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# ROUSSEAU'S NORMATIVE IDEA OF NATURE<sup>1</sup>

## I

The concept of nature in modern science is, to put it very simply, that of a universe of facts, events or items governed by laws – in Kant's phrase: "das Dasein der Dinge, so fern es nach allgemeinen Gesetzen bestimmt ist".<sup>2</sup> This is not a normative idea of nature. Norms are not laws which "govern" a series of events, they are rules that can be followed or violated. Such is the case only with rules for the behavior of beings which have or at least believe to have some freedom of choice. These beings put values in the outcome of a course of events. They wish that some state of events may come into existence rather than another and try to influence this by their own behavior.

Throughout the history of modern philosophy and science, an ontological and epistemological gap has opened and continuously widened between the realm of nature governed by laws and the realm of value- and norm-guided activity. The steps of this process are well-known: Hume's criticism of inferences from is to ought, Kant's separation between the realms of nature and of freedom, G. E. Moore's concept of the non-natural character of moral values, Max Weber's postulate of value-free science etc. Today nature is conceived as completely value free and as the subject of purely objective science. Norms and values on the other hand originate by peoples' private wishes

and valuations and the necessity to regulate conflicting attempts to realize them. Preference utilitarianism, rational choice theories, contractarianism and most forms of modern Kantianism subscribe to this division between valueless nature and the rational coordination of value-realizing activities.

Among the main reasons for this historical development are, as is well-known, the refutation of teleological explanation in the sciences and the liberation of individual conscience from the moral authority of church and state. Rousseau plays an important role at least in the second process: he figures among the staunchest supporters of the freedom and holiness of conscience. And despite the possibility of totalitarian consequences implied in the *Social Contract*, Rousseau's concept of autonomy – as co-legislation and voluntary subordination to the general will – is among the most influential in the history of liberal political philosophy.

As to the other side, Rousseau's concept of nature, the picture is less clear. On the one hand, Rousseau conceives of nature, natural history and natural man in terms of modern empirical science. The history of nature and of man's cultural development, as reconstructed in the *Discourse on the origins of inequality*, is void of any teleological or purposive structure. It is full of contingent facts, accidents and surprising turns, which do not follow a rational design. Man himself in his state of nature is an animal devoid of almost all traditional attributes characterizing the image of god in his creation.

On the other hand, in his letter to Voltaire of 1756, the confession of faith of the Savoyan vicar in his *Émile* and in other texts Rousseau subscribes to a teleological picture of nature as designed by an almighty, omniscient and benevolent divine will. In this nature there seems to be no room for chance, accidents and catastrophes which have been brought about only by the abuse of man's free will. The evolutionary concept of natural history which seemed so close in the Second Discourse is almost unimaginable in these texts. Here Rousseau's conception is much closer to Leibniz than to Darwin.

This second concept of nature is, of course, evaluative and normative. If man had managed to preserve his position on the top of the natural order, he would have followed God's intention and by doing so he would have attained happiness. As to the first, the concept of the Discourse, many have considered it to be evaluative and normative as

well. “Back to nature” seemed to be the message of this attack on the *ancien régime*’s and the Enlightenment’s pride in the achievements of cultural progress. Voltaire himself set the tone of this interpretation and it has been echoed by many followers ever since.

But as Rousseau maintained and clarified in several later texts, natural man in his original condition, the “*homme sauvage*” which may still survive among the primates in some corners of the tropical forests, although goodhearted, is morally neither good nor bad and he is not aware of his own happiness. His specifically human traits, which according to the profession of the Savoyan vicar make him the king of nature and the image of god – intelligence, free will and conscience in this ascending sequence – are still lacking. The only natural “norm” which man can learn from this happy past seems to be the correspondence between needs and means to fulfill them. But in order to become a human form of happiness and self-reconciliation, this correspondence has to be transformed and regained on a completely different level.

What I attempt to do in the following is to clarify the different concepts of nature in Rousseau’s writings between 1755 and 1763. My guiding question is, how this concept is situated in relation to the traditional evaluative and dominantly teleological concepts of nature on the one hand, and the modern, value-free concept of nature on the other.

After a provisional classification of meanings of nature (II) I discuss Rousseau’s concept of nature in his *Second Discourse* (III). Then I turn to the teleological and physico-theological concept of nature in the *Confession of the Savoyan vicar* and the Letters to Voltaire and Beaumont (IV). In the following part I discuss the thesis that the legal and moral norms in Rousseau’s the *Social Contract* aim at de-naturalizing man (V). In the final section (VI) I draw some conclusions for the contemporary debate about nature and morality.

## II

In order to clarify Rousseau’s different concepts of nature, let us first consider some uses of the concept which he shares with everyday

and philosophical language.<sup>3</sup> They can be classified under three headings:

First one might distinguish concepts of nature which are defined by their *extension* or their *intension*. Extensionally defined concepts of nature refer to a realm or sector of objects. In contrast I call “intensional” concepts of nature referring to certain aspects or properties of objects. Whereas extensional concepts of nature do not allow that one object at the same time belongs to nature and to another sector of objects, such a crossing of borders is perfectly possible for “natural” objects defined by intensional concepts. Thus a highly artificial (or cultural) object like a movement of a ballet dancer can be quite adequately called “natural”.

These two concepts of nature and natural can be distinguished into further subdivisions.

(1) The following concepts are *extensional* by demarcating different realms of “natural objects”:

(1.1) Nature in the broadest extensional sense is the universe of things, events and processes to which human life belongs as long as it is incorporated in man’s mortal body

(1.2) There are some aspects or divisions of this whole which we are used to call nature in particular: the realm of material things, and more specific the realm of living things.

(1.3) Even more particular demarcations of the realm of nature are gained by using contrasting terms or oppositions. We distinguish nature as that part of reality which in his existence and his change is not subject to human will or intention. At least part of the human body belong to this sphere. By focussing on different activities of this will we derive more specific pairs of opposites: namely the natural and the cultural, the natural and the artificial or the technical etc.

(2) Besides these extensionally defined concepts there are some *intensionally* defined concepts of nature which cross the lines of the realms drawn by the extensional ones:

(2.1) Nature can mean the essence of things, both natural and artificial like the state or friendship.

(2.2) In essentialistic and teleological conceptions this sense gets an “evaluative touch”. Nature and natural is understood as original, authentic, not yet spoiled, corrupted or alienated. These evaluative prop-

erties, too, cut across the nature-culture distinction: a smile or a gesture, for instance, can be natural.

(3) There is a third group of concepts of nature consisting of models, metaphors and ideals of nature. Elements of the above mentioned concepts – especially the concept of nature as essence – are contained in these concepts but the latter cannot be reduced to them. What I have in mind are especially two models of nature prominent in the 17th and 18th century:

(3.1) First, that of the order of nature, the laws, organizing principles and basic structures which can figure as a model for man's behavior or the order of his society.

(3.2) Second, the concept or metaphor of nature as a subject with human or superhuman traits. Its most concrete and certainly metaphorical form is that of "mother nature". It can have pantheistic and theistic connotations. In the 17th and 18th century it is used both by "materialists" in the tradition of Lukrez, who conceived of nature as the eternal creative power and by Christian "creationists" who tried to prove the immanence of the creator's will in his uncorrupted creation.<sup>4</sup> This meaning of nature caring for human welfare and, if undisturbed, providing for human happiness, left its traces even in modern everyday language. It played an important role in 18th century thinking about man's relation to nature and to his creator.<sup>5</sup>

In the following, I do not intend to relate Rousseau's uses of the concept of nature precisely to these different meanings. I use them only as a background to avoid confusion and ambiguity in dealing with his texts.

### III

The concept of nature which Rousseau employs in the *Second Discourse* contains all the meanings mentioned above. It combines traditional and rather modern tendencies. On the one hand, nature is a teleological order, on the other it is a process governed by contingent facts and their consequences.

As to the first, Rousseau clearly conceives of the natural order of things as harmonious and beneficent. Nature has provided animals

and human beings with faculties and impulses which, properly used, make them flourish and enjoy happiness, even if they have little consciousness of this happiness. Man in the state of nature is a strong, healthy animal, which can easily meet his needs and has little to fear. Man and the other animals are no “natural” enemies, since they do not need each other for food. Ample space for a small number of human beings with a low rate of reproduction allows for a solitary existence and makes conflict among humans unlikely. Moreover, the natural antipathy to see a sentient being suffer, above all a member of one’s own species, keeps him from violence – except for some “*coup de poings*” over a meal.

There are, however, two problems with this harmonious and purposive conception of nature. Different from traditional teleological concepts, it seems to be indeterminate and incomplete in two respects: firstly, it is indeterminate in a historical dimension, because natural history and cultural progress are not directed towards a good end. And secondly it is indeterminate and unstable regarding man as a species, which by following his perfectibility may lose – and in fact has lost – his natural place. This loss (or “fall”) destroyed his emotional balance and the balance of nature as a whole.

In this process, the two ways of indeterminacy worked together: the accidental events in the history of nature – among them the outbreaks of volcanoes and the origin of islands or other pieces of land separated by natural barriers – gave rise to more densely populated areas. This in turn forced or at least favored man to live socially and thereby to develop all his social and technical skills – but at the same time lead to the depravation of his natural harmony and harmlessness.

As to the specific difference of man, Rousseau characterizes it both in a natural (or biological) and a metaphysical way. The natural difference is the perfectibility, the faculty to learn and develop his faculties which by far exceeds the rest of the animal world. The metaphysical difference is marked by free will, which enables man to actions beyond the limits of natural (or instinctive) impulses. But even this metaphysical faculty, which Rousseau connects with the Cartesian immaterial soul, presupposes for his employment the contingent history of man’s cultivation. Man in his original animal existence is unable to imagine his future, to make plans or to reflect on reasons for different ways to act.

If nature, then, develops and thereby changes the conditions for the existence of living beings, can it still be considered to be a teleological and harmonious order?

In order to study Rousseau's answer to this question, we will have to look into the passages which expose and defend his teleological concept of nature. This can be found in his *Letter to Voltaire* of 1756, the *Confession of Faith of the Savoyan Vicar* in the *Émile* (1762) and his *Letter to Christophe de Beaumont* (1763).

#### IV

The ambivalence between a beneficent *and* destructive nature is closely related to the problem of the theodicy, namely how an almighty, omniscient and beneficent creator can allow for destruction, evil and suffering in history. Rousseau gives his own "proof" of such a god in the confession of the Savoyan vicar in the *Émile* (1762). It may be doubted, however, that the vicar really presents Rousseau's position. But its main content – if not the form and the claim of a proof – can be confirmed by Rousseau's letters to Voltaire (1756) and Beaumont (1763).

In his *Confession of Faith* the vicar gives his commonsensical, anti-academic version of the cosmological and physiotheological proofs of god's existence. He criticizes the contemporary materialistic and deterministic conceptions with a traditional dualistic argument, namely that matter cannot move itself. His view of matter is mechanistic and in this respect Rousseau does not follow his mentor in the field of natural philosophy, Buffon.<sup>6</sup> Though he agrees in general with the classical conception of the great chain of beings, living beings do not belong to a higher level with its own sources and laws of motion. Instead he allows for only two ways of motion. Matter is by nature inert, it can be moved only from outside and finally from the only conceivable spontaneity, that of a will, be it the finite human or the infinite will of god, the first mover of the universe.

The laws, the order, and especially the purposive, teleological organization of the material world demands that the divine will is intelligent and loves order. Whether the generation of order is an act of

creation remains, according to this text, beyond man's understanding. In his letter to Beaumont Rousseau indicates that matter may be eternal and only set in motion by a spiritual god. What man *can* understand is the effect of God's will on the world, not God's essence in itself. Here again he comes close to Buffon, but remains a bit more cautious. While Buffon calls the vivifying power of nature divine, the vicar, instead, conceives of the divine motion rather like that of the deistic clockmaker who gives the first push to the pendulum.

In the letters, moreover, Rousseau doubts that we can know the perfection of nature without already presupposing a god with this attribute. The purposefulness of nature can be experienced and is a hint to the existence of such a god, but the real proof is the immediate feeling of the believer. Though Rousseau agrees with Leibniz that every evil in the world will in the end contribute to the perfection of the whole, he doubts whether this can be proved. Such a proof would require complete knowledge of nature and history which transcends the limits of the human mind.<sup>7</sup>

Despite these differences Rousseau agrees with the content of Leibnizian "optimism" at least with regard to nature. For the evil and suffering he suggests three different explanations: 1) First and above all, man himself is the origin of both the *malum morale* and the greatest part of the *malum physicum*. 2) There is a "contradiction" between the laws of "impermeable" matter and those of the sentient beings. This leads to unavoidable suffering on the level of bodily pain.<sup>8</sup> 3) The rest of the physical evil not explicable by these two arguments must be understood as a contribute to the best of the whole or cosmos.

The last argument presupposes the goodness of the whole, which according to Rousseau cannot be proved independent of the belief in god. Therefore it is of very limited value. Rousseau himself in his *Letter to Philopolis* argues against a universal "quietism" which may follow if everything is good because it contributes to a perfect universe. He refutes this consequence at least for the social world.<sup>9</sup> But he holds that all the disturbances in this world do not seriously touch the goodness of nature in general. To be sure, the cultural depravation of modern man destroys the natural balance *for him* – but not, as is assured in the "confession", for the universe. This order he cannot touch and even his preservation as a species is not seriously



endangered by his cultural self-alienation. Man may destroy his own happiness and morality, but he is bound by natural law to preserve his existence as a biological species.<sup>10</sup>

More interesting are the second and the first argument. However, in the second argument one has to replace the concept of contradiction, because a perfect world in the Leibnizian sense cannot contain any logical contradictions. And moreover, the argument that the negative consequences of this incongruity are compensated by the goodness of the whole is again based on an unproved presupposition.

As to the first point, one must distinguish different aspects. As to the moral evil, Rousseau follows the Leibnizian argument that freedom of the will is man's highest perfection and his utmost similarity to god, even if he abuses it. As to man's responsibility for the physical evil, Rousseau uses again different arguments: first, man's feelings, consciousness and imagination in his original state are so undeveloped, that he has very little consciousness of pain. For his cultural development which leads to this consciousness, he is himself at least partly responsible. Second, only the extension and refinement of his needs and wishes make him vulnerable for hardship and suffering. And third, in his process of civilization he loses the knowledge, the interest and the modesty to accommodate himself to the natural environment. Voltaire, as is well known, based his attack against the theodicy of Leibniz on the evidence of natural catastrophes like the earthquake of Lisbon. Rousseau counters that no one is forced to build seven-floor buildings in earthquake areas.

Although the argument has some plausibility especially in view of modern civilization – take for instance the big floods and forest fires of today which are at least partly caused by damages to the environment – one may doubt whether it can be carried through for all damage man suffers from natural events. And even if Rousseau were successful in blaming man as the sole source of his physical and moral evil, he would have to deal with the question, whether *animals and plants* can be damaged by natural events up to the degree of large scale extinction of species.

To be sure, for Rousseau as a substance dualist the “whole material universe” is of less value than “one thinking and feeling being” (*Letter to Voltaire*, OCP IV, 1067). But “sentient” includes at least higher animals. In a passage of the *Confession of Faith* Rousseau even argues,

that every “being in the universe” can in some respect be regarded as an end to which “all others” serve as means (*OCP IV*, 578). Besides this ambiguity regarding pathocentrism or physiocentrism, not every destruction of matter and life in natural history serves the interests of “higher” beings.

Rousseau’s attempt to reconcile a concept of natural history influenced by chance, including accidents and catastrophes, with a perfect and beneficent nature, fails to be completely convincing. And the problem becomes even more complicated if one regards Rousseau’s “metaphysical anthropology”.

How does man fit into the natural teleological order? As an animal, he belongs to it and would be happy if he remained in his natural or animal state. Rousseau explicitly advises the surviving wild nations or groups to remain in, or go back to their uncivilized state.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, the development of truly human faculties requires leaving this state. Among these faculties is the perfectibility of bodily and technical skills as well as the development of man’s spiritual substance, his free will, his conscience, his spontaneous judgements and so on.

By his technical skills and his insight in the natural order and its divine origin he ranges far beyond the realm of the animals. He is indeed modeled after God’s image – but by the mistakes of his god-like free will he has turned the human world into a chaos in the middle of the harmonious and balanced order of nature: “The animals are happy, only their king is miserable” (*Émile*, *OCP IV*, 583).

The indeterminacy of his free will and the contingency of natural processes has led man to leave his natural position. In a clearly negative sense he remarks to Beaumont that “our social order is in every respect against nature, which cannot be destroyed” and therefore “permanently demands its rights” against his “tyrant” (*OCP IV*, 966 f.). On the other hand, the *Emile* and the *Social Contract* characterize a true social order as unnatural and even against man’s nature. This sounds like a radical split between natural and social, including moral and legal order. I will try to show in the next section that this is not the case: even the rational and artificial state of the *Social Contract* remains a part of the teleological universe.

But before leaving the *Émile* and the *Letters* I still have to clarify how man as a spiritual and moral being belongs to the normative concept of nature.

Following metaphysical dualism especially in his Cartesian form, Rousseau conceives of man as a “composed being” – composed of a physical and a spiritual substance.<sup>12</sup> He agrees with Plato and Descartes, that matter or the realm of extension is separated from spontaneity and spirituality by an ontological gap. On the other hand, he regards man's spiritual faculties as a gift of nature. Nature, then, is not only the material substance but comprises both substances. Since this concept includes the idea of a possible natural harmony between man's physical and spiritual nature, it certainly is a *normative* idea.

In the famous passages on conscience in the *Émile*, which had so much impact on philosophy and literature throughout the age of “*Empfindsamkeit*” and romanticism, Rousseau (or the vicar) argues for a perfect harmony between man's uncorrupted feelings and inclinations on the one hand, and conscience as his “moral instinct” on the other. Conscience as “the voice of the soul” (OCP IV, 594) and the “divine instinct” (600) perfects his nature and moralizes his actions (ibid.).

Since man consists of two substances, his self-concern has two objects, the intelligent and the sensitive being, each of which has a different sort of welfare.<sup>13</sup> The sensitive impulse longs for the well-being of the body, the intelligent impulse is the love of order aiming at the well-being of the soul. If it is developed, it is named conscience. Conscience, on the one hand, is a feeling prior to the use of reason which may distort it. But on the other hand it is more than natural compassion, it belongs to his spiritual substance. According to Rousseau conscience is neither a product of education nor of cultural influences. Against all sceptical arguments in favor of moral relativism – especially against Montaigne – he takes great pains to show that at bottom the concepts of human goodness – based on the voice of conscience – are the same in all cultures.

Conscience feels, loves and is aware of order. The love of order can, in Rousseau's view, be developed by observing and feeling the order of nature and its purposefulness. But the order of nature outside the human being and its society does not contain the model of the social order. Man's animal nature has not equipped him with special social impulses or faculties. Nevertheless, the goal of a true social order remains the harmony between man's physical and spir-

itual faculties. And it can be brought about only by men and women who are still in some basic congruence with their natural impulses, needs and interests.

Rousseau's conceptual classifications differ from the Post-Humean and Post-Kantian divisions dominant up to the present day: Conscience, freedom and moral action do not belong to a realm completely different from that of nature. To act according to one's conscience is to follow one's own nature and at the same time nature as a whole. There is one all-encompassing natural order to which man's immaterial substance belongs.

Rousseau's dualism is a transformation of Christian doctrines as well. In some respect, man's history is his fall and at the same time his perfection. His "redemption" requires to some extent a break of the human will with man's nature. But this has to be distinguished both from the Biblical dogma of the fall or the original sin *and* from the Platonic dualism and his Gnostic and Christian successors. From the Biblical dogma, since it is not nature which is corrupted, neither man's inner nature nor the creation as a whole. Nature remains a perfect order and it has stopped to be a paradise only for human beings.

To which extent the social redemption in a rational state belongs to the order of nature or breaks with it must be discussed by turning to the *Social Contract*.

## V

Rousseau's concept of nature and morality as exposed in the *Second Discourse*, the *Confession of the Savoyan Vicar* in the *Émile* and in his letters to Voltaire and Beaumont are based on a teleological concept of nature and a "natural" view of morality and religion. "Natural" not in the sense, that morality and religion are properties of natural man, the *homme sauvage*. Instead, they are a product of culture, developing man's intellectual and emotional faculties. But conscience and natural religion are independent of cultural differences and rooted in man's essence and his unspoiled faculties. In developing and exercising these faculties man remains in harmony with himself and nature, he loves the order designed by his creator.

However, man is by his original condition a solitary being and concerned only for himself. In his cultural development he loses this condition and his natural independence. He becomes a social being dependent on his fellow beings for satisfying his natural and cultural needs and wishes. This sociality normally remains on the surface: by fulfilling his social functions he still tries to serve his own interests.<sup>14</sup> This hidden self-interest becomes the source of the social system of competition and mutual domination which deprives man of his identity and harmony.

The *Émile* designs two ways out of this dilemma: either to live as much in distance and independence from society as possible, or to give up man's individualistic nature. The necessary condition for the first way is the "natural" education which is the main subject of this book. The other way demands social institutions and an institutional education which is directed against this self-centered nature of man. In the opening pages of the *Émile* Rousseau marks this opposition as radical as possible: "The good social institutions are those which know best how to denaturalize man, to take away his absolute existence for himself in order to give him a relative one and to transport the I into a common unity."<sup>15</sup>

Regarding man's solitary and self-centered nature, the social institutions, the laws and morals of a good state are anti-natural. The *Social Contract*, Rousseau's conception of a "good" state in which civilized man can maintain his freedom and regain a form of authentic existence, follows this device. Thus it seems that nature has lost all normative significance for man as a social and moral being. This interpretation is, indeed, well-spread among Rousseau scholars.<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, I think it is at least one-sided. My thesis is, that the social order of the *Social Contract* is anti-natural only in two respects: it is directed firstly against man's natural "individualism" and secondly against the "second nature" of his egoistic habits in most developed societies. But the normative conception of nature which Rousseau exposed in his writings discussed above, remains valid in two respects: firstly, the anti-individualistic social community remains part of an all-encompassing nature of a purposive and teleological character; and secondly the essence and final end of man's nature remains a life of harmony between his corporal, emotional and intellectual faculties. Together with just laws conscience remains the di-

recting instance for actions leading to that goal. And conscience belongs to man's true nature.

As to the "denaturalizing" of man, Rousseau states it in his famous chapter on the legislator in almost the same words as in the *Émile*. The legislator has "so to speak" (*pour ainsi dire*) to change man's nature in order to establish the artificial unity of a people. By nature man as an individual is a solitary and perfect whole ("*tout parfait et solitaire*" OCP III, 381). His independent physical existence, which he "received from nature" must be replaced by a "partial and moral existence" within the political body. By entering this "moral existence" he exchanges his "natural freedom", which is only limited by his physical forces, against his "civil freedom" guaranteed by the laws. These laws are not the laws of nature, they are created by acts of the general will, and in this sense "artificial".

The concepts of "nature" and "natural" which Rousseau uses in these passages are in general related to the "state of nature" in opposition to the civil state. This state has to be overcome like in Hobbes' or Spinoza's political philosophies (*ex eundem e statu naturae*). In the *Social Contract* it does not serve as a model for man's culture – especially since man in his development has already reached a stage of mutual dependence and domination. The concept of nature in the sense of physis or essence is only touched in one respect: regarding the solitary nature of man. As a social and political being, above all as living in a just social order, man is an artificial creation. But even this creation is in line with the perfection outlined in his teleological nature or essence. His faculties develop, his sentiments are ennobled and his soul rises, as Rousseau formulates in the first chapter (section 8) of the *Social Contract*, according to a measure inherent in both his physical and spiritual substance. Man as a social being is no arbitrary creation.

That this development is not against the purposive order of nature in general and not against or independent of man's inner nature is proved by the frequency with which Rousseau uses the concepts nature and natural for the rules and rights within the artificial political body. They are not "natural" in the sense that they could be found outside this order. But they have to be "natural" in the sense of corresponding to man's nature and the purposes of the creator. In this sense he can maintain that man although not social in his "natural state" is "created for society" (*Letter to Beaumont*, OCP IV, 969).

Rousseau is no advocate of a legal positivism or a procedural justice according to which every law is just if legislated in “due process” and with the consent of the majority. Just laws have their limits in the rights and the welfare of the citizens and the autonomy of the republic. To be sure, in order to defend the life and the autonomy of the republic, the general will can oblige the citizen to offer his life. In this respect, his life is no more “only a benefit of nature but a conditional gift of the state” (*OCP III*, 376). But at the same time the state has to defend every citizen’s life, property and welfare with equal force – and Rousseau calls this a “natural right” of citizens as human beings (373).

I cannot go into the details of the debate about the liberalism or totalitarianism of the *Social Contract*. My aim is only to argue that its “anti-naturalism” is limited to the original individualism and to the egoism of human beings in “normal” societies. This egoism is natural in that it is supported by man’s self-concern, his *amour de soi*. But as *amour propre* it is already a perversion of his harmless natural instincts. The change of nature, which the rational community of the *Social Contract* has to bring about, is a paradoxical way of denaturalizing man in order to realize his true nature. The aim of this perfection is still the harmony between the faculties of man’s two substances, his uncorrupted physical nature and the spiritual substance of his will, his sentiments and his intelligence. Given the stage of cultural development he can reach this aim only as a particle of the spiritual substance of the general will.

In this stage his moral duties are not simply found by his conscience. They are laid down in the laws of his community. The “voice of duty” (364) is the command to obey the law. This obligation can and must be legally enforced by the state. But this does not mean that “the essence of politics (and morality) in Rousseau’s view, is force”.<sup>17</sup> Rather, the common sense judgement of every citizen must be able to find and to obey the laws expressing and serving the public good. Given a good moral education, an equal distribution of property and no opportunities for the formation of factions, the citizens of small communities – or the “peasants gathered under an oak tree” (*OCP III*, 437) like in a Swiss canton – can rule a country by just laws.

The voice which each one has to listen to in questions of law-giving is his unspoiled individual judgement which will tell him “what

everybody had been feeling all along” (ibid.). The inner voice which loves order and general rules is nothing other than – in the terms of the *Émile* – conscience. And this voice rather than a forced subordination also tells him to obey the existing laws – as long as neither his own nor the general will are corrupted. In this respect the moral guidance within a good state is nothing else but conscience. And conscience also remains a divine voice of nature (cf. *Émile OCP IV*, 597). This is why in a republic according to the rules of the *Social Contract* the sentence “*vox populi vox dei*” is valid.

In my view, even the ominous concluding chapter on the civil religion fits with the *Confession of the Savoyan vicar*. The civil religion which Rousseau considers necessary for a rational republic is limited to the belief in god and a future life and to the “negative dogma” condemning religious intolerance. The divine attributes are the same as those formulated by the Savoyan vicar. This civil religion allows for the vicar’s true natural religion and prevents any exclusive claims for dogmas and priests. At the same time, however, it overcomes the political neutrality of undogmatic Christianity by engaging the citizens for the laws and the defense of their country. This guarantee of the holiness of the social contract and the legal order is, of course, the primary function of the civil religion.

Again, I am not pretending to discuss all the ambiguities and possible abuses of the rules and institutions formulated in the *Social Contract*. But I do not consider this “artificial state” as irreconcilable with Rousseau’s normative idea of nature as expressed in his writings discussed above. This becomes clear if one distinguishes between the different meanings of nature which Rousseau employs: nature as the original state of man, nature as his already culturally determined physical habits and emotional passions, the state of nature (*status naturalis*) outside the artificial civil state (*status civilis*), the essence (*physis, telos*) of man – and the order of nature independent of his will.

## VII

In what sense, then, is nature the origin of moral and legal norms for Rousseau? Not in the sense, that the teleological order of the surrounding nature could be copied by man. The order of the rational



will, which Rousseau characterizes in the *Social Contract*, and the virtues which he describes in the *Nouvelle Héloïse* and in other texts, are in no way an imitation of any model in the realm of non-human creatures. Man is far above these beings in the order of nature and of God's will.

Neither is man's own state of nature such a model – at least not in his first, completely undeveloped stage. In this state man lacks all cognitive faculties required for intentional action according to the voice of his conscience. The development of his social existence is a precondition for human virtues and just laws (cf. *Letter to Beaumont*).

On the other hand, Rousseau's concept of nature is not that of a neutral realm of facts and laws determining causally connected chains of events. Even less does he conceive of man as projecting his wishes and values on a value-free nature or "reality". There is a natural order figuring as the source of values and as a norm for human action. It has two aspects: first, the order of the external nature, which cannot be disturbed by revolutions and catastrophes in the history of the earth. And second the development of man's faculties and inclinations, both sensitive and spiritual, which can be harmonious. Rousseau's picture is that of a parallel between uncorrupted natural inclinations and moral judgements of conscience.

But in fact, this harmony has been lost. The history of mankind has been a process both of self-perfection and of self-corruption and denaturation. As is well known, Rousseau is very ambivalent as to a possible redemption. In the *Social Contract* he advocates a total reversal of man's perverted mental and social order. It requires the almost supernatural forces of a quasi-divine legislator and a conversion of man's soul by the "baptism" of the contract, which generates the "state of grace" of the general will.

In the *Émile* and other writings the possibility remains open, that some individuals and some nations – like the Corsicans or the citizens of Geneva – can be kept on the way of natural development and protected against total cultural corruption.

However that may be, Rousseau's concept of nature obviously crosses the traditional and the modern lines: it combines monistic and dualistic conceptions, mechanistic concepts of matter – as in

itself motionless – and the idea of a purposive order of nature in general. It is evaluative in assigning to nature the highest attributes of goodness and order. And it includes man's moral faculties, not only self-concern and compassion, but also conscience. But it does not conceive of non-human nature as a model for man's behavior. And there is no law of nature which could serve as the basis for the laws of a just society.

In modern debates in the field of metaethics, virtue ethics and bioethics some have argued for an evaluative conception of nature, too. The dualism between a value-free conception of nature and a moral world of rational beings has been questioned. A concept of nature as it appears to sentient and evaluative beings has been defended by moral realists like John McDowell.<sup>18</sup> In bioethics many have argued for a polycentric view which allows to regard living beings on grounds of their purposive organization as “ends in themselves”.<sup>19</sup> I think that even the pre-modern idea of the “*scala naturae*” deserves some cautious transformations.<sup>20</sup> We can regard the manifold cosmos of species and individuals being able to develop and to flourish not as a given order of nature but a goal of man's interaction with nature.

In this respect, at least some traces of Rousseau's concept of nature may figure as a model for transformations of the traditional normative idea of nature in pre-modern teleology. Beyond Rousseau, substance dualism and the concept of nature as conceived by a divine intelligence may be given up without reducing nature to a value-free “battlefield” for the arbitrary interests of autonomous individuals.

In order to justify (or criticize) the international conventions for the protection of the environment, the manifold of species and of forms of organic and inorganic nature, two ways of argumentation are open. The first is to start from man's rights, interests and wishes – in that case, the protection of nature depends on a temporary political consensus of interests of human beings, be it for reasons of survival, wellbeing or aesthetic values. The second way is to learn from traditional concepts of nature as a well-ordered cosmos including a scale from the most simple to the most complex and organized beings, the “*scala naturae*”. However, this conception cannot serve as a theoretical explanation of natural processes or natural order any

more. Moreover, this order does not exist as a fact or even a necessity, as it was conceived by traditional metaphysics. But if we can defend and develop an evaluative conception of nature, we might argue that some sort of “cosmos” is a possible and to some extent already realized goal for man’s action.

Human beings, to a higher degree than other animals, are constantly changing their environment – with ever growing consequences for the earth as a whole. Modern biotechnology, especially genetic engineering, is a new step in this process which opens the possibility to fit nature more and more to all sorts of human wishes. In my view, the ethics of personal rights and interpersonal cooperation cannot afford us with sufficient moral standards or directions regarding man’s biotechnical possibilities. Even less can the sciences themselves answer these normative questions. We need a normative idea of nature and we can go back to our everyday evaluations of natural beings and processes in order to develop it. We can also profit from the different evaluative concepts of nature imbedded in our cultural discourses. It is an important task of contemporary philosophy to clarify and discuss them. In this attempt we can learn from ideas of nature which go beyond the typical fact-value split like the one Rousseau develops in his writings.

## Notes

- 1 A first version of this paper was presented at a meeting of the European Science Foundation on *The unity of nature in the 18th century*, organized by K.-M. Meyer-Abich in Essen (July 1998). I am grateful to the participants for discussions.
- 2 I. Kant, *Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik, die als Wissenschaft wird auftreten können*, § 14 (Kants *Werke*, Akademie Textausgabe, Berlin 1968, Bd IV, S. 294).
- 3 I am grateful to Michael Quante for useful suggestions regarding this section of my paper.
- 4 Cf. P.M. Masson: *La religion des Jean-Jacques Rousseau*. Paris 1916, Reprint Geneva 1970, p. 259ff. (especially 267) and G. R. Hocke, *Lukrez in Frankreich*. Köln 1935, p. 175f.
- 5 Cf. R. Lenoble: L’Évolution de l’Idée de “Nature” du XVI au XVIII Siècle. *Revue de Métaphysique et Morale*, vol. 58. 1953, p. 108-129.

- 6 Cf. G. Gusdorf: *Dieu, La Nature, L'Homme au Siècle des Lumières*. Paris 1972. For Gusdorf, "le matérialisme du XVIIIe siècle est un vitalisme" (p. 12, 325ff.); cf. also M. Beretta: *The impact of Lucretius' De rerum natura on 18th century science* (paper presented to the ESF meeting, see above FN 1) p.14.
- 7 Letter to Voltaire (18. 8. 1756), In *Oeuvres Complètes de J.J. Rousseau*. Ed. sous la direction de B. Gagnebin et M. Raymond, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, vol. IV, Paris 1969, p.1068 (In the following text I abbreviate the "Oeuvres" as OCP)
- 8 Letter to Voltaire, OCP IV 1061
- 9 Letter to Philopolis, OCP III, 234
- 10 "Le mal que l'homme fait retombe sur lui, sans rien changer au système du monde, sans empêcher que l'espèce humaine ne se conserve malgré qu'elle en ait." Rousseau: *Émile* OCP IV, 587.
- 11 "Back to nature" is Rousseau's advice solely for the part of humanity still close to its "wild" origins.
- 12 Regarding the Cartesianism of the *Confession* cf. H. Gouhier, Ce que le Vicaire doit à Descartes. In *Annales J.J. Rousseau*, vol. XXXV, 1959-62, S. 140-160.
- 13 Letter to Christoph de Beaumont OCP IV, 936, cf. *Émile* OCP IV, 595
- 14 In the first version of the *Émile* (the "Manuscript Favre") Rousseau writes: "Tous ce que nous faisons semble se rapporter aux autres et se rapporte toujours à nous" (OCP IV, 57).
- 15 "Les bonnes institutions sociales sont celles qui savent le mieux dénaturer l'homme, lui ôter son existence absolue pour lui donner une relative, et transporter le moi dans l'unité commune." (OCP IV, 249).
- 16 For discussions of this point I am grateful to Jean-Fabien Spitz who presented a paper on *Political Naturalism in XVIIIth Century France: D'Holbach vs. Rousseau* at the ESF meeting mentioned above (FN 1). Spitz argues for the "artificialism" of the political order in the *Contrat Social*.
- 17 A. Melzer: *The Natural Goodness of Man. On the system of Rousseaus's Thought*. Chicago 1990, p. 96.
- 18 J. McDowell: *Mind and World*. Cambridge: Mass. and London (Harvard UP)1996; McDowell: *Mind, Value and Reality*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard UP 1998.
- 19 For instance P. Taylor: *Respect for Nature*. Princeton 1986.
- 20 Cf. L. Siep: Eine Skizze zur Grundlegung der Bioethik. *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung*, Bd. 50, H.1/2, 1996. p. 236-253; and Siep, Bioethik. In A. Pieper, U. Thurnherr (eds.): *Angewandte Ethik. Eine Einführung*. München 1998, p. 16-36