus' argument is that human beings are slaves by nature due to their permanent necessity to live for the opinion of others, and that the so-called human virtues (courage and temperance in particular) are characteristics of beasts, not of human beings: only in beasts the intellect rules appetite in a spontaneous and harmonious manner. Ulysses does not contest the argument that human life is for most individuals a life of toil and torment, but he leads Gryllus into a crucial contradiction that allows the talking-beast to perceive in what sense the human condition is superior to his own. Beasts are in a way endowed with a capacity for reason (*logos*) and understanding far more effective than that of human beings; from a negative perspective, the difference between beasts and human beings is precisely that human *logos* can err, due to the admixture with passions that come out of inequalities within the species (Cf. with *Émile*, pp. 572-3). From such a perspective, human beings are, at best (i.e. whenever they achieve what they want in spite of their passive perception or dogmatic use of reason), on the level of beasts. Yet whatever the *logos* of beasts is, it is not human *logos*. Individual beasts have no mind of their own and follow the universal law of their species. Gryllus is forced to realize through his blunder at the end of the text (the passage quoted by Montaigne and Rousseau) that the human species is the only species that reproduces within itself the natural differences that exist between other species (e.g. between the intellectual characteristics of foxes and sheep). The human condition becomes more interesting when one realizes that the tension between the lowest and the highest is only available to the human animal. To bring together Aristotle, Plutarch, and Rousseau on this point, we can say the following. Human *logos* (thought of both as discourse and reflection) becomes the qualitative difference between the two states when it is articulated as the faculty of interaction that allows human beings to become conscious of their freedom in relation to, and in light of their differences with, other individuals of their species.

absolute power, like the soul rules the body. In a republic, this power is transcribed in the impersonal force of the laws; i.e. there is, in principle, no arbitrary coercion between rulers and ruled. At the same time, the appetites or desires of the human beings that constitute the state should receive a political and kingly (i.e. non-despotic) treatment. What, then, does this general sense of slavery mean?

A few lines above in the *Politics*, Aristotle speaks of slaves as necessary instruments (*organa*) for life or a good life.⁶⁶ He says that slaves are instruments of *action* (*praxis*) and not of *production* (*poiesis*), a difference that can be explained precisely in terms of how one sees the relation between body and soul in these individuals. Aristotle says that it is natural for the soul to rule over the body, and that in the same way that a part belongs, wholly, to something else, the slave belongs, wholly, to the master. If the slave belongs wholly to the master and if the goal of the master is both, to do things in the best way (i.e. according to nature) and to achieve the best possible state for the whole over which he rules, then it is necessarily in the interest of the master to rule over his parts as he rules over that whole, i.e. by conducting them towards their best possible state.⁶⁷ The ruling over the slave should, then, according to Aristotle, be coherent with the capacities of the human being that that slave is. In a word, the art of ruling (slaves) should not include coercion, for before one knows what those capacities are, one cannot know if the individual is indeed a slave, i.e. a slave by nature.⁶⁸ The main difficulty posed by Aristotle is not whether slavery is just or unjust; the main difficulty is in how to

⁶⁶ *Pol.*, 1253b25 ff.

⁶⁷ Cf. passage in the *Politics* with the beginning of the *N. Ethics*, 1094a10-27.

⁶⁸ See *Pol.* 1255b11-15.

know, given the pre-existing relations of power in society, who is and who is not what he calls a slave by nature.

To use the slave as an instrument of action (*praxis*) is to use him in his best capacities, i.e. it is to give him the activity most coherent with the natural relation existent between his body and his soul. This seems to be the difference between the two kinds of instruments. Whereas to use the slave as an instrument of action is to engage his soul or will in the work at stake, to use him merely as an instrument of production would be to employ the slave as if he did not have in himself the principle of his action – it would be to employ him simply as an inanimate instrument or a soulless body.⁶⁹ The *telos* in this last situation would consist of the isolated product of the work in question, a work conceived without taking into consideration the soul of the worker – more precisely, without taking into consideration the relation between his body and soul. In contrast, the good master – whose relation towards his slave should not be different from that between a master-craftsman (*architekton*) and his subordinate⁷⁰ – must not overlook, but include the coordination of the soul of his subordinate as part of his ultimate goal. It is through this coordination that an individual with a natural disposition towards being ruled is able to escape his otherwise inevitable fate in society – i.e. the “bad and unnatural condition” of the body ruling the soul.⁷¹ It is, thus, through this coordination between body and soul that this individual will accomplish, by ruling (acting) over

⁶⁹ Cf. *N. Ethics*, 1161a31-1161b5.

⁷⁰ See *Pol.* 1253b22-1254a18.

⁷¹ *Pol.*, 1254b1.

his own body, his natural end as a being: “that for the sake of which he exists.”⁷² The end of the good master must include, then, finding a natural balance for that animated part of the whole that his “slave” is.

It is only in this sense that the slave should be seen as a property (*ktema*). Aristotle’s treatment of private ruling as the art of mastery over slaves (the difference between *oikonomia* and *despoteia* becomes subtle, although, as indicated by Aristotle, the former is technically a broader term⁷³) makes us think of a parallel with the ruling of children. Indeed, if we think of the correct spirit of paternal power (for Aristotle, the foundational power of political associations), the parallel is not that surprising. The master must own the slave’s mind before wanting to rule the slave’s body; put differently, he must first see the individual as an extension of his mind, not of his body.⁷⁴ By understanding the various degrees of this state as characteristic of the human condition in general, Aristotle’s definition of the slave as an instrument of action and not of production amounts, in this sense, to a subversion of the merely institutional (and unjust) sense of slavery. Throughout the passage about the instrumentality of slavery, Aristotle speaks of the situation of the slave (*doulos*) and the subordinate (*huperetes*) of a master-craftsman as equivalent,

⁷² *Pol.*, 1252b35.

⁷³ Cf. *Pol.*, 1253b1-22 and 1255b30.

⁷⁴ See *Pol.*, 1254b3ff., for Aristotle’s correction of the despotic rule. Later in the *Politics*, Aristotle says that properties, although essential for the city, are not part of the essential unity that constitutes the city. The city is constituted essentially by the communion of equal citizens; therefore, citizens cannot be slaves (a sort of property) or at least must not think of themselves as such. It is interesting, however, that Aristotle does not mention slaves among the allegedly essential things for the city that are not part of the essential unity of the city. Cf. also 1328a21-1328b22, a passage that corroborates the view that on the question of property and the oneness of the state Aristotle would side with Rousseau rather than with Locke.

and in his clearest and broadest statement on the matter, he says that “the slave is a subordinate in things concerning action.”⁷⁵ One is tempted to expand this definition by saying that for him the “slave” is *any* subordinate who is used as an instrument of *any* action for life or the good life – therefore political and moral actions too.

According to this interpretation, the best condition, for Aristotle, would be one whereby all human beings that constitute the state are ruled, in principle, in a political and kingly manner. For both Aristotle and Rousseau political freedom is the outcome of a voluntary, spontaneous or natural enslavement to a *law* whose source and force lie outside the individual.⁷⁶ In this sense, one can say that all members of the state are limited in their freedom, on the one hand, by the particular rule (or *logos*) that best suits one’s natural constitution,⁷⁷ and on the other, by the general rule of the state. Thus, not only those who are slaves by nature (namely, those who have their bodies as either the ultimate means or the ultimate end for their actions) must follow the rule of their masters, but these very masters will have to follow as well a the rule of a *logos* that will often transcend their understanding. Although a citizen can be *economically* free or self-sufficient, as a citizen he too must always be ruled.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Cf. *Pol.*, 1254a6.

⁷⁶ Cf. SDED §4-5 and *Social Contract*, I, 8.

⁷⁷ Cf. *Pol.*, 1252b1.

⁷⁸ Aristotle’s psychological treatment of slavery leads us to the following conclusion. Individuals differ in their greater or lesser capacity to be ruled by others, or in their greater or lesser necessity to allow, so to speak, the *nous* of others to harmonize their own passions. Human beings do not have, like other animals, a sort of instinctive intelligence that rules automatically over their appetites. Therefore, the human intellect must receive the proper training, or ruling, so that the individual passions can be controlled and the individual become part of the state. This does not

Together with our interpretation of the Epistle Dedicatory, and of Rousseau's references to Herodotus and Machiavelli, the passage of the *Politics* from which the epigraph to the *Second Discourse* is taken reveals the logic behind Rousseau's rhetorical strategy. The question here is less about the value of this interpretation than it is about whether the epigraph illuminates, as a good epigraph should do, the road opened by Rousseau in the *Second Discourse*. The relation between Rousseau and Aristotle on the question of natural inequality and the relation between rulers and ruled seems to be evident. If, on the one hand, Aristotle's treatment of rulers informs the spirit of Rousseau's future legislators about both the content and the form of their actions, on the other, it gives Rousseau the political-psychological principle that guides his written discourse and that allows him to address his different readers, including his future legislators, as a ruler of rulers. As such, the logic that Rousseau's rhetorical strategy obeys is fundamentally a political logic. He uses the principle illustrated by his references to Herodotus, Machiavelli, and Aristotle, in order to found, almost as a religious founder, his own political order. This is how, we believe, his necessity to conceal in

mean, as assumed in modernity, that a proper education can emancipate any human being. For Aristotle, the natural inequalities among human beings place those who have their bodies as either the ultimate means or the ultimate end of their actions (those whose higher contributions to the state are made through the use of their bodies or in view of bodily satisfactions) in a situation similar to that of beasts – at least in what concerns their relation to the state (see 1254b16-1255a3). The correct spirit of ruling is, thus, necessary to avoid that these human beings end up falling in a condition *lower* than that of beasts, which, in their turn, do not need political institutions or speech to achieve their best individual condition: “for if man is the best of animals when perfected, he is the worst when separated from law and justice” (1253a32).

his work this visceral relation between his egalitarian politics and his non-egalitarian speech should be understood.

We conclude with a remark about political freedom in democratic republics, the main practical difficulty in both Aristotle and Rousseau. In Book Six of the *Politics*, Aristotle says that freedom is the basic presupposition of democratic republics in general.⁷⁹ He says that freedom is the goal of every democracy, and by freedom he means here the possibility “to live as one desires.”⁸⁰ Yet, we saw how in the beginning of the *Politics* Aristotle affirms that only the city can be independent or self-sufficient, and that its members should work towards that self-sufficiency and with that self-sufficiency in mind, not their own (i.e. not the satisfaction of their immediate desires). In his discussion of slavery, and perhaps due to the very nature of that discussion, Aristotle does not voice but only implies the otherwise intuitive notion that in order for individuals to work, *at their best*, towards a higher goal (i.e. towards a good that is not only private) they must do it voluntarily. Human beings should lead their lives without feeling coerced by an alien force, without feeling that they are being ruled. They must have in themselves the principle of their communitarianism. In other words, individuals will only work at their best, for the benefit and independence of the state, if the work in question coincides, at least in part, with what they intimately want to do. The best regime requires, thus, in that

⁷⁹ Cf. *Pol.*, 1317a40.

⁸⁰ Cf. *Pol.*, 1317b10.

respect, free individuals: the best regime is democracy, or a certain type of democracy.⁸¹

Aristotle says that political freedom in democratic republics is characterized by “being ruled and ruling in turn.”⁸² From the perspective of the people in general (*to plethos*), freedom is found in their perception of equality and number, not of merit, as the grounds for justice; each citizen shares equally in the general ruling and, consequently, in the general obedience to the rule.⁸³ In this way, the people as a whole is ruled and rules in proportion: equality is the essence of political freedom. We can, therefore, interpret “being ruled and ruling in turn” as also a variable ratio in individuals between the extent to which one is ruled and the extent to which one rules. That said, the notion contrasts with what Aristotle affirms in Book One. He opens the *Politics* by saying that there is a *qualitative*, and not merely gradual (numeric), difference between public ruling (political or kingly) and the private ruling of a master or a father; he also says that in the same way that kingly rule is not appropriately defined as the mere imposition of one’s will, political rule is not appropriately defined as “ruling and being ruled in turn.”⁸⁴ Indeed, the logical conclusion of Book One is that due to the natural inequality of human beings

⁸¹ But for a democracy to be just, the popular element in it must be “tempered.” For Aristotle’s treatment of the different types of democracy and other regimes in general, see *Pol.*, 1290a30ff. and 1317b15ff.

⁸² Cf. *Pol.*, 1317b1.

⁸³ On the two senses of political equality, see also *Pol.*, 1301b25-39. Cf. with Otanes’ one-dimensional *isonomia* in Herodotus, *Hist.*, III, 80 (see above) and Rousseau’s last note to the *Second Discourse* on distributive justice, pp. 221-2 (222-3).

⁸⁴ *Pol.*, 1252a4-22. Note that in the chapter ‘On Monarchy’ of the *Social Contract* – the chapter in which he calls Machiavelli’s *The Prince* the book of republicans – Rousseau speaks of the “art of obeying” as propaedeutic to the art of ruling (SC, III, 4, p. 411).

political rule can never be equally shared. Aristotle's emphasis on the qualitative difference between public and private rule shifts the focus from the difference in the number of individuals ruled to the difference in the spirit behind the ruling action.

Aristotle begins by shifting the focus on the ruled to a focus on rulers. He argues that private and public ruling are different not only in terms of the number of people ruled, but in the essence of the ruling action. Yet, as we saw, there is an aspect of private ruling that should not be essentially different from the political and kingly rule of a statesman. At the same time, it seems to be a natural aspect of politics that all ruling has an element of despotism – although the “despotism” in question here is not oppression, but the limit enforced almost impersonally through the outcome of a successful persuasion, namely, general rules, opinions and laws.⁸⁵ Hence, in the same way that we can think of the slave and the free individual in the same person, we can also think of the political, or kingly, and the despotic rule in the same ruler.⁸⁶ This is why the formula used to define popular freedom cannot be used to define political rule. The perspective adopted in the opening book of the *Politics* is the perspective of the ruler *qua* ruler for whom the paradigm of justice and action lies beyond the dullness of mathematical equality, towards an equality that instead takes into account the natural differences among human beings regarding body and soul.

⁸⁵ In the *Social Contract*, Rousseau says that the despot, different than the tyrant, “*est celui qui se met au dessus des lois-mêmes*” (SC, III, 10, p. 423). The despot *makes* the rules, the tyrant contradicts them.

⁸⁶ Cf. with *Pol.*, 1255b15.

Aristotle begins the *Politics* with the despot (the private ruler) and ends it with the legislator (*nomothetes*), whose art is, according to Book One, also “despotic.” It is necessary to learn what the difference between private and public ruling is in order to know how to rule in a democratic republic. In the psychological sense of Aristotle’s discussion, the same free and equal individuals “ruled” by the *politikos* can be thought to be “enslaved” to others (or to the same *politikos*) who hold, so to speak, the intellectual principle of their action. Whether the ruled see themselves as enslaved or free individuals is something that will be determined less by the sort of person that their ruler is than by his awareness of the ambiguous nature ruling. The political ruler must be above all a psychologist, for the ruling of people is always both private and public at the same time.⁸⁷

Aristotle does not voice the notion that dedication to the common good should be voluntary because the will in question here is, also for him, a sort of fiction. It is a product of the work of the political ruler, or legislator in general, upon the imagination of his people,

for the best things are those at the same time private and common to all, the things that the legislator should create in the souls of human beings.⁸⁸

Political rule, different from despotic or absolute rule, is a rule about and not against the desire of others; it is a rule that takes into account the general importance of that

⁸⁷ For the education of rulers as opposed to the education of the ruled, see mainly *Pol.*, 1332b10ff. That “psychological skills” and moderation can and should be a quality of rulers in any regime is attested in the discussion about tyrannies that culminates at 1315a40. Cf. also 1333b25 (“ruling over free individuals is more becoming (*kallios*) (...) than ruling in the spirit of a master (*tou despotikos*)”).

⁸⁸ *Pol.*, 1333b35.

desire and that seeks to persuade instead of subjugate the individual. The effort of the statesman is, therefore, to bring together private and public interest – particular and general will – through the extraordinary capacity of ruling people as free and enslaved at the same time.

Conclusion

Aristotle:

Those who [in comparison with other men] are as different as the soul is from the body and as man is from beast (...) are slaves by nature; for them it is advantageous to be ruled by that kind of ruler.¹

Rousseau:

Some Philosophers have even suggested that there is a greater difference between a given man and another than there is between a given man and a given beast.²

The idea that some men are closer to beasts than to other men does not have a more negative connotation, i.e. it is not more offensive, than Condillac's conclusion about the merely gradual difference between man and beast in general, something that in our time seems more than ever to be taken for granted by biologists, linguists, and professional philosophers. The maxim pronounced by Rousseau does not contradict, but expands Condillac's and, for that matter, the empiricist position as a whole. Although the perception of the empiricists made sense in what concerns the majority of human beings, they could not account for the exceptional cases. They did not see that the species would never have evolved

¹ *Pol.*, 1254a21-26.

² "It is, then, continues Rousseau, not so much the understanding that constitutes the specific difference between man and the other animals, as it is his property of being a free agent." SD, p. 140 (141).

without these exceptional cases, no matter how minimal were the inequalities in the beginning when compared to our current situation; in other words, they did not see that the difference between man and beast is before anything the difference between the exceptional case of man and a beast. Against them, Rousseau claimed that, in their potentialities, human beings in general are always essentially different than other animals, and that the similarities between the life of beasts and the life of most human beings at the developed stage of the human species are nothing but what he describes as the unfortunate yet inevitable results of that very process of development: “perfectibility” firing backwards.

The goal of this dissertation was to show in what sense “some philosophers,” among whom we must include Rousseau, have understood this fundamental inequality. Since the maxim stated above would have no relevant meaning if those closer to beasts were taken to be only the exception to the rule – namely, if they were merely a few stupid individuals in society – then, it must imply that those closer to beasts represent indeed the majority of men. Most men become enslaved by their institutions. Their lives are similar to that of beasts, because their individual will is ultimately conditioned, not to say dictated, by rules whose meaning and relevance transcend their existence as individuals. The idea that some men are closer to beasts than to other men refers to the quality that separates human beings from other animals *in absolute*, namely, the ability to think freely. Thus, the difference between the two men indicated by Rousseau’s maxim is greater than that between one of these men and a beast because it is ultimately a *qualitative*, not a gradual difference.

The illusions of *presence* that appear almost concomitantly with the development of speech – and which both the deconstructionists and Rousseau associate with the corruption of freedom – are the seeds of the necessity for laws and government, without which human beings could not have progressed as a species. This is why the greatest irony in Rousseau’s account of the human adventure concerns freedom, the faculty through which speech was developed, i.e. through which individuals of a given species, at a given time, became human. For whereas the capacity to be a free agent founds, as it were, the human species, the more *human* the species becomes, the more remote is the enactment of that capacity in its individuals. This is the sense in which, in the end, most human beings will be comparatively closer to beasts than to other human beings who somehow managed to remain free.

Rousseau’s references to Herodotus, Machiavelli, and Aristotle are addressed to those hypothetical free individuals (the exceptional cases). Subtle as these references are, they extend the scope of Rousseau’s rhetoric to those like himself, or like (his) Otañes, who can articulate their ideas from outside any accepted convention, as being free and independent from the laws. Aristotle’s epigraph, the Epistle Dedicatory and the first note to the *Second Discourse* are, in this sense, the gate to the philosophical sense of Rousseau’s rhetoric. His account of the origin of inequality, and mainly the relation of his notes to his discourse – i.e. the alternative to the “straightest path” mentioned in the Notice on the Notes – cannot be fully appreciated without the articulation of these introductory texts. It is, then, here where Rousseau allows us to consider the meaning of his rhetoric. His examples let

us reflect on the *Second Discourse* from outside³ and distinguish, ultimately, the richness of his argument from the seductive power of his discourses. It is also only from the perspective opened by these introductory texts that we can contemplate the principle of ruling that directs Rousseau's "legislative effort" over his readers. To the extent that these things coincide, Rousseau's rhetorical strategy and the foundations of his political thought can be identified with the principle affirmed in Book One of Aristotle's *Politics*: not being possible to determine *a priori* whether someone is naturally free or a slave by nature, one must rule other human beings as the intellect should rule the passions, in a political and kingly (i.e. non-despotic) way, i.e. in accordance with their democratic aspirations and with their own perception of freedom.⁴

Before his inquiry about the origin of inequality begins, Rousseau sets, in these introductory texts, the boundaries of the field upon which his discourse takes place. He exposes the ordinary situation of most human beings by pointing up the exceptional character and freedom of those made to rule. But, he cannot do this without guarding the interest of the majority. He, thus, dissimulates, without lying, what most readers would perceive as a profound contradiction in his thought. His views on the natural inequality between rulers and ruled had to be stated obliquely, not to say kept latent, lest his pessimism concerning man's prospects of *true* freedom would contaminate his democratic theory of politics and education. It is in this sense that the function of his philosophical rhetoric is, precisely, to isolate politics from philosophy; there is no room for philosophy (or philosophical

³ With the text itself being outside the *Discourse*.

⁴ See SC, II, 7, p. 383.

freedom) in his Geneva, and the highest prospect of greatness depicted in both his political and educational treatments of Everyman is patriotism. The general will of the people or the common soul represented in *Émile* are *necessary* paradigms for democracy; and the rule of the majority, namely, of those who are closer to beasts than to radically free individuals, makes the existence of the latter unsustainable in the state. If, on the one hand, the inequalities among the members of the state must be respected and, as Rousseau says in the last note to the *Second Discourse*, the health of the republic depends on the awareness of its members about their differences in strengths and talents, on the other, these differences will never be as great as the difference between them and that of a philosophically free individual who, in theory, has no place in the State.

Given the extreme case of philosophical freedom presupposed by Rousseau, his political and educational teachings could only be sold as philosophical teachings because the philosophy of his time had become, in his eyes, nothing but an ode to the banality of human existence. The association between cosmopolitanism, materialism and the Enlightenment became simply irresistible. Rousseau, apparently, saw no alternative but to address even the highest intellects, the “*Philosophes*,” of his time as dreamers.⁵ As such, his rhetoric in the *Second Discourse* is conceived not to confront his opponents on the fundamental dialectical issues, but to substitute their views (i.e. their dogmas) on the ever-obscure subject of human nature. The doctrinarian aspects of Rousseau’s work – the aspects correctly criticized by Derrida as dogmatic, such as his natural morality, the natural

⁵ “Bad dreamers.” See again *Émile*, *Pléiade* ed., pp. 350-1.

goodness of man, but also the ensuing superficial sense of political freedom and equality – were, therefore, the only arms with which he officially equipped his legislators against materialism. Unfortunately, they were not sufficient and, we would argue, not adequate arms.

The key to understanding the logic of Rousseau’s rhetorical strategy lies, ultimately, in his account of the origin of languages. The intellectual faculties responsible for speech – more precisely, the principle of individual action that allows the movement through these faculties from general to particular knowledge – are the means through which Rousseau orders his texts and upon which his philosophical order depends. Thus, both things, i.e. the account and the “rhetoric,” cannot be separated. We saw that deconstruction fails to explain either – and, therefore, the philosophical content of Rousseau’s work – for starting with the premise that no philosophical order can be possible. Derrida was a victim – like Lévi-Strauss and so many others – of the democratic myth (the egalitarian creed) perpetrated by Rousseau. His understanding of freedom and self-determination suffers from the same problem that Rousseau criticizes in the empiricists; the easy association between freedom and democracy (or the understanding of freedom as an exclusively psychological-political notion) is precisely what Rousseau’s highest rulers would, ideally, need to avoid. Because Derrida takes for granted the views that Rousseau, albeit indirectly, attempts to undermine, he could not even have started to understand the critique of freedom imbued in Rousseau’s writing. Thus, for him, Rousseau’s rhetoric must have been either merely diffusive or the elaborate contrivances played by Rousseau’s unconscious delusion of self-presence. Limited

by his prejudice, Derrida does not perceive the different types of readers addressed by Rousseau nor the different functions of *presence* (idealizations) in the life and action of each of these types. For Derrida, we must destroy or deconstruct presence, something that he sets out to accomplish by presupposing the impossibility of meaning *tout court*: we become free by first embracing insanity. Derrida starts by throwing the baby out with the bath water.

Derrida does not appreciate the inevitable (natural?) role of presence in human communication which, according to Rousseau, characterizes all human languages and all attempts to transmit experiences and knowledge; he fails to identify the fundamental ambivalences in Rousseau's inquiry on the origin of languages and, thus, the part that the intellectual powers that actually allow human language to exist played in Rousseau's rhetoric. Thus, coherent with his preconceptions about language and his belief that philosophical knowledge is impossible, he depicts Rousseau as another thinker of what he calls the metaphysics of presence. Yet, it is Derrida, not Rousseau, who proceeds dogmatically. His dogmatism can be read as his faith, on the one hand, in the empiricist notion that *thought* must be explained through the analytical elements of language, and on the other, in the notion that all language, and thus all knowledge, is historical or conventional: there is no true thought, only explainable (deconstructible) thought.

As such, Derrida's doctrine of supplementarity – of the endless enchainment of signs and “meanings” through which he explains language – places him on the side of those like Condillac, La Mettrie and Helvétius who maintained that man differs from beast only by degree. By playing down consciousness and not

considering the non-analytical intellectual powers at the origin of human languages – namely, the cognitive sense of imagination,⁶ intuition, foresight – and thus by not considering their role in the production of general meanings as the ground for communication, Derrida misses the true dialectical force that separates humans from beasts: not, as he wants, the automatism of the chain of supplementarity, but the free action of a self-determined will, if we want, the free intention of the author. Rousseau would have confronted Derrida not only for his dogmatic empiricism and historicism, but also for the determinism implied in his thought.

We have to conclude, however, by pointing out that the greatest failure here was not in Derrida's, de Man's or in any of the interpretations that since the Eighteenth century have fueled the polemics about what Rousseau was actually saying. The greatest failure is Rousseau's own. The almost ineffable philosophical sense of his rhetoric was certainly the main source of the innumerable misinterpretations of his thought. We wonder whether Rousseau was, as it were, too effective in his goals. Effective to the point of excluding the protagonists to whom he allegedly addresses the most guarded passages in his text. Rousseau's pessimism did not allow him to confront the "*Philosophes*" of his times (precisely, people like Condillac, La Mettrie, or Helvétius) with the full force of his arguments, hence the necessity of his rhetorical strategy; however, his too well-guarded "*doctrine intérieure*" was also a necessary element to the free spirited reader grappling with the philosophical sense of his work. Without access to Rousseau's fundamental principles, one was indeed left with the options represented by Derrida and de Man:

⁶ Again, Derrida's describes the imagination as a re-active or merely mechanical faculty. See *Gramm.*, p. 187, and chapter 1 above.

either Rousseau's natural morality was dogmatic, too dreamy, or simply imperfect, and, therefore, needed to be modified (in Derrida's case, Rousseau's supposed shortcomings are substituted, and become an excuse, for the rhetorical license practiced by Derrida); or Rousseau's "doctrines" were nothing but a cover-up for his view that language is "hollow at its core" (Rousseau is, then, as de Man claims, a Nietzschean *avant la lettre*).

We do not have to elaborate on the fact that the political outcome of Rousseau's work did not have the results he expected. Ironically, and tragically, his effort towards freedom and against fanaticism became one of the main sources of inspiration for the great political ideologies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Individualism and communitarianism, egalitarianism and inegalitarianism, libertarianism and authoritarianism: they can all somehow find their voice in the naïve sense of justice and freedom present in Rousseau. With this in mind, we wonder whether up to a certain point Rousseau can indeed be accused of being responsible for the beginning of the political dissention that led to the ideological wars. To what degree did his reluctance to a head-on confrontation with materialism on the origin of natural inequality (regardless of the negative prospects for him of such confrontation) merely postpone the issue of a century or so, contributing to its explosive appearance in Nietzsche's reckless rhetoric of frankness (the rhetoric celebrated by de Man) that fueled, among other things, one of the most perverse political phenomena of human history? To what degree should we look back to Rousseau when we reflect on the madness of both communist and liberal "democracies," or about the current incapacity of our intellectual rulers of dealing

with the abuses made in the now vain name of freedom and equality? The question, of course, is not whether Rousseau could have saved the Enlightenment, but whether, by trying to save it, by trying to harness its rulers, he might have unwillingly contributed to the release of its most destructive forces.

Whatever the case was, one must look ahead and perhaps try to find in Rousseau's account of freedom the remedies for the harms to which, in the end, he might have contributed. All pessimism aside, freedom in Rousseau is, evidently, more than a vestige from the past. The capacity for free agency of our ancestors remains the ground for the timeless search for both our own happiness and the happiness of others. We need, however, to exercise the whole of our intellectual faculties (our primordial faculties) in order to conduct this search philosophically. Rousseau's discourse on this matter is the reference that guided his moral philosophy and that entitled him to re-write, in light of his privileged perspective, what is good and evil in general.

Appendix

On the Moral Character of Sovereignty in Rousseau's Political Theory (*Social Contract*)

Like the defenders of absolute monarchic power, Rousseau too sees the unity of sovereignty as a logical necessity of political philosophy. But unlike those thinkers, he separates sovereign power and political power. Sovereignty is political power, but only in the deepest sense of the word “political.” It is not the power to *act* upon particular questions of right and ordinary legislation, a role that Rousseau assigns to government. Instead, it is the power that establishes the limits and direction of ordinary political action.¹ The sovereign power, for Rousseau, is essentially a moral power, and ultimately *the* moral power in the state. It is true that the moral power of the sovereign was already a crucial aspect of the “divine right of kings” thought by Bodin, Bossuet, Fénelon, or Robert Filmer. But Rousseau goes beyond his predecessors, Hobbes included, by seeing and addressing two difficulties necessarily implied by the unity of sovereign moral power that could not be properly addressed by absolutism any longer. The first of these difficulties concerns precisely the unity of the moral character of sovereignty, namely, what the

¹ On the difference between sovereignty and government, see SC, III, 1. On sovereign power as the power to make the laws, see SC, II, 6.

undivided moral power in the state must be. Rousseau's argument about the legitimacy of the state concerns the coherence and efficiency of this moral power.²

Morality exists in the hearts of people. The unity of moral power in absolute monarchies, i.e. the effectual morality of those regimes, could not resist the emancipation of people's desires promoted by modern cosmopolitanism, especially with the latter's avail from the emerging liberalism predominant in Rousseau's time. Rousseau takes the blind rationalism characteristic of the Enlightenment as an irresistible cultural force already in an advanced stage. The inevitable outcome, he thought, is an oppressive and ultimately despotic situation caused by the (moral)

² Rousseau's critique is not only against the "second head" represented by the Church, but against any sort of institutionalized creed in the republic: "*Par tout où le Clergé fait un corps il est maître et législateur dans sa patrie*" (SC, IV, 8, *De la religion civile*, p. 463). Note, in the same passage, what Rousseau says about the unity of sovereignty: "[d]e tous les Auteurs Chrétiens le philosophe Hobbes est le seul qui ait bien vu le mal et le remède (sic), qui ait osé de proposer de réunir les deux têtes de l'aigle, et de tout ramener à l'unité politique, sans laquelle jamais Etat ni Gouvernement ne sera bien constitué. (...) C'est ne pas tant ce qu'il y a d'horrible et de faux dans sa politique que ce qu'il y a de juste et de vrai qui l'a rendue odieuse." Rousseau attaches a note to this last sentence in which he refers the reader to a letter by Grotius – an author criticized in the *Social Contract* for always establishing, in his manner of reasoning, right by fact ("*le droit par le fait*." SC, I, 2) – where Grotius condemns Hobbes' views that human beings are naturally in a state of war, and that "every Particular has the duty to follow the Religion approved in his country by the public authority, if not by adhering to it wholeheartedly, at least by professing and submitting to it by obedience." If these are the views that Rousseau suggests have rendered Hobbes' politics detestable, they are also, according to what he says, what is just and true about it. Grotius' letter to his brother appears in the preface to Barbeyrac's edition of *De jure belli ac pacis* (*On the Laws of War and Peace*); see *Pléiade* ed., vol. 3, p. 1502. Compare also Rousseau's praise of Hobbes above with SD, *Pléiade* ed., p. 153, where he distinguishes Hobbes from Grotius and others for having better conjectured the facts that informed his (Hobbes') discussion of natural right. On the deepest layer of the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau must establish right by fact; thus he follows Grotius' alleged procedure criticized in the *Social Contract*, in spite of the incorrect facts established by Grotius in his discussion of natural right. Grotius is the only modern named in the Epistle Dedicatory, where he is commended together with Tacitus and Plutarch (SDED, §17).

split between public and private interests, and by the consequent spiritual isolation of individuals from the whole of which they should be a part – hence, his solution of making the sovereign moral power a direct attribute of these individuals. In order to appreciate the full significance of Rousseau’s republicanism, one must have in mind what he indicates in the conclusion of his main political treatise, namely, that the only logical alternative to his own would be a theocratic regime. Rousseau’s doctrine of sovereignty is his answer, on the psychological-political level, to the “political dualism” of modern regimes – i.e. the separation between the moral and political power – and to the further fragmentation of the notion of sovereignty implied by liberal individualism.³

³ The idea of popular sovereignty was certainly far from being a novelty; the novelty was in Rousseau’s presentation of it. In modernity, the notion can be traced back to the second scholasticism (see mainly Suarez, *De legibus*, III). For some of Rousseau’s modern predecessors, one can consult Robert Derathé’s *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et la science politique de son temps* (Vrin, 1979), ch. II, pp. 92-100 and 120-124. In the same book, Derathé defends the view that Rousseau’s notion of sovereignty is in no way incompatible with Montesquieu’s theory of the separation of powers. “Not only, says Derathé, Rousseau generally avoids contradicting Montesquieu, but also irony and sarcasm are weapons that (...) he does not use against his “illustrious” predecessor, for whom he professes the greatest admiration” (p. 281). Derathé may be right to point out that Rousseau’s critique of those who have divided the objects of sovereignty (SC, II, 2) was aimed mainly at Hobbes, Grotius and Pufendorf, the thinkers who had an explicit theory of the parts of sovereignty (pp. 280 ff.) However, his suggestion that Rousseau’s position on the question of balance of powers differs from Montesquieu’s solution (separation of powers) *only* by degree would need further clarification (pp. 301, 307). Rousseau says right before the passage in question that “*la volonté est générale, ou elle ne l’est pas; elle est celle du corps du peuple, ou seulement d’une partie.*” If sovereignty is united in the general will – in other words, if sovereignty is a power of a will – the question of its fragmentation concerns the fragmentation of the will of which it is a power. In this sense, for Rousseau, sovereignty is primarily a moral power; the more technical question of balance of powers and the quandaries associated with the conventional understanding of sovereignty are secondary or at least subordinated to the moral sense of sovereignty that Rousseau wants to establish in the *Social Contract*. Derathé certainly does not have this distinction in mind

Rousseau re-invents what Aristotle calls *orthai politeiai*⁴ by making the legitimacy of any political regime depend on popular sovereignty.⁵ He employs Hobbes' definition of "people" as opposed to "multitude," wherein the people is seen, precisely, as a unity and as a being that has a will and an action of its own.⁶

when he pairs Rousseau to the liberal thinkers. The rights with which the liberal thinkers endow individuals born in society entitle these individuals to a quasi sovereign power over their choices; as such, a permanent tension between those wills and public laws is presupposed as the rule. Rousseau does not deny that such a tension is a trait of politics (SC, III, 2), but for him the protection of the general will has all prerogatives – put differently, for him, individual freedom depends fundamentally on this safekeeping. When obedience to the law becomes, avowedly, merely a function of the instinct of self-preservation, the unity of sovereignty becomes a problematic if not obsolete notion. For Locke and Montesquieu, the separation and balance of powers – and thus a fragmentation of the conventional sense of sovereignty – become, as Derathé suggests (p. 291), a necessity of politics. For Rousseau too, this tendency might reflect an inevitable reality, as Derathé shows with his examples (pp. 302-7); yet according to Rousseau's principles, the state would only be truly balanced if the general will remained strong, united, and hence sovereign. At any rate, that the tendency contrasts with and even negates Rousseau's principle of sovereignty is a characteristic of politics: only a fundamentalist, blind rationalism would want to cancel the natural opposition. See also Arthur Melzer's endorsement and re-articulation of Derathé's argument in *op.cit.*, pp. 200-231; Montesquieu, *De l'esprit des lois*, XI, 6; and Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, XIII. As for Rousseau's opinion of Montesquieu – not so unqualifiedly positive as Derathé suggests – see *Émile*, book 5, p. 836, with the conclusion to the *Social Contract*, IV, 9, p. 470: the principles established in the *Social Contract* are propaedeutic to Montesquieu's otherwise "useless science."

⁴ Cf. for instance Aristotle's *Politics*, 1279a15 ff.; and Plato's *Republic*, 543a ff. For Aristotle's treatment of republican ruling (*politikos*), see above.

⁵ Rousseau defines legitimacy in the *Social Contract* by pairing duty and obedience to the desire to perform the duty and obey. Rights must respect a psychological order and cannot be imposed by force (SC, I, 3 and II, 6). For Rousseau's definition of republican state, see SC, II, 6, the chapter that precedes the allegedly most unrepublican chapter in the book, 'On the Legislator.'

⁶ "[I]t's a great hindrance to Civil Government, especially Monarchical, that men distinguish not enough between a People and a Multitude. The People is somewhat that is one, having one will, and to whom one action may be attributed; none of these can properly be said of a Multitude. The People rules in all Governments, for even in Monarchies the People Commands; for the People wills

For Hobbes, the body constituted by the people *is* (or becomes) the body of the sovereign;⁷ but for him the metaphor has a limit. The body, the will, and the action of the people must be *represented* by the *person* of an *actual being* in order to exist, i.e. in order for the multitude to become a people.⁸ In Hobbes, the physical person of the sovereign represents the necessary condition for the unity of moral and political authority in the state. Rousseau reproduces the Hobbesian terminology and accepts all this; but with one caveat he strikes the heart of Hobbes' political theory: he forbids the notion of representation of the will. A general will (the people) cannot be represented by a particular will (the king), only by itself.⁹ More importantly, a moral representation is redundant if the people, in its unity, is literally thought of as a moral being.¹⁰ But Rousseau is not promoting what in Hobbes' view would be a sheer reification of the abstractions at stake, particularly of the general will. Our intention here is to stress this point. The will that constitutes the sovereignty of the people (general will) is evidently not the same kind of will that would constitute the sovereignty of a single human being (i.e. a king), due to the mere fact that the two beings in question are entirely different beings – even if one would have to admit that the general will is a *human* will – or at least a particular mode of human desire.¹¹ Sovereignty is not in an unqualified will of the people, but in a certain

by the will of one man.” Hobbes, *De cive*, XII, 8; see also VI, 1; and *Leviathan*, XVI. Cf. with last paragraph of SC, II, 6, p. 380.

⁷ Hobbes, *De corpore politico*, II, 8, 9.

⁸ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XVIII.

⁹ SC, II, 1; III, 15.

¹⁰ SC, II, 4; I, 6; and *On Political Economy*, p. 245.

¹¹ Naturally, the general will does not exist literally as a will of the being in question; it is the result of the common interest that unites the individuals in the state. As such it is rooted in the individual.

knowledge and a certain action characteristic of that will. It is then constituted by only a partial aspect of the thing that ultimately defines it, namely, the will. Therefore, with the opposition between *volonté générale* and *volonté particulière* Rousseau must have had in mind the fundamental difference between the powers associated with these wills *qua* wills; however, not only is he silent about this simple point, but also we believe that one of his great challenges in the *Social Contract* is in how to preserve this silence and how to portray the sovereign general will as the will of a being that has in itself (i.e. in that will) the principle of its own action; a portrait according to which the sovereign people would be, in its will, as autonomous as a king.¹²

That said, the general will *qua* will in the individual is not part (as it were, the generous part) of the individual's particular will (the sum of which, in the state, Rousseau calls "*volonté de tous*"), because the objects of the two wills are, in principle, entirely different objects related to entirely different bodies or forms of human existence. Rousseau says that "*s'il n'est pas impossible q'une volonté particulière (sic) s'accorde sur quelque point avec la volonté générale, il est impossible au moins que cet accord soit durable et constant; car la volonté particulière tend par sa nature aux préférences, et la volonté générale à l'égalité*" (SC, II, 1). Schematically we can say that whereas the individual's particular will reponds to objects that are, for most people, immediately identifiable and thus passive of being rationally pursued and acquired, the objects of the general will – or at least the way to pursue and acquire them – are as abstract as is the notion of that will. The general will reflects one's beliefs rather than engaging one's rationality: it is then fundamentally a passive will. In this sense, individual deliberations that are informed by the general will (the "deliberations of the people" or their consent to the laws) are, by and large, mechanical and pre-conditioned acts. Rousseau's sovereign is a moral being that cannot reason because it cannot think, and that cannot think because it lacks, *as a being*, an active will. Cf. SC, II, 3.

¹² Rousseau seems to want to preserve the idea present in Malebranche (the author from whom the opposition is borrowed) that the two wills *qua* wills are equally *active principles of causation*, namely, that the two wills are not different as powers, but only in their objects. But for Malebranche, the general will is the form of God's action... See the first clarification in his *Traité de la nature et la grace*. Here again, one must be careful with Rousseau's misleading semantics.

Hence, in order to learn what sovereignty, as the unity of the moral power in the state, really meant for Rousseau, we must inquire about the terms that qualify it. This takes us to the second difficulty addressed by Rousseau. By making the people the seat of moral power, he formally reunifies in the same body (*Corps politique*) the actor and subject of morality.¹³ Yet if, on the one hand, Rousseau affirms that the general will is the law and that the people as a body have the supreme legislative power in the state, on the other, he dissolves the absolute identity between people and law by qualifying that view.¹⁴ The general will is not a free will because, as we have just indicated, its *being* (the political body) lacks the principle of its own action; in other words, it lacks the principle that characterizes individual human action, namely, the capacity to anticipate problems or perceive them with the mind.¹⁵ Thus the legislative “action” of the sovereign people – again, taken as a body – is necessarily pre-determined by another will; in spite of its sacred importance, it is nothing but a collective re-action to the true political action of the

¹³ Cf. with Grotius, *De jure belli ac pacis* (*On the Laws of War and Peace*), II, 9, 6.

¹⁴ “*Comment une multitude aveugle qui souvent ne sait ce qu'elle veut, parce qu'elle sait rarement ce qui lui est bon, exécuteroit-elle d'elle-même une entreprise aussi grande, aussi difficile qu'un système de législation? De lui-même le peuple veut toujours le bien, mais de lui-même il ne le voit pas toujours. La volonté générale est toujours droite, mais le jugement qui la guide n'est pas toujours éclairé. Il faut lui faire voir les objets tels qu'ils sont, quelquefois tels qu'ils doivent lui paroître, lui montrer le bon chemin qu'elle cherche, la garantir de la séduction des volontés particulières, rapprocher à ses yeux les lieux et les tems, balancer l'attrait des avantages présents et sensibles, par le danger des maux éloignés et cachés. Les particuliers voient le bien qu'ils rejettent: le public veut le bien qu'il ne voit pas. Tous ont également besoin de guides: Il faut obliger les uns à conformer leurs volontés à leur raison; il faut apprendre à l'autre à connoître ce qu'il veut. Alors des lumieres publiques résulte l'union de l'entendement et de la volonté dans le corps social, de-là l'exact concours des parties, et enfin la plus grande force du tout. Voilà d'où naît la nécessité d'un Législateur*” (SC, II, 6, p. 380). See also SC, II, 3 (last paragraph and note on Machiavelli).

¹⁵ As Rousseau says, it lacks “*prévoyance*” (SC, II, 6, p. 380).

rulers. Therefore, the ruling exercised by the people is not exactly active ruling. All practical significance on the side, it is the fictional and psychological character of this “passive ruling” that matters first.

Ultimately, because Rousseau’s sovereign (*Corps politique*) is incapable of abstract thinking, it cannot be thought of as a *person*, let alone a *moral person*, unless we distinguish between *Corps politique* and *Etat* (or City), and find, somewhere in the latter, the principle of the sovereign’s action (i.e. the mind of the body).¹⁶ Rousseau’s analogy must respect the notion put forward in the *Émile* that the principle of free movement in human beings is not inherent to their bodies, but lies in an unfathomable relation to a substance that is external to what they understand as their bodies.¹⁷ Accordingly, the political *body* would be, as a body, a soulless being. Thus, on the terms of the *Social Contract*, the moral power of the sovereign people is in the *passive* quality of a being (*Corps politique*) whose essence is purely conservative. In other words, the political body of the people is literally the seat of morality in that the people are not more than the receivers and keepers of the moral laws. These laws, however, are not made by the government, which is in charge of only the particular and practical matters of the state.¹⁸ Rousseau locates the principle of moral action in the extraordinary person of the legislator, whose active imagination, thought of as the capacity to anticipate what is

¹⁶ I.e., unless we find the source of the force behind the pact. See SC, I, 6 (especially Rousseau’s note about the distinction between *ville* and *cit *, and between *bourgeois* and *Citoyen*) with the beginning of II, 4, and with the fact that the action of the legislator is outside the pact and thus “outside” the city, in II, 7, p. 382. Rousseau compares the political body to the human body in his article *On Political Economy*, p. 244-5.

¹⁷ *Émile*, p. 576.

¹⁸ SC, III, 1.

the case, works inconspicuously as the natural ruling factor in the state.¹⁹ Thus, also for Rousseau the unity of morality, or the moral freedom of the citizens, depends on the unity of moral action; that is to say, it depends on a unity of action that can only be found in an actual person. As an extraordinary action about and upon the general will of the people, the action of the legislator is, at least from this angle, the most sovereign in the state. In the *Social Contract*, Rousseau does not hide that he is Machiavelli's student: the true prince or ruler must be invisible and all intricacies of his (sovereign) moral action should remain foreign to public debate. Sovereignty and the importance of its unity are, then, primarily, psychological matters; both moral and political power in the state must be studied accordingly.

Paradoxically, Rousseau could not be more explicit about the almost divine and, at any rate, subversive character of the legislator in his famous chapter of the *Social Contract*. It is too facile, and, in light of the *Second Discourse*, deceitful, to identify Rousseau's own work as the activity of the man he describes in that chapter. If he is implying his own action, he is certainly not giving us the full extent of it. The chapter is less about Rousseau's own legislation than about the projected action of his addressees in the *Social Contract*; it is a eulogy of the correct spirit of political ruling, of “*une entreprise au dessus de la force humaine et, pour l'exécuter, une autorité qui n'est rien.*”²⁰ The action of legislators and the detached way in

¹⁹ SC, II, 7, ‘On the Legislator.’ On the capacity of foresight, see also II, 10: “*le législateur (...) ne doit pas fonder son jugement sur ce qu’il voit mais sur ce qu’il prévoit (...).*” Cf. also Aristotle’s *Politics*, 1252a30.

²⁰ “*Les sages qui veulent parler au vulgaire leur langage au lieu du sien n'en sauroient être entendus. Or, il y a mille sortes d'idées qu'il est impossible de traduire dans la langue du peuple. Les vues trop générales et les objets trop éloignés sont également hors de sa portée; chaque*

which they are supposed to rule complicate Rousseau's psychology of power. They make us think of the sort of freedom that a little earlier in the *Social Contract* he says would not concern him.²¹ Certainly, even if Rousseau's legislator appears to be depicted as a philosophical ruler, one should not confound legislator and philosopher, if anything else because, from Rousseau's perspective, his legislators would also be endorsing his own doctrines about first things. In Rousseau, the highest sense of this active sovereign power – of sovereignty predicated on philosophical (non-egalitarian) freedom and not on pre-established beliefs (regardless of whether these beliefs are based on traditional religion or on dogmatic rationalism) – is the hidden theme of the introduction to the work that promises to address those first things, namely the Epistle Dedicatory to the *Second Discourse*.

The question of the passive and active sense of sovereignty is behind the following well-known difficulty. If on the one hand we have in the unity of the general will, as Rousseau insists in the *Social Contract*, the unity of a referential sovereign power for all political and legislative action in the state, on the other, this power must be also understood individually, namely, as the political power writ

individu ne goûtant d'autre plan de gouvernement que celui qui se rapporte à son intérêt particulier, aperçoit difficilement les avantages qu'il doit retirer des privations continuelles qu'imposent les bonnes loix. Pour qu'un peuple naissant put goûter les saines maximes de la politique et suivre les regles fondamentales de la raison d'Etat, il faudroit que l'effet put devenir cause, que l'esprit social, qui doit être l'ouvrage de l'institution, présidât à l'institution même; et que les hommes fussent avant les loix ce qu'ils doivent devenir par elles. Ainsi donc le Législateur ne pouvant employer ni la force ni le raisonnement, c'est une nécessité qu'il recoure à une autorité d'un autre ordre, qui puisse entraîner sans violence et persuader sans convaincre” (SC, II, 7, p. 383; see also I, 3, *Du droit du plus fort*). Cf. this passage with Darius' response to Otanes in Herodotus quoted above, and with SDED, §6. See also *On Political Economy*, pp. 246-255.

²¹ Namely, philosophical freedom. SC, I, 8.

large that each citizen might or might not have according to opportunity, disposition, ambition, intelligence and consciousness of freedom. This latter specifically active side of sovereignty would be proportional to the effectiveness of the non-institutional (i.e. political or legislative) action that one might have in society as a whole; as such, sovereignty would be unequally distributed in the state, something impossible according to Rousseau's precept of its indivisibility.²² In the *Social Contract*, Rousseau circumscribes the power of both government and people with his re-definition of sovereignty; the concept becomes apparently dissociated from (or at least incoherent with) the action that it necessarily entails – an action that can be only partially explained by Rousseau's mysterious figure of the Legislator. Even if we account for all that Rousseau says in the chapter on the Legislator, and no matter how hard we try to make that cohere with Rousseau's egalitarian theory of sovereignty, the paradox would persist if left in the terms of the *Social Contract*. Rousseau's republicanism would not be essentially different from Machiavelli's.

Naturally, in light of the philosophical debate of the time and of Rousseau's profound consideration of it, this conclusion is both historically and philosophically insufficient. We have seen that Rousseau's treatment of the origins of human inequality is directly related and, ultimately, fundamental to the understanding of this question; it takes more than the mere acceptance of the permanent tension between the natural inequality of souls, and of republicanism as the most natural form of government, to make sense of Rousseau's political philosophy.

²² SC, II, 2.

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