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## **Between Heaven, Chaos and Disorder : The Problem of Mediation in Rousseau's *Dialogues***

The mind of man is by its nature situated, as it were, between its Creator and corporeal creatures... there is nothing but God above it and nothing but bodies below it. But as the mind's position above all material things does not prevent it from being joined to them, and even depending in a way on a part of matter, so the infinite distance between the sovereign Being and the mind of man does not prevent it from being immediately joined to it in a very intimate way.

Nicolas Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*

The land of chimeras is in this world the only one worth inhabiting, and such is the nothingness of human things, that except for the Being existing in itself, there is nothing beautiful in this world except that which is not.

Rousseau, *La Nouvelle Héloïse*

*The Calculus of the General Will* (1997), a new doctoral dissertation, began as the search for a conceptual framework that could unify the paradoxes of the general will in a comprehensive system, and facilitate a radically egalitarian interpretation of Rousseau's political doctrine. That effort led to an analysis of Rousseau's larger *œuvre*, and resulted in the conviction that the paradoxes of the general will require a metaphysical explanation. Rousseau often claimed that all his writings fit together in a coherent philosophical system.<sup>1</sup> *The Calculus of the*

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<sup>1</sup>. When talking about "The Right of Life and Death," Rousseau anticipates the objection that an act of corporal punishment would be a particular act, and, therefore, could not be an act of the Sovereign. Rousseau answers that corporal punishment is a right that the Sovereign may confer without itself being able to exercise it. He then exclaims, "All my ideas fit together, but I can hardly present them simultaneously (*Social Contract*, translation by R. Masters, St Martin's Press, New York, 1978, page 151 [377])." In *The Émile*, Rousseau exclaims, "I do not believe that [...] I contradict myself in my ideas (*Émile*, Bloom, Basic Books, New York, 1979, page 108n [345])." And, of course, in *The Dialogues*, Rousseau has the Frenchman comment on the reputation of Jean-Jacques' writings "... what I had been told were fatuous declamations, adorned with fine language but disconnected and full of contradictions, were things that were profoundly thought out, forming a coherent system which might not be true, but

*General Will* demonstrates that, indeed, all of Rousseau's ideas fit together if considered within a bipolar, dual axial, conceptual framework. This paper introduces that conceptual framework in abbreviated form, and tests it in the context of Rousseau's *Dialogues*.

There is a basic "onto-epistemological" diremption in Rousseau's thought which cuts across two conceptual axes. The first axis is bounded by Heaven and the temporal world; the second by Nature and society. Heaven and Nature signify perfect regulative ideals, representing the way things ought to be and were meant to be. On the other side, the temporal world and society are marked by imperfection and represent the way things are.<sup>2</sup> A series of basic bipolar conceptual pairs fill in the framework. Unity-in-Being, the "eternal now," immediacy, the totality, identity, and harmony, for example, coincide with Heaven and Nature. Separation, the particular, the need for mediation, difference, and conflict coincide with the temporal world.

The distance and tension between the opposing poles of Rousseau's bipolar, dual axial system, and the problem of resolving that tension and bridging that distance, constitute the fundamental philosophical problem at the heart of Rousseau's thought, that is, the "problem of mediation." The problem of mediation takes on religious, spiritual, moral, psychological, social, and political dimensions. Rousseau yearns for the cosmological unity of Eden. He yearns for immediacy in all things, and he dreams of the immediate fusion and harmony of all human hearts with the rest of creation. The individual who listens to the inner voice of conscience is One with Heaven and Nature, while the social individual who is obsessed with *amour-propre* is torn by self-division.

If conscience provides a solution to the religious and spiritual problem of mediation, and joins human beings to God in the "intimate" way described by Malebranche, moral, psychological, social, and political mediation problems allow only the most proximate solutions because they depend on the fallibility of human will, and they presuppose a set of impossible circumstances; that is, the establishment of a social system devoid of inequality, composed of citizens free of *amour-propre*.

Rousseau presents a set of problems that defy solution because he wants to dramatize the contradictions which preempt our happiness

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which offered nothing contradictory (page 209 [933])."

<sup>2</sup> Ernst Cassirer writes, "Rousseau used the word and concept *society* in a double sense. He distinguished most sharply between the empirical and ideal form of society, between what *is* under present conditions and what it *can* and in the future *ought* to be." See Ernst Cassirer, *The Question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, Bloomington and London, Indiana University Press, 1954, page 123.

and undermine political legitimacy. He uses his paradoxical formulations to frustrate the attentive reader into recognizing the inconsistency between republican, egalitarian principles and the established order. Rousseau deliberately and self-consciously formulates his philosophical system in terms of an "abyss," or, "an "insurmountable barrier,"<sup>3</sup> because he thinks such words aptly describe the limitations of the human mind in comprehending the totality of Nature, and aptly characterize the obstacles that separate mankind in its current condition, following the onset of conventional society, from both our long lost happiness in the State of Nature, and the hope of still attaining a just, truly egalitarian society.

It is essential to keep the ruptured structure of Rousseau's thought in mind in order to satisfactorily interpret the doctrine of the general will. Rousseau's bipolar, dual axial, conceptual system is evident in the way Rousseau deliberately presents the doctrine of the general will in the context of a series of paradoxes which defy solution. How can each citizen obey the general will and obey only himself? How can a man relinquish all his rights to the whole community and remain as free as he was in the State of Nature? How can the citizen be "forced to be free?" Moreover, how can the general will always be right and always tend to the public utility, if it is to be willed by self-interested men who are often deceived? Somehow the sum of particular wills, the will of all, is transformed into the general will, that is, the common interest. Somehow the "sum of the differences" produces the general will, but how is a will, at once, singular and collective, "indivisible," "indestructible,"<sup>4</sup> "infallible," and "always constant and pure" to be reconciled with difference? How can "private individuals see the good they reject," while the "public wants the good it does not see?"<sup>5</sup> Why does Rousseau prescribe a Legislator to "obligate" private individuals to make their wills conform to their reason, while teaching the public to know what it wants?<sup>6</sup> How can majority rule bind the citizens following unanimous

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<sup>3</sup> In the "Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar", Rousseau has the Vicar say that when looking into the details of the wonders of Nature, "the greatest wonder - the harmony and accord of the whole - is overlooked. The generation of living and organized bodies is by itself an *abyss* for the human mind. The *insurmountable barrier* that nature set between the various species, so that they would not be confounded, shows its intentions with the utmost clarity. It was not satisfied with establishing order. It took certain measures so that nothing could disturb that order (*Émile*, page 276 [579])."

<sup>4</sup> *The Social Contract* IV, i, is entitled, "That the General Will is Indestructible."

<sup>5</sup> *The Social Contract*, page 154 [380].

<sup>6</sup> *The Social Contract*, page 154 [380].

consent<sup>7</sup> to a founding compact which never occurred? From the very start, Rousseau presents the question of legitimate government in terms of a paradoxical set of mediation problems. For individuals to will the general will, "The effect would have to be the cause... Gods would be needed to give laws to men."<sup>8</sup>

The general will is best understood as a bifurcated will. Rousseau writes of the general will in both ideal and empirical terms, exhibiting both perfect and proximate representations of the way things ought to be, and the way things actually are. The paradoxes of the general will make sense when interpreted through a conceptual framework that allows the ideals of perfect unity to sit in sharp juxtaposition with empirical approximations of actual regimes with varying degrees of discord, faction and particularity.

Strictly speaking, it is impossible for a citizen to obey the general will and obey only himself, that is, to enjoy citizenship while retaining natural independence. But Rousseau wants his citizen to come as close as possible to natural independence while living in society. By sharply pointing out the radical split between the ideal of natural man in the State of Nature and the ideal citizen of a truly legitimate, egalitarian republic, Rousseau emphasizes the distance between where we ought to be and the moral, social and political vacuum where we are.

Again, Rousseau's bipolar system is evident in the phrase "forced to be free." Rousseau posits perfect harmony between discipline and freedom. He supposes that one might willingly submit to the discipline of the general will, and in so doing discover a new kind of social freedom. On the regulative side of Rousseau's bipolar system, discipline and freedom presuppose each other by definition. Dependence on the political community is synonymous with the independence of the citizen. On the proximate, empirical side of the general will, however, there is the risk that social discipline might become social coercion. Of course, the closer a given regime comes to replacing coercion with laws willed by the citizens themselves, the closer it approximates true legitimacy. The more a state relies on coercive sanctions designed and imposed by a government dominated by particular wills and interests, the more illegitimate it becomes.

Rousseau's bipolar framework can also make sense of the paradox

<sup>7</sup>. In *The Social Contract* IV, ii, Rousseau writes, "There is only one law that, by its nature, requires unanimous consent. That is the social compact." Two paragraphs later, he elaborates, saying, "Except for this primitive contract, the vote of the majority always obligates all the others (page 200 [440])."

<sup>8</sup>. *The Social Contract*, page 154 [381].

that the general will is always right and always tends toward the public utility, even though the people, who are its only legitimate architect, can often be fooled, or fail to formulate the general will. On the ideal side, the general will is, *a priori*, always right and always consistent with the public utility, but on the imperfect empirical side, the people are fallible, and their judgment about the common interest is political and often prone to error.

Rousseau stipulates that the original compact in which a people becomes a people must be willed by unanimous consent. Strictly speaking, Rousseau sets an impossible standard for a legitimate founding because in the real world there has never been a founding compact based on unanimous consent. Strictly speaking, no aggregation of individual wills and interests can result in a collective will that is indivisible, indestructible, infallible, and always constant and pure, but by metaphorically representing the body politic as a singular collective subject, and in ascribing such qualities to the general will, Rousseau stipulates the regulative ideals of perfect unity and consensus. Of course, when Rousseau then allows that the general will can result from majority vote, he switches to the proximate, empirical side of his bipolar system.

What can the "sum of the differences" possibly mean? Surely, it is just that, a sum of particulars. Clearly, the common interest can be thought of as the intersection of particular wills and interests, that is, the sum of similarities or agreements. But the general will as the "sum of the differences" seems to be nonsense.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps it means the "residue precipitated by the clash of private interests publicly confronted?"<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the "sum of the differences" refers to a process of political logrolling in which an aggregation of a "large number of small differ-

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<sup>9</sup>. John Plamenatz writes, "Let John's will be  $x + a$ , Richard's  $x + b$ , and Thomas'  $x + c$ ;  $x$  being what is common to them all, and  $a$ ,  $b$ , and  $c$ , what is peculiar to each. If the general will is what remains after the "pluses" and "minuses" have cancelled each other out, it is  $x$ ; but if it is the "sum of the differences" it is  $a + b + c$ . Whichever it is, it cannot be both; and the second alternative is too absurd to be considered. See John Plamenatz, *Man and Society*, vol. 2, New York, McGraw Hill, 1963, page 393.

<sup>10</sup>. Benjamin Barber argues that the "general will depends on citizens practicing the craft of citizenship in a particular time and place; its content can thus never be posited in the abstract or defined universally... It arises out of the intersection of interests but is disclosed by their collision." I agree with Barber as far as the empirical, political side of the general will is concerned. While the ideal will of the ideal side of Rousseau's bipolar system is a speculative abstraction, its content is neither specified nor universally defined. Only the ideal preconditions for its legitimacy are universally specified. See Benjamin R. Barber, *The Conquest of Politics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1988, pages 203 and 204.

ences" results in the general will?<sup>11</sup> Or perhaps the procedural and institutional incomprehensibility of the "sum of the differences" indicates that Rousseau has failed to resolve the "paradox of democratic legitimacy," which demands that the general will be both willed and rational in order to be legitimate, because Rousseau mistrusts representative legislative procedures?<sup>12</sup>

Each of these arguments explains part of the doctrine of the general will, but each interpretation is also one-sided. The phrase, "sum of the differences," metaphorically denotes the "no place" where identity of interests *and* difference hypothetically coexist in perfect harmony, like the fable of the lion and the lamb lying down together in the Kingdom of Heaven. The "residue of private interests publicly confronted" well expresses political efforts to hammer out a proximate general will in the real world, but this political interpretation cannot accommodate Rousseau's perfectionist language. It is one-sided without taking account of Rousseau's regulative ideal. Similarly, the process of political logrolling is no doubt essential to a proximate formulation of the general will, and a "large number of small differences" is, indeed, a necessary precondition for a successful formulation of a proximate general will. However, a close look at the math shows that the large number of small differences

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<sup>11</sup> Zev Trachtenberg argues that the general will is the result of an aggregation of individual preferences about a range of competing public goods, formulated over time by a process of bargaining and compromise, or political logrolling. Trachtenberg takes the formula a "large number of small differences" and successfully shows how the general will might be modeled. He goes on to argue that Rousseau's theory of political culture is inconsistent with his conception of freedom. Because of the contradiction between the requirements of individual autonomy and independent judgment necessary for a legitimate formulation of the general will and the supposedly coercive means necessary to enforce it, Trachtenberg concludes that Rousseau's political theory, as a whole, is incoherent. I argue in *The Calculus of the General Will*, on the other hand, that Rousseau deliberately posits this contradiction between legitimacy and enforcement to draw attention to the immense difficulty of creating a truly legitimate democracy. A perfect solution exists only in the "no place" of utopia. Political culture cannot be imposed by the Legislator or the executive. Rousseau says, "one finds combined in the work of legislation two things that seem incompatible an undertaking beyond human force and, to execute it, an authority that amounts to nothing (page 156 [383])." Rousseau's theory of political culture is meant to show the need for political integration and ideological legitimation *after* the institution of a legitimate compact that is free from an ideology imposed from above. To be legitimate, *mœurs*, and the props of civic virtue, would, first, have to be freely willed by the sovereign people. See Zev Trachtenberg, *Making Citizens Rousseau's Political Theory of Culture*, London and New York, Routledge, 1993.

<sup>12</sup> See Seyla Benhabib, "Deliberative Rationality and Models of Democratic Legitimacy," *Constellations* 1, 1, April, 1994, pages 26 to 52.



is really the "sum of agreements" (the "pluses") after the differences (the "minuses") have canceled out. Finally, Rousseau may well express the "paradox of democratic legitimacy" by stipulating that legitimate law must be both willed and rational, but he does not ask us to choose rationality over legitimacy. He deliberately presents the paradox without a solution to draw our attention to the fact that inequality in society and *amour-propre* amongst men preempt legitimate will and rationality. As long as those moral and social imperfections remain, representative procedures are doomed to produce the will of all; that is, aggregations of particular wills and interests.

Regarding law, Rousseau believes in a natural order "by the nature of things, independently of human conventions."<sup>13</sup> In a speculative sense, Rousseau supposes that perfect justice resides with God, but in the real world we do not know how to receive it. Of course, he believes in "a universal justice emanating from reason alone," but universal justice is ineffective without civil sanction.<sup>14</sup> Thus, arises the need for conventional laws. If the citizens of a perfect egalitarian republic were to assemble and will the laws, the laws would be perfect and would coincide with the ideal of universal justice. In the real world, however, fallible men make less than perfect laws under conditions of majority rule. Strictly speaking, a "blind multitude" cannot know its own will or what is good for it, lacking "an organ to enunciate its will."<sup>15</sup> They need a Legislator to guide them, but he is prohibited from using either force or persuasion. He is charged with "an undertaking beyond human force and an authority that amounts to nothing."<sup>16</sup>

It is clearly impossible to reconcile Rousseau's conception of legitimacy with the Legislator's task. Most interpreters take one side or the other, but Rousseau does not mean for the paradox to be actually resolved. At the founding moment, ideally, the Legislator's judgment would coincide with universal justice and would meet with unanimous consensus. If a truly legitimate regime were ever founded, empirically, laws would be made by fallible men according to majority rule. Such an authority, while unconditionally binding, would still only approximate the ideal of true legitimacy.

Rousseau employs his deliberate paradoxical language to leave

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<sup>13</sup>. *The Social Contract*, page 152 [378].

<sup>14</sup>. *The Social Contract*, page 152 [378].

<sup>15</sup>. *The Social Contract*, page 154 [380].

<sup>16</sup>. *The Social Contract*, page 156 [383].

us a critical utopia, a "no place" of the imagination, that opens up the field of the possible "beyond that of the actual."<sup>17</sup> Utopia here means the critical space created by the tension between the ideal legitimate regime and proximate efforts that might approach that ideal.<sup>18</sup> Utopia is figuratively the "NO PLACE" in-between, and, including, each pole of the bipolar framework. The perfect general will, likened unto a

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<sup>17</sup>. See Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1986, page 15.

<sup>18</sup>. To identify the utopian moment in Rousseau is nothing new, but to identify the "no place" "between-and-including" Rousseau's paradoxes as a deliberate heuristic formulation which functions as a critical utopia is a new contribution. Judith Shklar called Rousseau "the last of the classical utopists (page 1)". She argues that Rousseau used the utopia form to convey the contrast between "what is and what ought to be," between the "probable and the possible (page 3)." Shklar finds a tension between two utopias in Rousseau's writing, the Spartan city-state and the tranquil domestic household. "Both utopias are unnatural, but each meets the psychic needs of men for inner unity and social simplicity," an impulse which Shklar finds pathological when applied to democratic politics. *The Calculus of the General Will* owes much to Shklar, but takes sharp issue with her negative reading of the significance of Rousseau's utopian impulse. See Judith Shklar, *Men and Citizens*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1969. It should be emphasized that Rousseau seemingly denied that his writings were utopian. In the sixth letter in *Letters Written from the Mountain*, Rousseau writes to the syndics of the Geneva *Petit conseil* "How could I mean to subvert all kinds of Governments, in laying down as principles all those of yours? The fact alone destroys the force of the accusation; for as a government really existed on such a model, I could not intend, by such means, to destroy all those which existed. No, Sir, if I have described only an ideal system, you may be certain nothing would have been said about it. My adversaries would have contended themselves with adding the Social Compact to the Republic of Plato, Utopia, and the Severambes in the world of Chimeras. But I described an object really existing, and they were desirous the face of this object should be changed. My book bears witness against the attempt they were going to make; and this they will never forgive me (*Lettres écrites de la montagne*, page 810, my translation)." In fact, it was Rousseau and his friends who were trying to change things in Geneva. Geneva had never lived up to the egalitarian republican ideals laid out in *The Social Contract*, as Rousseau well knew. His effort to drape the popular party's cause in the context of Geneva's constitutional history was a rhetorical ruse to give his argument legitimacy. It should be noted that when the *Petit conseil* agreed in 1763 to a request of the French resident in Geneva to forbid the publication of Rousseau's *Letter to Beaumont*, Rousseau renounced his citizenship in anger. In *The Dialogues*, Rousseau no longer identifies himself as *Citizen of Geneva*. For a detailed analysis of the events surrounding Rousseau's quarrel with the Genevan authorities and the writing of *Letters Written from the Mountain*, see chapters 4 and 5 in Maurice Cranston, *The Solitary Self*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1997.

"frictionless surface,"<sup>19</sup> reflects and sets a utopian standard of judgment, a benchmark of perfect democracy, and thus an unobtainable measure of the truly legitimate regime. Rousseau deliberately sets up the problem of political mediation to defy solution. A legitimate regime would approach the standard of a perfect democracy as an asymptote approaches a line, but in the real world "the square cannot be circled."<sup>20</sup>

In *The Dialogues*, we again see Rousseau situate himself between Heaven and the depravation and discord of the real world. The bipolar, dual axial, system again sets the boundaries of the entire work. We see the same bifurcated rupture between the ideals of unity-in-Being, the "eternal," immediacy, totality, identity and harmony, and the reality of separation, particularity, mediation, and difference.

By 1776, when Rousseau tries to deposit *The Dialogues* on the altar of Notre-Dame Cathedral, his situation is pitiful and his plea is

<sup>19</sup>. The argument developed in *The Calculus of the General Will* owes a great debt to Roger Masters. Masters argues that the general will is a modern version of a Platonic Idea. In *The Geneva Manuscript* Rousseau writes, "In the mechanism of the State there is an equivalent of friction in machines, which one must know how to reduce to the least possible amount and which must at least be calculated and subtracted in advance from the total force, so that the means used will be exactly proportionate to the effect desired (Masters and Kelly, 1994, page 88)." Masters characterizes this frictionless surface as "an ideal model which is difficult if not impossible to realize in practical circumstances, though it can be minimized by applied engineering (introduction by Masters and Kelly page xxi)." Masters notes that Rousseau distinguishes between "the formal presentation of the 'principles of political right' - the logic of the general will - and the 'science of the legislator' which studies the actual friction between the general will and the wills of the citizens in each concrete situation (page xxi)." That is, says Masters, Rousseau combines "an empirical science of politics with an examination of the principles of legitimacy (page xxi)." Also see Roger D. Masters, *The Political Philosophy of Rousseau*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1968, pages 285, 286, 290, 327, 422 and 424. Masters also characterizes the "frictionless surface" metaphor in terms of an "abscissa on a graph used to plot political observations; actual societies approach this co-ordinate, but would never fall directly on it." See Roger D. Masters, "Structure of Rousseau's Political Thought," in Maurice Cranston, *Hobbes and Rousseau*, Garden City, N.Y., Anchor-Doubleday, 1972, pages 401 to 436.

<sup>20</sup>. In the *Government of Poland*, Rousseau compares the problem of "putting law over men" to "squaring the circle in geometry. Solve that problem correctly, and the government based upon your solution will be a good government, proof against corruption. But until you solve it, rest assured of this you may think you have made the laws govern; but men will do the governing (translation by Kendall, Indianapolis, Hackett, 1985, page 3 [955])." Benjamin Barber makes a significant contribution to the empirical, practical challenge of coming closer to "squaring the circle." Barber recommends, "a Strong Democratic Program for the Revitalization of Citizenship." For details see Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy*, Berkeley, The University of California Press, 1984, page 307.

desperate. In his earlier writing, the regulative ideals of Heaven, Nature, and a perfect egalitarian republic are used as literary and rhetorical devices by a thinker squarely in the Enlightenment tradition.<sup>21</sup> In *The Dialogues*, however, Nature recedes into the background, and Heaven assumes increasingly literal religious significance. Heaven becomes the court of last appeal. Rousseau despairs of ever knowing the satisfaction of civil justice. He no longer places the same emphasis on the positive ideals of social identity and communion. His sense of being cast adrift is overwhelming. He is enraged, afraid, and indecisive. Rousseau realizes that his life will end in exile. He will never see a legitimate political community. He will never know the joy of citizenship in a just egalitarian republic, or experience the sweet bonds of fraternity between citizens of an egalitarian republic, equal in right and ascriptive status, free of *amour-propre*, motivated by love for each other and their country.

He can only hope to find his treasure in Heaven, and to leave a blueprint for the future when the "public delirium" against him has subsided.<sup>22</sup> "Detached from everything pertaining to the earth and the senseless judgments of men, I am resigned to being disfigured among them forever, without counting any less on the value of my innocence and suffering. My felicity must be of another order. It is no longer among them that I must seek it, and it is no more in their power to prevent it than to know it. Destined to be the prey of error and lies in this life, I await the hour of my deliverance and the triumph of truth without seeking them any longer among mortals. Detached from all worldly affection and released even from the anxiety of hope here below, I see no hold by which they can still disturb my heart's repose. I will never repress the first impulse of indignation, transport, anger, and I no longer even try to do so. But the calm that follows this passing agitation is a permanent state out of which nothing can pull me anymore (253 [986 and 987])." One scarcely believes that Rousseau can find peace by declaring the end of his attachments. In proclaiming his innocence and authenticity, by standing as his own witness of truth, uncontaminated by envy, jealousy, or revenge, indifferent to what others think of him, surely

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<sup>21</sup>. In a provocative recent work, Mark Hulliung argues that Rousseau should be rescued from the Romantics, reconstituted squarely in the pantheon of the Enlightenment, and understood in terms of the "autocritique" of Enlightenment. Inasmuch as anti-Enlightenment arguments from Weber to Horkheimer and Adorno always employ Enlightenment concepts in the service of critique, Hulliung's suggestion is a good one. See Mark Hulliung, *The Autocritique of Enlightenment: Rousseau and the Philosophes*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1994.

<sup>22</sup>. See page 255 (988).

Rousseau himself is overcome with *amour-propre*.

Is Rousseau, then, a hypocrite? We should not judge him that harshly. After all, he is a mere mortal, living in the world of men. If one half of his character is truly unique in all the world,<sup>23</sup> natural and unspoiled, the way Nature meant men to be, the other half is socially contaminated like everybody else. He cannot escape his time or his place. Perhaps Heaven awaits him, perhaps providence will vindicate his teaching, but here and now, he suffers with psychological self-division and social alienation.

Starobinski criticizes Rousseau for imagining "two worlds in which action makes no sense in the one because it is irremediably divided, in the other because it is already perfected."<sup>24</sup> Starobinski faults Rousseau's imagination for sometimes resigning himself to "obscure hostility," while at other times losing himself in "the transparency of the great Being, in presence, in existence."<sup>25</sup> Either way, however, "true unity is compromised by the alternation of these contradictory states."<sup>26</sup>

In fact, Starobinski faults Rousseau's imagination for what reflects the ruptured world of Rousseau's deliberate observations. It is quite true that Rousseau fails to act, and, perhaps, he fails to find real lasting inner peace, but is it really his fault? Rousseau does not compromise real unity. Real unity is precluded by the human condition.

For Rousseau in 1776, an all too real "abyss," an "insurmountable barrier," separates the chaos and disorder of the world from the perfection of Heaven and Nature, which remains the lodestar of his thought and sentiments. He has pointed out that a truly legitimate polity presupposes citizens free of *amour-propre* and social equality, and for that Rousseau is alone. His books have been burned. He has been exiled all over Europe. The world has cast him out. He has been slandered and ostracized. Rousseau cannot find a way to heal the breach because that would require a solution to the unsolvable problem of mediation. He can neither find an accommodation with himself nor the world, but this does

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<sup>23</sup>. In *The Dialogues*, Rousseau places a discussion of his uniqueness of character in the mouth of the Frenchman, who says of Rousseau "a man had to portray himself to show us primitive man like this, and if the Author hadn't been as unique as his books, he would never have written them (page 214 [935])."

<sup>24</sup>. J. Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau Transparency and Obstruction*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1971, page 257.

<sup>25</sup>. Starobinski, page 261.

<sup>26</sup>. Starobinski, page 261.

not testify to his failure or prove his madness. His world, like ours, is corrupt. Men neither know equality nor *amour de soi*. Where are there true hearts? Where are there citizens? Where is a truly legitimate regime?

To a large extent, Rousseau's pathology is the externally imposed condition of the unarmed prophet. The opacity and obstruction of his disturbed personality are not altogether his own doing.<sup>27</sup> It is partly his reward for fulfilling his destiny without compromise. He goes to great lengths to defend himself from a series of trumped up charges. He is a monster. He did not really write his books, or he is accused of writing others that he did not write. He is a hypocrite and a misanthrope. He has betrayed his friends, the philosophical party of Voltaire, Diderot, and d'Alembert. But these charges are "red herrings" of very little real consequence, and are not worthy of his impassioned defense. His real crime is having the audacity to speak out against a rotten monarchy, a decayed and corrupt aristocracy, and philosophers who defend a system of privilege and inequality. He has attacked the arts and sciences when they work to further inequality rather than ending it. He has praised the virtues of the common people and turned his back on cosmopolitanism. Rousseau is hated for these "crimes," and perhaps rightly because his message is dangerous.

Whatever else, Rousseau endured and persevered. Under the circumstances, to be consistent with his principles, real action had to be revolutionary action. Although he diagnosed the contradictions, Rousseau may be forgiven for stopping short of acting on the consequences, whether because of a disordered personality or out of an astute moral sense that perhaps intuited the horror that was to come all too soon from revolution.

Too much is often made of Rousseau, the preserver of tradition. He taught us that "nature made man happy and good, but the society depraves him and makes him miserable (213 [934])." Of course, he worked to "rectify the error of our judgments in order to delay the progress of our vices," but he also relentlessly forced our attention on the

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<sup>27</sup> Jean Starobinski shows great sensitivity to Rousseau's psychological condition, but ultimately criticizes Rousseau for his failure to achieve an integrated personality in the world, and he pronounces Rousseau "mad." While Rousseau desires transparency, he finds obstacles and suffers from opacity and psychological obstruction. In short, Rousseau fails in both the psychological and social elements of the problem of mediation. "No exchange is possible between opposites. Jean-Jacques' transparency is static, the darkness outside him is congealed. The veil, too, has changed no longer thin and fluttering, it has turned solid and clamped down on the world it once hid. But only the human world turns opaque. Nature remains close to Jean-Jacques, in the realm of transparency... (Starobinski, page 257)."

moral, social, economic, and political paradoxes which stand between our present condition and a legitimate egalitarian future. But alas, "human nature does not go backward, and it is never possible to return to the times of innocence and equality once they have been left behind (213 [934])." More than that, it is never possible to escape the present and leap forward into a veritable utopia. Like beauty, there is nothing utopian in this world "except that which is not."<sup>28</sup> Perhaps, in time, "natural revolution" will "change the disposition of the public," but Rousseau did not live to see it (255 [988]). His work to slow our decay was merely remedial, until a more enlightened generation of the future would once again take up his revolutionary legacy. Yes, he failed to solve the problem of mediation, but, to date, so have we.

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<sup>28</sup>. *Émile*, page 447 [821]; *Nouvelle Héloïse*, page 693. Here and in the epigraph, the translation of *Julie* is the author's own.