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# **Rousseau on Rousseau: The Individual and Society**

**Ann McArdle**

## Introduction

Rousseau's *Confessions* is generally regarded simply as his autobiography or, more precisely, as his apology—his defense of his character and conduct against the attacks of his enemies. Yet he himself claims that the work is philosophically significant; the *Confessions* is intended to be an account of man as he is according to nature. This essay will attempt to uncover the philosophical import of the *Confessions* especially as it bears upon the question of the individual and society. The Introduction will establish the philosophical context within which Rousseau places his enterprises and will point to the contemporary political significances of that enterprise. In the second section, Rousseau's understanding of himself as a "natural man" will be examined. The third section will show the radical character of the tension between the individual and society as this tension follows from Rousseau's account of the nature of man. Finally, the root of Rousseau's understanding of the political problem having been exposed, Rousseau's status as the champion of the individual's claims against society will be seen to be highly problematic. That is, Rousseau will show himself to be far more critical of contemporary political- and self-consciousness than is generally thought to be the case.

In his *Confessions* Rousseau addresses himself to what he saw to be the consciousness of his contemporaries—a consciousness which is in fact our own and which has, since the time of the writing of the *Confessions*, become more and more explicitly articulated. What is perhaps most deeply rooted in contemporary consciousness is the notion of an inner self, an inner core, other than and separable from everything which is not itself. Contemporary man is conscious of himself, thinks of himself, as an individual center of self-consciousness to which even his own actions are somehow strange. When contemporary man speaks of "finding himself" he means that he must look within himself, get in touch with an inner self which he presumes to be there inside himself.

Alienation, in its deepest sense, has come to mean the separation of the individual from his "true self."

Happiness, in such terms, is not thought to be constituted by a set of circumstances in which one would most like to find oneself; it is, rather, thought to be a state of mind or feeling, a "being oneself" which is only reflected (imperfectly and distortedly) in one's actions. The presumption is that the inner self is good, pure, but invisible to others: if one could only peel away everything that surrounds the "center," everything "superficial," what would remain would be something good and lovable.

In commenting on one of his more shameful confessions, Rousseau writes: "There are times when I am so little like myself that one would take me for another man of entirely opposite character."<sup>1</sup> The possibility of being so little like oneself, of being unrecognizable by others, implies a self—a fixed, immobile self—which one can be like and not like in one's actions. Thus, in Rousseau's words: "There are moments of a kind of delirium when it is necessary not to judge men by their actions."<sup>2</sup> The actions of which one is ashamed, then, are done during these moments of "delirium." Good actions are reflections of, come from, the "real" me. The point of reference, the measure, is the essentially good inner self in terms of which one can say of oneself under various circumstances: "This is really me" or "This is not really me."

The inner self which is a given for contemporary consciousness, a presupposition of our thinking about ourselves, is precisely what is at issue in Rousseau's *Confessions*. Our concern with the *Confessions*, then, goes beyond simple historical curiosity. It is the *history* of our understanding of ourselves which is at issue here. Through a consideration of Rousseau's revelation of the inner self as the presupposition of our thinking about ourselves we come to question what has become unquestioned.

To call the notion of the inner self into question is ultimately to ask whether we understand ourselves correctly, to ask whether or not this is what we are. It is also to raise the possibility that there are other ways of understanding ourselves. Now in the very process of uncovering the inner self as the given of modern man's thinking about himself, Rousseau reveals the alternatives over and

<sup>1</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Les Confessions* in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Oeuvres complètes*, eds. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond, vol. 1: *Les Confessions: Autres textes autobiographiques* (Paris, 1959), 3, p. 128.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1, p. 39.

against which he carries out his project. These alternatives are presented by Augustine and Plutarch.

Rousseau calls our attention immediately and directly to Augustine by choosing to call his work *Confessions* and by constructing his *Confessions*, both in design and narrative detail, as a parallel to Augustine's *Confessions*. We are led to believe, then, that Rousseau intended his *Confessions* to be understood, at least in part, as a response to Augustine's work. Although an extensive comparison between Rousseau and Augustine cannot be attempted here, the view of man's nature which is revealed in Rousseau's *Confessions* emerges most clearly against the background of at least some aspects of Augustine's account.

The relationship of Rousseau to the ancients and to Plutarch in particular is also beyond the scope of this study. Rousseau, however, does call our attention to Plutarch both in his *Confessions* and by the parallelism with Augustine's *Confessions*. Our concern with Plutarch will be limited to the implications of the observation that the being of the men in Plutarch's *Lives* seems to be a clear case of "living in the opinions of others."<sup>3</sup> The men of Plutarch's *Lives* are no more and no other than what they show themselves to be in their public (visible) acts. They are "noble Greeks and Romans" because their cities have said they are noble: they *are* what those other than themselves say they are.

Augustine, on the other hand, *is* what he is for God. Only God can say what Augustine is. God sees in Augustine what even Augustine cannot see in himself. Augustine has his being from and through another: he is what God sees him to be.

Now Rousseau's enterprise in the *Confessions* is the revelation of himself precisely as he *is*. He claims to see himself as he is, and what he is is within, invisible to others. This inner self is experienced as the feeling of one's own existence. In contrast to both Plutarch and Augustine, then, Rousseau presents himself as a clear case of "living within oneself." He is not what the others say he is, even if the other were God.

But Rousseau himself tells us, in the Fifth Reverie, that it would not be good for most men to live within themselves, to experience what he has experienced. The experience of the inner self is dangerous for society. Further, society does not need saints (Augustine)

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<sup>3</sup> "Living in the opinions of others" is Rousseau's characterization of the being of civilized (*sociable*) man.

for whom God is the one thing necessary and sufficient; but it does need men who are totally absorbed in the pursuit of its goals, men who need other men (Plutarch's noble men). And society does need its solitaries (Rousseau). It needs those who can stand apart from it and see it for what it is, having seen themselves as other than it.

It is here that we begin to see the relationship between Rousseau's so-called autobiographical works and his political works. The division of Rousseau's work into the autobiographical and the political turns out to be, for most Rousseau scholars, a division between the autobiographical and the philosophical. This distinction is seen to be improper if one takes seriously Rousseau's own assurance that the *Confessions* is philosophically significant in itself. The fact remains, however, that philosophical concern has centered around the *Discourses*, the *Social Contract*, *Emile* and not the *Confessions*, *Dialogues*, and *Reveries*. In particular, attention has focused on two areas of difficulty: the problem of the individual and society and the problem of nature and history. These two problems are not unrelated.

The problem of the individual and society is generated out of the claim that man is by nature *a-social* and the fact that he lives in society: he must live as if he is what he is not. The coming into being of society is a historical development which entails numerous other changes, *exempli gratia*, the development of the arts and sciences. Man himself is radically changed in and by history. The question we are faced with, then, is the question concerning the relevance of the state of nature to men who are so far removed from the state of nature. It is to this question that the *Confessions* addresses itself.

Against Rousseau's apparent preference for the savage over the civilized we must place the passage from book 1, chapter 8, of the *Social Contract* in which he writes:

Although in civil society man surrenders some of the advantages that belong to the state of nature, he gains in return far greater ones; his faculties are exercised and developed, his mind is so enlarged, his sentiments so ennobled, and his whole spirit so elevated that, if the abuse of his new condition did not in many cases lower him to something worse than what he had left, he should constantly bless the happy hour that lifted him forever from the state of nature and from a narrow, stupid animal made a creature of intelligence and a man.

If man has been so radically changed, if he has in fact *become* man, then why is Rousseau so concerned with doing what he claims his predecessors have failed to do—reaching the state of nature?

The *Confessions* is not a call to return to the condition of the narrow, stupid animal. Rousseau claims to be a man “according to nature”; he finds *within* himself something which the savage enjoys and which civilized (sociable) man has lost, “surrendered.” This primitive (first) thing is the feeling of his own existence which has been lost in the manyness of the moments of time and in the manyness of the opinions of others. Rousseau’s “return” to the state of nature is a turning within to the isolated self-sufficiency of the essentially private self. This experience is not thinking but the *feeling* of his own existence. As feeling it is essentially private and unshareable; as feeling of oneself it is whole for itself, self-sufficient.

Now Rousseau, the highly civilized man, can do what the savage cannot do. He can reflect on his experience, understand it, give expression to it. Through his reflection on this radically asocial experience, he comes to see society for what it is. He recognizes the sources of man’s miseries. Rousseau’s political works represent his attempt to make it possible for man to “bless the happy hour that lifted him forever from the state of nature.” It is not necessary or even good for most men to “return” to the state of nature. But it is necessary and good that some men do. And Rousseau claims to be the first and only man who has reached the state of nature. His portrait, in the *Confessions*, is “the only portrait of man painted exactly according to nature and in all her truth [the only such portrait], which does exist and which will probably ever exist.” The *Confessions* shows us the character of Rousseau’s return to the state of nature and the conditions for the possibility of that return.

### Rousseau on Rousseau

By calling his *Confessions* a “portrait” Rousseau indicates an essentially artistic intent. Indeed, all biographies are supposed to be portraits and the *Confessions* is generally regarded as having artistic (literary) value. Thus, whatever its philosophical significance, Rousseau’s *Confessions* is obviously not simply an old man’s reminiscences strung together in some kind of order, but rather at the very least a carefully planned, artfully constructed narrative.

There is, however, beyond this, a special artistic, creative, perhaps even fictive, aspect to Rousseau's *Confessions*. It comes to light, paradoxically, in the course of an examination of his early protestations of veracity, accuracy, and frankness. At the beginning of book 1, he writes:

I have told the good and the bad with the same frankness. I have been silent about nothing bad, have added nothing good, and if it has happened that I have used some indifferent ornament, it has only been to fill a void due to a defect of memory; I have been able to suppose true what I knew to have been possible, never what I knew to be false.<sup>4</sup>

In the midst of the very passage in which he promises complete candor (he later confesses even to lies and deceptions),<sup>5</sup> Rousseau clearly indicates that he has permitted himself the greatest latitude. Apparently his frankness and veracity permit him to *fill in* the gaps of memory and even "to suppose *true* what he knew to have been *possible*" (emphasis added).<sup>6</sup> This surely goes beyond the artful reconstruction of a biographer and approaches the creative invention of a historical novelist.

Further support of the artistic-creative character of the *Confessions* is to be found in Rousseau's four *Letters to Malesherbes* (which he regards as a kind of summary of his *Confessions*). In the second Letter, Rousseau remarks upon an "opposition" which he says is fundamental to his character. He claims he cannot resolve this opposition by reference to principles, but that he can reveal it by means of a kind of "history."<sup>7</sup> But this history is not to be a mere chronicle of his life, a simple record of events, however detailed. Rather, Rousseau intends to reveal a man such as

<sup>4</sup> Rousseau, *Confessions*, 1, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, p. 85; 3, pp. 120, 128.

<sup>6</sup> Rousseau often draws attention to his poor memory. See, for example, *Confessions*, 7, p. 277; 8, p. 398. Concerning the question of Rousseau's frankness, see Jean Starobinski, *La transparence et l'obstacle* (Paris, 1971), especially chap. 7. With reference to the related question of "distance," see Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris, 1967), pt. 2, chap. 2, and Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight* (New York, 1971), chap. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Quatre lettres à M. le Président de Malesherbes*, in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Oeuvres complètes*, eds. Gagenebin and Raymond, vol. 1: *Les Confessions: Autres textes autobiographiques* (Paris, 1959), p. 1134.



he is "inside"; his purpose is to make known his interior.<sup>8</sup> Such a revelation must take the form of a history of his soul. But in order to do this, his memory need not be precise as to external detail and, by his own admission, it often is not. Rousseau's veracity and frankness are then a function of his creative self-revelation, and his portrait, in the *Confessions*, of a man "according to nature" is plainly a work of art more concerned with revealing an inner essence than with the representation of external appearances. It is within the context of such an endeavor that his claim to accuracy must be understood. Rousseau's project in the *Confessions* is not the writing of an autobiography but the revealing of human nature. Rousseau's "return" to the state of nature is not a turning back in time but a turning within.

In book 7 Rousseau tells us that we can "finish knowing a man" by finishing his "confessions."<sup>9</sup> But the *Confessions* is in fact incomplete, unfinished as a chronicle of the events of Rousseau's whole life. At the very end of part two, he promises us a "third part" which we do not have. It is also necessarily incomplete, for a complete chronicle of a man's life could be written only after his death. It must be the case, then, that to know a man we need not be acquainted with all the details of his life: a man is *not* the sum of all that he does and all that happens to him between birth and death. Yet the notion of death plays a most significant role in Rousseau's *Confessions*. While Rousseau cannot supply us with the details of his death, he does in some sense have access to his death. Death is that future event which is certain. He refers to his death in his prefatory note by speaking about his "ashes"; his death is somehow present from the very first page of the work.

But does the fact that man dies mean that he is simply mortal, that death is the finish? For the Christian believer, like Augustine, "life is not ended but merely changed": the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the body are articles of faith. The Christian's chief concern, then, is the salvation of his immortal soul. Rousseau, however, seems more concerned with the "immortality" of his name and his books than with that of his soul. Some writings,

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<sup>8</sup> Rousseau, *Confessions*, 7, p. 278. Pierre Burgelin in his *La philosophie de l'existence de J.-J. Rousseau* (Paris, 1952), p. 576, and Ernst Cassirer in *The Question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, trans. and ed. Peter Gay (Bloomington, 1963), p. 50, understand Rousseau's return to the state of nature as a turning within.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 279.



he tells us, are "worthy of immortality."<sup>10</sup> His *Julie* is "dead," but it will, he believes, be "resurrected."<sup>11</sup>

In book 11, he recalls a time when he believed himself to be dying. He had never before experienced so great a fear of dying and had he died at that point he would have died in despair—because he suspected a Jesuit plot to alter the *Emile* after his death. What frightens him almost to the point of killing him is the idea of his memory's being dishonored through the alteration of his book.<sup>12</sup> This is hardly the chief concern of a dying man for whom the salvation of his soul is "the one thing necessary." In book 6, after recounting the story of his near-fatal illness, Rousseau tells us that he dismissed all concern for his eternal salvation by the simple expedient of striking a tree with a rock. He had told himself that if the rock did strike the tree he would be saved.<sup>13</sup> A man who takes the salvation of his soul seriously could hardly abandon this concern so easily. The lightness with which he takes his conversion to Catholicism<sup>14</sup> and his subsequent return to Protestantism<sup>15</sup> is further indication of his lack of seriousness about matters of salvation.

It seems, then, that for the Rousseau of the *Confessions*, death is the end of one's existence. He does not share Augustine's belief in the immortality of the soul. This difference in the understanding of what death is reveals certain very significant differences in the understanding of what man is and in what his happiness consists.

In the first part of his *Second Discourse*, Rousseau writes: "an animal will never know what it is to die; and knowledge of death and its terrors is one of the first acquisitions that man had made in moving away from the animal condition."<sup>16</sup> The knowledge of death and its terrors is distinctive of man as different from the other animals. Rousseau often shows us himself as he is in the face of death, yet he does not manifest any fear of death himself. This

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 8, p. 374.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 11, p. 547.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 568.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 6, p. 243.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, p. 69.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 8, p. 393.

<sup>16</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité* in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Oeuvres complètes*, eds. Gagnebin and Raymond, vol. 3: *Du Contrat social; Écrits politiques* (Paris, 1964), pt. 1, p. 143.

distinction will be accounted for in terms of Rousseau's claim that he is a man according to nature.

The significance of the knowledge of the certainty of death is perhaps clearest in Rousseau's account of his attack of illness at Charmettes. He believed himself near death: "I am able to say that I began to live only when I looked upon myself as a dead man." He enjoys without inquietude and without trouble what he believes to be the few days left to him because "the passions that remove our hopes and fears to a distance" have been deadened. When death is believed to be imminent, when it is no longer vaguely anticipated from a distance, certain passions are killed—passions such as ambition, vanity and revenge which may be very much alive in a man who sees himself before an indeterminate future.

His account of this incident continues: "I have never been so near to wisdom as during this happy epoch. Without great remorse for the past, delivered from cares for the future, the sentiment which constantly dominated my soul was the enjoyment of the present."<sup>17</sup> In this Rousseau is like the savage of the *Second Discourse* whose "soul, agitated by nothing, is given solely to the feeling of its present existence without any idea of the future. . . ."<sup>18</sup>

Rousseau calls this time "happy." This is not because he anticipates an eternity of happiness in heaven but because there is no future to be concerned about. This same view is manifested in his account of another attack of his near-fatal illness. Believing he has little time to live, he sells his watch and says to himself: "Thank heaven, I will no longer need to know what time it is."<sup>19</sup> Rousseau, then, associates happiness with the absence of care about the future. Indeed, the ecstasies which he describes in his *Rêveries* are characterized by the absence of the consciousness of the past and the future.<sup>20</sup>

In showing himself as he is in the face of death, Rousseau reveals man as he is according to nature. What man is, the manner in which he understands himself, and the character of human happiness are brought to light through a consideration of the nature of his awareness of his mortality.

<sup>17</sup> Rousseau, *Confessions*, 6, pp. 228-44.

<sup>18</sup> Rousseau, *Discours sur l'inégalité*, pt. 1, p. 144.

<sup>19</sup> Rousseau, *Confessions*, 8, p. 363.

<sup>20</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Oeuvres complètes*, eds. Gagnebin and Raymond, vol. 1: *Les Confessions: Autres textes autobiographiques* (Paris, 1959), 5, p. 1046-7.

The discussion of the notion of death leads to a consideration of the question of time or at least of what might be characterized as "human time." Whether man is held to be mortal or immortal, his death marks the end of "his time," his birth marks the beginning of "his time." His life is over, his time is finished when he dies. At any moment between his birth and his death, he might be said to *be* "between" his past and his future: part of his life is past, part of his life is still to come. How is it possible, then, for man to speak about his life, about himself? It would seem to be possible for him to speak only about his past, about what he was. But even his past is constantly changing.

Augustine gives expression to this problem when he writes: "I am divided up in time whose order I do not know."<sup>21</sup> Augustine cannot grasp what he is: even his past is constantly changing; each time he looks at his past he sees something different. Augustine experiences time as past, present, and future; for God there is only the eternal now. Augustine's future is already "there" in God. And there is for Augustine only one future although he does not know what his future will be. While he is "in time" his access to himself is through memory and his memory is "bottomless."<sup>22</sup> He will see himself, see what he is, only when he "stands" in God, in his own true form.<sup>23</sup> It is God who knows Augustine and Augustine does not have access to God's knowledge.

Rousseau does claim to know himself; he claims to reveal what he is in his true being. The reader can "finish knowing a man" by finishing his *Confessions*: it is not necessary to know all the details of Rousseau's life in order to know him. Yet the *Confessions* takes the form of a chronicle of the details of his life, a chronicle which is halted almost eight years before his death. If a man is not simply the sum of what he does and what happens to him, then why present the portrait of man as he is according to nature in the form of a story of a life, of what he did and what happened to him?

The form of Rousseau's presentation seems even more puzzling when one considers certain passages in which he comments on his enterprise. In book 2, he pauses to justify his recording of the minute details of certain incidents. His enterprise is that of show-

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<sup>21</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* 11.29.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.8.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.30.

ing himself "entirely." In order to accomplish this, it is necessary that nothing remain obscure or hidden; the reader must not lose sight of him for a single instant. There must be no void, no occasion for asking, "What has he done during that time?"<sup>24</sup> In book 4, he claims that in order to render his soul transparent to the eyes of the reader no movement of his soul must pass unperceived. He is simply "saying all," detailing all that happened to him, all that he did, thought and felt.<sup>25</sup>

It is, of course, impossible to "say all." And it is obvious that Rousseau himself admits to voids by referring to the gaps which are caused by his poor memory. But these gaps do not affect the completeness of his story. When Rousseau seeks to reveal himself, seeks to grasp and show what he is, he reenters inside himself: "The proper object of my confessions is to make known exactly my interior in all the situations of my life. It is the history of my soul that I have promised, and in order to write it faithfully I do not need other memories: it is sufficient for me, as I have done until now, to re-enter inside myself."<sup>26</sup> Rousseau is not "divided up in time" whose order he does not know; he is "always the same at all times."<sup>27</sup>

Rousseau, then, claims a perspective on his life which for Augustine would be proper only to God; he claims the perspective of Augustine's God. He does not make this claim on the basis of knowledge of the future. In fact, he speaks about futures, "contingent futures."<sup>28</sup> Rousseau's future, except in some sense his death, is not already there. And although Rousseau's memory is poor, although his access to his past is imperfect, he knows what he is. He sees man from the standpoint attributed to the divinity.<sup>29</sup> His *Confessions* would enable him to say to Augustine's God: "I have unveiled my interior such as You Yourself ['Eternal Being'] have seen it."<sup>30</sup>

The problem of time and self-consciousness gives way to a discussion of the relationship between memory and imagination as

<sup>24</sup> Rousseau, *Confessions*, 2, pp. 59-60.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 4, p. 175.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, p. 278.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 6, p. 272. For a discussion of Rousseau's understanding of "human time" see Georges Poulet, *Studies in Human Time*, trans. by Elliott Coleman (Baltimore, 1956).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 5, p. 218.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 8, p. 388.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 1, p. 5.

instruments in the achievement of self-awareness.

For Augustine memory is an important if not conclusive avenue to self-knowledge. In book 10, chapter 8, of his *Confessions* Augustine writes of memory:

Here too I encounter myself; I recall myself—what I have done, when and where I did it, and in what state of mind I was at the time.

But when Augustine seeks to encounter himself in his memory, he is forced to exclaim:

How great, my God, is this force of memory, how exceedingly great! It is like a vast and boundless subterranean shrine. Who has ever reached the bottom of it? Yet this is a faculty of my mind and belongs to my nature; *nor can I myself grasp all that I am*. Therefore, the mind is not large enough to contain itself. [Emphasis added]

Memory is a *help* to self-discovery, for Augustine, but it is also a bottomless descent. His discussion of it takes place within the context of the question, "Who am I and what am I?"<sup>31</sup> and his response is that he himself cannot grasp all that he is. It is God alone who holds the moments of his life together, who grasps all that Augustine is.

For Rousseau, memory is not quite so important; his imagination takes its place, and through imagination he does seem to know himself.

When Rousseau seeks to encounter himself, he reenters inside himself. When he enters inside himself, Rousseau finds himself; he does not find a bottomless, boundless, "subterranean shrine." He does not encounter his self in his memory. His memory gives him access to his past, to some of "the situations of his life," but it does not give him access to his interior (self).

What gives Rousseau access to the interior history of his soul is his imagination. It is his imagination which allows him to connect the discrete situations of his life in terms of a unitary self which has gone through these situations. He says of himself that he is "always the same at all times."

But to claim that it is the imagination which gives one access to one's true being is to raise many serious difficulties. The imagi-

<sup>31</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* 9.1.

nation can mean two very different things. On the one hand, images are more or less spatial-bodily events (in contrast to "concepts") located in a faculty classically contrasted with the more spiritual "intellect." And Rousseau makes considerable use of this meaning of the term. He maintains that all his ideas are in images,<sup>32</sup> and he characterizes the *Confessions* as a portrait, an image.

But there is another usage which has accrued to the imagination. In Rousseau and in much of modern thought the imagination is that faculty which constructs, which weaves feelings and possibilities; the imagination is the peculiarly *creative* faculty in modern man. And Rousseau makes considerable use of this meaning of the term.

During the course of his narrative, Rousseau pauses several times to consider what might have been the case had circumstances been different: he constructs "possible" lives for himself.<sup>33</sup> One might argue, then, that since he is able to distinguish between what might have been and what in fact did happen, his account corresponds to something real, a real life, a real self. But in book 1 he tells us that "I have been able to suppose true what I knew to have been possible." Thus it is not his memory but something very like a creative imagination which appears to guarantee the truth of what is said.

The role of this constructive imagination is revealed most strikingly in the apparent contrast between parts one and two of the *Confessions*. Part two is dominated by Rousseau's preoccupation with the Great Plot; he seems to believe that a conspiracy of enormous proportions is being mounted against him, and we are never quite sure as to what its real character is. But within the wider context of the Great Plot of part two, Rousseau discusses a lesser conspiracy—the brief Jesuit plot of book 11—which he ultimately comes to see for what it is, a figment of his imagination.

The publication of the *Emile* has been suspended and he has not been told the reason. He learns that a certain Jesuit has been talking about the book and has even quoted some passages from it.

Immediately my imagination was off like lightning, and unveiled the whole iniquitous mystery to me; I saw the march of events as if it had been revealed to me. . . . It is astounding what a host

<sup>32</sup> Rousseau, *Confessions*, 4, p. 174.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 1, p. 43; 4, p. 146.

of facts and circumstances came into my head to reinforce this mad notion and give it the appearance of probability—or rather, to provide me with both evidence and proof.<sup>34</sup>

This Jesuit plot is the work, he finally realizes, of his perfervid imagination. There is no plot; he had connected numerous events and circumstances and formed them into a coherent system to which nothing real corresponds.

The Great Plot of part two is of a different order of magnitude: an invisible hand directs a conspiracy which enlists *all of Europe* in the destruction of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. But is it different in kind? It is presented as a negative image of providence, the working of an evil genius; and it is obviously a textbook example of paranoiac invention. But so also was the Jesuit plot, and Rousseau must have been aware of the similarity.

Augustine's reliance on memory is grounded in his belief in God's providence. His life does have a unity, even if he cannot remember it all. But for Rousseau the creative imagination provides the only unity in terms of which to express the story of his life. That faculty, however, runs too easily into sheer construction. Might not Rousseau be telling us, in part two, that all such unifying principles are provisional to the point of being illusory? And further, might not the innocent youth of part one be equally, and equally consciously, an artistic construction on the part of a timeless "inner" Rousseau who is himself "always the same."

In his *Confessions*, Rousseau *shows* us a man understanding himself. The form which Rousseau's demonstration takes is what appears to be the story of the events of his life, the events woven into a coherent history. This way of answering the question, "How does man understand himself?"—the autobiographical "form" of the *Confessions*—is in function the role of the imagination in modern man's understanding of himself. The imagination constructs a history, a sequence of events, which are related in terms of a "self" (Rousseau's) which is "always the same at all times."

The chronological sequence of the *Confessions*, then, is not what is essential: the history of the portrait is not the portrait. The

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 11, p. 566. The Great Plot is discussed by Starobinski, *La transparence et l'obstacle*, p. 65; Jean Guehenno, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, 2 vols., trans. John and Doreen Weightman (London, 1966), 1:430; Marcel Raymond, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: La Quête de soi et la rêverie* (Paris, 1962), p. 126; Hermine de Saussure, *Rousseau et les manuscrits des "Confessions"* (Paris, 1958), pp. 269-71.



temporal movement of the *Confessions* is for the sake of revealing an inner self which is "timeless." But Rousseau's access to his self is different in kind from *our* access to him, the access he gives us and which he alone can give us. The artist, through the process of painting, shows us something that he already sees. It is the revealing in time of what he sees which requires successive events. The movement of the *Confessions* is *not* essentially temporal; it is rather a movement from without (from the "external" events) to within (to the "interior" self), a "spatial" movement.

It is significant that Rousseau, who describes himself as passionately devoted to music and who himself composed several operas, does not choose to compare his *Confessions* to a musical composition or to an opera. (Indeed, on one level, the *Confessions* is an opera, an *opéra bouffe*.) Rather, Rousseau constantly employs analogies with painting. His *Confessions* is "the only portrait of man painted exactly according to nature." In his *Essay on the Origin of Languages* he tells us that "painting is closer to nature and music is closer to human art."<sup>35</sup> We are led to suspect that the revelation of man as he is "according to nature" is analogous to painting *because* "the sphere of music is time, that of painting is space"; and "the effect of colors is in their permanence and that of sounds in their succession."<sup>36</sup> Sounds are of the fleeting, painting is of the permanent. It is the analogy with painting which establishes the relationship between human nature and timelessness. But in what does this relationship consist?

Rousseau sees himself as a natural man, a man according to nature: "I wish to show to my kind a man in all the truth of nature; and this man, this man will be me. Me alone. I know my heart and I know men. I am not made as any of those who exist. If I am not better, at least I am other."<sup>37</sup> But what might Rousseau mean by calling himself a man according to nature? How does one distinguish the "man of man" (civilized man, sociable man) from the "man of nature"? Rousseau himself bears little, if any, resemblance to the savage of the *Second Discourse*. Yet Rousseau claims to find in himself something which, in civilized, sociable man has been covered over.

Rousseau reveals this naturalness in showing himself as he is in

<sup>35</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essai sur l'origine des langues* (A. Belin, 1817; reprint ed., Paris: Copedith, 1970), chap. 16, p. 537.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 536.

<sup>37</sup> Rousseau, *Confessions*, 1, p. 5.

the face of death: "I am able to say that I began to live only when I looked upon myself as a dead man." Without care for the future, he lives simply in the present. He finds in himself what he ascribes to uncivilized, savage man, whose "imagination suggests nothing to him," whose "soul, agitated by nothing, is given solely to the feeling of its present existence without any idea of the future." It is the sentiment of his present existence which Rousseau has in common with the savage and which distinguishes him from civilized man.

This sentiment is experienced only in the absence of the consciousness of past and future. The inner self, the true self, is grasped in the timeless instant of self-perception. But the revelation of this inner self to other men requires a spelling out, a succession of sounds, an artistic reconstruction. What underlies this imaginative construction is the assumption of a timelessly subsistent inner self, an assumption unrecognized by the "man of man" but known and revealed by the "natural Rousseau."

The innerness of the self finds a parallel in Rousseau's physical, spatial separation from the society of men. In the outline of the *Confessions*, he claims that "there is a Rousseau in the world, and another in his retreat who resembles him in nothing."<sup>38</sup> Rousseau "in his retreat" is the Rousseau of Charmettes, of l'Hermitage, and of St. Pierre; and Rousseau in his retreat is happy.

In his second letter to Malesherbes, he explains why he left the society of men:

After having spent forty years of my life thus discontent with myself and others I sought uselessly to break the chains which held me attached to that society which I esteemed so little, and which enchained me to occupations least to my taste by needs which I esteemed those of nature, [but] which were only those of opinion.<sup>39</sup>

In his retreat, Rousseau is like the savage and enjoys the happiness of the savage:

Savage man and civilized man differ so much in the bottom of their hearts and inclinations that what constitutes the supreme happiness of one would reduce the other to despair. . . . Such is,

<sup>38</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Ébauches des Confessions* in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Oeuvres complètes*, eds. Gagnebin and Raymond, vol. 1: *Les Confessions: Autres textes autobiographiques* (Paris, 1959), p. 1151.

<sup>39</sup> Rousseau, *Quatre lettres à Malesherbes*, p. 1135.

in fact, the true cause of all these differences: the savage lives within himself; the sociable man, always outside of himself, knows how to live only in the opinions of others; and it is, so to speak, from their judgment alone that he draws the sentiment of his own existence.<sup>40</sup>

Rousseau in the face of death (time-less) and Rousseau in his solitude (society-less) constitute the essence of man, a portrait of man as he is according to nature. Human nature is precisely the inner self. The human self is not divided up in time or summed up in the providential intention of God (Augustine); nor is it what is spilled out and reflected in the opinions of others (civilized man, sociable man). Human nature is what underlies its own history and what remains when social contexts are removed. There being, for Rousseau, no divine providence and human providence (care for the future, society itself) being not what we are, it must be concluded from the *Confessions* that for Rousseau the nature of man is a private self-defining impulse, a *feeling* of self, beyond law, above time and without limit.

### The Problem of the Individual and Society

The problem of the individual and society has its roots in the understanding of human nature presented in Rousseau's *Confessions*. Although Rousseau begins book 1 of the *Confessions* with a statement about his own uniqueness, he refers to all men, in this same passage, as "those like me." Rousseau's uniqueness seems to be constituted by the fact that he has seen, uncovered, what has remained hidden from most men. The feeling of existence, the essence of the inner self, is not truly or fully experienced by most men. Yet it is this experience, however infrequently and obscurely it is had, which is somehow at work in all men as the source of the tension between the individual and society.

In the Fifth Reverie, Rousseau describes the feeling of existence as the state of happiness: "As long as this state lasts, whoever finds himself there can call himself happy . . . with a sufficient happiness, perfect and full, which leaves in the soul no void which it feels the need of filling." One might expect that Rousseau would wish to see all men strive for this experience, that he would encourage all men to attempt to achieve the happiness which he himself had

<sup>40</sup> Rousseau, *Discours sur l'inégalité*, pt. 2, pp. 192-3.

found. Instead, Rousseau first describes the condition of most men who "agitated by continual passions hardly know this state and, having tasted it only imperfectly for a few instants, keep only an obscure and confused idea of it," and then goes on to tell us that "it would not even be good, in the present constitution of things that, eager for these sweet ecstasies, they would be disgusted with the active life for which their needs, always reborn, prescribe the duty to them."<sup>41</sup>

The problem of the individual and society, then, is most keenly and urgently experienced as the problem of happiness. Society seems to require that happiness, the perfect happiness of the idle solitary, be denied to most men. The yearning for happiness, however obscure and confused, is never extinguished and keeps the individual in perpetual conflict with society. In his present condition man is pulled in opposite directions: toward the self-sufficiency of his natural state and toward the satisfaction of the exigencies of his social state. Rousseau explores this tension, this inescapable polarity, in the account of himself which he provides in the *Confessions*. In returning to the state of nature, in showing us man as he is "according to nature," Rousseau paints a clear picture of man as he is *not* "according to nature."

The contrast between natural man and social man is most strikingly revealed in the story of Rousseau's experience in the face of death. At Charmettes, he is convinced that death is imminent; he begins to truly live only when he looks upon himself as a dead man because the passions that remove his hopes and fears to a distance are killed.

The passions that remove our hopes and fears to a distance are mostly occasioned by our relationships with other men. Every man hopes for and fears things from other men. What we can get from other men is not entirely out of our power; we are not powerless to affect human action. Thus, the essentially *passive* passions of hope and fear are "carried to a distance" by such *active* passions as vanity, ambition, greed, vengeance.

It is significant that these active passions make us plan and contrive. We seek to put ourselves in situations where we can bring about what we hope for. We "provide" occasions for getting what we want. Vanity, for example, is always directed toward some future satisfaction, always foreseeing, because it is never satisfied.

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<sup>41</sup> Rousseau, *Rêveries*, 5, pp. 1046-7.

It cannot be content with past triumphs because one's worthiness of past recognition is ratified only by future recognition. One must have one's worthiness constantly reaffirmed. The passions which remove our hopes and fears to a distance are marked by agitation, turmoil, a straining toward what is not yet and may not ever be, desire for distant objects. Between desire and satisfaction lies the future.

Rousseau describes himself as a man almost without vanity, vindictiveness, ambition or hatred. In showing us the absence of these passions, he shows us the conditions in which they do exist. In book 8 of his *Confessions*, he tells us of a time when he thought he had only six months to live: "I renounced forever all projects of fortune and advancement."<sup>42</sup> Ambition has a place only within the context of an indeterminate future. Believing that he has no more need of "prevoyance," he silences vanity and becomes a copyist. In book 11, Rousseau recounts the story of his flight from Montmorency. It is due to his fortunate disposition that he has

. . . never known that spiteful disposition which ferments in a vindictive heart because of the continual memory of offenses received, and which torments itself with all the evil it would like to do to its enemy. Naturally quick-tempered, I have felt anger, even rage in its first movements, but never has a desire for vengeance taken root inside me. I occupy myself too much with the offense in order to occupy myself much with the offender. I think about the evil I have received only as the cause of the evil I can still receive and, if I were sure that the offender would do no more to me, what he has done to me would be forgotten at once.<sup>43</sup>

It is only because there is a future to be concerned about that he even thinks of his enemies. He is not tormented by the desire for vengeance.

Vengeance requires reflection, thinking over the injury, planning, however simple, of an appropriate form of revenge. Anger, even rage, are of a different character. They are natural; they are the first movements of passion. This "preference" for first movements, for immediate gratification over distance-creating passions is also apparent in Rousseau's description of his thefts. He steals little things which give him pleasure (drawing paper, cakes, wine), but he does not steal the money which would enable him to buy

<sup>42</sup> Rousseau, *Confessions*, 8, p. 362.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 11, p. 585-6.

more and better than what he steals. The distance between the money and the thing is too great, too troublesome, requires too much planning.<sup>44</sup> By putting so much planning and caring between ourselves and what we hope for or fear, we feel our hopes and our fears less. We put "providence" between ourselves and our hopes and fears.

Hoping and fearing are perhaps unavoidable when there is a future to be faced. The calm and sensual state brought about by the imminence of death shows us that the desires which are satisfied through planning and contriving are troublesome, disruptive and destructive of sensuality which is only immediately satisfied. These troublesome desires are produced by "the passions which carry our hopes and fears to a distance." These passions have us always living in the future. The present cannot be savored, enjoyed, for it is always a preparing for something to come, a painful anticipation. At Charmettes, in the face of death, Rousseau is happy: "Without great remorse about the past, delivered from cares about the future, the feeling which constantly dominated my soul was the enjoyment of the present."<sup>45</sup> The past is the completed; he cannot affect it and, since there is no future, the past cannot affect him. He can forget the past. The imminence of death has the effect of cutting him off from both past and future. And it is noteworthy that Charmettes is at the same time the scene of his imminent death and of his separation from society, from other men.

Now society is a kind of human providence.<sup>46</sup> It is made possible by man's recognition that he has a future which extends beyond the next day. Time makes man perceive the conformity between himself and other men. In the beginning, associations among men lasted only as long as the passing need which had formed them. At that time, "foresight meant nothing to them, and far from being concerned about a distant future, they did not even think of the next day."<sup>47</sup> It is noteworthy that Rousseau cites metallurgy and agriculture as the two arts which produced the great revolution, the great change from independent intercourse

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 1, p. 38.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 6, p. 244.

<sup>46</sup> See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du contrat social ou, Principes du droit politique*, in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Oeuvres complètes*, eds. Gagnebin and Raymond, vol. 3: *Du contrat social; Écrits politiques* (Paris, 1964), bk. 2, chap. 10, p. 389: The legislator must "foresee" and "calculate."

<sup>47</sup> Rousseau, *Discours sur l'inégalité*, pt. 2, p. 166.

to slavery and misery. Metallurgy supposed "much courage and foresight to undertake such difficult labor and to envisage so far in advance the advantage they could gain from it"; and "to devote oneself to [agriculture] and seed the land, one must be resolved to lose something at first in order to gain a great deal later: a precaution very far from the turn of mind of savage man, who as I have said, has great difficulty thinking in the morning of his needs for the evening."<sup>48</sup> Society has men in prolonged contact with one another and always looking ahead to an indeterminate future. Vanity comes into being through this prolonged association: each man begins "to look at the others and to want to be looked at himself."<sup>49</sup> And ultimately this leads to each man's living outside of himself and in the opinions of others.

It is here that one sees the relationship between the problems of happiness and society and the problem of time. In society (made possible by foresight) men come to seek their happiness in the opinions of others and to see themselves as they are reflected in the opinions of the others. They are dissipated in the manyess of opinion. This dissipation follows from the fact that they see before them an indeterminate future which consists essentially in their relationships with other men. What they *will be*, what they want, are from other men.

In contrast to Rousseau's assurances that he abandons all concern with the opinions of other man and that he is no longer concerned with the future, he fills his *Confessions* with descriptions of daydreams, chimeras, which show us the character of dissipation in the future and in the opinions of others and the role of the creative imagination in the work of dissipation. When Rousseau is discontent with his situation in society, he permits his imagination to nourish itself "on situations which had interested me in my reading, recalling them, varying them, combining them, appropriating them to myself so much that I became one of the persons I imagined and saw myself always in positions most agreeable to my taste; and that, finally, the fictive state in which I succeeded in putting myself made me forget my real state with which I was so discontent."<sup>50</sup>

Rousseau becomes the person he imagines. In one of his day-

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 172-3.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>50</sup> Rousseau, *Confessions*, 1, p. 41.



dreams, he is Field Marshal Rousseau standing fearlessly in the midst of battle calmly giving orders to his troops. He imagines himself in a situation where he would be greatly honored by other men. He constructs an image of himself out of the characteristics attributed to heroes. Of course, the difference between the imaginary world of the adolescent daydream and the actual situation is painfully evident. And to act like Field Marshal Rousseau in public would be mad. But isn't the activity of the daydreaming Rousseau the same *kind* of activity which he attributes to the civilized sociable man—the man who lives only in the opinions of others, who exists only in the judgments of other men? The self of civilized man is really a creation of the imagination, a construction out of the opinions of others.

The role of the constructive imagination in creating images of ourselves is also visible in Rousseau's account of the Great Plot. The target of the imaginary Great Plot is the imaginary Rousseau—Rousseau as he imagines himself to exist in the opinions of his enemies. The victim of the imaginary plot is tortured by the product of his own imagination. He retreats from society and thus from the effects of his bad reputation, his bad "image."

The imagination which has us living in the opinions of others is the same faculty which dissipates us in the future.

As noted above, Rousseau speaks about futures. The future as future is many. And the faculty which gives one access to the future is the imagination. The future is entirely imagined; one can imagine countless possibilities. One imagines what might happen and therefore what is not and may never be. The imagination creates futures for us. It goes out in advance and places us in possible situations. We are and feel ourselves in these situations as if they were actual. And these created futures cause us to act in order to prevent them or bring them about. The future which is not is made present within the imagination and brings about, actualizes, what occurs in the space between the present and the imagined future. This is what we call "prudence," foresight, and this is how we make mistakes. The prudent man is the man who anticipates correctly, who imagines the right future. Rousseau shows us his imprudence in the story of his conversion to papism and in the story of his causing Mama expense in his effort to save her from ruin.

The imagination has us always living in the future, in what is

not and may never be. It dissipates us in the countless possibilities which are its own creation. It has us wrenching ourselves apart between desire and fear. This is Rousseau's "history":

My cruel imagination, which always goes ahead of misfortunes, showed me this one [Mama's ruin] without ceasing in all its excess and in all its consequences. I saw myself in advance [ahead of myself]. . . . Here is why my soul is always agitated. Desires and fears devour me alternately.<sup>51</sup>

The future reaches back to the present and destroys it: the making present of the future destroys the present as present. The past is not nearly so powerful: "My cruel imagination, which torments itself without ceasing in foreseeing evils which are not yet, distracts my memory and prevents me from recalling those which are no longer." This is because "against what is done there are no more precautions to take and it is useless to occupy oneself with it."<sup>52</sup> The past is a source of concern for him only insofar as it might cause some future harm. Rousseau's memory, which retraces for him only agreeable objects, is the fortunate counterweight of his frightened imagination which makes him foresee only cruel futures.<sup>53</sup> The very disagreeable objects he retraces in his *Confessions*, especially in part two, occupy him because they are part of the "chain of events" which stretches ahead of him into the cruel future.

The imagination is that faculty by means of which one "pictures" oneself in future situations. In fact, one can picture an entire future for oneself: one sees oneself stretched out ahead of oneself. The imagination does not simply present us with situations which are not yet and may never be: it presents us with *ourselves* in those situations. And it is possible for us to imagine a whole lifetime for ourselves in an instant. Rousseau describes one of the walks he took outside the city while he was living with Mama. His heart is full of her image and of the desire to spend his life with her:

I saw myself as in ecstasy transported to that happy time and that happy place. . . . I do not remember ever being thrown into the future with more force and illusion than I was then; and what struck me most in the memory of this reverie when it had been

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 5, p. 219.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 11, p. 585.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, p. 278.

realized was having found the objects again exactly as I had imagined them. If ever the dream of a man awake had the air of a prophetic vision surely this one did. I had been deceived only in its imaginary duration; for the days and the years and an entire life passed there in an unalterable tranquillity, but in fact all this lasted only a moment.<sup>54</sup>

Desire has us imagining no end to its fulfillment. It encourages us to deceive ourselves by ignoring the passing character of things human. Rousseau's reverie does not admit the possibility of a change in his happy situation. The contrast between this reverie and what actually occurs when he is supplanted by Witzgenried is revealing: "In a moment I saw evaporate forever the entire future of happiness I had painted. . . . This moment was frightful. . . . I saw before me only the sad remains of an insipid life."<sup>55</sup> When he is happy, he desires that his happiness be without end and imagines it without an end. When he is sad he sees only sadness before him. This failure or reluctance to imagine an end is also clear from his account of his contentment with Therese: "The future no longer touched me or touched me only as the prolonged present: I desired nothing but to assure its duration."<sup>56</sup> But as we see in his account of himself on the Isle de St. Pierre, Rousseau learns of the passing character of human things. He desires the continuation of his stay on the island but fears being forced to leave; this fear of a possible future event destroys his happiness.<sup>57</sup>

Now the most complete and irreversible of all passings is death. And death is that future event which is certain: it is not simply one among many possibilities. It is not yet but it surely will be. Just as we tend to imagine present happiness and present sadness to extend before us indefinitely, so we tend to imagine ourselves before an indeterminate future. Perhaps it is precisely because it is certain that death can be "imagined away": it does not haunt us as a possibility. Rousseau is familiar with the "image" of death; he has looked death in the face. He has been "near enough" to death to familiarize himself with its image.

The awareness of the imminence of death brings about Rousseau's return to the state of nature. His imagination is silenced, his passions are deadened, his care for the future and concern with

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 3, p. 108.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 6, p. 263.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, p. 333.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 12, p. 645.

the opinions of others are destroyed, and he is happy. But the attempt to preserve life, to hold death at a distance, has, and necessarily has, precisely the opposite effect. And the preservation of life is the reason for the very existence of society. The existence and the good of society require prudence, foresight, the exercise of the imagination, the play of such passions as vanity and ambition. It is in activities such as these that we see manifested the noble sentiments and elevated spirit which Rousseau praises in the *Social Contract*. The clearest example of the fulfillment of the demands of society is the hero—the citizen who “renounces life in order to acquire immortality.” The contrast between the solitary and the hero is understood in terms of Rousseau’s comparison between savage man and civilized man:

Savage man and civilized man differ so much in the bottom of their hearts and inclinations that what constitutes the supreme happiness of one would reduce the other to despair. The former breathes only repose and freedom; he wants only to live and remain idle. . . . On the contrary, the citizen, always active, sweats, agitates himself, torments himself incessantly in order to seek still more laborious occupations; he works to death, he even rushes to it in order to get in condition to live, or renounces life in order to acquire immortality. . . . What a sight the difficult and envied labors of a European minister are for a Carib: How many cruel deaths would that indolent savage not prefer to the horror of such a life. . . ? But in order to see the goal of so many cares, the words “power” and “reputation” would have to have a meaning in his mind, he would have to learn that there is a kind of men who set some store by the consideration of the rest of the universe and who know how to be happy and content with themselves on the testimony of others rather than on their own. Such is, in fact, the true cause of all these differences: the savage lives within himself; the sociable man, always outside of himself, knows how to live only in the opinion of others; and it is, so to speak, from their judgment alone that he draws the sentiment of his own existence.<sup>58</sup>

Living in the opinions of others is vanity. The sociable man knows how to live only in the opinions of others: he is dissipated, emptied, in the manyness of opinion. Vanity has him always agitated, always seeking, and thus always living in the future and rushing blindly toward his death. The sociable man lives outside of himself in the opinions of those who are not himself and in the future which is not vet and may never be. The savage, on the other hand, lives

<sup>58</sup> Rousseau, *Discours sur l'inégalité*, pt. 2, pp. 192-3.

within himself; his are the idleness and freedom which come from the absence of foresight. What ultimately accounts for the differences between the savage and the sociable man is, in great part, the relative powers of the imagination. The soul of the savage is agitated by nothing because his imagination suggests nothing to him. The soul of civilized man is always agitated because his imagination suggests everything to him. Civilized man constructs an imaginary integral self for himself out of the manyness of opinion and out of the manyness of the moments of a past which is no longer and a future which is not yet. But "imagination, which causes so much havoc among us, does not speak to savage hearts."<sup>59</sup> The soul of the savage "is given over to the sole sentiment of its present existence without any idea of the future, however near it may be, and his projects, as limited as his views, barely extend to the end of the day."<sup>60</sup>

Surely, Rousseau is not a man without imagination. He often speaks of the tremendous power and richness of his imagination.<sup>61</sup> Thus, Rousseau seems far removed from the savage whose imagination suggests nothing to him. Rousseau has uncovered the role of the creative (constructive) imagination in civilized man's understanding of himself. And in connection with the constructed, imaginary self, it is noteworthy that Rousseau says of himself: "I believe that no individual of our kind would have naturally less vanity than myself."<sup>62</sup> Rousseau, then, has a great deal of imagination and very little vanity. His true self is *not* constructed out of the opinions of others and out of the moments of the past and future, but his self-consciousness is closely tied, in its beginnings, to his powerful and active imagination.

Toward the beginning of book 1, Rousseau tells us:

I do not know what I did until I was five or six years old. I do not know how I learned to read: I only remember my first readings and their effect on me: this is the time from which I date without interruption the consciousness of myself.<sup>63</sup>

In the Fourth Reverie he indicates that Plutarch was the first reading of his childhood and in the *Confessions* he says that Plutarch

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, pt. 1, p. 158.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>61</sup> See, for example, *Confessions*, 4, pp. 159-60.

<sup>62</sup> Rousseau, *Confessions*, 1, p. 14.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

was his favorite reading. He remembers the effect that this reading had on him:

Ceaselessly occupied with Rome and Athens, living, so to speak, with their great men, born myself a citizen of a Republic and the son of a father whose love of country was his strongest passion, I inflamed myself by his example. I believed myself Greek or Roman; I became the person whose life I read. The account of traits of constancy and intrepidity which struck me made my eyes sparkle and my voice strong. One day, as I recounted at table the adventure of Scevola, it was frightening to see me put out my hand and hold it on a chafing-dish in order to represent his action.<sup>64</sup>

Rousseau became the person whose life he read and, from the time he began to read, he dates the uninterrupted consciousness of himself: his consciousness of himself occurs at the same time as he imagines himself to be another. He becomes the other by representing the action (exterior) of the hero he imagines himself to be.

Rousseau, in discussing the difference between ancient and modern tastes, uses the illustration of inscriptions on tombs:

Our monuments are covered with praises, theirs recorded facts. "Stand, traveler; you are tramping on a hero." If I had found this epitaph on an ancient monument, I should at once have guessed it was modern; for there is nothing so common among us as heroes, but among the ancients they were rare. Instead of saying a man was a hero, they would have said what he had done to gain that name.<sup>65</sup>

Rousseau gives three examples of ancient epitaphs: "Tarsus and Anchiales I built in a day, and now I am dead" (the epitaph of the effeminate Sardanapalus); "They died without stain in war and in love" (Xenophon's tribute to the memory of some warriors who were slain by treason during the retreat of the Ten Thousand); and "Go, Traveler, tell Sparta that here we fell in obedience to her laws" (epitaph engraved on a tomb at Thermopylae). Imagining oneself as a hero costs nothing. What is praised in the second and third epitaphs is heroic death. Heroism usually occurs in the face of death and the awareness of imminent violent death

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>65</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile ou de l'éducation*, in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Oeuvres complètes*, eds. Gagnebin and Raymond, vol. 4: *Émile; Éducation; Morale; Botanique* (Paris, 1969), bk. 3, p. 675.

tends to discourage heroic imaginings. The first epitaph does not praise Sardanapalus; it points to his ultimate powerlessness, his mortality, which he shares with all other men.

The hero renounces his life in order to acquire immortality; he sacrifices his present existence for an immortal existence in the good opinions of his countrymen. Rousseau's self-consciousness is dated from the time he imaged himself to be the heroes he read about. But at Charmettes, when he is going to die, he becomes conscious of himself as an inner self; he enjoys the sentiment of his own existence, the isolated self-sufficiency which is precisely private and unshareable. The idle solitary, in contrast to the hero, finds the feeling of his present existence to be most precious, more precious than any future glory.

Now society does need its solitaries. It needs a few men like Rousseau who, finding nature within themselves, can see society for what it is and as it should be. What Rousseau sees is the necessity for and even the nobility of men who need other men, men who will renounce life in order to acquire immortality. What is significant for the good of society is public virtuous action, not heroic imaginings simply and not the awareness of the inner self. Heroic action may have its beginnings in heroic imaginings, but it is the consuming desire for immortality, the immortal glory conferred by society, which leads from imagining to acting.

### Conclusion

The contrast between the idle solitary and the immortal hero is Rousseau's vivid painting of the problem of the individual and society. This problem was seen to be intimately related to the question concerning man's nature and it is in his *Confessions*, his "autobiography," that Rousseau gives us "the only portrait of man painted exactly according to nature." Rousseau is careful to point out that the portrait he is painting in the *Confessions* is a portrait of natural man and, at the same time, a portrait of himself—himself alone. His recovery of human nature, the experience which is had in solitude and in the absence of the awareness of past and future, is claimed by Rousseau to be exceedingly rare. We do not find in the *Confessions*, then, a program for the return to nature by all or most civilized men. We do not find a formula by means of which they could retain the human goods made available by history and society and at the same time regain the last advantages



of the state of nature. Rather, the *Confessions* shows us the very radicalness and unresolvability of the tension between the individual and society. There can be no society of consciously inner selves.

Thus, for Rousseau, man is by nature asocial but must live as if he were social. He must live as if he is what he is not.<sup>66</sup> Therefore, on the level of political, the exterior which is not what he is assumes a greater importance than the interior which is what he is. The interiorization of the self is politically dangerous because it allows a man to dissociate himself from his public acts: "There are moments of a kind of delirium when it would be necessary not to judge men by their actions."<sup>67</sup> Of his abandonment of Le Maitre, the subject of his third painful confession, Rousseau says: "There are times when I am so little like myself that one would take me for another man of entirely opposite character."<sup>68</sup>

Having an interior self as a point of reference, one can say, "This is really me" or "This is not really me." The characters in Plutarch's *Lives* cannot say this. What they are *for us* is no more and no other than what they show themselves to be in their public acts, what is visible to us (not what would be visible only to God).

It is noteworthy that the essential movement of the *Confessions*, the movement from exterior to interior, from living in the opinion of others to living within oneself, is precisely the reverse of the movement described in the *Second Discourse*. Rousseau's return to the state of nature is not a turning back in time but a turning within. The tension between the individual and society is reflected in the tension between Rousseau's autobiographical and his more obviously political works. The autobiographical works, however, are themselves political in that they reveal the conflict which the individual feels within him, the conflict between what he is and the way he must live. On Rousseau's understanding, the nature of man and the actual condition of men are as different from each other as Rousseau is from other men. This tension takes us back to our starting point: the relevance of Rousseau's *Confessions* to our own thinking about ourselves and about political matters. If

<sup>66</sup> In connection with the radical tension between individual and society see especially Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago, 1953), chap. 6 and "On the Intention of Rousseau," in *Hobbes and Rousseau: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Maurice Cranston and Richard S. Peters, *Modern Studies in Philosophy* (Garden City, New York, 1972), also in *Social Research* 14 (1947), and B. Greothuysen, *J. J. Rousseau*, 18th ed. (Paris, 1949).

<sup>67</sup> Rousseau, *Confessions*, 1, p. 39.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 3, p. 128.

this understanding of Rousseau's *Confessions* is correct, then there is to be found in the *Confessions* the uncovering of the inner self as the latent presupposition of contemporary thinking about ourselves. By virtue of its presuppositional character, the notion of the inner self is unrecognized as a presupposition and is, therefore, unreflected upon. In the absence of this recognition and reflection, the political consequences of this way of thinking about ourselves cannot be confronted as Rousseau confronted them. In this respect, Rousseau's *Confessions* provides us not with a justification but with a critique of contemporary consciousness.