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Nearer My True Self to Thee: Rousseau's New Spirituality—and Ours

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Abstract: This article presents a reading of the *Confessions* as a spiritual drama. Rousseau tells the story of a man (himself) who, like the rest of civilized humanity, fell away from natural goodness as he was socialized. Yet unlike the rest of us, Rousseau managed to make at least a partial return to nature. In fact, the *Confessions* gives us two stories of return: one by the man whose life is recounted and one by the narrator who is doing the recounting. (These are of course the same man, presented in two aspects.) Yet the two stories share a common core: in each case the return occurs by means of a journey by the self to the self. This teaching regarding the sufficiency of the self has resonated with many, particularly in our own time: with Rousseau began the vindication of man as godlike not in his *power* but in his *being*.

Arguably the defining feature of what we have come to know as modernity—at any rate one of the outstanding features of the past several centuries—has been the vindication and elevation of human will. The story goes back at least to Machiavelli, who vividly and indeed shockingly articulated the case for the sovereignty of man. Humanity on Machiavelli's telling has both the capacity and (therefore) the right to determine its own destiny and its own conception of the good, prerogatives hitherto reserved for God. Descartes gave perhaps the most succinct expression to this elevation when he spoke promisingly of human beings establishing themselves as "masters and possessors of nature."[1] Thus did the humanism of modernity smack of divinization from the start. What began with Machiavelli has proceeded apace, in thought

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[1]René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, trans. Laurence J. Lafleur (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1950), 40 (AT VI:62). Machiavelli launches the struggle for human sovereignty most strikingly in chapter 25 of *The Prince*, whose title indicates the theme: "How Much Fortune Can Do in Human Affairs, and in What Mode It Can Be Opposed."

and in action. To be sure, there have been dissenters. But to date their efforts have not proved decisive, perhaps because the dissenters have not always been quite as dissenting as one had thought. Many among us still believe in God, but not always a very jealous God, least of all jealous of human power.

Rousseau might be counted among the dissenters. He rose to fame for his *critique* of the popularization of the sciences (and arts), and he inveighed endlessly against the vanity of man's lust for power and prestige. Yet even as he opposed one kind of exaltation of man, Rousseau launched another kind. With Rousseau begins the vindication of man as godlike not in his *power* but in his *being*, that is, in his goodness and sufficiency. Rousseau, who warns against the vanity of science and the delusions of power, insists on man's (or at least his own) sufficiency unto himself even to the point of being "like God" (*Reveries* 69, 5).[2] This exaltation too has gathered steam, most particularly in our own time.

But the story of the modern self has another side. Even as the self's claims have continued to grow, a counternarrative has appeared alongside, dogging the no longer so confident stride of self-affirming humanity. If one of the outstanding stories of the past five centuries has been the extolling of human will, arguably the leading theme of the past two centuries of serious thought has been the *constraints* on human will by forces beyond our control. These forces are historical, social, psychological, and biological. Determinism of one variety or another has been the watchword of the age. Whether any of the various determinisms has been adequately established can be questioned. What cannot be questioned is the powerful appeal of these doctrines. Rightly or wrongly we have come to question our capacity to govern and even to understand ourselves. And yet for all this deflation, man has not chosen to climb down from his throne. Nor does he seem much chastened in his sense of entitlement. One only abdicates when there is someone in favor of whom to abdicate; and even a weak sovereign may be a vain one.

If the elevation of the self was launched by political philosophers such as Machiavelli and set on its final ascent by Rousseau, where did the counternarrative, the rise of determinism, come from? Undoubtedly there are many

[2]All page references to Rousseau's works are to *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, ed. Christopher Kelly et al., 13 vols. (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1990–). Rousseau's individual works will be identified by the following abbreviations (listed in order of appearance): *Reveries* = *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, trans. Charles; *Confessions* = *The Confessions of J.-J. Rousseau*, trans. Kelly; *SC* = *On the Social Contract*, trans. Judith R. Bush, Roger D. Masters, and Christopher Kelly; *Emile* = *Emile, or On Education*, trans. Christopher Kelly and Allan Bloom; *Mountain* = *Letters Written from the Mountain*, trans. Christopher Kelly and Judith R. Bush; *SD* = *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality (Second Discourse)*, trans. Judith R. Bush, Roger D. Masters, Christopher Kelly, and Terence Marshall; *NH* = *Julie, or the New Heloise*, trans. Philip Stewart and Jean Vaché; *Dialogues* = *Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques: Dialogues*, trans. Judith R. Bush, Roger D. Masters, and Christopher Kelly.

sources, and not only among philosophers. One who wants to investigate the question seriously would want to consult Tocqueville, who attributes to democracy both the taste for general ideas and the inclination to believe that our lives are determined by impersonal forces.[3] But the counternarrative may well have a decisive starting point—if not absolutely, then effectively. And that starting point may well be Rousseau—again. Rousseau is uniquely implicated in both sides of the story of the modern self. He both extends the modern tendency to exalt the self and at the same time helps to launch the project of pronouncing limits to the self's sovereignty with his discovery of the overwhelming power of history and society.

This paradox, though striking, bespeaks no incoherence or logical contradiction. Nor was it the case for Rousseau, as it probably has been for many less comprehensive thinkers, that the second element in the paradox was born of disillusionment concerning the first. If anything, Rousseau's sense of the limits of human possibilities preceded his discovery of the godlike potential of the self. But whichever of the two elements he discovered first, they are substantively coextensive. For they each arise from the same pair of circumstances: namely, the acknowledgment of certain spiritual needs and the presumed unavailability of a God outside the self who will meet those needs. If Rousseau had been convinced of the second circumstance but not the first, he would have remained with the party of the Enlightenment. If he had been convinced of the first circumstance but not the second, he would have found himself in the situation of the young Augustine and might have undertaken something like the efforts of that great seeker of God. Holding both circumstances to be the case, he had to proceed as he did, seeking—and to some extent finding—the answer to his need within himself. He had to undertake a journey worthy to become the stuff of his own *Confessions*.

In what follows I will outline a reading of Rousseau's *Confessions* in light of these circumstances—a reading of the *Confessions* as a story of a religious or spiritual quest. But it is important to note that Rousseau does not frame the book in quite this way; and apart from the title, he gives no obvious indication that the book addresses religious themes. Moreover, he offers an explicit and seemingly quite comprehensive religious teaching in other works, most notably in the *Social Contract*'s chapter on "civil religion" (*SC* IV.8) and the "Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar" that appears in *Emile*. So if it *is* permissible to read the *Confessions* as a kind of religious story, we must do so in relation to the context established by the explicit religious teaching, which I will summarize in a moment. But if the explicit religious teaching appears elsewhere, why look to the *Confessions* in this vein at all? What can it add? A great deal, as it happens. To begin with, the *Confessions* presents itself as the story of the one who discovered the truth about the human

[3]See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 2, pt. 1, chaps. 3 and 20.

condition and who in turn propounded a teaching that lays out the road to such happiness and wholeness as is available to human beings. Thus it might not be too much of a stretch to regard the *Confessions* as the story of a prophet. And insofar as the hero of the book not only propounds a teaching but also comes to live by it and thereby benefit himself and others, the book also asks to be read as the life of a saint. By telling these stories—the discovery of his principles and the attempt to live by them—Rousseau points us toward a deeper understanding of those principles.

Yet if Rousseau was a prophet or saint, he was a most unusual one. For it turns out that the principles he discovers and lives by are not exactly the principles he propounds in his explicit religious teaching. It's not for nothing that Rousseau puts his most extended presentation of his explicit religious teaching into the mouth of another (the Savoyard Vicar). Moreover, his principles are unlike those of other prophets and are bound to seem sacrilegious to many. A prophet is a person of God. Rousseau is a man of Nature—*the* man of Nature, as he would have it (*Confessions*, 3, 5). And Nature on his telling lies not beyond the self but within it. So, in addition to helping us understand the principles advocated in his explicit religious teaching, the *Confessions* articulates additional parts of Rousseau's spiritual teaching. These additional parts, spoken as they are in Rousseau's own name with reference to his own life, may prove to be more fundamental to his thought.

Rousseau's Explicit Teaching on Religion

The religious teaching Rousseau presents in the *Social Contract* and the "Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar"[4] begins with a comprehensive critique of Christianity, both original Christianity and especially the Christianity of later ages, including his own. Rousseau sees two main differences between original and later Christianity, and both can be traced back to late antiquity. First, under the influence of Augustine and others, Christianity had become metaphysical in its understanding of the world—this in response to the challenge from classical philosophy. Second, Christianity had become a worldly

[4]The treatments of religion in the *Social Contract* and the Vicar's Profession in *Emile* are very different from one another. The former treats religion from a civil perspective, the latter from the standpoint of the individual—and that is only the first of the differences. Yet the two teachings can be seen as complementary parts of a single whole, albeit—as is so often the case with Rousseau—a complex and even paradoxical whole. In any case, the teaching Rousseau considered more relevant to modern man (i.e., man who is not a citizen of a virtuous republic) is the one conveyed in the Vicar's Profession. That teaching is echoed and defended in other works as well. See, for example, Julie's profession of faith in *The New Heloise* and Rousseau's discussions of the Vicar's Profession—in his own name—in the *Reveries* and *Letters Written from the Mountain*.

power in unique and unprecedented ways—for example, in its establishment of a transnational priesthood with the power to dictate the terms of one's salvation. As Arthur Melzer has explained in detail, Rousseau's critique was more or less a compendium of the critiques propounded by the early-modern philosophers and the Enlightenment.[5] What was remarkable about Rousseau's critique was not so much any novel criticism as its frankness and comprehensiveness, which in turn lent it great power. Rousseau's critique of Christianity did not lead him into the camp of the Enlightenment, however. In fact, as Melzer demonstrates, Rousseau applied to the Enlightenment almost precisely the same criticisms he aimed at Christianity. The philosophes had learned all too well from the priests, sometimes consciously and gratefully (for example, in establishing what was in essence a secular priesthood of intellectuals with the authority to "excommunicate" heretics) and sometimes, perhaps, not so consciously (for example, in tyrannically enforcing right opinion).

The novelty of Rousseau's explicit religious teaching, however, lay less in critique than in its positive, prescriptive teaching. In the *Social Contract* and especially in the Vicar's Profession, Rousseau presents an argument for a very liberal version of Christianity in which morality is central and theology almost absent. The only faith that is required is that which directly supports morality—specifically, faith in a just God who rewards or punishes us in an afterlife. For "morality" here think of the French word *morale*, with its broader compass. Absent faith in a just God and afterlife, humanity would be demoralized in both senses of the word: principles of right action would lack practical force and man would be deprived of hope and consolation. The faith that Rousseau advocates is striking for its radical departure from the far more stringent, dogmatic, and theological Christianity that still prevailed in his time. The theism of the Vicar's religion should not lead us to overlook how limited and impersonal is the Vicar's conception of God. The Vicar's God is a perfect dispenser of justice, yes. But he is not the source of redemption or grace, nor do human beings seem to need redemption or grace on the Vicar's telling. Melzer aptly refers to the Profession as "entail[ing] a great

[5]See Arthur Melzer, "The Origin of the Counter-Enlightenment: Rousseau and the New Religion of Sincerity," *American Political Science Review* 90, no. 2 (1996): 344–60. Rousseau's critique of Christianity, on Melzer's reading, "takes the form of seven distinct, if interrelated, charges": (1) "persecution and sectarian conflict"; (2) "the destruction of republican virtue"; (3) "the destruction of political unity"; (4) "clerical tyranny and personal dependence"; (5) "the weakening of morality"; (6) "the weakening of the family"; and (7) "the divided soul" (345–50). Melzer gives a superb account not only of Rousseau's critique of Christianity but of his explicit religious teaching as a whole as it is presented (predominantly) in *Emile* and the *Social Contract*. My own brief account of what I am calling Rousseau's "explicit religious teaching" is indebted to Melzer's analysis. Melzer does not treat the *Confessions* in his account of Rousseau's religious teaching.

secularization: It makes morality—man's free moral action in this world—the highest thing."[6] (Is this even Christianity anymore? I am not qualified to say. Clearly, though, Rousseau meant to calm anxieties on that score and convince readers that his teaching was indeed consonant with the essence of Christianity. The chosen mouthpiece of his major religious statement is, after all, an ordained Christian cleric, albeit one whose views—and life—have strayed from the precepts of his order.) And yet as striking as the content of the Vicar's faith is, what is even more striking and indeed the truly novel and influential part of Rousseau's teaching is the *source* of this new content—namely, the *foundation* of this faith. The foundation of the Vicar's faith is neither revelation nor reason but *sentiment*—one's own sentiment, discovered on one's own, through introspection.

The Vicar doesn't so much propound a faith or the reasons for faith as a *process* he trusts will lead to faith. So subjective is sentiment that he could not proceed otherwise. He calls on us to consult our hearts with all the honesty we can muster. We are to identify our most powerful longings and the intractable beliefs to which they give rise—the beliefs we cannot help but hold. And, absent positive reason to deny them, we are to credit these longings and beliefs as pointers to the truth. Chief among our longings, the Vicar supposes, is the need for a moral order, a need that can only be satisfied by, and which therefore dictates, belief in a God who rewards and punishes us justly in an afterlife. None of us, he suggests, wants to live—and perhaps none of us even *can* live, our protestations notwithstanding—without believing that the world is governed according to a moral order. Obviously the felt need for God is no logical proof of God's existence. But no logical proof of God's existence—*or nonexistence*—is possible. This most important of questions cannot be settled rationally. Yet it must be settled: to live we must make certain presumptions. And if we find that we cannot but believe in a moral order and in a just God as the vindicator and enforcer of that order, and if there is no rational case against them, we may reasonably embrace these beliefs.

The process prescribed by the Vicar is inherently subjective. Unlike scripture (or reason, for that matter), which speaks the same words to all, sentiment must be discovered by and within each individual. And even if, as the Vicar supposes, we will all discover the same innermost sentiments because we all share the same nature and inhabit the same world, still, sentiment must be *felt* if it is truly to guide us. Thus there is no way for one person to prescribe for another a faith based on the other's sentiment. Rather, the Vicar takes us through his own inner exploration and trusts that he will thereby help us, through a process of recognition, toward the same end. (Of course, it is not "us" but the young Rousseau whom the Vicar instructs. But the presence of the Profession in *Emile*—at the center of *Emile*,

[6]Melzer, "Origin of the Counter-Enlightenment," 355.

no less—means that his instruction is offered to readers.) The Vicar trusts that we will each discover within ourselves the need for, and the belief in, a moral order according to which justice will always be done in the end ("the end" normally meaning in an afterlife, given the all too frequent triumph of injustice in this world). Honest introspection reveals to us our need of and belief in God. Not necessarily a personal God, but a perfectly just one.

Was the Vicar right—about Rousseau? Did Rousseau discover within himself the need and the belief that the Vicar supposes we all feel? And did Rousseau proceed thereafter to draw the conclusions that the Vicar suggests we should all draw?

The answer is that we simply don't know. In the *Confessions* Rousseau does present himself as feeling dependent on God to ensure his happiness. And he echoes his felt dependence on God in other works as well, particularly highlighting the need of sufferers—among whom he numbers himself—for the hope and consolation that can only be provided by faith in a just God.[7] But there is some reason for skepticism. In the *Confessions*, it is only the young Rousseau who expresses dependence on God. It's not clear that the mature Rousseau any longer experiences this need. Compare his period of happiness as a young man at Les Charmettes, where his daily prayers, though mostly contemplative, nevertheless included elements of petition, with the happiness he experienced much later during his exile on St. Peter's Island, where his prayer was wholly contemplative (198, 538). Indeed, as we will see, the happiness Rousseau experiences on St. Peter's Island seems to involve less *dependence* on God than a felt *likeness* to him.

There are additional reasons to resist imputing the Vicar's views to Rousseau. To begin with, the Profession is not Rousseau's own, and he vehemently protested when some readers took the Vicar to be speaking for him. Also, Rousseau acknowledges that it is difficult to distinguish the Profession's religion of sincerity from wishful thinking.[8] Moreover, some of the Vicar's views contradict Rousseau's central doctrines. For example, the Vicar sees human beings as "sociable, or at least made to become so" and attributes the origin of evil to men's choices rather than to history and society as Rousseau does. Where Rousseau speaks in his own name about the Vicar's Profession, he is studiously ambiguous. In the *Reveries*, he notes that the views expressed in the Vicar's Profession—and in Julie's similar profession in *The New Heloise*—are "approximately" what he believes (34). In *Letters Written from the Mountain*, speaking again of the two professions

[7]See, e.g., his *Voltaire*, 121: "I have suffered too much in this life not to expect another one." Also see *Reveries*, 34 and *Dialogues*, 53.

[8]The Vicar himself acknowledges the danger of wishful thinking, saying in response only that he would rather be led astray, if he must be led astray, by his own illusions than by someone else's lies (*Emile*, 269). In any event, there is no way to ensure that we won't be led astray. If sentiment is less than perfectly reliable as a pointer to the truth, so is our reason.

together, he says that "if he does not adopt both of them in their entirety, at least he favors them a good deal" (694). Philosophers have been known to favor teachings they do not themselves entirely believe, and Rousseau provides an unusually frank moral justification for precisely such duplicity (*Reveries*, "Fourth Walk").

Can we know with certainty what Rousseau did believe? Perhaps not. But our chances would seem to be enhanced by consulting his autobiographical writings. And irrespective of what Rousseau *believed*, the *Confessions* conveys an important part of what Rousseau sought to *teach*. The lesson begins with its title, which signals a challenge to the prevailing faith of the age.[9]

The *Confessions*

Like Augustine before him, Rousseau offers to posterity an account and interpretation of his life. Also like Augustine, he presents his story as a spiritual drama, with special emphasis on man's (or *a* man's) fallen state and his pursuit of redemption, of wholeness.[10] The pursuit succeeds in part.[11] To put it more precisely, Rousseau's purported autobiography can be read as the story of the self's departure from and its attempts to return to original goodness—to what Rousseau calls *natural* goodness—and indeed the source of all goodness. In its original state, before the departure from original goodness, the self was not social or self-conscious. The self's goodness was protected by and arguably even lay in precisely this lack of development. Yet it is not possible to return to this original condition; indeed, it would not even be desirable to do so if it *were* possible, at least not compared to what we might have made of ourselves (*SD*, 201–2; *SC*, 55–56). To return to natural goodness does not mean rejecting our acquired capacities and

[9]By the mid-eighteenth century Augustinian Christianity (using the term in its broadest compass) was besieged, to be sure. But it still prevailed in Europe—politically, ecclesiastically, and in the hearts of most who still professed religion. (Rousseau believed that the latter were few: "Religion, discredited in all places by philosophy, had lost its ascendency even among the people" [*Mountain*, 227].) He also suggested, however, that religious faith is natural to human beings and that it would therefore revive (*Emile*, 312–13; *Reveries*, 36–37; *Dialogues*, 241).

[10]Just a little while ago I suggested that Rousseau's explicit religious teaching does not seem to presume a felt need for redemption. Yet now I am suggesting that, in the *Confessions*—i.e., with regard to *himself* (and other sensitive souls?)—Rousseau depicts just such a need as central to his experience of life.

[11]Another likeness to Augustine is the parallel structures of the two *Confessions*—or rather, the near parallel structures, the "near" signifying Rousseau's purported correction of Augustine. See Ann Hartle's outstanding study, *The Modern Self in Rousseau's "Confessions": A Reply to St. Augustine* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), esp. 24–28.

needs but rather putting them in accord with original goodness. What matters most is that the acquired capacities and passions not compromise the independence of the man. One who has returned to nature will have overcome *amour-propre*, the relative and hence dependent form of self-love, in favor of a recovered (or perhaps better put, *un*covered) *amour de soi*, the nonrelative and benign form of self-love that governed human beings in their original state.[12]

As important as the object, or the What, of Rousseau's quest is the Where: with Rousseau, the entire spiritual universe is internalized. The alienation to be overcome is not between man and God but between man and himself. God as the source of redemption and validation of one's being is replaced by the true or natural—the eternal, unchanging, and *inner*—self. Even creativity, heretofore a divine prerogative, has been incorporated into the self, in the faculties of imagination and memory. With the internalization of the spiritual universe and the depiction of the return to self as a kind of redemption, the *Confessions* extends and radicalizes the teaching of the Savoyard Vicar. The Vicar had called us to return to ourselves so that we might find God and wholeness.[13] Rousseau depicts in his own name and with respect to his own life a return to a self that suffices by itself unto itself: redemption no longer seems to require God.[14] And the *Confessions* also extends and radicalizes the exaltation of the self that began with the early modern philosophers. Where Machiavelli et al. vindicated man as godlike in his *power*, Rousseau, as I have already said, vindicates the self as godlike in its *being*.

The action of the *Confessions* makes clearly visible a defining feature of Rousseau's thought more generally. Insofar as the book depicts a "fall" from and a return to nature—particularly to nature understood as something *within*—it illuminates the duality of human life and even, perhaps, of existence. On the one hand, the *Confessions* tells a story of change or *development*.

[12]In what follows I will not focus on the question of self-love—*amour-propre* versus *amour de soi*—but rather on what the answer to that question signifies: namely, dependence versus self-sufficiency, respectively. I have offered a lengthy treatment of the meaning of "nature" in Rousseau's thought, with special emphasis on the varieties of self-love, in *Rousseau, Nature, and the Problem of the Good Life* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).

[13]Melzer characterizes the Vicar's teaching as a call "to return to ourselves" ("The Origin of the Counter-Enlightenment," 352).

[14]Rousseau's moments of greatest happiness and self-sufficiency find him living entirely in the present, free from hope and fear—and, at least in the later and most extensive episode, free from any acknowledged reliance on God. Might a belief in a divinely sanctioned moral order (i.e., the belief in the eventual triumph of justice) be a prerequisite for the self's ability to fulfill its spiritual needs for itself? Perhaps it is, though Rousseau gives no indication that I can see that he thinks it is. In his moments of spiritual self-sufficiency he seems less to have fulfilled moral needs than to have transcended them.

Irrespective of the particulars of its account, the *Confessions*, like the *Second Discourse* and *Emile*, effectively teaches that the human condition cannot be adequately understood except by virtue of a developmental approach. Human beings and human life must be understood in light of their having *become* what they are. Yet the development that the *Confessions* or indeed any of Rousseau's books depicts cannot be understood or judged and cannot have meaning except with reference to something that has *not* developed, namely, a timeless inner core of natural goodness. Rousseau teaches us to understand things with reference to their development, but he also teaches us to understand development with reference to that which is timeless and naturally good. The former teaching made Rousseau a source of historicism; the latter, a source of sentimental humanism. Rousseau himself, who embraced both principles, both developmentalism and natural goodness, is neither a historicist nor a sentimental humanist.

There is yet another duality to be noted—this one not a general feature of Rousseau's thought but rather a formal feature of the *Confessions*, though of course with a writer as capable as Rousseau nothing is *merely* formal: the formal features of the book carry important substantive teachings. The *Confessions* tells not one but two stories: (1) the story of the man whose life experiences are recounted, whom I will henceforth call "Jean-Jacques," and (2) the story of Rousseau the narrator. Each is a character in his own right, and neither can be assumed to be perfectly synonymous with the author of the book. (A complicated state of affairs: we have three persons who somehow both are and are not the same.) I will sketch a reading of each story as an attempt to overcome the alienation between the social, self-conscious, or acquired self and the true, inner self—or, to use a different Rousseauan term, as an attempt to reappropriate the source of the sentiment of being.

Jean-Jacques's story—that Jean-Jacques *has* a story—is more obvious than the story of the narrator, Rousseau. But the latter is also real: the narration not only *tells* but also *is* a story in itself. As Ann Hartle puts it, "In the *Confessions*, Rousseau shows us a man understanding himself."[15] This too is a story of returning to nature. For by virtue of understanding himself and remembering his life, Rousseau the narrator (like Jean-Jacques) achieves a wholeness and independence that is reminiscent of primal man, even though the latter's wholeness and independence were safeguarded by his *lack* of self-understanding and memory.[16]

[15]See Hartle, *The Modern Self*, 126.

[16]See Hartle, *The Modern Self*, 136: "in *The Confessions* Rousseau shows us *his* return to the state of nature and the conditions for the possibility of that return" (emphasis in the original). Hartle focuses especially on what I am calling the story of Rousseau the narrator. The finest and most comprehensive reading of Jean-Jacques's story, in my view, is offered by Christopher Kelly, who sees the *Confessions* as a story that culminates in a kind of return to nature: "Particularly in Part One, the *Confession*s shows

As we turn now to the two stories of return, we are presented with an opportunity to think about what nature, or a return to nature, could mean for ourselves. Rather than formulate the principles entailed in a return to natural goodness, the *Confessions* shows us something of what these principles look like in reality and what we're up against in striving to live by them. The book, we might say, gives the effectual truth of Rousseau's principles to those who might benefit from knowing it: those whose own checkered development has left them full of conflicting hopes and fears, morally weak perhaps but not wicked, confused but capable of reflection.

Jean-Jacques's Return to Nature

My concern in this necessarily brief treatment is less *how* Jean-Jacques returned to nature than *that* he returned (albeit partially and tenuously) and, most of all, what a return to nature can mean. What conditions, in particular what *subjective* conditions, account for Jean-Jacques's return to the wholeness of natural man?

Jean-Jacques enjoyed two sustained periods of happiness in his life. Although Rousseau does not refer to these episodes in terms of a return to nature—nowhere in the *Confessions* does he refer explicitly to returning to nature—each of these periods was characterized by remarkable self-sufficiency and might therefore be seen as a moment of natural living or return to the true self. The first episode was his idyllic stay at Les Charmettes with Madame de Warens when he was twenty-four years old. The second was his exile on St. Peter's Island after he had fled arrest in the wake of the publication of *Emile* and the *Social Contract*. Although there is much to learn from each episode, I will focus predominantly on the latter one, since it is recounted in greater detail and since its self-sufficiency and naturalness were arguably more complete. The one feature of life at les Charmettes that I do wish to note is Jean-Jacques's ability to live in the present, untouched by hope and fear, as—rather, *because*—he believes himself to be near death.[17]

The crucial feature of Jean-Jacques's happy life on St. Peter's Island is his solitude. Although he would not have been able on his own to choose a life of solitude over social alternatives (more about this in a moment), once

the unhealthy development of the passions in an individual who is given a defective education; in Part Two it shows how an extraordinary person comes to terms with, or even overcomes, his civilized corruption" (*Rousseau's Exemplary Life: The "Confessions" as Political Philosophy* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987], 38–39).

[17]Both Kelly and Hartle highlight these features in their respective investigations of Jean-Jacques's happiness at Les Charmettes. See Kelly, *Rousseau's Exemplary Life*, 147–60 and 221, and Hartle, *The Modern Self*, 53–68.

solitude is thrust upon him, he finds it the best possible condition: "I would have wished to be so confined to that Island that I would no longer have any dealings with mortals, and it is certain that I took every measure imaginable to remove myself from the necessity of having to maintain any" (534–35). How can solitude satisfy a man with social needs—a man who would later describe himself as "the most sociable and the most loving of humans" (*Reveries*, 1)?[18] The answer is that, for Jean-Jacques, with solitude comes self-sufficiency. Removal from society means escape from the grip of social passions: no more dependence, no more *amour-propre* to speak of.

But self-sufficiency is merely a formal condition. What did Jean-Jacques do, and what did he experience, on his island?

We are told that Jean-Jacques's happiness in solitude consisted in "the sweetness of inactivity and the contemplative life" (534). His version of the contemplative life was unlike any version conceived by prior philosophers or religious devotees. Indeed, it is not the philosopher at all but two other very different types whom Rousseau cites by way of description. He likens his kind of contemplative life to the idleness "of a *child* who is ceaselessly in motion while doing nothing and, at the same time, that of a *dotard* who strays when his arms are at rest" (537; emphasis added). The child and the dotard are characterized less by thinking than by imagining and dreaming.

As it turns out, though, Jean-Jacques's activity on the island includes a good bit of science, of all things. He practices botany. And yet his pleasure in botany is almost exclusively aesthetic. Knowledge is necessary but is valuable only insofar as it makes possible aesthetic enjoyment. Indeed, too much knowledge—or even a normal accumulation of knowledge through the faculty of memory—would spoil the experience:

> To wander nonchalantly in the woods and in the country, here and there to take up mechanically, sometimes a flower, sometimes a branch; to graze on my fodder almost at random, to observe the same things thousands of times, and always with the same interest because I always forgot them, was enough for me to pass eternity without being bored for a moment. However elegant, however admirable, however diverse the structure of plants might be, it does not strike an ignorant eye enough to interest it. That constant analogy and nevertheless prodigious variety that reigns in their organization carries away only those who already have some idea of the vegetal system. Others have only a stupid and monotonous admiration at the sight of all these treasures of nature. They see nothing in detail, because they do not even know what they need to look at, and they do not see the ensemble either because they have no idea of that chain of relations and combinations which overpowers the mind of the observer with its marvels. I was, and my lack of

[18]That this description appears in the *Reveries* rather than the *Confessions* does not weaken its relevance. The *Reveries*, as Rousseau makes clear, is in many respects a continuation of the *Confessions*.

> memory ought to have always kept me, at that fortunate point of knowing little enough about it so that everything was new to me and enough so that I was able to feel everything. (537)

What a strange and improbable pleasure that requires both high mental capacity, including scientific expertise, and rapid forgetfulness. It is only because Jean-Jacques unlearns so completely today that he can be awed anew tomorrow. If we take Rousseau at his word, such happiness as Jean-Jacques experienced botanizing on St. Peter's Island would seem to be extremely difficult to come by.

Botany was only one source of pleasure on the Island. There were others, similar in spirit yet requiring no strange combination of scientific knowledge and forgetting. These other experiences were not scientific at all but rather meditative and mystical. Sometimes Jean-Jacques would lose himself in identification with the whole of Nature or Being. At other times he would contract his own being or abstract himself from the world until his consciousness was filled with nothing but the pure sentiment of existence. As I have written elsewhere, these two varieties of experience, though apparently widely divergent, are in fact much alike in the decisive respect: the self is freed from its usual bounded and vulnerable existence.[19] Another thing these experiences have in common with each other—and with Jean-Jacques's botanizing—is that they require solitude. And this makes such happiness as Jean-Jacques knew on St. Peter's Island—all of it—very difficult to attain. One needs to have a taste for solitude and the ability truly to be alone. These are rare qualities among civilized human beings. Most of us would be struck by dread at the prospect of solitude, which we would equate with loneliness; and many who *think* they would enjoy solitude would find themselves in the event unable to leave the world behind in their thoughts. Even Jean-Jacques, who had a taste for solitude and the ability to enjoy it, had to be forced to abandon social relations. His own efforts, his own wisdom, weren't enough. Kelly develops this point and draws the inescapable conclusions:

> His final return to nature on St. Peter's Island is brought about by the accident of the conspiracy against him. Even if one regards the conspiracy as largely a figment of his imagination, his banishment from country after country is real. Thus Rousseau's teaching about the possibility of a return to nature is ambiguous. First, the strength and charm of the artificial passions make it impossible for civilized humans even to desire a return to a natural condition. While the prospect of wealth, satisfaction of vanity, love, and the multitude of other objects of civilized hopes remains, the abandonment of these desires has no immediate attraction. Rousseau shows, however, that there are certain accidents that can end

[19]See Laurence D. Cooper, *Eros in Plato, Rousseau, and Nietzsche: The Politics of Infinity* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 2008), 154–57.

> these hopes and restore humans to a quasi-natural happiness, against their wills, as it were.[20]

What was it that enabled Jean-Jacques to take advantage of the opportunity, provided by banishment, to return to nature? He certainly possessed extraordinary gifts. He stands out not only for his intellectual capacity but also for the intensity of his longings—and for that which would seem to be a bridge between, or perhaps the product of, the two: imagination. Yet Rousseau does not tell us how, or even whether, these qualities contributed to his return to a natural condition. We are left to figure this out for ourselves. Rather, Rousseau indicates from the start of the *Confessions* that his exceptionality lies in the first instance in a kind of preservation. It would seem that he has always preserved some connection with, some living remnant of, nature. His "fall" was never complete. A return to nature requires first of all that there be something left to return *to*—and all the more so, presumably, for the one who first discovers the way.

But surely Jean-Jacques's early life was a study in *un*natural development. What then is the evidence that he preserved a rare degree of naturalness throughout his life? The answer is simple: for all his unnatural passion, he remained *good*. Except when under temporary pressure of fear, he was always harmoniously disposed toward others. Yes, he committed bad acts. And he never showed much virtue in his life (though for one lengthy stretch he was imbued with the *love* of virtue).[21] But his failures were prompted by weakness, never by wickedness—that is, never by the intention to hurt. Where weakness did not override it, his goodness prevailed.

But how is it that Jean-Jacques preserved so rare a degree of naturalness? If we wanted only to explain the "action" of his return to nature, we might look to his philosophic insights in the expectation that they showed him the way. But we want to understand a connection to nature that preceded his development as a philosopher, let alone the development of his philosophic system. Where then to look? Perhaps to the qualities that preceded but made possible his development as a philosopher. I would like to suggest that what enabled Jean-Jacques to preserve or remain in touch with an inner core of natural goodness even as he developed exceedingly unnatural passions was an extraordinary if not fully articulate self-awareness. If this is true—and I will try to show that it is in a moment—we have met with yet another stunning paradox. Arguably the decisive cognitive mark of naturalness on Rousseau's telling is the *absence* of self-consciousness. The original natural man did not have self-consciousness; Jean-Jacques, as I will shortly explain, comes to be able

[20]Kelly, *Rousseau's Exemplary Life*, 247–48.

[21]It was during the years 1756–1762, or roughly from ages 44 to 50, that Jean-Jacques was imbued with and elevated by a love of virtue (*Confessions*, 350). Also see *Dialogues*, 126–27.

at times to transcend it. Unnatural social man, by contrast, is plagued by self-consciousness, so much so that we might say that it is the birth of self-consciousness that marks the "fall" from nature and that it is only through the overcoming of self-consciousness that one can return to nature. Yet my suggestion is that what enables this transcendence—what has kept alive the flicker of natural goodness throughout Jean-Jacques's life and in all likelihood what enabled him to discover his principle of natural goodness—is self-consciousness itself, that is, a more intensive and more self-aware self-consciousness, a self-consciousness that goes to the core of his being and is conscious of itself.

The situation is paradoxical indeed: self-consciousness is the problem; to overcome self-consciousness is the solution; yet the key to overcoming self-consciousness is self-consciousness itself. (As Nietzsche might have put it, the way back to nature entails the self-overcoming of self-consciousness.) The resolution of the paradox lies in the distinction between kinds or degrees of self-consciousness: the self-consciousness that needs to be overcome is *ordinary* self-consciousness; the self-consciousness that can bring about the overcoming, and the self-consciousness that is the result of the overcoming, are *extra*ordinary. This is the case not only for Jean-Jacques but for Rousseau the narrator, too.

Self-Consciousness

Self-consciousness in its primary sense is the awareness of being a separate self, a self distinct from nature and from other selves. The birth of self-consciousness thus marks the end of natural wholeness (the end of the savage's or small child's pre-self-conscious wholeness). For Jean-Jacques this break occurred at the age of five or six. Its immediate cause was reading—at first romances and then other, more serious books, of which Plutarch's *Lives* was his favorite: "I do not know how I learned to read; I remember only my first readings and their effect on me. This is the time from which I date the uninterrupted consciousness of myself" (7). The mechanism whereby self-awareness arose is not what one might have supposed. Reading did not underscore the separation between Jean-Jacques and others, at least not directly. Rather, it led him to *identify* with the characters in books. On reading Plutarch, for example, Jean-Jacques "believed [him] self to be Greek or Roman; I became the character whose life I read" (8). This may not sound like an alienating experience. But of course the "I" who says *I am* Brutus or Scaevola cannot but be aware that he isn't *really* or at least isn't *simply* Brutus or Scaevola. The very act of pronouncing the identification, of saying *I am*, reflects the "I's" awareness that the affirmation has to be made, that is, that it isn't simply true.

Jean-Jacques's self-consciousness would continue to be determined by others—in an increasingly unpleasant, because anxious, way—throughout

most of his life. As a youth he was constantly fearful of displeasing others (40). Later, we find him almost always uncomfortable in society—indeed, positively crippled by self-consciousness to the extent that he appears stupid to others (or at least supposes that he does) (351). The peak of his fear and discomfort is his obsession, once he has incurred the wrath of the philosophes, with what he believes to be an elaborate conspiracy against him. His likes and dislikes are directly or indirectly shaped by the needs of his painful self-consciousness: the things and especially the people he likes have in common that they put him at his ease by relieving his self-consciousness. Two examples among many are Madame de Warens and his friend Gauffecourt (178).

Most of the time self-consciousness keeps Jean-Jacques from being freely and easily himself. This inhibition—his *awareness* of the inhibition imposed by his self-consciousness—makes him conscious of his lost wholeness and leads him for a long time to seek completion through social relations and especially through sexual union, which alone, he supposes, could be total union. And yet the same logic that seemed to demand sexual union would ultimately make any social union inadequate:

> The first of my needs, the greatest, the strongest, the most inextinguishable, was entirely in my heart: it was the need for an intimate society and as intimate as it could be; it was above all for this that I needed a woman rather than a man, a lover rather than a friend. This peculiar need was such that the closest union of bodies could not even be enough for it: I would have needed two souls in the same body; since I did not have that, I always felt some void. (348)

Lovers have sometimes thought of themselves as a single soul in two bodies. As idealistic as that might sound, it at least represents what human beings have felt. Rousseau's longing, by contrast—two souls in a single body—belongs, except for brief moments, only to the realm of utopian desire or Aristophanic comedy. True, Jean-Jacques's relations with Thérèse were made additionally unsatisfying by her competing ties with her family. But this conflict of interests only aggravated an already unsatisfactory condition. The union he sought was not possible. It was inevitable, given his desire, that Jean-Jacques would remain "devoured with the need to love without ever having been able to satisfy it very well" (358).

Yet for all that Jean-Jacques *suffered* self-consciousness, he ultimately escapes its effects precisely by ex*panding* it: his preservation of naturalness, his *awareness* of a natural core beneath so much that is not natural, enables him to cultivate experiences in which he identifies with Nature or Being or else "fills" his self with nothing but the sentiment of existence. As noted above, these experiences differ from one another but in each case the self is similarly liberated: Jean-Jacques ceases to experience himself as vulnerable and embattled. His sense of separateness dissolves. Not continuously, but in extended episodes. But isn't this mere regression? And shouldn't we call

it a renouncing of self-consciousness rather than an expansion? No. For even as he transcends ordinary self-consciousness and ceases to feel its oppression, Jean-Jacques retains the awareness and sensibilities that were born with the "I." He retains a certain sense of himself—or rather, gains a new and different sense of a new and different self. Jean-Jacques (and Rousseau the narrator as well) can and does still speak about himself. What disappears is the oppressive sense of separateness. Such transcendence is more fully elaborated in the *Reveries*, most memorably in the Fifth and Seventh Walks, but it is recounted in the *Confessions* as well.[22]

In sum, Jean-Jacques's story is a story of self-consciousness—a story of three moments of self-consciousness: first, self-consciousness in its primary sense, the (usually painful) awareness of the self's separateness and vulnerability; second, self-consciousness understood as extraordinary self-awareness, including awareness of one's core of natural goodness and of the disjunction between that core and the acquired, social passions that have overlaid it; and finally, as a result of this extraordinary self-awareness, a new, nonoppressive self-consciousness—nonoppressive because it is the consciousness of a new self that has overcome the sense of separateness and vulnerability through identification with Nature or Being or its own sentiment of existence.

Rousseau's Return to Nature

Like Jean-Jacques's, the story of Rousseau (the narrator) is also a story of self-consciousness. Its distinction is this: whereas the story of Jean-Jacques is a story of development—a story in which ordinary self-consciousness is eventually overcome by means of a kind of *extra*ordinary self-consciousness—Rousseau's story is an account of an extended episode of extraordinary self-consciousness. It is not *about* self-consciousness, it *is* self-consciousness—a proactive and rewarding self-consciousness. The action of Rousseau's story is threefold: it consists in *reliving* the episodes of his earlier life (something he seems to be able to do at will), *interpreting* them, and *depicting* them. As we shall see, however, these three activities prove to be facets of a single process and are inseparable from one another. By laying hold of the episodes of his life as he does, Rousseau defines and validates his own being and reappropriates the source of his own sentiment of being. Thus his story too is a kind of return to nature.

To relive is more than merely to restate. Rousseau tells the story of Jean-Jacques with feeling. He re-experiences in the telling, in the remembering, the full force of the original emotional content of the experiences he

[22]I have offered fuller analyses elsewhere of the depiction of these experiences in the *Reveries*, along with reasons for deeming them a step above ordinary self-consciousness. See *Rousseau, Nature, and the Problem of the Good Life*, 175–80, and *Eros in Plato, Rousseau, and Nietzsche*, 152–62.

recounts. This is evident from his storytelling style, one of whose revealing elements is the occasional shifting of verb tenses. In the *Confessions* Rousseau generally speaks in the past tense. On certain occasions, however, he switches to the present as a particular episode approaches its dramatic climax. This has the effect of conveying to the reader the immediacy of his remembered experience. A good example is the opening of book 4, where Rousseau resumes his account of his trip back to Madame de Warens's home after an extended absence. The prior stages of the account had been told in the past tense. But book 4 opens with a shift into the present tense that conveys his anxiety more vividly: "I arrive home and do not find her there" (111).

To judge from his narrative skill, Rousseau's ability to re-experience past events is finely developed. He even seems to have the power to alter the pace of time in that he can savor in memory the emotional content of an experience whose actual lifespan was very brief. Such is the case in book 6, where Rousseau prefaces his tale of life at Les Charmettes by imploring his re-experienced happiness to linger:

> Here begins the short happiness of my life; here come the peaceful but quickly passing moments which have given me the right to say that I have lived. Precious and regretted moments, ah begin your lovable course for me again; flow more slowly in my remembrance, if it is possible, than you really did in your fleeting passage. (189)

The precious moments do flow more slowly. By exercising such artistic power Rousseau introduces an active, even a productive, element into his remembering. "The rememberer," as Hartle writes, "can make a longer time; he does not simply recall but somehow reproduces as the painter recreates."[23] The painter, of course, is not just a mirror, and this is just what Hartle means. By reproducing the episodes of his life Rousseau takes control of his past. It is not for nothing that we say that an artist "captures" his subject; and Rousseau surely has something of this in mind when he pronounces in the foreword to the *Confessions* that what he is about to serve up is a "portrait" of himself (3). In capturing his subject an artist also creates it anew. He must decide which elements of his subject to emphasize and which to ignore and what to make of them all. In doing this he defines the subject's very being. Thus it may be said of Rousseau, a philosophic artist whose subject is his own self, that he defines who he is or even makes his own self. Through his art—which in his case is to say, through his self-consciousness—he establishes autonomy. Civilized man always lives in the eyes of others, it is true (*SD*, 179); but what Rousseau accomplishes is to become his own other. He retrospectively defines his own being.

[23]Hartle, *The Modern Self*, 115.

As a return to nature this may sound like a merely technical achievement. Retrospection can achieve only so much. On further reflection, though, the magnitude of Rousseau's achievement begins to become apparent. Retrospection may be the present's response to the past, but since the past persists into the present (both as living memory and as the source of what we have become) retrospection is also powerful with respect to the present. Moreover, the act of retrospection may well, and in Rousseau's case does, entail experiencing and understanding one's natural core or innermost self. In order to communicate himself to the reader, Rousseau writes, he needs only "to return inside [him]self [*au dedans de moi*], as I have done up to this point" (234). To "return inside" oneself means to take account of all manner of inner experience, much of it unnatural. But if one penetrates deeply enough—as indeed Rousseau purports to have done—one will arrive at the timeless true self.

In fact, though, the power of Rousseau's retrospection and thus the magnitude of his return to nature are even greater than we have yet seen. For it turns out that it is only through memory and artistic rendering that Rousseau can fully and finally live his experiences in the first place—not *re*live, but *live*: "I do not know how to see anything of what I am seeing; *I see well only what I recall, and I have intelligence only in my memories*. Out of everything that is said, everything that is done, everything that happens in my presence, I feel nothing, I penetrate nothing. The exterior sign is all that strikes me. But later everything comes back to me" (96; emphasis added). Rousseau's experiences are not clear, they cannot be assimilated, until he has reflected or at least gazed at them from afar. Prior to this post-hoc remembering, his experiences lack depth ("I penetrate nothing") and meaning ("I have intelligence only in my memories") and thus full subjective reality. Consider the significance of all this. In order to be fully real, Rousseau's experience—his life—requires the activity he performs in writing the *Confessions*. I said above that in capturing a subject an artist creates it anew. But that turns out to have been an understatement. When the subject is himself and the artist Rousseau, he does not create *anew*: he simply creates. There is no old creation to replicate.

Now one might suppose that Rousseau's need for post-hoc remembering reflects a *defect*, an inability to live in the present moment. Would it not be better, and a mark of truer self-sufficiency, to be able to experience one's life fully in the original moment? It might indeed—*if we were in a position in the original moment to see and feel all that there is to see and feel.* But we are not in such a position. None of us is. Our experience doesn't just take place in a context, it is significantly informed or *determined* by its context: it *is* what it is, in significant part, on account of its context. All of our experience is relational, and it can't be completely seen or felt unless and until the context is made available by the passage of time. To put it another way, all meaning is by definition relational, and so the meaning of our experience is not available to us until the requisite relations are apprehended. Until the meaning of

our experience can be apprehended, our experience cannot be seen or felt with any depth. But what that means is that until its meaning can be apprehended, our experience cannot fully *be*, insofar as meaning is internal to or constitutive of experience. To be sure, human beings can feel much in the original moment; and to be altogether unable to do so would indeed constitute a serious deficiency, even if that deficiency were offset by an extraordinary ability to see and to feel later what one had lived through earlier. But I am still reluctant to attribute such a deficiency to Rousseau. For, notwithstanding the lines I quoted above, he indicates throughout the *Confessions* that he does experience much in the original moment, most particularly when the moment is one of high spirituality. Thus I would contend that his later, remembered experience is less the supplying of a deficiency than an enrichment and intensification of experience. And I would point out that in the lines I have quoted he does not say that he feels nothing in the original moment, only that he feels nothing of what lies outside himself.

With Rousseau as with Jean-Jacques it is important to understand that the return to nature does not mean a return to savagery in any way, least of all a loss of mental acuity. Rousseau remains thoughtful and self-conscious. (And by "Rousseau" I now mean all our Rousseaus: Jean-Jacques, Rousseau the narrator, and Rousseau the author.) Or if one insists on defining self-consciousness only as the self's felt awareness of its separateness, then Rousseau is something *more* than, not less than, self-conscious. He is a philosopher even by the most refined understanding of that term. Most people have been diminished—in their happiness, in their wholeness, in their being—by self-consciousness and indeed cognitive development more generally. Not so Rousseau at his peak. Like all of those whom he considers to live well, Rousseau comes to feel his own existence to an impressive degree. Like all whom he calls natural men, he reappropriates—he finds in or restores to himself—the source of his sentiment of existence. And he does all this not in spite of but rather, as we have seen, *because* he has cultivated self-awareness and understanding.

Of course the very formulations I've just offered indicate an important respect in which Rousseau is *un*like most whom he considers to live well and most whom he calls natural. Unlike them—unlike either the wholehearted citizen or the savage—he needed to *return* to wholeness. He once was lost and then was found, or rather, found or even found*ed* himself. This would seem to be a hopeful teaching, particularly because the means to his return to nature included the cultivation of the very thing that caused or at least marked his departure. (A nice touch: as it was reading that precipitated Rousseau's fall, it is through writing—in part—that he returned.) But as with so much else that he teaches, Rousseau would caution us against raising our hopes too high. Some steps toward wholeness may well be available to us. But it takes a Rousseau, a man of extraordinary gifts, to say nothing of extraordinary circumstances, to return—to ascend—to nature.

Conclusion: Ubi Sit Deus

As we observed earlier, Rousseau's explicit religious teaching, especially as put forth in the "Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar," conceives God's relation to humanity in a strikingly limited way. God's role is that of executor of perfect justice. In this role God meets what may be man's deepest need (or most men's deepest need) and in any event a need that only God could meet: the need to believe that the world is governed according to a moral order. But God is no longer presented as sustainer of Being or dispenser of grace and salvation. The implication of these omissions is that we have no *need* of a God who sustains Being and dispenses grace and salvation: the Vicar's procedure is to locate within oneself one's undeniable needs and the indispensable beliefs to which these needs give rise. Where there is no belief, or even the hope for belief, there must be no great need.

Yet consider: those other divine acts—sustaining Being, dispensing grace or salvation—have not disappeared from Rousseau's corpus. They have only migrated. They aren't referenced in the explicit religious teaching offered in the *Social Contract* or *Emile*, but they do occur in the *Confessions*. They aren't performed by a God distinct from the self, but they are performed—by the self. Rousseau discovers in solitude that he can supply his own sentiment of existence. He discovers in recollection that he can interpret the past and thereby define, indeed *create*, himself in the present. And while we're talking about the exercise of what one has traditionally supposed to be divine prerogatives, we might also take note of Rousseau's work as a political philosopher: by propounding a new understanding of the human condition and the good, and by doing so with enormous persuasive power, Rousseau attempts to legislate and even, in a sense, to create the world anew.

Does the performance of these functions by the self imply a *need* for these things after all? Perhaps. But given that Rousseau is so unusual a character, it is impossible to say whether he supposes that this need is felt by all human beings or only by those with a certain degree or type of spirituality. It may well be that in Rousseau's view most people's need for religion is predominantly if not exclusively a moral need (i.e., the need for divine justice), and that it is only with the emergence of reflectiveness and sublime sensitivity—combined, perhaps, with exquisite honesty—that additional, supramoral needs emerge. (Why the mention of honesty? Because such needs as those I'm speaking of may not be felt by those who have not freed themselves of the delusions of pride. This may be why a Pascal would feel such needs and a Socrates would not. In Rousseau's estimation Socrates and the other great philosophers have not quite overcome pride and its distorting effects. Of course, Pascal might well convict Rousseau of a similar—no, a worse—pride for claiming an even more divine self-sufficiency.)

Is Rousseau's claim to spiritual self-sufficiency credible? A journal devoted to political thought is probably not the right venue to take up so theological a question. But perhaps, in any event, the best preparation for addressing the

theological question would be to investigate two *political* questions first: the intention of Rousseau's teaching on self-sufficiency, and its effects. I will conclude by speaking to these political questions.

It seems clear that Rousseau intended through the *Confessions* to offer himself as an example for many people in many respects.[24] It seems unlikely that he meant to serve as an example for many people in *all* respects—particularly where the self-appropriation of hitherto divine prerogatives is concerned. Rousseau was keenly aware that some of his insights could prove detrimental to many readers, either by enflaming their *amour-propre* or by freeing them from wholesome restraints. He particularly stresses the danger of human beings wishing to be more than human beings. Misguided attempts to exalt the self would not only fail, they would *intensify* dependence, no matter how high one's position in the social hierarchy (*Emile* 83, 445–46). Nor would self-sufficiency in all spheres of life be desirable even if it were possible. In our relations with others, our vulnerability lends intensity to the pleasure of connection.[25]

Yet for all the care he evidently took, Rousseau's influence has overflowed its intended channels. Just as Rousseau's practical skepticism regarding revolution was ignored by those such as Robespierre who were inspired by his radical ideas, so his explicit religious teaching, that is, his advocacy of a moderate Christianity, has been eclipsed among many today by the effective divinization of the self in the *Confessions* (and in the *Reveries*), even if most of those influenced by Rousseau in this way have not read him and are influenced only indirectly. Some of what I take to be Rousseau's religious influence *does* seem consistent with his intent. It seems fair, for example, to suppose that contemporary liberal Christianity, which has a great deal in common with what Rousseau propounded in the Savoyard Vicar's Profession of Faith, owes something to Rousseau's influence. As Melzer notes, although few have accepted its teaching in toto, "the 'Profession of Faith' established the paradigm for post-Enlightenment religion."[26] But the transformation of Christianity is not the end of the story; other cultural transformations have occurred as well, in our own time, and these seem to me to testify to an unintended and more questionable influence by Rousseau. Although few have embraced Rousseau's *Confessions* as their guide for living, the book established the paradigm for a whole swath of contemporary culture, including much religion and very much of what eschews the word "religion" in favor of "spirituality."

[24]This is the primary thrust of Kelly's argument—and of the title of his book on the *Confessions*: *Rousseau's Exemplary Life*.

[25]Certainly this seems true of romantic love. Emile's awareness of his vulnerability, for example, lends his love for Sophie a "voluptuousness that nothing can disturb" (*Emile*, 446). I would suggest that friendship and civic relations too may be intensified and made more satisfying by awareness of vulnerability.

[26]Melzer, "The Origin of the Counter-Enlightenment," 358.

An in-depth exploration of Rousseau's influence on contemporary culture lies beyond what I can attempt here. Fortunately, though—or perhaps unfortunately—the facts are so evident that even a few words should suffice to make the point. No one who considers the profound changes of sensibility that have occurred in the West over the past half century will be unable to see something Rousseauan in an awful lot of them. Not so much in avant-garde arts and letters—here it is no longer Rousseau but rather Nietzsche and his postmodern progeny who have come to the fore—but in a far more pervasive cultural taste and cast of thinking. Consider the following elements of contemporary culture: the embrace of sincerity as the highest virtue (along with compassion); the belief in the fundamental goodness of the self, which is the basis of the embrace of sincerity; the gratifying belief in the harmony of all things, if only we will leave them in their natural state; the belief in the sufficiency of the self, if only one connects with one's *true* self; in sum, a culture that vindicates spontaneous self-expression and insists that such expression will redound to everyone's benefit. To be sure, contemporary culture is not all of a piece: elements of older civic and religious traditions remain robust in certain quarters, particularly in the United States. But the shift I have described is evident; and it reflects a kind of popular Rousseauism.

As serious readers of Rousseau know, Rousseau himself would have shrunk from most of what I have just described. Yes, nature is good, he would say. But nature is far from us, or rather we from it. Today's popular Rousseauism overestimates our ability to reconnect with natural goodness.

And yet, strangely, even as our popular Rousseauism overstates human capability, it has the practical effect of *undermining* such self-sufficiency as really lies within our reach. To see how this is so, we must recall Rousseau's other legacy, the counternarrativeof which I spoke at the start of this article—that is, our sense of the self's weakness and corruptibility. Rousseau, who did believe in the possibility of considerable independence and even self-sufficiency, believed at the same time that we are determined by outside forces. A contradiction? No: for our freedom and lack thereof are characteristic of different spheres of our lives. And in order to achieve such independence or self-sufficiency as we might, we need to recognize the distinction between these spheres. We *can* achieve a real degree of independence or even, in some cases, self-sufficiency, Rousseau would hold—but only in a certain sphere, and only by recognizing that we *can't* achieve sufficiency in other spheres. Indeed, it is precisely by accepting our powerlessness with respect to the outside world that we can achieve such sufficiency—and happiness—as we can. Only when one recognizes necessity can one live freely, immune to alienating fear and hope. Recall Rousseau's happiness at Les Charmettes and St. Peter's Island. In both cases his happiness and sufficiency were made possible by his acceptance of what he took to be necessity: his supposedly impending death in the first instance, his supposedly permanent isolation in the second. If we fail to recognize and accept necessity, if we fail to attend to the distinction between the spheres in which we live, we will

oscillate between utopianism and undue passivity, between naive expectations and the dubious pleasures of self-pity.

Another paradox? Only for those who mistakenly suppose that freedom means power over the outside world. And if it *is* a paradox, it's hardly unique to Rousseau. On the contrary, the idea that one achieves maximum freedom and happiness by accepting necessity is one that Rousseau shares with other great thinkers, both ancient and modern. Rousseau may lay out a unique path, but the end, which is the more important thing, he shares with others. This prophet who embraced solitude was not altogether alone.