CHAPTER I

Nature is not the source of social inequality

NATURAL AND SOCIAL INEQUALITIES

The present chapter aims to explain what question Rousseau means to be asking when he inquires into the origin of human inequality, as well as the first, negative part of what he takes the answer to that question to be. It seeks, in other words, to reconstruct his argument for the claim that inequalities—or, more precisely, the particular sorts of inequality he is most interested in—do not have their origin in nature, neither in human nature nor in the natural conditions of human existence nor in some combination of the two. By the end of this chapter we will have seen why Rousseau thinks himself entitled to claim at the end of the Second Discourse that he has “proved that inequality is scarcely perceptible in the state of nature and that its influence there is almost nil” (DI, 159/OC III, 162).

Before reconstructing his argument, however, it is necessary to get clear about the specific phenomenon Rousseau has in view when speaking of inequality in the Second Discourse. The very first pages of the Second Discourse make it clear that Rousseau means to be asking about the origin of human inequality in general but only of what he calls moral inequality. Moral (or political) inequalities are said to differ from natural (or physical) inequalities in two important respects. First, they are not products of nature but are instead—to use a term Rousseau will invoke repeatedly in the Second Discourse—artificial, which is to say: they are established by a kind of convention that rests ultimately on human consent (DI, 131/OC III, 131). Second, moral inequalities are social in the sense that they consist in one individual (or group) exerting a kind of power or possessing a kind of advantage over another. As Rousseau puts the point, moral inequality consists not in “differences in age, health, or bodily strength” but “in different privileges which some enjoy to the prejudice of others, such as being more wealthy, more honored, more powerful than they, or even getting themselves obeyed” (DI, 131/OC III, 131). Because “moral” no longer has the same meaning for us that it did for Rousseau, and because “political” is too narrow to capture all the inequalities he means to examine, I will from now on refer to the object of the Second Discourse’s inquiry as social inequalities. I use this term in order to signal that the inequalities under investigation here both have a social origin (in human “conventions”) and are social in nature, insofar as they consist in relative advantages or privileges that some humans enjoy over others. The first of these points will occupy us for most of this chapter, but it is important not to lose sight of the second as well if we are to have a clear picture of the kinds of inequalities the Second Discourse is concerned with.

It is crucial to bear in mind that for Rousseau social inequalities are always privileges—benefits that some enjoy to the prejudice of others—and that his standard examples are differences in wealth, honor (or prestige), power (over others), and authority (the right to command others and to have one’s commands obeyed). Rousseau’s language and examples here suggest a point whose importance will become clearer later: the characteristics in terms of which social, as opposed to natural, inequalities are defined are robustly relative, or positional, properties rather than “absolute” qualities. Strength of body, mind, and character—differences in which constitute natural inequalities—are properties that individuals can possess, and desire to possess, without regard to whether others possess more or less, or even any amount, of the same. The extent of a person’s wisdom, for example, is independent of how wise her neighbors are, and the desirability of her wisdom does not depend on whether others possess or lack it. Social inequalities, by contrast, are made up of disparities in qualities in which the factor of privilege (over others) plays a central role. This is easy to see in the case of authority, where a person can be said to have authority only when

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there is someone else who must obey him. Authority is always authority over some other who (in that specific respect) lacks authority and is therefore (in that specific respect) “beneath” someone else. Something similar is true of power, as long as we mean by that term something more than physical or mental strength, disparities in which count as natural inequalities. A socially powerful individual—one who succeeds in influencing or coercing others to carry out her own wishes and ends—is powerful only insofar as there are less powerful individuals to function as the instruments of her will. The relativity (or positionality) of honor is of central importance to Rousseau’s genealogy of inequality and will be discussed in detail below. Finally, privilege over others is constitutive even of riches, at least if Adam Smith’s famous account of the “real measure” of wealth “after the division of labor” is to be believed: “every man . . . is rich or poor according to the quantity of that labor [of others] which he can command, or . . . afford to purchase.” In all these cases, possessing a good—wealth, prestige, power, or authority—is inseparable from someone else being disadvantaged by the other’s possession of it; the goods that make up the stuff of social inequalities are goods that can be enjoyed only “to the prejudice” of another.

It should be noted that in defining the kind of inequality he is interested in, Rousseau has already told us something important about how he intends to answer the question regarding its origin: social inequality has its origin not in nature but in opinions and practices that come from human activities; it “depends on a sort of convention and is established, or at least authorized, by men’s consent” (*DI*, 131/OC III, 131). Moreover, he has made it clear that nature as he conceives it stands in opposition to artifice, convention, opinion, and consent. It is worth dwelling a bit on this puzzling claim, for when properly understood it reveals a great deal about how Rousseau conceives of the inequality whose origin and legitimacy the Second Discourse is investigating. The puzzling character of the claim lies in its suggestion that social inequality depends on human consent, presumably the consent of the very individuals who stand in relations of inequality to others. It initially seems wrong, even perverse, to claim that social inequalities exist, even in part, because the propertyless, the oppressed, and the looked-down-upon consent to the wealth, power, and prestige of those above them in the social hierarchy. But Rousseau’s exact words are significant here: social inequality is said to be “established, or at least authorized,” by human consent. That Rousseau replaces talk of how inequalities come to be—how they are first established—with talk about how they are authorized should alert us to the important fact that the Second Discourse is less concerned with the actual historical origin of inequality than it initially seems to be. In fact, what Rousseau is most concerned with in this statement is how and why, once inequalities have come to exist, they are maintained. Rousseau’s fundamental claim, then, is not that social inequalities first come into the world through human agreement but rather that, once present, their continued existence depends on a kind of consent that he calls authorization. That authorization is crucial to the maintenance of social inequalities implies that, in contrast to the “physical,” or non-“moral,” realm of nature, they are essentially normative phenomena. Social inequalities are normative in the sense that they are embedded in human practices whose existence depends on their participants’ belief in the goodness or legitimacy or naturalness of those practices, which in turn implies that we are responsible for social inequalities—they depend on our own doings—in a way that is not true of natural inequalities. To say, however, that social inequalities are authorized by consent does not mean that they are in truth legitimate or authoritative; it means only that they are taken to be legitimate by those subject to them and that this “authorization” plays a significant role in maintaining them. (It should be noted, then, that “authorized” has a different sense here from its meaning in the second of the Second Discourse’s main questions. When Rousseau asks there whether social inequality is authorized by natural law, he is not wondering whether individuals believe in its legitimacy but whether, apart from the actual opinions of humans, natural law in fact makes it legitimate.)

This point brings to light an important sense in which social inequalities for Rousseau are moral rather than physical: the practices and institutions that sustain social inequalities are maintained for the most part not by force but by a (tacit or explicit) consensus that they are justified. When workers in capitalist enterprises perform their eight or more hours of labor, day in and day out, without sabotaging their employers’ property or appropriating it for themselves, they typically do so not primarily because they fear the state’s power to enforce existing

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property laws — though one should not forget that such power stands constantly in the background, ready to crush the few who might dare to violate those laws — but because at some level they accept, perhaps unquestioningly, the legitimacy or naturalness of the social arrangements that make it necessary for them to work for their survival, while others have sufficient wealth to live without laboring and to enrich themselves from the fruits of others' labor. By the same token, asymmetric power relations between men and women seldom depend entirely on men's having superior physical power at their disposal; they depend also on the belief of those who participate in those relations, including many women, that patriarchal rule is natural or appropriate. This point is bound up with what Rousseau takes to be a general truth about human social life: institutions that depended entirely on brute, physical force or on the threat of coercion, without any belief in their legitimacy on the part of those who participate in them, would be highly unstable and inefficient, not least because a very large part of the society's resources would have to be spent in maintaining oppressive mechanisms of coercion so that its members would perceive them as ubiquitous and inescapable.

The consent that authorizes most social inequalities, then, is not the consent typical of contracts, where contracting parties negotiate the terms of their relationship and explicitly agree to them before their relationship is established. Instead, the consent that grounds inequalities consists in the holding of more or less conscious beliefs regarding the appropriateness of certain practices and institutions. The reason Rousseau regards this as a type of consent — as a free assenting to practices and institutions — is that, as we will see below, beliefs (or "opinions") rest ultimately on our freedom. Believing something requires an active assent to the proposition that such-and-such is the case. It is perhaps more perspicuous to say that holding a belief — for example, that men are naturally suited to rule over women — implies a kind of responsibility for what one believes: our beliefs, even if only vague or tacit, are ultimately up to us in the sense that it is within our power as cognitive agents to reflect on their adequacy and then, in light of that reflection, to abandon or revise them (to adjust them according to the evidence we take ourselves to have for or against them). It is for this reason that social inequalities are artificial. They are the sort of thing whose existence requires the active participation of those who are subject to them; they are, if not exactly created intentionally, at least actively perpetuated by the "consent" of their participants, including the very beings who are disadvantaged by them.

While it may seem harsh or unfair to make the oppressed and disadvantaged even partially responsible for their condition, Rousseau's view also implies that the power to alter that condition resides, at least in part, with them. If social inequality were not something that the disadvantaged played some role in maintaining, it would be much more difficult to see how they could ever be in a position to overturn it. Moreover, Rousseau's view implies that philosophy, broadly construed, has an important role to play in progressive social change. For philosophy that refutes our beliefs in the legitimacy of certain inequalities undermines part of the foundations those inequalities rest on. And this is precisely one of the Second Discourse's principal objectives in inquiring into the "origin and foundations [fondements] of inequality." 

It is impossible to overstate the significance of the opinion-dependent character of social inequality for Rousseau's undertaking in the Second Discourse. It has, for example, profound implications for how he conceives of what he must find in order to uncover the origin of social inequality. When Rousseau poses the question to himself "What precisely is at issue in this discourse?" he responds with the potentially misleading reply: "to mark in the progress of things the moment when, right replacing violence, nature was subjected to law" (DII, 132/OC III, 331). The central contrast in this reply is that between purely natural beings, on the one hand — for which violence is the rule — and moral, or normatively oriented, beings, on the other, which are governed by law and right (or, better, by law and their ideas of what is right). At the core of this obscure but important statement is the following claim: the key to understanding where social inequality comes from lies in explaining how it is possible for opinions.

1 I discuss the important term foundations of inequality and its implications in Chapter 3.
2 One potential source of confusion is that Rousseau's language suggests that he will give a historical account of inequality's origin. I have more to say on this vexed topic below.
3 Readers of The Social Contract will recognize this as the same question Rousseau raises there when considering "the remarkable change in man [that] substituted justice for instinct in his conduct and endowed his actions with the morality they previously lacked" (SC, LL.3).
concerning right, as opposed to mere nature, to assume a central role in human affairs. If human societies are typically characterized by social inequalities of diverse sorts (which themselves depend on the opinions, or consent, of their members), then humans must be the kinds of beings that can let opinions (normative beliefs about the goodness or legitimacy of things), rather than mere nature (impulses unmediated by such opinions), determine their behavior and mode of being. One could reformulate Rousseau’s question concerning the origin of inequality, then, as follows: what must human beings be like if social inequalities, grounded in opinion, are able to assume so prominent a role in their lives? Assuming that we have understood him correctly so far, it would come as no surprise if Rousseau took his answer to the question concerning the origin of social inequality to depend on uncovering some fundamental feature of human beings that both marks the distinction between the human and the purely natural and explains the capacity of opinion to rule in human affairs.

In Part II of the Second Discourse, where the natural creatures of Part I first become genuinely human beings, Rousseau will introduce into his account precisely a factor of this sort – the passion of amour propre – and, as we should now expect, it will serve as the centerpiece of his answer to the question of where social inequality comes from.

Finally, understanding Rousseau’s distinction between natural and social inequalities helps to make clear why he confines his attention in the Second Discourse to the latter. The most obvious reason is that the Second Discourse’s two main questions are quickly answered when directed at natural inequalities: these, of course, originate in nature (Di, 131/OC III, 131) and, so, are authorized — or at least not condemned — by nature’s law. It is probably more accurate to say that in the case of natural inequalities the question of authorization — whether they are legitimate or permissible — does not even arise. It seems likely that Rousseau believed that it makes sense to pose the second, normative question only with respect to artificial phenomena, those that depend on human activity (and freedoms) in the sense articulated above. In the case of natural phenomena, issues of legitimacy or critique do not arise. It may be unfortunate that nature gave to some individuals stronger bodies, more beautiful voices, or sweeter dispositions than to others, but these differences themselves — as opposed to what human societies make of them — are not unjust, illegitimate, or the proper object of moral critique. Normative assessment and critique for Rousseau are appropriately directed not at nature’s (that is, God’s) doings but at ours — which is to say, only at those states of affairs for which we bear responsibility. It is important, however, not to overestimate the extent to which Rousseau’s view removes nature’s effects from the purview of normative critique. The mere fact that one individual is born blind while another comes into the world with perfect sight is not for Rousseau a form of injustice, or any other kind of moral deficiency. But how that natural difference ultimately affects the lives of the individuals concerned is not the result of natural circumstances alone. Since social practices and institutions play a great role in determining the consequences that natural inequalities have for the lives of those disadvantaged by them, these consequences are in large part our own doing — something we, not nature, are responsible for — and are therefore an appropriate subject matter for the Second Discourse’s normative question. If natural blindness is not in itself an injustice, the facts that in some societies the blind have little access to educational institutions or public transportation can indeed be unjust (and legitimate objects of critique) since the latter are social, not merely natural, consequences of blindness that it is within our power to change.

This point suggests a further reason why the Second Discourse is concerned exclusively with social inequalities: it is a basic conviction of Rousseau — one for which the Second Discourse means to deliver a kind of argument — that natural inequalities, though real and of some significance, typically end up making very little difference in human affairs compared to the vastly greater effects of artificial inequalities. When an observer of modern society, troubled by the inequalities around him, resolves to inquire into the origin and justifiability of inequality, the phenomena most likely to motivate his inquiry, whether he realizes it or not, are by far more the results of social circumstances than of natural ones. As Rousseau points out at the very beginning of the Second Discourse, it is easy to see once one reflects on the matter that the great disparities in power, wealth, prestige, and authority so prevalent in modern societies are not direct consequences of differences in age, bodily strength, innate talents, or natural intelligence. That wealth, prestige, power, and authority simply reflect the natural superiority of those who possess them “may perhaps be good for slaves to debate within hearing of their masters,” but such a hypothesis can have
little force for anyone who sincerely seeks the truth about human inequality (DI, 131/OC III, 132). Of course, that social inequalities cannot simply be traced back to natural differences in no way constitutes proof of their illegitimacy. What it does imply is that the greatest portion of the inequalities found in existing societies are not merely given, natural, or necessary phenomena but instead are due, at least in part, to social circumstances that humans actively maintain and for which they are for that reason responsible; it shows, in other words, not that social inequalities are one and all illegitimate but more modestly, that they are an appropriate object for moral evaluation and critique.

With these reflections a beginning has already been made in reconstructing Rousseau’s answer to the Second Discourse’s first question concerning where social inequalities come from. For the initial step in his argument that they do not have a natural origin consists in precisely this claim: the general existence of social inequalities cannot be explained as a direct or necessary consequence of natural inequalities; and, correlative, natural inequalities play at most a negligible role in determining which individuals in any specific society enjoy the advantages of wealth, prestige, power, and authority. In other words, innate differences among human individuals do not—pace Plato and Aristotle—imply the necessity or legitimacy of social hierarchies in general, nor do they authorize any specific assignment of advantages as “in accordance with nature.” Moreover, Rousseau insists, even if it turned out that natural inequalities played some role in determining the relative positions of individuals in society, they would not do so of themselves, independently of a host of social practices and institutions—rules of private property, codes of honor, or conventions establishing authority, for example—that give meaning to natural differences and encourage their cultivation in ways that extend their consequences far beyond those they would have “naturally,” in the absence of such practices and institutions. Because the practices and institutions that mediate whatever effect natural inequalities might have on social position are variable and depend on human freedom, social inequalities are, at most, underdetermined by nature. Which forms of inequality obtain in a given society, as well as how far they extend, are not natural (and therefore eternal) facts but social (and therefore variable) circumstances that, because sustained by human participation, are up to us and, so, possible objects of both evaluation and reform.

There is, however, more to Rousseau’s dismissal of nature as the origin of social inequalities than this, and seeing what more there is reveals a good deal about the nature of the Second Discourse’s genealogical project and its central concept, “origin.” Immediately after establishing that social inequalities cannot be traced back to natural inequalities, Rousseau poses a further question regarding their possible origin in nature, a sure indication that this first claim does not exhaust his thesis that social inequalities have a non-natural origin. This further question is whether social inequalities might not have their origin—or, as Rousseau sometimes says, their source (DI, 124/OC III, 122) —in human nature. One reason for preferring to speak of inequality’s source rather than its origin is that the former term discourages the common but mistaken impression that Rousseau means to be posing a primarily historical question about how inequality actually came into the world. Formulating his question in terms of inequality’s source suggests instead that the Second Discourse promises a more general investigation into where inequality comes from than a purely historical account can deliver. When one asks, for example, about the source of the Hudson River or the source of poverty in the US, one normally expects in response not a historical narrative but a synchronic account of: in the first case, the various tributaries whose waters come together to constitute the Hudson and, in the second, the various factors — the export of jobs to countries where labor power is cheaper, laws that discourage union organizing, and so on — that explain not how poverty in the US first came to be but what standing forces contribute to its persistence. Indeed, it is this kind of account Rousseau is after when he inquires into the origin of inequality. Rather than asking when, where, and why social inequality first entered human society, he wants to know instead which of the various aspects of the human condition in general—our biological nature, acquired psychology, history, contingent social circumstances—work together to explain why inequality exists and is so pervasive in most human societies.

Having established that inborn differences among individuals contribute little, if anything, to social inequalities, Rousseau’s next concern is to argue, in considerably more detail, that they also do not have their source in human nature (or in nature more generally conceived). Already in the Preface, even before he has properly defined the questions he plans to address, Rousseau makes it clear that developing an accurate
picture of human nature is crucial to the Second Discourse’s success: “how can the source of inequality among men be known unless one begins by knowing men themselves?” (DI, 124/OC III, 122). Although it is plain enough from the beginning that he does not intend to explain social inequality as a consequence of human nature, it is much less clear what this position amounts to. Since Rousseau’s answer to the question of whether social inequality has its source in human nature turns out to be much more complicated than it initially appears, understanding the argument of the Second Discourse requires devoting considerable effort to figuring out what the question is about and why he answers it negatively.

**TWO SENSES OF HUMAN NATURE**

The main difficulty here stems from the elusive terms “nature” and “human nature,” which, as even a first-time reader of the Second Discourse will notice, Rousseau employs in multiple senses. This multiplicity of meanings is no less evident in the way Rousseau handles the central theoretical construct of Part I, the state of nature. It is best to approach the difficulties contained in the related concepts “nature,” “human nature,” and “state of nature” by examining the passage in which Rousseau first refers to the basic strategy the Second Discourse will employ in order to show that social inequality does not originate in nature:

6 Readers familiar with The Social Contract will wonder why the state of nature described there—-as a Hobbesian state of war (SC, 1.6.3)—-differs so greatly from its depiction in the Second Discourse. The answer is that Rousseau uses a single term—“state of nature”—to refer to two different theoretical functions. The state of nature in Part I of the Second Discourse is an attempt to imagine what human life would be like in the absence of all artificial modifications (those depending on judgment, will, historical developments, and contingent social circumstances), whereas the state of nature in The Social Contract is an attempt, similar to Hobbes’s and Locke’s in their political philosophies, to imagine what human life would be like in the absence of political institutions for humans who have been altered by the very civilizing processes described in the Second Discourse. Hence, to make matters even more confusing, the state of disorder and domination presented in Part II of the Second Discourse is immediately prior to political society (DI, 127–130/OC III, 135–138) — and referred to once as “the state of nature”—corresponds roughly to the state of nature in The Social Contract. One could distinguish these two theoretical constructs by reserving “original state of nature” for the account found in Part I of the Second Discourse, but since my focus here is the Second Discourse alone, I will often simply use “state of nature,” with the understanding that it refers to the original state of nature depicted in Part I of that text.

7 Careful readers will note that Rousseau here uses “nature” (of humans) in yet another sense from the two senses I distinguish below: “man’s present nature” refers to what exists or is currently like and, so, is distinct from “human nature” in both its explanatory and normative sense as I define them here.
at an understanding of the most bewildering claim in the passage cited above: that the state of nature may never have actually existed and probably never will but must nonetheless be known if we are accurately to evaluate our present condition. Because the present chapter is devoted to answering the first of the Second Discourse's two questions—where does social inequality come from?—I will restrict my attention here to the state of nature's descriptive and explanatory functions. In Chapter 3, when beginning to reconstruct Rousseau's view on the legitimacy or justifiability of inequality, we will need to return, once more, to the state of nature and attempt to understand the role it plays in the normative assessment of society and in social critique.

To repeat: Rousseau's elaboration of the state of nature in Part I of the Second Discourse is meant to play a central role in explaining where social inequalities come from. More precisely, it aims to establish where social inequalities do not come from: neither from human nature nor from nature more generally (nor, as we have already seen, from natural inequalities themselves). The content of Rousseau's claim that social inequalities do not have their source in human nature or in nature more generally can be summarized in two general claims (beyond the claim that they do not come from natural inequalities): first, that human nature provides no psychological incentives that explain why humans would be motivated to seek out the inequalities they in fact create; and, second, that there are no fixed features of the external world to which humans must relate in order to satisfy their natural needs that necessitate or even encourage the creation of inequalities beyond the relatively insignificant natural inequalities imposed on them by nature. Rousseau's negative answer in Part I to the Second Discourse's first question—nature is not the source of social inequalities—prepares the way for his positive, and very complex, answer to the same question in Chapter 2, where new, non-natural elements are introduced into the psychological constitution of humans and into their social relations. The remainder of this chapter will be taken up with a reconstruction of the two claims I have just summarized. Before turning to this task, however, it is necessary to say a bit more about Rousseau's highly confusing use of the term "nature" more generally. 8

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Corresponding to the two main functions I have ascribed to the state of nature, the concept of nature in general has both a normative and an explanatory sense in the Second Discourse (and, indeed, throughout Rousseau's corpus). That is, "natural" sometimes refers to the kind of existence that humans and other beings ought to have, despite the fact that (in the case of humans) their actual lives often bear little resemblance to those that nature prescribed. In the Second Discourse this normative function is most apparent in the quotation from Aristotle that serves as the text's epigraph—"One must seek what is natural not in deprived beings but in those that live well in accordance with nature" (DI, 113/OCC III, 109) —as well as in statements that depict the inhabitants of the state of nature as enjoying the "way of life prescribed to them by nature" (DI, 138/OCC III, 138), which implies that their way of life is uncorrupted or good or appropriate, given the kind of beings they are (DI, 157/OCC III, 160). This use of "natural" is common in other texts of Rousseau's as well —for example, in Emile, where the goal of Emile's education is said to be to make him into a natural man (E, 205, 254/OCC IV, 483, 549), which means that he is to be educated into a way of being that is "suitable for man and well adapted to the human heart" (E, 34/OCC IV, 243). When used in this normative sense, the opposite of natural is corrupted, or degenerate, or unbefitting the kind of being one is.

In its non-normative meaning, "natural" contrasts not with "corrupt," or "unbefitting," but with "artificial." When Rousseau employs "natural" in this sense, he associates the artificial with the intervention of human opinions, or judgments, such that a thing counts as artificial if it has been in some way "modified by . . . opinions" (E, 39/OCC IV, 248). This is why, as we saw above, he classifies social inequalities, which depend on human consent, or beliefs regarding their legitimacy, as artificial and distinguishes them from natural inequalities. Another way of defining the artificial is to say that it is the result (or
partial result) of human action, where action, as distinct from mere animal behavior, is informed by an opinion or judgment concerning the purpose or good of what one does. Simply being moved by a disposition to avoid what is painful, for example, does not yet take one beyond the realm of nature (E, 39/OC IV, 248), whereas behavior informed by a judgment — say, a judgment of what it is good to do as an expression of agency, an instance of human, as opposed to merely natural, doings. Examples of the natural in this sense are the purely "mechanical" effects that self-love and pity have on humans' animal-like behavior in the state of nature, "prior to reason" (Di, 127/OC III, 126): its defining characteristic, as Rousseau explains more clearly elsewhere, is the "absence of knowledge and will" (E, 61/OC IV, 280). When, in contrast, humans intervene in the world in ways shaped by their judgments and will, they introduce artificiality into it, and a world that has been altered by intervention of this sort ceases to be fully natural in this second, non-normative sense of the term.

Although Rousseau says this less explicitly than he might have, the reason the intervention of judgments counts as artificial is that judging involves freedom. Following the Stoics who so impressed him in his youth, Rousseau takes both willing and judging to involve a spontaneous act of consent or endorsement, either to a proposition (in which case the result is a judgment) or to something's appearing to be good (in which case the result is an action) (E, 270–3, 280/OC IV, 571–6, 585–6). This is why, as we saw above, belief in the legitimacy of a form of social inequality — a kind of judgment — counts for him as a species of consent. At root, then, what divides the natural from the artificial — as well as the purely animal from the human (Di, 142/OC III, 141–2) — is the absence or presence of freedom. A world modified in some way by human freedom — by human judgment and will — is no longer completely natural. According to this standard, only the original and "hypothetical" (Di, 132/OC III, 133) state of nature described in Part I of the Second Discourse is a truly natural world, whereas the world depicted in Part II — where human beings first appear — is always in some measure artificial.

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90 Rousseau expands on this idea at E, 280/OC IV, 386. Although he expresses this point in the voice of the Savoyard vicar, I see no reason for thinking it is not his own view as well.

91 I defend this interpretive claim in detail below.

92 The social contract is, of course, artificial (SC, I, 6, x), and Rousseau explicitly praises a variety of artificial phenomena at SC, I.8.1, I.9.4, and II.7.11, as well as in the Second Discourse (Di, 164, 169/OC III, 169, 170).
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to distinguish the normative from the non-normative aspects of his conception of human nature, even if later it will be just as important to ask how he sees the two as fitting together. (For ease of expression I will continue to refer to two conceptions of human nature, though it should not be forgotten that Rousseau takes them to be intimately connected.)

In the Second Discourse Rousseau’s normative conception of human nature appears mostly in conjunction with his talk of the “corruption” and “debasement” of human nature that accompany the changes in human beings and their society depicted in Part II (DI, 133, 178–9, 209/OC III, 133, 183–4, 207). In Emile the normative sense of human nature is more prominent, especially in its central claim that the proper task of education is to form humans so as to realize their true nature. The conception of human nature that enables Rousseau to speak in both texts of human corruption and debasement is normative because it specifies the characteristics human beings ought to possess but frequently do not, the lack of which is precisely what Rousseau means by a debased human existence. I will postpone discussion of this sense of human nature until Chapter 3, when reconstructing Rousseau’s normative position with respect to social inequality. In this chapter, where my concern is the origin of inequality, I will examine his descriptive or explanatory conception of original human nature, which is contained in his account of the state of nature in Part I. One reason for beginning here is that Rousseau’s non-normative conception of human nature is more difficult to understand and typically engenders more confusion than his relatively straightforward conception of true (or ideal) human nature.

THE NON-NORMATIVE CONCEPTION OF ORIGINAL HUMAN NATURE

Rousseau’s descriptive or explanatory conception of original human nature offers an account of what human beings are like—or, since, as I argue below, the state of nature is a hypothetical construct (DI, 125, 132/OC III, 123, 133) — what they would be like in a world completely untouched by the artificial, a world in which nature, including our own (animal, or biological) nature, were completely unmodified by the effects of human agency. I will call this conception, with Rousseau, original/human nature (DI, 124–5, 128/OC III, 122–3, 126), although it is important to remember that, since it abstracts from all effects of human agency, this original human nature will in important respects not be recognizably human at all. (In Chapter 2 I will contrast this original human nature with another non-normative conception of human nature that can be attributed to Rousseau—consisting essentially of original human nature plus amour propre—which I will call human nature in the expanded sense.) Although much more will need to be said about this idea, what Rousseau means to capture in his conception of original human nature is the human being’s “original constitution,” or what the human is like “as nature formed him,” apart from “what circumstances and his progress have added to or changed in his primitive state” (DI, 124/OC III, 122).

Before exploring the content of Rousseau’s account of original human nature, however, it is necessary to confront an interpretive issue that has generated much controversy among readers of the Second Discourse and that is of considerable importance for constructing and evaluating the position it sets forth. I have already indicated that in my view it is crucial to recognize that state of nature depicted in Part I as a hypothetical construct, not as a thesis that purports to describe an actual state of affairs that really existed sometime in our distant past. One reason for espousing this interpretation is that doing so makes the most philosophical sense of the Second Discourse, which is to say that it renders Rousseau’s argument more coherent and more compelling than alternative readings. A second reason, though, is that Rousseau himself says clearly—or so it seems to me—that this is how he intends for the original state of nature to be understood. Since many interpreters disagree with me on this fundamental exegetical claim, however, it is worth passing

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9 The normative conception is also apparent in those aspects of what Rousseau calls his “study of original man” that are concerned with “his true needs and the fundamental principles of his duties” (DI, 128/OC III, 126).
to consider in some detail the textual evidence relevant to deciding the matter.

I have already cited the passage most important for settling the controversy, Rousseau's reference to the original state of nature as a condition "which no longer exists, which perhaps never did exist, which probably never will exist, and of which it is nevertheless necessary to have exact notions in order accurately to judge of our present state" (II, 125/OC III, 123). This statement is relatively plain in revealing both that Rousseau takes his hypothesis of the state of nature to be of fundamental importance to his undertakings and that whether or not it refers to an actual historical state has no relevance for his argument: if the state of nature might never have existed but our ideas about it are nevertheless essential to answering the Second Discourse's questions, then what is of interest to Rousseau in this thesis can have nothing at all to do with its representing an actual state of affairs. Apart from all other complications, this in my view is the fundamental point to be kept sight of in the matter, and it plays a major role in my reconstruction of the Second Discourse's argument.

Even if one grants this point, however, one might argue that there is still room for the possibility that Rousseau in fact believed in the historical veracity of the original state of nature, or at the very least was agnostic about it, even if its philosophical importance is independent of that point (what he says, after all, is that perhaps the state of nature never existed). But even these weaker possibilities appear to be excluded, and just as plainly, by the following statement:

Let us begin ... by setting aside all the facts, for they do not affect the question [as to whether the state of nature ever existed]. The inquiries that...

10 That this passage is referring to the original state of nature is evident from the sentence immediately preceding it, where what is at issue is whether "men were ever in the pure state of nature," a question that Rousseau answers once again in the negative. The explicitly theological context in which the question is raised here—Rousseau is clear that taking the state of nature as a historical reality would be seen by many as contradicting the Biblical account of human origins—has encouraged some to conclude that his explicit denial of that state's historical character can be explained by his desire to avoid the consequences of religious controversy. (I am indebted to Christopher Brooke for improving on the importance of this possibility.) While Rousseau was fully aware of the real dangers involved in contradicting Church doctrine, the claim that this was his only or main reason for denying the historical character of the state of nature requires more positive evidence than the text in fact supplies. For (1) not all of his denials occur in the context of theological discussions (II, 125/OC III, 123); (2) there is no strong positive evidence for the contrary interpretation (that he intends to be making a historical point); and, most important, (3) construing the state of nature historically saddles Rousseau with a highly implausible view that must have appeared as such to him.

11 René Descartes, *The World and Other Writings*, trans. Stephen Gaukroger (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 29. Like Rousseau, Descartes too describes his account as a "table" that makes no claim to being literal (32). Descartes' descriptions of his project echo Descartes' makes no claim to being literal (32). Descartes' descriptions of his project echo Descartes' makes no claim to being literal (32). Descartes' descriptions of his project echo Descartes' makes no claim to being literal (32). Descartes' descriptions of his project echo Descartes' makes no claim to being literal (32). Descartes' descriptions of his project echo Descartes' makes no claim to being literal (32). Descartes' descriptions of his project echo Descartes' makes no claim to being literal (32).
than "to show their genuine origin." Similarly, the Second Discourse project is to show that the range of complex human phenomena that we are familiar with in highly developed societies can be accounted for by assuming a very small number of "first principles," namely those embodied in Rousseau's account of original human nature (and, as I explain in the following chapter, supplemented in Part II by the fundamental "principle" of social existence, amour propre). As I argue more extensively below, those principles are important to Rousseau because they represent the fundamental "building blocks" of human reality and indicate the very general limits that nature imposes on human variability. This way of putting the point suggests yet another way of describing the theoretical function of the state of nature that finds an echo in one of the passages cited above: hypotheses concerning our original nature have an analytic function that consists in "disentangling what is original from what is artificial [and due to society]" in man's present nature" (DI, 125/OC III, 123) — or, equivalently, in "separating what, in the present constitution of things, divine will has done from what human art has pretended to do" (DI, 128/OC III, 127) — even if in reality neither the natural nor the artificial ever appear detached from its counterpart.

In any case, it is important to see that denying the historical veracity of the original state of nature is consistent with regarding it, as I do, as making a truth claim, even a claim to be in a certain sense empirically true. For Part I of the Second Discourse purports to reveal the truth about the basic elements of human nature, even though these elements cannot be directly apprehended by sense perception alone (because the object of our inquiry, "original" human nature, never appears in reality in that pure form). This does not mean the thesis is metaphysical in the sense of being empirically unfalsifiable — it is always possible in principle to discover human phenomena that cannot be explained on the basis of the minimal elements Rousseau attributes to human nature — but merely that it is not an immediate "fact" of the sort "The tree before me is green" might be taken to designate. (Recall in this context Rousseau's call for us to "set aside all the facts" when considering the state of nature (DI, 132/OC III, 132).)

Nor are claims about original human nature unscientific in the sense of being hypotheses of a completely different sort from those made by natural science, which is why it is not entirely out of line for Rousseau to suggest that "experiments," in the broadest possible sense, might help to decide the question of our original nature (DI, 125/OC III, 123–4). Indeed — to invoke yet another analogy with physics — it is likely that Rousseau thinks of his theses about human nature as having a similar theoretical status to that possessed by Newton's first principles of motion: though neither empirical generalizations nor directly observable facts, Rousseau's theses derive their support from the success with which, on the assumption of a very small number of basic principles regarding "the first and simplest operations of the human soul" (DI, 127/OC III, 125), they account for the vastly diverse forms of human behavior we know from our own experience as well as from other empirical sources, such as biology, history, and what we would now call anthropology. (And this explains why the empirical evidence adduced in the Second Discourse concerning the great diversity of human forms of life, both "primitive" and developed, is relevant to Rousseau's undertaking even though the original state of nature is not a historical thesis. I return to this issue in the Coda to Chapter 4.)

Let us now return to settling out the content of Rousseau's account of original human nature. The most important part of this account is what Rousseau calls our "natural faculties," those simplest operations of the soul that function in us "prior to reason" (DI, 127–8/OC III, 125–7). In other words, original human nature for Rousseau is made up of the natural endowments of human individuals, the "original dispositions" (E, 39/OC IV, 248) and capacities they receive from nature alone, apart from how contingent social or historical circumstances might form them. Given what has been said above regarding nature in general, it makes sense to think of these dispositions and capacities, in their purely natural form, as existing and functioning independently of human judgment and will. This is precisely how Rousseau describes the two original dispositions he attributes to human beings, love of self (amour de soi-même) and pity, both of which he takes to be dispositions we have

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11 I explain the connection between the artificial and the social in Chapter 2.
from birth that lead us to respond to the world without the intervention of opinion or will and, so, prior to reason. Insofar as these dispositions operate independently of judgment and will, they are no different in kind from animal dispositions; in fact, Rousseau regards both as dispositions that humans and (at least some) other animals have in common.

As its name indicates, amour de soi-même (or, equivalently, amour de soi) is a form of self-love, or self-interestedness, the defining characteristic of which is that it "leads us to care intensely about our [own individual] well-being and self-preservation" (Di, 127/OC III, 126). (In Part II of the Second Discourse Rousseau introduces a second form of self-love, amour propre, whose aims are importantly different from those of amour de soi-même. Because this distinction plays so large a role in Rousseau’s thought, and because no English terms adequately capture the contrast, I will use the French expressions from this point on.) In its completely natural form, before any opinions of what our well-being consists in can guide our self-interestedness, amour de soi-même operates in a purely animal fashion, which means that natural human beings are disposed to respond to the world, more or less "mechanically" and "prior to all reflection" (Di, 152/OC III, 154), with behavior that furthers their individual preservation and well-being. What Rousseau has in mind here is surely that humans, like other animals, are born with dispositions to seek sensations of pleasure and to avoid sensations of pain. These dispositions lead the beings that have them to seek—or in the case of pain, to avoid—the objects in the world that tend to produce those sensations in them (E, 39/OC IV, 248). Moreover, nature is so arranged—it is in this modest respect teleologically structured—that the unreflective responses of such beings issue for the most part in behavior that ultimately promotes their good qua natural beings, which is to say: their survival and well-being.

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20 In this book I use the first of these equivalent expressions. In French one would normally refer to l’amour de soi-même and to l’amour propre. Instead I follow here the established practice in English writings on Rousseau of omitting the definite article, even though this would sound odd to readers who know French.

21 In Chapter 3, once amour propre has been introduced into the picture, we will see that a more general and more accurate description of what amour de soi-même strives for in one’s own non-relative (non-positional) well-being.
Nature is not the source of social inequality

Nature is not the source of social inequality

the kinds of ends (in this case, physical survival) that nature's creatures must be equipped to achieve if they are to satisfy the most basic strivings of life itself. 23

The claim that pity, too, belongs to original human nature is no doubt more controversial, both for us and for Rousseau's contemporaries, and perhaps for this reason he devotes more attention to the arguments in support of it. First, Rousseau makes a point of presenting various examples of familiar human behavior that are very difficult to explain without the thesis of natural pity. One obvious example is the readiness of mothers to subordinate their own interests—in extreme circumstances, their lives—to the well-being and comfort of their infants. But since his readers might be inclined to regard this as a special case limited to women or to the very close relation parents have to their own offspring, other examples are needed, and these Rousseau finds in the scenario, adapted from Mandeville, of the personally disinterested (and male) spectator of a child being torn from his mother's breast by a ferocious beast, as well as in the well-known fact that theater audiences are commonly moved to weep for unknown and even fictitious characters whose sufferings they see portrayed on the stage. Second, as in the case of amour de soi-même, these considerations are reinforced by speculations about how pity, too, helps to achieve nature's ends: if amour de soi-même promotes the preservation of individuals, our natural sensitivity to the pain of others serves an even larger purpose of nature: by "carrying us without reflection to the assistance of those we see suffer," it "contributes to the mutual preservation of the entire species" (DI, 154/OCIII, 156). This consideration is closely related to Rousseau's claim that, in the original state of nature at least, all human behavior is guided by a single, very general end: "love of well-being is the sole spring of human actions" (DI, 163/OC III, 166). In the case of amour de soi-même the well-being that is sought is our own; in the case of pity, it is that of others.

Some pages after Rousseau has set out the basic elements of original human nature and shown that the state of nature is peaceful and good,

us than others' and our inclination to relieve others' suffering tends to be trumped by self-love when helping our fellow beings would result in significant harm to ourselves. In the ends of these two original dispositions, together with their relative strength, Rousseau finds in nature the basis for a "maxim of natural goodness" that provides the general rule for "natural" human behavior "in all men": "Do your good with the least possible harm to others" (DI, 154/OCIII, 156). Of course, the sense in which this maxim constitutes a rule for human behavior differs significantly depending on whether we are thinking of behavior in the state of nature or of human action within developed social conditions. In the former—where, in the absence of countervailing tendencies due to artificial conditions, "no one is tempted to disobey it—the maxim describes how humans in fact behave, while in the latter it takes the form of a genuine imperative, instructing humans who in fact may or may not obey it how they ought to act. Moreover, as Rousseau notes, the "naturalness" of the maxim implies that most civilized beings feel a "repugnance to evil-doing" when they encounter it in the world, including when that evil-doing is their own.)

That humans are by nature first and foremost self-interested beings is a claim that Rousseau, together with most of his predecessors and contemporaries, takes to be sufficiently obvious as to require little argumentation. Most of us are likely to agree. Still, it is worth articulating the two, mostly implicit considerations that ground Rousseau's claim. The first is entirely empirical: merely observing the behavior of those around us, together with what we know about how men and women in other times (and places) have lived (and live), makes it clear that self-interest is a central element of human psychology—or, in other words, that human individuals are by nature highly motivated to pursue their own good as they conceive it. A second, less banal argument reinforces the first: the widely observed self-interestedness of individuals can plausibly be regarded as serving a purely biological end of nature, namely, the survival and physical well-being of the very organisms that are "programmed" by nature to seek their own good. Thus, the thesis that amour de soi-même belongs centrally to human nature is based not only on empirical observations of actual behavior—which, as Rousseau points out, can easily mislead us into taking contingent but widely observed characteristics of humans to be part of their invariable nature (DI, 125, 132/OCIII, 123, 132)—but also on a more general conception of

23 That such a consideration is at work when Rousseau thinks about original human nature is evident in his reference to the "relations established by nature among all animate beings for their common preservation" when characterizing natural law in its descriptive or explanatory function (DI, 128/OCIII, 124; emphasis added). See note 9.
he introduces what can look like a third natural disposition: sexual passion (DI, 154–7/OC III, 157–9). Much of his discussion is devoted to making the plausible point that, because it is unshaped by opinion and imagination, the merely animal desire for sex (what is “physical is the sentiment of love”) is a much less powerful and destructive force than the sexual passion—the “moral” element of love, bound up with love for a specific individual and judgments of personal worth, of both the lover and the beloved—that is the cause of so much jealousy and sexual rivalry among “civilized” beings. The more puzzling aspect of Rousseau’s discussion of sex arises at a more fundamental level, however. It is difficult to know, partly because he says nothing about it, how sexual desire fits into the two categories of natural dispositions distinguished earlier: is the desire for sex a prompting of amour de soi-même or of pity? The initially more plausible alternative is to regard it as a subspecies of amour de soi-même since the pleasure sexual behavior brings to the individual creatures that engage in it is clearly central to what motivates it. But sexual desire is also different from the other natural urges associated with amour de soi-même—hunger, thirst, the desire for sleep—in that its satisfaction is useless to the being that has acted on it. That is, acting on sexual desire produces no good, beyond the pleasure it brings, for the satisfied individual herself. Obviously, sexual desire does serve a natural end of the species (biological reproduction), but in this respect it is more like pity than amour de soi-même. Perhaps it is best to conclude that purely natural sexual desire is motivationally similar to amour de soi-même—the promise of their own pleasure is what prompts natural beings to seek sex—but more like pity with respect to the natural good it leads those beings to realize (“mechanically,” of course, without their necessarily intending or caring about that good). (Both Emile [E, 211–13/OC IV, 489–94] and Part II of the Second Discourse [DI, 165/OC III, 169] make clear that human sexual passion, as distinct from animal desire, is necessarily bound up with amour propre, the form of self-love Rousseau introduces only in Part II.)

In addition to these two dispositions, original human nature includes two capacities—one cognitive, the other volunatative—the existence of which is independent of all social and historical development. It is best to speak of these capacities’ presence rather than their functioning as natural (or innate), for, as we will see, in the absence of all social relations one of them would be completely latent and the other would be reduced to the very thinnest of functions. It is worthy of note that Rousseau regards both of these as distinctively human capacities, whereas he takes the two dispositions of original human nature discussed above to be shared by both human and non-human animals. This implies that whatever eventually distinguishes human from merely animal existence must have its ultimate source not in amour de soi-même or pity but in these two capacities and the modifications they undergo under artificial conditions created by society and history.

The first of these natural capacities is perfectibility, the human species’ “faculty of perfecting itself” (DI, 208/OC III, 211). At its core, perfectibility consists in an ensemble of latent, species-specific creative faculties— including the faculties of language, thought, and imagination—which, though present as capacities from birth, remain dormant until more complex circumstances stimulate their development (DI, 141, 159/OC III, 142, 163). In discussing perfectibility Rousseau is careful to distinguish between latent faculties, on the one hand—the purely natural endowments that make the acquisition of a certain skill or competence in principle possible for a given creature—and actualized faculties, on the other (which include the actual ability, acquired through a process of development, to perform the cognitive functions in question). He is equally careful to include only the former within perfectibility and, so, to ascribe only these bare, unrealized capacities to original human nature: “although the organ of speech is
natural to man, speech itself is... not natural to him” (DI, 207/OC III, 210). As Rousseau emphasizes again and again, whatever development of these natural capacities actually takes place in humans depends on “the fortuitous convergence of several foreign causes that might never have arisen and without which [man] would have remained eternally in his primitive condition” (DI, 159/OC III, 162). The difference, then, between humans and other animals with respect to the cognitive capacities that belong to perfectibility is not, to take a specific example, that humans always possess or inevitably develop language skills, whereas other animals do not; the difference, rather, is that humans have the inborn potential, given the right external circumstances, to develop and use language, whereas other animals lack this potential entirely, regardless of the circumstances they live under.25

As many commentators have already pointed out,26 perfectibility--a term of art that Rousseau himself introduced into philosophical discourse (OC III, 1, 317–18)–is a potentially misleading name for what it is meant to designate. It does not, for example, refer to some innate tendency or drive humans to improve themselves and their condition over time, to come closer and closer to a state of “perfection.” Whatever type of perfection is at issue here, it is manifestly not moral perfection. On the contrary, Rousseau takes very seriously the possibility—and in a limited sense affirms this speculation in Part II—that “this distinctive and almost unlimited faculty [might be] the source of all of man’s miseries” and the cause of “his errors and vices” (DL, 142/OC III, 142). In other words, ascribing perfectibility to original human nature is not in any way an expression of optimism about the fate of humans, nor is it a claim about their inherent goodness or tendency to actualize their natural potential. Instead, the obviously teleological connotations of the term must be construed very weakly; human beings by nature possess a number of latent cognitive faculties that are in principle capable of being perfected in the relatively meager sense of undergoing qualitative development from the simpler to the more complex.27 Again, “perfection” does not imply that there is a single, determinate form or telos that each faculty ought under ideal conditions to develop towards, nor that there is some disposition internal to human nature that makes such development necessary or even probable.

Strictly speaking, perfectibility involves slightly more than the various specific cognitive faculties discussed above; it is itself said to be a faculty—a “faculty of perfecting oneself” (faculté de se perfectioner). What Rousseau has in mind in attributing to humans a general faculty of self-perfection, over and above their specific cognitive capacities, is far from obvious. It is not, to repeat, an internal drive towards development since Rousseau insists that in the absence of contingent external conditions, human development might well never have occurred. If one looks carefully at the paragraphs surrounding his statements that perfectibility is itself a faculty (and not just a collection of specific latent capacities) (DI, 142–3, 208/OC III, 142–3, 211), one gets the impression that what is most important in this claim is the general point that the human species, in contrast to all other animal species, is highly malleable in the sense that social and historical circumstances are able to transform it in numerous and fundamental ways, making the human being of today similar to the statue of Glaucus invoked in the very first paragraph of the Second Discourse. Like this time- and storm-ravaged statue, contemporary humans have been so altered “by all the changes that the succession of times and of things [has] wrought in [their] original constitution” that their original nature is now “almost unrecognizable” (DI, 124/OC III, 122). (That in present circumstances our original nature is almost unrecognizable is important, for otherwise the task of discerning that nature, so crucial to Rousseau’s undertaking, would be

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25 The pre-Darwinian aspect of Rousseau’s view hardly need to be pointed out: (i) with respect to the capacity for development and change the human species is fundamentally different from all other species; and (ii) the latent capacities of the human species are themselves given by nature for once and for all, prior to any actual development, even if these latent capacities manifest themselves concretely depend on historical and natural contingencies.

26 See, for example, Victor Cousin’s remarks in his Introduction to the Second Discourse (DL, xxiii–xxiv).

27 It is possible, though hard to determine with certainty, that Rousseau did have something more robust in mind than the position I attribute to him here—something like the view that there is a more or less set pattern (or a small number of possible patterns) that human development, once external circumstances set the process of development in motion, must take and that the capacities in question are sufficiently determined in advance by nature that they make sense to speak of a latent faculty being perfected in the sense of being fully actualized, or developed in the manner and to the extent “intended by nature.” It may be possible to find the more robust view of natural development in Émile (though, as far as I know, the term “perfectibility” appears nowhere in that text). In any case, the meager view I attribute to Rousseau here is all that the Second Discourse requires or explicitly involves in its explanation and critique of social inequality.
impossible.) Understanding Rousseau’s claim in this way does not add much new content to the thesis of perfectibility, but it is not difficult to see why it merits special attention: this aspect of perfectibility is essential to the Second Discourse’s principal undertaking, for the enormous malleability of the human species – its astounding ability to develop in a nearly limitless variety of ways and to acquire fundamentally new characteristics and capacities – is crucial to the claim of Rousseau that social inequality, though pervasive in the world we know, is not a necessary product of nature (or of human nature) itself.

The second capacity Rousseau ascribes to original human nature is a primitive form of free will – a “power . . . of choosing” – which he describes as the ability to follow or resist what could loosely be called instinct or the promptings of nature: “Nature commands every animal, and the beast obeys. Man experiences the same impression but recognizes himself as free to acquiesce or to resist” (DI, 140/OC III, 141–2). When Rousseau introduces this feature of original human nature, he makes it clear that to ascribe freedom of this sort to human beings is to ascribe to them a “metaphysical” property (DI, 140/OC III, 141), by which he means a property that lifts humans above the realm of pure nature (and hence above all other animals), understood as a domain governed entirely by deterministic causal laws: “in the power of willing . . . are found purely spiritual acts about which nothing is explained by the laws of mechanics” (DI, 141/OC III, 142).

The ascription of free will to beings that lack language and reason is, as Rousseau recognizes, a tricky matter. This is why he is careful to characterize the free will of original human nature as thinly as possible. Usually he characterizes our original capacity for free agency merely in terms of something we lack, namely, the instincts that determine with strict necessity the behavior of other, non-human animals; whereas “the beast cannot deviate from the rule prescribed to it” by nature, the human being, even at his most primitive, can choose – freely, without being determined to do so – to act on or to disregard the urges nature supplies to him (DI, 140/OC III, 141). In including free will as part of original human nature Rousseau means to ascribe to us an innate capacity for spontaneous choosing that is undetermined by either causes or reasons, a spontaneity best characterized as a not being necessitated to respond to nature’s stimuli in specific, predetermined ways. Of course, free will, like the other original characteristics of humans once they have undergone development, will look much different in civilized conditions from the bare form it takes in primitive beings. Free will as it appears in Part II of the Second Discourse will amount to choosing which of one’s desires to satisfy in accordance with one’s own “opinions” concerning who one is and what one’s good consists in. (And in The Social Contract Rousseau will point to a yet more complex form of freedom available only to humans living under just political institutions: a species of autonomy that consists in determining one’s actions in accordance with laws that come from oneself (SC, L8.iii). The Second Discourse, in which autonomy does not appear, delivers the negative part of Rousseau’s argument for the claim that this most elevated form of freedom is impossible except within a legitimate republic.)

Whereas Rousseau’s ascription of perfectibility to original human nature is relatively unproblematic – since the latent capacities he is interested in are capacities we already find realized in actual human beings – his position regarding free will in the state of nature is more controversial, especially its claim that free choosing is possible in the absence of language and reason. Before rejecting Rousseau’s claim, however, it is important to be clear as to what exactly it asserts. Above all, it is important to remind oneself – and to be prepared to do so again and again while interpreting the Second Discourse – that the state of nature has a purely hypothetical status for Rousseau, that it aims not to describe actual or actually possible human beings but to develop a picture of what humans would be like in the absence of all modification of their original nature by (contingent) social or historical circumstances. Rousseau is not claiming, then, that at some time before they lived in societies, and before they possessed language and thought, actual human beings inhabited primeval forests like animals, spontaneously choosing which of their urges to act on. Instead, his

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18 Elsewhere Rousseau describes this form of freedom as “my being able to will only what is suitable to me, or what I regard as such, without anything foreign to me determining me” (E, 380/OC IV, 386).

19 Another way of formulating the difference between humans and mere animals is to say that the latter have instincts, which determine their behavior with necessity, whereas the former (“perhaps”) have none (DI, 139, 140/OC III, 149).
account of original human nature – one part of his vision of the sex of nature more generally – is meant to function as an analytic device that separates out the different independent and fundamental elements of human individuals (in abstraction from all social circumstances) that must be presupposed and brought together in order to comprehend the basic features of all actual forms of human life as we know it in its astounding variety. Just as pity was introduced into the set of natural dispositions because amour de soi-même alone could not explain certain forms of human behavior that we know to be real, so the hypothesis of free will is required in order to do justice to some basic features of human reality as we know and understand it. To attribute free will to original human nature, then, is to claim that some fundamental element would be missing from a theory of human nature that attempted to grasp the human condition in all its complexity while restricting itself to the cognitive capacities of perfectibility and the dispositions of amour de soi-même and pity. What such a theory would be unable to accommodate in its picture of the human condition is the realm of the voluntaristic – the entire range of phenomena that we take to be bound up with the human will, the capacity of humans to determine their own actions rather than be determined from without. Rousseau’s thought is that if we are to end up with a picture of civilized humans that has room for free agency, some basis for that freedom must be located in original human nature itself. This is because anything that counts as genuine freedom for Rousseau must incorporate an element of metaphysical independence from the causal laws of nature (DI, 140f, OC III, 141). This aspect of human action can never emerge from a developmental story based solely on a theory of human nature that, having at its disposal only perfectibility and natural dispositions, is restricted to purely naturalistic explanations. If spontaneity is to be found at some advanced point in the civilizing process, Rousseau reasons, it must be present in some form among the original endowments that undergo development in civilization since a metaphysical difference of this kind – between causally determined nature and self-determining freedom – cannot emerge from the development itself.

Of course, the “phenomena” that we take to be manifestations of free will are not phenomena in the same sense as the examples of behavior appealed to above in support of the hypothesis of natural pity. More precisely, the evidence that grounds the latter is found in empirically observable behavior (and in a general thesis about the natural reproductive ends of living beings), whereas no strictly empirical evidence exists for the hypothesis of free will. That is, the human actions we take to be free can be empirically observed, but that they arise from free self-determination rather than being the necessary effects of antecedent causes explainable by deterministic laws is not in any way suggested by empirical facts themselves. Rousseau is fully aware that his “metaphysical” hypothesis of free will is grounded neither in empirical observation nor in purely theoretical considerations concerning what is required in order to explain empirically observed phenomena (since deterministic laws of nature might well satisfy those ambitions). This is why in other places he calls the hypothesis of free will an “article of faith” and attempts to ground his belief in human freedom in the testimony of his “inner voice,” a voice that all humans who will but attend to it are capable of hearing and that evokes in every listener the same “sentiment of [his] freedom”: “One may very well disagree with me about this; but I sense it, and this sentiment that speaks to me is stronger than the reason that combats it . . . I consent or I resist; I succumb or I conquer, and I sense perfectly within myself when I do what I wanted to do” (E, 280–1, OC IV, 385–7). It should be clear, then, that the considerations that motivate Rousseau to include free will among the elements of original human nature are of a different kind from those that motivate the inclusion of perfectibility, amour de soi-même, and pity. It is not on the basis of empirical (or any other theoretical) evidence that we take

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29 It is an interesting question, raised to me by Paul Gayer, whether Rousseau actually needs this strong conception of metaphysical freedom in order to sustain the claims about human freedom most important to him in the Second Discourse (and elsewhere). In other words, does the social conception of freedom that matters most to him there – the absence of domination by others – require the metaphysical thesis of free will? Or, in Kantian terms, does Rousseau’s moral and political project require transcendental freedom in addition to W. W. Wood [Cambridge University Press, 1999], 140ff. In distinction to Rousseau (and of Chapter 3).

30 Here, too, Rousseau expresses these points in the voice of the Savoyard vicar, but echoes of the same claims can be found in other texts where Rousseau is clearly speaking in his own voice.
humans to be free; rather, support for this hypothesis comes from a different source, from a "looking within" that is available only from the first-person perspective and that delivers a kind of evidence one can have only in relation to one's own actions.\textsuperscript{33}

Properly understood, then, Rousseau's ascription of free will to original human nature is not distant, with respect to both content and the grounds that support it, from Kant's well-known claim that humans possess a freedom to choose, an *arbitrium liberum*, that distinguishes them from non-human animals, which possess only an *arbitrium brutum*, where the difference consists in the fact that the former is affected (or influenced) but not *determined* by natural impulses, whereas the latter is always simply determined by the natural impulses it has.\textsuperscript{34} The most significant respect in which Rousseau's position diverges from Kant's - a substantial difference, to be sure - lies in its claim that the undetermined character of the will is prior to - existentially independent of - reason. (For Kant, as I read him,\textsuperscript{35} the absence of foreign determination that characterizes the *arbitrium liberum* is possible only for creatures that also possess pure practical reason - that is, for creatures that can understand themselves as obligated by, and can determine their wills in accordance with, the supreme principle of pure practical reason, the moral law. If this is correct, then free will, even in the minimal sense in which Rousseau ascribes it to original human nature, cannot exist independently of reason.) Despite his similarities to Kant on other issues, with respect to the relation between freedom and reason Rousseau stands in the other great tradition of thinking about the will, voluntarism, according to which free choice does not require the exercise of reason. For the latter tradition there is something akin to spontaneous, unguided "picking," and this is precisely the type of freedom of will that Rousseau attributes to original human nature.

A further issue on which readers of the Second Discourse sometimes disagree is how freedom and perfectibility are related. If the account of original freedom given above is correct, then, strictly speaking, the two endowments are completely independent of each other: the spontaneity of the will does not require reason or language, and the mere existence of the latent cognitive capacities does not in any way depend on the presence or exercise of will. The question becomes trickier, however, when one asks whether the development of perfectibility - the actual unfolding of our latent capacities - depends on free will. Rousseau's view is that it does, but it is important to be clear about what this claim entails. The development associated with perfectibility requires the exercise of freedom, but in a very specific sense: the development itself is not willed (consciously intended) by the being that undergoes it but is an unintended consequence of freely chosen actions directed at other ends. When adverse climatic conditions and increasing competition from animals led primitive humans to fashion fishing hooks and to invent bows and arrows, which in turn developed their capacity to perceive relations among things, these creative deeds - free, because, although motivated by *amour de soi-même*, they were spontaneous deviations from "instinct" - were aimed at satisfying their hunger, not at perfecting their capacities. Getting clear on the interplay between freedom and perfectibility is important because it enables us to understand how the contingent development of human beings and their society that plays such a large role in the Second Discourse both is and is not the product of human will: it is the result of free human activity - a state of affairs that we, not god or nature, introduce into the world - but it is not an intended product of our will. In other words, the process of civilization (and consequent degradation of the human species) depicted in Part II is to be understood as our own doing - as something we are responsible for in the sense that it is the product of our own free choices and, as such, could have turned out differently - but not as a development we can be morally blamed for (since we did not intend it and could not, in the less developed stage, have foreseen its consequences). Even if "most of our ills are of our own making" (DI, 137/OC III, 138), they are not the effects of evil wills (or of original sin). The importance of this doctrine for Rousseau's project is obvious: it enables God and nature - and us, too - to emerge free of blame, or "justified," from the account of the human species' decline (DI, 197/OC III, 202), and it shifts the responsibility for reforming the world we inhabit onto us, the free creators (or re-creators) of the very features of the world that the critique of social inequality tells us ought to be changed.

\textsuperscript{33} In Note II Rousseau even hints, citing Buffon, that an "internal sense" of this sort is necessary for achieving the knowledge of human nature that the Second Discourse requires (DI, 189/OC III, 190).

\textsuperscript{34} Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A822/B840.

\textsuperscript{35} In understanding Kant's position in this way I have been influenced by Henry E. Allison, *Kant's Theory of Freedom* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 196.
There is a prominent feature of Rousseau's state of nature (and its concomitant account of human nature) that has elicited much criticism from his readers and that I have barely touched on thus far. This is the thoroughly individualistic character of original human nature as reflected in the repeated emphasis placed on the fact that the state of nature is completely void of social relations and that original human nature lacks all capacities and dispositions that concern or depend on social existence. This atomistic perspective is so fundamental to Rousseau's vision of the state of nature that his conception of original human nature could also be characterized as an attempt to capture the basic dispositions and capacities that nature bestows on all human beings qua individuals, in abstraction from all relations they might have to other humans. In other words, in ascribing amour de soi-même, pity, perfectibility, and free will to original human nature, Rousseau is claiming that all are features of human beings that individuals could in principle possess on their own, that is, even were they to exist outside all society (even though real humans never do in fact exist in that isolated state). Rather than reject this individualistic conception of human nature out of hand, it is worth trying to understand why Rousseau proceeds in this way, given that, as I argue here, he does not ultimately fall into the error most readers take him to be guilty of, namely, regarding all that belongs to our social being as external to our "true" nature (in the normative sense).

One way of understanding Rousseau's individualistic conception of the state of nature is to see it as an attempt to avoid the Stoic principle of sociability (Di 127/OC III, 126), which later natural law theories, especially Grotius and Barbezat, included in their pictures of human nature. For these thinkers sociability was understood as an innate sentiment, intrinsic to all human individuals, that inclined them both to care about the welfare of others independently of its relation to their own particular good and to seek our social relations of various kinds for more than merely instrumental reasons. Rousseau's most important reason for rejecting sociability appears to be that it encloses too much of the social within the realm of the natural, blinding us to the artificial and, above all, the malleable character of our social institutions and our desires to have bonds to others. For him the desires that lead us to establish families, states, and economic relations are cultural and historical products, and no "natural" blueprints for these institutions can be read off any innate human drives of the sort sociability was taken to be. While Rousseau's relation to the thesis of sociability is complex, it would not be too far off the mark to say that what replaces it in his picture of human psychology is the combination of pity, a "natural" sentiment, and amour propre, an "artificial" passion. The former helps to explain how individuals can be positively disposed to willing the good (or the absence of suffering) of other individuals, whereas as will become clearer in the following chapter — the latter accounts for the persistent need civilized humans experience to establish and maintain social relations.35

Perhaps the best way to make sense of Rousseau's individualistic approach is to see how it follows from his more basic aim of determining what humans would be like in a wholly non-artificial state. The key here is to understand why he posits so close a link between the natural (that which is devoid of artificiality) and asociality. The basis for this connection lies in the thought that social relations are indispensable to and inseparable from the development and exercise of the very capacities that artificiality depends on. Given that the mark of artificiality is the intervention of human actions mediated by opinion, then artificiality necessarily goes hand in hand with social relations if it is the case that humans can develop and exercise their capacity to judge only in society. This is precisely Rousseau's view, for he takes language and thought — two prerequisites of judgment and agency — to be possible only for social beings. At the same time, he holds that enduring social relations bring with them, more or less automatically,36 the development of capacities such as language and reason, which inevitably introduces opinion into human affairs. His view, in other words, is that there could be no genuinely social existence without language and thought and, conversely, no language or thought for beings that lived as isolated an existence as those fictional inhabitants of the original state of nature. From this it


36 The thesis I am attributing to Rousseau is that language and reason develop more or less automatically in the presence of social relations. This is not the same thesis rejected above in the discussion of perfectibility, namely, that human individuals by nature possess an inner drive or tendency to actualize their latent capacities.
follows that in order to get at what humans would be like “as nature formed” them, before our “original constitution” was “altered in the lap of society” (DI, 124/OC III, 123), it is necessary to look at them in abstraction from social relations.

Yet, even if this explains why Rousseau links the natural with the asocial, it merely pushes our original question back a step: if humans never do exist in a condition void of language, thought, and social relations, and if (as we will see in Chapter 3) such a condition is incompatible with what Rousseau regards as a fitting existence for humans, why is he so intent on figuring out what original human nature is like? Rousseau’s full answer to this question is complex, and laying it out will occupy a large portion of the rest of this book. Still, it is possible now to grasp part of that answer. Since the idea of original human nature is an analytical device intended to separate our natural contribution to what we are actually like from our artificial features—those due to social and historical circumstances (and, hence, to circumstances produced by our own intervention in the world)—the question above can be reformulated as follows: why is Rousseau so intent on figuring out what in our current condition comes from nature and what originates in our own freedom (since society and history are our own, if usually unintended, creations)? The answer to this reformulated question is contained in what has already been said about the significance of the distinction between the natural and the artificial for Rousseau, namely, that it marks the dividing line between what is imposed on us necessarily and invariably by nature and what, because it depends ultimately on our free choice, is contingent, variable, and up to us in the sense that it is in principle alterable by our own activity. In view of this, it is of great importance that the dispositions and faculties that Rousseau ascribes to original human nature are relatively meager in both number and content. For part of the aim of his account of human nature is to explain the nearly limitless diversity of forms of life that historical and anthropological observations show to be possible for human beings. Yet, even though Rousseau is among the most radical proponents of the variability of human culture and the mutability of our original dispositions, his account of original human nature also sets some very broad natural limits to human variability—limits that will function to dismiss certain responses to the evils that arise in Part II of the Second

Discourse as utopian and that will have important normative implications for the kinds of behavior it is appropriate to expect of human beings, given the constraints of their original nature.

SOCIAL INEQUALITIES DO NOT HAVE THEIR SOURCE IN HUMAN NATURE

Let us return now to the main thesis that the original state of nature, together with its picture of human nature, is supposed to establish, namely, that social inequalities do not have their source in nature. As I indicated above, one part of this thesis consists in the claim that original human nature alone provides no psychological incentives that explain why humans would be motivated to seek out the inequalities they in fact create. In other words, neither of the two species of motivation that arise from the original dispositions of humans inclines them or gives them reason to seek out inequalities (other than perhaps very short-term advantages that special circumstances might make instrumentally desirable). In the case of pity this is obvious: although it is conceivable that short-term advantage might in unusual circumstances serve the end of alleviating others’ suffering—for example, when an aggressor who seeks to inflict pain on a weaker third party has great physical power—there is no reason to think that sensitivity to others’ pains should systematically motivate natural human beings to seek out inequalities, either for their own sake or as a means to pity’s distinctive end (reducing the pains of others).77 The situation is more complicated in the case of amour de soi-même. Here too, however, Rousseau’s claim is that there is nothing in purely natural self-interest that would lead humans in the state of nature to seek out inequalities for their own sake: the goods sought by amour de soi-même—food, shelter, and sleep, for example—are all non-relative (or non-positional) goods and, so, neither consist in nor intrinsically depend on advantages over others. How well my good night’s sleep satisfies my own need for rest is completely independent of how well

77. One should ask, though: could there be such an aggressor in the pure state of nature? Regardless of how one answers this question, one should bear in mind that what is most important to Rousseau throughout is the claim that, even if possible in isolated instances, such scenarios would have to be rare and inconsequential in the natural state; in other words, nothing in nature systematically encourages the establishment of inequalities.
or poorly those around me have passed the night, so the mere wish to
sleep well gives me no reason to want to sleep better than others.

But might not amour de soi-même provide incentives that possess
a standing incentive to seek inequalities as a means to its ends?
Many philosophers are inclined to answer affirmatively: Hobbes is
the most famous example and surely the main interlocutor Rousseau
has in mind here\(^8\) — and common sense is quick to agree, for it is easy
(for us) to imagine plausible scenarios in which getting what one
wants or needs for oneself requires outdoing others. It is important
to be clear, though, about the background assumptions that inform
such scenarios. One situation philosophers often appeal to when
thinking about self-love in general is that of several self-interested
individuals who face the task of cutting a pie and distributing its pieces
among themselves and whose self-interestedness motivates each to
seek to maximize the size of the piece she receives.\(^9\) Given these two
assumptions — the desire to maximize one’s lot without limit and a
fixed amount of the good to be distributed — it is easy to see how
humans could be motivated to strive for conditions of inequality.

One way of understanding what Rousseau is up to in painting such a
meager picture of original human nature, however, is to see him as
calling into question the naturalness of these assumed conditions.
With respect to the first, Rousseau would contend that nothing internal
to purely natural amour de soi-même can explain the desire to maximize
some good that one desires or needs (as opposed to merely acquiring
enough to satisfy a given need or urge). In other words, although
extremely common in human societies we are familiar with, the desire
to maximize — and especially the desire to maximize without limit — is
not a desire that nature imposes on humans, which is to say: it is not

\(^8\) Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan (Oxford University Press, 1998), Chapter 17, §§1–3;
Chapter 17, §7.

\(^9\) Normally no distinction is made in such examples between different species of self-
interestedness. It is important to bear in mind that Rousseau’s precise way of distinguishing
between amour de soi-même and amour propre is unique to him and a philosophical
innovation of fundamental significance. Even though some figures before Rousseau distin-
guished these two forms of self-love, his specific understanding of the contrast is new.
For more on the history of conceptions of self-love, see Christopher Brooke, Philosophical
Pride: Socialism and Political Thought from Hobbes to Rousseau (Princeton University Press,
2013); and Pierre Force, Self-Interest before Adam Smith: A Genealogy of Economic Science
pursuing the same end. Even if achieving one's end in this scenario requires securing advantage over another (the one who finds no room on the lifeboat), this advantage is not internal to \textit{amour de soi-même} – final end of survival but is desired only because external conditions make it impossible to survive without it. A similar conclusion is suggested by the less extreme example of ordinary hunger: the only conditions under which \textit{amour de soi-même} alone provides a hungry creature with an incentive to seek more of something than others – more food, more force, or more influence, for example – is when having more is necessary to satisfying its only ultimate concern, having sufficient food, regardless of what others have, to still its own discomfort. As both examples show, seeking advantage over others is a rational strategy for \textit{amour de soi-même} only under conditions of scarcity.

This leads us directly into what I labeled above the second part of Rousseau’s thesis that social inequalities do not have their source in nature: the claim that there are no necessary or invariable features of the external world to which humans must relate in order to satisfy their natural needs that necessitate or encourage the creation of inequalities beyond those they are born with. What has become plain from the preceding considerations is that Rousseau’s denial that social inequalities have their source in nature depends on an assumption regarding the extent and significance of natural scarcity, an assumption expressed in his depiction of the original state of nature as a condition of plenty that makes labor, conflict, and private property both unnecessary and undesirable (\textit{DI}, 134–45/OC III, 134–5). Many readers are inclined simply to dismiss Rousseau’s claim about the natural fertility of the earth as manifestations of a naïve and unjustified faith in the goodness of nature. In order to assess the appropriateness of his assumption, however, it is necessary to be clear about precisely what it entails and what role it plays in his account of inequality’s origin.

By assuming a natural condition of plenty Rousseau does not mean to deny that scarcity of some sort generally plays a prominent role in human affairs and therefore must be taken seriously by social philosophy. The point of his assumption, rather, is to make a claim about the kind of scarcity that plays so prominent a role in human society and to, as it were, locate its source. Rousseau’s claim is that the vast majority of the scarcity that affects actual human societies has not natural but social origins. It is, in other words, not a necessary consequence of general facts about human and non-human nature but is instead socially created – which is to say: it results from social arrangements that are themselves the (mostly unforeseen) consequences of human actions and opinions, which, because free, could also have had different outcomes. Although Rousseau can admit that natural scarcity is possible, he is committed to denying that it is an invariable or fundamental feature of the human condition. Moreover, when it does exist – in cases where actual scarcity is due in some part to purely natural factors – it nearly always plays a negligible role in comparison to scarcity that has its source in social, humanly created circumstances. When Rousseau describes with enthusiasm the abundance of the state of nature, he should not be understood to be making a factual claim about the natural availability of the resources required for human survival but to be proposing instead a sort of theoretical abstraction. (Here, again, it is important to bear in mind the hypothetical, analytical function of the state of nature.) The assumption of natural plenty, by eliminating from view nature’s contribution to scarcity, serves to direct our attention away from the type of scarcity that common sense normally, and mistakenly, takes to be the only or most significant kind in order to focus exclusively on the type that Rousseau – this is the substantive claim underlying his assumption of natural abundance – takes to account for the by far greatest part of the scarcity that plays a role in producing inequalities in actual societies. In this respect Rousseau’s position on scarcity exemplifies a general tendency of his thought towards de-naturalizing, and thereby de-mystifying, the social.\textsuperscript{40} In this case de-naturalizing scarcity consists in showing that scarcity does not come from nature in either of two possible senses: there is nothing, first, in the constitution of nature itself – in the relation between human biological needs and the earth’s natural resources – or, second, in the character of unsocialized pity and \textit{amour de soi-même} that would explain why scarcity is a necessary or widespread feature of human social life. Much of the force of this argument depends on seeing

\textsuperscript{40} Rousseau’s most explicit reference to his project of de-mystifying the social occurs in a remark criticizing earlier attempts to describe human nature: “philosophers . . . have all felt the necessity of going back as far as the state of nature, but none of them has reached it . . . [All of] them, continually speaking of need, greed, oppression, desires, and pride, transferred to the state of nature ideas they had taken from society. They spoke of savage man and deplored civilization” (\textit{DI}, 132/OC III, 132).
how, in Part II, the introduction of both artificial social conditions and a "non-natural" passion enables Rousseau to explain the powerful tendency of humans to produce scarcity – of many types and of great magnitude – and hence to explain why extensive inequalities are nearly unavoidable in the social state.

We are now in a position to summarize the main elements of Rousseau’s argument in Part I of the Second Discourse that nature is not the source of social inequality. His argument can be understood as a rejection of three possible natural explanations of social inequality (as well as all combinations of the three). First, social inequalities are not the direct or necessary consequences of natural inequalities. Although the latter exist, they explain neither the existence of social inequalities in general nor why particular individuals end up where they do within existing hierarchies. If natural inequalities matter at all in the constitution of social inequality, they play only a very minor role and make themselves felt, if ever, only within a context of social practices and institutions that humans, not nature, are responsible for creating and that therefore could in principle be otherwise than they are. Second, the two natural passions of humans – pity and amour de soi-même – provide no incentives for humans to seek to establish inequalities (except in certain conditions of scarcity) since the final ends of each are indifferent to how well or how poorly other individuals fare in achieving their own natural ends. Third, there is no reason to believe that the conditions under which pity and amour de soi-même could lead humans to seek advantage over others as a means to achieving their final ends – the conditions of scarcity – would necessarily or typically obtain in a world where desires remain untransformed by unnatural passions and where artificial social institutions have not made scarcity a systematic necessity.

The thought that leads us into the topic covered in the next chapter is the following: if social inequality is to be understood as our creation rather than nature’s, we need some way of understanding what motivates us to create it, and, as we have seen, amour de soi-même and pity provide no such explanation. In Chapter 2 we will examine the positive part of Rousseau’s view on the origin of inequality, his account of how systematic social inequalities are made possible, and nearly unavoidable, once a certain “artificial” passion, amour propre, is added to his picture of original human nature.

The aim of this chapter is to reconstruct the positive part of Rousseau’s answer to the Second Discourse’s first main question: where does social inequality come from? Its task is to uncover the various "non-natural" factors that, according to that account, must come together in order to explain the pervasiveness of inequality in actual human societies, and in carrying out this task it explicates one part of the Second Discourse’s well-known thesis that "most of our ills are of our own making" (DI, 137, OCT, 138). Rousseau’s positive answer to the question of inequality’s origin is surprisingly complex and difficult to reconstruct, in part because the logic of his position – how the various elements of his account work together to explain inequality – is buried within a developmental narrative that, as I suggested in the preceding chapter, ought not to be understood literally, as a recounting of actual historical events. The narrative structure of Part II: Rousseau’s repeated emphasis on the search for “origins”; his description of his project as a genealogy (OCT, 936); his insistence that the “events” he describes “could have occurred in several ways” or “might never have arisen” at all (DI, 139, OCT, 162) – all these factors tend to obscure the systematic, atemporal, in short, the philosophical, characteristic of the Second Discourse’s explanation of inequality.

Indeed, it seems likely that most readers when confronted with the question this chapter attempts to answer – if nature is not the source of social inequality, then what is? – will be tempted to locate Rousseau’s response in history, not least because the opposition between nature and history occupies a prominent place in the Second Discourse, the very