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Rousseau and the Problem of Self-Knowledge

Benjamin Storey

Abstract: From the beginning of his career in the *First Discourse* to its end in the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, Rousseau makes clear that the problem of self-knowledge is a central problem—perhaps *the* central problem—that his thought seeks to address. This essay studies Rousseau's thought in the light of that problem. I argue that attention to the problem of self-knowledge is essential to understanding the rank order of Rousseau's five major human types—the citizen, natural man, the bourgeois, Emile, and Jean-Jacques. I further argue that self-knowledge remains stubbornly problematic even for Rousseau's most exemplary figures—the solitary walker of the *Reveries* and Emile. The persistence of the problem of self-knowledge in Rousseau's thought makes it clear that he was more concerned with presenting a comprehensive depiction of human problems than he was with teaching us how to solve them.

From the beginning of his career in the *First Discourse* to its end in the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, Rousseau makes clear that the problem of self-knowledge is a central problem—perhaps *the* central problem—that his thought seeks to address.[1] In this article, I map Rousseau's thought from the point of view of

[1]In addition to the passages from the two *Discourses* cited below, consider the famous beginning of the *Confessions*: "I wish to show my fellows a man in all the truth of nature; and this man will be myself" (*Confessions* [*C* hereafter], 5). In *Emile*, Rousseau declares the purpose of that book is to make "natural man . . . known" (*Emile* [*E* hereafter], 41). The *Reveries*, too, begin by asking "what am I?" (*Reveries of the Solitary Walker* [*R* hereafter], 1). My argument for the centrality of the problem of self-knowledge assumes substantial overlap between Rousseau's inquiries into the nature of man and his inquiries into his particular self; Rousseau seems to justify that interpretive assumption in the remark from the *Confessions* just cited, as well as in the remark of Rousseau's Frenchman in the *Dialogues* that "a man had to portray himself to show us primitive man like this" (*Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques: Dialogues* [*D* hereafter], 214. See also Roger Masters, *The Political Philosophy of Rousseau*, [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968], vii). My argument for the centrality of the problem of self-knowledge does not, in my view, conflict with Arthur Melzer's argument that the natural goodness of man is the unifying principle of Rousseau's thought (Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man: On the System of Rousseau's Thought* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990], 15). A principle is not the same as a problem, and I believe some of Rousseau's overarching concerns can be most clearly understood by considering the principle of natural goodness as one part of the problem of self-knowledge. Rousseau citations refer to the following

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that problem. I argue that attention to the problem of self-knowledge is essential to understanding the rank order of Rousseau's five major human types—the citizen, natural man, the bourgeois, Emile, and Jean-Jacques. I further argue that self-knowledge remains stubbornly problematic even for Rousseau's most exemplary figures—the solitary walker of the *Reveries* and Emile. The persistence of the problem of self-knowledge in Rousseau's thought makes it clear that he was more concerned with presenting a comprehensive depiction of human problems than he was with teaching us how to solve them.

This approach to Rousseau builds on the insights of recent scholarship into the importance of the development of our natural capacities to Rousseau's view of the good life, and the concordant centrality of what Rousseau called "his greatest and best book," *Emile* (*D*, 23).[2] According a central

translations: "Preface to a Second Letter to Bordes," "Last Reply," *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts* (hereafter *FD*), and *Discourse on the Origins and Foundations of Inequality Among Men* (hereafter *SD*), in *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); *Confessions* (hereafter *C*) in *The Confessions and Correspondence, Including the Letters to Malesherbes*, trans. Christopher Kelly (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1995); *Constitutional Project for Corsica*, in *The Plan for Perpetual Peace, On the Government of Poland, and Other Writings on History and Politics*, trans. Christopher Kelly and Judith R. Bush (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2005); *Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques: Dialogues* (hereafter *D*), trans. Judith R. Bush, Christopher Kelly, and Roger D. Masters (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1990); *Emile, or on Education* (hereafter *E*), trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979); "Geneva Manuscript," in *On the Social Contract with Geneva Manuscript and Political Economy*, trans. Judith R. Masters (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978); *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (hereafter *R*), trans. Charles E. Butterworth (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992); *Of the Social Contract* (hereafter *SC*) in *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). In the case of *Emile et Sophie, ou Les Solitaires* (hereafter *ES*) translations are my own, based on the French text in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 4, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1969).

[2]Tzvetan Todorov, *Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism*, trans. Carol Cosman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 181; Jonathan Marks, *Perfection and Disharmony in the Thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 3; Laurence Cooper, *Rousseau, Nature, and the Problem of the Good Life* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1999), 4; Jeffrey A. Smith, "Natural Happiness, Sensation, and Infancy in Rousseau's *Emile*, " *Polity 35* (2002): 93. There is an important difference between Cooper's and Marks's views of *Emile*, in that Marks believes Rousseau's understanding of nature is teleological, whereas Cooper does not (Cooper, *Rousseau*, xi; Marks, *Perfection and Disharmony*, 3). I agree with Marks on this point, and thus refer to the capacities to be developed as natural. I should make clear that the "Emilist" arguments of Cooper and Marks are not subject to the critique I will make of Todorov, as both Cooper and Marks recognize

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place to *Emile* and its description of the proper cultivation of the human intellect corrects the impression Rousseau gives of himself in the two *Discourses*, where he sometimes seems to be an enemy of philosophy (*FD*, 25–26; *SD*, 153).[3] Attention to the problem of self-knowledge affirms the view that the human types portrayed in the *Discourses*, the citizen and natural man, are not finally ideals by showing that no self-ignorant life can be a fully human life for Rousseau. At the same time, attention to the problem of self-knowledge allows us to avoid the interpretive mistake of supposing that Rousseau's "sad and great System" resolves into a single best way of life, or even multiple internally complete ways of life, as some commentators have supposed ("Preface of a Second Letter to Bordes," 108).

There are three variants of this error among contemporary interpreters. Tzvetan Todorov makes the mistake of supposing Emile to represent an essentially complete human life. Todorov describes three ways of life as the focal points of Rousseau's thought: the social life of the citizen, the solitary life described in the *Reveries*, and, in the middle, the happy if fragile life of Emile. This "third way," Todorov argues, "integrates ... elements" of the other two; because it does not require a sacrifice of either solitary or social life, it "alone holds a promise of happiness," "uncertain happiness, but nonetheless possible."[4]

Todorov's conceptualization of Rousseau seems to me to contain two fundamental errors: First, Todorov's description of Rousseau's system fails to mark the distinction between the citizen, on the one hand, and Jean-Jacques and Emile, on the other. When we see that self-knowledge is central to Rousseau's understanding of the good life, it becomes clear that the citizen is a lesser human type than either Jean-Jacques or Emile, because the citizen lacks self-knowledge. Second, Todorov overestimates the perfection of Emile. When we ask the question of how well Emile knows himself, his flaws become apparent, as I will argue below.

The opposite interpretive error is to suppose that the solitary walker represents the definitive pinnacle of Rousseau's thought. In this vein, Laurence Cooper writes that "it is Jean-Jacques whom Rousseau puts forth as the highest human type."[5] To be sure, Cooper is more moderate than Todorov

limitations of the Emilist project that escape Todorov's notice: see Cooper, *Rousseau*, 172–81; Marks, *Perfection and Disharmony*, 70. All of these authors, in their emphasis on *Emile*, however, seem to me rightly to correct Leo Strauss's overemphasis of the *Second Discourse* (Strauss, *Natural Right and History* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953], 264).

[3]Marks, *Perfection and Disharmony*, 38–51.

[4]Todorov, *Frail Happiness: An Essay on Rousseau*, trans. John T. Scott and Robert D. Zaretsky (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 18.

[5]Cooper, *Rousseau*, 173. Leo Strauss almost makes the same error when he remarks "It is in giving himself completely to [the feeling of existence] that civilized man

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in that he acknowledges that this highest human type is not a solution for all of us, because his life is beyond the reach of most men.[6] In my view, however, the problem with Jean-Jacques is not merely that he is exceptional, but that from the point of view of self-knowledge, he, like Emile, has substantial defects. These defects, I will argue, make it impossible to judge him decisively superior to Emile.

Other commentators, such as Arthur Melzer, describe not one but many solutions in Rousseau's thought, including Emile, the solitary walker, and the citizen. For Melzer, each of these types attains a kind of perfection with respect to "the formal standard of psychic unity or noncontradiction."[7] When viewed in the light of the problem of self-knowledge, however, it becomes clear that the self-ignorant citizen is too flawed to be counted among Rousseau's highest human types, and that both Emile and the solitary walker lack the complete psychic unity Melzer attributes to them.[8] In my view, Rousseau self-consciously presents his readers with two partial models of human perfection rather than one—or many—complete models of human perfection. By so doing, Rousseau makes it clear that the problem of self-knowledge persists even at the highest levels of human excellence known to him.

The Human Problem and the Problem of Self-Knowledge

In what follows, I will describe Rousseau's thought in terms of two related problems, which I will refer to as the human problem and the problem of self-knowledge. The human problem, or the tension between the individual and society, is an aspect of Rousseau's thought that has been described frequently.[9] We can see this problem clearly by examining the two *Discourses*. In the *First Discourse*, Rousseau describes the wholehearted

completes the return to the primitive state of nature on the level of humanity" (*Natural Right and History*, 292, emphasis added). Strauss corrects himself, however, on the next page, when he describes the solitary walker's "bad conscience," a point I will emphasize below (*Natural Right and History*, 293).

[6]ibid.

[7]Melzer, *Natural Goodness*, 90.

[8]Like Melzer and Todorov, Allan Bloom fails to mark the distinction in levels between the citizen, on the one hand, and Jean-Jacques and Emile, on the other, when he describes Emile as standing "somewhere between the citizen of the *Social Contract* and the solitary of the *Reveries*" (Bloom, "Introduction" to *Emile* [New York: Basic Books, 1979], 28). Attention to the problem of self-knowledge allows us to grasp the "vertical" dimension of Rousseau's thought that these commentators overlook.

[9]Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 255; Bloom, "Introduction," 28; Melzer, *Natural Goodness*, 3.

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sociability of the citizen, who dedicates himself fully to the good of his community. In the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau describes the wholehearted, yet innocent, selfishness of natural man. These poles resemble each other, if only in a formal sense, in their "transparency" or lack of psychic division (*E*, 39–40).[10] Because their goodness is constituted in part by their lack of division, they are, in an obvious way, incompatible with each other. Interestingly enough, however, neither of the *Discourses* presents a thematic treatment of the conflict between wholehearted social life and wholehearted solitary life. Instead, each *Discourse* describes the tension between one of these ways of life—citizenship or solitude—with the quest for knowledge, particularly knowledge of ourselves. Rousseau thus introduces us to his understanding of the human problem only in conjunction with the problem of self-knowledge.

The theme of the *First Discourse* is the tension between perfect sociability, or the life of the citizen, on the one hand, and the quest for knowledge, or the life of the philosopher, on the other. In the first paragraph of that text, Rousseau writes:

> It is a grand and a fine spectacle to see man go forth as it were out of nothing by his own efforts; to dispel by the lights of his reason the darkness in which nature had enveloped him; to raise himself above himself, to soar by the mind to the celestial realms; to traverse the vast expanse of the Universe with Giant strides, like to the Sun; and, *what is grander and more difficult still, to return into himself, there to study man and to know his nature, his duties, and his end*. (*FD*, 6, emphasis added)

The study of oneself, then, is singled out by Rousseau as "grander and more difficult" than the study of the heavens; indeed, Rousseau seems to consider that study the queen of the sciences. As the discourse proceeds, it will turn out that this science stands in tension with the first of Rousseau's exemplary human types, the citizen. Citizens, such as the Spartans or the early Romans, Rousseau observes, encountered more knowledgeable peoples, such as the Athenians, who "spent their lives arguing about the sovereign good, vice and virtue" (*FD*, 11). But they saw that the study of human things, the study of ourselves, was not consistent with the civic virtues they prized: "[T]hey considered their morals and learned to disdain their teaching" (*FD*, 11). Nonetheless, the *First Discourse* is not one-sided: that text also celebrates the exemplary self-knowledge of Socrates, making clear that Rousseau regards the possibility that "science and virtue" are incompatible as a tragic possibility (*FD*, 12). Rousseau thus identifies the problem of self-knowledge, in the form of this tension between self-study and civic virtue, as a central

[10]Jean Starobinski, *Transparency and Obstruction*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), xii, 254; Pierre Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, trans. Rebecca Balinski (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 66; Melzer, *Natural Goodness*, 90.

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problem of his thought from the very first page of his first published work of philosophy.

The *Second Discourse* begins at the opposite extreme, that of perfect solitude, or the life of natural man. With the reference to the Delphic inscription, "know thyself," on the first page of that discourse, self-knowledge once again emerges as the good which stands in tension with the good that is thematically treated in that book—the happy solitude of man in the state of nature. "The more we acquire new sciences, the more we take from ourselves the means of acquiring *the most important science of all*, and it is in a sense by force of studying man that we have put ourselves out of condition to know him" (*SD*, 124, emphasis added). The *Second Discourse* is not simply a one-sided paean to natural man at the expense of the science Rousseau here celebrates: while Rousseau does accuse philosophy of destroying natural pity in that work, he later acknowledges that "philosophers" are among the "small number of good things" gained by the advent of civil society (*SD*, 184).[11] The problem of self-knowledge is thus the basic theme of both *Discourses*.

If we take the two *Discourses* together, we stand in the presence of the compound problem of the tension between absolute solitude and absolute sociability with each other, on the one hand, and the tension between each of these goods and self-knowledge, on the other. We can now understand both levels of the problem more fully. The conflict between the goods known to the citizen and to natural man stems from the regard toward oneself intrinsic to each of these ways of life: it is because natural man is alone, because he does not compare himself to others, that his soul is able to "[yield] itself entirely to the sentiment of its present existence" (*SD*, 143). It is because the citizen is a "fractional unity dependent on the denominator" that he can experience his existence as extended over his city as a whole (*E*, 39).[12] Beyond their conflict with each other, each of these goods conflicts with self-knowledge. Knowing oneself necessarily involves the use of intellectual faculties that are only developed in the social world; self-knowledge is thus foreign to natural man. Knowing oneself also involves reckoning with our individual finitude and our solitary pleasures, and, therefore, threatens the wholehearted dedication to the community that characterizes the citizen. Self-knowledge thus stands in tension with these two already conflicting goods. By understanding this compound problem, we can come to a clearer view of the whole system of Rousseau's thought.

This way of understanding Rousseau's thought indicates that he regards neither natural man nor the citizen as a genuinely exemplary human type.

[11]In his *Confessions*, Rousseau blamed the antiphilosophic remarks of the *Second Discourse* on Diderot's influence (*C*, 326 n).

[12]Cooper, *Rousseau*, 25; Melzer, *Natural Goodness*, 104.

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Natural man, as a direct consequence of his nature as a solitary and a "stupid and limited animal," ignores the virtuous sociability and the self-knowledge that Rousseau acknowledges to be good (*SC* 53). The citizen, too, ignores goods Rousseau acknowledges to be real. That the citizen ignores the goods of solitary happiness has already been shown; that he lacks self-knowledge is less apparent, but is indicated by Rousseau in a number of ways. First of all, the basic theme of the *First Discourse* indicates that citizenship is possible without self-knowledge and that the acquisition of self-knowledge would threaten it. Secondly, when Rousseau states that "there is one country left in Europe capable of receiving legislation," Corsica, he is indicating that one cannot teach citizenship to men who have left it behind (*SC*, 78). The wholehearted citizenship of the Spartan woman described in *Emile*, who unhesitatingly prefers her country to her children, is only possible *prior* to the experience of human dividedness that comes with awareness of the variety of genuine goods known to man (*E*, 40). A third indication of the necessary self-ignorance of the citizen can be seen in his acceptance of the revealed religion promulgated, in a blatant act of deception (albeit salutary deception), by the legislator (*SC*, 70–71).[13] This clearly differentiates the citizen from Rousseau's genuinely exemplary types, Emile and Jean-Jacques: the former is not taught revealed religion and the latter does not embrace it (*E*, 313; *R*, 27–40). Finally, the citizen is by definition one of the people, the "blind multitude," which, according to Rousseau, "often does not know what it wants because it rarely knows what is good for it" (*Geneva Manuscript*, 178).[14] Rather than being models of the good life, natural man and the citizen are extreme types that make the problematic character of our life clear by embodying certain goods to the exclusion of others.

The much-maligned bourgeois, surprisingly enough, is the first major Rousseauvian character to experience the human problem, the problem constituted by the tension between the citizen's virtue and natural man's happiness.[15]

[13]Melzer, *Natural Goodness*, 235.

[14]Ibid., 233.

[15]I say the first *major* Rousseauvian character to feel this tension: Jonathan Marks has rightly pointed to the importance of "the state reached by most savage peoples"—who "oscillate" between the goods of solitude and those of society—that Rousseau highlights in the *Second Discourse* (Marks, *Perfection and Disharmony*, 61; *SD*, 167). As Marks implies, however, the self-knowledge of these savage peoples, while superior to that of natural man or the citizen, is deeply flawed, in that they allow themselves to change in ways that will lead them beyond their happy state "without thinking of it" (*Perfection and Disharmony*, 63; *SD*, 164). They will have to become bourgeois in order to learn to defend savagery: "It may be that the man of the frontispiece, who returns to savage life after experiencing civilized life, is in a better position to understand how a mean between individualism and collectivism

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> He who in the civil order wants to preserve the primacy of the sentiments of nature does not know what he wants. Always in contradiction with himself, always floating between his inclinations 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 these men of our days: a Frenchman, an Englishman, a bourgeois. He will be nothing. (*E*, 40)

To be sure, the bourgeois does not know himself and never experiences the genuine goodness of either solitary happiness or social virtue because he is so halfhearted in his pursuit of both. Nonetheless, he is in the grips of the human problem. The bourgeois and his experience of the problem of human division constitute a threshold that must be crossed before self-knowledge is possible. Recognizing the importance of this threshold allows us to see that Rousseau does not celebrate natural man and the citizen in an attempt to encourage us to return to either of those states: Rousseau knows that "human nature does not go backward" (*D*, 213).[16] Rather, Rousseau celebrates natural man and the citizen in an attempt to teach the bourgeois to know himself, to become self-conscious of the predicament that defines his life (and ours): the predicament of trying to embrace the goods of solitude and the goods of sociability without understanding the contradictions between them.[17]

Rousseau describes two ways of transcending the problem of the bourgeois: the way of life of Emile and the way of life of the solitary walker. These two characters are distinguished as Rousseau's truly exemplary men by their highly cultivated understanding, particularly self-understanding. As Laurence Cooper writes, "Few human beings are as sublime or as highly developed—mentally, morally, aesthetically, and spiritually—as either Emile or the solitary dreamer of the autobiographical writings."[18]

can be preserved in the face of the inevitable and not in itself undesirable cultivation of the human faculties" (*Perfection and Disharmony*, 63–64).

[16]This remark from the *Dialogues* indicates another problem with Todorov's schematization of Rousseau's thought in *Frail Happiness*: Todorov lists the citizen as a way forward from the problem of the bourgeois, whereas Rousseau clearly understands the citizen to precede the bourgeois in his one-way account of human history (Todorov, *Frail Happiness*, 18).

[17]I do not mean to suggest that the only purpose of Rousseau's celebration of the citizen was to teach self-knowledge to the bourgeois; as Arthur Melzer points out, Rousseau also avowed the political intention of encouraging citizenship in those few European peoples for whom it remained an option (Melzer, *Natural Goodness*, 271; *D*, 213).

[18]Cooper, *Rousseau*, xiii-xiv. In describing Emile and the solitary walker as exemplary types because of their highly cultivated faculties, I follow the teleological reading of Rousseau suggested by Marks and Smith, in opposition to the nonteleological reading offered by Strauss. Marks points to the following passage from *Emile* as

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This high degree of moral and intellectual cultivation allows Emile and Jean-Jacques to develop the self-knowledge that natural man and the citizen lack. Both of Rousseau's models exemplify self-knowledge in their awareness of the human problem, and in their attempts to recover the goods that bourgeois dividedness destroys.

It is only via a self-aware attempt to grasp the "disharmonious" elements of the good life that anything even approximating full human happiness can be attained.[19] The solitary walker finds happiness in solitude only through a self-conscious sacrifice of social life; Emile finds happiness in social life only through a self-conscious sacrifice of solitude. This is not to say that a life cannot partake, to some degree, of elements of both; Jonathan Marks rightly points out that for Rousseau all good lives "oscillate" between sociable and solitary goods.[20] But the bourgeois also oscillates, and this oscillation contributes to his inability to derive satisfaction either from himself or from others. Oscillation, therefore, is not the sufficient criterion of the good life for Rousseau. Only self-knowledge can prevent one from attempting impossible combinations of conflicting goods.

For Rousseau, our human predicament necessitates that we choose between conflicting goods as well as attempt to combine them, as is indicated when Rousseau describes two ways of knowing ourselves, that of Emile and that of Jean-Jacques. He thereby indicates, as I will argue in detail below, that the human problem persists even in the lives of his most exemplary men. The persistence of the human problem in these self-aware characters, in turn, indicates that self-knowledge will remain problematic for both. As I will argue below, both Emile and Jean-Jacques can be said to know themselves in meaningful ways, and both transcend the problem of the bourgeois, but neither resolves the human problem and neither knows himself fully. Emile's self-knowledge is more sociable, whereas Jean-Jacques's self-knowledge is more solitary; that very distinction already indicates their incompleteness as models of self-aware human flourishing. The remainder of this paper will be devoted to describing the two highest human types in Rousseau's system as models of sociable and solitary self-knowledge and to explaining the virtues and limits of each of these two ways of understanding ourselves.

strong evidence of Rousseau's teleological understanding of nature: "[Natural man] would have to be seen wholly formed: his inclinations would have to have been observed, his progress seen, his development followed. In a word, natural man would have to be known" (*E*, 41; Marks, *Perfection and Disharmony*, 38). It is thus only in man's development—not in his origins—that his nature is fully revealed and the "enjoyment of one's whole being" is possible (Smith, "Natural Happiness," 93–94, 100–101; contrast Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 266).

[19]Marks, *Perfection and Disharmony*, 1.

[20]Ibid., 7.

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The Sociable Self-Knowledge of Emile

Emile knows himself in the sense that he is aware of the human problem. That awareness leads Emile to attempt to transcend the problem of the bourgeois in the direction of sociability. His self-knowledge makes him superior to the bourgeois: Emile's awareness of the human problem prevents him from imagining, as the bourgeois does, that he can embrace social life without sacrificing independence. His self-knowledge also makes his sociability superior to the sociability of the citizen, for Emile embraces his obligation to others because he *understands* that it is fitting for a being with a mortal, sexual, incomplete nature to do so (*E*, 167, 221). Emile not only manifests virtue, as the citizen does, he also makes a self-conscious choice in favor of virtue (*E*, 449). His self-knowledge differs from the self-knowledge of the solitary walker in that his most important experiences are social and moral and that he understands himself in a fundamentally social and moral way. It is through comparison with the self-knowledge of the solitary walker that the inadequacies of Emile's self-knowledge will come into view.

One might object to my description of Emile as fundamentally sociable, given that in the entirety of the first three books of *Emile*, he is raised to exemplify solitary self-sufficiency. While it is true that Emile is raised as a solitary until puberty, his adult character is fundamentally sociable: his basic concerns are with his duties to mankind, to his family, and, to a lesser extent, to his country (*E*, 424, 441, 473). The reason Rousseau begins the education of a fundamentally sociable human type by educating him for solitude is that, as Jonathan Marks has shown in a more political context, "the success of the social contract demands that the objects of legislation be independent."[21] Just as "proud and untamed" men are the only suitable raw material of Rousseauvian citizenship, it is only the highly independent child Emile who can become the adult Emile who wholeheartedly embraces his sociable duties.[22]

Emile is not sheltered from dependency and obligation as a child so as to be immune to the claims of duty as a man; rather, Emile's introduction to duty is carefully delayed so that when he embraces it, he will regard it as his own. Having cultivated self-sufficiency to a splendid peak and then having discovered its limits, Emile sees the duties to others that come with sociability as an expression of his moral freedom and his self-knowledge (*E*, 89). Because he knows both the extent and the limits of his own self-sufficiency, he regards his social life and the duties that come with it in a fundamentally different way than civil man, who typically regards his social duties as arbitrary constraints imposed by external authorities. Civil men thus become "dissemblers, fakers, and liars," whereas Emile becomes a law unto himself (*E*, 91). Emile's

[21]Ibid., 76.
[22]Ibid., 76.

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self-aware sociability is thus profoundly superior to the self-ignorant and half-hearted sociability of the bourgeois.

While both the citizen and Emile wholeheartedly embrace their social duties, only Emile does so in a self-aware way. With respect to the question of self-knowledge, the heart of *Emile* lies in the lessons Emile learns about himself from the middle of book three onward, lessons that will lead him to choose knowingly his obligations to others over solitary self-sufficiency. His education in sociable self-knowledge begins with his reading of *Robinson Crusoe*. As Denise Schaeffer has pointed out, while Emile's reading of Defoe's book certainly encourages him to cultivate his capacity for self-sufficiency, the deeper point of that reading is the "gradual introduction of sociality."[23] In Crusoe, Emile encounters a mirror of himself as he would like to be, a man whose self-sufficiency he self-consciously emulates. And yet that very model of self-sufficiency is a social man with many sociable traits that Emile cannot understand by reference to his own experience. *Robinson Crusoe* thus serves to plant in Emile the question, "what is society good for?"[24] Emile will embrace sociability only when he can answer that question for himself, whereas the antiphilosophic citizen would never even ask such a question.

The most basic lessons of Emile's sociable self-knowledge concern the sexuality, mortality, and vulnerability he shares with all men. As Emile's burgeoning sexual desires make him feel the first defect in his self-sufficiency, the tutor introduces him to the fact of death and puts him in circumstances that inspire compassion for others (*E*, 227). This experience "transport[s] him out of himself" and gives him a vantage point from which to view his human condition, "subject to the miseries of life, to sorrows, ills, needs, and pains of every kind" (*E*, 222). The tutor thus uses the emergence of sexual neediness to lead Emile to take his first look at himself. He discovers his fragility and incompleteness, and the connection between sex and death (*E*, 215–27). The conclusion he is to draw from these lessons is that "it is not good for man to be alone" (*E*, 357; Genesis, 2:18). This is the fundamental maxim of Emile's sociable self-knowledge.

While the arrival of sexuality and sociability enables Emile to step outside himself and see himself for the first time, it also introduces *amour-propre*, which can, of course, present a formidable obstacle to self-knowledge.

> As he extends his relations, his needs, and his active or passive dependencies, the sentiment of his connections with others is awakened and produces the sentiment of duties and preferences. . . . *[A]mour-propre*, which makes comparisons, is never content and never could be, because this

[23]Denise Schaeffer, "The Utility of Ink: Rousseau and Robinson Crusoe," *The Review of Politics 64* (2002): 122.

[24]Ibid., 132.

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> sentiment, preferring ourselves to others, also demands others to prefer us to themselves, which is impossible. (*E*, 213)

The insatiable character of *amour-propre* makes us highly prone to self-delusion once it is born. As Cooper has pointed out, however, the tutor conducts Emile's education on the basis of the premise that *amour-propre* is "inevitable."[25] The goal of Emile's education is, therefore, "to shape [*amour-propre*] into as wholesome a form as possible."[26] With respect to self-knowledge, the question of the "wholesomeness" of *amour-propre* takes the form of the need to combine a gratifying comparative view of oneself with a true view of oneself. As Emile begins "to study himself in his relations with men," how he sees himself relative to others will determine whether he is gentle or cruel, proud or vain: distinctions that rest on a true or false understanding of the human condition (*E*, 214).[27]

The crucial question with respect to *amour-propre* is whether it will develop as pride or as vanity, "the most basic polarity within the universe of *amour-propre*."[28] Rousseau distinguishes between the two in his *Constitutional Project for Corsica*: "The opinion which puts great value on frivolous objects produces vanity; the one that falls upon objects great and beautiful by themselves produces pride" (*Constitutional Project for Corisca*, 154). Pride, because it is based in reality, is a form of self-knowledge, whereas vanity is a form of self-delusion. Emile has the former:

> [Emile] will be quite gratified to be approved in everything connected with good character. He will not precisely say to himself, "I rejoice because they approve of me," but rather, "I rejoice because they approve of what I have done that is good." (*E*, 339)

The fact that Emile possesses real merit allows him to see his condition clearly even though he has *amour-propre*. Because of his excellent education, his highly cultivated faculties, and his immunity from factitious passions, Emile rightly fares very well in his own eyes when he compares himself to others (*E*, 245). His education thus makes self-knowledge and *amour-propre* compatible. Emile's self-knowledge teaches him that his condition as a man makes sociability natural; he can embrace that sociability because he knows himself to occupy an honorable place in the social world.

Emile's knowledge of himself as excellent but mortal—immune to unnecessary dependency but fundamentally needy—grounds his sociable virtue. His awareness of his incompleteness leads him to accept the necessity of a mate; his pride allows the tutor to concentrate his sexual imagination on a

[25]Cooper, *Rousseau*, 120.

[26]Ibid.; see also J.S. Maloy, "The Very Order of Things: Rousseau's Tutorial Republicanism," *Polity 37* (2005): 250.

[27]Cooper, *Rousseau*, 160–72.

[28]Ibid., 162.

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single, virtuous companion (*E*, 329, 337). Emile's education in self-knowing sociability culminates when he returns from his travels with his tutor and embraces his sociable bond to Sophie as his own, based on his understanding of his nature:

> This, my father, is my chosen course. If I were without passions, I would, in my condition as a man, be independent like God himself; for I would want only what is and therefore would never have to struggle against destiny. At least I have no more than one chain. It is the only one I shall ever bear, and I can glory in it. Come then, give me Sophie, and I am free. (*E*, 473–74)

Emile thus knowingly embraces sociability, as an aspect of his nature; he accepts duty as an expression of his freedom.

The self-knowledge of Emile is "good witness of oneself," as will be the case with Jean-Jacques (*E*, 81).[29] Emile's "good witness of himself" differs from that of Jean-Jacques, however, in that he can regard himself as "he who knows how to conquer his affections" so as to "follow his reason and his conscience" (*E*, 444). As we will explore below, Jean-Jacques is free only in the sense that he follows his own inclinations rather than the opinions of men; he is good only insofar as he is naturally good. Emile, by contrast, rises above his inclinations to become "really free" and can thus regard himself as "his own master": Emile is not merely good, but virtuous (*E*, 444–45). In his defining act of moral dignity, Emile sacrifices immediate marriage to Sophie so as to fulfill a promise to his tutor (*E*, 449). He experiences this sacrifice as a genuine sacrifice, not as delayed gratification; he thus shows himself to be aware of the need to sacrifice selfish desire so as to fulfill social obligation in a way neither the bourgeois, nor natural man, nor Jean-Jacques, ever could. Emile's self-knowledge is both the knowledge of his capacity for "moral freedom" and the pride he takes in his ability to live up to the duties that come with that freedom (*SC*, 54).

Emile thus experiences what is good about the citizen's sociability—the sublime ability to command oneself and to choose self-sacrifice for the larger whole—but Emile's sociability is guided by his self-knowledge, which the citizen lacks. "A wife and a field that belong to him are enough for the wise man's happiness," he says (*E*, 457). He loves Sophie and his young family as the citizen loves his city, but he loves "as a mortal and perishable being" who understands himself to be "in possession of fragile goods," which gives his love "a voluptuousness that nothing can disturb" (*E*, 446). His love does not require the support of a dubious revealed religion, as does the citizen's. Instead, it is supported by the Savoyard Vicar's natural religion, which takes as its first principle a maxim of self-knowledge: "[T]o accept as evident all knowledge to which in the sincerity of my heart I cannot refuse my consent" (*E*, 270). Emile knows himself as a limited but free being

[29]Cooper, *Rousseau*, 80–105.

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whose freedom allows him to live up to the obligations his dependency causes him to contract.

As impressive as Emile's self-knowledge is, however, it is incomplete in two important ways. Emile's way of life includes only an incomplete form of the solitary happiness known to the solitary walker, reverie. A brief discussion of three elements of the experience of reverie will make clear what Emile shares of Jean-Jacques's experience and what he misses.

1. Reverie involves loss of awareness of time and others, so that "time is nothing" and "we are sufficient unto ourselves" (*R*, 68-69).
2. Reverie takes place in a situation of idleness or "precious *far niente*" (*R*, 64).
3. Reverie consists in the free flight of the imagination: "My reveries sometimes end up in meditation, but more frequently my meditations end up in reverie, and during these wanderings my soul rambles and glides through the universe on the wings of imagination in ecstasies that surpass every other enjoyment" (*R*, 91).

Emile experiences the first of these three elements but not the other two.

Emile can become absorbed in his work or in his scientific investigations in a manner that allows him to forget time and others. As Emile and the tutor travel from Paris to the countryside where they will meet Sophie, the tutor remarks that the Sophie-in-speech they have been discussing will be "forgotten before we have gone fifty leagues": Emile will forget himself in furthering his scientific knowledge through the opportunities afforded by travel (*E*, 412). Later, after Emile has met the real Sophie, she famously finds him in his workshop, "so busy with what he is doing that he does not see her" (*E*, 437). Emile knows that much of Jean-Jacques's experience of solitary happiness. It is crucial that he has some experience of the satisfactions of solitude, because only a being that knows such satisfactions could be said to embrace sociability in a self-knowing way.

His experience of the satisfactions of solitude is incomplete, however, because idleness and the free flight of the imagination are necessarily foreign to him. Emile has been prevented from indulging in idleness at least since puberty (*E*, 320). By the time he is an adult, "the active life, work with his hands, exercise, and movement have become so necessary to him that he could not give them up without suffering" (*E*, 432). Emile does not know how to be idle. With respect to the imagination, Emile's has been carefully smothered in childhood and later narrowly channeled into a particular erotic dream (*E*, 81, 316, 329). Furthermore, to the extent that imagination is a natural quality, we know that Emile has "a common mind" (*E*, 52). Emile is thus cut off by habit and nature from the full experience of the solitary walker's happiness.

This defect of breadth in Emile's experience is an important hole in his self-knowledge and marks the incompleteness of his life. Todorov's defense of

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Emile as the one best way for Rousseau depends on his degradation of the experience of reverie as a "mere personal taste of the author."[30] Everything in Rousseau's description of reverie, by contrast, suggests that it is nothing less than a fundamental human experience (*R*, 16, 69). Insofar as self-knowledge entails knowledge of the most important human possibilities, Emile's ignorance of reverie constitutes a significant failure of his self-knowledge.

The second and more immediately consequential defect of Emile's self-knowledge concerns his understanding of moral freedom. From the outset, the tutor has been meticulously controlling Emile's environment so as to form his character. Cooper points out that, for Emile, "the 'error most to be feared' is an error of attribution: that Emile will attribute to himself things that in fact are the products of his tutor's work."[31] Although Emile at times acknowledges his debt to the tutor, he could hardly understand the degree to which his character is the product of carefully contrived circumstances—that is, of the tutor's application of his own knowledge of natural necessity (*E*, 480). Emile, of course, knows something about necessity, in that he has learned to bear "the harsh yoke of necessity under which every finite being must bend," and accepts such necessities as human death (*E*, 91). His tutor, however, possesses an immensely sophisticated understanding of another kind of necessity: he understands psychic cause and effect, or the "springs" that drive human action (*E*, 431). This understanding allows the tutor to govern Emile's soul with great precision, while appearing, from his pupil's standpoint, to do almost nothing, thereby uniting "subjection" that is "perfect" with "the appearance of freedom" (*E*, 120). Emile's limited understanding of necessity does not include the complex relations of psychic cause and effect that the tutor has been using to govern him while leaving him apparently free.[32] His understanding of his own moral freedom, therefore, is flawed.

Emile's ignorance of the degree to which his freedom is in fact the product of circumstances his tutor has managed in the light of the necessities of psychic cause and effect leads to disaster in *Emile and Sophie*.[33] To distract Sophie from the grief into which she falls upon the death of her daughter and parents, Emile takes her to Paris. He feels a touch of worry:

> In approaching the capital, I felt myself struck by a fatal impression that I had never previously felt. The most sad presentiments rose up in my

[30]Todorov, *Imperfect Garden*, 104.

[31]Cooper, *Rousseau*, 168.

[32]Smith, "Natural Happiness," 112.

[33]Neither Cooper nor Marks nor Smith gives serious attention to *Emile and Sophie*, which is problematic, given how much weight they put on *Emile*. Todorov, who stakes even more on *Emile* than they do, mentions it only as a warning against "facile optimism" rather than a text that sheds new light on *Emile* as a whole (Todorov, *Imperfect Garden*, 205).

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> breast: all that I had seen, all that you had told me of great cities made me tremble for [Sophie's] visit there. I was afraid of exposing so pure a union to so many dangers that could alter it. . . . Nonetheless, sure of [Sophie] and of myself, I dismissed this judgment of prudence that I took for a vain presentiment. (*ES*, 885)

It is Emile's *amour-propre*, his pride in his virtue and in that of his wife, that leads him to disdain the idea that unfavorable circumstances might corrupt Sophie, himself, or both. Later, Emile concludes that this change of circumstance was fatal to his marriage: "Was it she who asked you to take her from the fortunate place [where you found her]? . . . It was you who from the bosom of peace and of virtue dragged her into the abyss of vice and misery into which you threw yourself" (*ES*, 896).

Of course, Emile had, in one sense, every reason to be confident. After all, he had been to Paris as a bachelor and had maintained his virtue in the face of the temptations of the capital. As he realizes in hindsight, however, his youthful virtue was dependent on the guidance of his tutor. In particular, he went to Paris in search of Sophie, or rather the image of Sophie his tutor had created for him, thereby immunizing Emile against the attractions of vice (*E*, 329; *ES*, 886). His freedom existed within circumstances controlled by the tutor in the light of the latter's understanding of psychic cause and effect. Because he does not fully recognize the role the necessities of psychic cause and effect played in the formation of his character, Emile's self-knowledge is bound up with an excessive confidence in his own moral freedom and virtue.

It does not seem to me that Rousseau shows us these defects in Emile's self-knowledge to indicate that the character he has described at such length is living a lie. Emile understands his mortality, his sexuality, and the sociability and obligation that are born from those traits. He understands moral freedom and is able to make real sacrifices so as to be the kind of man his conscience and pride demand that he be. But his life is more sociable than solitary, and, therefore, remains a partial life. His self-knowledge reflects his experience, not the fullness of human experience, which no life that does not encompass all human possibilities could reflect. He is aware, albeit not fully aware, of the contingency of his virtue; the tragic course of *Emile and Sophie* indicates that even the most self-aware sociable man will be prone to an excess of pride in his own good character. Rousseau thus indicates that Emile's self-knowledge and happiness are "frail," as Todorov suggests. However, whereas Todorov supposes that Emile represents a comprehensive, if fragile, human ideal, I have argued that Emile's self-knowledge is frail because it is not comprehensive but partial—more sociable than solitary. That partiality will come more fully into view when we examine its complement, the self-knowledge of the solitary walker.

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The Solitary Self-Knowledge of the Solitary Walker

The solitary walker is aware of the human problem and attempts to transcend the problem of the bourgeois in the direction of solitude. He is superior to the bourgeois in that he, like Emile, understands the conflict between the genuine human goods: the solitary walker knows that his experience of solitary happiness entails a sacrifice of social life. He is superior to natural man because he knows himself—he understands the goodness of the experience of solitary happiness that makes the life of natural man good. He differs from Emile in that his self-knowledge is knowledge of amoral and asocial pleasures and because he gives an amoral account of human activity, including his own. This difference between his self-knowledge and that of Emile indicates that the solitary walker is also an incomplete model of self-knowledge.

As Emile chooses sociability from a standpoint of highly cultivated independence, the solitary walker embraces solitude in spite of an intense awareness of the pleasures of sociability he is giving up. It would not be proper to speak of Jean-Jacques's choosing solitude, for the understanding of human action presented in the *Reveries* sharply elevates necessity over freedom. Jean-Jacques makes it clear that he would have resisted isolation until the end of his days had it not become clear to him that he had no hope of enjoying human society again: he has been forced into solitude, and makes the best of it (*R*, 1–5). The theme of necessity will return below. At present, the important point is that Jean-Jacques, "the most sociable and the most loving of humans," describes a series of experiences in which he stands apart from other men. He recovers, at a higher level, the pleasures of natural man's solitude on his walks outside Paris, on St. Peter's Island, and as he botanizes, and he knows that the pleasures he enjoys at those moments can only be had in solitude. We cannot be "sufficient unto ourselves, like God" with anyone else (*R*, 69). In this, he knows the simple but decisive thing that the bourgeois ignores.

Jean-Jacques's self-knowledge makes his way of life superior to the life of natural man because it allows him to experience the goodness of solitary life at the level of intelligence. Natural man enjoyed the sentiment of existence, but Jean-Jacques experiences it more deeply because he experiences it in a self-conscious way. We see this in his description of his first reverie, which occurs after he is run down by a Great Dane while walking outside Paris. He describes his return to consciousness as follows:

> I perceived the sky, a few stars, and a little greenery. This first sensation was a delicious moment. I still only felt myself as if "over there." I was born into life in that instant, and it seemed to me that I filled all the objects I perceived with my delicate existence. Entirely whole in the present moment, I remembered nothing; I had no distinct notion of my self, nor the least idea of what had just happened to me; I knew neither

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> who I was nor where I was; I felt neither pain, nor fear, nor worry. . . . I felt in all my being a ravishing calm to which, every time I recall it, I find nothing comparable in all the activity of known pleasures. (*R*, 15–16)

Jean-Jacques thus recovers natural man's experience of yielding "entirely to the sentiment of [his] present existence" (*SD*, 143). His self-knowledge enhances this experience in that he knows what is good about natural man's life, and this allows him to experience it more fully than natural man does. While this experience is, in itself, "ravishing," as Rousseau says, what makes the experience all the more ravishing is to have that experience in a self-conscious way, which is precisely what happens when Rousseau recalls his reveries: "This is a state which is brought back by being remembered and of which we would soon cease to be aware, if we completely ceased feeling it" (*R*, 13). The experience is deeper for the self-aware solitary than it was for natural man, because the former is both able to experience reverie and able to compare it to "the activity of known pleasures," which causes him to delight in its superiority over them. Jean-Jacques's knowledge of the goodness of the sentiment of existence redoubles its goodness. As Leo Strauss writes, "The feeling of existence as Rousseau experienced and described it has a rich articulation which must have been lacking in the feeling of existence as it was experienced by man in the state of nature."[34] Natural man may have a good life, but Jean-Jacques's life is better, in part because he knows its goodness.

Essential to Jean-Jacques's recovery of the sentiment of existence is his renunciation of his social and comparative self-consciousness, or *amour-propre*.[35] "By renouncing comparisons and preferences," by forgetting his social self, Jean-Jacques overcomes the divided self-consciousness that destroys the sentiment of existence (*R*, 116). The wounds of injured pride and vanity become silent in his solitude: "It seems to me that in the shade of a forest I am as forgotten, free, and peaceful as though I had no more enemies or that the foliage of the woods must keep me from their attacks just as it removes them from my memory" (*R*, 99). His experience of solitary happiness permits his transcendence of comparative self-consciousness, or *amour-propre*, because it allows him to move beyond the dependency that begets *amour-propre* (*E*, 213). Jean-Jacques knows himself to be capable of a solitary happiness that makes him "sufficient unto [himself]" as he repeatedly affirms (*R*, 5, 69, 111).

This transcendence of the world of *amour-propre* allows Jean-Jacques to view social life from a supramoral perspective. Whereas Emile's self-knowledge reinforces his sense of duty and allows him to live up to his

[34]Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 292.

[35]Of course, Jean-Jacques makes comparisons among pleasures in the passage just cited; comparisons among pleasures, however, are not the same as *amour-propre*-laden comparisons among men.

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obligations, Jean-Jacques knows that he is no Emile: "[V]irtue consists in overcoming [our inclinations] in order to do what duty prescribes, and that is what I have been less able to do than any man in the world" (*R*, 77). Be this as it may, Jean-Jacques does not regard himself as a bad man—he has "good witness of himself" (at times: more on this below). He defends his goodness by describing how he would behave if possessed of the power of invisibility conferred by the ring of Gyges. He affirms that he would practice toward his fellows "a universal and perfectly disinterested benevolence: but without ever forming any particular attachment, and without bearing the yoke of duty, I would do towards them, freely and of myself, all that which they have so much trouble doing, incited by their *amour-propre* and constrained by all their laws" (*R*, 81). Jean-Jacques is good, but not virtuous or dutiful. Furthermore, the account Jean-Jacques here gives of virtue and duty, which are at the heart of Emile's moral self-knowledge, implies that they are contaminated by their association with *amour-propre* and law.

Why this difference in Rousseau's account of the status of virtue and duty in the two works? Whereas in *Emile*, *amour-propre* is seen as "inevitable," in the *Reveries*, Rousseau holds out the prospect of moving "beyond *amour-propre*."[36] Viewed from beyond *amour-propre*, a "particular attachment"—such as Emile's attachment to Sophie—seems "a factitious sentiment" rooted in a proud regard toward oneself and one's beloved that attributes to each a dignity they do not, in truth, possess (*SD*, 155). When Jean-Jacques tries to escape *amour-propre* in the *Reveries*, his enterprise turns out to entail abandoning the belief in human agency—including the moral freedom central to Emile's self-understanding. Jean-Jacques's self-knowledge repudiates not only vanity, but also pride, and, indeed, the entire moral point of view that allows a human being to regard his actions as his own, as products of his freedom.

Abandonment of the sense of human agency is at the center of Jean-Jacques's self-knowledge, as is evident in the Eighth Walk of the *Reveries*, perhaps the most radical passage in the book. There, Jean-Jacques describes how he has ceased to hate his contemporaries by regarding them as "nothing more than automatons who [act] only on impulse and whose action I could calculate only from the laws of motion" (*R*, 114). "The wise man," Jean-Jacques affirms, "sees only the blows of blind necessity in all the misfortunes which befall him" (*R*, 114). The wise man does not get angry with his enemies because he does not regard them as acting freely.

It is not, however, only his enemies that Jean-Jacques comes to understand as governed by necessity, but also himself, whom he learns to regard as a "purely passive being" (*R*, 115). One might say that Jean-Jacques shares the tutor's grasp of psychic cause and effect, and that his effort to "apply the barometer to [his] soul" consists in observing that cause and effect operating

[36]Cooper, *Rousseau*, 120, 172.

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within himself (*R*, 7). Having attributed his ability to recover from anger to his reason, he quickly corrects himself:

> What am I saying, my reason! I would be very wrong to honor it with this triumph, for it hardly plays a role in any of this. Everything comes out the same when a changeable temperament is irritated by an impetuous wind, but becomes calm again the instant the wind stops blowing. My ardent natural temperament irritates me; my indolent natural temperament pacifies me. (*R*, 120)

Not only can Jean-Jacques not overcome his impulses to force himself to do unpleasant duties; he cannot even deploy reason and freedom to correct his unpleasant impulses and restore his psychic tranquility. He is good, not because he is morally free, as is Emile, but because he is naturally good (*R*, 81–82; *D*, 214; "Last Reply," 70). Rousseau's ability to regard himself and others as "purely passive beings" is connected to the self-sufficiency he recovers when isolated from the community, because it is his independence from the community and its quarrels that lifts him above the sense of moral freedom and blameworthiness that animates those quarrels: "[O]ffenses, acts of revenge, slights, insults, injustices are nothing for the person who, in the bad things he endures, sees only the bad itself and not any intention" (*R*, 116). Jean-Jacques's solitary self-knowledge takes him beyond the world of human agency as such.

The solitary walker's self-knowledge, then, begins with his knowledge of the goodness of the experience of the sentiment of existence that can be found in solitary reverie. Unlike natural man, he not only experiences the goodness of this fundamental sentiment of the self, he also knows that experience to be good, which enhances its goodness and increases its self-sufficiency. He avoids the fundamental confusion of the bourgeois by not supposing that he could have that experience at the center of his life while remaining immersed in the social world. Indeed, it is precisely his position outside of social life that allows Jean-Jacques to see himself without the *amour-propre* that prevents the bourgeois from knowing the goodness of his own existence. He differs from Emile in that his self-knowledge is ultimately based on knowledge of necessity, which has determined his fate as well as the fates of others, whereas Emile's self-knowledge is fundamentally knowledge of the obligations that come with his sociable nature and the moral freedom that allows him to fulfill his obligations. It is with respect to this difference between the solitary walker's self-knowledge and that of Emile that the defects in the solitary walker's self-knowledge will come into view.

The validity of the solitary walker's view of human things depends, as indicated above, on his transcendence of *amour-propre*, of social self-consciousness. But does he truly transcend *amour-propre*? During one of his botanical excursions, Rousseau reaches a point of wilderness so isolated that he imagines himself to be the first mortal ever to have set foot there. Even while he is enjoying this picture of himself as another Columbus, he

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hears a noise from the other side of a thicket that sounds vaguely familiar; his curiosity rouses him, he bursts through the thicket, and discovers a stocking-mill churning away just twenty feet from him—a "machine in the garden," as it were (*R*, 100).[37] This experience captures in metaphor a constant undercurrent of the *Reveries*. Others are frequently present even when Jean-Jacques thinks himself most alone, both literally and in terms of how he regards himself. Here, in the midst of one of his most solitary moments, Rousseau compares himself to Columbus, a comparison that obviously flatters his *amour-propre*. In this instance, Jean-Jacques's solitary self-consciousness is tainted not merely by *amour-propre* but even by the bad, self-ignorant form of *amour-propre*, vanity. When he says to himself, "with satisfaction, 'without a doubt, I am the first mortal to have penetrated thus far,'" he glories in a false accomplishment (*R*, 100). Rousseau thus lets us see a chink in the armor of Jean-Jacques's self-knowledge.

This is not the only such defect in Jean-Jacques's self-understanding. His stated intention in the *Reveries* is to wrestle with the question, "But I, detached from them and from everything, what am I?" (*R*, 1). Nonetheless, every walk, even the fifth, is at least partially concerned with Jean-Jacques's relations to others (*R*, 66).[38] In particular, Jean-Jacques frequently ruminates over the moral and social questions of whether he is a just man and has done his duties to them. A sizable portion of the Second Walk is devoted to explaining his treatment of Mme d'Ormoy (*R*, 18–19). The Fourth Walk explains that Jean-Jacques is an honest man even though he has on occasion been caught in a lie (*R*, 53). The final words of the Tenth Walk concern the resolve Jean-Jacques made to "give back" to Mme de Warens "the help I had received from her" (*R*, 142). The Ninth Walk, which is a justification of his decision to place his children in the foundling home, is perhaps the most striking example. Here, one might wonder if Jean-Jacques does not go beyond mere self-ignorance and lapse into manifest self-deception. He explains his decision as follows:

> It was fear of a fate worse for them and one otherwise almost inevitable which surely most determined me in this proceeding. Had I been indifferent about what would become of them, since I was incapable of raising them myself, in my situation, I would have had to let them be raised by their mother, who would have spoiled them, and by her family, who would have made monsters of them. I still shudder to think about it. . . . I knew that the least perilous upbringing for them was that of the foundling home, and I placed them in it. I would do it again, and with much less doubt too, if I had to do it again. (*R*, 124)

[37]Joseph H. Lane, "Reverie and the Return to Nature: Rousseau and the Experience of Convergence," Review of Politics 68 (2005), 493; John T. Scott, "Rousseau's Quixotic Quest in the *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*," in *The Nature of the "Rêveries,"* ed. John C. O'Neal, *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* (*SVEC*); 2008:3; pp. 139–52.

[38]Starobinski, *Transparency and Obstruction*, 353.

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His explanation, here, that he abandoned his children out of concern for their good, seems questionable when we recall what he has said about himself in the Sixth Walk—that he is "less able . . . than any man in the world" to "overcome [his inclinations] when duty commands in order to do what duty prescribes" (*R*, 77). Given this fact he has stipulated about himself, why should we trust Jean-Jacques when he tells us he was motivated by concern for his children's best interest? Jean-Jacques seems here a classic example of the "unreliable narrator." In the terms of the present argument, he seems to be deceiving himself.

In *Emile*, Rousseau states unequivocally that "neither poverty nor labors nor concern for public opinion exempts [a father] from feeding his children and from raising them himself" (*E*, 49). One might argue that the *Reveries* were written from a higher, less moral perspective than *Emile*, the perspective of natural necessity, which suggests that the whole world of freedom and duty is in some sense illusory. Such a perspective might excuse Jean-Jacques from his dereliction of duty with respect to his children, just as it allows him to avoid blaming his enemies for their wrongs against him. But if the perspective of the *Reveries* were simply higher than that of *Emile*, that is, if Jean-Jacques's self-knowledge was complete in the sense that he could be said to know that human actions are determined by necessity, he would have evoked necessity to explain away his apparent fault and left it at that. Instead, Jean-Jacques affirms that he did right with respect to his particular obligation to his children: he argues on Emile's terms. Perhaps Jean-Jacques is less confident that necessity governs men than he indicates in the passages cited above. If doubts do indeed remain on the question of whether men are in fact determined in their actions by necessity or whether they have the moral freedom in which Emile believes, Jean-Jacques would have a significant motive for deceiving himself when it comes to his conduct toward his children.

This interpretation should not be mistaken for an attempt to psychoanalyze Rousseau. In the *Dialogues*, Rousseau showed himself capable of standing apart from himself, literally dividing himself into two characters, one of whom judges the other. Similarly, in the *Reveries*, Rousseau the author presents a picture of Jean-Jacques the narrator that allows the reader to see him as a man in the grips of "existence-diminishing bad conscience."[39] We should therefore regard Jean-Jacques's account of the necessity that governs men with the same wary eye our discovery of the limits of Emile's self-knowledge causes us to turn on his belief in human freedom. In the *Confessions*, we read that "one will see in succession the vicissitudes that [my decision to place my children in the foundling home] has produced *in my manner of thinking*" (*C*, 289). This suggests that Jean-Jacques's self-understanding might in part be determined by his desire to rid himself of "existence-diminishing bad conscience." The presence of a moral argument in defense of his conduct toward his children in the midst of a book that explains human actions in the light of necessity

[39]Cooper, *Rousseau*, 27.

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rather than choice indicates that his self-understanding as a whole—including *both* the arguments he makes from necessity and the arguments from choice—may be partially motivated by the desire to recapture "good witness of oneself," which, as Cooper argues, is an indispensable, natural good in Rousseau's system.[40] His desire to think well of himself thus mars the perfection of Jean-Jacques's self-knowledge.

To show that Jean-Jacques had an interest in believing in the doctrine of necessity no more proves that doctrine false than showing that Emile has an interest in believing in moral freedom proves that freedom is an illusion. What it shows, instead, is that Jean-Jacques's self-knowledge is flawed, in a manner suited to his character, just as Emile's self-knowledge is flawed, in a manner suited to his. In transcending the problem of the bourgeois in the direction of sociability, Emile embraces the world of *amour-propre* and moral freedom, and it is entirely fitting that his self-knowledge fails through an excess of pride that leads him to overestimate that freedom. In transcending the problem of the bourgeois in the direction of solitude, Jean-Jacques rejects the world of *amour-propre* and moral freedom to embrace the world of necessity, and it is entirely fitting that his self-knowledge is suspect on the question of his own moral responsibilities. Both these two ways of life are partial ways of life, and both are subject to the defects of human partiality. The human problem and the problem of self-knowledge persist, even at the level of Jean-Jacques.

The Persistence of the Human Problem and the Problem of Self-Knowledge

By looking at Rousseau's thought through the lens of self-knowledge, the most fundamental lesson of self-knowledge that we acquire is that the human problem and the problem of self-knowledge that springs from it are nowhere fully and finally resolved in Rousseau's thought. If we say, with Tzvetan Todorov, that Emile's self-knowledge is not fundamentally defective in any way, we are forced to dismiss the experiences described in the *Reveries* as inessential to the good human life. On the view I have described, by contrast, it seems that, for reasons deep in his character—his aversion to idleness and his limited imagination—Emile does not experience, and perhaps cannot experience, the most intense experience of the goodness of human existence on its own that the solitary walker shows us in the *Reveries*. It is furthermore not clear that a life with the moral dignity of Emile's could be lived by a man with Jean-Jacques's understanding of the power of necessity to determine human action. The holes in Emile's self-knowledge seem to be intrinsically bound up with the most splendid attributes of his character.

[40]Ibid., 11.

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One might say, with Cooper, that Jean-Jacques is Rousseau's "highest human type," and that he is a limited model only in the sense that his life is not accessible to all. To be sure, Jean-Jacques has an inordinately powerful mind that gives him access to experiences ordinary men miss. But given Rousseau's indications that the imagination must be carefully pruned to produce a man of Emile's exemplary moral character, we have reason to doubt that so imaginative a man as Jean-Jacques could ever possess the virtuous self-mastery of an Emile. Indeed, that there is so much for Jean-Jacques to confess in the *Confessions* is a strong indication to the contrary. The very potency of imagination that allows Jean-Jacques to experience the full splendor of reverie gets him into trouble, and the pain of troubled conscience that results from his moral mistakes leads him to deceive himself (*C*, 358–59). Extraordinary men still have the mortal, sexual nature of men, as Jean-Jacques himself points out as he concludes his tale of the ring of Gyges:

> On one point alone the ability to penetrate everywhere invisibly might have made me seek temptations I would have poorly resisted; and once straying onto these paths of aberration, where would I not have been led by them? To flatter myself that these advantages would not have seduced me or that reason would have stopped me from this fatal bent would be to understand myself and nature quite poorly. Sure of myself on every other count, that one alone would have done me in. Anyone whose power puts him above other men ought to be above human weakness; otherwise, this excess of strength will in effect serve only to put him below others and below what he himself would have been had he remained their equal. (*R*, 82–83)[41]

As long as extraordinary men are men in the way Jean-Jacques here describes, as long as they do not achieve the divine self-sufficiency that would allow them to transcend the moral world fully and finally, the problems will remain. Jean-Jacques is a splendid solitary but a bad citizen, husband, and father, as we could have predicted on the basis of the *First Discourse*. Emile is a splendid social man but less than fully aware of the possibilities of solitary life. Because of the partiality of each of their lives, and because each is *partial* to his partial way of life, their self-knowledge remains incomplete. The human problem and the problem of self-knowledge persist. Rousseau's thought is truly a "sad and great System."

[41]Michael Davis points out the ambiguity of this passage: "One is tempted to conclude that he is talking about sexual desire. . . . This temptation ought and ought not to be resisted" (Davis, *The Autobiography of Philosophy: Rousseau's The Reveries of a Solitary Walker* [Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999], 204). On this view, Rousseau is both pointing to sexual desire as the fundamental mark of our imperfection, but also leaving his exact fault unspecified: we know we are imperfect and would conduct ourselves badly with the ring of Gyges, but we might not know how our imperfection will manifest itself until we actually put on the ring.

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