

Finding Consistency in Rousseau

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1. Introduction¹

Several of Rousseau's critics begin with the presupposition that his writings are inconsistent or incoherent² and attempt to locate the "essence" of his philosophy in some of his writings while excluding others. Those favoring an individualist interpretation suggest that the "essence" of Rousseau's philosophy can be found in the *First and Second Discourses* while those favoring a collectivist interpretation suggest that it can be found in the *Social Contract*.³ The common element among these interpretations is that they disregard Rousseau's own claim to consistency. In his *Confessions*, Rousseau asserts that "everything that is daring in the *Social Contract* was already to be found in the *Discourse on Inequality*. Everything that is daring in *Emile* was already to be found in *Julie*" (2000, 397). In the absence of a persuasive argument against Rousseau's claim to consistency, any interpretation that requires us to ignore any of his writings is unsuccessful.

Ernst Cassirer is among the few philosophers who have attempted to defend Rousseau's claim to consistency.⁴ In *The Question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, Cassirer proposes a Kantian interpretation of Rousseau. In "Kant and Rousseau," he reaffirms his commitment to the claim that the differences between Rousseau and Kant are not substantive but merely methodological. Kant, he writes, "achieved the same methodological transformation in the concept of the social contract as he had carried out in the transformation of Rousseau's state of nature" turning both from an "experience" to an "idea" (1945, 35). Despite its broad influence, Cassirer's interpretation has

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remained largely unchallenged. The aim of this paper is twofold. Firstly, it aims to show that Cassirer's interpretation undermines (a) the important role Rousseau assigns to pity in both the state of nature and civil society and (b) the significant role the general will plays in his political theory. Secondly, it proposes an alternative interpretation that succeeds in uniting Rousseau's opus.

2. Viewing Rousseau through a Kantian Lens

Cassirer maintains that Kant was the only one among the nineteenth century philosophers who correctly understood Rousseau's philosophy, which, he argues, lies in his rational conception of freedom. In what follows, it shall be argued that Cassirer's interpretation is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, it de-emphasizes the role Rousseau assigns to pity in both the state of nature and civil society (§2.1). Secondly, it obscures the differences between Rousseau's notion of the *general will* and Kant's notion of the *categorical imperative*, particularly the fact that the former is a political concept while the latter is a moral concept (§2.2).

2.1. The Role of Pity in Rousseau's Moral Philosophy

Rousseau advocates a social contract theory of morality according to which moral duties are derived from mutually beneficial agreements. In the state of nature, there is no morality precisely because such agreements have yet to be formed. Cassirer seems to have this in mind when he claims that pity, according to Rousseau, is not rooted in some "ethical" quality of natural man. It is rather a mere gift of imagination. He writes: "It is true that according to Rousseau even natural man is capable of compassion; but this very compassion is not rooted in some originally "ethical" quality of man's will but merely in man's gift of imagination" (1963, 101).

Pace Cassirer, Rousseau could not have viewed pity as a mere gift of imagination since he denies that natural man is capable of imagining. He maintains that natural man's "imagination depicts nothing to him; his heart asks nothing from him" (*DOI II*

[21]). Imagination requires intelligence as well as the ability to engage in thoughts about the future. Rousseau views natural man as a purely instinctive creature living in the present, lacking intellectual capacities: "His soul, which nothing stirs, yields itself wholly to the sentiment of his present existence, with no idea of the future, however near it may be, and his prospects, as narrow as his views, hardly extend to the close of day" (DOI II [21]). Natural man's "intelligence made no more progress than his vanity.... If he by chance made some discovery, he was all the less in a position to communicate it as he did not at all recognize even his Children" (DOI II [46]). Pity, far from being a mere gift of imagination, is an essential quality of natural man, "the only Natural virtue," which takes the place of morality in the state of nature (DOI I [35]). Rousseau maintains that "savage man had only the sentiments and the enlightenment suited to this state, that he sensed only his true needs" (DOI II [46]). Morality and imagination were unnecessary in this stage of man's development, and thus absent from the state of nature.

In order to establish that "Rousseau's ethics is not an ethics of feeling but the most categorical form of a pure ethics of obligation that was established before Kant" (1963, 96), Cassirer underplays Rousseau's polemic against Hobbes. He asserts that "according to Rousseau, the only flaw in Hobbes's psychology consisted in its putting an active egoism in the place of its purely passive egoism which prevails in the state of nature" (1963, 101). This is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, unlike Hobbes, Rousseau distinguishes between two distinct notions: "self-love" and "vanity." While self-love is a natural sentiment, i.e., consistent with human nature, vanity is an artificial sentiment found only in civil society (DOI Note XV [1]). Self-love is thus an essential attribute of both natural and civil man while vanity is only an accidental attribute of civil man. The role of pity is to moderate the activity of self-love, not vanity, which Rousseau views as being active in both natural and civil man: it is "a natural sentiment which, by moderating in every individual the activity of self-love [i.e., *amour de*

soi-même], contributes to the mutual preservation of the entire species" (DOI I [38]).

Secondly, Hobbes envisions natural man as living in "continual fear, and danger of violent death"; his life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (*Leviathan* ch. XIII). Rousseau, by contrast, maintains that natural man is good despite the absence of morality in the state of nature. He is thus critical of Hobbes who assumes that the absence of morality in the state of nature entails that man is naturally wicked.⁵

It would at first seem that men in that state [of nature], having neither moral relations of any sort between them, nor known duties, could be neither good or wicked, and had neither vices nor virtues ... [But] let us not conclude with Hobbes that because he had no idea of goodness, man is naturally wicked, that he is vicious because he does not know virtue.... Hobbes very clearly saw the defect of all modern definitions of Natural right: but the conclusions he draws from his own definition show that he understands it in a sense that it is no less false ... [Hobbes] should have said that, since the state of nature is a state in which the care of our preservation is least prejudicial to the self-preservation of others, it follows that this state was the most conducive to Peace and the best suited for Mankind. He says precisely the contrary. (DOI I [34-35])

For Rousseau, morality is unnecessary in that stage of man's development because pity is "all he [i.e., natural man] needed to live in the state of nature" (DOI I [33]). This, however, does not entail that man is naturally wicked.

One of the reasons Cassirer understates the crucial role Rousseau attributes to pity is that a Kantian reading of Rousseau requires showing, among other things, that pity plays no role in his moral philosophy. In Kant's view, moral judgments have primarily a rational basis. Moral actions have worth when they are done from duty: what should motivate one to act in a certain way is one's rational understanding that it is one's duty to act in that way. Actions motivated by sentiments such as pity have no moral worth, according to Kant. In an effort to view Rousseau through a Kantian lens, Cassirer attributes to Rousseau the view that "in the pure state of nature there was *no* bond of

sympathy binding the single individuals to each other" (1963, 101). Although Cassirer is right that, for Rousseau, there are "neither moral relations of any sort between them, nor known [moral] duties" in the state of nature (*DOI I* [34-35]), the view he attributes to Rousseau is inconsistent with Rousseau's own claim that pity is a natural virtue: "I do not believe I need fear any contradiction in granting to man the only Natural virtue.... I speak of pity, a disposition suited to beings as weak and as subject to many ills as we are" (*DOI I* [35]). Rousseau accepts that natural man is incapable of reasoning and hence incapable of using reason to derive moral duties. However, he maintains that, in the state of nature, pity can give rise to "maxims of natural goodness":

It is pity that carries us without reflection to the assistance of those we see suffer; it is pity which, in the state of Nature, takes the place of Laws, morals, and virtue, with the advantage that no one is tempted to disobey its gentle voice; it is pity which will keep any sturdy Savage from robbing a weak child or an infirm old man of his hard-won subsistence if he hopes he can find his own elsewhere: pity that, in place of that sublime maxim of reasoned justice *Do unto others as you would have do unto you*, inspires in all Men 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*. It is, in a word, in this Natural sentiment rather than in subtle arguments that one has to seek the cause of the repugnance to evil-doing which every human being would feel even independently of the maxims of education. (*DOI I* [38])

Even though pity is distinct from morality, it is nevertheless an adequate substitute for morality in the state of nature.

The crucial role Rousseau assigns to pity is not limited to the state of nature but rather extends to civil society. Rousseau asserts that while pity is "obscure and lively in Savage man," it is "developed but weak in civil man" (*DOI I* [37]). The relations among men in civil society "required in them qualities different from those they derived from their primitive constitution"; for, "the goodness suited to the pure state of nature was no

longer the goodness suited to nascent society" (DOI II [18]). Pity was sufficient to guide man's actions in the state of nature, but not in civil society because civil man has acquired an artificial sentiment, i.e., vanity. Civil man is moral, according to Rousseau, when his self-love, i.e., *amour de soi-même*, is "guided ... by reason and modified by pity" to produce "humanity and virtue" (Note XV, 218). Thus, contrary to Kant, Rousseau denies that reason alone is sufficient to make civil man moral. For, vanity encourages man to use reason to justify even his most evil actions. Rousseau acknowledges that learned men like "Socrates and minds of his stamp may be able to acquire virtue through reason" alone but insists that "mankind would long ago have ceased to be if its preservation had depended solely on the reasoning of those who make it up" (DOI I [38]). In the state of nature, pity is the substitute for morality; in civil society, it becomes a necessary component of morality.

2.2. The Role of the General Will in Rousseau's Political Philosophy

A central problem of political philosophy is the apparent conflict between autonomy, i.e., the fundamental attribute of moral agency, and political authority, i.e., the right of the state to promulgate and enforce laws. While autonomy requires that individuals are self-governed, political authority requires that they be subjected to the will of another. They are thus *prima facie* incompatible. Rousseau takes this to be a "fundamental problem" and argues that its solution requires finding "a form of association that will defend and protect the person and goods of each associate with the full common force, and by means of which each, uniting with all, nevertheless obey only himself and remains as free as before" (SC I: 6 [4]).

Rousseau's resolution to the "fundamental problem" is based on his notion of the general will. Rousseau acknowledges that man qua human is concerned with his particular will, which aims towards the satisfaction of his individual interests, but maintains that man qua citizen is concerned with the general will, which aims towards

the common interest: “the general will alone can direct the forces of the State according to the end of its institution, which is the common good: for while the opposition of particular interests made the establishment necessary, it is the agreement of these same interests which made it possible” (SC II: 1 [1]). In civil society man gives up his natural freedom, i.e., the unlimited right to everything he can acquire and keep, in exchange for civil freedom. As a result, in civil society man is transformed into a citizen. Man qua citizen no longer has the unlimited right to everything but he can act freely as long as his actions are in accordance with the general will. In return for surrendering his natural freedom, civil man is able to cultivate his intellectual capacities.

Although men qua humans can have opposing interests, men qua citizens cannot. The common good generalizes the will and unites all citizens. Each citizen imposes laws on others while simultaneously submitting to them. The laws or “commitments which bind us to the social body are obligatory only because they are mutual, and their nature is such that in fulfilling them one cannot work for others without also working for oneself” (SC II: 4 [5]). Although citizens obey laws, they are nevertheless self-governed and thus autonomous because “everyone necessarily submits to the conditions which he imposes on others” (SC II: 4 [7]). These laws are generated by the general will.

The general will cannot tend towards any “individual and determinate object” lest it lose its generality: “The general will, to be truly such, must be so in its object as well as in its essence, that it must issue from all in order to apply to all, and that it loses its natural rectitude when it tends toward some individual and determinate object; for then, judging what is foreign to us, we have no true principle of equity to guide us” (SC II: 4 [5]). Rousseau acknowledges that disagreements between the particular wills and the general will are possible—since the particular will “tends, by its nature, to partiality, and the general will to equality” (SC II: 1 [3])—but maintains that the general will, in virtue of it being the “source of the laws,” must always receive priority. For, unlike the particular will, the general will can never err: it “is always upright and always tends to

the public utility." The "people's deliberations," on the other hand, are not "equally upright"; for, although "one always wants one's [own] good ... one does not always see it" (SC II: 1 [3]). Men can be persuaded to do what is contrary to the common good when they are made to believe that they are acting in their own interests. Rousseau thus argues that men do not will what is bad, but rather what they mistakenly believe to be good. Only the actions that are consistent with the common good truly succeed in promoting individual interests.

Undoubtedly, Rousseau had a profound influence on Kant's approach to the problem of reconciling autonomy with authority. However, there are substantive differences between Kant's approach and that of his predecessor. Kant attempts to resolve the fundamental problem by showing that "autonomy" and "authority" are *not* distinct notions (Dodson 1997, 95). He argues that autonomy "leads to a very fruitful concept, namely, that of a realm of ends," which is a "systematic combination of different rational beings through communal laws" (Kant 2002, 51). Communal "objective laws" arise, according to Kant, by abstracting from the "personal differences between rational beings" (2002, 51). Each member of any civil society is, therefore, autonomous in virtue of each obeying the laws he derives through reason. Communal laws, therefore, have unconditional universal validity in the sense that any community of rational beings would derive the same laws. The authority of reason is that which makes men autonomous. For the laws they obey are derived internally through reason and are not imposed on people by any external coercive power. Communal laws must thus be obeyed because they are universal in the sense that each member of any civil society qua rational being is capable of deducing them from reason alone.

Cassirer deemphasizes the substantive differences between Rousseau's conception of the general will and Kant's conception of the categorical imperative. He asserts that Rousseau places primary emphasis on moral freedom, which should be understood in terms of a rational conception of freedom, which is fundamental in Kant's approach:

Ethical liberty cannot be achieved without a radical transformation of the social order, a transformation that will wipe out all arbitrariness and that alone can help the inner necessity of law to victory. This hymn to the law and to its unconditional universal validity runs through all of Rousseau's political writings, although he has been most thoroughly and most frequently misunderstood precisely on this point. Only one man correctly understood the inner cohesion of Rousseau's world of ideas. Kant alone became Rousseau's admiring disciple on this very point. (1963, 58)

Cassirer is quite right in saying that Rousseau and Kant saw a close connection between the morality of freedom and the rationality of law. However, he fails to notice that Kant's conception of the categorical imperative is fundamentally different from Rousseau's conception of the general will. Unlike Kant's postulate of moral universality, Rousseau's postulate of political universality is neither unconditional nor absolute (Barnard 1984). The general will, according to Rousseau, aims towards the common good, which is contingent on, among other things, to "the location, the climate, the soil, the morals, the neighbors, and all the particular relations of the people" of the association (*DPE* [23]). Rousseau did not intend it to function as a universal moral imperative irrespective of such conditions. Those who uphold the general will are not members of a global kingdom of ends, but rather members of a particular association. Therefore, the laws generated by the general will are applicable only to a particular association, not to "strangers": "It is important to note that this rule of justice, dependable with respect to all citizens, can be false with respect to strangers; and the reason for this is clear: that in that case the will of the state, although general with respect to its members, is no longer so with respect to the other states and their members" (*DPE* [13]).

A civil society, for Rousseau, is an association of individuals who are united by common interests and a shared morality, both of which are exclusive to that society: "All private individuals who are united by a common interest make up as many other,

permanent or transient [societies] whose force is no less real for being less apparent, and whose various relations, well observed, constitute the genuine knowledge of morals" (*DPE* [15]). The universality Rousseau ascribes to the general will is restricted to the members of a particular association and aims towards the political and economic equality of its members. It is not general without qualification as Cassirer envisions it. It follows that, pace Cassirer, the differences between Kant's notion of the categorical imperative and Rousseau's notion of the general will are substantive, not merely methodological. Cassirer's interpretation is, therefore, problematic precisely because it fails to account for such substantive differences.⁶

3. Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Anarchist

Thus far it has been argued that Cassirer's interpretation fails for two reasons. Firstly, it undermines the important role pity plays in Rousseau's philosophy. Secondly, it conceals the substantive differences between Rousseau's conception of the general will and Kant's conception of the categorical imperative. In what follows, it shall be argued that an anarchist interpretation is a better alternative precisely because it provides a unified framework of Rousseau's oeuvre, thereby preserving his claim to consistency. To be clear, the argument is not that Rousseau defends a version of political anarchism but rather that such an interpretation is uniquely suited to unify his work.

There are two distinct but related ideas that appear in most, if not all, of Rousseau's writings. The first is the sharp distinction Rousseau draws between "natural man" and the "state of nature". This distinction is instrumental in understanding his philosophy. For Rousseau "'nature' and the 'nature of man' are much more fundamental concepts than the 'state of nature' ... since they provide normative and critical principles of distinguishing between the original and the inessential aspects of man's being" (Grimsley 1973, 31). Throughout his writings, Rousseau uses these concepts as analytical tools to explain "how present existence is at variance with human nature in its deepest sense"

(Grimsley 1973, 31). It is the failure to distinguish between these two concepts that led Fichte, among others, to claim that for Rousseau “the forsaken state of nature is the ultimate goal which must finally be attained by mankind” (Fichte 1988, 178). The *First Discourse* expresses Rousseau’s dissatisfaction with modern society, which he views as being antagonistic to human nature. It is the degradation of the *new condition*, viz., the corrupt society Rousseau experiences, that he so viciously attacks in the *First Discourse*, not man’s exodus from the state of nature, as Fichte suggests (Hendel 1934).

The second is the relation between virtue and citizenship. Rousseau likens human nature to a mother who wishes to protect her child from a dangerous weapon. He writes: “Men are perverse” and “they would be worse still if they had had the misfortune of being born learned” (DSA [34]). Acquiring knowledge prematurely hinders man’s natural development by creating a society that is not conducive to virtue: “People no longer ask about a man whether he has probity, but whether he has talent; nor about a Book whether it is useful but whether it is well written. Rewards are lavished upon wits, and virtue remains without honors” (DSA II: [53]). In corrupt societies, we “have Physicists, Geometers, Chemists, Astronomers, Poets, Musicians, Painters; we no longer have citizens” (DSA II [54]). Citizenship is a prerequisite for virtue. In modern society propriety takes the place of probity, creating a false sense of social uniformity which is “vile and deceiving” (DSA I [12]). As “politeness demands, propriety commands: constantly one follows custom, never one’s own genius. One no longer dares to appear what one is” (DSA I [12]). Men tend to value that which society values lest they be perceived as social pariahs. As long as modern society values talents more than virtue, men will aim to develop their talents and neglect virtue.

Rousseau opines that Rome, like Athens before it, fell under the spell of the “foolish” sciences and arts which led to the pursuit of vain inquiries: “Rome filled up with Philosophers and Orators; military discipline came to be neglected; agriculture despised; Sects joined, and the Fatherland forgotten” (DSA I [30]). Both cities embraced

“luxury, dissoluteness and slavery,” which “have at all times been the punishment visited upon our prideful efforts to leave the happy ignorance in which eternal wisdom has placed us” (DSA I [34]). Rousseau identifies luxury as one of the greatest evils of modern society, and argues that it “is seldom[ly] found without the sciences and arts, and they are never found without it” (DSA II [41]). Societies that become accustomed to luxury find themselves preoccupied with wealth. As a result, men aim to get “rich at all costs” (DSA II [41]). Even the leaders of corrupt societies begin to assign priority to wealth over virtue. Rousseau compares politicians in ancient society who “forever spoke of morals and of virtue” to those in modern society who “speak only of commerce and money” (DSA II [41]). The pre-occupation with wealth and status in modern society creates a fertile ground for vice. For a “taste for ostentation is scarcely combined in one soul with a taste for the honest” (DSA II [43]).

Rousseau revisits these ideas in his later writings. In the *Social Contract*, he writes that if it were not for the abuses that exist in modern society, natural man should “ceaselessly bless the happy moment which wrested him from it forever, and out of a stupid and bounded animal made an intelligent being and a man” (SC I: 8 [1]). Pace Fichte, he also makes clear that returning to the state of nature is neither desirable (SC I: 8 [1]) nor possible (SC I: 6 [1]). It is not desirable because civil society elevates man from a purely instinctual animal to an intelligent and virtuous being (SC I: 8 [1]). It is not possible because man’s preservation, at a certain point, depends on forming a civil society: “I assume men having reached the point where the obstacles that interfere with their preservation in the state of nature prevail by their resistance over the forces which each individual can master to maintain himself in that state. Then that primitive state can no longer subsist and humankind would perish if it did not change its way of being” (SC I: 6 [1]).

Natural man is radically different from civilized man: “Savage man and civilized man differ so much in their inmost heart and inclinations that what constitutes the

supreme happiness of the one would reduce the other to despair” (DOI II [57]). Rousseau insists that self-love and vanity “must not be confused”; for they are “very different passions in their nature and their effects” (DOI Note XV, 1). While self-love is a natural sentiment, worthy of celebration, vanity “is only a relative sentiment, factitious and born in society which inclines every individual to set greater store by himself than by anyone else, [and] inspires men with all the evils they do to one another” (DOI Note XV, 1). Vanity requires the ability to make comparative judgments, which is absent in the state of nature:

In the genuine state of nature *Amour propre* [i.e., vanity] does not exist; For, since every individual human being views himself as the only Spectator to observe him, as the only being in the universe to take any interest in him, as the only judge of his own merit, it is not possible that a sentiment which originates in comparison he is not capable of making, could spring up in his soul. (DOI Note XV, 2)

The ability of civilized man to make comparative judgments is accompanied by the desire to be better than others: civilized man “is capable of living only in the opinion of others and, so to speak, derives the sentiment of his own existence solely from their judgments (DOI II [57]). By comparison, “savage man lives in himself” (DOI II [57]). Therefore, his happiness does not depend on the opinions others have of him. A fundamental tenet of anarchism is that competition distorts and devalues human relations, and is thus an obstacle to “natural growth and freedom” (Buckley 2011, 76).

In the *Preface to Narcissus*, Rousseau once again denies that the arts and sciences as such deserve derision and contempt. He reaffirms that his target was never “[s]cience, taken abstractly, [which] deserves all our admiration” but rather the “foolish science of men [which] deserves nothing but derision and contempt” (N [18]). By assigning priority to talent, prestige, and status over virtue and citizenship, modern society is in conflict with human nature. His arguments here are consistent with Rousseau’s *First Discourse*, where he argues that the “apparent” contradiction between science and virtue

can be resolved by examining “closely the vanity and vacuousness of those proud titles which dazzle us and which we so gratuitously bestow on human knowledge” (*DSA I* [35]). By rewarding talent with “proud titles,” modern society forces men to conform to its tastes lest they die in “poverty and oblivion” (*DSA II* [45]). A man who could become “a great clothier” will instead choose to become an “inferior Geometer” upon realizing that the latter vocation offers greater rewards, i.e., proud titles, than the latter (*DSA II*, 59). Rousseau insists that the “only reward worthy” of learned men must be their enjoyment in contributing “to the happiness of the Peoples to whom they will have taught wisdom” (*DSA II* [59]). But as long as society rewards talent instead of virtue, it “will continue to be base, corrupt, and wretched” (*DSA II* [59]). Societies that reward talent place priority on personal achievements. They thus produce men who are self-centered, vain, and ultimately unfulfilled. Real fulfillment lies in the service to one’s fellow citizens and the promotion of the common good. This is another fundamental tenet of anarchism. Rousseau leaves the relation between citizenship and virtue unexplained in the *First Discourse* but returns to it in his later writings.

The discussion in the *Second Discourse* is an elaboration of many of the themes Rousseau introduced in the *First Discourse*. Here Rousseau connects the degradation of modern society discussed in the *First Discourse* to inequality, which he maintains exists only in civil society. In the *First Discourse*, Rousseau argued that the degradation of modern society results from the fact that talent rather than virtue is rewarded. Now in connecting this idea to inequality, he rhetorically asks “Where do all these abuses arise, if not in the fatal inequality introduced among men by the distinction of talents and the disparagement of the virtues?” (*DSA II* [53]). Inequality “owes its force and growth to the development of our faculties and the progress of the human Mind, and finally becomes stable and legitimate by the establishment of property and Laws,” which are at variance with the common good (*DOI II* [58]). As wealth increased, society became divided into “domination and servitude” (*DOI II* [28]). The desire for domination began to supersede

all other desires: “The rich ... had scarcely become acquainted with the pleasure of dominating than they disdained all other pleasures, and using their old Slaves to subject new ones, they thought only of subjugating and enslaving their neighbors” (DOI II [28]). Sooner or later even those who are enslaved begin to participate in the perpetuation of oppression. For “inequality easily makes its way among cowardly and ambitious minds, which are ever ready to run the risks of fortune, and almost indifferent whether they command or obey, as it is favourable or adverse” (DOI II [51]).

Rousseau entertains the idea that oppression might exist in the state of nature—“I constantly hear it repeated that [in the state of nature] the stronger will oppress the weak”—but dismisses it as involving a conceptual confusion. “Explain to me,” he asks rhetorically, “what the word ‘oppression’ means [in that context]? A man might seize the fruits another has picked ... but how will he ever succeed in getting himself obeyed by him, and what would be the chains of dependence among men who possess nothing?” (DOI I [49]). Oppression, according to Rousseau, arises from the combination of interdependence, which exists only in civil society, and inequality: “since ties of servitude are formed solely by men’s mutual dependence and the reciprocal needs that unite them, it is impossible to subjugate a man without first having placed him in the position of being unable to do without another” (DOI I [50]).

A great deal of inequality can be traced back to private property laws, which gave rise to civil society: “The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, to whom it occurred to say *this is mine* and found people sufficiently simple to believe him, was the true founder of civil society” (DOI I [1]). Taking common property and declaring it to be private has led to unnecessary “violence and plunder”: “How many crimes, wars, murders, how many miseries and horrors Mankind would have been spared by him who, pulling up the stakes or filling in the ditch, had cried out to his kind: Beware of listening to this impostor; you are lost if you forget that the fruits are everyone’s and the Earth no one’s” (DOI I [1]).

The institution of private property propelled the gradual transformation of society, which included the acquisition of “industry and enlightenment” that gave rise to the “consuming ambition ... to raise one’s relative fortune less out of genuine need than in order to place oneself above others” (DOI II [27]). Wealth acquisition had thus more to do with vanity, which Rousseau considers to be the vilest of all artificial vices, than need.

The idea that individuals have rights, especially the right to private property and inheritance, assumes that individuals are in conflict with one another. Rousseau seems to reject this assumption. He argues that it is the very presupposition of such rights that facilitate the increase of inequality, which inevitably leads to “domination and servitude” as well as “violence and plunder” (DOI II [28]). Once “inheritances had increased in number and size to the point where they covered all the land and all adjoined one another, men could no longer aggrandize themselves except at one another’s expense” (DOI II [28]). Property and inheritance rights, rather than make men autonomous, deprive them of civil freedom. For the prejudicial attitude, which resulted from inequality, along with the acquisition of artificial sentiments, the “useless” or “pernicious arts,” and the “frivolous Sciences” gave rise to hierarchical divisions in society and inevitably to despotism, which is the “last stage of inequality” (DOI II [54-56]). The rejection of private property and inheritance laws is also among the fundamental tenets of anarchism.

The basis of inequality is the “denaturalization” of man. In the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau aims to “give an account of the origin of inequality, the establishment and abuse of political Societies, in so far as these things can be deduced from the Nature of man by the light of reason alone, and independently of the sacred Dogmas that endow Sovereign authority with the Sanction of Divine Right” (DOI II [58]). He is not interested in offering a historical account of the origins of inequality. He argues instead that inequality alters human nature. “Political distinctions necessarily introduce civil

distinctions. The growing inequality between the chiefs and the people is soon felt by individuals, and modified in a thousand ways according to passions, talents and circumstances" (*DOI II [51]*). Man's ambition and vanity, which are amplified in societies that breed inequality, inevitably lead to oppression:

Besides, individuals only allow themselves to be oppressed so far as they are hurried on by blind ambition, and, looking rather below than above them, come to love authority more than independence, and submit to slavery, that they may in turn enslave others. It is no easy matter to reduce to obedience a man who has no ambition to command; nor would the most adroit politician find it possible to enslave a people whose only desire was to be independent. (*DOI II [51]*)

Society makes man dependent on proud titles, which inevitably lead to his enslavement. Despotism replaces probity and duty with obedience, which is the "only virtue left to Slaves" (*DOI II [56]*). The laws are replaced by privileges, which depend on the will of the Despot, whose actions are ruled solely by artificial sentiments.⁷ Such a civil state resembles the state of nature in that "everything reverts to the sole Law of the stronger" but differs from the state of nature in that it originates from inequality (*DOI II [56]*). Rousseau, therefore, denies that corrupt societies are manifestations of man's natural depravity. For him, it is inequality that "changes and corrupts all our natural inclinations this way" (*DOI II [57]*). Inequality goes hand in hand with arbitrary political power, which was associated with monarchs in Europe,⁸ and which, according to Rousseau, lacks legitimacy. Anarchism also views hierarchical governments as being illegitimate as well as corrosive to human development since they tend to validate inequality and oppression.

Despite the strong condemnation of modern society in both the *First and Second Discourses*, Rousseau is optimistic about both human nature and the prospect of transforming society into an equitable association conducive to human fulfillment. Having established in the *Second Discourse* that oppression originates from inequality,

Rousseau reveals his vision of a good society in the *Social Contract*. Upon acknowledging that in civil society man loses his natural freedom—“which has no other bounds than the individual’s forces” (SC I: 8 [2])—he sets out to show that he can remain autonomous by gaining civil freedom. The “commitments which bind [each man] to the social body are obligatory only because they are mutual”; their “nature is such that in fulfilling them one cannot work for others without also working for oneself” (SC II: 4 [5]). In just societies, the laws succeed in promoting the common good because they are derived from the general will, which tends towards equality. In hierarchical societies, by contrast, man cannot be free because the “particular will,” e.g., the will of a dominant faction, “tends, by its nature, to partiality” (SC II: 1 [3]), which leads to inequality and inevitably oppression.

In the *Discourse on Political Economy*, Rousseau expands on the themes found in the *Social Contract*. Here he emphasizes the important role governments play in the transformation of man: “Certain it is that in the long run peoples are what governments make them be: “Warriors, citizens, men, when it wants; mob and rabble when it pleases” (DPE [24]). The best form of government is an association of men,⁹ whose “first and the most important maxim” is to have as its object the good of all the people, which requires that “in all things” it must “follow the general will” (DPE [19]). Rousseau recognizes that it is not easy to have “both public freedom and governmental authority” (DPE [19]). For the citizens’ autonomy is compromised anytime the government compels them to obey laws that are contrary to the common good. Preserving the citizens’ autonomy thus requires, among other things, that governments do not function as a hierarchical institutions ~~in order to succeed in~~ if they are to promote the common good. The view that the state should not function as a hierarchical institution is also among the main tenets of anarchism.

Rousseau views equality as a prerequisite for a good association. Citizens must have an equal standing in society in order to be self-directed participants in the

formation of laws that aim to promote the common good. The general will eliminates class hierarchy by requiring that “everyone necessarily submit to the conditions which he imposes on others” (SC II: 4 [7]). By obeying the laws derived from the general will, men “obey but no one commands, they serve yet have no master” (DPE [19]). Thus the law “is the salutary organ of the will of all that restores in [the realm of] right the natural equality among men” (DPE [19]). It is thus not enough that citizens be equal under the law for society to be good. Laws often give the illusion of equality. Women, for example, have been equal to men under the law for decades. Yet they consistently earn less than men doing the same type of work. Ensuring equality among men requires that the law itself be derived from the general will. Thus, laws are just only insofar as they conform to the general will, which aims to promote the common good. After all, there can be no *common* good when there are class hierarchies in society. For what is good for one class is not always good for another. The elimination of class is thus a prerequisite for a just society. This is another fundamental tenet of anarchism.

The connection between virtue and citizenship, which Rousseau hinted in his previous writings, is finally revealed in Rousseau’s *Discourse on Political Economy*. The “fatherland cannot endure without freedom; nor freedom without virtue; nor virtue without citizens; you will have everything if you form citizens; if you do not, you will have nothing but nasty slaves” (DPE [36]). Transforming men into citizens is the main component of an enduring association since virtue cannot exist without citizens. For Rousseau, “virtue is nothing but this conformity of the particular will to the general will” (DPE [25]). Citizens do not submit to the state but, as equal members of the association, submit only to the general will. The autonomy of citizens is preserved because the laws are generated by the general will, not the state. According to Rousseau, citizens can be taught to be good by learning to give priority to the common good; they cannot be made good through reason alone. This is consistent with an anarchist framework in which the members of an association do not submit to the authority of the

state but aim to promote the common good.

The association “must not seek to destroy their passions” since “carrying out such a project would be no more desirable than it would be possible” (*DPE* [36]). For “men cannot be taught not to love anything” (*DPE* [36]). It is the artificial sentiments, e.g., vanity, that Rousseau believes must be eliminated, not natural sentiments, which contribute to human understanding: “Regardless of what the Moralists may say about it, human understanding owes much to the Passions ... it is by their activity that reason perfects itself; we seek to know only because we desire to enjoy, and it is not possible to conceive of why someone without desires or fears would take the trouble of reasoning” (*DOI* I [19]).¹⁰ Men can be taught “to love one object rather than another, and to love what is genuinely fine rather than what is malformed” (*DPE* [36]).

Rousseau acknowledges that “[p]eoples, like men, are docile only in their youth, with age they grow incorrigible; once customs are established and prejudices rooted, it is a dangerous and futile undertaking to try to reform them” (*SC* II: 8 [2]). As a result, they “cannot tolerate having their evils touched even if only to destroy them, like those stupid and cowardly patients who tremble at the sight of the doctor” (*SC* II: 8 [2]). In *Emile*, Rousseau explains the importance of education in transforming children into citizens. The “citizen is but the numerator of a fraction, whose value depends on its denominator; his value depends upon the whole, that is, on the community” (*E* I [8]). Rousseau argues that since the individual’s worth is inextricably linked to the community, “[g]ood social institutions are those best fitted to make a man unnatural, to exchange the independence for dependence, to merge the unit in the group, so that he no longer regards himself as one, but as a part of the whole, and is only conscious of the common life” (*E* I [8]). This dependence, however, should not be understood as a form of subjugation or oppression. It should rather be understood as a form of interdependence between equal individuals. Equality cannot be achieved in a hierarchical society where one’s worth is determined by one’s class or status. Men whose worth is dependent on

class or status become vain and thus unfree.

Rousseau is optimistic about the prospects of controlling, if not entirely eliminating, artificial sentiments such as vanity through a non-authoritative, intimate, educational process. He thus maintains that making citizens out of men requires that they be educated at an early age: "Now to form citizens is not the business of a single day; and to have them be citizens when they are grown, they have to be taught when they are children" (*DPE* [36]). Teaching men to love their fatherland is the most effective way of making them good:

It is not enough to tell the citizens to be good; they have to be taught to be so; an example itself, which in this respect is the first lesson, is not the only means that should be used: love of fatherland is the most effective; for as I have already said, every man is virtuous when his particular will conforms in all things to the general will, and we readily want what the people we love want. (*DPE* [29])

Creating a good and equitable association is beneficial to all its members. Learning to give priority to the common good is a precondition for creating such a society. Education at an early age can encourage men to give priority to the common good. Punishment and retribution, by contrast, are ineffective methods since they cannot bring about the same results: "harshness of punishment is nothing but a vain expedient thought up by small minds to substitute terror for ... respect [for the laws] that they are unable to achieve" (*DPE* [21]). Education, not punishment, can make men virtuous: "all that we lack at birth, all that we need when we come to man's estate, is the gift of education" (*E I* [6]).

In *Emile*, Rousseau distinguishes between three modes of education, which must be harmonized in order to bring about the desirable results:

Nature ... is merely habit.... Everything should therefore be brought into harmony with these natural tendencies, and that might well be if our three modes of education [which come from nature, from man, or from things] merely differed

from one another; but what can be done when they conflict, when instead of training man for himself, you try to train him for others? Harmony becomes impossible. (*E I* [7])

Rousseau argues that these modes of education are in conflict in modern society, precisely because it is corrupt. Emile, his student, cannot be transformed into a citizen in such a corrupt society. Rousseau thus decides to make him a man: “When he leaves me, I grant you ... he will be a man” (*E I* [10]). For when “forced to combat either nature or society, you must make your choice between the man and the citizen, you cannot train both” (*E I* [17]). Rousseau is hopeful that a good education can give rise to a “natural” society, in which nature and society co-exist harmoniously and the three modes of education do not conflict. In such a society, the teacher is not “forced to combat either nature or society” (*E I* [17]).

The importance Rousseau assigns to education as a vehicle in transforming men into citizens is consistent with an anarchist framework. By transforming men into citizens one can transform a malignant society, in which vanity thrives and vice is rewarded, into a free and virtuous society, in which people are caring toward one another and happy. When societies promote the common good, they inevitably promote the individual good. Rousseau acknowledges that what makes political institutions necessary is that the common interest “encounters obstacles.” For if “the common interest ... never encounter[ed] obstacles ... everything would run by itself, and politics would cease to be an art” (*SC II*: 3 [2]). However, for Rousseau, the body politic is not merely a practical institution. “The body politic is ... also a moral being that has a will” (*DPE* [12]). Its will is the “general will, which always tends to the preservation and the well-being of the whole and of each part, and which is the source of the laws, is, for all the members of the state, in relation to one another and to it, the rule of what is just and what is unjust” (*DPE* [12]). However, the general will cannot be realized within hierarchical institutions since they inevitably result to inequality and domination, which

inevitably lead to the degradation of society. In the *Preface to Narcissus*, Rousseau reaffirms that in modern society individuals are forced to work against each other: “the laws, the customs, self-interest, everything places individuals under the necessity of deceiving one another and of doing so incessantly.”¹¹ Competition corrodes social bonds. Cooperation, by contrast, fortifies them, thereby creating a society that is conducive to happiness. An anarchist society provides a fertile ground for making citizens out of men. It is also the only society in which the general will can be truly general, in that it can promote the mutual benefit of the members of an association.

4. Conclusion

Viewing Rousseau’s philosophy from an anarchist perspective is essential in preserving his claim to consistency as well as offering a coherent analysis of human nature. Anarchist societies are consistent with the political and legal association Rousseau is defending but inconsistent with hierarchies which, in his view, inevitably lead to inequality and oppression. The apparent inconsistency between his various works disappears once we view his writings as components of an anarchist framework.

Notes

1. I am using the following abbreviations: “*DSA*” or “*First Discourse*” for the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, “*DOP*” or “*Second Discourse*” for the *Discourse on the Origins and Foundations of Inequality among Men*, “*SC*” for the *Social Contract*, “*N*” for the *Preface to Narcissus*, “*E*” for *Emile*, and “*DPE*” for the *Discourse on Political Economy*.

2. See John Morley (1873) and Sir Ernest Barker (1947) among others. See also Peter Gay’s introduction in Cassirer (1963).

3. Joseph De Maistre, Louis-Gabriel-Ambroise, Emile Faguet, and more recently John Chapman (1968) are among those who have argued that Rousseau is an advocate of individualism. Sir Henry Maine (1886), Hyppolyte Adolphe Taine (1896), Sir Ernest Barker (1947), and Karl Popper (1945) are among those who have argued that Rousseau is a collectivist.

4. See also Hendel (1934).

5. Rousseau makes similar claims in the *Social Contract* (I: 3 [5]) and in the *State of War* ([12], [14]).

6. Kevin E. Dodson (1997) argues that Cassirer’s Kantian interpretation of Rousseau also lessens the significant contribution Kant has made to moral theory.

7. They are “artificial” in the sense that they are not part of human nature.

8. Quentin Skinner (2002) argues that Hobbes aims to discredit a position of liberty as non-domination or absence of dependence, which was accepted in the 17th century. Rousseau is no doubt

familiar with this conception of liberty since he attacks the notion of living in the state of servitude and aims to reconcile autonomy with obedience to the laws.

9. Rousseau's use of the term "association" as opposed to the term "state" is also consistent with an anarchist framework. Unlike the state, an association is not a hierarchical institution.

10. Rousseau here seems to be distancing himself from the moralists. This seems to be problematic for those who argue that Rousseau should be understood as a moralist, e.g., Charles W. Hendel (1934).

11. See Rousseau (1997a), footnote on p. 101. For similar remarks see also *Letter to Grimm* and the *Preface of a Second Letter to Bordes*.

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