Researching the Changing Meanings of 'Nature'

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When discussion about conceptions of *nature* in European history arises, the name of Jean-Jacques Rousseau is usually invoked. He is seen as the prime example of resistance to the dominant views of the Enlightenment, and as a precursor to the Romantic notions of nature. Perhaps the most famous of his catchphrases is 'Return to Nature!' allegedly a call for people of his time to abolish urbanisation and emerging industrialisation and to return to life in primal nature. This clarion call is linked to his conception of *the state of nature*, and to the life of the *natural man* within that state. It is claimed that Rousseau said that this life is simple, happy and good, and without the trappings of civilisation.

On a surface reading such an interpretation receives some support. In his first major philosophical work, the *Discourse on Inequality* (1754–1755), where he deals extensively with the notion of the state of nature, Rousseau talks very empathically about the peacefulness and happiness of the natural man. Most of the sorrows and pains experienced by humans are '...of our own making, and … we would have avoided almost all of them if we had retained that simple, uniform and solitary way of life prescribed to us by Nature.' (Rousseau 1997b: 137–138.) He repeatedly stresses that humans in the state of nature must have been more vigorous, healthier, and happier – the latter mainly due to the fact that they lacked the multitude of anxieties and vain hopes and aspirations that societies have imposed on civilised humans. And indeed, such sentiments seem to be a direct continuation of the polemical claim stated in his first work to gain wider acclaim. In his *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* (1750),[1] he directed a scathing attack on the culture of his time, even on cultural and scientific progress of any kind, claiming that 'our souls have become corrupted in proportion as our Sciences and our Arts have advanced toward perfection.' (Rousseau 1997a: 9.) For

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[1] Hereafter I refer to the discourses of 1750 and 1754–1755 as the First and the Second Discourse. This usage is well established in Rousseau research.

his contemporaries and, through the portraits preserved by his supporters and critics, for successive generations, he became the ardent critic of civilisation and the defender of nature. As N. J. H. Dent summarises in his valuable *A Rousseau Dictionary*, 'As far as the natural world itself is concerned, Rousseau was among those who instigated the shift in sensibility from desire to 'tame' nature, to make it bear the imprint of man's design, towards the appreciation of the wild, the untouched and the terrifying in nature, which is characteristic of Romanticism.' (Dent 1992: 178.)

But beyond the surface of Rousseau's provocative rhetoric, the picture isn't as clear. Perhaps one of the most important passages of the Second Discourse, the ninth of his extensive footnotes, states very clearly his view that any kind of historical return to a state of nature is patently impossible, except for a few 'existential hermits':

> What then? Must Societies be destroyed, thine and mine annihilated, and men return to live in forests with the Bears? ... you who are able to leave behind in the Cities your fatal acquisitions, your restless minds, your corrupted hearts, and your unbridled desires; resume your ancient and first innocence since it is in your power to do so; go into the woods to lose the sight and memory of your contemporaries' crimes. [---] As for men like myself, whose passions have forever destroyed their original simplicity....' (Rousseau 1997b: 203.)

Rousseau goes on to say that, for the majority of humanity, it is impossible to break the bonds of societies. As the citation above shows, Rousseau saw these bonds as being objectified in needs and aspirations of people and in the world of objects that surrounded them. Perhaps some of us could 'go into the woods', but the historical creation of society is irreversible[2] (Rousseau 1997b: 203). In another passage, which is seldom noted, in the 'Exordium' of the Second Discourse, Rousseau explicitly warns his readers against nostalgia for any sort of Golden Age.

The picture is further complicated by his claim that the best state for humans is not the life of natural man, but the already developed state of primitive societies. In this state some of the 'fatal acquisitions' of 'false needs and aspirations', of the 'mine and thine' of established property relations, had already been born (Rousseau 1997b: 167). In the First Discourse the main object of his criticism

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[2] There are two sides to this. Firstly Rousseau realised that societies deeply transform the people who come to live in them. Secondly, Rousseau seems to doubt that there are any such 'woods' left in the world.

had been *luxury*, needs and their satisfaction that surpass the level concordant with the human mental and physical constitution. This theme continued, albeit in a changed form, in the Second Discourse. Rousseau was one of the most important figures in the long tradition of social philosophy, which has employed the problematic distinction between 'true' and 'false' needs.[3] But the trouble in reading Rousseau is that he seems to use the phrase 'state of nature' (and the accompanying term 'Savage') to designate both the primal state of nature and primitive societies.

These apparent contradictions in Rousseau's thinking have given rise to many different interpretations. For example, even though Dent's words cited above seem to follow the simplistic notion of 'Rousseau the Nature-Lover', he is very guarded in his words. He sees Rousseau as *instigating* a shift, not necessarily proposing it himself. What's more, the citation opens with the words 'as far as the natural world itself is concerned'. And here's the catch: we have to be able to differentiate between ideas about nature as we've come to understand the word, and nature in the meanings that Rousseau and his contemporaries gave to the word. Our perception of Rousseau's contradictions is very much tied to the way we customarily understand 'nature'.

In order to get to the heart of Rousseau's thought, we have to interpret state of nature through the context in which, and the purposes for which, it was developed. There are actually many different conceptions behind the façade of this single term. They cannot be understood properly outside of the debates about political systems during the Enlightenment. Rousseau was reacting against the views of several predecessors and contemporaries and their theories of natural right/law.

The trouble with nature

The modern usage of the word 'nature' is dominated by one meaning. One of the most important developments of the modern era, perhaps its fullest conceptual product, was *nature-culture dualism*, the separation of nature and culture into

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[3] Distinctions between different needs are in this tradition usually based on a notion of human essence/nature of some sort. Nature becomes a social 'measuring device'. As we shall see below, Rousseau differed from many of his contemporaries in this: for him human essence was not a static level but a historically developing constitution. On this basis he built his notions of 'natural growth' and natural education.

distinct realms of reality. This divide has been manifest in many areas of thought. We have inherited strong assumptions about what we mean when we talk about nature. At present one of the most important areas of meaning that is a source of these assumptions is the debate over environmental problems. In it the word 'nature' has a customary meaning: it is a distinct *realm of the physical world*, the nature 'out there' (as in brooks, trees, seas, oceans, glaciers, etc.). This nature is separate from the physical realm of culture, the area of significant human interference. Historically this divide has been held up in significant cultural discussions, such as the debate over the demarcation lines between the sciences, or the theoretical debates about the basis of property.

Historically the borders of the division between natural and cultural realms in the physical world have not been unambiguous. What has counted as nature has differed from time to time. Environments that have been produced by long-lasting interaction between human and nonhuman elements are easily perceived as part of nature, as they become parts of the accepted and established state of the world. The history of labour and interaction vanishes (Williams 1980: 78). This is analogous to the process of reification or naturalisation of social conventions, as they are perceived not as products of negotiation and struggle, but as parts of human nature or as basics of any and all human societies.

Indeed, on closer inspection the layered history of nature and culture is a slap in the face of strict conceptual divisions. As Raymond Williams notes, 'We have mixed our labour with the earth, our forces with its forces too deeply to be able to draw back and separate either out.' (Williams 1980: 83.) The fuzziness of the nature-culture border is inevitable. There is interplay between human and nonhuman elements, and 'pure' examples of either pole are damn near impossible to find. This challenge has been taken up by many writers, for example in contemporary environmental philosophy.

However, despite this growing awareness, the strict nature-culture divide is still very much alive in everyday discourse. Accordingly, we are still affected by modern assumptions in our reading of ancient texts. Even though the strictness of the divide is being increasingly questioned, 'nature' is still mainly understood to refer to a *realm in the physical world*, to a collection of physical beings and events. In the modern world, the word has been a conceptual tool to establish categorisations of the surrounding world (and mainly to draw universalised division lines around humanity/culture or some forms of culture vs. 'naturalised' primitiveness).

This general denotation is the assumption that affects our reading of Rousseau and 'nature' in the early modern period in general. We tend to assume that the early modern writers had a similar common (even though contested) *point of reference*. To understand the world of the Enlightenment we have to get rid of this idea of the Eternal Present.

In Rousseau's philosophy and the philosophical literature of his time, the word 'nature' rarely refers to a select assembly of physical beings and processes in the modern sense. These writers were still heavily influenced by medieval and earlier thought. In medieval philosophy 'nature' refers to *order* in two important senses. It is the physical Creation as a whole, undifferentiated, as a part of the general divine order, which was created by God. This physical dimension is inseparable from a normative one: hence 'nature' simultaneously refers to a divinely ordained moral order, in which everything has its place. This nature also encompasses social conventions, law and morality. Knowledge of nature is knowledge of this order (Cassirer 1951: 39). The normative sense of nature was prevalent in philosophical usage during the Enlightenment, although other meanings were developing. Already in earlier thought the distinction between naturally formed and human-made objects, nature vs. artifice, had been important, but it had concerned mainly the nature of the *agency* behind these objects and the possibility of novel human creations in a world that was interpreted from a Christian perspective. This is not the same as a wholesale division of the world.[4]

The idea of nature as a normative order had, of course, older roots. It seems that the earliest meaning of 'nature' in western tradition[5] was the inherent essence of a being, its inborn qualities. This usage is of course with us today; we still talk about 'human nature', etc. Another meaning developed beside this one. 'Nature' came to refer not only to the essence of a single being, but also to a more general essential principle that determined the course of events in the world. Such a principle was of course easily personified as a guiding being or a group of beings, who gave all beings their essence-nature, subsuming them into a more

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[4] Of course in this worldview there is a wholesale division between the mundane and heavenly, but it should be understood that the division is differently aligned than in modern dualism.

[5] To be precise, we are talking about a continuum of terms related to the Latin root *nasce*, 'to be born', and the related Latin formulation *natura*, and earlier Greek terms that were translated into *natura*. The problematics of translation would of course warrant a deeper inquiry. But there must clearly be a conceptual continuum from Greek to Roman antiquity, concerning the main conceptions of nature, to warrant this simplification.

general plan. This notion was later linked to the Christian worldview, by making this personalised nature 'God's minister or deputy', as Raymond Williams has noted (Williams 1980: 68–69). Nature came to mean something like the old Greek notion of *cosmos*, a normatively ordered state of the universe that encompasses not only the physical but also the moral and religious. Thus in Rousseau's Second Discourse and his later texts, especially *Émile* (1762), nature as the giver of essences and the educator ('the Spartan Mother', as he was fond of saying) is always present.

Even this archaic meaning of 'nature' is still in use today. *Natural* and *unnatural* are still used as moral judgments; they refer to following or deviating from a preordained moral order. Such black-and-white conceptualisations are in use, for example, in the debate over the nature of sexuality, genetic engineering etc. The moral connotations have very little to do with the modern nature-culture divide. Instead, they descend from the idea of nature-as-cosmos in its many historical formulations, wherein nature is the established and normal state of the world/society. As William E. Connolly has shown, biblical accounts of the Creation are, of course, one of the most important sources of this 'nature' for us (Connolly 1993: 197–198).

Some new variants of Natural Law and Natural Right thinking in the 17th and 18th centuries were attacks on the traditional social conceptions which built the basis of legitimisation on Biblical interpretation or inherited absolutist rule (Cassirer 1951: 239). These earlier doctrines, of course, also used the concepts of natural law and right. Attacks and counterattacks around the *ancien regime* were waged in the battleground of nature. This 'nature' had a common point of reference as a normative order. What was being contested was the origin and nature of this order. Others clung to the notion that there was a preordained formal order that was imposed from without. Some kept close to the Biblical account, but others tried to wrest the order from the divine sphere and make it into principles that rule even deities themselves. The 17th century meaning of 'nature' as universal stems from this endeavour (Cassirer 1951: 242). Instead of God's commandments, Nature was to be found in the eternal dictates of Reason, which could be found in logic, mathematics, etc. Others tried to force the notion of order to another platform. They wished to seek the recipe of a legitimate order in human nature – instead of following a given social plan, the plan was to be devised on the basis of 'empirical' humanity (Cassirer 1951: 246). In this important ideological

shift, the state of nature was the prime conceptual tool. During this shift, Rousseau mixed elements from ancient and early modern thought.

As was mentioned above, the strictly physical connotation of 'nature' was in the process of being born, but nature-culture dualism did not yet dominate Enlightenment thought. The writers of that era played a part in establishing it. Historically the emergence of the modern nature-culture divide was linked to the split between human and natural sciences, where two distinct areas of inquiry were being established. The division between inherent and learned, in explaining human behaviour, was another important catalyst, as was the notion of free will. But we should not forget the change in cultural experience that took place in the long process of modernisation. The rise of modern cities and the intensifying industrial appropriation of resources heightened the contradiction against lived reality in 'pristine' environments. Nostalgia and adoration of 'the wild' later became one facet of the critique of modernisation. Colonial exploration and invasion brought new areas of the world to the western sphere of experience, areas 'unsoiled' by human (that is, 'civilised') hands. Nature-culture dualism is not a part of some supposedly inherent Western logic. It is the product of a long historical process. During Rousseau's time this process was still going on.

State of nature as a tool of legitimisation and critique

In the social philosophical writings of early modernity, 'state of nature' referred mainly to a state of humans without civil society, without lasting political societies formed by laws, a state of habitual ties or traditional ties (Gourevitch 1988: 29). Perhaps the best known formulation of this concept of the state of nature is found in the writings of Thomas Hobbes. In short, Hobbes considered the life of humans in this state to be one of constant conflict and aggression, and he felt that strong political institutions were needed to secure the lives of individuals. This is the standard textbook reading. But what about 'nature' in all this? What does it refer to?

It has been convincingly shown that Hobbes's conception of the state of nature, as the one created by John Locke, was a tool of legitimisation. The idea was not to make a serious claim about some supposed pre-civilised state of humanity, but to create a description of a state that lacks sustained political institutions. For example, Hobbes made a claim about the essence-nature of humans as beings prone to aggression and mutual predation, if they were left in the power of 'mere

nature'.[6] Hobbes believed that *convention* had to be introduced as a fetter on human behaviour. The state of nature was for Hobbes the ever present possibility of chaos and violence that had to be countered by political institutions. 'Nature' in this sense refers to uncontrollability and chaos – something outside rational control. It is an existential state, not a realm of the world.

Hobbes is one of the main targets of Rousseau's criticism. By using a devious (and a bit unfair) rhetorical device, he accuses Hobbes and other theorists of the state of nature of *introjecting social categories* into the state of nature:

> The Philosophers who have examined the foundations of society have all felt the necessity of going back as far as the state of Nature, but none of them has reached it. ... all of them, continually speaking of need, greed, oppression, desires, and pride transferred to the state of Nature ideas they had taken from the society; They spoke of Savage man and depicted Civil man. (Rousseau 1997b: 132.)

Later he targets this criticism specifically at Hobbes, who 'contends that man is naturally intrepid, and seeks only to attack, and to fight' (Rousseau 1997b: 135). He praises Hobbes for understanding the defects of earlier formulations of *natural right*, ones that tried to legitimise social conventions on a transcendent order, and for looking for answers in humans themselves. But Hobbes's mistake is that he 'improperly included in Savage man's care for his preservation the need to satisfy a multitude of passions that are the product of Society and have made Laws necessary.' (Rousseau 1997b: 151.) In short, Rousseau intentionally interpreted Hobbes's state of nature as a description of a concrete *historical situation*, of an era before the rise of civilisation. Hobbes (and Locke) had, according to him, made an error in saying that natural man was either brutish and violent or already capable of forming lasting social ties. These were capabilities that were born in the historical process of socialisation, the birth of civilisation. It's fair to say that Rousseau most likely misinterpreted both of these writers, or at least simplified their claims to suit his own needs. But the result of this rhetorical trick is interesting.

Rousseau created another concept of the state of nature. But this was not a tool of legitimisation; it was a *tool of critique*, which laid the basis for his social philosophy. Rousseau's state of nature was also an existential condition, but not

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[6] One revealing expression in that time was 'brute nature', in which non-governed humans were equated with animals (and the ruling notion of animality was again linked to beastliness and instinctual behaviour).

one of egoism or nascent sociability. It was a condition where the *natural man* lacked developed reason,[7] language, coherent memory or the capability of forming lasting relationships with other humans. Natural men wandered the sparsely populated forests and plains of the primeval world, only occasionally meeting each other. This in turn means that they couldn't have developed a complex set of needs and aspirations.

> His imagination depicts nothing to him; his heart asks nothing of him. His modest needs are so ready at hand, and he is so far from the degree of knowledge necessary to desire to acquire greater knowledge, that he can have neither foresight nor curiosity. The spectacle of Nature becomes so familiar to him that he becomes indifferent to it. (Rousseau 1997b: 143.)

It can be said that in Rousseau's view this being was perhaps bodily human, but it lacked all the capabilities that make the 'human proper'. For him humanity in humans can not be found principally in some inborn qualities, but only in the continuous intercourse with others and the symbolically invested world that this intercourse creates (Dent 1992: 234). Thus Rousseau did not have a notion of universalised 'Reason'. He actually entertained the notion that many primates, the 'men of the forest' or orang-utans, might be humans that had never left the original state of nature – and had thus never *become* human.

This conception of solitary existence in the state of nature may seem strange, especially since Rousseau basically assumed that the first humans actually lived in separation from each other. He doesn't offer much in the way of evidence to support this claim, except some scattered anecdotes about 'savages' and animal behaviour. Such critique was levelled at him in his own time too: people failed to understand how anyone could make such claims about humans in some era of history. There is some basis for such a critique, but for the most part it misses the mark.

Why did Rousseau create this conception of the state of nature? For him it was a necessary fiction, an *abstraction* in the philosophical sense of the word. He wanted to attack dominant theories of natural law or natural right that tried to legitimise social conventions on the basis of nature. In these theories 'nature' referred either to the above-mentioned conception of a normative order of the cosmos, or a static/universal human essence. There was some original or primary

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[7] Incidentally, Rousseau didn't consider reason to be the distinguishing feature between humans and animals. Humans shared with other animate beings a kind of 'mechanical prudence'.

order on which political and moral ideals could be based. Or Nature/God had given the essences as the original basis of moral ideals. Rousseau tried to attack this idea by painting a picture of a nature that was so rudimentary, so beyond any social or moral considerations, that nothing could be based on it.[8] The only things that distinguish natural men from other animals are the potential for freedom of choice and self-improvement (Rousseau 1997b: 140–141). These potentialities however were only realised by a series of historical accidents that forced humans out of their primal state and into continuous intercourse, which gave rise to language and related capabilities.

In this state of nature, 'nature' is again an existential condition. It refers to *immediate existence*: relationships with the surrounding world are not mediated by rational reflection, symbolic discourse or use of tools (for Rousseau these all were born out of social intercourse and were mutually dependent). '…savage man desires only the things he knows, and knows only the things the possession of which is in his power or easy to achieve, nothing must be so calm as his soul and nothing as limited as his mind.' (Rousseau 1997b: 212.) Nature is also asocial and amoral – it is beyond any political or moral considerations, and thus cannot be used as a point of legitimisation. So even though natural man was naturally good, this goodness cannot be measured on any kind of moral axis. The notion of natural goodness becomes only relevant with respect to the social life, in which case natural goodness refers to beneficial tendencies in humanity versus the harmful tendencies that emerge in certain forms of social relations (Dent 1992: 176–177).[9] This was Rousseau's intellectual strategy: to push nature beyond consideration, even beyond history in the sense of traditional humanities.

Hobbes and Locke had used the notion of 'social contract' to describe the transition from the state of nature to the state of society, but Rousseau clearly couldn't employ such a theoretical device. His natural men were incapable of making any original pact. And this is, of course, at the core of Rousseau's critique: through his version he wanted to invalidate the legitimising fictions of his predecessors. Even though there are two forms of social contract in his writings

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[8] There is a theme of rudimentary morality in Rousseau's writings, but it is too complex to address here. Rousseau claimed that there were some basic drives in all humans (empathy and self-preservation), but their relationship to morality proper is a point of contention.

[9] This becomes evident in *Émile*, where the concept of the state of nature mostly functions as an educational ideal.

– one a description of a speculative historical event, the other a utopian vision – he cannot thus be seen as a 'social contract theorist' in the traditional sense. To understand this we have to see how Rousseau moves from criticism to constructing his own social theory and his own view of how lasting societies developed.

Rousseau's second state of nature

Rousseau created a historical tale in which he tried to show how stable societies and finally political institutions might have emerged through a long historical process with many stages. As he himself said, this tale is fictional or conjectural, but only because there were no reliable ways of finding evidence of such a development. Here is an important difference from the previous conception of the *pre-social state of nature*: it was necessarily fictional, a theoretical abstraction created for the theoretical needs of critique. The historical tale of the birth of societies was also fictional, but not out of necessity. It 'could have happened thus'. It is actually a very complicated thing to decide whether the original state of nature can even be seen as a starting point of Rousseau's historical tale. On the one hand it is, but on the other hand it is beyond it, in another class of abstraction.

In the confines of his historical tale, Rousseau created another conception of the state of nature. This time the state of nature is not the immediate and pre-social state of the solitary man. It is already a social state, where humans live in sustained relationships with other humans. It is the state of primitiveness or savagery. If there is the notion of 'the noble savage' in Rousseau's thought, it is drawn from a stage in this *social state of nature*, not the previous pre-social one. There is nothing noble or ignoble in the amoral existence of the purely Natural Man.

Rousseau searches for analogies of this new state of nature in the 'savages' of his age, in the depictions of so-called primitive societies by explorers, missionaries and the like (Rousseau 1997b: 219–221). But to confuse the issue further, he also uses the same analogies to describe the purely natural man. The Caribs and other 'savages' are at the same time members of the societies of human scale and remnants of 'the men of the woods'.

The social state of nature is divided by Rousseau into many distinct stages, which are unnecessary to recount here. The most important thing for us is the point where the social state of nature ends. The pre-social state of nature ended with the rise of language and the ability to reflect. Rousseau obviously had trouble explicating this process. His primal humans had so little in the way of capaci-

ties that language and reason would have literally had to drop out of the sky. He ran into a 'chicken and egg' kind of problem regarding the primacy of complex thought or symbolic expression – a predicament common to the pre-evolutionary philosophy of language (Rousseau 1997b: 146–149).

There are two places where Rousseau talks about the end of the social state of nature. First of all, it ended with the establishment of private property. The word 'establishment' is vital here. In John Locke's conception of property, an object leaves the state of nature and enters the human realm through *work*, human interference of any kind (even picking a piece of fruit). Property is an existential condition of the object, and 'nature' here refers to being untouched, undisturbed (Locke 1993: 274–275, Williams 1980: 76). This is quite close to the modern nature-culture divide. Rousseau's conception is very different:

> 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. 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…. (Rousseau 1997b: 161.)

As can be seen, for Rousseau the essence of property is not the act of work but the mutual recognition by all that something is the property of someone. Property is created only through the consent of the 'simple ones'. This is one of the most evocative of Rousseau's statements, and perhaps the most cited as evidence of his primitivism and one-dimensional criticism of property and civilisation in general. But a different picture emerges if one reads further:

> But in all likelihood things had by then reached a point where they could not continue as they were; for the idea of property, depending as it does on many prior ideas which could only arise successively, did not take shape all at once in man's mind: Much progress had to have been made, industry and enlightenment acquired, transmitted and increased from one age to the next, *before this last stage in the state of Nature* was reached. (Rousseau 1997b: 161; my emphasis – *V. L.*)

Property is a social category that requires previous social development. And, as with the idea of the Return to Nature mentioned previously, Rousseau again notes that, as soon as a certain intellectual and societal development has taken place, humans can no longer escape the shared symbolic world which they have created. Here 'state of nature' refers to *habitual* relationships that are surpassed by social conventions.

The second endpoint of the social state of nature is the establishment of *civil society*. Here things get interesting, because now Rousseau adopts a 'Hobbesian' conception of the war of all against all and even the idea of the original Social Contract. It was the richest ones who noted that upholding their possessions and power over others by mere force of coercion was precarious. Thus they devised a 'clever plot' of institutionalising the situation:

> To this end, after exhibiting to his neighbours the horror of a situation that armed all of them against one another, that made their possessions as burdensome to them as their needs, and in which no one found safety in either poverty or wealth, he easily invented specious reasons to bring them around to his goal: 'Let us unite', he told them, 'to protect the weak from oppression, restrain the ambitious, and secure for everyone the possession of what belongs to him...' [---] All ran forward toward their chains in the belief that they were securing their freedom…. (Rousseau 1997b: 173.)

As we can see, this conception is hardly a legitimising fiction that pictures the rational origins of civil society. This social contract was just one step in the long degeneration from the short happy stage in human history. The terms 'nature' and 'society' are set in a new constellation. Human egoism, which Hobbes saw as essential to humanity, was, according to Rousseau, a social creation, and the establishment of property relations (and many other things) strengthened it beyond anything seen before. All societies contained the kernel of self-aggrandisement, egoism, greed, and more positive feelings. Any sentiments that were relative, that is, realised in mutual relationships between sentient beings which could recognise something of themselves in others, were social in origin. According to Rousseau they existed in a rudimentary form in natural men but, before the advent of language, developed reason and stable relationships, they were little more than instinctive drives (Rousseau 1997b: 218). But the 'destructive forces' of egoism and greed exploded to the brink of catastrophe as societies grew more complex and the division of labour and other developments widened the differences in power and property.

This gave rise to the first social contract, where the acquired relations of property and power were replaced by institutional relations. In Rousseau's terminology, violence gave way to right, and nature gave way to law. Here is yet another meaning of Rousseau's 'nature', which approximates the meaning Hobbes used: violence, mere power as opposed to law. As for Hobbes, the danger of this 'nature' was ever present should the institutional fetters binding it fail. Rousseau's novel

creation was the idea that new kinds of social arrangements could avoid this pit-fall, which he considered inevitable in the European societies of his time.

Conclusion

This brief exploration of the various 'natures' of the Enlightenment shows how futile it is to approach such texts by using only the modern conceptualisations of nature. Our expectation that 'nature' at least partly refers to nature as a physical realm distinct from the cultural realm deceives us. That is only one of many concepts of nature that we have inherited and, despite its dominance today, it has been marginal in important areas of thought in Western history. 'Nature' has been as influential, if not more so, as a moral category.

We need to study the rich historical layers that have been collected under the seemingly simple and self-evident term 'nature'. Today we are tangling with many problems where the meaning of nature-as-the-environment is clearly at issue – the general area of reference is clear. But the vocabulary we have inherited carries with it many meanings that have nothing to do with that area of reference. For example, in environmental discourse such meanings are employed unconsciously. In debates over climate change or genetic engineering, the distinction natural vs. unnatural is not used merely as an 'objective' distinction, considering, for example, the agency behind some phenomena. It is also used as a moral judgement. 'Unnatural' is still something that deviates from a clearly defined order. 'Natural' is something that doesn't need to be questioned, or something that has nothing to do with our choices. These conceptual shifts have to be noticed and arrested. If we take 'nature' at its face value, we will easily invoke ideas that have nothing to do with the matters at hand.

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