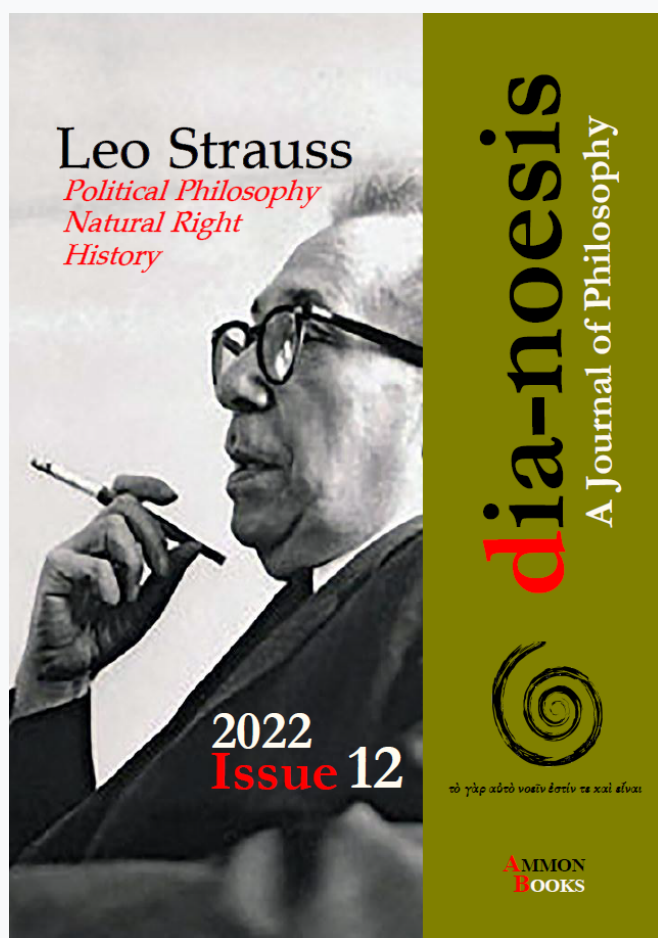


Dia-noesis: A Journal of Philosophy

Vol 12 (2022)

Issue 12 – Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy, Natural Right, History



Rousseau, Leo Strauss, and Denaturalization

Nick Tsampazis

doi: [10.12681/dia.37816](https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.37816)

To cite this article:

Tsampazis, N. (2024). Rousseau, Leo Strauss, and Denaturalization. *Dia-Noesis: A Journal of Philosophy*, 12, 227–248. <https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.37816>

Rousseau, Leo Strauss, and Denaturalization

Nick Tsampazis,
Doctor of Philosophy,
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki
ntsampaz@sch.gr

Abstract: Rousseau's concept of denaturalization refers to the process of transition from the unhappy and corrupt modern man to the citizen of the *Social Contract*. The project is contradictory and fails. Denaturalization is incomplete and wrong. The problem, according to Strauss, comes down to choosing the right natural foundation for a "good life". Neither the unnatural general will nor the imitation of original natural man's way of life in the modern conditions (a *renaturalization* of sorts) can offer it. This requires classic natural law.

Keywords: Denaturalization, renaturalization, general will, social contract sentiment of existence, state of nature, natural right.

Whoever refuses to obey the general will be constrained to do so by the entire body, which means only that he will be forced to be free. For this is the condition that (...) creates the ingenuity and functioning of the political machine.

Rousseau, *Social Contract*

I am not made like any of the ones I have seen; I dare to believe that I am not made like any that exist. If I am worth no more, at least I am different.

Rousseau, *Confessions*

Rousseau was not the first to feel that the modern venture was a radical error and to seek the remedy in a return to classical thought. (...)

But Rousseau was not a “reactionary”. He abandoned himself to modernity.

Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*

According to Strauss, Rousseau is a key figure in modern political thought. He calls him “genius of the first order”.¹ Strauss builds an inspired interpretation that conduced to a relative flourishing of Rousseauian studies in the last quarter of the twentieth century through Strauss’s students.

The most complete reference of Strauss to Rousseau can be found in *Natural Right and History*.² We also have the article *On the Intention of Rousseau*,³ along with two brief but substantial references in *What is Political Philosophy*⁴ and

¹ Leo Strauss, *Seminar in Political Philosophy: Rousseau* (Jonathan Marks ed.), Estate of Leo Strauss, 2014, p. 442. [Hereafter *Seminar*]

² Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1953, pp. 252-294. [Hereafter *NRH*]

³ Leo Strauss, “On the Intention of Rousseau”, *Social Research*, vol. 14, No 4, December 1947, pp. 455-487. [Hereafter *Intention*]

⁴ Leo Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?”. *An introduction to Political Philosophy* (Halail Gildin ed.), Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1989, pp. 3-57. [Hereafter *WIPP*]

The Three Waves of Modernity.⁵ Finally, there is the seminar that Strauss dedicated to Rousseau as a professor at the University of Chicago in 1962.⁶

Strauss discovers in Rousseau deep and timeless reflections about ethics, law, science, happiness and politics, thematics that lie at the core of his own thinking. He assigns to Rousseau a pivotal position on the path to what he calls “the crisis of modernity”. While Rousseau seems to gravitate towards a form of premodern political thinking, opposing the course of political theories of early modernity, he ultimately takes the decisive step of radically detaching modernity from its classical roots. As it has been written, Rousseau was “an ancient with a modern soul”.⁷ According to Strauss, Rousseau and his intellectual offsprings, German Idealism and Romanticism, formed the “second wave of modernity”, which emerged as a reaction to the “first wave of modernity”, as represented predominantly by Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Locke. Rousseau, he writes, criticized the first wave “in the name of two classical ideas: the city and virtue, on the one hand, and nature, on the other”. He notes a tension in Rousseau between the return to the classical city and the return to nature, commenting that “this tension is the substance of Rousseau’s thought”.⁸ Strauss also insists on Rousseau’s radical critique and rejection of natural law (classical and modern), arguing that the French philosopher introduced in its place the general will, with history being the creative principle of man and his man-made world. The pivotal position of the concept of nature in Rousseau’s work and its uneasy harmonization with his politics, render denaturalization problematic.

Rousseau himself connects denaturalization with the formation of *Social Contract*’s society and citizen. This type of

⁵ Leo Strauss, “The Three Waves of Modernity”. *An introduction to Political Philosophy* (Halail Gildin ed.), Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1989, pp. 81-98. [Hereafter *TWM*]

⁶ Leo Strauss, *Seminar*.

⁷ Ian Hampsher-Monk, *A History of Modern Political Thought. Major Political Thinkers from Hobbes to Marx*. Blackwell, Oxford UK & Cambridge USA, 1992, p. 153.

⁸ Strauss, *NRH*, 254.

society signifies the end of the state of nature. Nature has many different meanings in Rousseau. Most of them derive directly or indirectly from his extensive description of the original man of nature in *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*.⁹ For Rousseau, this work was “of the greatest importance”,¹⁰ as it contained his principles proven “with the greatest boldness, not to say audacity”.¹¹ Strauss also writes: “the *Second Discourse* is indeed Rousseau’s most philosophic work; it contains his fundamental reflections. In particular, the *Social Contract* rests on the foundations laid in the *Second Discourse*”.¹² In what follows, I will briefly elaborate on Rousseau’s nature and city alongside Strauss’s corresponding interpretations and views. This discussion will serve as a basis for illuminating denaturalization.

Rousseau uses the term denaturalization to describe the process of eliminating or transforming human natural features in order to create a new human type, organically dependent on the political body to which it belongs. This human type is a prerequisite for the operation and maintenance of Rousseau’s ideal state. He writes:

Natural man is entirely for himself. He is numerical unity, the absolute whole which is relative only to itself or its kind. Civil man is only a fractional unity dependent on the denominator; his value is determined by his relation to the whole, which is

⁹ But a simple definition of nature is found in *Emile*: “(Our not acquired) dispositions, (...) constrained by our habits, are more or less corrupted by our opinions. Before this corruption they are what I call in us *nature*”. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Emile or on Education”. *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, vol. 13 (Christopher Kelly & Allan Bloom transl. & eds), Dartmouth College Press, Hanover and London, 2010, p. 163; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Émile ou de l’Éducation”. *Ouvres Complètes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, vol. 4, (Bernard Gagnebin & Marcel Raymond eds), Gallimard, Paris, 1969, p. 248. [Hereafter *Emile*, p. 163; *O.C.* 4, p. 248]

¹⁰ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “The Confessions”. *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, vol. 5, (Roger D. Masters, Christopher Kelly & Peter G. Stillman eds, Christopher Kelly transl.), Dartmouth College Press, Hanover and London, 1995, book 8, p. 326. [Hereafter *Confessions*, 8, p. 326]

¹¹ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 9, p. 341.

¹² Strauss, *NRH*, p. 264.

the social body. Good social institutions are those that best know how to denature man, to take his absolute existence from him in order to give him a relative one and transport the I into the common unity, with the result that each individual believes himself no longer one but a part of the unity and no longer feels except within the whole.¹³

The natural man to whom Rousseau refers here is his famous original man. This creature is supposed to live in the state of nature in the depths of time. The state of nature finds in Rousseau its most rigorous scientific treatment,¹⁴ in order for the foundations of natural law, that is, of ethics and politics, to be illuminated.¹⁵ Not only this original man lacks natural sociability (as Hobbes' man of nature), he also lacks logic. This lonely creature lives in perfect harmony within the natural mechanism of the world, without a single element of civilization. It is determined mainly by the instinct of self-preservation, called "love of oneself" (*amour de soi-même*),¹⁶

¹³ *Emile*, p. 164; *O.C.* 4, p. 249. Elsewhere Rousseau notes: "Plato only purified the heart of man, Lycurgus denatured it" (*ibid.*, p. 165; p. 250). Strauss also uses the term "denaturalization" in the same sense as Rousseau (Strauss, *Seminar*, pp. 98, 101, 220, 222, 310, 495; *NRH*, p. 285). By this word Bloom means a certain way of politicizing the natural man in Rousseau of the *Social Contract* but not in Rousseau of *Emile*: "Society has always demanded an abandonment of natural freedom and an unnatural bending to the needs of community. Spartan denaturing, Christian piety, and *bourgeois* calculation are, according to Rousseau, the three powerful alternative modes of making this accommodation. The first is the only one which does not divide and hence corrupt; but the undesirability of the Spartan example is fully expressed in the word "denaturing". This is why Emile has been subjected to no law but only to necessity and has always been left free to follow his inclinations". Allan Bloom, "Introduction". *Emile or of Education* (Allan Bloom transl.), Basic Books, New York, 1979, p. 26. In certain other instances Rousseau uses the term with the meaning of "alteration" or "degradation" (for example, see *Emile*, p. 169; *O.C.* 4, p. 255).

¹⁴ Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, p. 19; *O.C.* 3, p. 131.

¹⁵ Strauss, *NRH*, p. 266.

¹⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on the Origins of Inequality". *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, vol. 3 (Roger D. Masters & Christopher Kelly eds, Judith R. Bush, Roger D. Masters, Christopher Kelly & Terence Marshall transl.), Dartmouth College Press, Hanover and London, 1992 p. 91; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discours sur l' Origine et les Fondements de

and by the “natural compassion” (pitié),¹⁷ which mitigates the hardness of the former. These two natural emotions constitute the basis of natural law, as natural law can only “naturally” and not logically govern this prerational human being.¹⁸ Moreover, the original man is constantly experiencing a sense of existence.¹⁹ Rousseau attributes to him natural goodness (moral evil is a cultural category). This goodness is his own natural and unacquired virtue, in contrast to the acquired political virtue of the social man. His only noticeable difference with animals is his potential for perfection (perfectibilité).²⁰ Rousseau went all the way back to the original man in search of human nature (as Hobbes had done), but, according to Strauss, came out empty-handed, due to the latter’s lack of humanity. So, Strauss argues, this subhuman creature cannot function as a real, positive model for civilized man or society.²¹

l’ Inégalité parmi les Hommes”. *Ouvres Complètes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, vol. 3 (Bernard Gagnebin & Marcel Raymond eds), Gallimard, Paris, 1964, p. 219. [Hereafter *Second Discourse*, p. 91; *O.C.* 3, p. 219].

¹⁷ Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, p. 36; *O.C.* 3, p. 154.

¹⁸ Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, p. 14; *O.C.* 3, p. 125. According to Strauss, Rousseau makes this hesitant reference to natural law, deviating from the traditional and modern teaching of natural right (*ibid.*, pp. 13-15; pp. 124-126). In Rousseau’s view, the natural law does not make logical demands for its understanding and acceptance by man (Strauss, *Seminar*, pp. 31-33, 42). Thus, Strauss adds, as nature recedes or alters in the course of human history, this natural law will also disappear, to be replaced by the general will, as we shall see.

¹⁹ Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, p. 43; *O.C.* 3, p. 164.

²⁰ Strauss, *NRH*, p. 265; Strauss, *Seminar*, p. 55; Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, p. 26; *O.C.* 3, p. 144.

²¹ Strauss, *NRH*, p. 274. As we shall see later, however, Strauss is not entirely consistent in this. Here, he does not seem to realize that in Rousseau *par excellence* the absence may become more noticeable than presence. The original man in Rousseau’s “dialectical” thinking and evocative wording embodies a happy absence of the features of modern man (essentially bourgeois). He is not socially dependent, he does not work hard, he is not competitive, he does not pretend, he is not vain, he has not lost touch with himself, he ignores property. We would say that, in general, his place in the world is characterized by self-sufficiency and authenticity. He *can*, therefore, be used as a model. Rousseau’s description of the original man of nature could perhaps be considered a vivid commentary on Aristotle’s view that man outside society can be either an

Strauss emphasizes how difficult the exit from this condition turns out to be, something that Rousseau himself lays stress on, citing a number of reasons for the problems that such a departure presents. This man appears to live in a natural context perfectly harmonious, functional and circular. Rousseau writes in this regard: "Who does not see that everything seems to remove Savage man from the temptation and means of ceasing to be savage? (...) His modest needs are so easily found at hand, and he is so far from the degree of knowledge necessary for desiring to acquire greater knowledge, that he can have neither foresight nor curiosity. (...) There is always the same order and the same revolutions".²² Rousseau finally states that the departure was brought about solely by the need to survive in the face of unpredictably changing physical conditions of the natural environment (Strauss refers to "mechanical causation",²³ thus indicating the absence of any teleology).²⁴ This means that history undertakes the role of the protagonist. Humanity is

animal or a God (*Politics*, 1253a28-30). Rousseau describes him as follows:

Let us conclude that wandering in the forests, without industry, without speech, without domicile, without war, and without liaisons, with no need of his fellows, likewise with no desire to harm them, perhaps never even recognizing anyone individually, Savage man, subject to few passions and self-sufficient, had only the feelings and intellect suited to that state; he felt only his true needs, looked at only what he believed he had an interest to see; and his intelligence made no more progress than his vanity. If by chance he made some discovery, he was all the less able to communicate it because he did not recognize even his Children. Art perished with the inventor. There was neither education nor progress; the generations multiplied uselessly. And everyone always started at the same point, Centuries passed by in all the crudeness of the first ages; the species was already old, and man remained ever a child. (Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, p. 40; *O.C.* 3, pp. 159-160)

²² Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, p. 28; *O.C.* 3, p. 144.

²³ Strauss, *NRH*, p. 272.

²⁴ At this point Rousseau differentiates himself from Hobbes and comes close to Spinoza, who criticizes Hobbes for his attempt to establish *Leviathan* through the application of rational natural law as imperium in imperio within the territory of nature. See Baruch Spinoza, "Epistle 50 to Jarig Jelles". *Complete Works* (Michael L. Morgan ed., Samuel Shirley transl.), Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis/Cambridge, 2002, pp. 891-892.

ultimately history's unplanned work. According to Strauss, man for Rousseau is an almost completely malleable being,²⁵ the product of either random historical developments or human conventions. Strauss traces in Rousseau an emphasis on history (not yet in the form of advanced historicism) and a dominance of 17th-century New Science, the two main

²⁵ Strauss, *NRH*, p. 271. This is an excessive interpretation on the part of Strauss, as Gourevitch has convincingly shown. According to Gourevitch, Strauss confuses "almost unlimited perfectibility" with "almost unlimited malleability". See Victor Gourevitch, "On Strauss on Rousseau." *The Challenge of Rousseau* (Eve Grace & Christopher Kelly eds), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012, pp. 156-157. Strauss himself, associating Rousseau with Kant's formalist ethics and distinguishing between moral and legal dimensions in German legal thought, denounces the historical flow and the immanent and conventional general will as a provider of substantive regulatory principles and values in place of the objective and transcendental natural right. Nevertheless, he recognizes in Rousseau an awareness of the problem and some attempts at thinking in a somewhat transhistorical way (Strauss, *WIPP*, pp. 53-54). The following Rousseau reference can be cited as an example: "Thus, although men had come to have less endurance and although natural pity had already undergone some alteration, this period of the development of human faculties, maintaining a golden mean between the indolence of the primitive state and the petulant activity of our amour-propre, must have been the happiest and most durable epoch. The more one thinks on it, the more one finds that this state was the least subject to revolutions, the best for man, and that he must have come out of it only by some fatal accident which for the common utility ought never to have happened" (Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, p. 48; *O.C.* 3, p. 170). Like Rousseau, Strauss engages in historical research to discover transhistorical purposes and principles. See Preston King, "Introduction". *The History of Ideas. An Introduction to Method* (Preston King ed.), Barnes and Noble Books, London & New York, 1983, p. 16. As for Rousseau, so for Strauss "the purpose of the enterprise is essentially therapeutic" for the crisis of the historical present (John G. Gunnell, "The Myth of the Tradition". *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 72, no. 1, March 1978, p. 123). Strauss does not consider Rousseau to be an exponent of what he calls historicism, a strand of thought positing the existence of a field of reality outside nature that has constituted the particular object of historical research (Leo Strauss, "Political Philosophy and History". *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 10, no. 1, January 1949, pp. 33-34). This characterization refers mainly to historical thought after Rousseau, with Hegel being the most famous exponent (Strauss, *TWM*, p. 91; *NRH*, p. 9).

causes behind what he calls the “crisis of modernity”.²⁶ The historical period after the exit is the “second” state of nature. It is often confused with the first (i.e. the world of subhuman), something that creates many problems of interpretation and understanding of Rousseau. Rousseau himself says of this confusion: “This was precisely the point reached by most of the Savage Peoples known to us, and it is for want of sufficiently distinguishing among ideas and noticed how far these Peoples already were from the first state of Nature, that many have hastened to conclude that man is naturally cruel and that he needs Civilization in order to make him gentler. On the contrary, nothing is so gentle as man in his primitive stage (...)”.²⁷ In the second state of nature the principles of the first are actually undermined and abolished. The second state of nature is the history of society before Rousseau’s social contract, from the primitive peoples to the despotism of Rousseau’s time. It concludes with Rousseau’s version of the social contract.²⁸ Rousseau summarizes this as follows: “(...) inequality, being almost null in the state of Nature, draws its force and growth from the development of our faculties and the progress of the human Mind, and finally becomes stable and legitimate by the establishment of property and Laws”.²⁹ But in parallel to the course of social developments, an equally important course of moral or anthropological decline is unfolding: “The Savage lives within himself; the sociable man, always outside of himself, knows how to live only in the opinion of others, and

²⁶ Strauss, *TWM*, pp. 81-82.

²⁷ Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, p. 48; *O.C.* 3, p. 170.

²⁸ Rousseau also describes the precedent of an earlier, deceitful social contract that created a political society defined by the political domination of the poor by the de facto rich (Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, pp. 53-54; *O.C.* p. 177). This society is not considered by Rousseau as a real exit from the state of nature. It is a society that consolidates its sufferings politically and eventually slips into despotism, which is the ultimate social and anthropological collapse with the master-slave relationship it establishes.

²⁹ Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, p. 67; *O.C.* 3, p. 193.

it is, so to speak, from their judgment alone that he draws the sentiment of his own existence”.³⁰

The survival of the human species was in danger. The state of nature, idyllic in its original form, gradually evolved into a hobbesian war of all against all. Rousseau says that “men have reached the point where obstacles to their self-preservation in the state of nature prevail by their resistance over the forces each individual can use to maintain himself in that state. Then that primitive state can no longer subsist, and the human race would perish if it did not change its manner of living”.³¹ Strauss emphasizes that the creation of a civil society in Rousseau is based on the right to self-preservation. This right, as we have seen, is the basic natural principle that governs the original man of nature. Therefore, we can say that the foundation of Rousseau’s new civil society is a “natural” departure from the state of nature.

In his new society, Rousseau seeks to apply in politics some of the principles he discovered during his anthropological research of the original state of nature. However, he often adopts rhetoric against nature. It aims to convince the reader that nature is being abandoned and a saving denaturalization is taking place. He writes:

This passage from the state of nature to the civil state produces a remarkable change in man, by substituting justice for instinct in his behavior and giving his actions the morality they previously lacked. (...) Although in this state he deprives himself of several advantages given him by nature, he gains such great ones, his faculties are exercised and developed, his ideas broadened, his feelings ennobled. (...) What man loses by the social contract is his natural freedom and an unlimited right to everything that tempts him and that he

³⁰ Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, p. 65-66; *O.C.* 3, pp. 192-193.

³¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Social Contract”. *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, vol. 4 (Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly eds, Judith R. Bush, Roger D. Masters & Christopher Kelly transl.), Dartmouth College Press, Hanover and London, 1994, book 1, Chapter 6, p.138; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, «Du Contrat Social; ou Principes du Droit Politique». *Ouvres Complètes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, vol. 3 (Bernard Gagnebin & Marcel Raymond eds), Gallimard, Paris, 1963, p. 360. [Hereafter, *Social Contract*, 1, 6, p. 138; *O.C.* 3, p. 360]

can get; what he gains is civil freedom and proprietorship of everything he possesses. (...) One must distinguish carefully between natural freedom, which is limited only by the force of the individual, and civil freedom, which is limited by the general will. (...) To the foregoing (...) could be added moral freedom, which alone makes man truly the master of himself. For the impulsion of appetite alone is slavery, and obedience to the law one has prescribed for oneself is freedom".³²

Elsewhere he points out that it is wrong to remain faithful to nature within society. Physical impulses collide with political obligations, with the result that the person who tries to maintain his naturalness and at the same time be consistent as a citizen fails in both, experiencing a painful constant internal conflict. "He who in the civil order wants to preserve the primacy of the sentiments of nature does not know what he wants. Always in contradiction with himself, always floating between his inclinations and his duties, he will never be either man or citizen. He will be good neither for himself nor for others. He will be one of these men of our days: a Frenchman, an Englishman, a bourgeois. He will be nothing."³³

Denaturalization aims at the creation of a new human type, the "citizen" of Rousseau's new society. This man is a direct product of the social contract. He is created together with the political body, which is a collective moral being. "Instantly, in place of the private person of each contracting party, this act of association produces a moral and collective body, composed of as many members as there are voices in the assembly, which receives from this same act its unity, its common *self*, its life, and its will".³⁴ In Rousseau's description the political body acquires a personal form of moral existence adopted by each of its members. Each member internalizes

³² Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 1, 8, pp. 141-142; *O.C.* 3, pp. 364-365). It is hard to believe that the visionary of an earthly Garden of Eden in the *Second Discourse* suddenly became hostile to nature. In fact, Rousseau is turning against the alienated late state of nature. Dedicated to the institutional political solution to the crisis of humanity, he slanders nature. A pre-eminent exponent of a denaturalization appears.

³³ Rousseau, *Emile*, p. 164; *O.C.* 4, pp. 249-250.

³⁴ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 1, 6, p. 139; *O.C.* 3, p. 361.

this common self and transforms itself into a deeply public or political being. Now he thinks and wills like this common self, that is, he thinks and wills like the state. According to Rousseau, nothing can “hurt” the political body without all its members instantly feeling this.³⁵ We could say that the individual and the common self, the part and the whole, tend to be equalized, not only politically but also existentially.³⁶ Every citizen is no longer a *sui generis* natural person, but an existence dependent and marked by the common self, that is, by his broader, objective and selfless self. So, here there is no dependence on anything other than himself. There is a dependence of the narrow self on a wider and more virtuous self. Rousseau sees this dependence as a release from the biological and psychological limitations of the individual self. As he puts it, “as each gives himself to all, he gives himself to no one”.³⁷ Total dependence on a political body liberates. The social contract, “by giving each Citizen to the fatherland, guarantees him against all personal dependence”.³⁸ It frees the citizen from personal dependence, which enslaved him during the long historical course of the state of nature. Dependence on the political body is a kind of denaturalization.

For Rousseau, natural self’s first law is “to attend to his own preservation, his first cares are those he owes himself”.³⁹ The self after the social contract is governed by the public interest, that is, by the will of an enlarged self. This is the result of denaturalization. We can call the enlarged self “political self”. The political self is characterized by the paradox of the part being one and the same with the whole, of the individual personal existence coinciding with the collective public existence. But while the political self itself

³⁵ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 1, 7, p. 140; *O.C.* 3, p. 363.

³⁶ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 1, 6, p. 139; *O.C.* 3, p. 361.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 1, 7, p. 141; *O.C.* 3, p. 364. The social contract includes also “the total alienation of each associate, with all his rights, to the whole community” (Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 1, 6, p. 138; *O.C.* 3, p. 360).

³⁹ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 1, 2, p. 132; *O.C.* 3, p. 352.

transcends the individual self, its world is shrinking. Its own universe extends only to the city walls. Rousseau states that everything outside the political community is indifferent or hostile to the political self. The natural compassion for every fellow human being that the original man of nature instinctively possessed seems to have been lost.⁴⁰ Patriotism conflicts with humanism.⁴¹ This is another outcome of denaturalization.

Nature appears to no longer exercise any regulatory influence. In the *Second Discourse* we find none of Rousseau's hesitant references to natural law, since nature is supposed to have been abandoned. A new regulatory principle for the political self is needed. It can only come from its broader version which is the common self, the political body as a whole. But the political body wills and acts on the basis of the demands of the general will. The general will is the essence of its existence, and therefore the rule that governs the political self. The general will is what remains when the elements of differentiation between individual wills are contrasted and mutually countermanded: "take away from these same wills the pluses and minuses, that cancel each other out, and the remaining sum of the differences is the general will".⁴² The general will is

⁴⁰ We read in *Emile*: "Every particular society, when it is narrow and unified, is estranged from the all-encompassing society. Every patriot is harsh to foreigners. They are only men. They are nothing in his eyes. This is a drawback, inevitable but not compelling. The essential thing is to be good to the people with whom one lives. Abroad, the Spartan was ambitious, avaricious, iniquitous. But disinterestedness, equity, and concord reigned within his walls" (Rousseau, *Emile*, pp. 163-164; *O.C.* 4, pp. 248-249).

⁴¹ See Strauss, *Seminar*, p. 99. Here Strauss speaks of a relevant passage by Rousseau himself. The full passage states: "Patriotism and humanity (...) are two virtues incompatible in their energy, and especially among an entire people. The Legislator who wants them both will get neither one nor the other. This compatibility has never been seen and never will be, because it is contrary to nature, and because one cannot give the same passion two aims". Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Letters from the Mountain". *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, vol. 9 (Christopher Kelly & Eve Grace ed., Christopher Kelly & Judith Bush transl.), Dartmouth College Press, Hanover and London, 2001, p. 149, note 9.

⁴² Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 2, 3, p. 147; *O.C.* 3, p. 371.

manifested in the form of laws enacted through the vote of the political body in its entirety. It is always right⁴³ and always rational.⁴⁴ It exists even when it is not adopted.⁴⁵ It favours “by nature” the general interest.⁴⁶ As Strauss rightly observes, natural right in the case of Rousseau is the real foundation of his new society and its laws have absorbed it. So, every law it produces is correct, just as natural law was “naturally” correct. Rousseau dethrones the natural right and put general will in its place.⁴⁷ He denaturalizes natural right through a new public right.⁴⁸

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Its rationality derives not from its content but from its general character, which arises from the participatory process of determining it. Political logic for Rousseau seems to have no natural or transcendent origin. It is born of history and society. The advent of the general will denaturalize politically natural right, something that provokes Strauss’ negative critique.

⁴⁵ According to Rousseau, for cognitive or moral reasons the general will may not be followed: “One always wants what is good for oneself, but one does not always see it. The people is never corrupted, but it is often fooled and only then does it appear to want what is bad” (Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 2, 3, p. 147; *O.C.* 3, p. 371). Enlightenment via education is required. As Strauss writes, for Rousseau “the people must be taught to know what it wills, and the individual, who as a natural being is concerned exclusively with his private good, must be transformed into a citizen who unhesitatingly prefers the common good to his private good” (Strauss, *NRH*, p. 287).

⁴⁶ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 2, 3, p. 147; *O.C.* 3, p. 371.

⁴⁷ Strauss, *NRH*, p. 286

⁴⁸ Strauss, *WIPP*, pp. 52-53; *TWM*, p. 91. Here, Strauss criticizes Rousseau for a formalistic perception of the general will. In *WIPP* he worries that it could lead to extreme relativism. Exaggerating, he comments that we could also introduce cannibalism as an expression of sanctified popular will. He goes on to argue that the general will is an attempt by Rousseau to realize the ideal and to identify the real with the logical. The general will is the product of consultation, from which emerges a regulatory principle that is binding to all without the involvement of a transcendental factor. The requirement of one is the limit of the other. Their content is secondary; what matters is finding a common ground. This common ground is the substitute for the substantial moral content of the principles of natural right. Rousseau seeks to create a realistic public right, without any element of transcendence. But this lacks sufficient moral potential and seems to be more of a legal than a moral principle (pp. 52-54; for the political role of

The general will is introduced by Rousseau in order to democratically solve the eternal problem of the relationship between the individual and society.⁴⁹ To begin with, the

the general will in place of the natural law, see Arthur M. Melzer, "Rousseau's Moral Realism: Replacing Natural Law with the General Will". *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 77, no. 3, September 1983, pp. 648-650). Strauss argues that the general will cannot replace natural law. The people, the majority, cannot undertake such a high task. It is something that Rousseau also realizes and that is why he is recruiting various enlighteners "from above". Strauss emphasizes the role of legislator in Rousseau (Strauss, *NRH*, pp. 287-288). According to Rousseau, the legislator undertakes a "divine" task and is an "extraordinary" person within the state. "Gods would be needed to give laws to men", he writes (*Social Contract*, 2, 7, p. 154; *O.C.* 3, p. 381). Legislator's pivotal role in denaturalization is obvious: "One who dares to undertake the finding of a people should feel that he is capable of changing human nature, so to speak; of transforming each individual, who by himself is a perfect and solitary whole, into a part of a larger whole from which that individual receives, in a sense, his life and his being; of altering man's constitution in order to strengthen it; of substituting a partial and moral existence for the physical and independent existence we have all received from nature" (ibid, p. 155; *O.C.* 3, p. 381). But the legislator's intervention contradicts the democratic structure of the state and thus Rousseau replaces it with political religion (Strauss, *NRH*, p. 288). In his lectures on Rousseau, Strauss makes a brief reference to another crucial institution for denaturalization, namely Rousseau's relatively unknown public education (Strauss, *Seminar*, p. 98). Indeed, Rousseau writes:

It is education that must give the national form to souls, and direct their opinions and their tastes so that they will be patriots by inclination, by passion, by necessity. Upon opening her eyes a child ought to see the fatherland and until death ought to see nothing but it. Every true republican imbibes the love of the fatherland, that is to say, of the laws and of freedom along with his mother's milk. This love makes up his whole existence; he sees only the fatherland, he lives only for it; as soon as he is alone, he is nothing; as soon as he has no more fatherland, he no longer is, and if he is not dead, he is worse than dead. [Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Considerations on the Government of Poland and on its Planned Reformation". *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, vol. 11 (Christopher Kelly ed., Christopher Kelly & Judith Bush transl.), Dartmouth College Press, Hanover and London, 2005, p. 179]

⁴⁹ This problem also concerns Strauss in various forms: as a relation of gifted individuals or minorities in relation to the majority of the mediocre; as a relation of philosophical or scientific knowledge with popular belief or opinion (see Strauss, *Intention*); as a need these crucial for the foundation of society issues to be forgotten by its own members

general will deviates from every individual will.⁵⁰ On the other hand, it is a product of everyone, since everyone participated in its formation. So, a kind of freedom is still enjoyed by the citizen, a freedom that is not natural but social. From another point of view, it could be considered a natural freedom of the common self, i.e. of every citizen's political self. The transmutation of natural man's natural freedom into the social freedom of the citizen is compensated by the security of the citizen provided by the political body (society is formed for reasons of self-preservation). He has thus found "a form of association that defends and protects the person and goods of each associate with all the common force, and by means of which each one, uniting with all, nonetheless obeys only himself and remains as free as before".⁵¹ The relation of the citizen to the political body is what Rousseau himself calls "fractional unity" referring to the denaturalized natural man.

In the society of the *Social Contract*, every citizen is at the same time a member of the political body and of the Sovereign, since in the beginning each member contracts as a natural person with the political body, which from then on becomes his broader political self. Rousseau writes: "Each individual, contracting with himself so to speak, finds himself engaged in a double relation: namely, toward private individual as a member of the Sovereign and toward the Sovereign as a member of the state".⁵² His desires are "socialized". Every citizen wants what the state wants and

for reasons of functionality and security (Strauss, *NRH*, p. 288); as a need for "external" writing that can be read "between the lines" to protect great writers from persecution, to educate apprentice philosophers and to responsibly prevent social unrest (Leo Strauss, "Persecution and the Art of Writing". In Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 1952, pp. 34, 36-37).

⁵⁰ Durkheim speaks of a sui generis entity that transcends individuals and constitutes what we call "society". Emile E. Durkheim, *Montesquieu and Rousseau Forerunners of Sociology*, 2nd edition (Ralph Manheim transl.), University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1970, p. 103.

⁵¹ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 1, 6, p. 138; *O.C.* 3, p. 360.

⁵² Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 1, 7, pp. 139-140; *O.C.* 3, p. 362.

the state, the Sovereign, “by the sole fact of being, is always what it ought to be”.⁵³

This means that as a political being he is politically sincere or authentic (there is no longer an individual-society gap), and also politically self-sufficient, as he is able to realize his rational desires by having the support of the entire political body that wants what he wants, that is, he is able to satisfy his rational political desires and needs with his own political forces.⁵⁴

As Strauss notes, Rousseau could not be completely satisfied with the political solution of the Social Contract.

⁵³ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 1, 7, p. 140; *O.C.* 3, p. 363. The citizen seems to identify with the state. Strauss argues that the private sphere in Rousseau’s society is virtually non-existent, since it is the result of an act of recognition by the general will and depends on it (Strauss, *Seminar*, p. 221). He states that Rousseau formulated a totalitarianism of “free society” but surmises that he would be opposed to any kind of totalitarianism of a government (*WIPP*, p. 53).

⁵⁴ Rousseau often describes self-sufficiency as a balance between desires and needs on the one hand and the objective possibilities of satisfying them on the other: “It is thus that nature, which does everything for the best, constituted him in the beginning. It gives him with immediacy only the desires necessary to his preservation and the faculties sufficient to satisfy them. It put all the others, as it were, in reserve in the depth of his soul, to be developed there when needed. Only in this original state are power and desire in equilibrium and man is not unhappy” (Rousseau, *Emile*, p. 211; *O.C.* 4, p. 304). In Rousseau, self-sufficiency is associated with freedom (as the absence of dependence), with happiness, with inner strength. For various references to self-sufficiency, see Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, pp. 27, 34, 40, 42; *O.C.* 3, pp. 143, 152, 160, 162; Rousseau, *Emile*, pp. 198, 211, 256, 309; *O.C.* 4, pp. 290, 303-304, 361, 426. Rousseau’s conception of authenticity is related to the concept of nature and is based on his own description of the original man. Rousseau states that this man always carries and has at his disposal all of himself (Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, p. 21; *O.C.* 3, p. 136). He also has a direct and transparent relationship with himself. He is the one who should be in every situation. It is, in a way, a natural automaton. There are no internal contradictions. The self is an internally harmonious and functional whole. All this is accompanied by a gentle, pure, pleasant and lasting experience of every moment of its existence, the famous “sentiment of existence” (Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, p. 28; *O.C.* 3, p. 144). Self-sufficiency and authenticity are a sort of ideal types on the basis of which the whole of Rousseau’s work can be better illuminated.

Rousseau writes: “Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains. (...) How did this change occur? I do not know. What can make that change legitimate? I believe I can answer this question”.⁵⁵ For Rousseau every society is bondage; at best it is legitimate bondage.⁵⁶ So he turns again to the model of the original state of nature, which, despite all his reservations about it, has never ceased to fascinate him.⁵⁷ According to Strauss, every proposal for a solution to the human problem by Rousseau is evaluated by Rousseau himself on the basis of the following principle: “The good life consists in the closest approximation to the state of nature which is possible on the level of humanity”.⁵⁸ Life in the society of the *Social Contract* is such an approximation. Political and moral freedom is reminiscent of natural freedom, political and moral virtue of natural goodness. Collective legislation that protects everyone is reminiscent of physical compassion⁵⁹ and dependence on the impersonal general will of dependence on “things” (and not individuals) in the original state of nature.⁶⁰ Yet, in the end, Rousseau

⁵⁵ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 1, 1, p. 131; *O.C.* P. 351

⁵⁶ Strauss, *TWM*, pp. 92-93

⁵⁷ We should keep in mind that while writing *Social Contract*, Rousseau was also working on *Emile*. In the latter, he acquaints us with natural education, whose main idea is the unhindered expression and utilization of the pupil’s emanate inclinations within a natural context, away from social influences.

⁵⁸ Strauss, *NRH*, p. 282.

⁵⁹ Strauss argues that the decisive development was the decline of compassion along the course of history in the state of nature (*Seminar*, p. 70). He also points out that in *Social Contract*’s society the conventional substitute for natural compassion is the legislation by the all-inclusive citizen body (*NRH*, p. 285).

⁶⁰ Durkheim’s approach is analogous. He writes: “We are now in a position to see the perfect continuity in Rousseau’s thinking from the *Second Discourse* to *The Social Contract*. The *state of nature*, as described in the former, is a kind of peaceful anarchy in which individuals, independent of each other and without ties between them, depend only upon the abstract force of nature. In the *civil* state, as viewed by Rousseau, the situation is the same, though in a different form. The individuals are unconnected with each other; there is a minimum of personal relation between them, but they are dependent upon a new force, which is superimposed on the natural forces but has the same

was not satisfied. According to Strauss's description, Rousseau ultimately chooses universal, indefinite and genuine natural freedom over political and moral freedom (that is, freedom as autonomy).⁶¹ Indeed, in his last work, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, Rousseau becomes a lonely, dreamy walker that walks in the steps of the original subhuman. There, Rousseau describes himself moving away alone into the untainted natural environment, trying to "return" to the freedom of the original man of nature,⁶² to recapture his natural self-sufficiency and authenticity. Strauss observes that the lonely dreamer, being a child of civilization, is able to enjoy this way of life much more than the subhuman himself, because he is conscious of how he lives.⁶³

Strauss focuses on how the lonely dreamer experiences the "sentiment of existence", the essence of this way of life. The sentiment of existence has nothing to do with disciplined meditation. Its main feature is the absence of restrictions and needs. The lonely dreamer feels that he is different from his compatriots, as the kind of his freedom sanctifies his individual peculiarity. At the same time, he considers himself the consciousness of society. He rebels against society on behalf of others. He feels marginal. Strauss likens him to the contemporary artist, who contributes socially by leaving his society and living it from the outside.

In the end, it seems that solitary dreaming is the kind of life that satisfies to the fullest the criterion of "the closest

generality and necessity, namely, the *general will*. In the state of nature, man submits voluntarily to the natural forces and spontaneously takes the direction they impose because he feels instinctively that this is to his advantage and that there is nothing better for him to do. His action coincides with his will. In the civil state, he submits just as freely to the general will because it is of his own making and because in obeying it he is obeying himself" (Emile E. Durkheim, op. cit., p. 135).

⁶¹ Strauss, *NRH*, pp. 281-282.

⁶² Strauss, *NRH*, p. 293. His freedom is radical and general. It has no unnatural limitations. It has no specific purpose and is, in a way, his "virtue". It is associated with the absence of human features in him. For Strauss this deficit is a problem, but it enables Rousseau to form a conception of radical, universal, and irresponsible freedom as the highest human characteristic and superiority over society.

⁶³ Strauss, *NRH*, p. 292

approximation to the state of nature which is possible on the level of humanity”. According to Strauss, Rousseau goes so far as to argue that the highest justification for the existence of a political society is few individuals’ possibility to experience the happiness of a life on its margins.⁶⁴ Denaturalization only makes sense in the perspective of a blissful renaturalization.

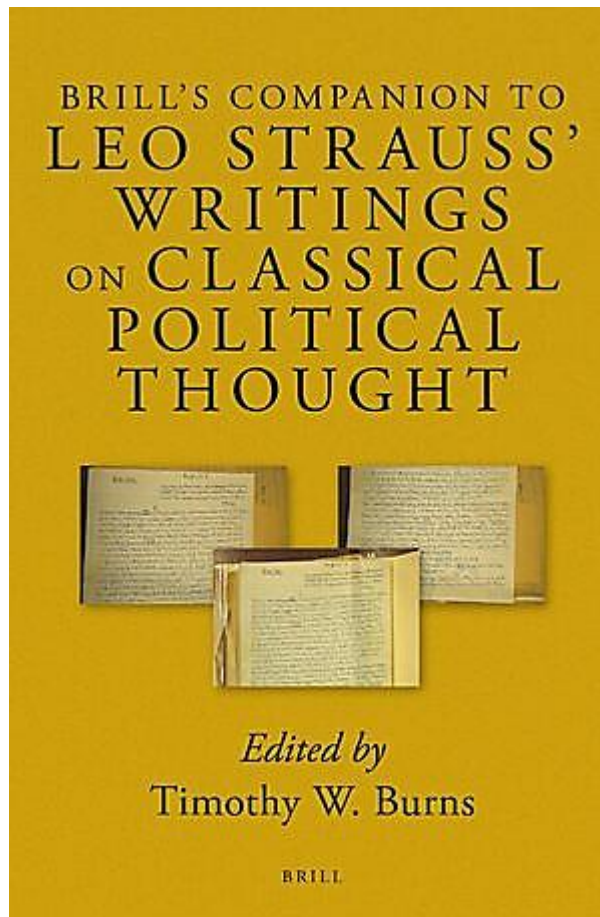
Conclusion

Denaturalization, according to Rousseau, is the political creation of a new man, the citizen of the Social Contract, doing away with the unhappy and corrupt modern man. We have here an extreme and paradoxical version of the modern Baconian project of knowledge and control of nature. The task of denaturalization is complex and inconsistent. At this point it is necessary to define Rousseau’s nature with more precision. Nature in him can be:

⁶⁴ For the description of the solitary dreamer by Strauss, see *NRH*, pp. 292-294. Rousseau describes him as follows: “But if there is a state in which the soul finds a solid enough base to rest itself on entirely and to gather its whole being into, without needing to recall the past or encroach upon the future; in which time is nothing for it; in which the present lasts forever without any trace of time’s passage; without any other sentiment of deprivation or of enjoyment, pleasure or pain, desire or fear, except that alone of our existence, and having this sentiment alone fit completely; as long as he who finds himself in it can call himself happy, not with an imperfect, poor, and relative happiness, such as one finds in the pleasures of life, but with a sufficient, perfect, and full happiness, which leaves in the soul no emptiness it might feel a need to fill. (...) What does one enjoy in such a situation? Nothing external to ourselves, nothing if not ourselves and our own existence. As long as this state lasts, we are self-sufficient unto ourselves, like God. The sentiment of existence, stripped of any other emotion, is in itself a precious sentiment of contentment and of peace which alone would suffice to make this existence dear and sweet to anyone able to spurn all the sensual and earthly impressions which incessantly come to distract us from it and to trouble its sweetness here below”. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Reveries of the Solitary Walker”. *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, vol. 8 (Christopher Kelly ed., Charles E. Butterworth, Alexandra Cook & Terence E. Marshal transl.), Dartmouth College Press, Hanover and London, 2000, p. 46.

1. The authentic character
2. The physical mechanism of the world and the unchangeable psychobiological background of man
3. The “spontaneous” mental and social tendencies emerging within the alienated modern man in the course of history
4. A version of natural right (nature as essentially moral principle).
5. All the historical stretch from the original state of nature to the society of the *Social Contract*.

By denaturalization Rousseau rhetorically refers to the complete abolition of nature. This is impossible. The second version of nature to a significant degree cannot be abolished. Self-preservation is one of its distinctive elements. But, according to Strauss, the fourth version, natural right as ethics, is abolished. The society of the *Social Contract* has as foundation the self-preservation and as a basic regulatory principle the general will instead of natural law. This society has limited and distant analogies with the original state of nature, so, according to Strauss, Rousseau finds the possibilities for a good life within it unsatisfactory. Moreover, Rousseau, always fascinated by the model of the first man's life in the original state of nature, makes a second attempt to solve the problem of modern man. He is now undergoing a renaturalization. He attempts to directly reconstruct the status of that man's life by imitating his universal, indefinite and carefree natural freedom in the forests and reliving his sentiment of existence. He focuses on the second version of nature, while he is indifferent to the restoration of the fourth, of natural law. In this case the approximation to the original state of nature is closer. But, as we have seen, according to Strauss, the subhuman cannot function as an essential model for the social man. It lacks moral potential as it is a product of “positivist” scientific discovery and description. As in the case of denaturalization, so in renaturalization Rousseau fails. Imitating the subhuman's way of life in the original state of nature is not really a form of good life for the socialized man.



Brill's Companion to Leo Strauss' Writings on Classical Political Thought offers clear, accessible essays to assist a new generation of readers in their introduction to Strauss' writings on the ancients, and to deepen the understanding of those who have already benefitted from his work. Strauss rediscovered esoteric writing. His careful explications of works by classical thinkers— of Socratic political philosophy, pre-Socratic philosophers, and of poets tragic and comic—have therefore opened those works up in a way that had been lost for centuries. Yet Strauss' writings, especially his later works, make considerable demands on any reader. These essays are written by scholars who bring to bear on their reading of Strauss many years of study.

Series Editor: **Kyriakos N. Demetriou**
Volume Editor: **Timothy W. Burns**