Reading Lovejoy's Reading of Rousseau's Discourse on Inequality

But could he, Arthur Lovejoy would probably contend that Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality* is still being read as a treatise on the noble savage. That is, in other words, eighty years since he essayed to historicize its reading with "The Supposed Primitivism of Rousseau's Discourse on Inequality" (1923), it's still being misread. And yet, ironically, if Lovejoy's reading of Rousseau has failed to displace the popular notion of Rousseau, the ideas elaborating his interpretation have eclipsed—in contemporary relevance—the ideas popularly attributed to Rousseau.

Lovejoy's bugaboo is Rousseau's purported glorification of the state of nature as humankind's original and ideal condition. He argues that Rousseau approaches "the state of nature" with greater discernment. Certainly, in accord with the intellectual tradition of the time, he tends to valorize a kind of primitivism as "natural" (with the term "natural" read, of course, eulogistically; as something both necessary and appropriate). At the same time, however, Rousseau describes a process of development beyond this state as also being natural. But because this process is prone to excess—to an unnatural overdevelopment—he regards it ambivalently. These incongruous tendencies—"waverings" Lovejoy calls them—properly constitute Rousseau's argument.

Lovejoy further argues that Rousseau has in mind a specific meaning of the term "state of nature". He conceives of a *political* state of nature—a period prior to the establishment

of civil government—which he divides into four cultural stages[1]. The first of these stages, the state of the brute, envisions humankind as no more—if not a little less—than animals. He imagines creatures that dwell entirely in the present moment, attend exclusively to their immediate needs, and are moved only by the faculty of instinct. Their dullness is at least a blessed dullness; the brute is "healthy, happy, and comparatively harmless" (Lovejoy 18). Even so, for Rousseau (via Lovejoy), these are only consolations for barbarity. Ultimately, he perceives such savagery as degradation.

This evaluation clearly issues from an understanding of human development as natural—even *humanizing* to an extent—for in such a "pure" state of nature, Lovejoy observes, a truly human nature has yet to eclipse animality. Three concepts define the topography of Rousseau's understanding on this point. First, the idea of human potentiality; an idea, obviously, Rousseau had theorized in retrospect, by observing the distance humankind had come and designating its development as prefigured—as natural.

Second: the idea of what Rousseau calls "perfectibility". As potentiality indicates humankind's capacity for development, perfectibility indicates its capability, and perhaps also its predisposition, for development. As such, it figures as the mechanism for harnessing potentiality. Perfectibility closely associates with the faculty of intelligence, which itself enables both reason and self-consciousness. I should note that Rousseau does not consider intelligence alone a sufficient sign of human nature. Rather, he argues

[1] As Lovejoy points out, each of these stages corresponds to various earlier conceptions of "the state of nature"; his first stage resembles the state of nature described by Voltaire and Pufendorf, his third stage approximates the characteristics imputed by Montaigne and Pope, and his fourth stage is distinctly Hobbesian.

that it is free will—a consequence of self-consciousness—that distinguishes humanity from animality by allowing human beings to do what animals cannot: resist nature.[2] (This quality, by the way, he calls "spirituality".)

Perfectibility is impelled both by environmental and emotional factors. In the first instance, humankind evolves by applying reason against the pressures of natural necessity (exigencies like scarcity, competition, and attack). The idea approximates—Lovejoy argues that it anticipates—Darwinian evolution. In the second instance, however, perfectibility is practiced as self-improvement; that is, it is practiced willfully and against the pressures of the passions. Desire, not necessity, is the spur, and self-consciousness (hence free will), more than reason, is the aspect of intelligence engaged.

This distinction, in Rousseau's terms between self-love and selfishness, provides the third idea informing his conception of human development. If self-love (*l'amour-propre*) is a natural sentiment, the instinct, really, to secure one's self-preservation foremost, then selfishness, in contrast, is factitious. Where self-love responds to necessity, selfishness preens for society.[3] Lovejoy points to Hobbes' account of the passions, in particular to

[2] "Nature speaks to all animals, and beasts obey her voice. Man feels the same impulse, but he at the same time perceives that he is free to resist or acquiesce; and it is in the consciousness of this liberty, that the spirituality of his soul chiefly appears…" (Rousseau 95).

[3] "Self-love is a natural sentiment, which inclines every animal to look to his own preservation, and which, guided in man by reason and qualified by pity, is productive of humanity and virtue. Selfishness is but a relative and factitious sentiment, engendered in society, which inclines every individual to set a greater value upon himself than upon any other man, which inspires men with all the mischief that they do to each other, and is the true source of what we call honor" (Rousseau 146).

his emphasis on "vainglory", as informing the idea of selfishness[4], but it can also be profitably (forward) linked to the Hegelian idea of recognition. As "a sentiment which takes its source from comparisons" (Rousseau 146), selfishness operates through acts calculated to win recognition. And as with all such acts, the stability of identity is the immediate and evanescent stake.

Rousseau regards selfishness as ruinous because he believes the appetite for it is insatiable, and hence, all-consuming. It leads not only to egregious excess but to profound dissatisfaction, social disarticulation, and, ultimately, to decay. This distinction, then, pitting innocence against sophistication, guilelessness against duplicity, and pity against philosophy, recapitulates a fundamental evaluation of what counts as natural and not; even though what Rousseau considers unnatural—a society too far removed from the chastening effect of necessity—seems to develop, in his own account, naturally.

We see the play of these ideas in Rousseau's account of human development. Following the state of the brute, humankind enters into a state of learning wherein it gains in language and technology, begins to form social ties, and asserts rudimentary property rights. After a span of several centuries, this second stage culminates in a third; what

[4] Lovejoy, by the way, repeatedly, and mistakenly, calls self-love what Rousseau called selfishness.

Rousseau calls "nascent society" and which he regards most highly, as "the veritable youth of the world" (cited in Lovejoy 30)[5].

This is hardly a perfect state, Rousseau admits, but, as a compromise between extremes, it is the best attainable. Natural stamina and sympathy have not yet diminished appreciably in the face of intelligence, and the corrupting aspect of intelligence—selfishness—has yet to become an overriding passion. Rousseau describes the third stage as "holding a just mean between the indolence of the primitive state and the petulant activity of our self-esteem" (Lovejoy 30). It represents the historical window of balance before human desires became excessive, and as such, "must have been the happiest and the most lasting epoch".

The fourth and final stage, then, is the undoing of the third. This is the state of war, where desires run rampant and "none, whether rich or poor [find] any security" (Rousseau in Lovejoy 33). This state of man against man recalls Hobbes' own state of nature. Notably, Rousseau places it some distance from his own idea of the state of nature. What Hobbes sees as an original condition, Rousseau sees as the corruption of an ideal condition.

Lovejoy makes the point that Rousseau is really describing a dual process in history.

[5] Rousseau's idea of nascent society would seem to approximate subsistence societies where families are the central social unit.

> …on one hand, an indefinite progress in all those powers and achievements which express merely the potency of man's intellect; on the other hand, an increasing estrangement of men from one another, an intensification of ill-will and mutual fear, culminating in a monstrous epoch of universal conflict and mutual destruction. (36)

The political state is invented as a remedy, but, because it is "a trick of the rich, designed merely to protect their property and still further extend their power", it succeeds only in deepening inequality and conflict (Lovejoy 34).

Hence *The Social Contract* proposes the reorganization of society along lines that can be maintained because they are agreed upon. The social contract would deliver humankind from one bondage into another, qualitatively different one; from the bondage of too much freedom, of unrestrained and rampant desire, to the bondage of consensual laws designed to enhance freedom within measure.

By way of conclusion, I would point out that Lovejoy's interpretation of Rousseau makes *The Social Contract* a nostalgic project, with the object of nostalgia located in an imaginary past. The language of nostalgia (also the language of regret and foreboding) is inescapable:

> There is, I feel, an age at which every individual would choose to stop; and you will look for the age at which, had you your wish, your species had stopped. Discontented with your present condition for reasons which threaten your unhappy posterity with still greater vexations, you will perhaps wish it were in your power to go back; and this sentiment ought to be considered a panegyric of your first ancestors, a criticism of your contemporaries, and a source of terror to those who may have the misfortune of coming after you. (Rousseau 89)

Desire reaches backwards through time in search of the point of disarticulation—when everything started falling apart—in order to dwell behind it, or somehow to re-inscribe it in the present moment as a way of "making things right". Discourses that share Rousseau's nostalgia—I think of Marxism, anti-globalization, and environmentalism—transpose the object of nostalgia into the future and, by making desire possible, define their project.

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