Rousseau, Cronon, and the Wilderness Idea

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William Cronon has recently argued that the current debate concerning justifications for protecting wilderness relies upon conceptions of natural value premised upon a nature/society dualism that originated in older nature writing but which still animates contemporary thinking. This dualism, he argues, prevents adequate realization of the human and social places in nature, and is ultimately counterproductive to the task of articulating the proper relationship between humans and the natural world. While the origin of one of these conceptions of natural value (the frontier) can be traced back to Rousseau, I argue that Rousseau's writings reveal a far more complex and nuanced treatment of the value of nature in and for society (and the persons that compose it) than has thus far been acknowledged. Moreover, by unpacking several arguments made by Rousseau on behalf of the stewardship and accessibility of natural areas, one can0not only gain a more accurate view of Rousseau's environmental thought than is ordinarily recognized by authors who focus on his primitivism and anti-modern critique, but also some insights that may help bridge the nature/society dualism plaguing contemporary environmental ethics and noted by Cronon.

I

The current ethical debate over wilderness protection often assumes a historical dualism in the manner that untamed lands have been regarded by humans. As the narrative is frequently told, wild nature and civilization originally were opposed to each other, with nature providing the threat to civilization, and with the latter contributing the impulse to tame the former. At some point, frequently identified as the romantic period of the early nineteenth century, these roles reversed, and civilization came to be regarded as the threat to human well-being, and nature became the source of renewal, vigor, and democratic individualism. Following this reversal, the older impulse to conquer nature began to be replaced by newer inclinations to protect unspoiled wilderness from human alteration and destruction. Contemporary environmental ethics, the above narrative suggests, is premised largely upon the account of natural value originating in the latter nature/society dualism (preserved intact despite the transformation of value from society to nature), and its implication that wilderness

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preservation is necessary as an antidote to the maladies of modern society. William Cronon recently challenged this dualistic manner of conceiving of natural value, provocatively arguing that "wilderness poses a serious threat to responsible environmentalism at the end of the twentieth century."[1]

According to Cronon, the origin of this transformation of the nature/society dualism can be traced to the development of two conceptions of nature: the sublime and the frontier. The former, in which "sublime landscapes were those rare places on earth where one had more chance than elsewhere to glimpse the face of God," and which, in the writings of transcendentalists like Wordsworth and Thoreau, "inspired more awe and dismay than joy or pleasure,"[2] caused humans to mythologize untamed wilderness as a source of spiritual renewal. Wilderness, in its most awe-inspiring manifestations, ought to be protected, under this conception of nature, for its quasi-religious and utterly irreplaceable value. The latter conception, which Cronon traces "back at least to Rousseau" but finds most clearly in Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, found a secular and nationalistic value in wilderness to complement the religious values inherent in the sublime idea. At the edge of civilization, nineteenth-century Americans "shed the trappings of civilization, rediscovered their primitive racial energies, reinvented direct democratic institutions, and thereby reinfused themselves with a vigor, an independence, and a creativity that were the source of American democracy and national character."[3] As the frontier began to close, the retreat to wilderness signified a retreat from (if not "downright hostility" toward) modernity, and an attempt to rediscover the source of those virtues absent from modern society.

The problem with these two conceptions of nature, according to Cronon, is that they together represent a paradox; that "wilderness embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural. If we allow ourselves to believe that nature, to be true, must also be wild, then our very presence in nature represents its fall."[4] That is, the sublime and frontier conceptions of nature combine to treat wilderness as both the source of critical value for humans who have become damaged from living in the modern world, and as the antithesis of that world. Unaltered nature becomes the standard for objectivity, human health, and authenticity, but is also the fragile Other that is too easily destroyed by human presence. As a result, Cronon argues, contemporary environmentalists falling into this dualistic trap tend to artificially regard environmental issues as "a crude conflict between the 'human' and the 'nonhuman,'" which in turn "tempts one to ignore crucial differences *among* humans,"

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[1] William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1996), p. 81.

[2] Ibid., pp. 73–74.

[3] Ibid., p. 76.

[4] Ibid., pp. 80–81.

leading to counterproductive clashes between the affluent and the working class, urban and rural, and the first and third worlds. Wilderness protection issues thus become "an epic struggle between malign civilization and benign nature, compared with which all other social, political, and moral concerns seem trivial."[5] Environmental problems in settled areas such as cities tend for this reason to be ignored, since only pristine landscapes are regarded as worth saving, and the related tendency of this manner of thinking is to privilege distant nature at the expense of that closer to home, where, Cronon argues, environmentalists ought to be directing their attention.

If Cronon is correct in his assessment, then the implications for the "wilderness idea" follow directly. Accounts of environmental value must overcome the tendency to regard nature and society, humans and nonhumans, and wilderness and development as existing on opposite poles in a dualistic relationship. They must cease using endangered species or biodiversity concerns as a "surrogate" for the idea of unspoiled (by humans) wilderness. Most of all, green theory must reject the notion that wilderness is anything but a human construct; we must acknowledge as myth that there is any landscape that does or even can exist apart from human influence, or that can somehow serve as an objective point of contrast to human society. If environmentalists are to argue for wilderness protection, they must find a justification that does not rely upon a nature/society dualism, and reject the sublime and frontier conceptions that currently serve as the "unexamined foundation on which so many of the quasi-religious values of modern environmentalism rest."[6] They must, in other words, see nature not as Other, but rather as existing along a continuum that includes not only the most remote or majestic landscapes of current concern, but also areas bearing a more noticeable stamp of human alteration, such as urban areas and even our own backyards. If wilderness (a contested concept that arguably ought not to exclude lands altered or otherwise used by humans) is worth protecting, it must be for some reason other than their "unspoiled" nature, or lack of human presence.

Cronon's critique of the wilderness idea looms large in the development of contemporary environmental ethics, but it has also invited some deserved criticism.[7] The neatness of his historical narrative betrays some complexity in the development of the wilderness idea that may helpfully illuminate the problem that he identifies. In particular, I submit that by examining the development of a conception of natural value in the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, one can see the possibility of synthesizing the nature/society dualism that Cronon identifies. In Rousseau's writings, taken as a whole, one finds an

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[5] Ibid., p. 84.

[6] Ibid., p. 80.

[7] See, for example, Donald M. Waller, "Getting Back to the Right Nature," in J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson, eds., *The Great Wilderness Debate* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), pp. 540–67.

alternative to the traditional separation of humans from the rest of nature, a tradition that may have begun with Aristotle but finds its way into contemporary claims by Holmes Rolston, III, Dave Foreman, and others[8] who define wilderness as necessarily apart from human use. While Cronon accurately identifies Rousseau's earlier writings as the source of the kind of dualistic thinking that regarded society as the corrupted antithesis of nature, his later writings reveal a more mature and more integrated vision of the human place within nature that may approach the kind of environmental ethic that Cronon seeks. Just as Rousseau was finally able to reconcile the dualism of man/citizen in his later writings, so too was he able to combine modern society and nature. Moreover, Rousseau's writings contain a set of arguments that suggest a value for nature that allows humans an integral place within rather than apart from it, and justifies human stewardship of natural areas and respectful treatment of nonhuman animals as motivated by neither instrumental rationality nor unwarranted reverence.

I examine four arguments for natural value found in Rousseau's social, political, and personal writings. In the first two, he invokes what Cronon refers to as frontier conceptions of nature, although each with distinctions from Cronon's account of those conceptions that suggest means of overcoming the dilemma noted above. In the latter two, Rousseau transcends the sublime and frontier conceptions of nature, bridging the nature/society dualism that, Cronon claims, plagues contemporary environmental ethics. While Rousseau's ecological thought largely prefigures later defenses of wilderness, the manner in which his ideas concerning the value of nature and human moral obligations for its proper distribution and stewardship can be seen to evolve over his lifetime suggests a novel conception of the wilderness idea. Rather than pitting society against nature, as Rousseau's early primitivism is often recognized as doing, his later thoughts on nature make a more sophisticated set of social, moral, and psychological arguments on behalf of wilderness that can, I argue, helpfully illuminate contemporary debates. In this paper, then, I first unpack these arguments, and then in terms of claims made in Rousseau's writings I sketch connections to the current debate over the wilderness idea.

II

In the pages of this journal, David Boonin-Vail observed in Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*[9] (or *Second Discourse*) and *Emile*[10] the development of a possible argument for vegetarianism on the grounds of either prudence, or

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[8] See Holmes Rolston, III, "The Wilderness Idea Revisited," and Dave Forman, "Wilderness Areas for Real," in Callicott and Nelson, *The Great Wilderness Debate*, pp. 367–86, 395–407.

[9] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse on Inequality*, trans. Maurice Cranston (New York: Penguin Books, 1984).

[10] Rousseau, *Emile or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1978).

natural pity, or both.[11] While Boonin-Vail's reading may miss some telling references to savage man's carnivorous habits,[12] the interpretation is nonetheless provocative and important in establishing Rousseau's work as containing several ideas and arguments concerning human obligations toward other species that prefigure current strains of thought in green theory. Indeed, Boonin-Vail correctly points out Rousseau's explicit claim that the moral sentiment of pity properly extends to the suffering of animals, and this claim allows him to extend ethical duties to include nonhuman animals on the basis of sentience rather than rationality (or lack thereof). From the perspective of the wilderness idea, the obligation to nonhuman animals arising from pity may require an obligation to protect species habitat, for reasons based neither in sublime nor frontier conceptions of nature, but rather from an awareness of humanity as part of the larger ecological community.

Rousseau, in what he regards as a corrective to the self-interested portrait of human nature painted by Hobbes, sees two principles that are "antecedent to reason" (and are thus more natural), rather than one: "the first gives us an ardent interest in our own well-being and our own preservation, the second inspires in us a natural aversion to seeing any other sentient being perish or

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[11] David Boonin-Vail, "The Vegetarian Savage: Rousseau's Critique of Meat Eating," *Environmental Ethics* 15 (1993): 75–84.

[12] Boonin-Vail seizes upon Rousseau's description of natural pity in the preface to the *Second Discourse*, along with several references in that work to savage man's mostly vegetarian diet and to the observation in *Emile* that a diet of boiled meat may be less healthy for children than a vegetarian one to conclude that Rousseau must have considered meat-eating either cruel (and thus repugnant to natural pity) or imprudent (noting that humans don't require meat in a healthy diet, and may even be better off without it), or both. While it is clear that from the standpoint of natural pity animal suffering is regarded as akin to the suffering of humans, there are other telling passages that suggest that Rousseau does not go as far as Boonin-Vail proposes in recommending against meat eating. Savage man, it is true, was most likely a vegetarian, but less out of pity than because of other considerations. In the note to the *Second Discourse* quoted by Boonin-Vail regarding the shape of human teeth most resembling those of other frugivorous animals, Rousseau points out that competition over prey is "almost the only thing carnivorous animals fight about," and that if humans abstained from eating meat, then "manifestly it would have had much greater ease subsisting in the state of nature and much less need and occasion to quit it" (Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*, p. 143). Here, Rousseau supports Boonin-Vail's claim about the prudence of a vegetarian diet (it allows humans to remain in their most primitive condition), but did not comment on its moral import, and other parts of the discourse indeed suggest that they did not act according to this prudence. For example, when savage man discovers fire, humans "use it to cook the meats that they had previously eaten raw." At roughly the same stage of human development, savage man discovers the "mechanical prudence" necessary to set traps for prey, which "increased his superiority over other animals" (p. 110). These two passages suggest not only that savage man was carnivorous, but that the reason he had previously subsisted mainly on a vegetarian diet had more to do with the difficulty of catching prey and cooking it so that it was fit for consumption. Moreover, the developments that allowed man to catch and cook the meat of animal prey were the main developments that ushered in what Rousseau called "the happiest epoch and the most lasting" (p. 115). One must also not forget that it was agriculture (along with metallurgy) that began the long and steep decline of humanity from this peak of well-being and happiness to its modern depravity.

suffer, especially if it is of our own kind."[13] The former is self-love (or *amour de soi-même*), which causes each to be concerned first and foremost with his own needs, while the latter is compassion or natural pity, which is "a disposition well suited to creatures as weak and subject to as many ills as we are," and which is "universal" and "so natural" that even other animals display it (as in "the aversion of horses against trampling on any living body").[14] From this sentiment of natural pity, all other "social virtues" (including generosity, mercy, benevolence, and friendship) arise, and by "moderating in each individual the activity of self-love," pity contributes "to the mutual preservation of the whole species."

> It is pity which carries us without reflection to the aid of those we see suffering; it is pity which in the state of nature takes the place of laws, morals, and virtues, with the added advantage that no one there is tempted to disobey its gentle voice. . . . it is pity which, in place of that rational maxim "do unto others as you would have them do unto you," inspires all men with this other maxim of natural goodness, much less perfect but perhaps more useful, "do good to yourself with the least harm to others."[15]

Were it not for this natural sentiment of pity or compassion, Rousseau maintains, "the human race would long ago have ceased to exist," because reason alone cannot instill in humans (with the possible exception of "Socrates and other minds of that class") the virtues necessary for social cooperation. Far from generating or even supporting social virtues, reason separates natural man "from everything which troubles or affects him."[16]

Natural law, according to Rousseau, applies to human subjects in nature (not merely in society, as is the case for the majority of Hobbes' laws of nature), and takes into consideration not merely humans but other animals, as well. Boonin-Vail takes Rousseau's account of the origin of duty toward animals to imply that he defends a vegetarian diet as a means to abstain from cruelty toward animals (a possible correlative duty), but the implications may extend far wider. If natural pity is closer to instinct than to a developed faculty like reason (as Rousseau maintains), and if pity is what (in the absence of a sovereign to enforce the dictates of reason) maintains the peace and preservation of the species, then humans may have more than a negative duty to refrain from harming animals unnecessarily, but may also be obliged to protect the conditions (including habitat) necessary for them to subsist.

While it is clear that animals, being devoid of intellect and free will, cannot recognize this law, yet by reason of the fact that they share, so to speak, in our nature by virtue of the sensitivity with which they are endowed, it follows that

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[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid., p. 99.
[15] Ibid., p. 101.
[16] Ibid.

animals ought to have a share in natural right, and that men are bound by a certain form of duty towards them.[17]

To say that animals share in natural right implies that they are part of a single moral community with humans, albeit as moral objects who are the recipients of duties rather than subjects that have duties. Rousseau goes on to say that it is by the possession of sentience and not reason that natural pity creates duties toward animals, and that this duty at minimum creates the negative right "not to be uselessly ill-treated by the latter."

This duty toward animals is founded on the sentiment of natural pity, and its scope is bounded by the intersection of reason and pity. In the state of nature, the duty to refrain from harming animals is limited by the human need for self-preservation (where reason overcomes pity): "He will never do harm to another man or indeed to any sentient being, except in a legitimate case where his interest in his preservation is at stake."[18] If there are no animals in nature that are natural predators to man, and if animals, lacking free will, can only follow instinct, which leads them to present no threat to humans except in cases of self-defense or extreme hunger, then it would seem that the injunction against harming animals is absolute. Given abundant resources (a condition Rousseau assumes in nature), other animals pose no threat to the preservation of humans. The fact that humans do come to prey on animals for food and for sport (savage man learned to outwit animals with snares and other traps, Rousseau claims, and in so doing "asserted the priority of his species"[19]) can only be explained by the development of human pride (or *amour propre*) that is bred by reason, which "turns man inward to himself" and "isolates a man" from the suffering of others, silencing the natural pity that impels humans to abstain from harm and respond to the pain or distress of another.[20] Duties to other animals, then, are perceived primarily in the state of nature, and become significantly muted in society as reason crowds out pity and compassion.

Modern society, Rousseau claims, has left humans without the capacity for compassion. As compared with savage man, humans in society are dependent upon each other, a fact that leads to inequality, pride (*amour propre*), and misery. Because the natural world has been transformed through private property and agriculture, no person can any longer subsist within the state of nature: "no one can remain in it in spite of the others, and it would really be leaving it to want to remain when it is impossible to live there, for the first law of nature is the care of preserving oneself."[21] Rousseau does, however, suggest a kind of remedy for mankind's fallen condition that may reinvigorate the sense of pity or compassion dulled by society. If forced to choose between depen-

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[17] Ibid., p. 71.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid., p. 100.
[20] Ibid., p. 101.
[21] Rousseau, *Emile*, p. 193.

dence on men (which he says is "from society" and which also "engenders all the vices") and dependence on things (in nature, which "has no morality" and "is in no way detrimental to freedom" and "engenders no vices"), he writes, one ought to depend on things, or on nature. The closest approximation of dependence on things available to humans once they leave the state of nature is the general will, which allows for the substitution of nature with the voluntary submission to law. Insofar as any relation of dependence is necessary for man, though, it is far preferable to be dependent upon nature, since only nature provides for morality, physical and emotional renewal, and stability.

Civil society within the general will may be the next best thing to nature itself (and the only alternative, given the impossibility of isolating oneself from society in nature), but Rousseau is careful to emphasize that it remains a mere approximation. The transformation from nature to society effectively silences the sentiment of pity that moderates action and generates interspecific harmony in the state of nature, and for this reason observers of Rousseau's ecological thought have emphasized his rejection of society and advocacy of primitivism. Once denatured, social man cannot return to the state of nature, or wholly depend upon a morality founded upon natural pity or compassion. For this reason, Rousseau's primitivism differs from Cronon's account of the frontier conception of nature, since humans living in society cannot recapture the essence of natural morality merely by crossing a geographical border between settled and unsettled land. On the other hand, the "wilderness experience" of depending not on other persons but instead relying only upon natural things (as opposed to human commodities) may have, extending Rousseau's argument, the effect of reawakening the better half of human nature. Similar to Thoreau's idea of self-reliance (as well as more contemporary formulations of rugged individualism or wilderness spirituality), this reliance upon things in nature is unlikely to lead to large-scale social change, but may transform individuals in a beneficial way, and as such provides an early argument for wilderness preservation as a means to human psychological or spiritual renewal. Thus, Rousseau's discussion of pity is not merely a critique of modernity, but can also be helpfully read as a diagnosis and prescribed remedy for one key psychological feature of modern society, and one that requires wilderness alongside society in order to bring its effects to bear on denatured humanity.

III

In contrast to Locke's political theory, in which private property, agriculture, and social inequality exist in the state of nature, Rousseau's social contract narrative has man leave behind the stability of the state of nature at the moment one person appropriates some good from the commons and claims it

for himself. The initial appropriation of the commons into private property, he claims, is the catalyst for the long, steady decline of the human condition that culminates in the misery of modern society.

> The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, to whom it occurred to say *this is mine*, and found people sufficiently simple to believe him, was the true founder of civil society. How many crimes, wars, murders, how many miseries and horrors Mankind would have been spared by him who, pulling up the stakes or filling in the ditch, had cried out to his kind: Beware of listening to this imposter: You are lost if you forget that the fruits are everyone's and the Earth is no one's.[22]

For Rousseau, the origin of society—which coincides with the origin of private property—is the origin of inequality and the miseries that accompany it. The natural state (especially nascent society, near the beginning of primitive societies but before the social contract), then, is not merely happier and more peaceful for its inhabitants, but is morally superior to the fallen condition in which social men subsequently find themselves.

Taking private property to be the origin of inequality and the misery of modern society, Rousseau offers a proposal for the proper distribution of land and the assignment of property rights to it. Since much of his critique in the *Second Discourse* is based upon the illegitimate "usurpations" of private property in the state of nature, he takes care to argue for limits on the acquisition of land. In the state of nature, provisional property rights accrue to the first occupant on a piece or property provided that the land is acquired justly and is not excessive given the needs of the claimant. In the *Social Contract*, Rousseau notes concerning the initial division of land that for each "having received his share, he must be bound by it, and he has no further right to the community [of goods]."[23] The impulse to acquire more land than one can use is expressly forbidden. Property claims, he writes, must be limited in size based upon the needs of the community, for "how can a man or a people seize an immense territory and deprive all mankind of it except by a punishable usurpation, since it deprives the rest of mankind of a place to live and of foods which nature gives to all in common."[24] To take more than one needs, insofar as land is a scarce resource (as it is from the beginning of society, well before the social contract), constitutes a direct harm to others. What's more, private property claims are not absolute; the collective retains ultimate control over the ownership and use of all property. He notes: "Regardless of the manner of this

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[22] Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*, p. 161.

[23] Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 54–55.

[24] Ibid., p. 55.

acquisition, the right every individual has over his own land is always subordinate to the right the community has over everyone, without which there would be neither solidity in the social bond, nor real force in the exercise of Sovereignty."[25]

Thus, Rousseau develops a second argument in favor of land management, if not exactly the modern idea of wilderness preservation. The appropriation of common land into private hands constitutes an act of theft, he argues, and harms the community by depriving certain members of the fruits of the commons, which, prior to the advent of society and private property, were available to all. Land use is recognized by Rousseau to be an issue of concern to the community (including, one can easily extrapolate, the intertemporal community), and his argument against strong property rights offers a defense (on grounds of equality) of limits on acquisition as well as on practices that degrade the land. Replacing the shared commons with large, private estates constitutes an economic injustice, according to Rousseau, since it amounts to a "usurpation" of land that ought properly to remain communal, but likewise harms persons in a noneconomic manner. The land provides for food and shelter, but also for less tangible goods such as the social solidarity that comes from managing communal resources as well as the personal independence that is denied when one relies upon another to meet basic needs. In describing the role of the social contract as it applies to property, Rousseau develops a communal land ethic, and does so while broadening the conception of the wilderness idea to include lands that might be used for agriculture in addition to those that might remain undeveloped.

This argument takes for granted the existence of laws of private property and the nearly complete appropriation of the commons in modern society, even while criticizing them. The conception of nature invoked by Rousseau here, then, is closest to the frontier idea, since it takes the natural resources available in the commons to be the source of opportunity, and argues for management of the land in order to preserve that opportunity for later others. However, it notably remains in contrast to the objectionable (for Cronon) elements of the wilderness idea in contemporary environmental ethics, since its value theory doesn't define wilderness as land necessarily untouched by human projects. The commons described by Rousseau as rightfully the provenance of the community allow for human use and alteration of the land, merely prohibiting unnecessary private appropriation of communal resources. Moreover, Rousseau limits the alteration even for justly acquired land, since he notes the potential for harm to the community inherent in strong property rights claims. Thus, the argument becomes one of distributive justice for natural resources, and for the sustainable management of the commons (or, to take its modern equivalent, the

[25] Ibid., p. 56.

existing stock of natural resources) such that all have access to it in order to meet basic needs, but none can claim unjustly large shares as their own. The maldistribution of natural resources is the most serious injustice of modern society, according to Rousseau, since those without land are necessarily bound to others for their survival.

We find here the basis of an argument for the maintenance of a natural and accessible commons, to be held in the public trust and as the source of an intergenerational egalitarianism. As such, this distributive argument allows Rousseau to avoid one outcome of the dilemma noted by Cronon, since Rousseau maintains a concern for social and political equality while arguing for the appropriate stewardship of natural lands, rather than invoking arguments for natural value that depend upon elite theories or sanction objectionable human inequality. Contemporary anthropocentric arguments for wilderness protection frequently point to such intergenerational claims, although with an important contrast to Rousseau's point. With significant public lands managed (purportedly, at least) in the public interest and for the benefit of future others, current egalitarian distributive arguments advocate a sustainable level of use of those public lands and their resources, with an appropriate amount of public wilderness set aside for non-extractive uses. Rousseau assumed that the commons had been transferred into private property at the advent of society, so that such an option was no longer available. Thus, the value that Rousseau attaches to wilderness as a source of egalitarianism remains still pre-social (or in dialectic with modern society), insofar as a radical need-based redistribution would be required in order to rectify the unjust distribution characteristic of modernity. In that sense, Rousseau's argument retains the nature/society dualism decried by Cronon, because a return to the state of nature (at least in the distribution of land) or primitive use-based squatter land claims (as existed in nascent society) would follow from Rousseau's critique.

IV

For Rousseau in his later years, nature literally became a refuge from what he took to be his persecution in society.[26] On the run from the church, from his Enlightenment critics, and from established secular authorities alike, and believing that his enemies intended to manipulate his confessional works to use against him (as he thinks they unjustly held the "Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar" from *Emile* against him), he characterizes himself in the opening of the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* as a solitary soul, friendless on the surface of the Earth, against whom legions of subterranean enemies were

[26] In the woods of Montmerency and the island of Saint-Pierre, where Rousseau was living in exile from the society that he believed had forsaken him.

conspiring to do harm and discredit. In exile from politics and society (both physically and intellectually), he occupied his time with walks in the woods and the study of native plants, recording his thoughts in the *Reveries*, a work he did not expect to publish. During this time, he began to develop a view of nature that found in it not only aesthetic beauty, but also a source of spiritual renewal and wholeness. Nature, for Rousseau in this period of his life and thought, continued to exist in dialectic with society, but now no longer existed beyond the reach of civilized man as some kind of foregone primordial condition. Rather, it presented an available haven for him in which to nurture the natural elements of his being, in which alone the physical and emotional pleasure of solitude could exist. Forced to flee first from Paris, then also from Geneva, and fleeing Hume's offer of sanctuary in Scotland, Rousseau sought above all else to escape from the social world—a world in which he says he was never meant to live.

On his island, away from the salons of Paris and with little human contact, he takes on the anachronistic identity of natural man in the modern world. Left with nothing, and forswearing the opinions of others (through *amour propre*), Rousseau seeks, and ultimately finds, an approximation of mankind's natural condition in the physical nature of the French countryside. Within this natural refuge, he reports feeling moments of calm and even happiness.

> Botany is a study for an idle and lazy solitary person: a point and magnifying glass are all the apparatus he needs to observe plants. He walks about, wanders freely from one object to another, examines each flower with interest and curiosity, and as soon as he begins to grasp the laws of their structure, he enjoys, in observing them, a painless pleasure as intense as if it had cost him much pain. In this idle occupation there is a charm we feel only in the complete calm of the passions, but which then alone suffices to make life happy and sweet.[27]

Quite literally, the sanctuary of nature provided Rousseau with a respite from his troubles, both politically and psychologically, and his development of a natural aesthetic in the *Reveries* reflects this growing appreciation for the nurturing power of nature on the human psyche.

His solitary communion with nature during his walks appeared to offer Rousseau the only available remedy for what Jean Starobinski would later diagnose as the "paranoid delusions [*delire sensetif de relation*]"[28] of this later period. His contact with the natural world, where the absence of any visible signs of human presence allowed him to feel truly isolated and solitary, allowed Rousseau, by his own report, to pacify his troubled mind. "The pleasure of going into an uninhabited area to seek new plants blots out the

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[27] Rousseau, *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, trans. Charles E. Butterworth (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1992), pp. 98–99.

[28] See Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971).

pleasure of escaping from my persecutors," he writes, "and having arrived in places where I see no trace of men, I breathe more at my ease, as though I were in a refuge where their hatred no longer pursues me."[29] The importance of his experience of solitude and escape from the human world during his walks should not be underestimated; he considered the opportunity for retreat to what would today be referred to as wilderness (natural areas not bearing the imprint of human order or manipulation) as vital to his emotional well-being. Nature for the Rousseau of the *Reveries* remained in opposition to society, but it was no longer inaccessible to modern man in the way that the state of nature was in his earlier writings. To invoke Cronon's conceptions of nature, the pastoral landscape was neither awe-inspiringly sublime nor the unexplored and bounteous frontier, but was something instead that existed alongside civilized society. The return to nature for Rousseau was possible in the *Reveries*, and was characterized by the respite it offered (real or imagined) from the evils of society. Even his mental illness (if Starobinski is correct in his diagnosis) appears to have been eased by this return to nature.

Rousseau begins the final walk of the *Reveries* (written just days before his death) with a recollection of his years with Mme. de Warens, whom he had met exactly fifty years prior. This passage offers a striking combination of two themes regarding nature in the works of Rousseau. Just as he returns to thoughts of Mme. de Warens (whom he reveals in the *Confessions* he called "Mamma" and who seduced him in his youth during a walk in the gardens) in the final walk of the *Reveries*, so too does he return to nature as mother on the isle of poplars. He writes, "then, seeking refuge in mother nature [*chez le mere commune*], I sought in her arms to escape the attacks of her children."[30] Women, he suggests in *Emile*, are the more natural gender, being closer both functionally (given their reproductive capacities) and emotionally (being identified more with nurturing than with reason) to nature itself, and his "Mamma" offered Rousseau a refuge from the perils of his youth in the same manner as his exile of the *Reveries* allowed for his sanctuary as an old man. "Mother" and "nature" are combined in this reference both to the natural environment and to female figures in his life, juxtaposing both into a synthesis of unity of nurturance and protection from harm. In this sense, nature is no longer the primitive bliss of nascent society for which no return is possible, but rather offers a source of comfort, refuge, and renewal as a counterbalance to the corrupting elements of society. This conception of "mother nature" helps explain the comfort he took in his solitude, as well as his felt need to return to nature once he realized that he, as he admits in the *Reveries*, was never meant for society.

In the *Reveries*, along with several of his other works, Rousseau develops his most compelling thoughts on the aesthetics of the natural environment and man's relation to it. In part, this turn back to nature can be explained psychologi-

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[29] Rousseau, *Reveries*, pp. 99–100.

[30] Ibid., p. 95.

cally by his mental illness and his equation of female nurturance and protection with nature, and in part also the explanation is historical, since his several crises reported in the *Confessions* had forced him to abandon political and overtly religious questions. As Robert Wokler points out in his history of the development of Rousseau's thought, this combination of circumstances made the creation of a natural world free from human interference, even if such a world existed only in his imagination, a particularly attractive relief from his troubles. "In escaping from the mundane crises of his life through reverie," Wokler writes, "Rousseau could dissolve all difference between recollection and invention. Transported by his own imagination, and carried with it into a celestial domain of pure bliss such as he describes in his third letter to Malesherbes, he could inhabit alternative worlds of perfect serenity uniquely fit for him."[31] Through reverie, he was finally free to be the kind of self-authenticating, self-creating, self-perfecting person that he had always thought necessary. In pursuing reverie, he was able to reconcile the nature/society dichotomy that had plagued his life and philosophy.

His reflections on nature, then, are a product of this period in which Rousseau was finally able to join the two opposite poles of nature and society so that he could both be denatured (as is required to be a citizen) and natural (in order to be complete, and not drawn apart by *amour propre*). Nature, he had earlier thought, was opposed to social institutions, just as the state of nature had to end before social institutions could be developed. In *Emile*, for example, he describes this nature/society dichotomy as a choice one must make between becoming a (natural) man or a citizen: "forced to combat nature or the social institutions, one must choose between making a man and making a citizen, for one cannot make both at the same time."[32] The natural man cannot exist in society, because by nature man is solitary and independent of all others.

> He who in the civil order wants to preserve the primacy of the sentiment of nature does not know what he wants. Always in contradiction with himself, always floating between his inclination and his duties, he will never be either man or citizen. He will be good neither for himself nor for others. He will be one of those men of our days: a Frenchman, an Englishman, a bourgeois. He will be nothing.[33]

There is, he writes in *Emile*, no denominator for natural man. "Natural man is entirely for himself. He is a numerical unity, the absolute whole which is relative only to itself or its kind."[34] Rousseau had assumed that the development of the social man through education was a project hostile to the human

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[31] Robert Wokler, *Rousseau* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 116–17.

[32] Rousseau, *Emile*, p. 39.

[33] Ibid., p. 40.

[34] Ibid., p. 39.

natural condition. Education was a replacement for, rather than a complement of, the state of natural man. The civic education of Emile renders him into a citizen through a process of denaturing, where the particularity of the solitary individual is transformed into the generality of the social community.

But the Rousseau of the *Reveries* is a social man, even if he has become largely alienated from society. The arc of his retreat from society into a more solitary state in the pastoral countryside forces him to reconsider the irreversibility of the denaturing socialization of man and the impossibility of simultaneously cultivating man and citizen. By the *Reveries*, Rousseau begins to acknowledge that denaturing civic education is itself natural; something he also alludes to on one occasion in *Emile*, where he writes: "besides, the natural education ought to make a man fit for all human conditions."[35] Choosing between men and citizens is a false dilemma, he comes to realize in the latter part of his life. Denaturing civic education is itself natural. The Rousseau of the *Reveries* no longer attempts to shed his natural impulses to become a citizen (a title he has by then forsaken). Instead, he embraces both at once, and his reflections on the natural world in the *Reveries* are a reflection of this cessation of hostility. His life (as an embodiment of his thought) is now fully authentic. By turning to the natural landscapes of the French countryside, he is able to restore what has been drained from him by his social existence, and his education is complete.

The idea of nature as a source of balance and rejuvenation of the human psyche from the degenerative influences of modern society is one that has had profound influence on the development of modern ecological thought. John Muir, for example, suggests that "thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wilderness is a necessity; and that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life."[36] Like Rousseau, Muir transforms the older nature/society dualism by arguing that civilization cannot exist without the renewing capacity of wild nature. Rather than an antagonistic force to the development of civilization (as Hobbes and Locke had posited), nature became a necessary component to it. Reworking a theme from Rousseau's *Reveries*, Muir likewise found the modern condition to render man incomplete unless the primal and spiritual needs can be met by wilderness experience. "Everybody needs beauty as well as bread," he writes, connoting that the longing for natural landscapes is as fundamental as the need for food, "places to play in and pray in, where Nature may heal and cheer and give strength to body and soul alike."[37]

Elsewhere, Rousseau comments on the need humans have for open space

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[35] Ibid., p. 52.

[36] John Muir, *Our National Parks* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1901), p. 2.

[37] John Muir, *The Yosemite* (New York: Century Press, 1912), p. 256.

(available only in the more natural countryside) for their proper moral and physical development. He writes, "Men are not made to be crowded into anthills but to be dispersed over the earth which they should cultivate. The more they come together, the more they are corrupted. The infirmities of the body, as well as the vices of the soul, are the unfailing effects of this overcrowding. Man is, of all the animals, the one who can least live in herds."[38] The idea that cities harm both body and soul, and that the countryside provides relief from that damage is echoed by Thomas Jefferson, who sought to protect civic virtue by celebrating the yeoman farmer who lives and works in close contact with the land itself. In a letter to James Madison, Jefferson evokes Rousseau's sentiments on this matter: "I think our governments will remain virtuous for many centuries; as long as they are chiefly agricultural; and this will be as long as there shall be vacant lands in any part of America. When they get piled upon one another in large cities, as in Europe, they will become corrupt as in Europe."[39] The best way to protect liberty, he thought, was to promote the life style in which citizens could remain close to the land (but not apart from it), rather than isolated from nature in cities. Like Jefferson and Muir, Rousseau recognized the importance of a connection to the land, in which persons remain dependent directly upon it for their well-being (rather than upon others), and in which the senses can be reawakened and the spirit rejuvenated, as a vital component of modern life.

Contemporary defenses of wilderness protection invoke this idea of wild nature as a refuge from the ills of modern society, but with an important distinction from the manner in which Rousseau employs this nature/society relation. For Rousseau, wilderness only has value to humans insofar as persons have access to it (although they need not alter it, nor must they extract resources from it to enjoy some of its value), and to close wilderness reserves to humanity cancels the primary benefit of holding such lands in trust in the first place. His argument is solidly anthropocentric, and yet it also strongly advocates the human use of land in a manner that preserves its other primary natural values, including habitat protection and ecological production. The benefits that Rousseau claims for humans are primarily psychological, but follow directly from his psychological diagnosis of modernity, and can be viewed as a remedy for that condition. At the same time, he scolds those who approach the study of nature in purely instrumental terms, as contemporary New Resource economists attempt to do. Wilderness, Rousseau argues, must continue to be a complement to society (not its contradiction), and a natural education, he finally realizes in his later works, is equally important to the creation of citizens as is a civic one.

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[38] Rousseau, *Emile*, p. 59.

[39] Thomas Jefferson, "Letter to James Madison (1787)," from Kenneth M. Dolbeare, ed., *American Political Thought*, 2d ed. (Chatham, N.J.: Chatham House Publishers, 1989), p. 192.

the cause of the greater good in which it is not the republic that benefits by particular acts of sacrifice (albeit involuntary ones, in the case of the earthquake), nor even humankind in general, but rather an entire ecosystem or food chain that requires death in order to continue supporting life. He describes this process as "the order of nature" and attributes to it the "general good."

> That a man's corpse feeds worms, wolves, or plants is not, I admit, a compensation for that man's death; but if, in the system of the universe, it is necessary to the preservation of mankind that there be a cycle of substance between man, animals, and vegetation, then one individual's particular evil contributes to the general good. I die, I am eaten by worms; but my children, my brothers will live as I have lived, and by the order of nature, I do for all men what Codrus, Curtius, the Decii, the Philaeni, and a thousand others did voluntarily for a small number of men.[45]

Those who perished in the Lisbon earthquake, he suggests, did so not out of divine cruelty, but so that others (including nonhuman others, he implies) may live. The terrible consequences of the earthquake for those who lived and suffered in Lisbon might at least be partially offset by their contribution to some common good. Nature may occasionally be violent (indeed, humans in the state of nature are occasionally so), but Rousseau maintains that the violence of society remains far worse, even in consideration of the natural terror of the Lisbon earthquake. He writes, "As for me, I see everywhere that the evils to which nature subjects us are much less cruel than those which we add to them."[46] While often beautiful, nature (including earthquakes, wild animals, desolate landscapes) can also be cruel, but Rousseau observes a sense in which individual suffering (such as that experienced in Lisbon) serves a larger purpose.

VI

Indeed, the wilderness idea, insofar as its development has been animated primarily by the nature/society dualism described by Cronon, may well continue to frustrate attempts to more fruitfully conceive of the proper human relationship with the natural environment. Accounts of environmental value that require a separation between the world of humans and that aspect of wilderness that is to be valued by them will have difficulty justifying many measures necessary for protecting the environment. The dichotomy between unaltered "wild" nature and lands marked by human alteration may not only be untenable and ultimately self-defeating (as Cronon suggests), but also misses the extent to which value inheres in areas (as well as processes, species, and other

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[45] Rousseau, "Letter to Voltaire," in Victor Gourevitch, ed. and trans., *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 240.

[46] Ibid., p. 235.

phenomena) that bear the stamp of human presence. His assessment of the need to integrate human concerns along with ecological ones within a theory of environmental value is arguably a good one (although one not to be defended here), but his description of the intellectual currents generating the nature/society dualism within the wilderness debate misses some important contrary perspectives. Historical origins of current arguments did not all assume the dualistic relation that he describes; nor should Rousseau's ecological thought be defined by the primitivism and anti-modernism of his earlier writings.

In the course of his life's work, Rousseau argued for the continued and relatively egalitarian access to natural areas for reasons that transcend the sublime and frontier conceptions of nature and that suggest a definition of and defense for those areas that allows for human use to occur along with careful protection against degradation. Without entirely eliminating the distinction between lands that bear more and less of the stamp of human presence, Rousseau's work presents an account of environmental value that recognizes the worth of pastoral countryside, of land tilled through sustainable agriculture, and of human-made or altered urban oases like parks or land reserves. The human experience of these areas, Rousseau suggests, provides a necessary counterbalance to social life, but his ecological thought should not be read as maintaining that persons must choose between nature and society, just as it would be mistaken to require a choice between men and citizens. The Europe of the late eighteenth century could not be returned to its "natural" state any more than could persons of that period return to the state of nature. Rousseau, although primarily concerned with social and political questions rather than ecological ones, sought to integrate what he took to be the critical and threatened aspects of the human condition within the modern world, and maintaining a close relationship with "nature" (broadly defined) was an essential component of that enterprise.

The value of "wilderness" (construed along a continuum that includes a range of environmental conditions), then, ought to be assessed in this wide and enlightened anthropocentric manner, such that it is seen as providing an education and a set of experiences that are necessary for a full and healthy life, given the existence of urban modernity and the social and psychological damage that such conditions might otherwise inflict. Such is Rousseau's contribution to the development of theories of environmental value, and his contribution ought to be recognized for transcending the nature/society dualism rather than reinforcing it. Taking account of the complex intellectual pedigree of current strains of environmental ethics allows the debate over the "wilderness idea" to avoid the crude dichotomies that discourage conceptions of natural value that appreciate that ecological complexity ought properly to be reflected in the philosophical analysis of its value.

V

A further genesis of a value claim for wilderness arises through a poignant natural aesthetic developed largely in his later works. His writings in the *Reveries* anticipate some of the naturalists of the Romantic period, especially Emerson and Thoreau. Ernst Cassirer, in his study of the relationship between Rousseau and the French Enlightenment, suggests that Rousseau's turn away from rationalism is in part a reaction against what he takes to be the excessive emphasis he thought was being placed on instrumental rationality and utility, and his nature writing reflects this attempt to develop intrinsic value within nature. Those who attempt to seek truth apart from nature, Rousseau writes, are committing a crucial error.

> People who spend their life learnedly arranging shells ridicule botany as a useless study when we do not, as they say, combine it with the study of properties; that is to say, when we do not forsake the observation of nature, which does not lie at all and which says nothing of all that to us, to yield to the sole authority of men, who are liars and who assert many things we must necessarily believe on their word, itself most often founded on the authority of others.[40]

Likewise, those who despoil nature or attempt to find lasting joy in unnatural, distinctively human pursuits (a clear reference to the *First Discourse*) are bound to be disappointed in their search. The arts and sciences are founded upon human conventions, and don't allow humans to transcend those conventions and escape their authority in the way that botany does. The modern impulse to place the human stamp of rationality on nature by turning simple observation into complex classification and ordering of its physical properties prevents people from truly seeing nature as it is, apart from the conventions of human understanding.

To experience nature, Rousseau observes, one must refrain from attempting to view it from the outside, from the detached point of view of a scientific observer, but must participate in nature from within. Generations of human development and urbanization have dulled the senses and natural faculties, but walks in the woods can reinvigorate them, and does so in a way that can only be described as a kind of epiphany. Turning to nature involves experiencing it directly, rather than through existing institutions and conventions (again, a precursor to the transcendentalists of Romanticism).

Trees, shrubs, and plants are the attire and clothing of the earth. Nothing is so sad as the sight of a plain and bare countryside which displays only stones, clay, and sand to the eyes. But enlivened by nature and arrayed in its nuptial dress amidst brooks and the song of birds, the Earth, in the harmony of the three

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[40] Rousseau, *Reveries*, p. 93.

realms, offers man a spectacle filled with life, interest and charm—the only spectacle in the world of which his eyes and his heart never weary.[41]

He scolds so-called men of science for imagining that they might gain an understanding of nature without directly experiencing it in its natural state. They should heed the example of their predecessors, Rousseau argues, who recognized the value of experiencing the world that they attempted to understand.

> To travel on foot is to travel like Thales, Plato, and Pythagoras. It is hard for me to understand how a philosopher can resolve to travel in any other way and tear himself away from the examination of the riches which he tramples underfoot and which the earth lavishly offers to his sight. . . . Your city philosophers learn natural history in museums; they have gadgets; they know names and have no idea of nature. But Emile's museum is richer than those of kings; it is the whole earth. Each thing is in its place. The naturalist in charge has put the whole in very beautiful order; d'Aubenton could not do better.[42]

To know nature, one must get closer to it, and in doing so one gets closer to divinity ("the naturalist in charge"). The source of life and virtue likewise exists only in nature, as does the moral sentiment of compassion. "Send your children, then," he counsels in *Emile*, "to renew themselves, as it were, and to regain in the midst of the fields the vigor that is lost in the unhealthy air of overpopulated places."[43] To prevent the atrophy of the human faculties that occurs from lack of use in society, one must return to nature where the body and mind can be rejuvenated: "As he becomes sociable and a Slave, he becomes weak, timorous, groveling, and his soft and effeminate way of life completes the enervation of both his strength and his courage."[44] More than merely an invocation of what Cronon calls the sublime conception of nature, then, Rousseau makes a more comprehensive argument that experience in nature is vital for physical, psychological, and intellectual—as well as spiritual—health.

Nature, Rousseau makes clear through his writings, does not exist solely for human purposes, as it does for Locke. Humans in nature comprise only a part of the larger circle of life, in respect of which they have no special status. His celebration of the Spartan mother and heroic figures of antiquity contains a strong element of reverence for the role of self-sacrifice in the service of the common good—a central theme (in slightly different form) of contemporary holistic (as opposed to individualistic) theories of nature. In his letter to Voltaire on the Lisbon earthquake, Rousseau develops a view of the role of sacrifice in

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[41] Ibid., pp. 91–92.
[42] Rousseau, *Emile*, p. 412.
[43] Ibid., p. 59.
[44] Rousseau, *Inequality*, pp. 138–39.