

ROUSSEAU'S HARMONY AS A NATURAL FOUNDATION OF MORALITY

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Abstract

During his lifetime, Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) created a deep understanding of us human beings as parts of a uniform whole of Nature. On this natural foundation he also constructed his moral philosophy. He never presented this natural foundation of morality in a clear-cut manner, but instead scattered it throughout his manifold writings. In this thesis the aim is to produce a nutshell of Rousseau's moral thinking in order to show that once viewed as a whole, it may prove to be a coherent system that can explain our moral nature in a detailed and elaborate way. This will be done by constructing an argument to describe his moral thinking. The premises and the conclusion of the argument will be considered one at a time, via a wide range of Rousseau's literary works.

The argument considering Rousseau's moral thinking will be presented with three premises; *(1) Moral decisions are made by combining two methods; rational deliberation on the one hand, and using a moral instinct, innate in all of us, on the other, (2) this moral instinct functions properly only when it is based on a harmonious connection with the whole of Nature, and (3) in the modern life of mankind this Nature connection has been severely diminished.* Hence, the conclusion is drawn that *this has led to problems with our moral instinct functioning properly and thus, to an imbalance in our moral decision-making process.*

After this argument has been well-founded, it will be briefly considered how in Rousseau's opinion we could change this unfortunate situation. How could we regain the Nature connection which might then give us a more balanced ability to act in a morally sustainable manner? The answer will lead us to a search for our own inner moral truths by evoking and strengthening our natural feeling of compassion. This can be accomplished via a phenomenological realization of our place in this seamless net of co-existence we call life. In addition, it will be discussed in what manner this *harmony with Nature* might be relevant also in helping us with such complex contemporary moral issues as the climate change.

Keywords: moral philosophy, metaethics, moral decision-making, moral sentiments, moral instinct, compassion.

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1. Introduction

Breathe in – Breathe out.

This is a phenomenon most natural to us humans among other animals. But as so often, this description is just one perspective to take on the chosen phenomenon. Another might be the tree perspective: *photosynthesize out – photosynthesize in*. As we humans breathe, we take in oxygen produced by the plants and trees in photosynthesis, and by breathing, we produce carbon dioxide for them to produce more oxygen. Life is full of such amazing co-existence.

When you come to think of it, living and existing is eventually all about being a part of a seamless net of everything co-existing with everything. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) is one of those philosophers, who have had a deep understanding of us human beings as uniform parts of such a net of existence. In addition, Rousseau had a vision that this natural way of co-existing establishes the foundation for our moral nature as well. In fact, he thought that our habit of lifting ourselves – in our minds – “above” and “distinct” from this natural co-existence, to the pedestal of the only rational animal, is very problematic for us. He had a vision of how our life has developed in such a fashion that it was inevitable that we slowly alienated from *sensing* the co-existence. In this process, we lost our natural connection with the whole of Nature. This sensibility to Nature’s co-existence is the key to true morality, Rousseau claims. We all have the sensibility inherent in us, but our modern way of life has created a malfunction in it which is, in his opinion, very hard to repair.

According to Rousseau, the route back to our true moral nature is not a rational one. To him, all our rationally based abstract theories of morality, although not totally irrelevant, merely *echo* this natural foundation of our moral lives – never completely reaching it.

Thus, the route back is not something you can easily describe with words, let alone theorize about. Our true moral nature is achievable via *feeling* the connection we have with the world. Indeed, he is after a kind of attunement with life itself, a completely different kind of being in the world. In fact, according to him, all “ideas of the mind” can in the worst-case scenario completely block our reconnection with Nature.

Nevertheless, it is possible to act morally right also by following socialized moral rules. In fact, most of us accomplish to do so most of the time. Rousseau’s point is that while often echoing our true moral nature, these moral rules *can* also mislead us, they are never bullet-proof accurate. He should therefore not be misunderstood as suggesting that due to our modern way of living, we are all doomed to be immoral.

As we modern people tend to ground our decisions on internalized rules instead of natural instincts, we end up having a problem at hand, Rousseau notices. How could we formulate rules that could cover all the varying situations of the life itself? Instead of general rules, a morally sustainable instinctive “being in the world” would naturally guide us to choose right in every challenge that life throws at us, Rousseau claims.

Rousseau continues, that this instinctive morality is more or less present in all of us, although mostly blurred and thus malfunctioning. Nevertheless, it seems to have a tendency to lead us towards morally right decisions in the background. This attunement with the world is a matter of degrees instead of an on/off setting. Like an old, manual radio, the connection is sometimes better, sometimes worse – and it is very hard to hear the message if there is a lot of noise distracting the attunement. Thus, Rousseau sets himself a goal of presenting us tools in order to learn how to tune our inner radios better. How to avoid the distractions around us and in us, and to hear the message loud and clear? The better you are attuned with Nature, the more accurate you are with your moral decisions – this is his central conclusion.

Rousseau was deeply worried how modern life is drawing us further and further away from our moral nature. Our connection gets blocked for example by the rules and norms that societal life inevitably creates. When you are constantly told what to do, you never learn but to obey. The natural compass installed in all of us never develops into its full capacity, you could say. Instead of forcing our children to obey the moral norms, Rousseau suggests that we should help them learn to use their own compasses, to find their own innate moral truths.

Rousseau had a profound vision of this naturalized morality, but instead of a clear-cut presentation, it is scattered throughout his literary works. In this thesis my aim is to dig deep into his considerations of founding morality on human natural sentiments. By connecting strings together, I intend to bring forth an interpretation of Rousseau's philosophy of morality as grounded on an inherent sensibility to life itself. The aim is to extract from his beautiful, but sometimes labyrinthine writings the hard core of his moral thinking – to produce a “nutshelling” of it. In doing this, I will propose an argument which could be used to describe his theory concerning natural foundations of morality. By going through his central concepts, considering some potential self-contradictions and showing eventually how all his thoughts can be connected into a coherent unity, it is my intention to show how he in fact (contra what is perhaps often assumed) had quite a detailed and elaborate view of our moral nature.

Rousseau takes himself not an easy task. He operates mainly in the level of feelings, sentiments, intuitions, instincts, presence – in short, all of the essentially nonverbal aspects of our human nature. His task is thus to verbalize a phenomenon not at all verbal – quite the contrary. The nutshelling of this verbalization presented here will inevitably be just as lacking as the original one, in the sense of not having the feeling attached to it. But perhaps it will produce some wonder in the reader – a wonder if such an innate moral truth might actually exist.

So, let us begin our journey into the depths of Jean-Jacques's thinking. I will start by considering the difficulties we might face along the way and proceed to assert an argument that in my view would present Rousseau's moral thinking in an explicit form.

2. "To exist is to feel"¹

Perhaps the best place to start is Rousseau's acknowledgment of a common, universal foundation for human morality. He points out that behind their differing habits and norms, all the nations, religions and worldviews throughout history have shared alike forms of moral principles and virtues as well as ideas of justice and decency, good and evil. Hence, according to him, there has to be "in the depths of all our souls an *innate moral truth*, preceding all our maxims of education".² This innate moral truth will be the focus of this thesis.

Rousseau suggests that all verbal maxims are in fact quite useless when it comes to this innate moral truth. We should put more trust in our own resources and not read books to find the principles: we should search within ourselves in order to *sense* what is right or beautiful.³ Indeed, the right and the beautiful will intertwine into a seamless harmony as we proceed in his footsteps. But what are these "own resources" we should search if they are not our *thoughts* about right and wrong? What does it concretely mean to search the truth from the inside? Or to *sense* what is right?

For Rousseau, morality is essentially a feeling, resembling sense experiences, or sentiments such as cold or touch. Rousseau compares a person not in touch with his instinctive morality with a man born blind, who is not able to imagine what sight is, and thus does not even believe he lacks any faculty⁴.

¹ Rousseau 2007f, 196.

² Rousseau 2007f, 195, 308–309.

³ Rousseau 1997, 13, 47.

⁴ Rousseau 2007f, 183–184.

I wonder whether he would agree with me if I compared this morally blind person to *Mary* in the classic thought experiment proposed by Frank Jackson⁵. *Mary* is living in a black-and-white-room with all the theoretical knowledge one can have about colours and of our ability to see them. The question in the thought experiment is, would *Mary* learn something new when she would actually go outside and have a sense-experience she never had before, like of the beautiful spectrum of colours of the nearby forest in an autumn foliage? Following the “man born blind” example, Rousseau might add the question of whether *Mary* would even be able to imagine the ability to see colours while in the room, when she never has experienced it. Would she believe she is lacking something?

Now, if we would proceed a bit with this analogy with *Mary*’s room, one might reform the thought experiment to a moral prison of the mind where *Mary* has learned all the theoretical knowledge there is to learn about moral maxims, norms and rules. In addition, let’s assume that the hidden innate moral truth really does exist deep inside her and that she is able to reach it via a process that resembles sense experience. When breaking free from her “prison”, she would suddenly experience the moral beauty of the world, which she so far had only read about. Knowing all the theoretical knowledge there is to know about morality, would she, being freed, have learned something new? I’m sure Rousseau would say yes, and what’s more, he would probably add that *Mary* would learn the *most fundamental part* of the whole thing – just like with the colours.

By learning to give more confidence to this “*voice of Nature*” than to the voice of reason, one becomes wise from the inside, Rousseau continues. He admits wholeheartedly, that he has no means to solve all the plentiful theoretical objections that people might have for the existence of such a voice of Nature.⁶ In fact, the objections do not need to be even

⁵ More on *Mary*; Jackson, Frank (1982), “Epiphenomenal Qualia”, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 32/127, 127–136.

⁶ Rousseau 2007f, 180.

theoretical – if one does not have a phenomenological feeling of such a voice of Nature existing inside, the gut feeling will probably also say this is just a make-believe-fairytale-voice to which Rousseau is referring to.

As the voice of Nature is not a verbal one, Rousseau’s task of bringing it into words is difficult indeed. He acknowledges this, and instead he makes a promise of trying to help us in hearing it ourselves; then, he declares, we will not have any objections to make anymore⁷. I take it that what he means by this is, that once we, with his help, break out of the prison, we learn to sense the innate moral truth, and in the process all verbal objections vanish along with the gut feeling objections as well. We reach a different kind of presence in the world, so to speak. As feeling is for him the fundamental form of existence, he concludes that this new feeling will overcome all those objections by making them meaningless. If Mary would object in the black-and-white-room against the existence of such a beautiful “colour vision” with different kinds of reasonings, all of the objections would vanish once she would actually see the colours. The idea is that it is the same with innate moral truth and our sensibility towards it. Mary with colour-deficit might insist that there is nothing more to colours than the knowledge she has learned via books. Others outside the room might sigh at her objections – of course there is more to it, but how to convince her? To actually give her the sense experience seems like the only way. This would, in Rousseau’s scenario, be also the only way to convince Mary with moral-deficit. It seems then that Rousseau’s task is to *convince us to begin the search* for our “own resources”. Most of his writings considering morality can be considered to revolve around this task. I suggest, that the following argument encapsulates Rousseau’s moral thinking:

P I. Moral decisions are made by combining two methods; rational deliberation on the one hand, and using a moral instinct, innate in all of us, on the other.

⁷ Rousseau 2007f, 180.

P II. This moral instinct functions properly only when it is based on a harmonious connection with the whole of Nature.

P III. In the modern life of mankind this Nature connection has been severely diminished

Conclusion: This has led to problems with our moral instinct functioning properly and thus, to an imbalance in our moral decision-making process.

In what follows, I will take this argument into consideration, step by step. It will also be considered what in Rousseau's opinion we could do to improve this rather unfortunate situation we have managed to create for ourselves.

3. Two methods

The first premise that I suggest Rousseau to have is:

“Moral decisions are made combining two methods; rational deliberation on the one hand, and using a moral instinct, innate in all of us, on the other”.

In order to get inside the justifications for asserting this premise on his behalf, it is necessary to go through his terminology. By doing this, the twofoldness of our morality in his thinking becomes apparent. I'll start with Rousseau's consideration about reason and instincts as guiding forces of our lives. I will explain his notion of *pitié*, which is quite central to his moral theory and then move on to discuss the two methods mentioned in the premise in more detail. In addition, I will take into consideration his two notions of self-love.

3.1 Reason and instinctive feeling

“In this immense labyrinth of human reasoning you will learn to speak about happiness without knowing it, you will learn to speechify and not at all to live, you will lose yourself in metaphysical subtleties, you will see objections and doubts

*everywhere, and as a result of instructing yourself you will finish by not knowing anything”.*⁸

Rousseau has been often accused of being self-contradictory. Often he seems to speak of a particular matter in completely contradicting manners on different occasions. Here, the contradiction seems to be present throughout the sentence. How can you speak of a matter without knowing it? Most of these seemingly ambivalent statements resolve, when we keep in mind that he has this idea of a completely different kind of being in the world. It is not merely that we need to learn how to tune into the right frequency with our inner radios, it is that we also have to change the way we are taking the information in, a bit like in changing the radio from FM to AM. When you speak about happiness in HR (human reasoning), you are speaking of a completely different matter, a mere echo, of the happiness that you would learn in IF (instinctive feeling). Consequently, if you keep on instructing yourself only in HR, you will finish not knowing anything in IF.

As we are not radios, but human beings, our handy analogy falls apart in the end because we are built in such a way that we use both HR and IF, not either or. Things do not operate in clear-cut dualities or categories when it comes to us humans. Nonetheless, for Rousseau, the problem is that we have created an imbalance by giving too much confidence for HR and thus neglecting the very important information we could achieve via IF. This is one of the most important messages he has.

According to Rousseau, in order for a decent mind to function well it needs a “rectitude of heart” that is “reinforced by reasoning”. We most definitely need reasoning in the world we live in, but, in Rousseau’s opinion, it can make the mind “dizzy” if we do not know how to handle it. Rousseau suggests that our sense of goodness seems to depend more on feelings of the heart than enlightenment of the mind. Even such actions as weighing the consequences and thus forming the judgment, depend on his opinion more

⁸ Rousseau 2007f, 180.

on feelings – although always powered by reasoning.⁹ Consequently, he should not be taken to imply that reason is completely useless or merely a harmful faculty but rather that without proper guidance from a moral instinct, it cannot operate exquisitely. The more we neglect our instinctive nature, the more we make errors in our judgments.

Thus, Rousseau plans to take us to a route which will “instead of words to mind, bring feelings to the heart”. If rather than reason one is able to trust this “voice of Nature”¹⁰ inside us, he believes one becomes not only wise, but also happy from the inside. He stresses over and over again how in the end it is feeling that teaches better than any argument about how to judge what is good or bad.¹¹ Yet, we need to keep in mind that in the end these two sides of us, here separated, in reality work always together strengthening or weakening each other. Instinct functions as the fundamental basis of morality, reason as its good companion when led rightly by those fundamental instincts. Rousseau writes:

*“If the first gleams of judgment dazzle us, and at first confuse all objects for our gaze, wait until our weak eyes open again, strengthen themselves, and soon we shall see the same objects by the lights of reason such as the instinct of nature first showed them to us. Or rather, let us be simpler and less vain. In everything let us limit ourselves to the first feelings that we find in ourselves, since it is always to them that study leads us back when it has not led us astray”.*¹²

Rousseau describes this “moral instinct” as being able to progress faster than ideas and thoughts could ever do. For him, it is “*the first impulse responding to the moment*”.¹³

⁹ Rousseau 2007c, 121–123.

¹⁰ Rousseau has several names for this “voice of Nature”, including “the divine voice”, “the holy voice of Nature”, “the inner voice”, “conscience”, “the innate moral truth”, “moral instinct”, “divine instinct” and “intuition”.

¹¹ Rousseau 2007f, 180, 304.

¹² Rousseau 2007f, 197, 309.

¹³ Rousseau 1927, 90–93.

When we act immorally, this instinct of ours is malfunctioning, it is not responding correctly to the situation at hand.

One might argue that in as important an issue as a moral decision is, we should rely rather on rational deliberation than some sort of an instinctive hunch of what we should do. Is it not obvious that although these hunches might be right, they might also be very wrong? Careful consideration seems, according to this counter-argument, to be a more reliable method for moral decisions. One could even compare the instinctive guidance of our behavior to playing dice with very important issues without any *real* justification. Do whatever comes to mind first! Trustworthiness of this instinctive method is indeed not obvious. Things become even worse if we consider the fact that instead of our instincts working randomly, they might even be biased to guide us towards selfish ends. In addition, one might point out that even every day experience shows how mere hunches are definitely not a reliable source for moral decision making. Perhaps rationally weighing of the available options is not the perfect solution, granted - but doing without, that is just hopeless. And speaking of instincts, even a glimpse to the instinctive behavior of animals prove that they are beasts to one another – no morals there, they argue. Did we not grow out of such cruelty towards another as we became the rational animal? Thus, one can only be moral because one is rational, they state.

Rousseau takes an opposite stance. He thinks the basis of moral goodness can be found in other animals as well. Furthermore, he claims that if the instinct worked properly it would truly be a perfect guide for our moral life. Our rational deliberations are only echoing the instant responses of our instincts. When we are thinking hard about a moral dilemma, there is usually a shared and universal basis that we are trying to mirror our thinking to: that is, the innate moral truth.

Rousseau's vision of human instinctiveness and rationality might be described by imagining life to be like sailing in the wide seas. There is a promised land somewhere

across the ocean, and we have this amazing ship full of technology of the highest sort, and we have the maps that others have drawn of the sea and its shores, but all we see is wide open waters. Without a compass we are lost. There's no use with all the high-tech and maps if we do not know which direction to take.

This inner compass, when working properly, would instantaneously guide us, reacting all the time to our position in the sea of life. So rather than drawing maps (though we do eventually need to do that also in our societal context) Rousseau wants us to learn how to read our inner compasses. Within the guidance of the compass, i.e right feelings, our rationality and the moral maps drawn by others are in full use. It is a joint effort, but the basics are laid in an instinctive level.

But what is there to do, when the instinct is leading us astray? In order to tackle this further, we need to get ourselves even deeper to his vision of human nature.

3.2 *Pitié*¹⁴

What about the counter-argument which presented us rational humans to be the only moral species there is? Without rationality we would be mere immoral savages like other animals, it stated. Rousseau would disagree and point out how also animals care about each other. Rousseau's view implies that if we only refer to rational deliberations of whether to obey rules and norms or not, we are only reaching the surface level of morality. Instead, the roots of morality transcend the limits of human reason – you can be kind to another without ever learning conceptual thinking. For Rousseau, *compassion* is the very essence of our moral nature. Rousseau gives examples of animals jumping in danger in order to save their offspring or how animals seem to experience great distress when

¹⁴ I have chosen to use original French terms of Rousseau's central concepts, as the translations can often be misleading. More on these problems on translations, see for example Kylmäkoski, Merja (1995), "Rousseau ja itserakkaus: Discoursin viite XV." Niin&Näin 4/95, 24. <https://netn.fi/artikkeli/rousseau-ja-itserakkaus-discoursin-viite-xv>.

witnessing a dead member of the same species.¹⁵ Compassion is ingrained in all kinds of living beings.

Rousseau has already emphasized how we necessarily *feel before knowing*. We, like other animals, have *natural feelings* that we need for our preservation. They are as natural to us as our own existence and they work in conformity with Nature. These natural feelings include, according to Rousseau, *a love of oneself, a fear of pain and a desire of well-being*. In addition to these we also have an innate natural feeling concerning other beings than ourselves; this feeling is compassion, or in his words, *pitié*.¹⁶ Before we humans started to group into larger units and formed an idea of property, Rousseau believes that *pitié* was the one responsible for all the laws, morals and virtues. “*Do good to yourself with as little evil as possible to others*”¹⁷ – this maxim of *natural goodness* is not about rational justice to him. Its origins lie in *pitié* and the other natural feelings.¹⁸

According to Rousseau, in order to track the *pitié* in us, we should “return into ourselves to examine where our natural inclinations carry us when all personal interest is put aside”. Not even the most corrupt souls can, according to him, lose this inclination completely: “there is no ferocious assassin who does not support a man falling in faint”.¹⁹ Thus, Rousseau firmly believes natural goodness is innate in all of us. Furthermore, he thinks that even the most wicked of them all possess it at least from time to time when they react instantly, without reason interfering. *Pitié* is the shared moral goodness in all of us. We all seem to have both self-protecting and altruistically caring instincts in us. It is a balance between these natural inclinations that seems to be the key. When all excessive personal interest is put aside, our innate moral truth begins to show itself more clearly.

¹⁵ Rousseau 2000b, 61–62.

¹⁶ Rousseau 2007f, 196.

¹⁷ Rousseau 1754, 20, 2000b, 64.

¹⁸ Rousseau 1754, 20, 2000b, 64.

¹⁹ Rousseau 2007f, 193–194, 308.

Rousseau defines *pitié* as a tendency of being naturally reluctant to see sentient beings, especially that of one's own kind, to suffer²⁰. *Pitié* is thus the tendency that drives us to help those in need without even thinking about it. In the natural state of human beings, *pitié* was in charge instead of the rules, laws and norms of society. We help others naturally, without the need for a rule to do so. *Pitié* is the force that keeps us from not robbing food from innocent children or defenseless elderly, Rousseau continues, no matter how maleficent we otherwise would be.²¹

Pitié is also responsible for our natural reluctance of *seeing others* doing harm to others. According to Rousseau, we all have this reluctance in us without any educational guidance. We would have died in extinction ages ago, were the survival of our species dependent merely on our ability to reason, Rousseau claims. It is far too untrustworthy and slow for the job.²² Consequently, Rousseau suggests that us being kind to each other is clearly not due to the education we receive. There is an innate feeling of compassion in every one of us, and if we do not resist it, we will never harm another person nor a sentient being, unless we have to do it on behalf of our own survival. Animals may not have the kind of reason humans have, but, according to Rousseau, what they have is this sensibility to the welfare of other beings.²³

Pitié is our only natural *virtue*, Rousseau states – it is a universal virtue that precedes all rational thinking. *Pitié* is the origin of generosity, charity, benevolence, humaneness, even friendships. *Pitié* is an empathetic feeling which is strong in a primitive mind, but weak in a societal mind, Rousseau continues. It puts us in the shoes of the suffering one – and the more an animal is able to identify itself to the suffering one, the stronger the feeling of empathy is. Rousseau suggests that this ability to empathize was more powerful in us

²⁰ Rousseau 2000b, 29.

²¹ Rousseau 2000b, 64.

²² Rousseau 2000b, 64–65.

²³ Rousseau 200b, 30.

in the state of nature than in “a state of reason” we are currently in. Reason has, according to him, created a selfishness that individuates us from other living beings and makes us eventually very depressed. Reason makes us not care of the misery of another, as long as we ourselves are safe.²⁴ Reason can thus even serve as a disruption for our moral compasses to work properly. It must be supported by *pitié*, in order to function trustworthily in moral cases.

3.3 Duty-based morality and pleasure-based morality

As already noted, Rousseau did not think that all moral decisions are conducted all the time merely with this instinctive nature of ours. Quite the contrary, he argued that such an instinct is rarely guiding us these days. Our compasses are broken, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that we have lost the ability to read them. We are more often guided by socialized rules. We *can* act morally right without the instinct working properly – by obeying the norms and rules in order to avoid undesirable consequences. We do the right thing, because we have been trained to do so. Often it hits the target. These rules we follow become internalized, and thus can also guide us quite effortlessly in our everyday lives.

One might ask, why should there then be anything else guiding us? Why should we assume another source for the instant moral decisions? Rousseau might appeal to the shared basis he notices between nations and times. In his view, there seems to be a certain universality guiding those norms we internalize; they appear in different forms depending on the culture we are socialized to, but they have a common foundation according to him. Moral instinct would provide us a framework to explain this universal basis – we would share the ability to sense the innate moral truth, to hear the voice of Nature.

²⁴ Rousseau 2000b, 61–64.

Thus, Rousseau's view of our moral behavior operates on two levels, you could say. He points out that the true motives of most of our actions are in fact not so clear to ourselves as we usually suppose. The inner moral truth is not self-substantially in our reach, and hence he is glad that it is not the only source of good action available to us. He connects these different sources to the difference of *doing good with pleasure* or *out of duty*. Although it is possible for us to hit the target via duty-based morality, the pleasure-based morality would lead us to it freely, via our own inclinations, without exterior, forced guidance.²⁵ Rousseau emphasizes the pleasure-based morality, the one guided by our innate moral truth, of being the more accurate one. Although our natural moral instinct is not functioning properly due to our modern ways of life, we are not totally doomed according to Rousseau: we are still able to act good most of the time, by internalizing those rules and norms that are given to us via socialization. They cannot guide us perfectly, mere echoes as they are, but our situation is not a completely hopeless one.

The reason why duty-based internalized rules and norms can never in Rousseau's eyes be bullet-proof-sure, is perhaps that they are difficult to form in a way that would hold in all the various situations that our lives take. Instinct is guiding us in the situation itself, in the position we are in the sea of life, and directs our path firmly from that specific spot we are in. Rules and norms can only give general guidelines on how to navigate. We can draw safe routes to the maps, but those drawings will not help much if we do not know where we specifically are and where it is that we are going.

Sometimes Rousseau calls his moral instinct "conscience", but acknowledges that the word is often used in a totally opposite manner to refer to the internalized norms acquired through socialization. For him, conscience is rather something, which has "*given up under those noisy voices of the prejudices, whose work they say it is*"²⁶ – that is, the rules and

²⁵ Rousseau 1927, 119–123.

²⁶ Rousseau 2007f, 198.

norms of the doctrines and societies. Our true conscience no longer speaks to us nor responds to us, Rousseau claims. “*Each of us are continuously occupied by public opinion extending one’s own existence entirely around oneself without reserving hardly any of it in one’s own heart*”²⁷, he continues.²⁸ These ponderings on the role of conscience give a vivid example on what he means when he talks about duty-based and pleasure-based morality. Pleasure-based morality would be this conscience, buried under the laws and rules that we must obey in order to avoid punishment – that is, buried under the duty-based morality. Either one of them can lead to acting right. But somewhere in the process, avoiding punishments might become the top concern, thus leading to situations where acting wrong if you’re not caught, might become acceptable. In Rousseau’s view, it is only the pleasure-based moral instinct that has the potentiality of being infallible – that is, when it speaks to us. In addition, it is the only route to *true* happiness and pleasure.

Now, we have learned that in order for us to function morally accurately as human beings in this world, our reason has to be supported by the right kind of feelings. Rousseau continues that only when these right kinds of feelings are replaced by “vain selfishness” reason is able to evoke immoral ideas. Without this transformation in our feelings, we could not act morally wrong at all, as our instincts would guide us infallibly. If not grounded in the right way, reason can do nasty tricks to our morality. This transformation is like a malfunction in our natural behavior in Rousseau’s point of view. It is like an artificial error code.

There is a risk of taking Rousseau to throw himself into another self-contradiction here. Although “love-of-self” was earlier stated as one of the fundamental natural feelings, now it seems that for Rousseau, selfishness can in fact be a factor that disrupts our natural moral behavior. It turns out that Rousseau has two separate concepts for self-love, *Amour-*

²⁷ Rousseau 2007f, 198.

²⁸ Rousseau 2007f, 198.

propre and *Amour de soi-même*, and they are well worth taking a fine-grained look at in order to fully understand his position.

3.4 *Amour de soi-même* and *amour-propre*

In a footnote in his “*Discourse on inequality among mankind*”²⁹ Rousseau explains the difference between “love-of-self” and “selfishness”. He states it is very important not to confuse these two to one another. They are feelings completely differing in their effects and nature. Love-of-self – *amour de soi-même* – is a natural feeling which brings all animals to care for their own survival. In human beings, with the aid of reason and compassion, it produces humanity and virtues. Selfishness – *amour-propre* – on the other hand is a relational, artificial feeling, which arises in a communal life and forces an individual to take his/her own advantage and gain above everything else and everyone else. *Amour-propre* solely causes human beings to be evil against one another. *Amour-propre* cannot even arise without comparison to others – thus, it began to develop in us once we started to form societal groups.³⁰

Rousseau describes how before *amour-propre* evolved, we had no reason to feel vanity, admiration or disrespect; we even had no recollection of an idea of justice because we did not hold the violence towards us as insults. We had no need to punish anyone for our misfortunes.³¹ Rousseau continues, that it was from comparing ourselves to others that vanity, contempt, shame and envy began to arise, thus causing a lot of new reasons to disagree. Slowly these developments led to the destruction of real happiness and innocence, Rousseau asserts. The very idea of being valued (or not) evolved and this development created a constant need for it. Violence against our sense of self value had to be punished, and this led to the first politeness rules. Violating those were taken as

²⁹ Rousseau 2000b, 145.

³⁰ Rousseau 2000b, 145.

³¹ Rousseau 2000b, 65.

insults even worse than the actual harm caused. This led, according to Rousseau, to cruelties and revenge.³²

In a primitive state a person cannot feel hate or revenge, Rousseau maintains; those feelings can only arise from being offended. Being offended is not, according to Rousseau, due to the actual deed but rather its roots are in contempt, disrespect and deliberate harming, which all arise in societal circumstances. A primitive person, not being able to respect himself in a way that presupposes comparing oneself to others, can in fact do a lot of harm to others when he counters them – taken that it benefits his own survival somehow – without ever really offending or insulting them in any way. Rousseau even insists that for example taking a prey from a weaker one is not in fact immoral when there is no societal connection involved, nor is giving one's prey to a stronger one. Rousseau suggests that animals, or primitive people, take these natural situations of life as they are – not with feelings of arrogance or anger (which are the products of comparison arisen in societal life) but instead sorrow or joy in consequence of a better or a worse accomplishment.³³

When a primitive person ends up in a situation where he has to fight for his food, he always weighs instinctively, which one is the best option: to fight or to find the food somewhere else, Rousseau continues. As there is no pride involved in the fights, they end fast, the winner eats and the defeated leaves to find his food somewhere else. It is different for people living in societies, Rousseau maintains. In a societal circumstance, first you pursue what you need, then you continue to pursue all the excess that you don't actually need; pleasures, wealth, power over others, leading even to things such as slavery.³⁴ There really is no limit to where *amour-propre* can take us.

³² Rousseau 2000b, 79.

³³ Rousseau 2000b, 146.

³⁴ Rousseau 200b, 121.

Consequently, when *amour de soi-même* and *pitié* still governed us, people might have acted in a way that we would (from our duty-based, societal *amour-propre* perspective) judge as good or bad, but without acknowledging it themselves at all. People did not understand what morality was before social relationships wider than those we needed for reproduction evolved. It was *amour-propre* that taught us to make these distinctions. Things that we would now, from our *amour-propre* perspective, take to be immoral, were not so for the primitive instinctive people.³⁵

In this context if the reader is not careful, it might seem like Rousseau is contradicting himself by stating at times that primitive people acted good and bad, at other times the contrary, that they did not act morally bad. Rousseau's idea seems to be that when we fully follow our moral compass based on compassion, it is impossible for us to do morally bad things. Once we lose our ability to sense the information brought by this compass, we end up making errors. As we have evolved so far away from the primitive way of life, it is impossible for us to view the world in primitive eyes anymore, thus leading us to judge their actions as immoral³⁶. Yet for them, their actions were not immoral, as they instinctively led the *pitié*-based life of harming only as much as it is necessary for survival. Comparison and rivalry led us wanting to take more than we need and to all such feelings as revenge or ambition, and hence, to immoral actions. We also gained a tendency to reason our never-ending needs as our "rights" over others.

Rousseau's natural goodness clearly does not entail being completely harmless to others. You'll eat and you'll be eaten, there is nothing bad in that. What makes it bad, is the comparisons and excesses of *amour-propre*, which started to evolve as a side effect of

³⁵ Rousseau 1998, 578.

³⁶ You could say that the same problem might be present also when we try to judge the behavior of other animals as moral or immoral.

our societal life; all the comforts of life increasing, excess time and luxury spreading, and over-emphasizing of our rationality over our natural feelings arising.³⁷

It is important in my view to notice how Rousseau does not entail kindness and compassion as referring to some kind of an over-altruism, putting the needs of others unquestionably ahead of your own. That is an impossibility with regard to our survival; you definitely need to harm some living things to survive. You cannot be kind all the time towards everything, you would die. In order for our morality to be an instinct, it would need to take this into account. Mere kindness is not enough, it would lead to quite destructive excesses from our own survival point of view. Rousseau is sensitive to this fact; mere *pitié* is not enough to base our natural innate moral truth to. In Rousseau's vision, our attention to our own benefit becomes a problem only when we do not settle for what would be enough for our survival, but instead start taking more than we need. The instinct is not going to make us die for hunger. It is a matter of a delicate balance between *amour de soi-même* and *pitié*.

The relations between these natural feelings in Rousseau's moral writings are left somewhat questionable. Several viewpoints can be taken; *amour de soi-même*, *pitié* and the moral instinct as equal driving forces, *amour de soi-même* and *pitié* as the underlying driving forces for the moral instinct, or *pitié* as the moral instinct (the innate moral truth) itself. Also, the relation between *pitié* and *amour de soi-même* can be questioned; are they equivalent, or perhaps one guiding the other? In addition, although according to my understanding, *amour-propre* is not a natural feeling at all, but instead an artificial feeling that distracts our natural way of being in the world and we should thus overcome it,

³⁷ Rousseau 2002, 59–63.

different viewpoints on this matter can also be taken³⁸. This relates to the further considerations of whether *amour-propre* originates from *amour de soi-même* or not³⁹.

But *why* was *amour-propre*, slowly developing in us, able to so severely damage our natural instinctive co-existence within the world? Rousseau thought that when our “harmony with the world” is not in order, the instinct malfunctions. Somehow, *amour-propre* was able to injure the foundations of our harmony with the life around us, leading us to overly concentrate on ourselves rather than having a clear experience of us as parts of this whole existing Nature. But how does he explain this “connection with Nature” to have such a remarkable effect on our behavior in the first place?

4. The Nature connection

The second premise in the argument I have formulated to describe Rousseau’s moral thinking is the following;

“This moral instinct functions properly only when it is based on a harmonious connection with the whole of Nature”

In order to defend this premise, I will describe a central theme in Rousseau’s thinking that he calls *harmony*. It will be considered how a state of harmony might be reached. In addition, careful investigation of Rousseau’s religious thinking is in order to reach a full understanding of what this connection with the whole of Nature is all about, and how it

³⁸ for instance, Neuhauser takes it, that “...solving these problems... depends not on suppressing or overcoming *amour-propre* but on cultivating it so that it contributes positively to the achievement of freedom, peace, virtue, happiness, and unalienated selfhood.” For more, see Neuhauser, Frederick (2008), “*Rousseau’s theodicy of self-love. Evil, rationality, and the drive for recognition.*”, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2.

See also Dent: “...*Amour-propre* can have a positive and constructive character too, but in his early writings Rousseau concentrates on its damaging forms.” in Dent, Nicholas (2005), “*Rousseau*”, Routledge, New York, 40.

I will rely with my interpretation mainly on the footnote XV on “*The discourse on inequality among mankind*”, where Rousseau clearly states, that they are different feelings that should not be confused to one another (Rousseau 2000b, 145).

³⁹ More on this, see for example: Kylmäkoski, Merja (2001), “Itserakkaus ja itsensä rakastaminen Rousseauin teksteissä.” Niin&Näin 3/01, 14-19. <https://netn.fi/artikkeli/itserakkaus-ja-itsensa-rakastaminen-rousseauin-teksteissa>

affects our moral instinct. This effect, namely the “different manner of being”, will also be considered thoroughly.

4.1 Harmony

Rousseau suggests that we have an *innate ability* to form a harmonious connection with the whole of Nature⁴⁰, but we have lost it during the rise of the artificial *amour-propre* in us. The route back to this *harmony* is best achieved by spending time in nature, he claims. According to Rousseau, *harmony is the natural source of true morality, our sense of beauty and true happiness of the heart* – in effect, these three become one, when harmony is reached. In order to receive a full picture of this harmony, it is thus necessary to look at what he has to say on each of them - beauty, morality and happiness. We have to keep in mind though, that for him, harmony is a different mindset altogether. All these three aspects of harmony melt together into one different kind of being in the world. When we talk about morality, beauty or happiness in our ordinary lives, we are usually more or less blurred and biased by our *amour-propre* and thus are able to see mere echoes of the true one(s). Rousseau’s task of helping us to shift our minds to this different mindset begins by trying to describe what is hidden from us. Bear in mind in this process, that he has to use words in order to describe this *essentially nonverbal kind of presence* in the world. By describing it, he plans to create a curiosity in us to begin our own search; the route back is in the end different for everybody.

To explain all this, Rousseau begins with the world. According to him, our world is in a continuous flux; nothing has a fixed form. Thus, our affections, which attach to these everchanging things around us, pass away and change too. As our affections to things are always passing by like this, they cannot be the source for true and steady happiness. They

⁴⁰ To keep track of Rousseau’s thinking, I have chosen to use “Nature” when referring to the whole existence, me among it, and “nature” when referring to our surrounding nature with the forests and meadows; i.e. those places, where you can go to have walks in.

leave the heart unquiet and empty, with constant regrets of the past and desires of the future. Rousseau describes happiness as a timeless state, where the “present lasts forever”. In this state there is no pleasure or pain. The only thing we sense, is *existence*. Pleasures of life are always relative, never complete, he continues. Instead, true happiness doesn’t leave any voids to be filled. This true happiness can be reached for in nature, Rousseau tells us. Nature (as the seamless net of co-existence) is nothing external to oneself but rather one’s own existence, with all the *distracting* sensual impressions removed.⁴¹ Harmony is thus a state of being where time, place and other ever changing and relative things of life vanish and we only sense our existence. As a state it seems to resemble mystical experiences, described through the history of human beings in various cultures, religions and traditions.

For Rousseau, nature provides us a gateway to this different state of being. Rousseau describes how walks in the peaceful woods or meadows may allow one to get immersed with nature, to let it fill the senses. It will then feel like being identified with the whole of Nature, he tells us: one’s own existence becomes the existence of the whole of Nature; all particular objects disappear; one does not see or feel anything but only everything. Rousseau acknowledges that harmony does not always occur to everybody while taking walks in nature. Why not? Why do we not automatically end up in harmony once we are in contact with nature? Why does it happen only to a few of us, and not every time? Rousseau explains that if this result does not occur it might be due to a “lack of a natural sensibility”. But more often than that, it will be because one’s *mind cannot detach itself from other ideas*. We are having hard times concentrating fully on the objects that actually strike the senses to open the gates to sensing just existence.⁴²

⁴¹ Rousseau 1927, 112–114.

⁴² Rousseau 1927, 138–143.

What Rousseau has in mind is that our minds wander. Continuous thinking blocks us from just being. Continuous thinking takes our minds away from the moment itself to past worries and future plans. It makes us *think about being* instead of *just being*. It makes us *think about* harmony instead of *being in* harmony.

Rousseau's message is, that we do not know anymore how to just let go of everything going on in our minds. As the harmonious state of being is a nonverbal one, we cannot *think* ourselves to be in it – we need to feel it. Rousseau suggests that we need to shut down thinking altogether for a while, in order to instinctively reach this different presence in the world. Yet, as we have become accustomed to think all the time, it is not like you can just tell yourself to shut up. We don't have a button to press to shut down thinking. I cannot think to myself; "*stop thinking!*", making it thus stop. In short, the situation we are in is this: we have lost the connection, but are stuck with continuous thinking. Consequently, it seems that we would need to proceed via thinking itself; there's no way around it. So, what can we do?

4.2 Thinking your way to reach harmony

Rousseau describes the process of us finding our true happiness as an attempt to tame the intoxication of our *amour-propre*. The aim is to be able to fully enjoy our present situation peaceably and hence, *enlighten* our reason.⁴³ It is worth emphasizing again the fact that by no means does Rousseau think that our ability to think is our mere enemy. It can be, if it is enforced by *amour-propre*. But thinking can also be the route back to *amour de soi-même* and *pitié*. We can acknowledge the artificiality of *amour-propre* rationally. And once we do, we are in a genuine position to open the gates back to our true Nature.

⁴³ Rousseau 1997, 42.

With thinking and reason there is indeed, once again, a danger of taking Rousseau to be self-contradictory. On the one hand, he has accused reason of being one of the main enforcers of *amour-propre*⁴⁴, leading thus to our moral corruption. On the other hand, he, as just described, takes reason to be our savior from the situation we are in. The solution to this controversial usage of these terms might be, that for him there are two ways of thinking and reasoning, the *amour-propre*-based and the “enlightened one”. The difference is in some sense a matter of depth; whether you stay on the surface, or learn to deep-dive in. It comes down to the “different kind of being in the world”. He does not always specify which one he is talking about, thus creating a trap which is easy to fall into when not yet having a complete understanding of his moral thinking.

Rousseau thus argues that in order for us to know how it is that we should act to achieve harmony, we first have to learn *how to think* – and this kind of thinking is the most universal talent of all human life, he says. *Via thinking alone, we can make good sense of the world and us in it.* Here, his thinking is clearly of the enlightened kind. He continues that the one who thinks the best, is the closest to happiness. By thinking he refers here to having ideas and combining them, seeing objects and comparing them, finding true relations between them, drawing conclusions that lead to knowledge of the truth and fitting them to the things that are useful to us. To learn how to think is to him proceeding to our primary destination of life: to learn how to be happy. But the route is long. Everything is connected; knowledge of ourselves needs knowledge of the surroundings we live in. To know oneself you need to know your kind and what it is that you are dependent on. What is essential to us, what is not? Thus, Rousseau starts his investigation from our surroundings, from the trees, plants, animals, mountains, valleys, rocks and seas – in short, nature. He has an idea that this kind of knowledge can lead us to wisdom, and wisdom then to good actions. Rousseau states that “*Nature ... is very small to the eyes of*

⁴⁴ Rousseau 2000b, 49; 61–64.

*our reason, when they start to open up*⁴⁵.⁴⁶ It is noteworthy how for him knowing oneself starts by knowing one's surroundings. It is as if we are not able to fully understand who we are if we do not pay close attention to where we are in the net of co-existence.

So, for Rousseau, reason seems to be a seamless part of the way we are in the world. But our current way of life, creating *amour-propre*, misleads our reason into directions that take us very far from actual happiness and the goodness that life in itself holds. What we need to do is to adjust it back under the guidance of our natural feelings instead of the artificial feelings of *amour-propre*. With the help of the “right kind of feelings” he tries to paint a picture of a different kind of human reason, one deeply connected to our instincts, our environment – in contrast to a separate logic machine. To learn how to think is for him deeply connected *to life*, not outside it as universal constructs of rational deliberation. When we learn to think, we learn to sense the situation we are in and in that situation to know what is essential to us and what is not. When the eyes of reason open up, it is oneness of existence that will be found; everything is connected, and in this connectedness, in this coexistence, lies the basis for our moral goodness.

Rousseau's battle does not thus seem to be in the traditional duality of whether our morality is being guided by reason or feeling. He thinks we use essentially both; our being in the world is constructed via both of them. His stance is that we have been doing a lousy job with the foundations of our constructions. Instead of building on our natural instincts, we have shut them down (or at least made them “dizzy”, like he calls it), replacing them with *amour-propre*, an artificial tendency to enhance our individuality and own gain in comparison to others.

Rousseau describes this new kind of “combined” thinking as such: “...*the internal feeling which does not organize itself by means of syllogisms, but which convinces more than*

⁴⁵ Rousseau 2007d, 135.

⁴⁶ Rousseau 2007d, 134–135.

*reasoning does. I have much more than proofs, I have certainty.*⁴⁷ This is in essence what he is after, when he says that he is not able to refute all the counter-arguments people invent against him. Instead he tries to show us how eventually all these counter-arguments melt away as meaningless. The shift to another mindset has happened. This shift needs, according to him, the experience of harmony.

Rousseau's search for true happiness is thus nothing of the sort that the shallow self-help happiness guides of our times persuade us to pursue. Rousseau is not convinced that many of us will ever be able to find it. He even argues that as a constant condition, happiness is not suitable for us humans, we are too mutable for it.⁴⁸ As noted before, this state of harmony is not an on/off-ability, but rather it resembles an old manual radio, which we have to adjust all the time a little. Mutability, this tendency to get out of tune is so strong in us, that a constant, perfect attunement is almost an impossibility. The balance is ever changing, it can be stronger or weaker. Disturbances are frequent. But when we learn how this particular radio can be best tuned in – what distracts it, what helps to keep up the attunement - it will be easier to keep it steady. Thus, in order to succeed it is necessary to *know yourself*. And like in the case of the radio, it might help to get out of our bunkers into nature in order to get a more clear and distinct connection.

4.3 The significance of religion in Rousseau's thinking

Like already noted earlier, harmony, as a state where "*time counts for nothing, present lasts forever, and where there is no pleasure or pain, only a sense of our existence*", seems to resemble the mystical experiences present in most religious traditions. Indeed, religion is at the very heart of Rousseau's thinking. He does not tie this innate moral truth to any specific doctrine though – what matters is, what the heart says. The innate moral

⁴⁷ Rousseau 2007b, 58.

⁴⁸ Rousseau 2007a, 50–51.

truth, the voice of Nature, is also a *divine, holy voice* to him. Consequently, it is clear that whatever he has to say about religion, is probably very relevant for understanding his moral philosophy. With this connection in mind, let us now explore his religious thoughts to see whether they might offer insights to his ideas of our moral goodness as well.

Rousseau takes it that all the differences between religions of the world arise from traditions, habits and differences in our living environments. *True religion* can be found independently of any of those, inside each and every one of us, he claims. It has nothing to do with any dogmas offered from the outside. In *Émile*, he warns us not to teach children dogmas of any certain religion, no concepts or ideas too early, when they are not able to understand them yet. According to him, if we give false ideas of these very important issues too early, there is a danger of those taking over for the rest of our lives. *If we take these dogmas as granted, we never learn how to find the true, natural religion inside us.* To children, he claims, everything is mysterious – and this is why mystery is, as a distinct concept, still unknown to them. Children should be offered the chance to make up their own minds instead of dogmatizing them. When you don't talk about God to children, they might naturally sense God everywhere, Rousseau claims.⁴⁹

In other words, Rousseau divides religion in the same manner as he does morality. On the one hand we have this nonverbal, mysterious, true natural religion, which all of us can find inside our hearts, it is innate in us – kind of like the pleasure-based morality and the moral instinct guiding it. On the other hand, there are dogmas – paralleling the duty-based morality. If the dogmas are asserted to children too early, they might not understand that the words describing them are just words, metaphors, describing the nonverbal; they might take the stories literally, instead of understanding that religious issues are fundamentally about the unspeakable; they are matters of feeling, not words. Once these

⁴⁹ Rousseau 1845, 353–355; Rousseau 1909, 230.

dogmas are internalized, the connection with natural religion inside us slowly vanishes. Instead of everything, nothing is mysterious anymore. His ideas on religion are very revealing when it comes to understanding how he approaches morality.

Above all, according to Rousseau, we should trust our inner *sense* of truth; rational means are not enough to understand the real truth. But this inner voice, which could show us the path, has already been silenced during the childhood socialisation process and religious education, he continues. Invoking it is not easy. Moreover, this inner voice is the *same voice* that tells us the innate moral truth. Thus, for him, true morality and natural religion become one. But the purity of morals and belief cannot be deduced from any doctrines, he insists. Instead, they can be achieved by the “right kind of application of the abilities Nature has given us”. Listening to our own inner voice, our conscience and understanding, reveals the truth to us better than any other human being ever could. “Artificial” religions are, according to him, examples of the misery of mankind. The elements of natural religion are to be found in every religion on earth, he tells us: the truth is the same everywhere. Fundamentally, all religions are good and in union with God.⁵⁰

Consequently, morality and religion go together inseparably in Rousseau’s thinking. Despite this unity, he declares that all human authority regarding morality and religion has to be set aside. We do not learn about God nor morality from holy books. They only tyrannize real understanding. You cannot read the revelation from books because it cannot be put into words in any language, he claims. Instead, it is written all around in Nature, with a universal language that every human being is able to understand. Even a man that grows up without human contact in a deserted island can find this innate truth inside himself. In a certain phase of life, we gain the ability to open up our minds and hearts to understand this truth.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Rousseau 1845, 359–364.

⁵¹ Rousseau 1845, 366–377.

Rousseau emphasizes a process of an inner change, similarly than many mystical religious traditions do. Furthermore, he continuously seems to parallel God and Nature. It is not the aim of this thesis to consider how much his worldview was of a pantheistic kind. In any case, his religious writings are very much rooted in Christianity. It is enough in this context to assert that he does not seem to exclude the possibility of us being able to find our inner truths without the notion of a God of any sort. The divine voice is the voice of Nature. For him, there is a God. But what kind of a God he has in *his* mind is irrelevant in some sense: the harmony is to be found inside oneself, the paths toward it differ, our stories develop in the surroundings we are in – and all these are equally valid in taking us to the truth. No-one can tell from the outside what it should look or feel like for me. Not even Rousseau. There are no words for it, and all that is put to words is just shadows, only mirroring the truth.⁵²

As natural religion seems to be in unity with our natural instinctive morality, and since they seem to come together in a certain kind of *experience*, it might be useful for us to find out whether Rousseau has something to say about religious experiences. Rousseau describes one possible way to experience revelation in the following terms.

The eyes were “...turned towards the sky, when it happened. Suddenly this so familiar sight, that usually touched him so little, left him now filled with

⁵² One might suspect self-contradiction also in what comes to Rousseau’s religious thinking. He has a notion of a civil religion in his *Social Contract*. In short, it asserts that the sovereign has a right to command a civil religion, according to which all citizens should live by. If a citizen would not live by these dogmas stated by the sovereign, he should be banished (See more in Rousseau 2002; *The social contract*, book 4, chapter 9; civil religion.). So, which is it then, that Rousseau is speaking for? A state religion, that the sovereign has a right to command, or a freedom for a personal religious life? My suggestion is both. As he himself puts it: “Each may have, in addition, such opinions as he pleases, without its being the business of the sovereign to know them” (Rousseau 2002, 252.). Rousseau considered all dogmatic religions to be just as good as the other ones from their core and just as bad as the other ones when it comes to dogmatizing. It would not matter to a person in touch with his inner natural religion which dogma he lives by in his everyday life. Rousseau did not insist the citizens to adopt a forced *inner* natural religion. Instead, according to him, the worst religious conflicts always happen between dogmas, not between personal natural religions. Those who have managed to find their inner religion and connection with Nature, do not care what kind of dogmas or ceremonies they get along with in their daily lives. And those, who have not been able to find the inner truth, do not end up in conflicts when there is only one dogma to live by.

*amazement and adoration. It felt like a ray of light lightened his mind, exposing all the remarkable truths, a new universe opened up to his meditation, he sensed an invisible chain linking all beings together. The divinity of Nature was revealed to his understanding, like a divine intellect and all those remarkable ideas that we attach to the word God presented themselves to his mind. This sparkle of divine fire, he concludes, seemed to have given him a new life”.*⁵³

This kind of “new life” is at the core of our morally accurate instinctive behavior. The moral instinct, that he sometimes also refers to as the divine instinct, is based on a harmonious connection with Nature, the invisible chain linking all beings - the co-existence. The closer we get to this harmony, or a balance with Nature, the better our moral instinct operates. We all have an innate, natural ability to form a divine connection with Nature.

4.4 “A different manner of being”

“A different kind of being in the world” has been appearing continuously as we have been exploring Rousseau’s moral thinking. It is time to take a closer look on what he specifically has in mind with this different kind of being. Rousseau describes how the majority of people often become “unlike themselves” – they seem to change into completely different people. He wonders, why is this, what causes these changes? He seems to track the changes into our desires taking a hold of our actions. If we could trace the causes to these changes that depend on ourselves, he reckons, then we might be able to learn how to *control* them – and hence, become better men and more secure of ourselves. He continues, that we are not always able to suppress our desires or resist them once they have already been formed. Hence, according to Rousseau, we are not acting like our natural selves. Rousseau wants to build a solution to this problem, which purports

⁵³ Rousseau 2007, 165–168.

to change these desires *at their source*. But this would entail us being able to go back as far as the source goes, *beyond the desires*.⁵⁴

This problem that he raises seems to refer to the artificial desires that *amour-propre* arouses in us. When we are not in harmony with Nature, not living according to our natural feelings of *amour de soi-même* and *pitié*, we tend to get swamped with all these desires of constantly wanting more and more and more. We get stuck in seeking pleasures for ourselves, because nothing is ultimately enough – the pleasures that *amour-propre* offers us, always leave us empty. It is only when you are able to shift your mind away from them that you can find true happiness and *this is the source*, this is where the change should happen. We should go back to nature, he famously states, and by this he means rather back to our natural being in the world than back in time to stone-age.

In other words, according to Rousseau's view it is not easy to win the battle against our desires, after they have already been formed. We can resist temptations at times, he states, if we have strength of mind - and on other occasions we give in because we are too weak to resist. Instead of this continuous battle, Rousseau suggests, we might try to prevent or alter the desires at their source. Rousseau took on himself the task of tracing the cause for these different "manners of being", as he calls them.⁵⁵ By this, he is referring to whether our being in the world is guided by artificial selfish desires, or by natural, compassionate desires.

He searched for the source within himself and in others too, and discovered that these different ways of being in the world actually depend a great deal on impressions of our surroundings. We are being continually modified by our senses. Unconsciously, we then bear the effects of these modifications in our thoughts, feelings and even actions, he

⁵⁴ Rousseau 2012, 180.

⁵⁵ Rousseau 2012, 380–381.

describes.⁵⁶ In these lines it is clear how he places us quite firmly in our organic net of co-existence.

Rousseau then set himself to find a “natural principle”, one that would help us in the continually varying circumstances of our lives. This principle, he hoped, would put – and keep - our mind in a state that could promote virtue across times and places.⁵⁷ The natural principle, our innate moral truth, (invoked by our natural feelings of *pitié* and *amour de soi-même*), will naturally change our desires from artificially created, selfish desires to more compassion-based ones. This inner change, the new life, will guide us in everything that we do through these compassionate desires. The point is thus, that *instead of a fierce inner fight between selfish motives and our internalized demands of acting morally right, we can change our presence in the world into a manner of being, where this discrepancy does not exist at all.* This is the ideal – but like with our old radio, it is not constant in its occurrence.

Rousseau continues how reason could be preserved from so many mistakes and vices if it would be possible to “*modify our desires to favor moral order, instead of disturbing it*”. He describes how all in all we are, just like other animals, under the continuous influence of “*climate, seasons, sounds, colors, light, darkness, the elements, ailments, noise, silence, motion, rest*”... Everything around us affects our bodies and consequently our minds, directing our sentiments which in turn govern our actions, Rousseau declares.⁵⁸ Our connection to our surroundings is presented here almost as some kind of a biological organic entity, where nothing is independent of everything else.

⁵⁶ Rousseau 2012, 380.

⁵⁷ Rousseau 2012, 380–381.

⁵⁸ Rousseau 2012, 381. To understand these paragraphs concerning “*Morale Sensitive*”, I have also used another translation in Rosen, Michael (2004), “*Against rationalism*”, 20-21. https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/michaelrosen/files/against_rationalism.pdf.

The question remains, how does he think that we could trace the source of these feelings in order to modify them? How to find this natural principle leading to a steady virtuous “manner of being”? These considerations above are taken from his *Confessions* where he describes a book project he never finished, called ‘*Morale Sensitive*’. It is left for the reader to collect together all the strings and form a whole picture of his thinking.

If we take, as I have suggested above, this source to be the harmony, then it might be alleged that a harmonious connection with the world is where we can modify these feelings in charge of our desires – this is where we have the opportunity to influence which feelings dominate us. Is it going to be *amour de soi-memê* and *pitié*, or *amour-propre*? This is why harmony is so important. It is the source. It is where we get a chance to change our “manner of being”. It is in the source that we can direct and modify our desires. It is what is stable in this continuous flux. This is where the basis for our moral life is laid, this is where we can form a virtuous state of mind which can prevail in the varying situations of the life lived. This is the universal essence of our innate moral truth. It rises above the circumstantial by taking the battle one step back and thus creating a whole new mindset, where the battle between compassionate and selfish desires diminishes. Instead of trying to fight the overly selfish desires by being strong and resisting them, we change the desires altogether. Harmony, the attunement with the co-existence of everything, gives us the opportunity to conform our manner of being to this biological organic entity we are in. It gives us a deep, natural insight of the Whole instead of our current artificial view of ourselves as separate from everything else.

By changing and modifying our desires, we do not form a moral universal principle operating on the level of logical syllogisms; instead, we adjust our manner of being in the world to match the universal “natural principle”, the universal, innate moral truth existing in all of us. This innate moral truth will then guide us as we continue on our ocean of influences, in our net of co-existence with everything in the universe.

Now we've traced ourselves to the source and we know what it is that Rousseau is after. Eventually I will consider how Rousseau thinks we might be able to assist ourselves into attaining this more sustainable moral being in the world. Before that, a short review of what got us in this mess in the first place is in order. What were the actual obstacles that societal life brought to us? What exactly is it in the progression we call modernity, that made us lose our connection with Nature?

The idea in what follows is that perhaps by looking at what it is that caused the problem in the first place, will help us with formulating a solution to it.

5. The modern way of life

The third premise, leading us towards the conclusion in the argument describing Rousseau's moral thinking, is this:

“In the life of modern mankind this Nature connection has been severely diminished.”

In this section, I will consider several obstacles that our modern ways of life have created according to Rousseau. These include individualism, alienation from nature, the effects of societal life and that of language. In addition, I will draw attention to two types of goodness that Rousseau's theory invokes.

5.1. Individualism and the alienation from nature

Rousseau claims that the development of *amour-propre* led us to put aside our natural tendencies of just caring for ourselves and for others and instead created an abundance of artificial desires. For *amour-propre* to do that, it needed a certain kind of societal situation. It also needed rationality to evolve. These two factors created a situation where *amour-propre* inevitably started to raise its head.

Rousseau is not utterly pessimistic though. We are in the prison that *amour-propre* created around us, but there is a way to break free. There is a way of strengthening *amour de soi-même* and *pitié* in us – that is, finding harmony by spending time in nature. Unlucky for us, the modern way of living has also minimized our nature contacts. So, what we have here is that, on the one hand, our situation led us to be taken over by *amour-propre*, and on the other hand, our way of life has separated us from nature, the possible solution to the problem.

It is not just that we have been cut off from actual nature surroundings as a consequence of industrialism. Also, the individualism of our times, dating back to the renaissance and many other historical developments of the western world, poses a problem for our tuning in with Nature. The idea of a harmony where the boundaries of subject and object dissolve, has become unintelligible in our individualistic world.

It could be put this way; when you have the feeling of being *one* with your surroundings, you instinctively treat everything as you would treat yourself. This does not imply that you could not harm anything – in order to survive, you would amputate one arm and thus harm yourself, wouldn't you. It is the balance between *amour de soi-même* and *pitié* that instinctively falls into place when in harmony. It is very hard to grasp this “oneness” through our individualistic glasses. Rousseau's argument is that the artificiality of our current way of being in the world leads to a sort of blindness to what the world really is about and thus to the malfunctioning of our moral instinct.

In addition to problems that I have already mentioned with the way of life we have today, one is that when you do not use your instincts, they decay. A similar kind of decay can happen to the senses as well. As stone-agers we were probably able to smell, hear and feel the moving of a beast nearby. As we have not needed these abilities anymore, they have decayed, or at least we have lost our ability to live according to them. If we were to be thrown into the wilderness among beasts, we would not be able to sense their

approaching any more. Perhaps we might even still have the same senses and instincts that the stone-agers had, but our abilities to be sensitive to them have diminished. Similarly, as *amour-propre* slowly drew us further and further away from our natural goodness, we became unable to instinctively recognize goodness anymore. The ability might still be in us, but it is decayed, our sensibility to it has rusted – we do not listen to our inner voice, we have learned first and foremost to trust mere rational deliberations. The inner compass might show us the direction, but we do not know how to read it, or don't even bother to check because we are so convinced that we can do without.

5.2 The effects of a modern society

When it comes to modern society, Rousseau is quite rigorous. He writes; “*The delicate tastes and the urbanity of manners of a modern man creates an appearance of all the virtues, without actually possessing a single one*”. The effects of society have molded our customs and passions – even our whole manner of being in the world – to unnatural forms. Before this happened, our morals were rough but natural. In the modern times, we only obey rituals, never our own intuition, he claims. There are no sincere friendships, no real caring, no deep trust among us.⁵⁹ How did this happen?

Rousseau compares our western modern culture to “happy nations”, such as Native Americans. They learned virtue like we learn science, they were simple, innocent and virtuous, preferring other activities than those of the mind, Rousseau states. Our morals would be healthier and society more peaceful without vain and futile activities destroying the foundations of our virtue, he continues. The great evils of modern societies are, according to Rousseau, the misuse of time, literature, arts, and *luxury*. Of these, particularly luxury is completely opposed to good morals; in fact, its necessary consequence is the “dissolution of morality”. Man's worth seems to be nowadays in the

⁵⁹ Rousseau 2002, 47–50.

value of his consumption, Rousseau states. We no longer ask if a man has integrity but rather if he has talent. We reward clever minds, not virtues. As the comforts of life increased, as arts and luxury spread, true virtues faded.⁶⁰

Luxury, for Rousseau, quite strictly meant everything that exceeds what we truly need. Rousseau also attacks our system of education, which only enhances our mind from very early childhood, thus corrupting our real judgment. Our children do not learn to know the true meaning of generosity, equity, temperance, humanity or courage, he declares.⁶¹

Another huge effect on people's lives has also been industrialization. "Human industry expands with the needs that give rise to it"⁶², Rousseau says, pointing out again how all these developments in the end are tied up around luxury. Along with industrialization, we started to build up cities around the factories, and slowly our physical contact with nature diminished.

5.3 The effect of language

Rousseau also saw the role of language as an important factor in this development. Our language changed character in proportion as our "needs" increased. Our social affairs became more entangled and enlightenment extended. Instead of us sharing feelings, our words started sharing ideas, he explains; thus, language became more exact and clearer, but at the same time also more drawn out, more muted, and colder. *Writing* altered language even more: it substituted precision for expressiveness. According to Rousseau, when one speaks, he expresses feelings, but when one writes, he expresses ideas. In writing, all the words need to be interpreted according to common acceptance – instead,

⁶⁰ Rousseau 2002, 59–63.

⁶¹ Rousseau 2002, 60–62.

⁶² Rousseau 1998, 309.

a speaker can determine the meanings as he pleases by the tones of his voice. In Rousseau's view, written language is thus less lively.⁶³

From Rousseau's standpoint then, it might not be a coincidence that at the same time when written language started spreading across European spoken languages also renaissance with its human centeredness and individualism raised its head. These phenomena started to rumble hand in hand, probably empowering each other along the way. Take for instance printing: it also enabled doctrines (i.e. the duty-based morality and dogmatic religion) to spread their rules and norms to wider audiences – reformation would have never succeeded without printing, they say.

5.4 Two types of goodness

Rousseau asserts that in the state of nature, people had no moral relations or obligations toward one another, and hence could not be either good or bad, virtuous or vicious – unless these terms are taken in a “physical sense”⁶⁴. Another self-contradiction seems to be lurking here; why is he talking about moral goodness we lost, if before we lost it, we could not be good or bad? It seems that this discrepancy might be explained via the difference between duty-based and pleasure-based morality. That is, moral relations and obligations in this context would refer to duty-based morality whereas physical sense of morality corresponds to pleasure-based morality; naturally and instinctively doing the right thing. In the obligation sense, people were not good or bad in the state of nature: the difference did not even exist because everybody did the instinctively right thing to do. In the state of nature there were no duty-based obligations or moral relations. There is no such thing as a “pleasure-based bad” in Rousseau's sense. If you reach harmony and understand the chain of co-existence of our world and live accordingly, you always do

⁶³ Rousseau 1998, 296–303.

⁶⁴ Rousseau 1754, 18.

the right thing. Doing bad is a malfunction, non-existent in the state of nature. Now, someone might argue, aren't there also people who take pleasure in doing bad things? Yes, in the non-harmonious sense of pleasure. It does not have much to do with true happiness and bliss, Rousseau might respond.

Now one might argue that it is preposterous to suggest that there is no compassion in the world these days. Rousseau would probably agree. These are not a matter of either-or, we have to remember. Rousseau's point is that we have drifted very far from what it would ideally be like. Our moral instinct is still able to affect us, more or less accurately. It is just blurred. Even if Rousseau at times seems to be very harsh towards us modern people, at other times he reminds us how even the most wicked ones still have it inside them, underneath all the distracting noises. The question we still have not considered thoroughly is how it might be possible to enhance this innate moral nature of ours.

6. The imbalance - and what to do with it

The conclusion of the argument that was formed to describe Rousseau's moral philosophy is this:

“This has led to problems with our moral instinct functioning properly and thus, to an imbalance in our moral decision-making process”

In this section, it is my intention to consider this imbalance in our moral decision-making, the problems that it poses and the process with which Rousseau thinks that we can try to relieve our distress.

“*Finally*”, Rousseau states in the *Moral Letters*, “*we have a secure guide in this labyrinth of human errors. But it is not enough that it exists, it is necessary to know how to get to know it and to follow it*”⁶⁵. In the margin he had added: “*it is not enough that it speaks to us, it is necessary to hear it, it is necessary to distinguish its voice, to learn to be*

⁶⁵ Rousseau 2007f, 198.

*acquainted with it*⁶⁶. Why is it, he asks, that it speaks to all hearts but only a few can hear it? His answer is that it speaks to us in Nature's language, which, unfortunately, everything around us has made us forget.⁶⁷ What is there to be done then? How can we correct all this? This will be the topic of this last section before conclusive remarks.

6.1. Free your mind – and the rest will follow

The situation we are in seems to be caused by two processes advancing simultaneously. One is industrialization and thus the disconnection from actual nature. The other is the rise of rationality together with augmentative societies creating excessive individualism in the form of *amour-propre*. As the proper functioning of our moral instinct is based on a phenomenological sense of co-existence with the world, aforementioned advancements have severely blurred its accuracy in guiding us. When the union with Nature has vanished, our natural inclination is not targeting itself the way it should. It has been replaced by duty-based morality, which helps – but is not the real source of morality. As a social species, we do eventually need guidelines on how to treat one another in our societal circumstances. These guidelines, rules and norms we form end up resembling somewhat the guidance of our moral instinct. This is because our inner moral truth is still in every one of us, although deep underneath and dizzy. Nevertheless, as products of language – not feeling – the rules end up being mere generalizations lacking a certain kind of contextual feature they would need in order for them to guide us correctly. In addition, since duty-based morality has been emphasized in our culture and up-bringing, it has left the instinct less in use, thus also contributing to its decay.

We seem to be facing a vicious circle here, and there is clearly no easy way out.

⁶⁶ Rousseau 2007f, 310.

⁶⁷ Rousseau 2007f, 198.

There is a possibility to sharpen this instinct, similarly like the wine tasters are able to sharpen their senses with a lot of practice. To start with this process, it might help to learn to quiet our mind down from time to time and get in touch with our feelings again. Learn to *just be in the moment*. I think this is a forgotten skill in modern societies, where hurry, duties and profits often rule our timetables. Cultures do usually have traditional ways to do this calming of the mind: In the eastern traditions, for instance meditation, tai chi or kyudo. Our way of living has made us forget what inner peace feels like. Just like Mary in the black-and-white room, we do not even know what to look for any more. We do not know what we are missing. As a starting point, Rousseau suggests the following;

“Let us return to that solitary and peaceful life. All great passions are born in solitude; their equal is not found in society, where nothing has time to make a deep impression, and the variety of tastes numbs the strength of feelings”.⁶⁸

Rousseau frequently mentions coming back to what once was or that which was intended to be. Perhaps the reason why all this talk about harmony is so hard for most of us to even imagine, is that we have been raised to discard our moral instinct since very early childhood. Instead of teaching the children to use their own compasses we have trained them to obey rules. The connection with the whole of Nature might be difficult for us because we have been trained to close the route. Perhaps we have been paralyzing this inborn, biological process by suppressing it with all this social overemphasizing of rationality and individuality. It still functions, but not properly just as would happen also to other senses and instincts in an abnormal developmental scenery. Our modern lives and *amour-propre* created in us needs we do not naturally have. This is our black-and-white room, creating an artificial environment around us, blocking the connection with the real truth. Imagine that.

⁶⁸ Rousseau 1997, 86.

As an adult, it is still possible to correct this, but it is much harder than it would have been, had we been gently guided from the beginning to cultivate this sensitivity innate in us. As our reason has taken misleading paths due to the influence of *amour-propre*, in order to find a way out of our prison we would need to learn how to silence it once in a while, to allow us to be in a pure contact with our innate feelings. Reason is one of the faculties that allowed *amour-propre* to arise in the first place, so also in this regard it seems to be of interest to us to shut it down for a while in order for those natural tendencies of ours to have room in our “manners of being”. Once we get in touch with these natural feelings again, once the connection grows stronger, we can start applying it to our thinking as well. In the end, the goal is an enlightened reason, that is supported by the right kind of feelings. But to begin with, to evoke these natural feelings, it seems wise to try and shut down reason from time to time.

This is also what Rousseau suggests that we should do. He wants us to set aside future worries and regrets about the past, he wants us to learn how to just be in the present, without wandering thoughts. And according to him, the circumstances where we most easily can accomplish this involves solitude and nature.

6.2 Spending time in solitude and nature

When learning ways to attune us back into Nature, Rousseau thinks it helps to have a good friend to share the path with. He wants to be our inspirer, or the stimulator of the process of inner change we are going to face. Finding the right path might be easier when one has someone to share it with, but we need to be careful here. This does not imply that we should take his words literally; in the end, the path is not possible to be instructed

from the outside. “*Do not listen to my voice, except to the extent that you feel it confirmed by the voice of Nature*”⁶⁹, he advises us.⁷⁰

Rousseau shares some quite concrete advice with us about what one needs to do to get this process started. “Extending beyond one’s natural limits for a time” is the goal, he describes. Okay, but what does that mean? It means, according to him, to mistrust all one’s inclinations, to study oneself, to examine everything that one thinks, believes, feels and also what one ought to think, feel and believe.⁷¹ But here, the mistrust and studying are not a work of our intelligence. To get a hold of it, Rousseau claims that one must in fact set aside all the objects that turn us away from it (this means probably all the vices of modern societal life). That can be accomplished by seeking out solitude. The process begins by returning into oneself, he emphasizes.⁷² In other words, it is easier to shut down the distractions when you erase them, temporarily, from your immediate environment. Once you learn to hear your inner voice without the distractions that our modern societal life continuously offers us, the connection grows stronger and slowly you are ready to face the challenges of modern life with a “new manner of being”. “*The gathering together with one’s heart ought to begin by that of one’s senses*”⁷³, is Rousseau’s elegant way to put all this. The studying has to be conducted via feeling, not thinking.

In the beginning, it is thus not necessary to learn how to be alone in the middle of the social world, Rousseau advises further. The objects that distract can be removed until their presence no longer distracts. This is the aim of solitude for him. Rousseau emphasizes that one has to learn how to be alone without boredom; otherwise it is impossible to hear the voice of Nature and thus know oneself truly. Short retreats are

⁶⁹ Rousseau 2007f, 177.

⁷⁰ Rousseau 2007f, 177.

⁷¹ Rousseau 2007f, 179.

⁷² Rousseau 2007f, 198–199, 310.

⁷³ Rousseau 2007f, 198–199, 310.

enough, according to him, to accomplish a dedication to the greatest pleasure of all – to know oneself. Rousseau does not insist us to become loners for life.

We need solitude, but being alone in the city inside four walls resembles a prison for Rousseau: everything surrounding us in our society makes us feel somewhat “*out of our place*”. According to him, it is thus better to go to the countryside where things are completely the opposite. In order to succeed, one should also have no acute feelings of pleasure or pain, no passions or restlessness. The mind should not be too preoccupied with thoughts either. These distractions would prevent the first returns to oneself, Rousseau maintains.⁷⁴ The goal is thus to get rid of them until we are able to bear them.

In order to reach the state of harmony, one’s heart must be at peace, Rousseau maintains. He describes how a uniform and moderate movement might help to achieve this: one without intervals which would draw us back to enviroing objects and out of ourselves. This movement can be created in the imagination – it does not have to be physical – but Rousseau gives an example of a perfect place to start; laying in a boat, swaying in a calm lake, looking at the skies, feeling the slow motion of the waves.⁷⁵ Tai Chi might also be an example of this uniform and moderate movement, produced by our own bodies.

In this most profound solitude, Rousseau describes, the heart will then reveal that you are in fact not alone. The aim is to be able to keep the mind in a calm state which, according to Rousseau, “*lets it fall back upon itself*”⁷⁶. And what should one do once this state has been reached? Nothing, Rousseau answers. Do not interfere with that natural uneasiness or start occupying yourself, he warns us. If you keep this up long enough, you should end up with obtaining such a friendship with yourself that you can do without any

⁷⁴ Rousseau 2007f, 199–200, 310.

⁷⁵ Rousseau 2007f, 199–200, 310; Rousseau 1927, 114–116.

⁷⁶ Rousseau 2007f, 200.

other, Rousseau concludes. Eventually, you will also learn to reach this harmony among the distractions of social life, and retreats become less necessary.⁷⁷

Let us end our journey to the depths of Jean-Jacques' thinking in his own words. In "Julie, or the new Heloise", Rousseau's hero reaches his inner peace when spending time in a little village in the mountains, and describes it in the following words:

"It was high in the mountains, in the purity of the air I found myself, I came to an understanding of the genuine cause of the return of my inner peace I for so long had lost. ... One breathes more freely, one feels lighter in the body, more serene of mind; pleasures there are less intense, passions more moderate. ... The subtlety of the air makes colors more vivid, outlines sharper, brings all lines of sight closer; distances appear shorter, the horizon presents more objects to the eye than it seems able to contain. It ravishes the spirit and the senses, you forget everything, even yourself, and do not even know where you are".⁷⁸

7. Conclusive remarks: The relevance of Rousseau's harmony to complex present-day moral issues

It might be asserted that even if we were to grant Rousseau the existence of such a moral instinct here described, it would not help us much in our modern-day surroundings. Even if it were the perfect guide for the primitive man, it cannot guide us with our complex moral problems that are out of reach for any instinctive behavior to react to. Whatever was, is not relevant today. What could be replied to these challenges?

Rousseau describes his own route in the search for harmony explaining how he is affected in two sometimes contradicting manners: one coming from the outside events and the

⁷⁷ (Rousseau 2007f, 200–201.)

⁷⁸ (Rousseau 1997, 64–65.)

other from his soul. “*Sometimes*”, he describes, “*a feeling of happiness and peace consoled me in my disfavor, and sometimes an intrusive malaise disturbed me during prosperity*”⁷⁹. Solitary life gave him the opportunity to develop these internal dispositions of peace and happiness even stronger. He describes them as a hidden force, counterbalancing his passions without thinking about it, and on the other hand, a seed of goodness inside him. “*We seek our happiness from afar in vain, neglecting to cultivate it in ourselves*”⁸⁰, he claims.⁸¹ His idea of a balance within Nature giving us tools to change our desires is evident in these words. Once we attain this attunement with Nature, our desires are no longer guided by *amour-propre* but instead by our natural feelings. This produces a change in the desires - one which you do not have to actively think about producing. It just naturally happens.

In our present times, almost 300 years after Rousseau’s days, we are facing enormous moral problems, which do not seem to be the kind that could be “instinctively” solved no matter how advanced an instinct one has. If the problem is not in the immediate environment for us to respond instinctively to, if it includes such huge “out of sight” aspects as for example climate change does, then how can any of this be of any use to us? The environmental problems we are facing are often only attainable via rational thinking. Rousseau did not underestimate the role of reason in our lives and decision-making processes. His “going back to nature” does not mean that we should abandon our rationality in the form it has evolved during our history and go back in time to a less “rational” state of being. The situation here is where we are now - but we can evolve further. “Going back to nature” is thus more going back to our natural feelings. To learn a new kind of balance. When we regain a stronger trust in the natural feelings in us, when

⁷⁹ Rousseau 2007f, 191.

⁸⁰ Rousseau 2007f, 191.

⁸¹ Rousseau 2007f, 191.

we replace *amour-propre* with *amour de soi-même* and *pitié* again, our reasoning abilities also enhance. Remember, “reason has to be supported by the right kind of feelings”.

Rousseau’s idea might thus go something like this. If we are able to shut down our *amour-propre*’s “me-me-me” and “more-more-more” -voices distracting us from seeing the instinctively right moral choices, we can achieve a naturally just way of approaching matters, even the big ones. To take an example, we would *naturally* be able to take a Rawlsian “veil of ignorance” approach; you would not have to create an artificial thought experiment to reach an understanding of matters that put no-one’s interest above another’s, when the (overly) selfish motives have vanished. Our natural inclinations of taking for ourselves only as much as we need to survive, and having a strong *pitié* fighting against all the suffering of other living beings in this co-existence of ours would naturally produce such an approach.

Besides the climate crisis, in the present moment there is yet another crisis affecting the whole humanity – the covid-19 pandemic. During the lockdown of spring 2020 here in Finland, *Helsingin Sanomat* had a series of articles where they called around the world to interview professionals of different fields, asking about the possible effects that the pandemic will have in a variety of matters. I wonder, what Rousseau might have answered to them, had he been called up to comment on our present day crisis from the 1700’s. I guess he would have pointed out how people have actually found their ways *back to nature* when all the options of a consumer society for spending time were out of reach. He might have pointed out how the pandemic forced us to attain *solitude*. In essence, this is exactly how he advised us to begin the search to our inner moral truths: to withdraw from the distractions of the society (such as the never-ending comparison and perhaps also the *amour-propre*ness of other people around), and to expose oneself to nature.

In addition, Rousseau might have pointed out how we could see traces of compassion increasingly showing up in people’s behavior. In Europe, people sang on the balconies to

bring hope and strength to medical staff⁸². People have helped the old ladies and gentlemen in their neighbourhood, whom they did not perhaps even say a hello to earlier. Caring about each other raised its head when the need for it came close. Like discussed above, for a long time it has been the case that in western societies the distress that our way of life causes is not in our immediate awareness. We know it is happening, somewhere else, but rationally knowing it seems not to be enough for *pitié* to strengthen in us. When the distress comes close, right to your “skin”, so to speak, the *pitié* that we all have in us has a natural route to grow stronger – when we receive information from our surroundings of a distress, a natural need to help arises. In order to increase *pitié*, Rousseau advised his friend in the *Moral Letters* to go and help the poor – not just to make the maid to bring some money for them, but to actually get her “hands dirty”, to expose herself to distress as much as possible⁸³. Consequently, Rousseau might have commented to *Helsingin Sanomat* that there might be some light in all this darkness of our pandemic times. The pandemic brings distress “close to the bone”, and the consequences are showing – for instance, while the need for mental health support lines has increased heavily, so has the amounts of volunteers⁸⁴.

The more people find their ways back to their natural compassion, the more *compassion* will spread around in humanity, Rousseau might conclude. We are constantly attuning to our surroundings, and once the amount of *amour-propre* all around decreases and is replaced by *pitié*, it will be easier for others to find it as well – as the distractions of the society decrease, the frequency of our shared innate moral truth is easier to be heard and attuned to. Thus, Rousseau might have casted hope for humanity in these times of crisis.

⁸² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2020/mar/19/balconies-sites-hope-coronavirus-in-pictures>

⁸³ Rousseau 2007f, 203.

⁸⁴ yle uutiset 23.10.2020: “Noora Frantzi, 30, kouluttautui keväällä vapaaehtoiseksi kriisipuhelinpäivystäjäksi ja auttaa nyt ahdistuneita suomalaisia – puheluiden määrät räjähtäneet”. <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-11584670>

In conclusion, it seems fair to say that if Rousseau is right, then the kind of enlightened reason he has described might help us not only to conduct a morally more sustainable life in our concrete everyday surroundings, but also with making the hard decisions this planet would desperately need us to make.

“In whatever state a soul might be”, Rousseau asserts, “there remains a feeling of pleasure in doing good that is never erased, and that serves as a first foothold of all the other virtues. It is by cultivating this feeling, that one succeeds”.⁸⁵ We do not know what we are missing until we reach it. Rousseau’s advice for us in this situation is *“not to set aside objects that might make us more tender”* and *“not to turn our eyes away from other people’s misery”*⁸⁶. By reinforcing empathy, it grows stronger. Instead of a vicious circle we have been facing since the rise of modernity, it is time to turn it into a positive circle. Thus, on the outset, approaching inner balance and harmony might seem like an irrelevant step to take, when we are facing a potential global environmental catastrophe. But Rousseau might insist that it is the very thing that we need to do.

Rather than suggesting we should tear up all the societal structures we have created and go back to the lifestyle of the stone-agers, Rousseau wants us to recognize the development of *amour-propre*, to understand its artificiality and thus reversibility. We have the ability to learn how to be guided by our natural feelings. With the right kind of guidance, we can also steer our rational moral decision making onto the right tracks – into a new balance. All it needs is a positive circle, instead of a vicious one, to start rolling. Out of tiny streams of compassion, vast rivers can evolve.

⁸⁵ Rousseau 2007f, 202.

⁸⁶ Rousseau 2007f, 203.

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