

**Rousseau      Rousseau**  
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**Criticism     Critique**

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## Nietzsche as Critic of Rousseau: Squaring Off on Nature

In the praise and criticism which Rousseau has evoked in subsequent thinkers, Nietzsche's commentary stands out as among the most condemning. Targeting his person, his doctrine and his influence, Nietzsche's contempt for Rousseau sometimes seems unbounded. At the same time, he acknowledges Rousseau as one of eight antecedent thinkers who engaged him in his intellectual wanderings, and from whom alone he will accept judgment.<sup>1</sup> This paper addresses what I believe to be the thematic matrix of this supreme ambivalence of Nietzsche toward Rousseau, namely, their respective preoccupations with nature. Both thinkers present their psychological critique of civilization from the perspective of our simultaneous immersion in and severance from nature. While this is the underlying matrix of continuity, however, they are operating from different conceptions of nature. This is immediately signalled by nature as a recurring subject of Nietzsche's invective against Rousseau. He disdains the latter's views on the goodness and innocence of nature, as well as his version of a "return to nature." Notwithstanding the vituperative tones of this explicit discourse, Nietzsche's own opposing theory of nature can be squared off trenchantly against Rousseau's. While ultimately retaining a sympathetic reading of Rousseau, I argue that on nature and human nature each thinker stands as a limit to the excess of the other. As much as he hated Rousseau's effeminacy, the wildness and ferocity of nature in Nietzsche is moderated by the "maternal" principles of nature enunciated by Rousseau. On the other hand, as an easy target for the charge of naivety, the "goodness" of humanity's buried depths in Rousseau is rectified by Nietzsche's awareness of our subterranean "inner beasts."

Notwithstanding Nietzsche's self-acknowledged dialectic with Rousseau, a comparative study has only recently been available with the publication of Keith Ansell-Pearson's book, *Nietzsche Contra Rousseau: A Study of Nietzsche's Moral and Political Thought*. It was preceded in a more limited way by W.D. Williams's much earlier

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p.299. Besides Rousseau, Nietzsche singles out Epicurus, Montaigne, Goethe, Spinoza, Plato, Pascal, and Schopenhauer for this acknowledgment.

book, *Nietzsche and the French*.<sup>2</sup> With both commentaries intended first as studies of Nietzsche, there is still room for comparative work proceeding from the perspective of elucidating Rousseau as an "antecedent critic" of Nietzsche. On the specific issue of nature, it is commonplace for commentators on Nietzsche to note his disdain for Rousseau.<sup>3</sup> Though sometimes characterizing his criticism as superficial, in the context of the predominating interest in interpreting Nietzsche, Rousseau's defense is either scant or nonexistent. While acknowledging Nietzsche's strengths in some respects, my present effort aims to establish the force of Rousseau vis-à-vis his later critic. My order of procedure is to first set the context by addressing Nietzsche's avowed indebtedness to and criticism of Rousseau. I then show how they both ground their psychological observations in nature, before finally discussing their differing images of nature.

### I. Nietzsche's Evaluation of Rousseau

Nietzsche's critical posture toward Rousseau intimates his passionate engagement by him. Whatever the intensity of Nietzsche's rancour, it is ensconced in his indebtedness to Rousseau as one of the eight predecessors who did not refuse themselves to him: "Whatever I say, resolve, cogitate for myself and others: upon these eight I fix my eyes and see theirs fixed upon me."<sup>4</sup>In his most vituperative moments Nietzsche attacks Rousseau's person, castigating him as a symptom of heated vanity and self-contempt. If the interpenetration of his person and his philosophy exposes Rousseau to this kind of attack, it nevertheless assures him his rank among the great philosophers. For Nietzsche understands every great philosophy to be "the personal

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<sup>2</sup> Keith Ansell-Pearson, *Nietzsche Contra Rousseau: A Study of Nietzsche's Moral and Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); and W.D. Williams, *Nietzsche and the French* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1952).

<sup>3</sup> See for example Ansell-Pearson, pp. 21, 31, 50; and Bruce Detwiler, *Nietzsche and the Politics of Aristocratic Radicalism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), p.131.

<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p.299.

confession of its author."<sup>5</sup> Excluding him from his group of eight, Nietzsche finds Kant lacking in power and breadth. He puts Kant at a disadvantage to Rousseau, for his thoughts are "the biography of a head," while Rousseau's constitute "an involuntary biography of a soul."<sup>6</sup>

In these brief passages Nietzsche acknowledges Rousseau as a great philosopher and one of his own main interlocutors. In a more sustained way his engagement by Rousseau emerges critically in his thematic preoccupations and opposition to him. His indebtedness to his French predecessor on the centrality of nature to his thought can be inferred from his vehemence in establishing his points of critical distance. He chastises the Rousseauian belief in "a miraculous primeval but as it were buried goodness of human nature."<sup>7</sup> He aligns himself with Voltaire in taking the side of culture against Rousseau's ascription of all the blame for the depravity of humanity on societal institutions.<sup>8</sup> Rousseau's reading of nature as the sphere of freedom, innocence and goodness is symptomatic of what Nietzsche emotively terms his "moral fanaticism."<sup>9</sup> Attributing an immense influence to Rousseau, but one which was retrogressive for the knowledge of moral phenomena, he traces a European moral awakening in the previous century to only two sources, a reawakened Stoicism and Rousseau.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, in what would have been a horror to Rousseau, given his

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<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), p.13.

<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p.198. Emphasis in original.

<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p.169. Emphasis in original.

<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p.169; and Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, trans. Walter Kaufman and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), pp.42, 62, 206.

<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, p.186; and Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, p.3.

<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, pp. 365-6.

stated opposition to revolution,<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche sees the spirit of the French Revolution already incarnate in the spirit and flesh of Rousseau. He charges that Rousseau's moral fanaticism, his superstition in the buried goodness of humanity, fired the perilous dreams and savage energies of the French Revolution.<sup>12</sup>

## II. Nature as Standard

Though Nietzsche despises Rousseau for his faith in the goodness of human nature, and its alleged expression in the French Revolution, so much energy in opposing elements of Rousseau's theory reinforces Nietzsche's shared preoccupation with nature as the elucidating category of human psychology. Nietzsche objects to Rousseau's "dogma" on the divine authorship of nature.<sup>13</sup> Brief references in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* do attribute God with being the author of our original nature.<sup>14</sup> But the overwhelming direction of this work is a secular evolutionism which points us to our animal origins. Whatever our civilized exterior, who we are can never be separated from nature, from the animal which still endures in us. If Rousseau scandalized his century with his animalized humanity, Nietzsche still chides us for our hubris in placing ourselves "in a false order of rank in relation to animals and nature."<sup>15</sup> Rousseau strove to accurately decipher nature, to disabuse us of all the false impressions of our original nature promulgated by

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<sup>11</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, in *The Social Contract and Discourses*, trans. G.D.H. Cole (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1973), pp.33-4.

<sup>12</sup> Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, pp.169,367; *Daybreak*, p.3; and *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufman (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1954), p.553.

<sup>13</sup> Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, pp.63-4.

<sup>14</sup> Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*, pp. 43, 48.

<sup>15</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage books, 1974). See also Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, p. 23.

philosophers.<sup>16</sup> For Nietzsche, too, the task is to translate humanity back into nature, to master all the vain interpretations "that have so far been scrawled and painted over that eternal basic text of homo natura."<sup>17</sup>

If both thinkers emphasize humanity's inclusion in nature, our severance from nature is also the measure by which they assess our psychological ills. Reconstructing our primeval, instinctual self, Rousseau sees our unhappiness in proportion to the renunciation of our original instincts. Through the historical process we in a way fall lower than the brutes. His appellation of humanity as the "depraved animal"<sup>18</sup> finds a counterpart in Nietzsche's diagnosis. He contends that "man is the most bungled of all the animals, the sickliest, and not one has strayed more dangerously from its instincts."<sup>19</sup>

Aware of this severance from nature as diagnosticians, in their programmatic moments both thinkers keep one eye fixed upon our animalized nature. Scorning Rousseau as "idealist and rabble in one person," Nietzsche rejects his version of a return to nature as being poisoned by the doctrine of equality. Nonetheless, Nietzsche insists that he, too, speaks of a return to nature. He distinguishes that his return is not a going back but an ascent.<sup>20</sup> This glib distinction, however, belies his deeper dialectic with Rousseau's image of nature. And it does not negate that their respective transformative visions for humanity are embedded in a sense of our historical evolution from the animal. A book for seekers in the quest to become the overperson, Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* images humanity as a rope tied

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<sup>16</sup> Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*, p.50; and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), p.312.

<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, pp.161-2. Emphasis in original.

<sup>18</sup> Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*, pp. 56, 60.

<sup>19</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufman (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1954), p.580.

<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, pp. 552-3.

between beast and overperson.<sup>21</sup> The equivalents in Rousseau are his book on childhood education, *Emile*, and the self-metamorphic guides of his autobiographies, particularly *Rousseau Judge of Jean-Jacques: Dialogues* and *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. They are distinguished in their democratic ethos from the aristocratic exclusiveness of Nietzsche's transformative vision. But in making the human psyche the object of the transformative will, these works are similar in seeing this project from the perspective of the lineage to the savage.

Relatedly, there is in both philosophers a sense of the enduring presence of the natural in us, and how we must work for its emancipation. Nietzsche differentiates himself from Rousseau in arguing there has never been a natural humanity. But even if he rejects a pure beginning, one still finds in Rousseau the same Nietzschean view that humanity "reaches nature only after a long struggle."<sup>22</sup> In Nietzsche's analysis of the naive in art as the highest manifestation of culture, he chides the romantic belief in an Emile "reared at the bosom of nature."<sup>23</sup> But Rousseau's Emile could no better illustrate the tremendous transfiguring labour needed to achieve the natural. This "savage made to inhabit cities"<sup>24</sup> is the product of a painstaking and all-encompassing educational enterprise. Rousseau's own personal effort and teaching on primordial self-metamorphosis is contained in the *Dialogues* and *The Reveries*. This self-directed transformative project also appears as an exhaustive labour requiring solitude, among other things, and the quiescence of the artificial passions. Thus in their diagnostic and programmatic moods, both thinkers see a lineage to the savage and a struggle if we are to emancipate the natural. Where they fundamentally differ, then, is in their respective images of nature.

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<sup>21</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufman (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1954), p.126.

<sup>22</sup> Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, p.73.

<sup>23</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p.43.

<sup>24</sup> Rousseau, *Emile*, p.205.

### III. Images of Nature

The Rousseauian image which recurrently incites Nietzsche's invective is his idea of nature as good. Nietzsche's critical sensitivities are not amiss, for Rousseau sometimes imposes moral categories on nature and human nature by calling humanity naturally good.<sup>25</sup> By contrast, Nietzsche strives to consistently propound the moral neutrality of nature, a sphere that is beyond either moral censure or moral praise.<sup>26</sup> If Rousseau participates in this dichotomization of good and evil by calling humanity naturally good, however, just like Nietzsche he also resists the other side of the dichotomy which judges us naturally wicked. Nietzsche objects to the imposition of evil onto nature and, parallel to Rousseau, particularly criticizes the Christian diabolicizing of nature.<sup>27</sup> Already implicit in the second *Discourse*, an argument against the Christian doctrine of original sin is made explicit in Rousseau's *Letter to Christopher de Beaumont, Archbishop of Paris*.<sup>28</sup>

Thus Rousseau appears to oppose one side of the moral dichotomization of nature only to slip into espousing the other. Nietzsche, in fact, observes that humankind first invented "evil nature" and then, as an emotional compensation, invented "good nature" in the age of Rousseau.<sup>29</sup> The emotive source of this moral invention in Rousseau is underlined by its incompatibility with his actual exegesis. For in an historically expounded equivalent to Nietzsche's "beyond

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<sup>25</sup> See, for example, *Discourse on Inequality*, p.118.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*; and Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p.57.

<sup>27</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufman and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p.92; and Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p.77.

<sup>28</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *An Expostulatory Letter from J.J. Rousseau, Citizen of Geneva to Christopher de Beaumont, Archbishop of Paris* in *Miscellaneous Works of J.J. Rousseau*, Vol.III (New York: Lenox Hill, 1972), pp.249, 263.

<sup>29</sup> Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, p.16.

good and evil," the natural instincts Rousseau presents in the second *Discourse* are understood to be before moral categories. Compassion and amour de soi (the instinct for self-care) are the psychological grounds for the equanimity and therefore the "goodness" of the natural condition. Both these instincts are conceived as being prior to morality and moral relations.<sup>30</sup>

Whatever the emotional motivation of Rousseau's designation of humanity as naturally good, this unnecessary moral labelling still accompanies a substantive portrait of nature which provides a critically needed contrast to Nietzsche's view. When Nietzsche speaks of the return to nature as ascent, he means an ascent into nature and naturalness as terribleness.<sup>31</sup> His dominating discourse on nature is that of cruelty, wildness, ruthlessness, and barbarity. The mild and unobtrusive Rousseauian primitive is countered with the image of the human being as the hard and violent beast of prey. Through culture this preying animal, with its health and might, is turned into a sickly and meagre domestic animal.<sup>32</sup>

In Rousseau there is also a sundering from our animal past, but one which is premised upon a more gentle image of nature. What Nietzsche refuses in contrast to Rousseau is the most fundamental principle of nature, namely, the maternal element. This is a principle of nurturance, and at the least of noninterference. It appears in Rousseau's theory of nature in the care mothers give to their offspring. Generalizing this maternal element, he contends that all human beings, and sometimes even animals, feel natural compassion, an innate aversion to the suffering of other sentient beings. Thus, the savageness and barbarity of the beast of prey, which Nietzsche presents as if it is generic of nature, is moderated by Rousseau's understanding of the more universal maternal element. The maternal element, as the preserving force of nature, also manifests itself as a principle of noninterference in Rousseau's amour de soi. An instinct which is moderated by natural compassion, it limits conflicts to the minimum

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<sup>30</sup> Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*, pp.47, 71.

<sup>31</sup> Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, p.552.

<sup>32</sup> Nietzsche, *Will To Power*, pp.61-2; and Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, pp.42, 120, 126.

required for self-preservation.<sup>33</sup> This Rousseauian instinct, then, counteracts the superfluity of cruelty, and joy in cruelty, which pervades the mood of Nietzsche's image of nature.

For both philosophers there is a sense of the civilized human as the caged animal. But, unlike Nietzsche, the domain of natural freedom for Rousseau is not one of capriciousness and ferocity. The suppression of our natural impulses also leads Rousseau to a diagnosis on the misery of civilized humanity. Too emotionally laden originally to belong to nature, the old instincts are not the hostility and joy in attacking which Nietzsche finds.<sup>34</sup> Rousseau goes deeper to a compassionate instinct, which expresses the eternal and universal maternal element of nature. Our psychological distress in society is related to our alienation from this instinct, and thus from the empathetic connection to others which is natural to us.

Rousseau is often acknowledged as an incipiently psychoanalytical thinker.<sup>35</sup> His pre-Freudian contribution is not just in positing the suppression of instinct in civilization, but in understanding that a compassionate instinct can be repressed. As an ineluctable element of the eternal maternal, this natural compassion serves as a limit to the Nietzschean excess of wildness and ferocity in nature. In pointing to subterranean "inner beasts," however, Nietzsche provides a psychoanalytical limit to the "goodness" of humanity's buried depths in Rousseau.

A philosopher of an historicized human nature, Rousseau argues that the impulses for violence and cruelty are not original to human nature, but are produced in the historical process. While he theorizes that a compassionate instinct is correspondingly suppressed, he does not consider that historically engendered impulses can also be repressed. Substantively more of an antecedent to Freud than Rousseau in his conception of unconscious contents, it is Nietzsche

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<sup>33</sup> Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*, pp.73-4, 76.

<sup>34</sup> Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, pp.84-5.

<sup>35</sup> Jean Starobinski, for example, comments that "it took Freud to 'think' Rousseau's feelings;" *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953), p.115.

who writes about "wild dogs" living in the cellar.<sup>36</sup> These wild dogs manifest themselves in the bestial eruptions of good people held in check by societal constraints. To Nietzsche these people go back in the "wilderness" to the "murder, arson, rape, and torture" of the beast of prey.<sup>37</sup> One may take Rousseauian issue with the beast-of-prey image of nature presupposed, and instead posit the historical construction of violence and cruelty. But Nietzsche must still be acknowledged for his psychoanalytical insight into these impulses as buried, and their susceptibility to eruption in the absence of social restraint. Where Rousseau is still needed contrary to Nietzsche, however, is in understanding that individuals do not emerge from these bestial eruptions "undisturbed of soul."<sup>38</sup> Incompatible with natural compassion, these historically cultivated impulses must produce the psychic despair which is connected to the suppression of the eternal maternal in we who are ultimately not history but nature.

Nietzsche's attempt, as described in his autobiography, *Ecce Homo*, was "to assassinate two millennia of anti-nature and desecration of man."<sup>39</sup> Even without his acknowledged debt, this understanding of his philosophical enterprise would alone establish his deep lineage to Rousseau. As we have seen, both thinkers share a preoccupation with nature as the elucidating category of human psychology. Underlying this continuity in their thematic matrix, however, are two radically different images of nature. Confronting the two revealed Nietzsche's contribution in limiting Rousseau's excess on the "goodness" of humanity's buried depths. Nevertheless, I have defended Rousseau as a powerful antecedent critic of Nietzsche through his image of nature--an image which is grounded in the most fundamental natural principle, namely, the eternal maternal.

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<sup>36</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pp.155, 414.

<sup>37</sup> Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, p. 40.

<sup>38</sup> Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, p.40.

<sup>39</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufman and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p.274.