

FORUM COMMENT

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Is there any work by a modern author that inspires the range of comparisons that Rousseau's *Second Discourse* does? Looking backward, the quartet of scholars writing above—leading figures of anglophone scholarship on Rousseau—finds echoes of the book of Genesis, the *Histories* of Tacitus, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and Pelagius. Others have been reminded of Lucretius and more than one of Plato's dialogues. Looking forward, the names of Hegel, Marx, and Heidegger are cited here; comparisons with *The Genealogy of Morals* and *Civilization and Its Discontents* spring as easily to mind. If the *Second Discourse* thus serves as a kind of intense philosophical echo-chamber, this no doubt has something to do with its author's singular position in modern intellectual history, standing not just at the crossroads of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, but at that of antiquity and modernity themselves. It also owes much to the sheer internal complication of the text, whose relatively few pages feature a bewildering variety of moving parts: the extended Dedication to Rousseau's native city of Geneva; the Preface, with its preliminary presentation of Rousseau's philosophical anthropology; the prize question that inspired the *Second Discourse*: "What is the origin of inequality among men, and whether it is authorized by natural law"; the Exordium, announcing Rousseau's scandalous intention to "set aside the facts"; the analysis of the "state of nature" in Part One, with its excoriating attack on previous natural-law thinkers; the account, in Part Two, of the various "revolutions" that gradually established and deepened social inequality, before sealing it with political tyranny; and last, but certainly not least, Rousseau's trenchant endnotes, conjuring up a fabulous range of philosophical, cultural, and scientific reference, as essential to the *Second Discourse* as Gibbon's footnotes are to his *History*.

The essays at hand touch on all these component parts of the *Second Discourse* and then some, to brilliant effect. Helena Rosenblatt, whose *Rousseau and Geneva: From the "First Discourse" to the "Social Contract"* is the finest recent study of the biographical and political context for Rousseau's early works, draws our attention forcefully to the Dedication.¹ After decades of self-imposed exile, this

1 Helena Rosenblatt, *Rousseau and Geneva: From the First Discourse to the Social Contract, 1749–1762* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

was in fact Rousseau's inaugural intervention in Genevan politics, which was already the scene of escalating civil strife between oligarchic and popular factions. Rosenblatt reads the Dedication as a politically charged "gift" to Geneva, in which subversion of the conventions of early modern gift-giving made it not merely a republican statement in a thoroughly monarchical world, but a radically democratic one at that. Little wonder that Rousseau's present was ill received, or that his engagement in Genevan politics would soon build to an explosive climax, ending in his formal renunciation of citizenship in 1763. Christopher Kelly, co-editor of the monumental *Collected Writings of Rousseau* published by the University Press of New England, has recently produced a penetrating analysis of these last, tumultuous episodes of Rousseau's career as a citizen.² Here Kelly takes us to into the heart of Part One of the *Second Discourse* by focusing on a notoriously mystifying passage in the Preface: Rousseau's assertion that the "state of nature" has not only vanished, probably for good, but "perhaps never did exist." Canvassing a spectrum of interpretations of the phrase, Kelly makes a persuasive case for taking Rousseau at his word, by analyzing the specific uses of the term "perhaps" elsewhere in the *Second Discourse*. Rousseau's intention, Kelly argues, was to establish that the "state of nature" as he understood it was at least historically possible, while also emphasizing the fragility that made it liable to disappear, sooner or later. The upshot is to underscore the accidental character of the process that took mankind out of its original state, working very much against the grain of human nature.

Part Two of the *Second Discourse* describes the stages in that process. For Robert Wokler this is the centerpiece of Rousseau's oeuvre, the secular equivalent of the third chapter of the book of Genesis. He draws upon a peerless command of the history of Rousseau's texts—restoring excluded passages on music and the history of language—to sketch in the deeper theological background of Rousseau's account of mankind's Fall into civilization.³ This devotional outlook was ultimately what set him at odds with more conventional Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire or Adam Smith. Wokler concludes, however, with a

2 See Christopher Kelly, *Rousseau as Author: Consecrating One's Life to the Truth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), chap. 5, "A Hermit Makes a Very Peculiar Citizen": Rousseau and Literary Citizenship." *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, which Kelly has co-edited with Roger D. Masters, was launched in 1990 and has now reached eleven volumes of careful and accurate translations, each furnished with a magnificent scholarly apparatus.

3 Robert Wokler's books on Rousseau include *Rousseau on Society, Politics, Music and Language: An Historical Interpretation of his Early Writings* (New York: Garland, 1987), and *Rousseau: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). His forthcoming *Rousseau's Social Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) will doubtless replace Derathé's classic text as the authoritative work on its subject.

startling suggestion: that the source for Smith's famous notion of an "invisible hand," his metaphor for grasping the beneficent orderliness of market societies in both the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations*, may have been none other than a footnote in the *Second Discourse* in which Rousseau extolled the superior hunting skills of Hottentots! Rousseau's theology, and its anthropological projection, are also taken up by James Miller, whose *Rousseau: Dreamer of Democracy* remains our liveliest portrait of *l'homme et l'oeuvre*.⁴ What was truly revolutionary in the *Second Discourse*, he argues, was its conception of human freedom as an "innate power of self-determination," whose only real precedent was the Pelagian heresy that bedeviled Augustine in his time. The tragic paradox, of course, was that it was precisely this trait—"perfectibility"—that made possible the unwitting descent of mankind into universal social servitude. Yet Rousseau was no theorist of the "end of history." Miller concludes by pointing to two opposite reactions to the dilemmas posed by the *Second Discourse*. One is the path indicated by Robespierre, Hegel, and Marx—a massive collective effort to reverse the course of an unnatural and unnecessary history, aiming at the abolition of social inequality and the political tyranny that protected it. Rousseau's personal itinerary, however, pointed in a very different direction. Glancing at his last word on the subject of freedom, in the *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, Miller suggests that Rousseau himself ended his intellectual career with a gesture of desistance—choosing *not* to choose, in a move closer to Stoicism than to Pelagianism, which also anticipated Heidegger's recommendation to "let being be."

Here, then, are glimpses of the *Second Discourse* from four distinct angles, illuminating different aspects of the text: Rousseau as Genevan democrat, critical theorist of the "state of nature," theologian of a secular Fall, and anthropologist of freedom. In large part this variety reflects that of the rival procedures that today dominate the field of the history of political thought. Christopher Kelly's essay suggests some of the reasons why Straussian scholars have acquired a virtual monopoly over English translations of Rousseau; here, the meaning of one of the central claims of the *Second Discourse* turns on his painstaking analysis of the uses of a single adverb. At the other end of the methodological spectrum Helena Rosenblatt's essay reveals all the virtues of a Cambridge-style reading of texts in their precise political context—together with deft application of a dollop of cultural theory, inspired by Mauss. Robert Wokler proceeds in a similar fashion, though relying on mastery of a different kind of context, restoring the *Second Discourse* to a wider history of manuscript recension and textual borrowing. Finally, for all of his dashing style, James Miller's essay is a reminder of a more traditional intellectual history, whose object is the career of single ideas

4 James Miller, *Rousseau: Dreamer of Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

or concepts across time. Not surprisingly, then, there are hints of disagreement here and there. At the end of his essay, Kelly points to one, suggesting that his interpretation of Rousseau's understanding of human nature might be at odds with the ontology of freedom that Miller discovers in the *Second Discourse*: "If the pure state of nature was real, or even (as I have suggested), possible, then we must never forget that, according to Rousseau, humans are animals and treating them as if they were not necessarily involves denaturing." At the same time, Kelly's own analysis of the "state of nature" is constructed against an alternative, also Straussian in inspiration, supplied in a recent book by Richard Velkley, for whom "[t]he pure state of nature is an alluring artifice or myth, necessary for philosophical liberation, which Rousseau's dialectic leads one to embrace and then to abandon."⁵

On the whole, however, what is striking is less the differences than the convergence of opinion among our authors. If these essays convey any collective message, beyond their individual insights and pleasures, it is to remind us of the philosophical depth of the *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men*—to restore its full title, for once. Few works of social thought, of any epoch, reward close philological scrutiny to quite this extent. Still, in navigating these deeps, we should take care not to lose sight of Rousseau's own starting point, his fierce moral indignation over the grotesquely unequal division of the goods of the earth in his time. He was perfectly capable of expressing impatience at overly fastidious definition, in the face of blunt social reality. This is nowhere clearer than in the magnificent concluding cadences of Part Two: "It follows, further, that moral inequality, authorized by positive right alone, is contrary to Natural Right whenever it is not directly proportional to Physical Inequality; a distinction which sufficiently determines what one ought to think in this respect of the sort of inequality that prevails among all civilized Peoples; since it is manifestly against the Law of Nature, however defined, that a child command an old man, an imbecile lead a wise man, and a handful of people abound in superfluities while the starving multitude lacks in necessities."⁶ No celebration of Rousseau's achievement in the *Second Discourse* can avoid asking where we stand today in regard to "moral inequality." For all of the wrenching effort expended on creating more equal life chances for human beings, or local successes in compensating for

5 Richard L. Velkley, *Being after Rousseau: Philosophy and Culture in Question* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 161. Meanwhile, for proof of the perennial capacity of the *Second Discourse* to inspire work in the most various traditions of social thought, cf. Brian Skyrms's *The Stag Hunt and the Evolution of Social Structure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), a striking exercise in game theory, whose starting point is Rousseau's brief parable about hunting and social cooperation.

6 Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 188.

the toll of polarization within individual societies, the balance sheet of the last two hundred and fifty years is, of course, deeply discouraging. At the moment of capitalism's global triumph, the division of its spoils even within its G8 heartlands remains profoundly and stubbornly asymmetrical—indeed, increasing economic inequality has been actively pursued and celebrated over the past three decades by rulers invoking Smith's, rather than Rousseau's, understanding of the "invisible hand." But both men would surely find the differences in living standards and social security that today divide the world's inhabitants, North and South, simply mind-boggling. Given the persecution visited upon Rousseau by the established authorities of his time, there is little surprise that his intellectual career ended in the gestures of accommodation and consolation described by Miller. But can there be any doubt as to what his judgment on the "moral inequality" of our own age would be? In any case, the unhappy relevance and actuality of Rousseau's masterpiece is a reminder that the anniversaries of other of his texts are not far off. Wokler suggests that if the *Second Discourse* served as Rousseau's book of Genesis, his re-writing of Exodus came in *On the Social Contract*. It is not too early to prepare for our celebration of its birthday.