

Rousseau's State of Nature and the Scandal of Scripture

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Introduction

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's famous "state of nature", as described in the *Discourse on Inequality*¹, can only be reached by one road: the setting aside of Judeo-Christian Scriptures. I will begin by showing that it is, in fact, Sacred Scripture that makes the state of nature first impossible and then necessary and in this sense scandalous. Rousseau has used them to open up a space, which he calls the state of nature and once this space has been opened, he has set them aside. It is my contention that in order for that space to remain open, the Scriptures will have to be present in the *Discourse* through their absence. As rejected, they will continue to be within the text, negatively determining the character of the state of nature.

The failure on the part of all the other philosophers up to Rousseau to reach the true state of nature has been due to the fact that it has not entered their minds

to doubt that the state of Nature had existed, even though it is evident from

reading the Holy Scriptures that the first Man, having received enlightenment

¹ For the French text I have used the Pléiade edition: Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *Oeuvres Complètes*. Vol. III, ed. Jean Staronbinski, pp. 109-223. For the English translation I have used Volume 3 of the *Collected Writings*, ed. Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly, (Hanover: UP of New England, 1992). Whenever I quote from the *Collected Writings* in the text, I will parenthetically include the reference giving the volume number followed by the page number. I have also consulted Heinrich Meier's bilingual edition: *Diskurs*

and precepts directly from God, was not himself in that state; and that giving the Writings of Moses the credence that any Christian philosopher owes them, it must be denied that even before the Flood Men were ever in the pure state of Nature, unless they fell back into it because of some extraordinary Event: a Paradox that is very embarrassing to defend and altogether impossible to prove (3.19).

This sentence is not an aside. It is a central methodological step for Rousseau. The Scriptures teach us to doubt the actual, historical existence of the state of nature and by so doing they make it possible for us to reach this same state of nature. At the same time this methodological step logically entails setting aside these same Scriptures, once they have performed their task of instructing us about the actual non-existence of the state of nature.

Immediately following the above quote Rousseau reaches the conclusion that the Scriptures are to be set aside. He uses the Scriptures and in using them sets them aside. He needs the Christian Scriptures to get us to the State of Nature, and he gets us there by setting them aside. The Scriptures get rejected, in the very use of getting us to our destination.

By following this procedure Rousseau finally arrives at the question that he seeks, and so he

über die Ungleichheit / Discours sur l'inégalité, 3rd ed. (Paderborn : Schöningh, 1993).

formulates again what the Discourse is about:

[Religion] does not forbid us to form conjectures, drawn solely from the nature of man and the Beings surrounding him, about what the human Race might have become if it had remained abandoned to itself. This is what I am asked, and what I propose to examine in this Discourse (3.19).

The question which the setting aside of the Scriptures has opened up is the question of what the human race might have become if abandoned to itself. I contend that this form of the question is theological. Implicit in this anthropological question is the theological question of what the human race might have become, if abandoned *by God*. Rousseau does not mean abandoned to itself in its sin or its lostness. That would be the very vision that he rejects. Humanity abandoned in its sin would be a vision of the innocent man crucified. Rather, Rousseau proposes a view of humanity as abandoned to itself without the cross, and without the sin and the redemption that the cross implies. It signals a rejection of the way God actually saved the human race and a search for an alternative. It is due to this type of consciousness that it becomes imperative to set the Scriptures aside and to write the alternative account. It is only through the Scriptures that Rousseau can reach the point where he can set them aside, so that the space that Rousseau himself has opened for this discourse is theological. This shows the extent to which Rousseau remains dependent on Christianity for the accomplishment of his project, the rejection of Christianity.

The Body of the *Second Discourse*

The Christian Scriptures contain the possibility of scandal. Rousseau has used them to open up a space, which he calls the state of nature and once this space has been opened he has set them aside. It is my contention that in order for that space to remain open, the Scriptures will have to be present in the *Discourse* through their absence. As rejected they will continue to be within the text. The *Second Discourse* does not really ‘resemble’ the Scriptures. The natural man is not Adam. The state of nature is not Eden. Rather the *Second Discourse* is trying to communicate in the same way as the Scriptures communicate. Specifically, we find that the Scriptures are contained in the “obstacles” we find in the state of nature. The obstacles in the state of nature have a peculiarly scandalous quality: they render discourse first impossible and then necessary. More than that, I will try to show that it is ultimately the discourse which emerges from this impossible and yet necessary situation which produces the closest thing to a god that appears in the *Second Discourse*.

I will show this by outlining the three aporias that Rousseau emphasizes in his considerations of the “metaphysical” side of natural man. Then I will show how the very things that block this development become the necessary conditions of its growth in the “Second Part” and then finally how the “discourse within the *Discourse*” functions to found society and the sacred.

The “First Part” of the *Discourse*

The Christian Scriptures suspend scandal by means of faith. This means that they are also capable at any time of being the occasion of scandal. If my contention is correct that scandal is the necessary condition for the possibility of thinking the state of nature in the way that Rousseau thinks it, then this rejected actuality, which makes necessary the impossible, should be present as a constitutive factor in the description of the state of nature. I believe that it is. The Scriptures are present in the space opened up by their absence. Rousseau, as he begins the “First Part”, repeats again the gesture that to enter into the state of nature requires the setting aside of Scriptures. This time he holds that both the reader and the being, who is the object of this investigation, be stripped of all supernatural knowledge. While excusing himself from examining the human in a more primitive physical form, Rousseau repeats that our considerations will be “without having recourse to the supernatural knowledge that we have on this point” (3.20). Once Rousseau and the reader have separated themselves from the supernatural source, it is possible and necessary to perform the same operation on the man we are considering: “Stripping the Being, so constituted, of all the supernatural gifts he could have received and of all the artificial faculties he could only have acquired by long progress...” (3.20). At the very end of the *Second Discourse* Rousseau repeats this once more saying:

I have tried to set forth the origin and progress of inequality, the establishment

and abuse of political Societies, insofar as these things can be deduced from the Nature of man by the light of reason alone, and independently of the sacred Dogmas which give to Sovereign authority the Sanction of Divine Right (3.67).

Thus, Rousseau frames the *Discourse* itself with the setting aside of theological knowledge. Still, if the *Discourse* itself is truly rooted in scandal, then it will be present in some form in the *Discourse* itself. I think that it is there in the form of “obstacles”, one of the most basic meanings of the Greek word *skandalon*. By focusing on Rousseau’s discussion of the obstacles to language in the “First Part” and the story of its emergence in the “Second Part”, I hope to make clear that the state of nature makes discourse itself both impossible and then makes it necessary. The impossible becomes the other side of the necessary, and this seemingly strange structure is rooted in the logic of scandal out of which the *Discourse* is written.

When Rousseau turns from the physical aspects of the human animal to its metaphysical aspects², his main consideration deals with the interplay between the human and nature. Rousseau uses the machine image (3.25) to emphasize that while man and other animals are capable of recovering from an imbalance, they always return to their former state. Rousseau is allowing for movement within nature, but not for real change or development. The needs and the capacities to meet these needs are in balance in the

² Cf. Goldschmidt (1987) p. 268, where he points out that for the scholars of Rousseau’s day, the problem of the genesis of ideas from sensation in human knowing was considered to be a properly metaphysical problem.

natural man. Development or progress of mind occurs due to needs (3.27). Rousseau emphasizes in the “First Part” that nature does not progress, does not offer new and different circumstances to the Savage, thus removing from him “the temptation and means of ceasing to be savage” (3.28). Nature changes, but the changes themselves are always the same, which is almost like not having any change at all³.

The spectacle of Nature becomes indifferent to him by dint of becoming familiar.

There is always the same order, there are always the same revolutions; he does not have mind to wonder at the greatest marvels; and one must not seek in him the Philosophy that man needs in order to know how to observe once what he has seen every day (3.28).

As we have pointed out above, Rousseau has said that he will not have recourse to supernatural knowledge and neither will the natural man. He also goes out of his way to show that, even if he were to grant the natural man supernatural knowledge, it would not affect the arguments he is presenting, because the knowledge would die with its possessor. In other words, even if we give the natural man extensive powers of reflection and knowledge of the will of God, all this knowledge would still pass back out of existence with his death (cf. 3.29). There would be no way for it to disseminate in the state of nature, because people do not speak to one another.

³ As Goldschmidt (1987, p. 240) points out, the permanence of the state of nature is neither history nor

Rousseau turns now toward “the obstacles to the origins of Languages” (3.29). His purpose in this part of the *Discourse* is to show the difficulties that the State of nature presents to the development of language⁴. In other words, the whole of the state of nature is conceived of as an obstacle. Still, we need to show that it is an obstacle in the sense of a *skandalon*, both preventing access and yet making the object more and more necessary. As we shall see, this development in the “First Part” is impossible and even inconceivable. We will briefly outline Rousseau’s arguments⁵.

The first aporia is this: it is impossible to imagine how language in the state of nature could ever become necessary, and if it were not needed, then it simply would never have developed.

Instead he simply supposes that the need is there and then tries to look at how a certain kind of interpretation, namely conventional signs, could have been established. This leads to the second aporia.

[L]et us seek, assuming them [conventional signs] to be necessary, how they could begin to be established. New difficulty, worse still than the preceding one.

For if Men needed speech in order to learn to think, they had even greater need of

myth but rather is a reflection of the ahistoricity of the consciousness of the natural human.

⁴ Starobinski, (OC, III, p. 1322, fn 2), de Man (*Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche Rilke und Proust*, (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979 p. 142, quoting Starobinski), Meier (1993, p. 117 ft. 149) and Swenson (2000, p. 111, also quoting Starobinski) all point out that Rousseau’s viewpoint is not to explain the *origin* of language, but rather the *obstacles* to its emergence.

⁵ It would have been possible to include here a discussion of the aporia that exists in the relationship between freedom and *perfectibilité*, that is that each presumes the other as its cause. But this relationship has been well explored by Paul de Man (1979) esp. chapter 7, “Metaphor”. My own analysis differs from his in that he sees freedom of the will as simply “pitted against the ever-present obstacle of a limitation which it tries to transgress” (p. 139). I am trying to show the origin of this “ever-present obstacle”.

knowing how to think in order to discover the art of speech...(3.30).

Finally, as a third aporia, in considering the relationship between society and language, Rousseau is again led to formulate the problem without pretending to offer a solution.

For myself, frightened by the multiplying difficulties, and convinced of the almost demonstrated impossibility that Languages could have arisen and been established by purely human means, I leave to whomever would undertake it the discussion of the following difficult Problem: Which was most necessary, previously formed Society for the institution of Languages; or previously invented Languages for the establishment of Society (3.33)?⁶

Rousseau's point, as he made clear in the "Preface", was not resolve the question, but to clarify it. The clarity he has reached is that "one sees" how little Nature has done to bring men together or to make speech necessary. If there are social bonds between men, clearly this is not Nature's doing.

The "Second Part" of the *Discourse*

From impossibility we now move to necessity. Rousseau will "describe" events, that is, he will narrate a story but a story which is, according to Rousseau, necessary, because "one could not conceive of any other system that would not provide me with the same results, and from which I could not draw the

⁶ Again this is the same circle that scandalized Rousseau in the "Preface."

same conclusions” (3.42)⁷. In other words, anyone and everyone would have to draw the same conclusions that Rousseau does. The impossibility of the emergence of language has changed into the necessity of its emergence.

The obstacles that prevent progress in the “First Part” now show their other dimension and cause progress. The obstacles not only make the progress possible, they also make it necessary. We would search in vain for a *reason* for the change in the obstacles⁸. Our two facts are first, a state in which this development is impossible and second that the development took place. Rousseau will connect these two facts *via* a narrative.

I do not wish to simply repeat Rousseau’s narrative of the development. Rather, I wish to point to the way that he overcomes, almost by fiat, one is tempted to say, the very aporia he was at pains in the “First Part” to make clear. Humans have begun to live in simple huts as families. The “first difference” is thus introduced between the way of life of the two sexes. Rousseau tells us that here one can catch a “slightly better glimpse of how the use of speech was established and perfected imperceptibly in the

⁷ Several scholars, including Goldschmidt (1987), Wright (1963) and Weinrich, (“Erzählte Philosophie oder Geschichte des Geistes: Linguistische Bemerkungen zu Descartes und Rousseau“) have pointed out the different tense in which the “First Part” and the “Second Part” are written. The “First Part” is mostly description, while the “Second Part” uses the historical past to narrate a story. From the viewpoint being developed in this work, one could put it this way: it is possible and even necessary to describe an impossible situation, but to move from that to necessity, one has to narrate.

⁸ Swenson (2000) mentions (p. 109) that population growth is given as reason for the development. This is correct, but it is not given in the narrative until later. The concrete difficulties and obstacles are the height of trees and competition of animals, certainly factors that were present in the “First Part” (cf. 3.43).

bosom of each family; and one can conjecture further how various particular causes could have spread language and accelerated its progress by making it more necessary” (3.46). It is due to natural disasters, such as floods and earthquakes, then, which would have left some areas surrounded by water and cut off from other land masses. “Revolutions of the Globe detached and broke up portions of the Continent into Islands” (3.46-47). From this humans are forced to live together and devise a common idiom that is then brought fully developed to the continent.

My interest here is not so much the scientific theory as the fact that Rousseau uses the word “revolutions” to talk about the kind of change that could have brought about this kind of dramatic, need-inducing change⁹. In the “First Part” Rousseau tells us that nature is always the same, and he expresses this by saying that it is “always the same revolutions” (3.28). There is no explanation given for why the word “revolutions” means one thing at one time and then means something totally different, almost opposite, at another. The lack of explanation is itself a kind of explanation. Rousseau is pointing to the way that language functions – to the scandalous aspect of language which he mentioned in his “Preface”. The same word means different things to different authors and is capable of being defined in different ways. The scandal of the *aporia* concerning the origin of language is being overwhelmed by the

⁹ The best study on Rousseau’s use of the word “revolution” remains “Concept de révolutionnaire chez J.-J. Rousseau” by Nagao Nishikawa in *Etudes sur J.-J. Rousseau*, ed. Takeo Kuwabara, (Kyoto: Iwanami, 1970) pp. 195-256 (text in Japanese).

scandal of language itself.

When language, which can be used in this way, a language that is the interpretation of what people want to say, is introduced into the world, “Everything begins to change its appearances” (3.47). We have here the source of the fatal gap between appearance and reality. Rousseau sums up the progress and its relation to the *skandalon* in three sentences.

People grow accustomed to consider different objects and to make comparisons; imperceptibly they acquire ideas of merit and beauty which produce sentiments of preference. By dint of seeing one another, they can no longer do without seeing one another again. A tender and gentle sentiment is gradually introduced into the soul and at the least obstacle becomes an impetuous fury. Jealousy awakens with love; Discord triumphs, and the gentlest of the passions received sacrifices of human blood (3.47)¹⁰.

This is Rousseau’s account of the emergence of scandalized consciousness. By this I mean a consciousness formed by obstacles and capable of taking offence. A consciousness that causes “the offended man” to see in a voluntary wrong “contempt for his person which was often more unbearable than the harm itself”

¹⁰ This seems to me to be a good description of what René Girard calls “mimetic desire”. Tzvetan Todorov makes the following parenthetical remark in *Life in Common: An Essay in General Anthropology*, (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2001): “the “mimetic desire of Girard is only another name for the *amour-propre* of Rousseau” (p. 38.).

(3.48). Once Rousseau has dilated a little on the role of metallurgy and agriculture in this process, he tells us that “it is easy to imagine the rest” (3.51). The destruction of natural equality brings about violence.

Thus the usurpations of the rich, the brigandage of the Poor, the unbridled passions of all, stifling natural pity and the as yet weak voice of justice, made man avaricious, ambitious, and evil. Between the right of the stronger and the right of the first occupant there arose a perpetual conflict which ended only in fights and murder (3.52).

We have reached the Hobbesian state of war. Discourse, made possible by the overcoming of natural obstacles, soon leads to human obstacles that bind humans together while driving them apart.¹¹

At this point we have kind of reversal of the pattern, in that the very forces that threaten to attack the person are to be turned to his favor, but nothing new is introduced into the system. Just as before, when the very forces which prevented language from originating turned out to be its cause, so here the violence that threatens to destroy the nascent human society will be redirected towards its preservation. It is discourse that is capable of effecting this transformation, because it itself is the result of such a transformation. Nothing has changed, and everything has changed. The chains are interpreted to mean

¹¹ Goldschmidt (1983), in a footnote (p. 579, fn. 65), makes the point that the political institutions are not established to defend humans from the obstacles of nature but from obstacles that emerge from other humans. The obstacles are human relations.

freedom for the people, and so they are embraced.

The Sacred

This is not all. It is at least suggested here that discourse also makes a god and so religion. This dimension has been notable by its absence from Rousseau's account of how society came about. The logic of the *Discourse* is clear: "instead of turning our forces against ourselves, let us gather them into one supreme power (*un pouvoir suprême*)", a god, and he will protect us. To this newly created god, even the rich had to "sacrifice" a part of their freedom so that it could maintain them in "eternal concord" (3.54). We have moved from the engendering of the state of nature through rejection of Christian Scriptures to the engendering of discourse through the state of nature and then further to the engendering of society through discourse. In each of these cases the impossible yet necessary structure gets repeated.

Again, I do not believe that it is necessary for me to detail Rousseau's narrative. It is enough for our purposes to point out that, both when society gets founded on the specious discourse within the *Discourse*, and also when Rousseau leaves the narrative voice to test "facts by right" and founds the state in that way, both these scenarios end in the situation that they were founded to remedy. The state is institutionalized scandal. It is necessary, but its necessity is due to the very vices that guarantee its abuse. In other words the very things that make it necessary also render it impossible. Scandal emerges again. Rousseau is clear that the very things which draw us together, i.e. the universal desire for reputation, also

makes us competitors and thus “causes reverses successes and catastrophes” – the very stuff of scandals.

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