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The natural gift in Rousseau's politics and educational theory

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Abstract:

Rousseau's theoretical treatment of natural talent exhibits two distinct tendencies. The first draws inspiration from the primitive, wholly natural existence of early humans before the advent of civilization. In contrast, the second tendency is grounded in the concept of nature as an ontological foundation for authenticity within the context of alienated civilization of his time. The first perspective is defined by suspicion towards natural talent because it runs counter to the model of elementary egalitarian naturalism inherent in the genuine state of nature. In this view, any exceptional abilities or talents disrupt the inherent equality of primitive existence. Conversely, the second tendency celebrates natural talent as a rare expression of untouched nature within the confines of civilized society. Such talents possess the potential for liberation and redemption, serving as a counterbalance to the alienation that pervades modern life.

Keywords: nature, talent, state of nature, civilization, alienation, authenticity

The crucial implications in any perceived gift or talent are its natural origin and the apparent superiority of the individual who possesses it. Gift or talent is intricately connected to the broader issue of human inequality. Consequently, any examination of it in the context of Rousseau's thought must commence with his *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men* (1755). In this seminal work, Rousseau delves into the problem of human inequality while shaping his theory of human nature and providing a historical account of civilization up to his era.

The first part of Rousseau's work extensively delineates the inhabitant of the primordial natural state, casting the primitive man of nature as a human archetype. It is a paradoxical human archetype in that it is moulded with both visionary ideals and scientific elements, enriching the literary concept of the "noble savage". Rousseau's version of the primitive man places the latter nearly at the level of animals, with which he co-exists in the untamed wilderness before the emergence of society or civilization. Simultaneously, through his naturalistic imagery, Rousseau imbues this figure with fundamental concepts and values that permeate his broader philosophical framework: authenticity, self-sufficiency, independence, harmonious integration with the environment, a life lived in cycles of euphoric serenity, absence of selfishness or evil. These also provide the basis for Rousseau's critique of bourgeois society and the industrious human archetype that upholds it—the bourgeois. The notion of primitive man becomes an almost obsessional motif in Rousseau's work, directly or indirectly influencing significant stretches of his writings.

The second part chronicles the genesis and historical development of civilization, up to and including Rousseau's times. The trajectory of civilization commences at the pivotal moment when humanity transitions from the primordial natural state to more complex social structures, ultimately culminating in the despotic regime. In the dawn of civilization, a rudimentary natural society emerges, where incipient corruption exists but remains relatively subdued,

still dwarfed by survivals of primordial authenticity. Thereafter, significant transformations take place, including the de facto institutionalization of individual ownership over land and the authorization of a deceptive social contract. These milestones inevitably lead to the total alienation associated with the despotic regime.

Upon commencing, Rousseau distinguishes two kinds of inequality: natural and moral inequality. As he writes:

I conceive of two sorts of inequality in the human Species: one, which I call natural or Physical, because it is established by Nature and consists in the difference in ages, bodily strengths, health, and qualities of Mind or Soul; the other, which may be called moral or Political inequality, because it depends upon a sort of convention and is established, or at least authorized, by the consent of Men. The latter consists in the different Privileges that some enjoy to the prejudice of others, such as to be richer, more honored, more Powerful than they, or even to make themselves obeyed by them.¹

Closing the work, he states:

[...] 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. It follows, further, that moral inequality, authorized by positive right alone, is contrary to Natural Right whenever it is not combined in the same proportion with Physical Inequality.²

¹ 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. 18; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discours sur l' Origine et les Fondements de l' Inégalité parmi les Hommes". *Ouvres Complètes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, vol. 3 (Bernard Gagnebin & Marcel Raymond eds), Gallimard, Paris, 1964, p. 131. [Hereafter *Second Discourse*, *C.W.* 3, p. 18; *O.C.* 3, p. 131].

² *Second Discourse*, *C.W.* 3, p. 67; *O.C.* 3, pp. 193-194.

In the concluding lines, he argues:

The ranks of Citizens therefore ought to be regulated not upon personal merit, which would be leaving to the Magistrates the means of making an almost arbitrary application of the law, but upon the real services that they render to the State, which are more susceptible of a more exact estimation.³

It is clear that any social inequality is legitimized only when it is grounded in and corresponds to the extremely low level of natural inequalities.⁴ In essence, Rousseau's *Second Discourse* champions the ideal of equality. The minimal natural inequalities observed among humans in the primordial state do not justify but very small social disparities. Rousseau regards significant dissimilarities in abilities and talents with skepticism and disapproval, rejecting the notion that they are purely natural. The concept of exceptional natural talent, according to Rousseau, has been a byproduct of social workings. It arises from a social process or effect that amplifies an initially dubious advantage, allowing the possessor to excel conspicuously.⁵ But in the *Second Discourse* societal processes mark a latter and distinct state from the primordial one and true nature is, in principle, exclusive to that pre-social, primal condition. Having made it complicated to ground social positions and ranks in nature, Rousseau ultimately turns to more overt and dependable criteria, namely external behavior. The importance of natural talent gives way to the significance of applied republican political virtue as a model and criterion for structuring social hierarchy.

Rousseau's suspicion towards natural talent and preference for an acquired ethos rooted in classical republicanism are evident in other works as well. For instance, Rousseau contends that the constitutional legislator of Corsica should prioritize actions that foster public delight in the

³ *Second Discourse*, C.W. 3, p. 95; O.C. 3, p. 223.

⁴ In this sense, the description of nature serves as a normative model in Rousseau, possibly constituting a form of naturalistic fallacy.

⁵ In general, Rousseau's political thought rejects liberal individualism in favor of an early version of sociocentrism or utopian socialism.

commonwealth and encourage the pursuit of virtues, while downplaying the significance of exceptional talents. In his view, great talents could potentially cause more harm than good, and the prudent exercise of common sense suffices for effective governance in a well-constituted state.⁶ Elsewhere, Rousseau rejects intellectual abilities as a reliable criterion for social superiority arguing that such abilities are often ambiguous, misplaced, and deceptive, and, as such, poor indicators of true merit.⁷ The case for the evaluation of citizens on the base of their socio-patriotic contributions as opposed to their social background or innate talents alone is further fleshed out by Rousseau. He suggests that “all grades, all employments, all honorific recompenses [...] be marked with outward symbols”.⁸ Also, in public education, which Rousseau holds paramount among all state institutions,⁹ living role models of patriotism should be showcased. For example, those citizens who have made distinguished contributions to the state should be the ones teaching.¹⁰

⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Plan for a Constitution for Corsica”. *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, vol. 11, (Christopher Kelly editor, Christopher Kelly & Judith Bush translation), Dartmouth College Press, Hanover and London, 2005, p. 156; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Projet de Constitution pour la Corse”. *Ouvres Complètes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, vol. 3 (B. Gagnebin & M. Raymond eds), Gallimard, Paris, 1964, p. 940.

⁷ 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. 177; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Considérations sur a le Gouvernement de Pologne”, *Ouvres Complètes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, vol. 3 (B. Gagnebin & M. Raymond eds), Gallimard, Paris, 1964, p. 963. [Hereafter *Poland*, *C.W.* 11, p. 177; *O.C.* 3, p. 963].

⁸ *Poland*, *C.W.* 11, p. 212; *O.C.* 3, p. 1007.

⁹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, ‘Political Economy’. *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, vol. 3 (Roger D. Masters & Christopher Kelly eds, Judith R. Bush, Roger D. Masters, Christopher Kelly & Terence Marshall translation), Dartmouth College Press, Hanover and London, 1992, p. 156; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Sur l’ Économie Politique”, *Ouvres Complètes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, vol. 3 (B. Gagnebin & M. Raymond eds), Gallimard, Paris, 1964, p. 261. [Hereafter *Political Economy*, *C.W.* 3, p. 156; *O.C.* 3, p. 261].

¹⁰ *Political Economy*, *C.W.* 3, p. 156; *O.C.* 3, p. 261.

Additionally, Rousseau proposes organizing public ceremonies to bring these models of civic virtue to the limelight.¹¹

However, in Rousseau's early work titled *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, where he extensively critiques science, art, and philosophy, attributing them to the erosion of virtue and the decline of society and politics in the modern world, we encounter a celebration of natural talent:

Those whom nature destined to be her disciples needed no teachers. Verulam,¹² Descartes, Newton, these Preceptors of the human Race had none themselves; indeed, what guides would have led them as far as their vast genius carried them? Ordinary Teachers would only have restricted their understanding by confining it within the narrow capacity of their own. [...] It is for these few to raise monuments to the glory of human mind. [...] Therefore, may Kings not disdain to allow into their councils the men most capable of advising them well.¹³

Rousseau regards genuine geniuses as manifestations of pure nature. These exceptional individuals are impelled by an inner drive intricately connected to their innate abilities. They owe no debt to society or conventional education. In a similar vein, Rousseau expresses his fervent appreciation for natural talent in his entry on "genius" within the *Dictionary of Music*:

Seek not, young Artist, what is Genius. If you have any, you feel it in yourself. If you do not, you will never know it. The Genius of the musician submits the entire Universe to his art. [...] He does not know how to say anything to those in whom its seed is not present, and

¹¹ Poland, C.W. 11, p. 178; O.C. 3, p. 964.

¹² This refers to F. Bacon.

¹³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on the Sciences and Arts". *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, vol. 2 (Roger D. Masters & Christopher Kelly eds, Judith Bush, Roger D. Masters & Christopher Kelly translation), Dartmouth College Press, Hanover and London, 1992, p. 21; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discours sur les Sciences et les Arts". *Ouvres Complètes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, vol. 3, (B. Gagnebin & M. Raymond eds), Gallimard, Paris, 1964, p. 29.

his wonders are little felt by anyone who cannot imitate them. [...] Vulgar man: do not profane that sublime word.¹⁴

Individuals possessing exceptional gifts are rare and remain unaffected by vanity. Their intellectual stature renders any display of pettiness or self-importance inconceivable. These extraordinary individuals, in fact, embody social, historical, and cultural phenomena. In their individuality, they symbolize something collective. A similar figure emerges in Rousseau's political writings: the lawgiver. In *Social Contract*, we come across the following passage:

The discovery of the best rules of society suited to Nations would require a superior intelligence, who saw all of men's passions yet experienced none of them; who had no relationship at all to our nature yet knew it thoroughly; whose happiness was independent of us, yet who was nevertheless willing to attend to ours; finally, one who, preparing for himself a future glory with the passage of time, could work in one century and enjoy the reward in another. Gods would be needed to give laws to men.¹⁵

In Rousseau's work *Emile*, the embracement of natural gifts is tempered with caution. Nature serves as the foundational principle underlying the renowned Rousseauian educational method outlined in this treatise. At the outset of the first book, Rousseau asserts: "(Our not acquired) dispositions, [...] constrained by our habits, are more or less

¹⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Dictionary of Music". *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, vol. 7 (John T. Scott editor and translation), Dartmouth College Press, Hanover and London, 1998, p. 406; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Dictionnaire de Musique". *Ouvres Complètes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, vol. 4 (B. Gagnebin & M. Raymond eds), Gallimard, Paris, 1995, pp. 837-838.

¹⁵ 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 translation), Dartmouth College Press, Hanover and London, 1994, book 2, Chapter 7, p.154; 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, 1964, p. 381.

corrupted by our opinions. Before this corruption they are what I call in us nature”.¹⁶ Nature, therefore, constitutes the core pre-existing element that precedes any social influence or formation. Education, according to Rousseau, must be guided by this innate nature. “[...] education comes to us from nature or from men or from things. [...] Since the conjunction of the three educations is necessary to their perfection, the two others must be directed toward the one over which we have no power”.¹⁷ Emile, the student, is steered towards a way of life reminiscent of that of the primitive man in a natural state. He is deliberately distanced from social relationships and external influences, immersed in a natural environment. The only consistent human presence in his life is that of his tutor, who carefully manages Emile’s interactions with nature and gradual introduction to aspects of culture. This approach, famously known as “negative education”, aims to cement and nurture Emile’s inherent characteristics before he embarks on more conventional, formal education for life within society.¹⁸ Unlike the narrative in the *Second Discourse*, this departure from the natural state is thoughtfully timed and executed, with due care to prevent alienation phenomena.

Rousseau’s perspective on natural talent in *Emile* is twofold. While he acknowledges its existence and recognizes its positive implications, he exercises caution regarding the casual and frequent labeling of children as gifted. In selecting the young Emile, a student possessing an average, unremarkable intellect, as the subject of his educational experiment, Rousseau aims to rigorously test his pedagogical approach.¹⁹ He contends that child prodigies, authentic

¹⁶ 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*, *C.W.* 13, p. 163; *O.C.* 4, p. 248].

¹⁷ *Emile*, *C.W.* 13, pp. 162-163; *O.C.* 4, p. 247.

¹⁸ See Pierre Burgelin, “The Second Education of Emile”. *Yale French Studies*, Yale University Press 1961, No 28, pp. 106-111.

¹⁹ *Emile*, *C.W.* 13, pp. 400-401; *O.C.* 4, p. 537.

manifestations of innate abilities, are far less common than many parents assume. He writes:

There is on the other side another kind of exception for those whom a happy nature raises above their age. As there are men who never leave childhood, there are others who, so to speak, do not go through it and who are men almost at birth. The difficulty is that this latter exception is very rare, very hard to recognize, and that every mother, imagining that a child might be a prodigy, has no doubt that hers is one.²⁰

Consequently, Rousseau proposes the establishment of a scientific method to discern genuinely exceptional children.²¹ In another context, he articulates the following viewpoint:

Examine your alleged prodigy. At certain moments you will find in him an extremely taut mainspring, a clarity of mind which can pierce the clouds. Most often this same mind will seem lax to you, soggy, and, as it were, surrounded by a thick fog. At one time it gets ahead of you, the next, it remains immobile. At one moment you would say, "he is a genius", and at the next, "he is a fool". You would be mistaken in both cases: what he is is a child.²²

Rousseau contends that even superficial ease in learning can be detrimental for children. Such apparent aptitude may dazzle adults, obscuring the fact that the children are not genuinely acquiring knowledge.²³ Rousseau attempts to explain the difficulty in identifying truly intelligent children:

Nothing is more difficult in respect of childhood than to distinguish real stupidity from that merely apparent and deceptive stupidity which is the presage of strong souls. It seems strange at first that the two extremes should have such similar signs. Nevertheless, it is properly so; for at an age when man as yet has nothing that is truly an idea, the entire difference between one who has genius and one who does not is that the latter

²⁰ *Emile*, C.W. 13, p. 240; *O.C.* 4, p. 341.

²¹ *Emile*, C.W. 13, p. 349; *O.C.* 4, p. 475.

²² *Emile*, C.W. 13, p. 241; *O.C.* 4, p. 342.

²³ *Emile*, C.W. 13, p. 242; *O.C.* 4, p. 344.

accepts only false ideas, and the former, finding only such, accepts none. Thus, the genius resembles the stupid child in that the latter is capable of nothing while nothing is suitable for the former. The only sign which permits the two to be distinguished depends on chance, which may present the genius some idea within his reach, while the stupid child is always the same everywhere.²⁴

Interestingly, Rousseau places himself within the category of child prodigies, as he writes in his work *Confessions*:

My childhood was not at all that of a child. I always felt, I thought as a man. It was only in growing up that I returned into the ordinary class, upon being born I had left it. One will laugh to see me modestly present myself as a prodigy. So be it; but when one has laughed well, find a child who at six years of age is attached to novels, interested, carried away to the point of weeping hot tears at them; then I will feel my ridiculous vanity, and I will acknowledge that I am wrong.²⁵

Rousseau's attitude toward natural talent exhibits a noticeable duality, vacillating between rejection and enthusiastic acceptance. This phenomenon becomes explicable when we recognize two distinct tendencies within his thought—one utopian and the other realistic—both embedded in his overarching project of remedying the cultural malaise of his era through revolutionary pedagogical and political proposals.

The utopian tendency aligns with the paradigm of the primordial state of nature and its inhabitant, the primitive man. Rousseau envisions this naturally perfectible being²⁶

²⁴ *Emile*, C.W. 13, p. 241; O.C. 4, p. 343.

²⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "The Confessions". *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, vol. 5 (Christopher Kelly, Roger D. Masters & Peter G. Stillman eds, Christopher Kelly translation), Dartmouth College Press, Hanover and London, 1995, p. 52; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Les Confessions". *Ouvres Complètes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, vol. 1 (B. Gagnebin & M. Raymond eds), Gallimard, Paris, 1959, p. 62.

²⁶ According to Rousseau, perfectibility constitutes a fundamental trait of human nature. Initially latent within the original natural state, it

developing latent capabilities in tandem with the emergence and evolution of civilization. Humanity, thus, symbolically returns to the egalitarian, simplistic existence of the primitive man, forsaking the modern, complex civilization and its stark inequalities. Within this negative strategy, Rousseau's concept of the republican political society, as expounded in *The Social Contract*, is key. An effort is made to circumscribe the culture of the bourgeois class—steadily advancing and expanding without bounds—within the confines of the city-state and the vainglorious ethos associated with deified individuals of the era yields to a conception of political virtue characterized by unpretentious, unwavering loyalty indelibly inscribed within the essence of one's being.²⁷ The individual submits to the collective. Within this framework, natural talent appears incompatible or even perilous.

The realistic tendency, on the other hand, entails an alternative approach to addressing the afflictions of alienating urban civilization. In a virtual application of the homeopathic principle (*similia similibus curantur*) in social malaise, Rousseau writes:

[...] the same causes which have corrupted peoples sometimes serve to prevent a greater corruption; it is in this way that someone who has spoiled his temperament by an indiscreet use of medicine, is forced to continue to have recourse to doctors to preserve his life; and it is in this way that the arts and sciences, after

becomes activated through the impact of diverse external factors (*Second Discourse*, *C.W.* 3, p. 42; *O.C.* 3, p. 162).

²⁷ For a political society of this kind, 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 its 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" (*Poland*, *C.W.* 11, p. 179; *O.C.* 3, p. 966).

having hatched the vices, are necessary for keeping them from turning into crimes.²⁸

In this context, the ideal of nature is not relegated to a distant past from which we have irrevocably departed. Instead, it remains a perpetual and essential ontological dimension, concealed beneath or within the fabric of civilization's creations. Nature, as Rousseau defines it, comprises those inherent dispositions that are not acquired through external influences.²⁹ When this innate nature dynamically emerges, it becomes a possible conduit for freedom and redemption. It might be able to reshape the cultural landscape by reimagining the very products of civilization. Natural talent serves as a clear and emblematic manifestation of this underlying nature, carrying with it the potential for liberation and redemption. Rousseau's enthusiastic acceptance of natural talent stems from this transformative power, and he takes great care to avoid misjudgments in its recognition.

²⁸ Jean Jacques Rousseau, "Preface to Narcissus: Or the Lover of Himself". *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, vol. 2 (Roger D. Masters & Christopher Kelly eds, Judith Bush, Roger D. Masters & Christopher Kelly translation), Dartmouth College Press, Hanover and London, 1992, p. 196; Jean Jacques Rousseau, "Narcisse ou l' Amant de Lui-Même", *Ouvres Complètes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, vol. 3, (B. Gagnebin & M. Raymond eds), Gallimard, Paris, 1964, p. 972. In *Geneva Manuscript* Rousseau writes: "Let us attempt to draw from the ill itself the remedy that should cure it. [...] Let us show [...] in perfected art the reparation of the ills that the beginnings of art caused to nature" [Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Geneva Manuscript". *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, vol. 4 (Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly eds, Judith R. Bush, Roger D. Masters & Christopher Kelly translation), Dartmouth College Press, Hanover and London, 1994, p. 82; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Du Contract Sociale (premiere version)". *Ouvres Complètes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, vol. 3 (Bernard Gagnebin & Marcel Raymond eds), Gallimard, Paris, 1964, p. 288]. "To draw from the fault the means of correcting it: this is precisely the dialectical solution that Rousseau proposes for the faults of modern society as a whole", Marshall Berman argues (Marshall Berman, *The Politics Of Authenticity. Radical Individualism and the Emergence of Modern Society*. Verso, London and New York, 1970, p. 235.

²⁹ *Emile*, C.W. 13, p. 163; O.C. 4, p. 248.

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