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| |  | | --- | |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Bruce Peabody  Assistant Professor of Political Science  Fairleigh Dickinson University (Ph.D., U. of Texas, Austin) teaches courses in criminal  justice, law and society, legal process, and American political  institutions. His recent publications have appeared in American University Law Review, Law and Social Inquiry, and Presidential Studies Quarterly.  Professor Peabody is the co-founder of Lexicon, an undergraduate law  journal.   |  | | --- | | **Read other reviews:**  [Official site](http://www.overthehedgemovie.com/)  [Internet Movie Database](http://www.us.imdb.com/title/tt0327084/)  [All Movie Guide](http://www.allmovie.com/cg/avg.dll?p=avg&sql=1:290158)  [Readers' comments](http://docs.google.com/user_feedback3.htm#comflies) |     Individuals are free and equal prior to society, because they are physically and psychologically unburdened. Their wants are few and easily satisfied, and they are largely ignorant of the existence or fortune of others | |  | | --- | | **Getting Under *Over the Hedge***  by Bruce Peabody  There are several reasons why you might squirm while watching *Over the Hedge* (2006). It might be the cacophony of sound that accompanies the film, including the grating voices of the animal protagonists, the shrill replies of their human nemeses, and the constant beeping, whirring, and grinding of suburban technology run amok. It might be the five year old next to you, shifting to get a better view, or noisily playing with the swinging theater seats. Or, perhaps you might find yourself unsettled by the film's disturbing echo of cautionary themes first sounded by Jean Jacques Rousseau in the eighteenth century.  Rousseau's writings celebrated what he depicted as the simplicity and basic goodness of the indigenous societies of America and Africa, while lamenting the corruption and venality of civil society. "Man is born free," Rousseau famously suggested, and "yet everywhere he is in chains."  *Over the Hedge* portrays a similarly stark dichotomy between the pastoral existence of animals - limited in their goals (largely eating and hibernating) and requiring few means to achieve these ends - and the complex, frenetic, and vacant lives of the film's human characters. Dividing these two worlds is "the hedge:" a literal, explicit barrier between a pre-society "state of nature" and the contemporary social order.  The hedge is a partition, but it also represents a choice - an invitation to consider what way of life, individual character, and personal attributes we might wish to adopt. And it is here that the comparisons between *Over the Hedge* and Rousseau become most interesting. For both the philosopher and the film that resonates with his ideas make a somewhat surprising choice: ultimately forsaking both the perceived excess and immorality of society and the simplicity and relative isolation of the state of nature. In Rousseau's case, the law serves as the vital medium for promoting a kind of "third way," based on articulating and enforcing the common interest or "general will" of society, in a manner that allows citizens to be both virtuous and social, distinctively human yet uncorrupted.  Rousseau, like other thinkers of his era, invited his readers to imagine a "state of nature" before society, before culture, before technology or trade. According to Rousseau, humans in this state, like other animals, operate "antecedent to reason." They are also isolated from one another, possess little imagination, have no sense of property or time.  Although these might not seem to be most obvious preconditions for enjoying the good life, to Rousseau these elements served as the foundation for an existence that was peaceful, free, equal, and decent. A person in the state of nature "lives within himself" - he or she is not preoccupied by reputation or the "opinion of others." Individuals are free and equal prior to society, because they are physically and psychologically unburdened. Their wants are few and easily satisfied, and they are largely ignorant of the existence or fortune of others. When those in the state of nature do interact, Rousseau tells us, they possess a pre-rational instinct of "pity" or compassion that induces them to avoid causing suffering.  *Over the Hedge* begins with a group of animals who live in a world with many of the characteristics of Rousseau's natural state. Awakening from their five month hibernation, the motley group instinctually begins hoarding roots, nuts, and whatever other morsels they can gather around them. In short order, they encounter RJ, the raccoon, who urges them to turn from their simplicity to the wonders that lie over the hedge. The turtle, Verne, immediately experiences a "tingling" in his tail, warning him of the dangers associated with both RJ and his promise of unbounded bounty. But Verne is unable to articulate his misgivings further, and the other animals are swayed by RJ's reasoned, honeyed promises.  So, with Verne sputtering and objecting all the way, the group passes through the once forbidding and fearful hedge and enters a new housing development on the other side: El Rancho Camelot Estates. As RJ unctuously puts it, "what was once mere wilderness is now 54 acres of man made, manicured, air conditioned paradise. Welcome to suburbia, the gateway to the good life."  But is it? According to Rousseau, civilization comes with great costs. Indeed, the cultivation of reason, language, technology, commerce, and other forms of "progress" that accompany and usher in society, contribute to a physical, emotional, and moral degradation of our species. The "sociable man" lives only "in the opinions of others" with the result that we become preoccupied with status, wealth, and property - not for the contentment they produce, but for how they temporarily quench our "burning desire to be talked about." In civil society, we overindulge to demonstrate our wealth and implicit superiority, and, as we become increasingly dependent upon the specialized skills and services of others, our bodies and souls turn "feeble, timid, servile…soft."  The degenerating effects of society, observed by Rousseau are rendered vividly in *Over the Hedge*. As the animals first step into the sprawling suburban subdivision, they encounter Gladys, a hideous, gorgon-like figure who communicates in screeching commands to the cell phone adhered to her ear. As president of the home owner's association she is obsessed with the appearance of her compound, and, consequently, the misdeeds of neighbors who do not follow a strict real estate code that ensures uniformity of appearance. Gladys is a restless, despicable figure who conjures forth Rousseau's image of a "civilized" people who are "endlessly" tormented in their "search of ever more laborious occupations."  In general, the humans in *Over the Hedge* have lost their harmonious connection to nature, and instead strive to conquer and reshape it. Their homes and lawns are coarsely landscaped, and full of implements and machines to keep nature at bay and in submission. Poisons, pesticides, traps, and bug zappers recur throughout the film, and a professional exterminator is a major (and villainous) figure. Just as with Rousseau, these efforts to keep nature at a distance take a toll on the vigor and health of humans. Consider the following exchange as RJ acquaints his companions with basic features of their new world:  RJ: *That is an S.U.V; humans ride in them because they are slowly losing their ability to walk.*  Lew the Porcupine: *Wow it's huge!*  Hammy the Squirrel: *How many people fit in there?*  RJ: *Usually, one.*  Society's inversion of what Rousseau called the healthful, "simple…and solitary way of life that nature ordained for us" is perhaps seen most consistently in *Over the Hedge*'s satirical depiction of food and its consumption. Rousseau marveled at the degree to which pre-social humans could readily satisfy their hunger and other appetites in a manner compatible with their fitness and vitality. In contrast, Rousseau observed his contemporaries indulging in "over-elaborate foods…which inflame and overwhelm them with indigestion."  These dynamics are neatly captured in *Over the Hedge* by the sly raccoon, who observes that while the animals "eat to live" the humans "live to eat!" Humans, RJ explains, spend an enormous amount of energy procuring, transporting, processing, preparing, and throwing away food. Gesturing, respectively, to an antacid tablet and a treadmill he remarks:  *"That's what they eat when they've eaten too much food…[and] that gets rid of the guilt so they can eat more food. So, you think they have enough? Well, they don't. For humans, enough is never enough! And what do they do with the stuff they don't eat? They put it in gleaming silver cans, just for us!"*  The animals of *Over the Hedge* are not themselves immune from the polluting effects of civilization. As noted, RJ is conniving, false, and selfish in his efforts to save himself. Hammy, the hyperkinetic squirrel, and the others are smitten by the taste of donuts, Girl Scout cookies, cheese dust, and other admitted "junk." And in the context of society, even Verne, dismayed by RJ's charisma and influence over the group, becomes jealous, and dismisses his friends as being "too stupid and naïve" to see through the raccoon's designs.  To this point, both Rousseau and *Over the Hedge* seem inclined to the following conclusion: while there exists a clear dividing line between nature and society, our traditional understanding of which order is more moral and "civilized" is simply wrong. The invited implication seems to be that we ought retreat to a simpler, less ordered existence, purged of the taint of human culture.  But *Over the Hedge* follows this path only to a point. Upon uncovering RJ's deceit, the other animals do not abandon him to the wrong side of the hedge (and certain annihilation). Instead, they decide to protect and save him, in part by utilizing some of the very technologies (sophisticated animal traps, the exterminator's van, and even caffeinated soda) and distinctive traits (rationality) associated with civilization. The animals survive by pluck, planning, and co-opting society's conditions and creations - not by atavism.  By the film's conclusion, the animals retreat back to the state of nature, but they are changed. Their family (albeit an unconventional one based on affection and choice not biology) remains the basis for a grounded moral order, but now it includes RJ, a figure inextricably linked with the world of humans and the creations and institutions of society. Indeed, the very last scene of the film depicts RJ teaching his children how to raid food from a candy dispensing machine - perpetuating his reliance on the manufactures of civilization, but at least within the safe confines of his expanded family unit.  Rousseau, on the other hand, calls for us to erect an entirely new community in which "the advantages of a state of nature would be combined with the advantages of social life." He believes that it is possible to refine and use the characteristics, talents, and tools that make us distinctively human - reason, speech, agriculture, morality, self-consciousness, enduring relationships - without losing our humanity.  But how do we steer a middle course? Rousseau's answer is construct a social and political order based on what he calls the "general will" - the genuinely common interests of the citizens. For Rousseau, the best form of government is one that passes laws that are recognized by the people as being freely chosen and of their own authorship. And this will only occur if the law actually embodies the general will - as opposed to representing the mere aggregation of different and divided individual interests, passions, and factions (what Rousseau calls "the will of all"). By adhering to and recognizing law based on the general will, we can be "forced to be free:" free because we are no longer enslaved by the artificial wants of others; forced because our own, private, narrow interest incline us to want a different, particularized set of policies that favor us.  But the general will can only be discovered when a nation sets aside its petty and disparate interests, deliberates, and comes to recognize and experience collective needs. In Rousseau's account, it is law that serves as the essential conduit, expression, and enforcer of the general will.  So what are we to make of all this? To some degree we recognize the potential social ills posed by Rousseau and *Over the Hedge*, and we embrace their respective "solutions:" attempting to delineate a general good through our politics and law, and identifying the family as a special forum for cultivating virtue and decency.  But like the hedge itself, these solutions are both partly separated from and integrated into society - and they are consequently fraught with problems and tensions. The family is hardly insulated from the consumerism, jealousies, and insecurities that course through the civilization around it; and we don't really have the option of retreating to a natural sanctuary in same way as the Hedge animals. And if Rousseau's vision of a political and legal system based on the general will strikes you as more than a little vague, romantic, and even dangerous, you aren't alone. Rousseau has been frequently criticized as anything ranging from an ungrounded idealist to an apologist for totalitarianism.  Americans seem to have adopted their own distinctive solutions to the problems identified by Rousseau, based on inducing or creating virtue through contrivance and structure. Through the separation of powers, a complex representation scheme, and a system of ambitious leaders countervailing one another, we give rise to a political and legal system in which even the most selfish must justify their actions in terms of the common interest. And through the large scale or scope of our nation we supplement these institutional checks with a diverse and divided nation that is intended to only come to agreement on measures consistent with, as The Federalist Papers put it, "justice and the general good."  Has it worked? Again, the narrative of *Over the Hedge* gives us reason to pause. While the animals retreat back to their natural existence, largely unsullied and undamaged, the humans are left behind, frayed, flummoxed, and wounded by their own technology and anxieties. The lingering smiles and laughter of the animals - and of the children leaving the movie - are not our own.  Posted August 9, 2006 |   **Would you like to comment on this article? 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