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Rousseau and His State:
A Review of the Politics and Rhetoric of The Second Discourse

by Russell Arben Fox

The writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau can be powerful and moving in their criticisms of modern society. His insight is still disturbing to us today in that it forces us to rethink our notions of society, government, and freedom. Yet examined closely, his Second Discourse contains important contradictions about human possibilities and human freedom. In the end, accepting his conclusions might require that we indulgingly overlook these contradictions. But perhaps the power of his ideas is precisely in his passionate, romantic, and even contradictory rhetoric.

If we follow the progress of inequality in these various revolutions, we shall find that the establishment of laws and of the right of property was its first term, the institution of the magistracy the second, and the conversion of legitimate into arbitrary power the third and the last; so that the condition of rich and poor was authorized by the first period; that of the powerful and weak by the second; and only by the third that of master and slave, which is the last degree of inequality, and the term at which all the rest remain, when they have got so far, till the government is either entirely dissolved by new revolutions or brought back again to legitimacy.

(Rousseau 33:32-39; hereafter, references to Rousseau's Second Discourse will be by page and line number only)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau has always been a fascinating figure, for his lifestyle as well as his ideas. But while his lifestyle (which apparently consisted of a good many romantic walks around the countryside of France and Switzerland) is perhaps unique amongst Enlightenment thinkers, the reception of his oftentimes radical and occasionally brilliant ideas by modernity has been unique as well. Allan Bloom, author of the profoundly conservative The Closing of the American Mind has nonetheless dedicated a good portion of his career to Rousseau, and admits that, upon reading his work, "one feels that (Rousseau) presented the human problem in its variety with greater depth and breadth than any of his successors" (Bloom 1987, 579). Robert C. Solomon labeled Rousseau a "socio-path," while simultaneously pointing out that he inspired "some of the most spectacular and successful philosophy that the world has ever known" (Solomon 1988, 2). (Will Durant, the eminent historian, suffers from none of these contradictory feelings, and simply calls Rousseau "queer"--Durant 1933, 187.)

What did Rousseau do? In a nutshell, Rousseau presented a radical rethinking of what it meant to be human, to be rational, and to be free. His version of the Enlightenment did not celebrate the powers of reason to cure human injustices, but rather the expressive ability of the human self to transcend the complexities and (numerous) injustices which inevitably arose from the very application of "reason." Unlike most that came before him, Rousseau denied
that society and government (particularly the government of his day) was a sign of the progressing human condition. Nor did Rousseau accept the idea of an Enlightened government as the guarantor of basic rights ever-threatened by humankind's "baser nature." His claim that human beings are truly free--free to be ethical, to choose between good and evil--prior to the development of civilization or reason raised a challenge to modernity reflected in the work of Kant (who desired to make Rousseau's "self" rational, and thus preserve both reason and passion, science and religion) as well as much of the political tradition that followed.

Rousseau's first substantial work is titled *A Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of the Inequality of Mankind*, commonly referred to as *The Second Discourse*. In the *Discourse* (written as an entry in an essay contest which asked "Have the Sciences Improved or Depressed the State of Man?") Rousseau challenges the "states of nature" presupposed in the writings of empiricist thinkers like Hobbes and Locke, claiming that their analysis of the development of the human animal simply sustained and justified politics as it then existed. On the one hand, Hobbes saw human nature as vile, with a strict material dominion over man by a ruler being the only plausible political alternative; on the other, Locke saw humankind as possessing natural rights and inherent characteristics which government must ratify and adhere to. But both of these writers, argues Rousseau, made human beings *political* even in their primitive, natural, "original" state, thus justifying rational, political answers to the human problem. Rousseau claims to take another route, to another state of nature, one that shows humans as peaceful animals, eventually robbed of their natural freedom by "civilized" government. On this model, Rousseau builds his case against government and the state.

Unfortunately, Rousseau's state of nature--and the very way he argues for it--is problematic, and sometimes outrageous. Is he trying to tell us that "returning" to the state of nature as he describes it is the only solution to oppressive government? That is how many understood his work, originally: Voltaire viciously satirized the *Discourse* as "a book opposed to the human species" (Durant 1933, 188). However, Rousseau concludes his essay by claiming such a return to nature is impossible (41:32-36). He even precludes the possibility of returning to the state of nature he describes by declaring (inconsistently with what follows) that his primitive state isn't really a "real" one (3:2)--except, of course, in terms of his argument.

So the best question, when approaching Rousseau and the influence he has had on modern political thought (an influence which began with *The Second Discourse*), is perhaps one of rhetoric: what is Rousseau's argument, and how well does it stand up? I believe that an examination of the essay will reveal numerous difficult contradictions and assertions in its reasoning, but that such problems do not undermine the work as a whole. Rousseau, ever the romantic, was far more interested in rhetorically prompting a rethinking of the role of government than in building a sound argument against a historical interpretation that assumed freedom required politics. By firmly associating government and rational society with that which is debilitating, unequal, immoral and wicked, Rousseau hoped to bring about a crisis of faith in regards to existing institutions. Hence, the importance of this paper's introductory quotation, in which Rousseau (perhaps illogically) places the blame for
all evil and inequality at the feet of government . . . or at least, points to government as the manifestation of that which led humankind to discard liberty for the sake of "laws," "property," and "rulers," all of which unfortunately have come to appear as necessary, and all of which Rousseau paints in uncompromisingly ugly terms.

Rousseau’s essay is broken up into four parts. First his Preface, in which he lists the sorts of inequalities that exist amongst mankind, and how other attempts to assess the human condition (and thus, the source of these inequalities) "have inquired into the foundations of society...but not one of them have got there" (2:30); following that, there are the First and Second Parts, which describe man in his primitive natural state, and follow through those circumstances which have "made man wicked while making him sociable" (19:30-31). In his Appendix, he sums up his argument by stating that while men are "actually wicked," they are (or were) "naturally good" (37:47-48), and concludes by anticipating that many will read into his essay a call to "totally abolish" society; a call which he says one cannot follow, though he does not entirely dismiss it (41:16-18). Exactly how Rousseau manages to (or fails to) make all these points coherent must be examined.¹

A Critique of Rousseau’s Second Discourse

Preface and The First Part

Rousseau’s first goal is to establish the importance of his argument. In describing the characteristics of mankind, he lists inequalities which should be apparent to all, one of which he calls "natural, or physical" and the other "moral or political" (2:8-10). Not "legal," not "civil," but "moral." Rousseau is consciously framing the debate in a very fundamental, very passionate way. Legal or civil inequities may be addressed dispassionately, but by placing the "privileges which some men enjoy to the prejudice of others" (2:12) in the moral realm (something never considered by Hobbes and other supporters of the rulers’ "divine" right to rule over—and in that way, serve—his subjects), Rousseau engages the emotions, in a overtly serious manner. This is what he wants. By using moral imperatives, he allows himself maximum room to delve deep into an obviously hypothetical past, and root out the source of government itself.

What follows is an immediate deconstruction of mankind. Rousseau’s human is spoken of in terms one would usually associate with animals: "natural fertility," "instinct," and so forth. Man was, Rousseau claims, as far as animals go, "weaker than some, and less agile than others; but, taking him all around, the most advantageously organized of any" (4:5-6). Such men are secure in their simplicity, afraid of storms and pleased by fresh water. In nature they are not weak, as Rousseau believed his fellows were, since the "effeminate way of life totally enervates...strength and courage" (6:41-42).

And yet, Rousseau is apparently not entirely comfortable with all this...nature. His frequent references to the Greeks (Plato, Machon, Hippocrates, Xenocrates, etc.) begin immediately and continue throughout the text. This reveals more than Rousseau’s familiarity with the classics; his reliance on them in constructing his argument reveals his sympathy for the ancient virtues the classics teach. Criticizing the "modern communities" which create servile characters, Rousseau looks fondly towards the example of ancient Sparta, comparing that city with nature in
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her treatment of her citizens: "those who come well-formed into the world she renders strong and robust, and all the rest she destroys," instead of "making children a burden to their parents, kill[ing] them indiscriminately before they are born" (4:26-30).

Sparta, incidently, is the only government or state, ancient or modern, to receive a good word from Rousseau. Two good words, in fact. Later in the essay, when Rousseau gives a description of yet another of early governments' failings--due to mistakes in policy and organization it is "continually being patched up," which was made difficult because of the government's unfinished previous policies--he states that "the first task should have been to get the site (for a society) cleared and all the old materials removed, as was done by Lycurgus at Sparta" (29:24-26). Rousseau did not necessarily see the ancient Greek polis as an answer to the human problem, but he drew much inspiration from it, and was profoundly influenced by the Greek emphasis on, not comfort or material gain, but certain natural virtues, in his choice of what he would later call "the most stable of epochs" (24:10).

First, however, Rousseau must construct as pleasing a state of nature as possible, so as to make more pitiful the fall man suffered when he left this state, and thus to have a stronger argument against existing governments. It is here where we encounter the foremost of the essay's contradictions: his creation of mankind as a passionate, yet passionless, animal.

Rousseau wants to claim that primitive man was absolutely not a political creature, so as to not allow for making freedom or rights in any way dependent upon government or rulers. Doing such was a materialism common in Enlightenment thought: freedom and political rights were considered to be, if not outright created by, than at least made real and available solely through Enlightened politics. Rousseau himself believed that individual power originated in the natural, ethical, human self, and that government and society have nothing to do with it. (Rousseau elsewhere would argue that the power of free action is constituted by the "general will," which is only found in freely entered into communities; however, he maintains that these potentialities originate in human being itself, sans politics.) People who engage in Hobbesian reasoning, Rousseau believed, were imposing concepts that originated with civilization upon primitive creatures who lacked any such ideas (see 2:34; 14:20; 18:49).

Of course, in order to escape the same charge of investing his state of nature with "civilized concepts" (whether liberal or otherwise), Rousseau needed to describe a state of nature that is without passions. As he writes, "nothing could be more unhappy than [a] savage man, dazzled by science, tormented by his passions, and reasoning about a state different from his own" (13:41-43). Thus, he necessarily must place humankind in a state of independent simplicity, instead of in a state where man is obligated by (made dependent upon--see 14:25-36) his self-interested (read: political) emotions. Unfortunately, such a wild animal would appear to be completely outside the realm of human existence; in order for his argument to make any sense to his readers, Rousseau must show how these simple human animals became like he is--a modern, wretched, government-ruled creature. A bridge must be built between the past and the present for his story of man (hypothetical or not) to be anything more than science-fiction. In building this bridge, however, Rousseau does subject his primitive hu-
mans to passions--two, in fact. They are compassion and self-perfectibility.

Consider the second first. In what sense is the essay's much-discussed "faculty of self-improvement" (8:8) a passion? Originally it does not appear to be one; it is simply a developmental capacity which man has to a degree which brutes do not. But later in the essay Rousseau describes this characteristic in terms of an emotional state, a driving force behind human action. And what is the origination of this driving action?

Difficulties soon presented themselves, and it became necessary to learn how to surmount them: the height of the trees... the competition of other animals... all obliged him to apply himself to bodily exercises... Natural weapons, stones, sticks, were easily found: he learned to surmount the obstacles of nature, to contend in case of necessity with other animals... or to indemnify himself for what he was forced to give up to a stronger [man]. (20:30-41)

In the Discourse Rousseau defines self-preservation (which, in the face of the natural competition that Rousseau describes in the preceding quote, often means "improvement") as "man's first feeling" (20:22). Surely Rousseau is describing an element of character that is more than simply physical; feeling implies emotion, or passion. Rousseau's humans are passionately self-perfectible.

The same may be said for compassion, only more so. Consider the language of the essay:

... What is generosity, clemency, or humanity but compassion applied to the weak, to the guilty, or to mankind in general? Even benevolence and friendship are, if we judge rightly, only the effects of compassion, constantly set upon a particular object: for how is it different to wish that another person may not suffer pain and uneasiness and to wish him happy? Were it even true that pity is no more than a feeling, which puts us in the place of the sufferer...this truth would have no other consequence than to confirm my argument. Compassion must, in fact, be the stronger, the more the animal beholding any kind of distress identifies himself with the animal that suffers. (15:35-44)

All sorts of virtues are connected by Rousseau with this one passion: generosity, benevolence, friendship, clemency, etc. This one "natural virtue" (14:49) may be good and praiseworthy; however, it, like the previously mentioned passion for self-improvement, only compromises Rousseau's position. A human being who feels compassion for his fellow beings will inevitably want to aid them in a more proactive sense--he will gather the wounded together after an avalanche, he will make sure no one falls behind during a relocation to another cave, a mother will feed her young (something that Rousseau, in one his more tremendously bizarre assertions, claims is originally done only to relieve discomfort: "a mother [gives] suck to her children at first for her own sake; and [only] afterwards, when habit had made them dear, for theirs"--10:43-45).

The problems these passions pose for Rousseau's humans are, at least at this point, primarily stylistic: to what extent can Rousseau effectively create a non-political, state of nature Paradise when he gives his creatures the sorts of passions that have naturally pushed mankind towards the sorts of cooperative problem-solving which is plainly the source of civilization—and government? By allowing for any passion to exist in primitive man, much less two, he allows for the contention that his state of nature wasn't such a happy place after all. Imagine a man struggling to resolve his inability to keep himself warm, feed his children, light his way, build a bridge, or kill a wooly mammoth—and remember Rousseau's statement about men being "tormented by his passions" (13:43). Obviously then, if humans are in fact the way Rousseau describes...
them, the advancement of civilization in some ways did lessen humankind's misery. And civilization, for all intents and purposes, means government (or at least, Rousseau never argues that you can have one without the other).

How to resolve this? Rousseau doesn't, insisting that the passions he has given primitive man are simply part of his make-up, and in spite of them mankind remains in a state of happiness. The term used in describe these passions by Rousseau is the neutral "possibilities." But that definition only opens up a line of thought with even greater problems, which are best considered in connection with the essay's Second Part and the question of freedom.

While all this bad logic does not obviate the validity of Rousseau's argument against the depressing assertions about mankind made by Hobbes, it does make his work of conjecture that much more inconsistent. It emphasizes some of Rousseau's more absurd contentions, including the radical anthropomorphism he engages in while describing animals, and makes more obvious the condescending admiration he has for "primitives"--African natives who can see as far as the Dutch can with telescopes, American natives that can trace Spaniards by their smell as well as any dog, and those "savages" who can "drink the strongest European liquors like water" (7:22-28).

Rousseau, in crafting The Second Discourse, attempts to make a distinction between the natural man and the natural equality and happiness which he apparently believes existed in mankind's primitive state, and the inequality and unhappiness which inundated the civilization all around him, all for the purpose of attacking existing institutions in favor of creating others. Unfortunately, in order to accomplish both required ends (i.e., to demonstrate the peace and happiness of the natural state, and to show how the natural state degenerated into the modern one, thus constructing an argument that is more than simply fantastic and irrelevant), he had to create a man who moved from one state to the other, and that required a man that was free from painful, stressful passion, but who had some passions for civilization as well.

Despite these flaws, Rousseau's construction of history is persuasive, at least in a romantic sense. It does seem, allowing for all possible qualifications, that mankind was in a happier state when there was no government. What remains now is to examine how Rousseau uses language to demonstrate that the establishment of government as it was known in his time prevents any return to that state, and whether or not mankind is, in actuality, free to make such a choice.

The Second Part and Appendix

The Second Part of The Second Discourse is much different in tone than the first: it is rapid, moving mankind in a downward spiral towards government and all its ills. It engages in far fewer leaps of logic than the first, for presumably, if the reader can accepts the assertions of the First Part, if only hypothetically, then the tragic story of mankind's Fall is only logical. Rousseau's story, however, also includes a subtle yet bothersome contradiction, one that threatens to undo far more than simply the author's condemnation of Enlightenment society.

Rousseau begins mankind's descent towards government by supposing that various difficulties (the same difficulties made bearable thanks to mankind's passion for self-perfectibility) encountered in the act of preserving one's own existence
would eventually force primitive man to recognize the existence of others of his own kind—in fact, recognize, become familiar with, and eventually discern conformities and distinctions between them (21:17-27). In other words, like deer, men and women would bump into each other, and develop a primitive sense of how to relate. In time, Rousseau claims, humans will naturally gather themselves together, though Rousseau believed that at first they were perhaps less than adept at joint operations:

If a deer was to be taken, every one saw that, in order to succeed, he must abide faithfully by his post: but if a hare happened to come within the reach of any of them, it is not to be doubted that he pursued it without scruple, and, having seized his prey, cares very little, if by so doing he caused his companions to miss theirs. (21:41-45)

It was this "first revolution" (22:11) that initiated a change of monumental proportions. Men, who before this point had existed in pure simplicity, began to build houses (well, huts) and to live in close proximity to each other (22:5-12), presumably so that it wouldn't be difficult to round up a bunch of the fellows for a hunt. While Rousseau does employ some surprising language to dramatize this shift, it is at first not at all negative: "these first advances," "first expansions," "this novel situation" (21:5, 20). He writes that human beings living in proximity "soon gave rise to the finest feelings known to humanity, conjugal love and affection. Every family became a little society, the more united because liberty and reciprocal attachment were the only bonds of its union" (21:22-24). Certainly, this hardly seems to be a harbinger of damnation—in fact, it seems a positive step.

The problem with communities, however, is that they give rise to leisure time, which gives rise to a desire to fulfill superfluous wants (22:32-36). Given differences in environment and climate, certain communities of men will emphasize certain things, and these distinctions will give rise to the ideas of "difference" and "comparison" (23:11)—of course, comparisons of a sort were already taking place, but these earlier distinctions were benign. Even these later distinctions, however, were not yet fulfilling Rousseau's bloody prophecy of intimacy leading to "human blood [being] sacrificed to the gentlest of passions" (23:17), for he qualifies himself at this point by saying that this "just mean between the indolence of the primitive state and the petulant activity or our egoism, must have been the happiest and most stable of epochs" (24:9-11). There are two reasons why this is so.

First and foremost, primitive society was fundamental to the introduction of morality (24:1). While Rousseau's language may seem to play up the sanctity of a passionless state, without morals or virtues, he is actually very interested in virtue, a virtue which can be best established by a certain moral sense. (Remember his respect for the Greeks.) This need for morality is most obvious by looking at Rousseau's essay in reverse: his every criticism of government involves the corruption and decay of respect and decency, the degeneration of manners and honesty (see, for instance, 26:19, 34-39; 27:43-47; 31:38; 33:23-31; and many, many more). These virtues, Rousseau claims, are not present in primitive man, who is just as likely to strike out at a physical affront as to forget it, who is simple, pleasant, peaceful, but not suitably passionate (forgetting here that he has already given men passions). It is only after the "first revolution" that we see the appearance of "industrious[ness]" (22:6), which seems to be in
Rousseau's eyes a fulfillment of personal worth. These virtues are, of course, to be found through society (not through government--they are found in spite of that institution, Rousseau insists), which has, in at least a minimal way, the approbation of the Divine Creator. (This is a sample of Rousseau's later writings about the importance of community, if not society.)

Mentioning God brings us to a second reason why Rousseau believed this strange primitive society was the "happiest" of all possible epochs--it is in accordance with the law of nature, which, to a wandering (literally and theologically) theist like Rousseau, is the same as being in accordance with the law of God. Throughout the essay, Rousseau employs the term "law of nature" as a tool, much as he does "natural liberty." The laws of nature and God are the same; in honoring the laws of nature we are honoring the purpose of our creation (see 3:7; 28:31; 41:33). It is this sort of virtue and nobility which is shown in the actions of the man of primitive society; it is also the sort of nobility that Rousseau apparently saw as present within certain ancient societies (like Sparta) that did not deny the difficult path to virtue proscribed by nature (4:26).

Rousseau argues that since most tribal people "have been found [already] in this state . . . men were meant to remain in it, that it is the real youth of the world" (24:15-16). So basic is this idea of basic, natural, "primitive" virtue to our very reason for existence that Rousseau describes the world as so created that this state could not be departed from, except through unfortunate accident (24:11-13).

Of course, apparently such accidents did in fact take place, for we are no longer utopianly primitive, nor living in a primitive Utopia. How does Rousseau explain this?

With the development of society, simple communication, Rousseau claims, gave way to complex intercourse, prompted by the distinctions and affections which men feel. While this does not in turn lead to evil, it does lead to trade and commerce, and to the development of economy. Rousseau characterizes this development in terms of "iron and corn" (24:36). The growth of metallurgy and agriculture in turn prompts specialization and separation, and ultimately competition. After this, exploitation. This meant that the natural distinctions which remained intact in primitive states become tools for gratifying wants at other's expense.

In this state of affairs, equality might have been sustained, had the talents of the individuals been equal, and had, for example, the use of iron and the consumption of commodities always exactly balanced each other; but, as there was nothing to preserve this balance, it was soon disturbed; the strongest did the most work; the most skillful turned his labor to best account; the most ingenious devised methods of diminishing his labor; the husbandman wanted more iron, or the smith more corn, and, while both labored equally, the one gained a great deal by his work, while the other could barely support himself. Thus natural inequality unfolds itself insensibly with that of combination, and the difference between men, developed by their different circumstances, becomes more sensible and permanent in its effects, and begins to have an influence, in the same proportion, over the lot of individuals. (25:47-26:5)

The end result of all this, of course, was "avarice, ambition and vice" (27:8), the results of the frustration mankind felt when confronted with claims which are patently against the laws of nature. As Rousseau wrote, "however speciously they [the rich] might disguise their usurpations, they knew that they were founded on false and precarious titles" (27:24). Man, within his primitive, virtuous society, would naturally have challenged any unnatural accumulation of wealth, for it
would be taking place without the "express and universal consent of mankind," and in the face of poverty and starvation to boot (27:32). And indeed, unless the situation brought by the specialization of economy was institutionalized, man would certainly have eventually overthrown the exploiters. This is why government, the bastion of the wealthy, the self-aggrandizing class, was created: so as to legitimize existing inequities, and to perpetuate them.

With this point, Rousseau's Discourse reaches its climax; everything after this is addendum. And having read this far, one cannot escape the feeling that Rousseau has made mankind's corruption an inevitability. Certainly saying so makes the human predicament all the more pitiful; and yet, in view of his rhetoric, one must wonder: what hath Rousseau wrought?

His human beings have moved from a state of passionless (yet oddly passionate) existence to a more conventional state, and from then on to civilized government and all its ills. Why? The question is an important one... Rousseau wants to argue for the true freedom of mankind, for the idea that political possibilities do not exist because of government and society but rather exist within the community-based context of government and society, prior to its actual formation. But if humans moved without real choice towards such an end...what does it all matter, anyway?

The freedom that Rousseau gave mankind was laid out early in his essay:

Nature lays her commands on every animal, and the brute obeys her voice. Man receives the same impulse, but at the same time knows himself at liberty to acquiesce or resist: and it is particularly in his consciousness of this liberty that the spirituality of his soul is displayed. (7:50-8:1)

However, if mankind was truly free, fundamentally, wouldn't those passions of self-improvement and sympathy for one's fellow had urged mankind away from this dreadful path? Why is it that, as soon as government was proposed as a solution to primitive man's ills:

All ran headlong to their chains, in hopes of securing their liberty; for they had just wit enough to perceive the advantages of political institutions, without experience enough to enable them to foresee the dangers. The most capable of foreseeing the dangers were the very persons who expected to benefit by them; and even the most prudent judged it not inexpedient to sacrifice one part of their freedom to ensure the rest; as a wounded man has his arm cut off to save the rest of the body. (28:6-12)

It seems that men were unable to return to their former state, or at least slow down the approach of that which would destroy their paradisiacal existence forever. And yet...if they were unable to avoid it, how is it that mankind is free? In the face of Rousseau's outrageous explanations accounting for the development of language (revolutions of the globe and earthquakes tore off land masses and made islands, forcing frightened groups of humans to hurriedly develop means of communicating with those they were stranded with) and metallurgy (volcanoes spout molten lava and pieces of melted rock, sparking the idea that fire, if hot enough, can be made to do the same thing), it seems that humans truly were instinctual animals, without the ability to withstand the changes life forced upon them (22:45-50; 24:49-50).

One might claim that Rousseau meant that these and other amazing situations forced the development of humans accidently—that what he called mankind's "possibilities" (still insisting they are not passions) were merely activated in a certain way by the situation, but that things needn't have resulted the way he described them in his essay. However, if this is so,
and human beings might not have developed towards modern society as a result of global accidents, then we can only assume one of two things: First, primitive man’s reactions could have been entirely accidental, in which case his passions aren’t really passions at all—are’t even true possibilities—but simply random actions. This completely throws Rousseau’s argument in jeopardy, preventing as it does any connection with the plight of modern man and hence any salient argument against the governments of the day or Hobbes’s theories. If man was this way, and then, through happenstance (there was a flood, man did this, and look what came of it) developed into a wonderful primitive society and from there into a terrible modern one, why shouldn’t we have the governments we do now? There is no reasonable historical standard or ethical principle against which to critique them.

The other possibility is that men might not have become modern, but didn’t become so accidently—when faced with difficult situations, they made unwise choices, and in that way we arrived in our present state. This does preserve man’s freedom of will, as well as the salience of Rousseau’s attack on those with negative views of man and his governmental needs. However, such an assumption necessarily means Rousseau’s *Discourse* is a call to return to a state of nature. If man in fact made his present state (through the operation of their non-passion passions), then obviously, if what Rousseau says about a more primitive state is correct (or even partially so), we ought to re-make ourselves and society in that direction.

Claiming that man is free and has chosen his path but now, because of the power of government, is limited in his ability to escape, simply contradicts Rousseau’s very eminent desire to make men free. And yet, if man is free, then Rousseau’s *Discourse* would apparently want us to revolt against the cities, and flee.

This is a difficult, yet intriguing position. Rousseau concludes his essay saying, as has been pointed out, that returning to a state of nature is impossible . . . for him and "men like me" (41:26). (Another question: If anti-social romantics like Rousseau can’t get "back to nature," then who could?) However, as was plainly mentioned in the introductory quotation, he does not dismiss the possibility of "new revolutions" (33:39). Where could such revolutions take man except back to nature? In which case, Rousseau’s argument is, in fact, as aggressively anti-intellectual, anti-social and anti-science as it has been so frequently characterized. What use is Rousseau to us then? Obviously, society is not about to disappear, and his claims that things were at their very best when mankind was back in huts would require a major renovation in thought, one that would dismiss the importance of life-saving and crop-growing technologies in favor of the freedom to go naked. A possibility, perhaps, but a difficult project just the same. Does he want humankind to take said project on? If not, is it because we aren’t free? Is our passionless primitive state forever lost to us? If so, then why should we believe we are free? And if we are free, is it because our passions enable us to act for ourselves? If that’s so, then maybe we wouldn’t want to go back, because civilization and government help soothe our passions. Don’t they? In the final analysis, Rousseau hints at many things, but comes clear on very little. Perhaps he himself hadn’t thought it through entirely.
Conclusion

Rousseau has remained, over the centuries, a vital and disturbing thinker because his thought, like The Second Discourse itself, is filled with romantically imagined contradictions, which simultaneously reveal and undermine numerous insightful observations on the Enlightenment and the human condition. His language--his reasoning--is poetic, passionate, perplexing and often extremely nonspecific (the word "government" only appears 14 times in the whole Discourse). However, especially when one is discussing that which is actually introduced as a hypothetical, that may be the very best language to use. Does Rousseau's rhetoric hold water? It does, but only if one is willing to overlook several strange assumptions, and bear with a contradictory conclusion in regards to freedom. The question as to what Jean-Jacques Rousseau really wanted to accomplish when he sat down to write this essay will probably remain unresolvable: while it is a emotionally powerful indictment of the materialistic, scientific, political world which he saw dragging men down, it is also inconclusive as to whether or not man can actually escape that dragging, or would want to. Both Rousseau's state and his state of nature remain out of the reach of both reason and passion. But, if nothing else, The Second Discourse remains one hell of an example of reaching.

WORKS CITED


NOTES

1. In The Second Discourse, Rousseau nearly always uses the masculine in describing humankind. In order to avoid continual grammatical correction, I will (under protest) generally follow the pattern of his essay.)