Regenerating Political Animals

by

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Department of Political Science
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Abstract

*Regenerating Political Animals* situates the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (1789) and the French Revolution in the theological natural science and political theory of the eighteenth century. Beginning with a “counter-revolutionary” account of the philosophy of this period—which situated the “return to nature” and assertion of natural right in atheistic and materialist philosophy—this thesis argues that the more influential and dominant account of “nature” in this period was one which asserted the uniqueness of the human being through the “spirituality of his soul,” and his capacity to perfect and regenerate himself through regenerating his moral and political conditions. Rooted in the natural theology of Georges-Louis LeClerc Comte de Buffon and Charles Bonnet, the “perfectible” human being also served as the Archimedean point of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s philosophy. These three thinkers are the focal points of the thesis, which culminates in the argument that what was born in Revolutionary France was a “new man” —*l’homme régénéré*—and a new conception of human nature that still courses through our contemporary conception of human rights, and of the human being. Rights are still grounded in a natural theology that has faith that a future possible world will better accord with nature; and we, as regenerative political animals, are the self-regenerative agents of the transformation of the world.
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For my parents,  
*Who brought me into the world, and taught me to strive for the good*
In the beginning, men had eyes, but could not see,  
They had ears, but could not understand;  
They wandered like dreams. . .  
Until I taught them to see the stars.

-Aeschylus  
Prometheus Bound
Introduction

The intellectual culture of eighteenth century France is routinely cast as one in which the philosophes were engaged in the “Enlightenment project.” Anthony Pagden has recently written that what this project “aimed at was the application of the rational intellect to the murky reaches of the human mind, wherein lurked the menacing, disruptive forces of prejudice, religion and superstition, uncontrolled and unimagined emotions, everything that conspired to deprive the autonomous individual of self-knowledge and self-control.” The “Enlightenment project” is employed for both celebratory and derisive reasons, and has, as a term, been valorized and criticized. Some argue that there is no one Enlightenment project, only Enlightenment projects. Grounded in the work of J.G.A. Pocock, there is a growing trend in academic scholarship to diversify the Enlightenment, claiming that there were multiple movements that were geographically separated, and multiple claims about what constituted the “Enlightenment project” itself. As Pocock has written, there may “no longer be ‘The Enlightenment,’ a unitary and universal phenomenon with a single history either

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celebrated or condemned, but instead a family of discourses arising about the same time in a number of European cultures.”⁴ The “Enlightenment Project” is also employed both to validate the terms of the project as they are understood, or to critique them. Alasdair MacIntyre employs the term to deride the period’s secularizing impulses,⁵ while Anthony Pagden resuscitates and celebrates it to demonstrate that “we are all, inescapably, the heirs of the architects of the Enlightenment. . . The Enlightenment still matters.”⁶

Regardless of the diversifications (both substantive and geographic) of this “Project,” however, a dominant reading in both the Enlightenment’s critics and champions has been to see the period (or periods) as a triumph of the rule of reason and science. Secularism is our Enlightenment inheritance: a casting off, as Pagden writes, of the menacing forces of religion. It is a period in which we are led to believe that scientists and philosophers saw religion for what it was—a superstitious substitute for true knowledge of the world. Science replaced the Biblical narrative, and reason replaced revelation. The scientific revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries drew man back to the earth and to nature, and away from the heavens.⁷ It is what Marcel Gauchet has called the disenchantment of the world.⁸ As Michael Gillespie has written, “the conventional story . . . sees the modern age as the product of exceptional human beings, of brilliant scientists, philosophers, writers, and

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⁵ He shares this assessment of the Enlightenment period with Charles Taylor: Charles Taylor, A Secular Age (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2007).
⁷ This is the source of the arguments of both the champions and the critics.
explorers who overcame the religious superstition of their time and established a new world based on reason.”

This vision of the Enlightenment is tempting for most because it allows us to rescue a vision of ourselves with which we agree. In the modern age of human rights and the secular state in the West, it is attractive to see the birth of human rights taking place in an era of triumphant reason, and radical irreligious thought. Jonathan Israel has, indeed, located the source of the “Enlightenment Project” and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in the period’s most radical and atheistic philosophy: “basic human rights lie right at the center of our core values in Western society today. . . . What I want to do . . . is go back to the beginning—the origin of our modern idea of basic human rights in the Enlightenment—and show how . . . [this was born from] an underground philosophy . . . generally associated at the time not only with democracy, individual liberty, liberty of the press, and sexual emancipation, but also with irreligion, materialism and atheism.”

Stephen Gaukroger also locates the “shaping of modernity” in a new scientific understanding that resulted in the “naturalization of the human, that is, the formulation in empirical terms of questions about the human realm that had up to that point taken a non-empirical form.” The French Revolution is seen as the culmination of this atheistic, scientific, and irreligious world-view.

While David Sorkin casts the Glorious Revolution as a “Religious Enlightenment” he writes that “by introducing a stark choice between old regime and new, Christianity and reason . . .

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the French Revolution and Napoleon ushered it out.”\textsuperscript{12} The Enlightenment and the French Revolution had no place for religion. They are treated as “ideological touchstone[s] of liberal, humanist, and secular values.”\textsuperscript{13}

The characterization of eighteenth century France as founded in materialist and atheistic philosophy is especially prevalent. Hippolyte Taine located the source of the French Revolution in the “battalions” of this philosophy, represented by the Encyclopedists and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who called for a “return to nature.”\textsuperscript{14} According to Taine, the philosophes claim man “must not forget, if he would comprehend his own being, that, along with himself, other lives exist in his vicinity, graduated up to him and issuing from the same trunk. . . He is there as the part of a whole, by virtue of being a physical body, a chemical composition, an animated organism, a sociable animal, among other bodies, other compositions, other social animals, all analogous to him.”\textsuperscript{15} Science and material philosophy—the study of nature—denies the spiritual nature of man, drawing him to the earth with the animals. In the scientific culture of the eighteenth century we also see the birth of Carl Linnaeus’s taxonomy of natural creatures, in which man and ape are classified together in the class of \textit{Anthropomorpha}. What we are drawn to see in the “Enlightenment,” thus, is the nascent stage of the scientific world view we now hold: one in which the nature of man is divorced from his spiritual essence, and embedded in nature and the natural kingdom. The great pioneers of this scientific world-view were those who turned away from religion and theology and toward the materials and principles of the natural world, including

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, 176.
the material and scientific principles of man himself. The liberal, secular Western world of human rights thus owes its debt to the secularizing scientists and philosophes of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

There are, however, scholars who remind us that the division between reason or secularism and religion is not as clear-cut as we would like to assume. While stopping short of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, both Michael Gillespie and Larry Siedentop have rescued what they see as the theological origins of the modern world. We must, Gillespie writes, “come to terms with the implicit metaphysical/theological commitments that characterize our often concealed tradition.” Siedentop locates a “secular translation of the Christian idea of the ‘soul’” in the idea of universal human rights, and human dignity, that does not, and cannot, shake its heritage. Christian beliefs, he writes, “provided the ontological foundation for the individual as a moral status and primary social role.”

Mark Lilla claims that we have not shaken our political-theological roots. Like Gillespie, Lilla writes that we have a “difficult heritage” in being “heirs to the biblical tradition”; “political rhetoric in the United States, for example, is still shot through with messianic language.”

So too has there been a recent turn to the theological aspects and origins of the Enlightenment, and of Enlightenment science in particular. David Sorkin’s *The Religious*

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16 See also Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History*: “all modern striving for improvements and progresses, in the plural, is rooted in that singular Christian progress from which the modern consciousness has emancipated itself because it cannot be known and demonstrated by reason as a natural law but only by hope and faith as a gift of grace.” Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 84, my emphasis. As will become evident throughout the thesis, Löwith’s claim that Christian progress and historical progress are exclusive categories of meaning is, I believe, too reductive: “Christian progress from the old Adam to a new creature is certainly a momentous progress, yet it is entirely independent of historical changes in man’s social, political, cultural and economic, conditions” (113); the “modern religion of progress . . . is an irreligion; for it is a belief in man’s perfectibility” (113).
19 Ibid, 355.
Enlightenment attacks the vision of the Enlightenment in the “academic as well as the popular imagination” as “a quintessentially secular phenomenon—indeed, as the very source of modern secular culture.”

He cites Pocock’s claim that “the Enlightenment was ‘a product of religious debate and not merely a rebellion against it,’” and grounds his own study of the Religious Enlightenment in the period of England’s Glorious Revolution. Here, Sorkin claims, “religious enlighteners attempted to renew and rearticulate their faith, using the new science and philosophy to promote a tolerant, irenic understanding of belief that could serve a shared morality and politics. [They aimed] to harmonize faith and reason.”

Jon Parkin’s Science, Religion, and Politics in Restoration England aims to demonstrate the blend of scientific and theological reasoning in the work of Richard Cumberland. Cumberland’s “curious ‘modernity’” is rooted in the purpose of “re-establish[ing] the divine obligation of natural law, to emphasize the link between God and morality,” and he employed “recent scientific advances to back up his ethical claims.” This, Parkin claims, is far from a modern “secular” theory.

Peter Harrison claims that this manner of studying philosophy in the Enlightenment period is essential. There were no divisions in the Enlightenment period between science, philosophy, and religion, and thus thinkers ought to be read in the manner in which they operated and wrote. “Science” and “religion” “are concepts of relatively recent coinage” and “we distort the past if we uncritically apply our modern categories to past activities that would have been conceptualized by those who engaged in them in a quite different way . . .

21 Sorkin, The Religious Enlightenment, 1.
The idea of a perennial conflict between science and religion [is] false.” It is only recently, Harrison claims, that there has been a boundary of ‘religion’ that has “been set apart from the ‘nonreligious’ or secular domains of human existence.” The historical norm is, rather, the cosmological understanding, which begins in (and before) Ancient Greece, and carries through Enlightenment science under the more aptly characterized category of “natural theology.” This is far removed from the modern tendency to classify science as “a kind of rational counterpart to an irrational belief system, an alternative source of meaning and value, or a more advanced stage of human development that was destined to replace a more primitive age of religion.”

Harrison’s *Territories of Science and Religion* is a good faith attempt to shift scholarship away from importing contemporary assumptions into the study of the philosophic past. But he curiously steps over the eighteenth century entirely. Harrison accounts for the natural philosophy of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in great detail, addressing the Reformation, and the philosophy of Bacon and Descartes (among many others) and their inheritors, rooting these in categories inherited from the theology of the Middle Ages. “Modern religion,” thus, he writes, “had its birth in the seventeenth century; modern science in the nineteenth.” According to Harrison, it is not until the nineteenth century that we see the emergence of science *as distinct* from religion; in the seventeenth century they are operating relatively harmoniously in the natural-theological sphere. What to make, then, of the eighteenth century—the period, it would seem, in which this transformation began to take shape?

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26 Ibid, 3.
27 Ibid, 187.
28 Ibid, 147.
The status of natural science in the eighteenth century, and its relationship to theology, has not generally been treated with the same nuanced study as that of the centuries preceding it. The eighteenth century is more usually described as the period in which secular science was entrenched; an era in which mechanistic and atheistic philosophy reigned supreme (think here, for example, of Sorkin’s claim that the Religious Enlightenment died with the French Revolution). But there are a number of notable exceptions. Stephen Gaukroger’s impressive collection of work takes a more balanced position. Gaukroger claims that the Christian “source of legitimacy was not wholly abandoned between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, and indeed in areas such as natural history attempts were made to foster it.” What Gaukroger calls the eighteenth-century “naturalization of the human” also led to the naturalization of religion, which he claims is rooted in the rise of the “sensible” empirical understanding of the world: “a distinctive feature of mid-eighteenth century thought is the way in which questions of cognition, morality, and civic responsibilities came to be grounded in sensibility. At the same time there is an emerging use of empirical methods, sometimes mirroring those of natural philosophy, to open up questions that had traditionally occupied the realms of humane learning and religious doctrine.”

For Gaukroger, then, the “return to nature” of the eighteenth century was one that did not foreclose—but rather opened up—the interaction of the theological, philosophical, and scientific modes of inquiry; a far cry from the “battalions” of atheistic and materialistic thought described by Hippolyte Taine.

Ann Thomson has recently argued that, in fact, the “materialist” philosophy of the Enlightenment was not as atheistic as has been assumed. Discussing, for example, Julien

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Offray de la Mettrie’s “materialist physiology,” Thomson claims that positions such as these “can be seen not as a refutation of religion, but as an impulse to rescue it from clericalism, ‘priestcraft,’ dogmatism, superstition, and fanaticism.” The eighteenth century was, Thomson claims, foundationally about figuring out what human beings are. Science and religion were equal partners in the debate over the identity of the human being, and the status of the human soul. Her study thus includes “the confrontation with religious orthodoxy, the impact of materialism on political ideas and reformist thought, and the contribution of materialistic speculation to the ‘natural history of mankind’ and the ‘science of man.’” The “science of man” “developed in this period out of a complex interaction of politico-religious circumstances and theological and scientific preoccupations. The confrontations which marked these years did not mean that the lines of combat were clearly drawn between science and religion . . . I am arguing for a more complex reading of the intellectual history of time, which can only be achieved by attempting to understand it on its own terms rather than sticking labels on it.”

Peter Hans Reill also seeks to understand the natural science of the eighteenth century on its own terms. Reill questions the “master narrative” of the Enlightenment, which consists of “the triumph in and by the Enlightenment of a mathematically-based science, founded upon certain essential presuppositions concerning matter, method, and explanation whose reign has lasted until today.” Far from this mechanistic and mathematical characterization, Reill argues that the “return to nature” in the eighteenth century was one that vitalized it. It is clear that “nature was the principle that unified all narratives: the history of human society, as

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32 Ibid.
33 Ibid, 27.
much as the history of the earth and the stars, was a narrative about nature."\textsuperscript{35} Reill claims that rather than seeing nature as what Max Horkheimer called a “heap of things,” “Enlightenment vitalists envisioned it as a teeming interaction of active forces vitalizing matter, revolving around each other in a developmental dance.”\textsuperscript{36} It was a living nature which encompassed investigations of natural history and the life sciences, all contributing to an account of the human being’s active place in the natural world. This natural vitalism also entailed a distinctive account of “prototypes” which provided the ordering principles of vital matter: a harmony of eternal molds and a regenerative universe.\textsuperscript{37}

Reill claims that the forerunner of this distinctive mode of natural science was the eighteenth-century French natural scientist, Georges-Louis LeClerc Comte de Buffon, author of the multi-volumed \textit{Histoire Naturelle}. Buffon “emphasized the primacy of living over inanimate matter, asserted the existence of inner, active forces as central agents in nature, [and] envisioned a world of new creation . . . Above all, Buffon proclaimed an order of things that elevated dynamic relations and qualitative change over time. He revitalized and historicized nature without denying the existence of a comprehensive order.”\textsuperscript{38} Buffon’s “new language of nature,” Reill claims, affected all realms of natural and human science, redefining “the relationship between nature and humanity.”\textsuperscript{39}

The “return to nature” is thus far more complex than the narrative of Enlightenment “science” to which we are accustomed. While Hippolyte Taine and many who have followed him have assigned this “return to nature” to a naturalistic—and thus atheistic, irreligious, and

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid, 9.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid, 69.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid, 241.
materialistic—view of the world and of the human being, how the human being and nature was understood far exceeds this caricature. What this thesis aims to do is to account for this eighteenth-century conception of the human being on its own terms, through taking account of its French theological-scientific origins, beginning, as does Reill, with Buffon. This is not merely, or only, a scholarly correction to the study of Enlightenment science and religion. As we have seen, the stakes of interpreting this period of history are high. Jonathan Israel, among many others, reads the history of human rights back into the French Revolutionary period and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. He claims that to know ourselves, we must know our origins: and these are to be found in the radical atheistic doctrines of the philosophes.

I too will subscribe to the position that we must know this period of history to know ourselves, though for reasons, and from sources, far removed from Jonathan Israel’s. Nosce te ipsum [know thyself] was the direct challenge of the philosophes upon whom this thesis will focus; and theirs was a response to the skepticism about the identity of the human being inspired by growing knowledge and observation of the natural world. Carl Linnaeus’ classification of the human being with the apes in the Anthropomorpha, accompanied with Linnaeus’s distinction of the human being defined merely with the dictum, “nosce te ipsum,” was not satisfactory to Buffon, Charles Bonnet, nor to Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In order for man not to be classified with the animals, he must come to know himself. It was this project—of defining the human being, and of establishing a “science of man”—that laid the ground for the assertion of distinctively human rights. The “return to nature” of eighteenth century thought was not an atheistic reduction of man to his material and animal root, but an assertion of the spirituality of man’s soul that could raise him out of his corruption, and
toward a higher good. In this distinction of the human being, Jean-Jacques Rousseau is embedded in the natural-theological tradition of the eighteenth century, and it is through Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his natural scientific interlocutors that the French Revolution gains its theologically- and scientifically-inspired “regenerative” discourse. The assertion of natural right was one that depended on understanding human beings as capable of regenerating themselves through regenerating their moral and political conditions. This is a “vitalist” vision of man that is born in the eighteenth-century natural science of France. And this is a vision of man that, I argue, we still hold today.

Chapter 1 begins with grounding the “atheistic” reading of eighteenth century philosophy in counter-revolutionary scholarship. Hippolyte Taine, among many others, claimed that the *philosophes* called for a “return to nature” that, in its materialist reading of nature, sought to level the human being with the animal. There is, I demonstrate, a long-standing tradition beginning in the work of Michel de Montaigne that claims the animals live in a condition that is more natural, and thus happier and healthier, than human beings: “do you want man to be healthy, do you want him disciplined and firmly and securely poised? Wrap him in darkness, idleness, and dullness. We must become like the animals in order to become wise.”

This celebration of natural animality was ascribed to many philosophes of the eighteenth century, including Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose “natural man” lives in a state of tranquility and liberty with (and like) the animals. The calling forth of man’s natural liberty and equality in the French Revolution was seen by the counter-revolutionaries as the degrading of man, which leveled the human with the animal kingdom.

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This location of revolutionary liberty and equality in the defamation of man’s spirituality and distinction in the natural kingdom is misplaced. It was not an atheistic, materialistic, and “leveling” account of nature that was dominant, but an account of the human being, and his place in nature, that sought to define our uniqueness as regenerative political animals. This is a tradition that I locate in three interlocutors of eighteenth-century France: Georges-Louis LeClerc de Buffon, Charles Bonnet, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Chapter 2 establishes the turn in eighteenth century natural science toward a “vitalist” scientific method which denied the ascription of final causes in nature. This turn toward vitalism was inspired, for both Buffon and Bonnet, by the 1740 discovery of the miraculous self-regenerating polyp. Beginning in the work of Buffon, nature was seen as ordered through the Great Chain of Being, and, simultaneously, historically renewing and renewable. Though human beings cannot know the final causes of natural things (these are known only by God), they can, according to Buffon, know that nature is ordered by what he calls “original prototypes” from which the inhabitants of the natural world have degenerated over time.

It is only the human being, however, who possesses the “spiritual principle” of being capable of perceiving nature’s degrees of degeneration; and, thus, it is only the human being who can work to perfect nature through perfecting himself. Man is capable of regenerating, or renewing, himself and the world through improvements, which, for the human being, are dependent upon the improvement of our moral life. Both inside and outside of nature’s degrees, man is simultaneously a natural creature capable of regenerative perfection (and, likewise, subject to degeneration) and the site of his own regenerative power. With the natural model of the polyp, and the spiritually creative essence granted him by God, man can
progressively change both his biology and his customs in view of a reborn and perfected form.

Chapter 3 places this regenerative power in what Charles Bonnet would come to call the “palingenetic” consciousness of the human being. Like Buffon, Bonnet claims that man is the only historical agent, capable of giving himself a “second birth” and changing natural history through the renewal of himself in social, political, and moral improvement. It is man’s creativity, his capacity to invent, to speak in and to comprehend universal ideas, that informs his conception of the possibilities of his future, and which separates him from the animal kingdom of which he is an otherwise integrated, integral, and indeed renewable, part. This capacity and distinction of the human being is precisely what Jean-Jacques Rousseau calls “perfectibility.”

Placing Rousseau in the theological-scientific tradition of Buffon and Bonnet, Chapters 4 and 5 reveal Rousseau’s significant debt and similarity to his interlocutors, and the manner in which Rousseau reworked this “regenerative” natural science in his moral and political theory. Rousseau’s “perfectibility” locates the distinction of man in the same “spiritual principle” as Buffon; and, like Buffon, Rousseau casts the human being as a creature defined by his division from the rest of the natural kingdom. Buffon calls man Homo Duplex—a division between the sentiment of our present existence (which we share with the animals), and the consciousness of our existence—and we see this same division in Rousseau’s description of man in the Discourse on the Origins of Inequality [the Second Discourse]. Rousseau’s description of man in the Second Discourse, the subject of Chapter 4, also casts man as the being directed toward futurity, and the creature defined by an “historical consciousness.” Rousseau, however, presents this division of man as the source
of all of our ills, and provides a description of the \textit{true} “natural man” who lives in tranquility
and liberty akin to the animals. Natural man is “naturally good,” while the perfectible human
being is subject to corruption and vice. What Chapters 4 and 5 demonstrate is that
Rousseau’s account of “natural goodness” is an aspirational ideal as opposed to an origin
story. What is naturally good is, as it is for Buffon and Bonnet, a sense of belonging to the
Great Chain of Being. It is a longing for a life that is lived \textit{in} the natural order, as opposed
to being divided from it. Being embedded in nature is, however, only possible if man is
\textit{Homo Unus} as opposed to \textit{Homo Duplex}; when he is lacking the perfectibility—the
dividedness— that defines his own humanity. Man can only be \textit{in nature} when he is lacking
his own.

Rousseau thus presents us with an account that divides \textit{human nature} from \textit{nature} in
the same manner as Buffon and Bonnet. Like his natural scientific interlocutors, Rousseau
also presents us with accounts of how we might harness our perfectibility to our advantage,
through moral education (in \textit{Emile}) and political reconstitution (in \textit{The Social Contract}), the
subjects of Chapter 5, and the beginning of Chapter 6. These are the means by which we can
redeem ourselves in turning away from the corruption to which our dividedness subjects us.
We must harness our “spiritual principle,” or perfectibility, and strive toward the betterment
of ourselves and of our conditions. Man is the agent of his own redemption because he has
fallen from the order of nature. To constitute the conditions of his redemption, then, man
must be in position to reconstitute himself. Looking to the “natural good,” and aiming to
accord our moral and political conditions with this image of self-sufficiency and lack of
conflict and division (both in and among ourselves), we are in a position to regenerate
ourselves through regenerating the world. We must employ our \textit{human nature} to \textit{become}
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natural, embedded in the Great Chain of Being and the natural order. Natural man, the image
of “natural goodness,” is a state foreign to the human condition, and Rousseau exploits this
image to direct us to a better possible moral and political future.
Rousseau provides an “original prototype” of man that serves to correct human
nature, and to correct human politics. We claim that we are born free and equal, but we are
not born free and equal. The world must therefore be changed to accord with nature as
opposed to circumstance. But this is an aspirational ideal. For Rousseau, the human
condition has never been one in which men are truly free and equal. To correct this lack in
the circumstances of our lives, and in the history of the institutionalization of inequalities, an
image is required of what we would like to become. We must remake ourselves in the image
of natural goodness and orient ourselves to the good, as opposed to accepting the corrupt.
We must see ourselves as natural man in order to bring about his existence. We have to turn
away from the inheritance of our human nature toward a nature that is better than ourselves.
Rousseau thus supplies a natural theology in which natural goodness is an act of faith: a
revelation that will transform how we think of ourselves and will indeed change our human
nature. No longer divided from ourselves and others, we would participate in an order and a
greater whole.
In this enterprise, Rousseau is one with the natural scientists Buffon and Bonnet.
Buffon’s natural philosophy is built upon the assertion of “original prototypes”: divine
wholes from which the species of the earth degenerate in their imperfections. It is only the
human being, Buffon claims, that seems “intent on destroying himself,”41 and yet it is the
only species that has within itself—in its combination of the physical and spiritual
	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  	  
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Georges-Louis LeClerc de Buffon, Histoire Naturelle, trans. J.S. Barr, Barr’s Buffon: Buffon’s Natural
History, 10 volumes. (London: H. D. Seymonds, 1797), X 340.

	  


principles—the capacity to remake and perfect its conditions. Borrowing the language of Rousseau, Bonnet claims that man is “the most perfectible of all the earth’s species” and must therefore be active in his own moral and social education toward a greater spiritual perfection. Man possesses an innovative capacity to modify his social and political circumstance, and to rise from his habitual, or ‘corrupted’ state “incorruptible and glorious.”

While Rousseau carries a pessimism about this better future world that Buffon and Bonnet do not seem to possess, he nevertheless sees its possibility. The human being as distinctively capable of regenerating his conditions must, to be redeemed from his corruption, regenerate himself. It is, thus, as François Furet writes, “by virtue of the project of regeneration that the Revolution belongs to Rousseau.”

Chapter 6 focuses, in its latter and concluding half, on the regenerative discourse that permeated the French Revolution. Having its roots in both the biblical conception of being regenerated through accepting the grace of God, and the biological conception of the regeneration of the flesh, “regeneration” became, in the French Revolutionary period, a moral and political term describing the capacity of human beings to actively remake themselves through remaking their conditions. What Mona Ozouf calls the “new man” of the French Revolutionary period, “l’homme régénéré,” was both the “beginning and the end” of the French Revolutionary enterprise. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen relied on men asserting those rights by nature and through regenerating the morals and institutions of the state. In regenerating the state, they

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42 Charles Bonnet, La Palingénésie Philosophique, ou Idées sur l’État Passé et sur l’État Futur des Êtres Vivans (Genève: Claude Philibert and Bartheleme, 1769), 315.
were, as they knew, regenerating themselves. Human beings must remake the state, and in the process make themselves into the bearers of natural right: a process that will make them good, free and equal, and thus in accordance with a nature that does not at present exist. They must use human art to make themselves natural; they must use what they are, to become what they might be. This is precisely the “return to nature” that was described by Buffon, Bonnet, and Rousseau.

The Conclusion thus returns to Hippolyte Taine’s atheistic and “leveling” “return to nature” to correct both the interpretation of the philosophes’ influence on the revolutionary rhetoric of rights, and the interpretation of Rousseau, who was accused of being the “apologist of bestialness.”

Rescuing Rousseau from this association, and reminding us of the natural-theological science of the eighteenth century of which he was a part, is not merely an academic or historical corrective. Because these interpretations of the philosophic thought of the eighteenth century are so often tied to the genesis of universal and natural human rights in the French Revolutionary period, the understanding of nature and human nature in this period is integral. As Durand de Maillane proclaimed at the Convention, “a people that has lost its rights, and that demands them, must know the principles of its regeneration.”

Both Lynn Hunt and Peter de Bolla have marked a significant shift in the eighteenth century discussion of “right”: from “right” or “rights” to the “rights of man” in the Declaration of the Rights of Man. The “rights of man,” Hunt claims, were born from Rousseau: the “rights of man” gained currency in French after its appearance in Jean-

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Jacques Rousseau’s *Social Contract* of 1762." By June 1763, “‘rights of man’ had become a common term according to an underground newsletter,” which tied the rights of man to Rousseau’s “*Inequality of Conditions, in Emile, in The Social Contract.*” Hunt locates the distinction of the “‘rights of man’” in the novel effect it had upon the people of the eighteenth century in France, in refashioning their perceptions of themselves, and of human nature. So too does Peter de Bolla distinguish between “‘rights’” and the “‘rights of man’: the latter “were both a container for all the specific rights one might claim and also the load-bearing foundation upon which one could construct an account of personhood.” “The conceptual architecture of the ‘rights of man’ does not require rights to have a content or an object. Its purpose is to provide the grammar for understanding the commonality of the singular universal that is the human”; it is a *noetic* as opposed to a purely *political* account of rights.

This was, thus, not a description of rights belonging to man, to be respected or guaranteed by the state, but a regeneration of the *self*. It was a new conception of human nature. This new human nature was that of the self-regenerative man: capable of remaking himself through remaking his moral and political world. It is a vision of the human being that we still hold, and one that is still directed in what Mark Lilla calls a “messianic” way to a future that has not yet been realized. Marcel Gauchet locates a distinction between the “‘religion’” conception of the future, and the “‘secular’”: “the *secularization of history* is completed as the future becomes unrepresentable. The faceless and nameless future . . . is the

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pure future, removed from the theological cocoon which concealed it.”53 We are not in Gauchet’s secular world. Though we are historical and self-creating beings, we still see our human nature as one that is striving for a natural good. We still believe that by nature human beings are free and equal, and we still perceive that our own corruptions have prevented the world from according with nature. To make the world reflect this natural image, we must change it. And to change the world, we must change ourselves. No longer subject to inequalities, and no longer unfree, the world would be made better—indeed, the world would be good—if it were in accordance with nature. We are still in the grips of the eighteenth century’s natural theology.

If we are going to know ourselves through knowing the Enlightenment, what we have come to know is misplaced. The very concept of modern human rights contains an understanding of human beings that has its origins in a theological natural science: one that is founded in the promise of a future and better possible world that requires our self-regeneration for its fulfillment. In the words of Edmund Burke, “atheists are not our preachers”; but scientific theologians (among whom I include Rousseau) are. The “new man” and the “science of man” that we see in the thought and politics of eighteenth century France is still operative, and our blindness to its origins in a novel form of natural faith obscures the dialogue we might have about the possibilities or pitfalls of its realization.

James Griffin has written of the lack of conceptual clarity in the idea of human rights. He claims, de Bolla writes, “that the problem with human rights is that the concept is poorly formed or ‘incomplete.’” He thinks that even today we still work with ‘what can reasonably be called the Enlightenment notion’ that derives a human right from the fact of being human: ‘the idea is still that of a right we have simply in virtue of being human, with no further

53 Gauchet, Disenchantment, 185.
So too has George Kateb written: “the defense of human rights needs a philosophical anthropology that explores human uniqueness, and that means, among other things, that it must avoid material or mechanical reduction . . . There are many scientific or would-be scientific reductions extant in the world. They all tend to reject human uniqueness or give an impoverished account of it. [But] they do not ring true. . . We need a general account of human nature.”

This account of human uniqueness is available to us in eighteenth-century natural science, and it is itself the keystone of our continuing faith in human rights. As the philosophes of the eighteenth century sought to do, we must, above all else, come to know ourselves through knowing this history of our regenerative human nature.

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Chapter 1
Beasts by Nature

Que sçay-je [What do I know]?
-Montaigne

Nosce te ipsum [Know thyself]
- Linnaeus

In *Les prisonniers d’Orléans (épisode révolutionnaire) 1792-1795*, historian Paul Huot tells a captivating story about the radical Jacobins liberating the animals of the king’s ménagerie in the midst of the French Revolution. Huot claims that “after the 10th of August [1792]¹ the Jacobins of Versailles (Society of the Friends of the Constitution) marched to the [king’s] ménagerie—drum beating, leading with the flag—and the leader declared to the director that they had come in the name of the people and in the name of nature to liberate the beings that had emerged free from the hands of the Creator and had been unduly held by the pomp and the arrogance of tyrants.”² Much of the French Revolution’s imagery and propaganda was indeed tied to the freeing of animals from their ‘prisons’: the revolutionary slogan ‘Vive la Liberté’ was often accompanied on posters with birds emerging freed from their cages; and, as Louise Robbins writes, like the liberated birds, “the oppressed and enslaved people who had in earlier decades been depicted as caged or chained animals now appeared [after 1790]

¹ August 10th was the assault on the Tuileries after which followed the replacement of the Legislative Assembly with the Convention, and the abolishment of the monarchy on September 21st.
unfettered.\textsuperscript{3} Huot’s tale suggests, however, that beyond the Rousseauian symbolism of revolutionary ephemera, there was a commitment on the part of the radical revolutionaries to the liberation of the beasts \textit{in fact}; that the release of the animals contained in the ménagerie at Versailles was an extension of \textit{liberté et égalité} to all the creatures of France.\textsuperscript{4}

While it is probable that this story is not true— and is more likely an “anti revolutionary tall-tale”\textsuperscript{5}— it is nevertheless indicative of a dominant interpretation of the events of the French Revolutionary period, and of eighteenth-century French philosophy. When Maximillian Robespierre was defeated on 9 Thermidor II (in the non-revolutionary calendar, July 27\textsuperscript{th}, 1794), the Thermidorian period of French history transformed the radical Jacobin political order into the more conservative republic of the Directory.\textsuperscript{6} The Jacobin clubs of Paris were closed, and the mood shifted, Laura Mason writes, with the publication of materials denouncing the Terror and challenging Robespierre’s commitment to “social leveling.”\textsuperscript{7} The democratic constitution of 1793 was suspended due to its threat of anarchy.

The “social leveling” with which Robespierre and the Jacobin club were charged was tied to the commitment to atheistic and seditious philosophic doctrines which denigrated man by


\textsuperscript{4} Matthew Senior writes that this is said to have occurred at around the same time Phillipe Pinel opened the \textit{loges} and released the inmates: Matthew Senior, \textit{A Cultural History of Animals in the Age of Enlightenment}, ed. Matthew Senior (Oxford: Berg, 2011), 21. Like the story about the Jacobins, this tale about Pinel has been put into question—it may have been a myth invented by Pinel’s son, Scipion, to enhance his father’s reputation as the founder of humane psychiatric care in France. The story can be found in \textit{Traité complet du régime sanitaire des aliénés} by Scipion Pinel (1836). For more on this story see also Michel Foucault, \textit{Madness and Civilization}, trans Richard Howard (New York: Vintage Books, 1988 [1965]).

\textsuperscript{5} Robbins, \textit{Elephant Slaves}, 214. Robbins writes that it is unlikely that there was a mass exodus of the animals of Versailles given that an account of a visitor (Henry Paulin Panon Desbassayans) to the Ménagerie in 1791 claimed that it housed only “a rhinoceros, a lion with its dog companion, a hartebeest, and a ‘hybrid derived from a zebra and an ass’.” There is, furthermore, record of animals being moved to the \textit{Jardin des Plantes} from Versailles. An official of the ménagerie at Versailles, Couturier, wrote to Bernardin de Saint-Pierre (a botanist and the director—for some time—of the zoo at the \textit{Jardin des Plantes}) concerning the transfer of the animals to the public zoo (Jan 17, 1793).


\textsuperscript{7} Ibid, 318.
making him naturally equal, and equal by nature to the animals. The Abbé Barruel’s 1797-1798 criticism, *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism*, is the most lengthy and well-known. It is four volumes long, spanning approximately 3000 pages. Barruel claims (with some valid and much specious and anecdotal evidence) that the French Revolution and all the egregious harms and injustices that were its result derive from the Jacobins, all of whom were philosophic atheists, Illuminati and Freemasons. He begins the first volume: “at an early period of the French Revolution, there appeared a sect calling itself Jacobin, and teaching that all men were equal and free! In the name of their equality and disorganizing liberty, they trampled under foot the altar and the throne; they stimulated all nations to rebellion, and aimed at plunging them ultimately into the horrors of anarchy.”

Barruel claims that all have been “obstinately blind to the causes of the French Revolution,” which consist foremostly in all the Enlightenment haters of religion and haters of kings. Rousseau, Voltaire, d’Alembert, Diderot, Condorcet, d’Holbach, and many others are listed as the initiators of the atheistic and terrorizing spirit that would come to haunt the revolutionaries fighting in the name of liberty and equality.

In Volume II, Barruel continues his attack, writing that the anti-religious philosophes “perceived that by means of these two systems, the same ideas of Equality and Liberty, which had proved such powerful agents against Christianity, might prevail also against all political governments. Till this period, the hatred which the school of Voltaire, or the brethren of D’Alembert, had conceived against kings was vague and without any plan. In general, it was a mere thirst after equality and liberty, or a hatred of all coercive authority.”

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9 Ibid, I.xi.
10 Ibid, II.130.
In particular, Barruel writes, the Jacobins spurred on the “light which Philosophy ha[d] spread”: “What are these great events which the learned atheist claims in the name of philosophy? They are those of a Revolution which discovers man breaking the shackles of slavery, and shaking off the yoke with which audacious Despots had burdened them. It is the people recovering their inalienable right, of making alone the laws, of despising Princes, of changing or continuing them according to their will and pleasure.”\textsuperscript{11}

The atheists and materialists were the common targets of anti-revolutionary scholarship. Edmund Burke proclaims in his \textit{Reflections on the Revolution in France}: “we are not the converts of Rousseau; we are not the disciples of Voltaire; Helvétius has made no progress amongst us. Atheists are not our preachers; madmen are not our lawgivers.”\textsuperscript{12} The later historian Hippolyte Adolph Taine claimed that the philosophy of the eighteenth century contained a poison that caused men to “fall to the ground, foam at the mouth, act deliriously and writhe in convulsions.”\textsuperscript{13} This cordial—the “venomous compound”—had eighteenth century scientific discovery and materialism as its base. From scientific discovery, Taine writes, philosophers “teach man what he is, from whence he came, where he is going . . . A new point of departure leads to new points of view.”\textsuperscript{14} The philosophes claim man “must not forget, if he would comprehend his own being, that, along with himself, other lives exist in his vicinity, graduated up to him and issuing from the same trunk. . . He is there as the part of a whole, by virtue of being a physical body, a chemical composition, an animated organism, a sociable animal, among other bodies, other compositions, other social animals, all

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid, II.144.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, 170; 176.
analogous to him.” Science and material philosophy—the study of nature—renders man equal to the beast.

Taine’s analysis is merely one example in a longstanding tradition of labeling the Enlightenment philosophes ‘degraders of man’ (or, in Taine’s terminology, poisoners of the human spirit) due to their questioning of the distinction of man from animal. The most abhorrent philosophes of the century were, seemingly, those who saw a continuum of human and animal identification, or those who questioned the spiritual, intellectual or moral superiority of men. The theriophilic argumentation of these philosophes was subsequently countered by an intense theriophobia on the part of the counter-revolutionaries.

H.S. Reimarus incorporates Rousseau into this grouping of seditious thinkers: “it is well known that M. Rousseau, of Geneva, has lately exerted his imagination, in representing to us, among other animals in a desert, an original man in his natural state, as a brute or something worse (plus bête que les bêtes). This is not done, with the view of other writers of the Law of Nature, to shew . . . that such a state is rather unnatural and extremely miserable . . . but to maintain that nature has formed man only for a brutal state, and that he would be most happy in such a state.” Hippolyte Taine phrases his aversion to the political anarchy caused by this corruption as “a return to nature, meaning by this the abolition of society . . .

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15 Ibid, 176.
16 Further critics include: JN Moreau, Noveau Mémoire pour server à l’histoire des Cacouacs (Amsterdam: 1757); l’abbé Giry de Saint-Cyr, Catechisme de decisions de cas de conscience a l’usage des Cacouacs (Cacopolis, 1758); and Delisle de Sales, De La Philosophie de la Nature (Amsterdam: Arksée et Merkus, 1790).
17 George Boas and Arthur O. Lovejoy labeled and discussed the concept of ‘theriophily’, or ‘animalitarianism’: the belief or assertion that animals are in some way superior or equal to men: George Boas, The Happy Beast in French Thought of the Seventeenth Century (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1933); Arthur O. Lovejoy, Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1935). John Rodman has argued, however, that “more common in Western thought than theriophilia has been theriophobia, the fear and hatred of beasts as wholly or predominately irrational, physical, insatiable, violent or vicious beings whom man strangely resembles when he is being wicked.” John Rodman, “The Dolphin Papers,” The North American Review 259 (1974): 13-26, 20.
18 Hermann Samuel Reimarus, Principal truths of Natural Religion Defended and Illustrated (London, 1766 [1755]), 316.
[It] is the war-cry of the whole Encyclopedic battalion. The same shout is heard in another quarter, coming from the Rousseau battalion.\textsuperscript{19}

The Rousseauian \textit{liberté et égalité} is here drawn from his \textit{Second Discourse}, which begins with a description of human beings who were, in the state of nature, “living in liberty” in “the simple, regular and solitary lifestyle prescribed to us by nature.”\textsuperscript{20} In possession of “purely animal functions,” living without the rule of reason and left by nature to instinct alone, human and beast stand in relation to nature as equals, who “renders strong and robust all those who are well constituted and makes all the rest perish”: “pit a bear or a wolf against a savage” forced to defend his life or his prey “against [the] other ferocious beasts,” Rousseau writes, and you will see that the dangers and opportunities will be equal.\textsuperscript{21} This was also a state in which ignorance of vice and lack of reflection absolved human and animal from moral thought or judgment: they were “not evil precisely because they [did] not know what it [was] to be good.” Savage man, Rousseau claims, “breathes only tranquility and liberty”; had we remained in the natural state, we could have avoided all the ills that are of our own making.\textsuperscript{22}

Here we see all of the sins of the revolutionaries refracted through the anti-revolutionary and theriophobic critical stance in an account of natural liberty and equality. The liberty and equality of man and animal is a threat to all authorities. Its atheistic stance undoes religious claims to hierarchy, and its appeal to natural, anarchic governance is a threat to any hierarchical social or political organizations. There is nothing evil in this state of

\textsuperscript{19} Taine, \textit{Ancien Régime}, 226.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, 45; 40; 41; 40.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, 53; 80. As the remainder of this thesis will demonstrate, the association of Rousseau with those who would equate human beings to animals is misplaced, and is a misreading of both Rousseau’s philosophy and its influence.
natural equality, thus all acts of murderous terror are permitted. Like beasts, the radical revolutionaries unleashed themselves upon the French state, ravaging all claims to the superiority of human reason, grace, or revelation. The Jacobins spurred on the “light which Philosophy ha[d] spread” in the Enlightenment, undoing social order in the name of unbounded freedom and equality. The Constitution of 1793 lists equality as the first right; it claims that all men are equal by nature; it claims that liberty has nature for its principle. Robespierre’s proposed Declaration states that the equality of right is established by nature; that rights appertain to all equally; that man has been “oppressed and degraded by tyranny”; that liberty is “the power which appertains to man to exercise all of his faculties at will.” Here these children of the philosophes, these atheists and revolutionaries who would have us equate ourselves with naturally free beasts, are said to make their intentions clear: anarchy, terror, and the degradation of man.

James Gillray’s print, “A Peep into the Cave of Jacobinism” (1798), published in the British Anti-Jacobin Review, depicts this theriophobic perception of the radical revolutionaries in showing us a lowly Jacobin. He is surrounded with his books “Atheism,” “Sedition,” “Defamation,” “Anarchy,” “Libels,” and cowers in the light of Truth, who sets fire to his evil doctrines with her torch. His body is wrapped with a serpent, his cave causes birds to be turned into bats, and frogs leap away from him as he screams in the presence of religious authority: *Magna est veritas prævalebit . . . Great is the truth and it will prevail*. This is the Jacobin in his natural habitat, surrounded with the beasts who are his equals—he is no match for the angels and the beauty of a higher truth. This is the Jacobin who could have appeared at the king’s ménagerie demanding the release of the animals in the name of nature and the people.

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23 Barruel, *Jacobinism*, II. 144.
Skeptics, atheists, anarchists

While it might be possible to claim that these counter-revolutionary positions are hyperbolized to enhance the authors’ comparatively moderate and conservative positions, there is much to corroborate the claim that a dominant tradition existed in seventeenth and eighteenth century French thought which sought to level the human being with the animal. The remainder of this chapter will be concerned with describing these positions and arguments. The purpose of this is two-fold. On the first hand, the goal is to establish that in one way the counter-revolutionary position has legs to stand on. There was much doubt about the distinction of the human being from the animal kingdom (and from particular species of animals) in the seventeenth century, and claims about what was ‘natural’ for human beings were generated from, and in response to, these philosophic positions. On the other hand, however, the goal of the remainder of the thesis is to establish that the concern with defining the distinction of the human being from the animal took priority in the scientific treatises of the eighteenth century. It is this project of defining the distinction of the human from the animal kingdom, and this account of the ‘return to nature,’ that was a defining discourse for the revolutionary program, both for the conservatives and the radical Jacobins. Further, this definitional project was founded not in atheistic philosophy, but in a theologically-inspired scientific discourse that sought to identify man as the natural creature distinctively capable of regenerating himself in the world. But before addressing the distinction of the human being, we must address the lack against which it was established.

The seminal work discussing the generation of the “theriophilic” tradition in France is George Boas’s *The Happy Beast in French Thought of the Seventeenth Century*. The
question of the human/animal relationship was, Boas writes, “of peculiar importance in the
seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in France.”24 The theoretical basis of theriophily, claims
Boas, is “that the beasts . . . are more ‘natural’ than man, and [are] hence man’s superior.”25
What began in the satirical *essais* of Michel de Montaigne became, as the century progressed,
a more serious doctrine, generating a great deal of support and philosophic rigor.

Boas begins his address of Montaigne in discussing *On Pedantry* and *On the
Cannibals* (the latter piece, it should be noted, is widely acknowledged to be a source text for
Rousseau’s *Second Discourse*). In these essays, Montaigne sings the praises of the ‘savage’
life: the life of those who are closest to nature, and thus furthest from civilized corruption.
However, the establishment of the theriophilic tradition comes primarily from his *Apology
for Raymond Sebond*.26 In the section titled “Man is no better than the animals,” Montaigne
decrees the presumption of man in assuming his superiority in the natural world:
“presumption is our natural and original malady. The most vulnerable and frail of all
creatures is man, and at the same time the most arrogant . . . It is by the vanity of . . . [his]
imagination that that he equals himself to God, attributes to himself divine characteristics,
picks himself out and separates himself from the horde of other creatures, carves out their
shares to his fellows and companions the animals, and distributes among them such portions
of faculties and powers as he sees fit.”27

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25 Ibid.
26 Much of Montaigne’s work is itself inspired by Plutarch, particularly *De sollertia animalium*. See Peter
Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Natural Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
1998), 18; and Boas, *The Happy Beast*, 18ff. Boas also acknowledges the influence of Plutarch’s *Gryllus*, which
inspired a contemporary work of Gelli’s: *Circe* (35). As Boas writes, “*Circe* had a great vogue and was often
imitated”, including in La Fontaine’s fable, *Les Compagnons d’Ulysse*, Fuselier’s *Les Animaux Raisonables*,
and Fénelon’s *Ulysse et Gryllus* (35-36).
(New York: Knopf Everyman’s Library, 2003), 401.
Montaigne proceeds to list all of the ways in which the animals are either equal to, or surpass, the abilities of human beings: “what sort of faculty do we not recognize in the actions of the animals? Is there a society regulated with more order, diversified into more charges and functions, and more consistently maintained, than that of the honeybees? Can we imagine so orderly an arrangement of actions and occupations as this to be conducted without reason and foresight?”; “in that beautiful and admirable texture of their buildings, can birds use a square rather than a round figure, an obtuse rather than a right angle, without knowing their properties and effects?”; “animals are much more self-controlled than we are, and restrain themselves with more moderation.” Montaigne concludes his discussion of the comparability of the human being to the animal with an indictment against humans’ knowledge of their own natures and their own good: “do you want man to be healthy, do you want him disciplined and firmly and securely poised? Wrap him in darkness, idleness, and dullness. We must become like the animals in order to become wise, and be blinded in order to become guided.”

Boas further grounds Montaigne’s skeptical leveling of the human being and animal in the work of Boaystuau, who emphasizes our distinctive human misery (in family, commerce, government, the church, and in war); Rorario, who “maintains that beasts reason better than man”; and in Montaigne’s contemporary, Estienne Pasquier, and his disciple, Pierre Charron. Pasquier, like Montaigne, lists all of the virtuous qualities of the ‘happy beasts’ while denigrating human reason: “the Pelican is a symbol of parental devotion; the Stock of filial piety. Lions are so magnanimous that they never touch a man before a

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28 Ibid, 403; 404; 421. By contrast, Charles Bonnet (to be treated in a later chapter) will inversely proclaim that beavers demonstrate their lack of reflection and ingenuity in only being able to create oval huts as opposed to deviating and creating square structures.

29 Montaigne, “Raymond Sebond,” 441, my emphasis.

30 Ibid, 37.
woman, only attack when wounded. . . . the beasts exhibit military justice . . . honey bees practice division of labor, and woe to the lazy. Beasts are capable of shame: elephants copulate only in the dark. They are prudent.” But, most importantly, Boas notes, Pasquier claims that the beasts are “particularly our superiors in legal matters. Nothing is more bigarré than human laws. They change from country to country, and in the same country from epoch to epoch. The beasts have no laws because they are well governed.”31 Here then we begin to see the claim forming that will provide the fodder for the counter-revolutionary critics. The ‘happy beasts’ are governed perfectly by nature; that is, they, unlike human beings, are not subject and subjected to corrupt civil laws. Pierre Charron argues similarly that the beasts operate according to nature and thus are not subject to the vices and corruptions of the human being—all engendered by our reason. As Boas writes, “in so far as concerns nature, they [the beasts] far excel us and we should do well to turn to them for instruction.”32

This skeptical theriophilic tradition inspired both supporters and detractors throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in France. But the stakes became more serious. The tradition made popular by Montaigne took on both philosophic and spiritual significance once philosophes began debating the existence (or lack thereof) of the animal soul. Hester Hastings, a student of George Boas’s, wrote a sequel to Boas’s Happy Beast, titled Man and Beast in French Thought of the Eighteenth Century. Hastings here chronicles what he sees as the gradual slide in eighteenth century French thought toward the leveling of the human being and animal; a consequence of “the elimination of the essential, supernatural

31 Boas, Happy Beast, 55.
32 Ibid, 59.
difference between man and brute.” Responses to work such as Montaigne’s were split. There were those who opposed the comparability of human and animal, asserting both the superiority of the human being due to the possession of soul or reason (esprit) and the mechanistic operations of the animals; and those who continued and enhanced the skepticism with which we ought to address the human/animal divide. What is most intriguing is that the latter arose out of the former.

The immediate critic of Montaigne’s work was René Descartes, who claimed in his *Discourse on Method* to have discovered a method that would uncover the truth about nature: “there is only one truth concerning any matter [and] whoever discovers this truth knows as much about it as can be known.” Descartes writes: “as I practiced my method I felt my mind gradually accustomed to conceiving its objects more clearly and distinctly; and since I did not restrict the method to any particular subject matter, I hoped to apply it as usefully to the problems of the other sciences as I had to those of algebra.” Indeed, he famously applies this method to himself in the *Meditations*, arriving at the irrefutable conclusion of the *cogito* and the existence of God. Descartes’ description of automatons in his *Discourse on Method* further demonstrates the conclusions of the last *Meditation*, which concerns the machine-like nature of the body in relation to the intellect. Initially comparing the automaton-like nature of the body of man to the body of the animal, Descartes is quick to refute this equation (and thus quick to refute the claims of skeptics, or levelers, like

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35 Descartes, *Method*, 30. Much more will be said about the scientific method in the Chapter 2.
Montaigne and Charron\textsuperscript{37}: though “animals show more skill than we do in some of their actions, yet the same animals show none at all in many others; so what they do better does not prove that they have any intelligence, for if it did, they would have more intelligence than any of us and would excel us in everything. It proves rather that they have no intelligence at all, and that it is nature which acts in them according to the disposition of their organs. In the same way a clock, consisting only of wheels and springs, can count the hours and measure time more accurately than we can with all our wisdom.”\textsuperscript{38} The rational, human soul—on the other hand—“must be specially created” and “when we know how much the beasts differ from us, we understand much better the arguments which prove our soul is of a nature entirely independent of the body.”\textsuperscript{39} Descartes objects in full to Montaigne’s leveling of human and animal: animals function only on instinctual mechanisms; human beings, while having mechanistic bodies, have a \textit{soul} that sets them apart. There can be no comparison. Indeed, Descartes states: “after the error of those who deny the existence of God . . .there is none that is more powerful in leading feeble minds astray from the straight path of virtue than the supposition that the soul of brutes is of the same nature with our own; and consequently that after this life we have nothing to hope for or fear more than flies or ants.”\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{37} See Boas, \textit{Happy Beast}, 89-90 for a discussion of a letter from Descartes to the Marquis of Newcastle (Nov 23 1646), in which Descartes names Montaigne and Charron as his two primary ‘theriophilic’ interlocutors.\textsuperscript{38} Descartes, \textit{Method}, 45.\textsuperscript{39} Ibid, 46.\textsuperscript{40} Descartes, \textit{Method}, V; cited in Boas, \textit{Happy Beast}, 84. This is not to say that there were not many who disagreed with Descartes about the animal soul. Responses to Descartes varied from attributing only a ‘feeling’ soul, or \textit{âme sensitive}, to animals (see, for example, Quesnay); or granting a spiritual or reasonable, soul to beasts that is nevertheless different from man’s superior iteration (for example Boullier, Condillac). David Renault Boullier, \textit{Essai philosophique sur l’âme des bêtes} (Amsterdam: Chez François Changuion, 1727); Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, 1798. \textit{Traité des Sensations}, 3 volumes (Paris: Arthèmen Fayard, 1798[1754]); François Quesnay, \textit{Essai physique sur l’économie des animaux}, 3\textsuperscript{rd} ed (Paris: Cavelier, 1747 [1736]).
Despite his vehement disagreement with Montaigne, Descartes paved the way for the materialist, or mechanistic, interpretation of nature’s operations that is the root (so the counter-revolutionaries claim) of the eighteenth century’s most seditious philosophic doctrines. With an acceptance of the mechanistic interpretation of nature and of human and animal instinct came a resurgence of skepticism about the division of the human being from the animal. The faith in the distinction of the human being from the animal based on the superiority of human reason, or the human soul, exemplified by Descartes’ mind/body dualism was, as it was in the seventeenth century, subjected to doubt—but on new terms.

**Materialism and the brute soul**

Julien Offray de la Mettrie made Descartes’ brute soul the equivalent of the human soul. La Mettrie writes in *L’homme Machine* that “this famous philosopher [Descartes] . . . understood animal nature and was the first to demonstrate perfectly that animals were machines.”41 According to La Mettrie, what Descartes failed to do was recognize that man is the same as the animals: “we must suppose that animals. . . give us undeniable signs of both repentance and intelligence, why is it absurd to think that beings, machines almost as perfect as ourselves, were made like us to think and feel nature’s promptings? It is no use objecting that animals are for the most part ferocious beings, incapable of appreciating the harm that they do; for can all men distinguish any better vice from virtue? Ferocity exists in our species as in theirs . . . Man is not molded from a more precious clay; nature has only used one and

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the same dough, merely changing the yeast.” La Mettrie asks the reader to consider the difference between man and ape, and ape and parrot: the capacity for language—taken to be indicative of the capacity to think—is granted to those who are seen to have ‘superior’ mental capacities, and yet the ape, who displays “more intelligence” than does the parrot, does not have the same capacities of speech. Is intelligence thus reduced to language? Would the ape thus be “a perfect man, a little man of the town” if we were to succeed in teaching him a language? The categories upon which we found the superiority of the human are often, La Mettrie demonstrates, quickly dispensed with when we observe the natural world.

La Mettrie’s rhetorical disassembly of the ‘species’ of man is a clear inspiration for some of the more playful philosophic moments in eighteenth century France. We distinguish man from animal, he writes, “but can the same distinction be extended to the deaf, those born blind, idiots, lunatics, wild men or those raised in the woods with animals; to those whom hypochondria has doomed their imagination; or to all those brutes in human form who only display the crudest instincts? No, all those who are men only in body do not deserve a special class.” Voltaire echoes this complication of the relation of the body, or form, of ‘man’ and its correlation to superior inner capacities or natures of intelligence or moral behavior and thought in his *Les Adorateurs, Ou Les Louanges de Dieu*: what animal is not superior to our imbecile, or “our greedy old struck with apoplexy, dragging the remains of their useless life in an uninterrupted, vegetative stupor, without memories, without ideas. What is the animal that is not one hundred times superior to our newborn children, in whom God, according to

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42 Ibid, 19.
43 Ibid, 12.
44 Ibid, 18.
our theologians, infused a spiritual and immortal soul?" This leveling is also seen in the work of Marquis D’Argens. In his Lettres Cabalistiques d’Argens proposes studying men deprived of a particular sense beside an animal lacking the same (the dog and elephant compared to a mute; the mole and earthworm to the blind). In all cases the man is no better—in fact, in all cases worse—than the animal with the same deprivation; thus, d’Argens claims, there is no case for the superiority of man over animal. As is claimed later in the Encyclopédie Méthodique: Logique et Metaphysique, the difference between an imbecile and a beast is only in the length of his nose; that is, Hester Hastings states, “while one argues that an imbecile has a reasonable soul, he will perhaps deny it if the imbecile’s head became modified to such an extent as to resemble a [beast]’s.”

The project of questioning the distinction of the human being from the animal was also primary in the Encyclopédie. Of particular interest are Denis Diderot’s “Beast, Animal, Brute” and Claude Yvon’s “Animal Soul” (both published in Volume 1, 1751). In his “Beast, Animal, Brute” Diderot addresses the Cartesian position, in which animals have “almost the character of machines.” Diderot articulates a position much like Montaigne’s: “beasts do not have the supreme advantage of human beings. However, they have some that we do not have: they do not have our hopes, but they do not have our fears. They suffer death as we do, but without knowing it. Most of them take better care of themselves and do

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46 Jean-Baptiste de Boyer Marquis d’Argens, Lettres Cabalistiques (A la Haye Chez Pierre Paupie, 1767).
48 Hastings, Man and Beast, 61. Hastings claims it is a dog that is mentioned, but it is just ‘beast.’
not misuse their passions as much as we do.” In “Animal Soul” Claude Yvon takes on the Cartesian position more directly: “Descartes was the first to be led by his profound meditations to deny the animal soul, a paradox that he has caused the world to embrace to an incredible degree.” Yvon proposes that “one must undo the Cartesian machines, and that, beginning from the actions that we witness animals make, we can move from point to point, following the rules of the most exact logic, until we demonstrate that there is in animals an immaterial principle that is the cause of these actions.” If we observe animals, Yvon writes, “it seems manifestly clear that there exists a type of society among those of the same species, and sometimes even between different species; they appear to understand each other and to act together toward the same goal; they have communication with men; witness horses, dogs, and c., we train them, they learn . . . Even more . . . we see these animals perform spontaneous acts that appear to reflect reason and liberty.” If we are proposing a mechanistic view, claims Yvon, we must see the same in ourselves: a “sensible principle produces a thousand actions and moves my body in a thousand ways, all similar to the ways in which animals move their own in similar circumstances. . . so it is that the reasons that directly demonstrate to us the existence of an intelligent soul in each man, also assure us of the existence of an immaterial principle in animals.”

50 We can here also see much related to Rousseau’s later Second Discourse. Diderot was nevertheless an advocate of a “mechanistic” reading of nature and the universe, for which he was temporarily imprisoned. See, in particular, “Thoughts on the Interpretation of Nature,” and “Letter on the Blind,” in Thoughts on the Interpretation of Nature and Other Philosophical Works, trans. David Adams (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 1999). Also thanks to Rebecca Kingston for pointing out that Diderot is most likely drawing the argument of this passage from Montesquieu’s Spirit of the Laws: “Beasts do not have the supreme advantages that we have; they have some that we do not have. They do not have our expectations, but they do not have our fears; they suffer death as we do, but without recognizing it; most even preserve themselves better than we do and do not make such bad use of their passions.” Montesquieu, The Spirit of the Laws, trans. and ed. Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller, and Harold Samuel Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), I.1, 5. On Montesquieu’s discussion of beasts, I am also indebted to my colleague Constantine Vassiliou, who has shared some of his work in progress with me on this topic, which examines the first book of the Laws.

51 My emphasis.
Yvon has here objected to the Cartesian ‘automatic’ interpretation of animal natures, and established a kinship between the life of the animal and human activity. While Yvon maintains that there is a distinction between human and animal (insofar as the human has the capacity for ‘abstract ideas’ that the animal does not52), he continues throughout the text to deny conventional manners of distinguishing the human being from the animal: animals also have languages,53 for example, and they can understand one another. While they have no innovative sciences, they “have no other science than that of living healthily.” They are, compared to human beings, happy and healthy beasts. This account of animal and human natures is echoed in another of the century’s most popular writers (a fellow Encyclopedist), and also one of the century’s only open atheists: the Baron d’Holbach.54

In Bons Sens, d’Holbach writes:

The superiority which man so gratuitously arrogates to himself over other animals, soon vanishes in the light of reason, when we reflect on human extravagances. How many animals shew more mildness, reflection, and reason, than the animal, who calls himself reasonable above all others? Are there among men, so often enslaved and oppressed, societies as well

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52 This is the argument that Georges-Louis LeClerc de Buffon makes in his Histoire Naturelle—to be discussed in much detail in the remainder of this thesis.
53 Here Yvon cites and discusses Guillaume-Hyacinthe Bougeant’s Amusement philosophique sur le langage des bestes (1739), which Hastings claims was “immensely popular,” having three re-printings in 1739 alone. Bougeant claims in his Amusement that in the “acceptance of animal mechanism leads to suspicion and doubt to the nature of man; one loses . . . the certainty that his friends are not machines” (Hastings, Man and Beast, 43).
54 D’Holbach also hosted one of the most reputed salons in France, and was very close with Diderot. Some speculate, in fact, that parts of the Système de la Nature were written by Diderot. See Will Durant, The Story of Civilization Volume 9: The Age of Voltaire (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), 700. The influence of d’Holbach on the other philosophes and the French Revolution has been vigorously argued by Jonathan Israel in his Revolutionary Ideas (2014). Israel also claims that the French Declaration of Rights was the direct outcome of the philosophy of Helvétius, Diderot, and d’Holbach who were “responsible for forging the idea of universal basic human rights,” and created [and he here concludes his essay citing Thomas Paine] “a scene so transcendentally unequalled by anything in the European world that the name of a Revolution is diminutive of its character, and it rises into a Regeneration of Man.” The location of the regeneration of man in these “materialists” is something with which I take issue in this thesis—and, indeed, Israel places himself among the many counter-revolutionaries who ascribe the generation of rights in the French Revolutionary period to those who ground liberty and equality in nature through a kind of leveling. Jonathan Israel, Revolutionary Ideas: An Intellectual History of the French Revolution from the Rights of Man to Robespierre (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Jonathan Israel, “Philosophy, religion and the controversy about basic human rights in 1789,” in Self-Evident Truths? Human Rights and the Enlightenment. ed. Kate E. Tunstall (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012).
constituted as those of the ants, bees, or beavers? Do we ever see ferocious beasts of the same species mangle and destroy one another without profit? Do we ever see religious wars among them? The cruelty of beasts towards other species arises from hunger, the necessity of nourishment; the cruelty of man towards man arises only from the vanity of his masters and the folly of his impertinent prejudices. Speculative men, who endeavour to make us believe, that all in the universe was made for man . . . [should be asked:] would not all these animals reason as justly as our theologians, should they pretend that man was made for them?  

D’Holbach’s leveling of man and animal is most developed in his *Système de la Nature*:

> “Man has no reason to believe himself a privileged being in nature, for he is subject to the same vicissitudes as all her other productions . . . Let him but elevate himself, by his thoughts, above the globe he inhabits, and he will look upon his own species with the same eyes as he does all other beings.”  

Nature, for d’Holbach, is and ought to be regarded as the standard for human life:

> “Man is the work of Nature: he exists in Nature: he is submitted to her laws: he cannot deliver himself from them; nor can he step beyond them even in thought . . . Instead, therefore, of seeking out of the world he inhabits for beings who can procure him a happiness denied to him by Nature, let man study Nature, let him learn her laws, contemplate her energies.”  

While man has “gratuitously supposed himself composed of two distinct substances,” he ought to see that he is, like the rest of nature’s creations, subject to the same natural laws, the same necessities, and the same desires for happy and commodious living. Even when we suppose that we have an immaterial soul, d’Holbach writes, we must see that it “is continually modified conjointly with the body, is submitted to all its motion . . . All the

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55 Paul Henri Thiry Holbach (Baron d’Holbach), *Good Sense: or, Natural Ideas opposed to Supernatural* (New York: Wright and Owen, 1831 [French 1772]), 61.
56 Paul Henri Thiry Holbach (Baron d’Holbach), *The System of Nature*, trans. H.D. Robinson (New York: Burt Franklin 1970 [1868; French 1770]), 47. D’Holbach’s *System of Nature* was also misattributed to Mirabeau for a long period of time (having been published anonymously).
58 Ibid, 47.
systems, all the affections, all the opinions, whether true or false, which man forms to himself, are to be attributed to his physical and material sense." The spirituality of the human soul—the marker of man’s distinction from the rest of the animal and natural kingdom—is, according to d’Holbach, a destructive chimera: “it was upon the ruins of Nature that man erected the imaginary colossus of Divinity.”

What does Nature teach men? “Nature says to man, thou art free, no power on earth can legitimately deprive thee of thy rights: religion cries out to him that he is a slave, condemned by God to groan all his life under the iron rod of his representatives.” In the work of d’Holbach we can, thus, see more than adequate fuel for the counter-revolutionary fire. Nature, d’Holbach claims, “cannot be accused of either goodness or malice”; “Nature does not make man either good or wicked.” Man, as a creature of Nature, is subject neither to hierarchical powers (to spiritual or political representatives) nor to internally binding standards of good and evil or the demands of an “immaterial” soul. He is a creature of the world, and thus as soon as “all that surrounds him becomes incommodious to him . . . he already exists no longer; he is suspended in the void; and he may quit a rank which no longer suits him; in which he finds no one interest; which offers him no protection; and in which he can no more be useful either to himself or to others.” It is ignorance of his own nature (of nature) that, for d’Holbach, has “prevented man from enlightening his morals . . . This is the reason why nations linger on in the most scandalous lethargy, groaning under abuses

60 Ibid, 174.
61 Ibid, 281.
63 Ibid, 136.
transmitted from century to century.”64 Instead man must see that he, “in the hand of nature, [is] that which a sword is in his own hands”: “the misery of people produce revolutions.”65

D’Holbach died mere months before the sword of nature would see its first slice in 1789, but we can see that the grounds for the d’Holbachian revolution are not his alone. D’Holbach is, it seems, but the culmination of a century’s reduction of man into his natural, animal, and anarchic root. D’Holbach’s proclamation of Nature, that man is free, echoes claims like Claude Yvon’s, that animals act with “reason and liberty.”66 We also hear the echo of the arguments of Montaigne, Pasquier, and all those who followed them in claiming that animals who live according to nature are happiest, healthiest, and most at home in the world. As was discussed above, this view of nature and of the natural life is also seemingly indebted to Rousseau’s formulation of “natural man” in his Second Discourse. This picture of man is one who lives in “tranquility and liberty” with “purely animal functions.”67 Most of our ills, Rousseau claims (the vices of our societies and civilizations) “are of our own making . . . [and] we could have avoided nearly all of them by preserving the simple, regular, and solitary lifestyle prescribed to us by nature.”68 Human institutions, Rousseau writes, have “succeeded in smothering nature,” which is a condition of equality and liberty: the first origin of the human is one in which men were “as naturally equal among themselves as were the animals of each species.”69

Robespierre is said to have met Rousseau in 1778 (the last year of Rousseau’s life) and promises Rousseau later in his Mémoires that he will “remain constantly faithful to the

64 Ibid, 14.
65 Ibid, 136; 155.
66 Yvon, “Animal Soul.”
67 Rousseau, Second Discourse, 80; 45.
68 Ibid, 42.
69 Ibid, 35; 33.
inspiration I have drawn from your writings.” There would have been no Saint-Just or
Robespierre, Henri Peyre claims, without Rousseau. Further, there would have been no
revolution, for Rousseau’s was an influence not only of ideas, but of idées-forces, the
evidence of which we can see in the allusions to his work in the many iterations of the
Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. Robespierre’s proposed revised
Declaration of 1793 states that the “equality of rights is established by nature”; that “liberty
is the power which appertains to man to exercise all his faculties at will.” This is not only
limited to Robespierre’s revisions, however. In the first Declaration of 1789 too we find the
claim that “men are born free and equal”; that the “ignorance, neglect, or contempt of the
rights of man are the sole cause of public calamities and of the corruption of governments”;
that the “aim of all political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible
rights of man.”

The counter-revolutionary position thus claims its ground. Joseph de Maistre writes
that “Rousseau’s seductive eloquence deluded the mob, which is controlled more by
imagination than reason. Everywhere he disseminated distrust of authority and the spirit of
revolt. It was he who systematized ideas of anarchy.” At bottom, however, de Maistre
claims that “the glory of the revolution belongs exclusively to neither Voltaire nor Rousseau.
The entire philosophical sect claims its part.” He cites the words of Richer-Sérerzy, who

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History of Ideas, 10.1 (1945): 63-87.
71 Printed in John Hall Stewart, A Documentary Survey of the French Revolution (Ann Arbor: University of
Michigan Press, 1951). There is much more that is Rousseauian in Robespierre’s Declaration (and the other
iterations of the Declaration) revolving around the invocation of the general will. This will be discussed in the
sixth chapter.
72 Printed in Hall Stewart, Documentary Survey.
73 Joseph de Maistre, Étude sur la souveraineté, (1794-1796), in The French Revolution Research Collection
74 Ibid, 407.
reproached the philosophes in his journal *l’Accusateur public*:\(^7^5\) “you, mad philosophes, who in your presumptuous wisdom claim to guide the universe; apostles of tolerance and humanity, you who prepared our GLORIOUS revolution and extoll the progress of intelligence and reason: leave your tombs. . . Your writings are in the pockets of the tyrants; your maxims on their lips; your pages shine forth in their testimony in court . . . There is not one of your works that is not on the desk of our forty thousand revolutionary committees. They left you only a moment, Diderot, to sign the order for mass drownings!”\(^7^6\) The Abbé Barruel claims that the revolutionaries perceived that “the same ideas of Equality and Liberty, which had proved such powerful agents against Christianity, might prevail also against all political governments. Till this period, the hatred which the school of Voltaire, or the brethren of D’Alembert, had conceived against kings was vague and without any plan. In general, it was a mere thirst after equality and liberty, or a hatred of all coercive authority.”\(^7^7\) Taine, as was discussed above, tied this explicitly to the leveling of man to his natural and animal root: philosophers “teach man what he is, from whence he came, where he is going . . . A new point of departure leads to new points of view.”\(^7^8\) The philosophes claim man “must not forget, if he would comprehend his own being, that, along with himself, other lives exist in his vicinity, graduated up to him and issuing from the same trunk. . . He is there as the part of a whole, by virtue of being a physical body, a chemical composition, an animated organism, a sociable animal, among other bodies, other compositions, other social animals, all analogous to him.”\(^7^9\) The echoes of d’Holbach could not be stronger.

\(^{7^5}\) De Maistre cites the source only as ‘Accusateur public, no 2, p 22’. Identification of source is from Athanase René Mérault de Bizy, *Les apologistes involontaires ou la religion Chrétienne prouvée et défendue par les objections* (1882).

\(^{7^6}\) de Maistre, *Étude*, 404.

\(^{7^7}\) Barruel, *Jacobinism*, II. 130.

\(^{7^8}\) Taine, *Ancien Régime*, 170; 176.

\(^{7^9}\) Ibid, 176.
Edmund Burke casts the positions of the revolutionaries, and the philosophes who inspired them, as an “insult upon the Rights of Man.” The reduction of the human being to his natural definition *insults humanity*: “these philosophers, consider men in their experiments, no more than they do mice in an air pump, or in a recipient of mephitic gas. Whatever his Grace may think of himself, they look upon him, and every thing that belongs to him, with no more regard than they do upon the whiskers of that little long-tailed animal, that has long been the game of the grave, demure, insidious, spring-nailed, velvet-pawed, green-eyed philosophers, whether going upon two legs or four.” The philosophes and revolutionaries “betrayed the most sacred of all truths, and by breaking to pieces the great links of society . . . brought eternal confusion and desolation on their country.” “The revolution harpies of France,” Burke writes, who are sprung from “chaotic anarchy, which generates equivocally ‘all monstrous, all prodigious things,’ cuckoo-like, adulterously lay their eggs, and brood over and hatch them in the nest of every neighbouring state. These obscene harpies, who deck themselves, in I know not what divine attributes, but who in reality are foul and ravenous birds of prey . . . flutter over our heads and souse down upon our tables, and leave nothing unrent, unrifled, unravaged, or unpolluted with the slime of their filthy offal.”

The anarchy of the French Revolution is thus ascribed to the animalistic anarchy of those revolutionaries and philosophes who themselves locate no difference between humanity and the rest of nature. It is a reduction of the human being to the animal; a return to nature that in generating revolutionary and universal rights of the human being in fact

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80 Edmund Burke, “A Letter from the Right Honourable Edmund Burke to A Noble Lord,” (London, 1796). Many thanks are owed to Rebecca Kingston for passing along this source.
81 Ibid, 27.
82 Ibid, 32.
83 Ibid, 11.
denies humanity. It is said to be rooted in a materialist philosophy that treats human beings as no more than a mouse in an air-pump, a mechanism, or a social being analogous to all other sociable animals. It is a confusion about *what it means to be human*—rooted in a denial of our superiority, and our distinctive spiritual or reasonable essence—that has political consequences. The lowly Jacobin revolutionary who, in the words of Barruel, was “teaching that all men were equal and free”\(^8^4\) is thus pictured in James Gillray’s print with his books “Anarchy,” “Defamation,” and “Atheism,” and with the beasts who are his equals. The light that philosophy and science spread was one grounded in the rhetorical disassembly of the human/animal distinction in the essays of Montaigne, and spurred by the continuing and growing confusion about what the human being is, and thus how the human being ought to live and act in the world.

**Ape and man: how are we to know ourselves?**

Skepticism about the distinction of the human being from the animal was, as has been demonstrated here, a dominant concern of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in France. The argument of the counter-revolutionaries is that this skepticism, or leveling, was the genesis of the revolutionary spirit. The remainder of this thesis is a corrective to this interpretation. Out of the deep Pyrrhonism inspired by the work of Montaigne and his inheritors came a commitment on the part of eighteenth-century natural scientists to *assert*, rather than deny, a distinction of the human being from the animal. This is not to say that the skeptical tradition as I have laid it out above did not maintain a vast influence. It is, rather, to say that the project of revolutionizing the state was one of *regenerating* mankind;

\(^8^4\) Barruel, *Jacobinism*, I.ix.
of asserting a distinctive right and will of the human being to make himself, and to make his own history and his own politics. The widespread invocation of the rhetoric of regeneration in the French Revolution (from both radicals and conservatives) which was discussed in brief in the Introduction and will be dealt with in full in the sixth chapter, is the influence on politics of a conception of the human being as distinctively self-regenerative that grew out of theological science, and was refracted through the work of Rousseau. It is an idea of the human being that sees our essence as in one sense animal (as embedded in the natural kingdom), but in another distinctively capable of remaking ourselves in the interest of progress and moral and intellectual betterment. We are by nature the only animals capable of self-perfectibility and of creating our own conditions of happiness. This distinction grounds, therefore, a natural right or prerogative that we have to be political, or self-regenerative, animals—and always oriented to the betterment of our future estate. It is therefore our distinction from the animal kingdom (what both Buffon and Rousseau will call ‘the spirituality of our soul’), rather than its lack, that makes possible the revolutionary esprit.

Natural science in the eighteenth century itself grew, however, out of—and maintained a connection to—a kind of skepticism about the human being akin to the tradition that has been laid out here. This skepticism was one concerning the distinction of the human being from the rest of the animal kingdom not in terms of behavior but in terms of form. Despite the many ways in which we may, like the parrot, have the capacity of speech, or, like the ants and bees, have the capacity for political or social organization, it can be argued that there is a fundamental way in which we are not parrots or ants or bees: whatever the
behavioral similarities are between human being and various kinds of animals, it is clear that
the human being has a distinct form, or external organization. There is a human species.85

Even d’Holbach acknowledges this fundamental distinction: “whoever contemplates
nature without prejudice, will readily acknowledge, that there is no other difference between
the man and the beast than that which is to be attributed to the diversity of his
organization.”86 In the skeptical tradition, the argument for the distinction of the human being
lying only in his external organization or form was made most famous by Helvétius in De
L’Esprit, which was ordered burned for its seditious doctrines.87 Here Helvétius claims that
the same faculties (physical sensation, memory, judgment) are possessed by man and animal,
with man’s benefit being only in his external organization. In the same spirit as Diderot and
La Mettrie, Helvétius writes: “if nature had, instead of hands and flexible fingers, ended our
wrists in a horse’s hoof, who would doubt that men without arts, without homes, without
defenses against wild animals, occupied with the care of their food and the avoidance of wild
beasts, would not be wandering the forests as fugitive herds.”88 Man’s distinction, according
to Helvétius, could be attributed neither to his soul nor to Scripture but only to his hands.

With respect to the form of the human being, the natural scientists were initially far
more skeptical than even La Mettrie and Helvétius. They were deeply troubled by the fact
that the human being bore a remarkable resemblance to the ape. If the “diversity of
organization” in form was to be the marker or signifier of the human distinction from the rest
of the animals, the distinctively human form of the newly discovered great apes was

85 The term species has its roots in the Latin for appearance or form—the factual look of something.
86 D’Holbach, System of Nature, 82.
87 And the reaction against this text was also the precursor to the suspension of D’Alembert and Diderot’s
Encyclopédie.
echoes of Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels are also unmistakable.
problematic. At the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth centuries, travelogues and reports were being published describing very human-like animals. The period’s two initial and most formative scientific descriptions of the great apes came from the Dutch anatomist, Nicolaes Tulp, and Jacobus Bontius, an employee of the Dutch East India Company in Batavia. Tulp’s Observationes Medicae was published in 1641, and Bontius’s De Medicina Indorum in 1642. Tulp writes that because of the ape’s “human appearance” it was called Orang Outang by the Indians, or “forest man.” Bontius writes of these creatures that “they sometimes walk on all fours, sometimes upright, they have the appearance and posture of a human . . . And the surprising thing is, I once saw myself some of both sexes walking upright, and the female . . . hid her genitals with great shyness from the men whom she did not know, covering her face with her hands (if I can call them that) and she cried abundantly and showed other human characteristics.” Not only does Bontius emphasize the human characteristics and form of the creature, but he ascribes a Biblical bashfulness to the female’s behavior (a description that would, seemingly, inspire later anatomists to cover the genitalia of the great apes with leaves in their visual depictions).

Human-like accounts of the great apes increased as the decades passed. As Cribb, Gilbert and Tiffin write: these accounts “gained plausibility with each telling.” Alexander Hamilton, a Scottish sea captain, writes in 1728: “[the ape] blows his nose, and throws away the Snot with his Fingers, can kindle a fire, and blow it with his mouth. And I saw one broyl a Fish to eat with his boyled Rice”; and Daniel Beeckman in 1718 of an ape that he bought

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91 Cribb et al, Wild Man, 33.
and who lived with him: “he slept lying along in a humane posture . . . if at any time I was angry with him, he would sigh, sob and cry, till he found that I was reconciled [reconciled] to him.”\textsuperscript{93} These accounts and more\textsuperscript{94} substantially informed the most influential scientific taxonomy of living things of the early eighteenth century: Carl Linnaeus’s \textit{Systema Naturae}. First published in 1735, and undergoing many revisions following, Linnaeus’s “Table of the Animal Kingdom” never diverged from including \textit{homo sapiens} and \textit{simians} (apes; later called “primates”) in the same classification of \textit{Anthropomorpha}, meaning “having human form.”

In a 1747 Letter to Johann Gmelin, Linnaeus expresses his simultaneous discomfort with, and assurance in, the classifications of ape and man: “I desperately seek from you and from the whole world a general difference between men and simians from the principles of Natural History. I certainly know of none. If only someone might tell me one! If I called a man a simian or vice versa I would bring together all the theologians against me. Perhaps I ought to, in accordance with the law of Natural History.”\textsuperscript{95} He further writes: “it is not pleasing to me that I must place humans among the \textit{Anthropomorpha}, but man is intimately familiar with himself. Let’s not quibble over words.”\textsuperscript{96} Indeed, Linnaeus’s evidence for the distinction of man from the rest of the animal kingdom and his primate brethren in the Table of the Animal Kingdom is simply: \textit{Nosce te ipsum} (Know Thyself).

The problem—one that Linnaeus himself spurred—was, however, that in these times and conditions of great doubt and skepticism about how the human being was distinct from the animal kingdom, \textit{man did not know himself}. The \textit{que sçay-je?} of Montaigne is hardly

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\textsuperscript{93} Daniel Beeckman, \textit{A Voyage to and From the Island of Borneo} (1718), 37-38; cited in Cribb et al, \textit{Wild Man}, 34.
\textsuperscript{94} See Cribb et al, \textit{Wild Man} for many more examples.
\textsuperscript{95} Carl Linnaeus to Johann Georg Gmelin, February 25, 1747, letter 0783, in \textit{The Linnaean Correspondence}.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
answered with Linnaeus’s *nosce te ipsum*. Providing an answer to Linnaeus about *how* man was to know himself as distinct from the animal kingdom was the task of the two most primary natural scientists in eighteenth century France: Georges-Louis LeClerc Comte de Buffon and Charles Bonnet. It was also the task of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who writes in the Preface to his *Second Discourse*: “of all the branches of human knowledge, the most useful and the least advanced seems to me to be that of man; and dare I say that the inscription on the temple at Delphi [Know thyself] alone contained a precept more important and more difficult than all the huge tomes of the moralists. Thus I regard the subject of this discourse as one of the most interesting questions that philosophy is capable of proposing, and unhappily for us, one of the thorniest that philosophers can attempt to resolve.”

Buffon, Bonnet, and Rousseau do not deny that the *form* of the great apes resembles that of man. But they nevertheless maintain that the human being is distinct. As Buffon will write in his *Histoire Naturelle*: “the soul, thought, and speech therefore do not depend on the form or the organization of the body; nothing proves better that this is a special gift of man, for the orang-outang, who does not speak or think, nevertheless has the body, the limbs, senses, brain and language resembling that of man; it can make or imitate all the actions of man, yet it is no act of man.”

Out of conditions of doubt, these thinkers sought to establish the grounds upon which man could see himself as a *distinct animal*: a natural creature—part of the newly emerging study of living things and the Great Chain of Being—with a distinctive essence. As we will see in the course of this thesis, the answer to Linnaeus’s dictum, *nosce te ipsum*, was precisely for man to know his unique place in nature, and to know how to change, or regenerate, his own.

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Chapter 2

Infinite Degrees, and Degrees of Separation

One first matter all,
Indu’d with various forms, various degrees
Of substance, and in things that live, of life;
But more refin’d, more spirituous, and pure,
As nearer to him plac’d, or nearer tending,
Each in their several active spheres assign’d
Till body up to spirit work in bounds,
Proportion’d to each kind.

-Milton, Paradise Lost

Carl Linnaeus’s classification and taxonomy of living things has been extremely influential in the history of science. In eighteenth century France, however, Linnaeus gained an instant opponent in Georges-Louis LeClerc de Buffon, author of the Histoire naturelle générale et particulière: a multi-volumed work that spanned the second half of the eighteenth century in France, and was one of the most widely-read texts of the period. Linnaeus appeared in the “Initial Discourse” of the first volume of the Histoire “as the villain” of Buffon’s entire system.¹ Buffon’s attack on Linnaeus was not, as the previous chapter concluded, just due to Linnaeus’s classification of man with the apes, but was also a matter of disagreement about the scientific method. Buffon claims that the “first truth that comes from [a] serious examination of nature is one which perhaps humbles man. This truth is that he ought to

classify himself with the animals, which he resembles in all his material. However, Buffon also writes that “after having successfully ordered the different objects which compose the Universe, and having put himself at the head of all created beings, he [man] will see with astonishment that one can descend by almost imperceptible degrees from the most perfect creature to the most formless matter, from the animal best organized to the to the most crude material; [and] he will recognize that these imperceptible nuances are the great work of Nature” (HN I, 12-13). As will be discussed further in this chapter, Buffon’s methodological contention is that man can never know the operations of Nature in terms of definitions or classifications, as Linnaeus claimed to demonstrate; these are merely an artificial human imposition that can never be fully corroborated by Nature’s imperceptible degrees. Natural science is, for Buffon, a human science: it is a method by which man can come to know himself through seeing himself as part of nature, but, more fundamentally, through seeing himself as separated from its imperceptible degrees in being able to reason scientifically.

Buffon, like his predecessors John Locke, Isaac Newton, and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, abandoned the pursuit of final causes, claiming that they were unknowable to the human intellect. While one had to see the world, and the universe, as divinely ordered, one could not claim to know what the order of nature was; this was only known by God. Also like his predecessors, Buffon set himself apart from the scientific methods of Aristotle and

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2 Unless otherwise noted, translations of Buffon are my own. Citations from Buffon, Histoire Naturelle are to: Georges-Louis LeClerc Comte de Buffon, Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière, avec la description du cabinet du Roy (Paris: De L’Imprimerie). The volumes of Buffon’s Histoire were published over the course of the second half of the eighteenth century. An Appendix is included at the end of the thesis with the publication dates of each volume. The most cited volumes in this chapter are volumes I-IV, of which the first three volumes were published together in 1749, and the fourth released in 1753. Hereafter citations will be intext (HN Volume Number, Page). I will occasionally use the translation of William Smellie: William Smellie, Natural History, General and Particular (London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1781). Because Smellie’s volume numbering sometimes differs from Buffon’s, when I employ his translation, I have placed the original French volume number in brackets following Smellie’s. The French was also consulted, but Smellie’s translations are full of character, and so I defer to his translation when appropriate. Citations from Smellie’s translation will appear as (HN Sm Volume Number, Page).
René Descartes, whose methods were founded on the assumption that the truth of natural essences and causes could be determined. In similar fashion, thus, Buffon distinguished himself from Carl Linnaeus, whose taxonomy assumed and asserted knowledge of the essences (and thus classifications) of natural creatures. Through providing an account of the divine natural order in his *Histoire Naturelle*, Buffon was, as Philip R. Sloan has written, concerned “less with classification than with giving a ‘cosmology’”; he provides, in his debt to Leibniz in particular, an account of “a pre-established harmony . . . established by God,” that sees a Chain of Being connecting all living creatures.

But man stands apart: though the “hand of the Creator” has presented us with an “infinity of contradictory and harmonious combinations” (HN I, 11), and “we have often said that Nature moves and proceeds in imperceptible degrees and nuances; this truth, which otherwise admits no exception, is here reversed: there is an infinite distance between the faculties of man and those of the most perfect animal, clear proof that man is of a different nature, that he himself constitutes a separate class, from which there are infinite degrees and nuances of descent before we arrive at the state of an animal” (HN II, 443). Man is possessed of a “spiritual substance” by which he is enabled to think and reflect. Human beings possess a “consciousness of [their] own existence” (HN IV, 109), a distinction which allows us to know ourselves. As Rousseau will do in his *Second Discourse* (the subject of Chapter 4), Buffon took Linnaeus’s differential dictum, *nosce te ipsum*, as an immediate challenge, and his answer would shape the philosophical world of eighteenth century France.

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4 Sloan, “Controversy,” 368.
The scientific method: Buffon’s interlocutors

Philip R. Sloan writes in “The Buffon-Linnaeus Controversy” that Buffon’s polemic against Linnaeus “has variously been considered to be an advocacy of an untenable taxonomic nominalism, a reflection of personal jealousy against his initially more famous contemporary, and a contrived and artificial attempt to distinguish his approach to natural history from that of the great classifier.”⁵ Sloan, however, grounds Buffon’s criticism of Linnaeus in a deep philosophical disagreement: “rather than dealing with specific taxonomic issues, it concentrated instead on a general philosophic critique of the root assumptions underlying all the taxonomic work of the time.”⁶ These assumptions were those that discerned an intelligible order to the world that could therefore be logically systematized according to creatures’ essential identities.⁷

Arthur O. Lovejoy describes this clash of scientific method in his Great Chain of Being through outlining two opposite modes of thought: “the first made for sharp divisions, clear-cut differentiations, among natural objects, and especially among living beings”; the other presented natural science as “a convenient but artificial setting-up of divisions having no counterpart in nature.”⁸ While there were nuances in these positions, as Lovejoy acknowledges and discusses, this is the controversy that emerged between Linnaeus, a representative of the former camp, and Buffon, a representative of the latter. The Linnaean

⁵ Ibid, 356. For this position, Sloan cites David Mornet, Les Sciences de la Nature en France au XVIIIe siècle (Paris: Colin, 1911). Sloan also discusses the interpretation of this controversy as one grounded in Buffon’s insecurity and an “alleged unfamiliarity with the subject matter of zoology and botany when he gained the post of director of the Jardin du Roi” (356). This was a critique leveled at Buffon by one of his contemporaries, C.G. de Lamoignon de Malesherbes in Observations de Lamoignon-Malesherbes sur l’Histoire naturelle générale et particulière de Buffon et Daubenton (Paris: Pougens, 1798).
⁷ Ibid, 358.
method is often cast as having its roots in the work of Aristotle\textsuperscript{9} and René Descartes, who, Margaret J. Osler writes, embody “the view that the proper aim for science is certain knowledge of the real essences of things.”\textsuperscript{10} Aristotle saw scientific knowledge as “compris[ing] knowledge of the essential natures of things”: their final causes.\textsuperscript{11} As he writes in Posterior Analytics: “We suppose ourselves to possess unqualified scientific knowledge of a thing, as opposed to knowing it in an accidental way in which the sophist knows, when we think that we know the cause on which the fact depends, as the cause of that fact and no other, and further, that the fact could not be other than it is.”\textsuperscript{12} So too does Descartes claim in his Discourse on Method that “there is only one truth concerning any matter [and] whoever discovers this truth knows as much about it as can be known.”\textsuperscript{13} Descartes writes: “as I practiced my method I felt my mind gradually accustomed to conceiving its objects more clearly and distinctly; and since I did not restrict the method to any particular subject matter, I hoped to apply it as usefully to the problems of the other sciences as I had to those of algebra.”\textsuperscript{14}

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\textsuperscript{9} Aristotle is a complicated figure, and can also be invoked as a predecessor of the second camp of scientific inquiry. While he did classify things according to species and genera, and thus was a clear inspiration for taxonomists like Linnaeus, he also, as Lovejoy discusses, acknowledged that such a classification invariably reveals the manners in which “nature refuses to conform to our craving for clear lines of demarcation”: Lovejoy, Chain of Being, 56. Lovejoy’s account of Aristotle will be discussed further in the chapter. Also see Justin E.H. Smith, “Introduction,” in The Problem of Animal Generation in Early Modern Philosophy, ed. Justin E.H. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), in which Smith argues that “no matter how much [these philosophers] were motivated in many respects by a fierce rejection of Aristotelianism, [they] remained Aristotelian at least to the extent that their results were seen as bearing on a cluster of distinctly philosophical questions inherited from the Greeks concerning the nature and origins of substances or beings” (2).
\textsuperscript{11} Osler, “Changing Ideal,” 4.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
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The assertion of clear and distinct knowledge, and of the capacity of the human inquiring mind to contemplate final causes, was questioned and refuted by natural scientists and philosophers of both the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. I will here focus upon the contemporaries John Locke, Isaac Newton, and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who laid the ground for Buffon’s scientific method. There has been much scholarship on the relationship between these three figures. On Locke and Newton, for example, there is controversy over the degree to which ideas were shared between the two. While Locke cites Newton in the epistle to the Essay Concerning Human Understanding, G. A. J. Rogers demonstrates that the first version of the Essay was “unaffected by [Newton’s] Principia,” and thus Locke found in Newton a scientific ally: “what Locke found in the Principia was the exemplification of a method to which he himself already subscribed.” Each thinker, Rogers claims, “wrote his most important work independently of the other,” despite the fact that Locke presents as the overwhelmingly “indebted partner.” A similar thesis has been suggested when it comes to discussing Newton and Leibniz, who had a quarrel over the invention of calculus, which they seemed to develop independently at the same moment in time. There are also debates over the similarities between Newton and Leibniz’s “scientific theism.” For the purpose at hand, however, they can be grouped together (controversies of

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15 There are also many points of conformity between Leibniz and Spinoza, which will be noted below.
18 While Leibniz was for a long time considered the plagiarizer, A.R. Hall represents the current consensus that they developed the ideas independently of one another: “It was certainly Isaac Newton who first devised a new infinitesimal calculus and elaborated it into a widely extensible algorithm, whose potentialities he fully understood; of equal certainty, differential and integral calculus, the fount of great developments flowing continuously from 1684 to the present day, was created independently by Gottfried Leibniz”: A.R. Hall, Philosophers at War: The Quarrel Between Newton and Gottfried Leibniz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 1.
19 See Ernst Cassirer, who claims that they represent a parting of ways, or two alternatives, in thinking about the scientific world: Ernst Cassirer, “Newton and Leibniz,” The Philosophical Review 52.4 (1943): 366-391. And see Stephen D. Snobelen, who argues that Newton’s theism was distinctively Unitarian, and was a unique breed
authorship withstanding) as a representative collective of a new scientific method: one which
turned away from certainty in final causes, and toward “an ordering of phenomenal
experience which would enable them to predict nature’s course, regardless of whether real
essences exist or can be known.”

Isaac Newton’s scientific method was one that actively set aside causal explanations,
restricting “itself to the mathematical principles of mechanics only.”

Differentiating himself from Descartes, who relied upon causal hypotheses, Newton rejects hypotheses, or conjectures about causes, as unscientific: “hitherto I have not been able to deduce the cause of these properties of gravity from phenomena and I feign no hypotheses; for whatever is not deduced from the phenomena is to be called an hypothesis; and hypotheses, whether metaphysical or physical, whether of occult qualities or mechanical, have no place in experimental philosophy.” As Osler writes, “reacting to the aprioristic method of Descartes, Newton repeatedly insisted on the empirical nature of scientific statements; and he fully realized that the price for empirical grounds was the loss of metaphysical certainty.”

It is in this respect, Osler claims, that Newton and Locke are united in their scientific methodology.

In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke distinguishes between real and nominal essences. Because we “are directly acquainted only with the contents of our minds,” human beings can only have knowledge, properly speaking, of nominal essences;

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22 Ibid, 286.
real essences, the material essence and causal explanation of things, remain beyond our grasp. Osler writes: “the goal of natural philosophy is to learn about the properties and interactions of material substances. But our knowledge of substances is confined to nominal essences—to their phenomenal properties, that is to say, to the ideas they produce in our minds.” For reasons similar to Newton, Locke claims that hypotheses “are a species of ‘conjecture’ or ‘speculation’ about empirical matters which attend the inevitable human propensity to ‘penetrate into the Causes of Things.’” Real essences, which Locke claims were postulated to rely on “small corpuscles,” could not be known in fact by the human mind.

One form of these inaccessible small corpuscles became the center of Leibniz’s philosophy. Leibniz too held that these small units of nature were essentially inaccessible to the human mind, but they formed both the real and metaphysical ground of his scientific theology, which saw God’s essence in the monadic structure of the universe. Through accounting for the creations of the natural world in terms of the monad (or the simple

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27 James Farr, “The Way of Hypotheses: Locke on Method,” Journal of the History of Ideas 48.1 (1987): 51-72, 56; citing John Locke, Essay Concerning Human Understanding 4.12.13. Farr emphasizes that Locke nevertheless uses hypotheses and finds them useful for human understanding, but all the while reminding his reader that they are merely conjectures. In this, Locke’s philosophy coheres with David Hume’s An Inquiry Concerning the Human Understanding (1748, published as The Philosophical Essays Concerning Human Understanding). Looking forward to Buffon, there is also speculation that Hume’s treatise served as an inspiration to Buffon’s ‘Initial Discourse’ when it came to the matter of conjecture versus certainty, and John Lyon demonstrates that there are similarities between the two works. He mentions in a note, however, that Buffon had delivered an address “on the manner of systematization in natural history” (taken to be a draft of his ‘Initial Discourse’) in 1745. Lyon presumes “no direct borrowing” on Hume’s part, but insinuates that Buffon’s borrowing of Hume might be questioned. Yet another authorial controversy! (Lyon, “Initial Discourse,” 141).
28 McMullin, “Impact,” 280. On real and nominal essences, and its relationship to Locke’s method and philosophy, also see Torrey Shanks, Authority Figures: Rhetoric and Experience in John Locke’s Political Thought (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014). Shanks writes that Locke’s emphasis on the humanness of nominal essences makes human knowledge dependent on language and, thus, rhetoric: “how to identify a substance depends upon its name and definition, that is, its nominal essence. God may create such entities, but humans author the words used to organize them” (Shanks, Authority Figures, 57). As we will see, this is very similar to the manner in which Buffon puts humans at the center of his natural science.
substance), Leibniz’s *Monadology* sought to reconcile God as the source of essences (eternal or teleological causes of things’ existences) with organic beings as kinds of “divine machine[s]” or “living automaton[s].” Leibniz’s philosophy accounted for the world in an atomistic manner and made it such that the material causes of things could be explained by the monadic structure, while accounting for the harmony or order of the whole: “because every monad is a mirror of the universe [and] is regulated with perfect order there must needs be order in what represents it.” The world of created things is one composed of minute particles of matter (the soul of Nature) that themselves reflect the divine purposes of God. As Virginia Parker Dawson writes, Leibniz “believed that all of creation, both the organized and apparently unorganized, was connected by imperceptible degrees . . . The idea of continuity supported his view of matter as dynamic and everywhere alive.” Leibniz’s theory thus allowed for a consistent reconciliation of the fundamental unknowability of the purposes—or teloi—of compounds, with the universal telos of the particles of matter, reflective of “the pre-established harmony, laid down by creation.” While we cannot know with certainty what the order is, we can know that the world is ordered, and that natural things are members of a Great Chain of Being.

30 Ibid.
32 Ibid, 44.
33 This is a vastly simplified restatement of Leibniz’s “principle of sufficient reason,” which, in an also vastly simplified version, serves as the foundation of the argument that we can know God exists because we have sufficient reason to know he exists through the order of the universe. The principle of sufficient reason is that we have “sufficient reason by virtue of which we consider that we can find no true or existent fact, no true assertion, without there being a sufficient reason why it is thus and not otherwise, although most of the time these reasons cannot be known to us.” Thus the universe is as it is because it was ordered by a divine mind, and because the divine mind would not have made the world otherwise (ordered in the best possible way, as the best possible world) given that there would have been an infinite number of possibilities available to such a mind. We thus have sufficient reason to know that God exists, and that the universe is ordered for the good, despite
The Great Chain of Being

In his monumental study, *The Great Chain of Being*, Arthur O. Lovejoy writes that “next to the word ‘Nature,’ ‘the Great Chain of Being’ was the sacred phrase of the eighteenth century”; “there has been no period in which writers of all sorts—men of science and philosophers, poets and popular essayists, deists and orthodox divines—talked so much about the Chain of Being, or accepted more implicitly the general scheme of ideas connected with it, or more boldly drew from these their latent implications.”

The three thinkers upon whom the remainder of this thesis focuses—Buffon, Charles Bonnet, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau—were embedded in this tradition, and indebted to their predecessors for its articulation. The Great Chain of Being as articulated by Leibniz and Locke postulates two things simultaneously: that there is a “hierarchy of beings,” and that “between natural things the transitions are insensible and quasi-continuous.” There are imperceptible degrees in nature, unknowable to the human mind, that are, yet, part of the order and hierarchy of

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35 Ibid, 3. As I discussed above, Aristotle is an intriguing figure in this respect, according to Lovejoy. While he was associated with teleological thinking and final causes, and was thus generally seen as an enemy of seventeenth and eighteenth century science, he too held this paradoxical argument: while “any division of creatures with reference to some one determinate attribute manifestly gave rise to a linear series of classes . . . [Nevertheless] such a series, Aristotle observed, tends to show a shading-off of the properties of one class into those of the next rather than a sharp-cut distinction between them. Nature refuses to conform to our craving for clear lines of demarcation; she loves twilight zones, where forms abide which, if they are to be classified at all, must be assigned to two classes at once” (Lovejoy, *Chain of Being*, 2). This tension will persist throughout this thesis, as the reader will see: in the thought of Buffon, who claims man is *Homo Duplex* (both animal and spiritual), in his follower Bonnet, and in the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.
nature. Lovejoy writes that “among the great philosophic systems of the seventeenth century, it is in Leibniz that the conception of the Chain of Being is most conspicuous, most determinative, and most persuasive.”

Leibniz writes in a letter to Varignon (1702):

All the different classes of beings which taken together make up the universe are, in the ideas of God who knows distinctly their essential gradations, only so many ordinates of a single curve so closely united that it would be impossible to place others between any two of them, since that would imply disorder and imperfection. Thus men are linked with the animals, these with the plants and these with the fossils, which in turn merge with those bodies which our senses and our imagination represent to us as absolutely inanimate. And, since the law of continuity requires that when the essential attributes of one being approximate those of the other, it is necessary that all the orders of natural beings form but a single chain, in which the various classes, like so many rings, are so closely linked one to another that it is impossible for the sense or the imagination to determine precisely the point at which one ends and the next begins.

Though the human mind cannot know, and human experience has not shown us, all of these imperceptible degrees of the natural order, we know that they are ordered by God, or a divine Reason. Leibniz’s theory of “possible worlds” explains the order of the universe and the natural world. God, being infinite and good, must have had available to him all possible worlds of creation. Given that this is the world that was created, Leibniz claims, it can only be a perfectly ordered world: the best of all possible worlds. The Great Chain of Being is reasonable and ordered, though the human mind is finite and thus cannot know the reason for its order. What reveals this order to us is, in fact, the failure of nature to be classified: there are imperceptible degrees of living things, and thus classifications or taxonomies of living things are but human impositions on an order that itself defies taxonomic ordering.
Locke also makes this argument in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*:

In all the visible corporeal world we see no chasms or gaps. All quite down from us the descent is by easy steps, and a continued series that in each remove differ very little from one another. There are fishes that have wings. . . . There are some birds that are inhabitanits of water. . . . There are animals so near of kin both to birds and beasts that they are in the middle between both. . . . And the animal and vegetable kingdom so nearly joined, that if you will take the lowest of one and the highest of the other, there will scarce be perceived any great difference between them; and so on until we come to the lowest and the most unorganical parts of matter, we shall find everywhere that the several species are linked together, and differ but in almost insensible degrees. And when we consider the infinite power and wisdom of the Maker, we have reason to think, that it is suitable to the magnificent harmony of the universe, and the great design and infinite goodness of the architect, that the species of creatures should also, by gentle degrees, ascend upwards from us towards his infinite perfection, as we see they gradually descend from us downwards.  

We can thus see an indictment in both Locke and Leibniz of the classificatory science that would follow them in Linnaeus’s taxonomy, and it is an indictment upon which Georges-Louis LeClerc de Buffon would seize. Buffon too claims that the “hand of the Creator” has presented us with an “infinity of contradictory and harmonious combinations,” and that “Nature moves and proceeds in imperceptible degrees and nuances” (HN I, 11; II, 443). Arguing against Linnaeus, Buffon presents a scientific method indebted to his predecessors, that is, in the words of Philip R. Sloan, a cosmology as opposed to a taxonomy.  

It is the ‘cosmology’ of the Great Chain of Being that holds together the tension at the heart of the Chain: that nature is simultaneously divinely ordered, and yet degenerate (or less-perfect) in comparison to divine order itself. The infinite degrees of nature also imply degrees of perfection and imperfection; as Locke writes, the natural degrees below human beings, imply divine, and more perfect, degrees above. The Great Chain of Being can, thus,
be progressive toward a greater perfection. As Leibniz writes in his *Principles of Nature and of Grace*, while we cannot hope to attain divine happiness in knowing the order and goodness of the world, our happiness can consist “in a perpetual progress to new pleasures and new perfections.”

“A cumulative increase in the beauty and universal perfection of the works of God, a perpetual and unrestricted progress of the universe as a whole must be recognized, such that it advances to a higher state of cultivation . . . As for the objection which may be raised, that if this is true the world will at some time already have become a paradise, the answer is not far to seek: even though many substances shall have attained to a great degree of perfection, there will always, on account of the infinite divisibility of the continuum, remain over in the abyss of things hitherto dormant, to be aroused and raised to a higher condition and, so to say, to a better cultivation. And for this reason progress will never come to an end.”

Lovejoy also writes that Leibniz sometimes “intimates that the possibility of an unlimited advance lies before all monads: ‘the eternity which is reserved in the future for all souls, or rather for all animate beings, is a vast field, designed to give, though by degrees, the greatest perfection to the universe.’”

The gradual perfection about which Leibniz speaks is dramatically transformed in the eighteenth century. Acknowledging the infinite degrees of nature, the natural scientist Buffon will make this progressive perfection the distinctive capacity of human being. In Buffon’s natural science we will see a conflation of all of his predecessors: in the Great Chain of Being, the human being is embedded in an order of infinite degrees; as a human being, we can, as Locke claims, thus only order our thoughts and our science around what we know, which is ourselves; nature is, in comparison to the divine, degenerate, and can thus be

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42 Cited in Lovejoy, *Chain of Being*, 250.
44 Lovejoy, *Chain of Being*, 259, citing Leibniz, *De Rerum*. 
subject to perfection and progress. Buffon’s cosmology, or natural theology, sees man as the animal capable of perfecting himself. The “consciousness of our existence” is a consciousness of the order of Nature itself, and it is the superiority of the human being to know his place in the Great Chain of Being. This is to know that we, and nature, are degenerate versions of what Buffon will call ‘original prototypes’; and this is, thus, to know that we can go about perfecting or regenerating ourselves.

**Buffon’s natural science and the discovery of the polyp**

Buffon’s natural science is indebted to all the traditions and philosophers that have been discussed in what has preceded. But there was one event that set Buffon’s natural science on its distinctive course: Abraham Trembley’s discovery of, and experimentation upon, the self-regenerating polyp in 1740. The polyp was described by Trembley to a fellow biologist, Réaumur, as something he discovered which attached to the sides of a beaker of water and on the stems of the aquatic plants contained therein: "It is green, and seems at first glance to be a plant. Then one discovers several characteristics of an animal.’ When touched or the beaker shaken, the body suddenly contracted . . . [Trembley] described the polyp’s ability to move about, its light-seeking tendencies, and finally its ability, after being cut in half, to form two separate living entities.”

Trembley repeated the cuttings numerous times—and numerous times on one body—each time with separate polyp fragments regenerating into whole organisms.

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45 This experiment was performed on November 25, 1740. The story is cited and discussed in Virginia Dawson’s *Nature’s Enigma*, which is an incredibly thorough accounting of the letters exchanged between Trembley, Réaumur and Bonnet concerning the discovery of the polyp (Dawson, *Nature’s Enigma*, 92).
The discovery of the polyp was paradigm-shifting for natural science. It was seen at first to be the discovery of one of these hitherto unknown “infinite degrees” of nature: a missing step between plant and animal. These types of creatures were postulated to exist by natural scientists since Aristotle’s time: they were what Aristotle called zoophytes, or plant-animals. Leibniz was in fact proclaimed a prophet of the polyp, having written in 1702:

> There is nothing monstrous in the existence of zoophytes, or plant-animals . . .
> On the contrary, it is wholly in keeping with the order of nature that they should exist. And so great is the force of the principle of continuity, to my thinking, that not only should I not be surprised to hear that such beings had been discovered —creatures which in some of their properties, such as nutrition or reproduction, might pass equally well for animals or for plants, and which thus overturn the current laws based on supposition of a perfect and absolute separation of the different orders of coexistent beings which fill the universe; —not only, I say, should I not be surprised to hear that they had been discovered, but, in fact, I am convinced that there must be such creatures, and that natural history might some day become acquainted with them.46

As Lovejoy writes: “the greater credit, it was sometimes remarked, was due to those who, not having seen, yet had believed in these principles. The chief glory, said a German popularizer of science, *a propos* of Trembley’s work, is that ‘of the German Plato [Leibniz], who did not live to know of the actual observation’ of this organism, ‘yet through his just confidence in the fundamental principles which he had learned from nature herself, had predicted it before his death.’”47

The polyp was indeed hailed as a confirmation of the scientific method that resists classifications. As La Mettrie wrote, “polyps do more than move themselves after being cut up; they regenerate in eight days into as many animals as there are cut portions. This makes me sorry for the system of generation held by the naturalists, or rather, it pleases me very

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46 Letter from Leibniz to Varignon, 1702; cited in Lovejoy, *Chain of Being*, 144-145.
47 Lovejoy, *Chain of Being*, 233.
much; for how well this discovery teaches us never to conclude anything general!”48 But the true revelation of the polyp was its novel mode of regenerating itself. La Mettrie writes in a letter to Diderot: “We do not understand Nature: causes concealed within herself . . . could have brought about everything. See . . . Trembley’s polyp! Does it not contain within itself the causes which produce its regeneration?”49 The polyp, as it turned out, was not disruptive because it was seen as a plant-animal hybrid (one of the missing links or infinite degrees); the polyp disrupted all ideas natural scientists and philosophers had about the reproduction of animals. Indeed, if it was an animal—as Trembley insisted it was—its regeneration was miraculous. As Virginia Dawson writes, the polyp “riveted the attention of men and women of the eighteenth century because they expected an animal cut in half to die. . . Regeneration upset their notions of how animals reproduced.”50

At the time when the polyp was discovered, there were two forms, or schools, of understanding animal reproduction: epigenesis and preformation. Preformationists argued that “since God placed extremely small germs in the progenitors of each species, the only real generation was consequently an act of Creation. What appeared as generation was merely the mechanical development of infinitely small germs, encased one within the other . . . When the original supply of germs placed in the female (or male) of each individual pair at Creation was used up, life on earth would cease.”51 Malebranche, for example, argued “that a single seed of an apple tree might contain an infinite number of seeds to supply an infinite number of centuries.”52 Because particular matter was the source of the essence, or purpose,

49 Ibid, 270.
51 Dawson, Nature’s Enigma, 37.
52 Ibid, 40.
of Nature, then so too must souls—both human and animal—be preformed and indivisible, and the generation of a new living thing must be an actuality of the Creator through biological reproduction. Epigenesists, on the other hand, argued via Aristotelian science that a living animal contained a germ which was “both the seed of the organism from which it came, of the horse, for instance, from which it was derived, and the seed of the organism that will eventually arise from it . . . The seed is potentially that which will spring from it, and the relation of potentiality to actuality we know.”\(53\) There were, Aristotle claimed, “two modes of causality” in play in reproduction: the reproduction of the telos in the offspring, and the material reproduction of the living creature.\(54\) The seed that was passed from the male to the female was passing along a teleological structure in which it could be assumed that the offspring would actualize itself according to the potentiality it was accorded at birth. The epigenetic theory accounted for the manner in which the soul and form of the reproduced animal was modified by the particularities of the species and the body’s sexual fluids—the reproduction occurring between two sexes produces an individual offspring with hereditary characteristics of both the species and the parents.

The division of these two ways of understanding reproduction falls along roughly the same axis as the methodological division discussed above: there is a division between the argument that relies on a teleological structure, and the argument that has Leibnizian roots in postulating an infinite monadic structure to the formation of reproductive seeds. But the polyp threw both of these theories into chaos. The polyp’s *parthenogenetic* (asexual) reproduction made it impossible to identify a seat of the soul in either the preformationist or epigenesist theory. As Keith R. Benson writes, citing Aram Vartanian: “In the pieces of a


\(54\) Ibid, 642a.
cut-up polyp regenerating into new polyps, Trembley’s contemporaries had the startling spectacle of Nature caught, as it were, in flagrante with the creation of life out of its own substance without prior design.’ . . . More critically for the philosophers, if each part of an animal could regenerate the entire animal, where was the residence of the ‘soul,’ the recognized organizing principle of organic beings?’\textsuperscript{55} For the preformationist, the soul of future creatures is contained in a seed that is passed from creature to creature in reproduction. But the polyp could be spliced into seemingly infinite pieces, and still regenerate itself from each piece of itself ad infinitum. For the epigenesist, reproduction relies on a teleological structure of potentiality (the soul) being passed through the interaction of parents, who give particularity to the genetic structure. But the polyp was its own parent, and it required no act of reproduction to regenerate itself. On all accounts of reproduction, the polyp was monstrous. Given its mode of regenerating itself it was no longer possible to speculate about the souls of animal creatures. In being able to regenerate itself from spliced pieces of its own body, the polyp seemingly had no soul.

But the polyp was not called a monster by the scientists of the eighteenth century. It was proclaimed a miracle. The miraculous nature of the polyp earned it an association in 1744 with “the chimerical ideas of the palingenesis or regeneration of plants and animals, which some alchemists have thought possible . . . The serpent cut in two and said to join together again, only gave one and the same serpent; but here is nature going farther than our

fancies.”56 The position of the natural scientists was in fact one that sought to appreciate the polyp and its miraculous palingenetic regeneration as a mode of creation in nature consistent with a continuous and harmonious natural universe. Either the polyp had no soul, or the polyp’s soul was everywhere. Either self-regeneration was against nature, or it was a miraculous revelation of the operations of nature. Here we arrive at Buffon, who published the first three volumes of his *Histoire Naturelle* nine years after Trembley’s discovery of the polyp. Jacques Roger writes that the polyp was integral to the development of Buffon’s natural history, most specifically in relation to Buffon’s account of reproduction: “it was from the model of the polyp’s regeneration . . . that Buffon attempted to form a general theory. What had been an incomprehensible exception became with him the simplest cause of a universal phenomenon.”57 Buffon postulated that all of nature was comprised of organic molecules, or primary and constituent parts. As he writes in Volume II: “the general principle of all production follows from this organic matter that is common to all that lives or vegetates . . . My experiments demonstrate with clarity that there are no pre-existing germs and at the same time they prove that the generation of animals and vegetables is not univocal. . . The corruption and the resolution [decomposition] of animals and vegetables produce an infinite variety of organized bodies . . . The more we examine the species of being, the more we will find singular varieties of them” (*HN* II, 320-321). Buffon saw in the polyp the demonstrable confirmation of Leibniz’s animate natural soul, motivated by a monadic

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structure. He argues that “the limits of these varieties are perhaps more extensive than we can imagine; it is good to generalize our ideas, to make efforts to reduce the effects of Nature to one point of view, and her productions into certain classes, yet an infinity of nuances and even degrees will escape us, which nevertheless exist in the natural order of things” (HN II, 324). Accounting for the polyp, Buffon claims that it is not possible to fully know how it reproduces, but it is clear that like “every mode of generation with which we are acquainted” the union of organic particles through an admixture of different particles (which, in accounting for the polyp, can be self-motivated) is necessary (HN II, 344). Buffon denies the pre-existence of ‘seeds’ or ‘germs,’ opting instead for an insistence on the animated properties of organic molecules common to all living things.

Because of Buffon’s embrace of the “vitalist” regenerative principles of nature, John H. Eddy Jr. has written that Buffon assumed “a nature full of its own creative powers.” This conception of nature, Eddy claims, is devoid of God; it was a “philosophe’s system.” It is, however, only due to the miraculous revelation of the polyp’s self-regenerative nature that Buffon set out on his scientific project, which was a philosophic reconciliation (not rejection) of the divine with the natural. The polyp’s evident capacity to repeatedly regenerate itself into identically perfected forms from degenerate forms of its body was not only compelling due to the polyp’s possession of its own regenerative motive power, or efficient cause, but because of its repetitive perfectibility. As will become evident in the further explication of Buffon’s natural science, the polyp was a natural instantiation of that

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60 Ibid.
whichBuffonsoughttorecreatethroughhumanactivity:theregenerationofspecies—most
essentiallyman—inviewoftheirperfectedformandthroughself-motivated,orself-
imposed,mechanismsandpowers. The evident power of one of God’s natural creations to
self-regenerate made it biologically, or naturally, permissible for man to do the same. Seeing
himself as partial but capable of perfection, man was empowered to recreate himself. Buffon
brings together the divine harmony of the Chain of Being, the nominal essence of human
knowledge of John Locke, and Leibniz’s progressive perfection of nature into one natural
science that proclaims the distinction of man, and his potential to perfect himself. The polyp
was an inspiring natural novelty because it was able to infuse life into its own corpse, thus
becoming associated with palingenensis (meaning rebirth)61, and man, like the polyp, could
see himself as possessing this same power to “rebirth” himself. The soul of nature is
regenerative, but man is the only natural creature capable of consciously and actively
regenerating himself and the rest of nature away from its degenerate (or ‘spliced’) conditions.
Buffon’s natural science is a cosmology, with man at the center of his study.

Histoire Naturelle and the spirit of man

Buffon writes that the “first truth that comes from his serious examination of nature is one
which perhaps humbles man. This truth is that he ought to classify himself with the animals,
which he resembles in all his material” (HN I, 12). Invoking the Great Chain of Being,
Buffon claims that “after having successfully ordered the different objects which compose
the Universe, and having put himself at the head of all created beings, he [man] will see with
astonishment that one can descend by almost imperceptible degrees from the most perfect

61 More will be said about this in the next chapter. It has important theological roots.
creature to the most formless matter, from the animal best organized to the most crude material; [and] he will recognize that these imperceptible nuances are the great work of Nature; he will find these nuances, not only in the sizes and forms, but in the movements, generations and successions of all species” (HN I, 12-13). When discussing man, Buffon writes: “we have often said that Nature moves and proceeds in imperceptible degrees and nuances; this truth, which otherwise admits no exception, is here reversed: there is an infinite distance between the faculties of man and those of the most perfect animal, clear proof that man is of a different nature, that he himself constitutes a separate class, from which there are infinite degrees and nuances of descent before we arrive at the state of an animal” (HN II, 443). Man is possessed of a “spiritual substance” by which he is enabled to think and reflect (HN IV, 22). Despite man’s incapacity to know the causes of the objects of nature, he is still the possessor of the ‘consciousness of his own existence’ which, Buffon claims, allows him to perceive standards of perfection—both in other species and his own. It is by the power, lesser than but reflective of God’s, of being able to “know the present, judge the past and foresee the future” (HN IV, 109), that the human being is potentially able to regenerate himself (and the rest of nature), and to bring himself to perfection through invention and knowledge.

While “we persuade ourselves that Nature works and operates all by the same means and by similar operations, this manner of thinking causes in the imagination an infinity of false relations” (HN I, 10). Arguing against rigid classificatory science such as Linnaeus’s, Buffon claims that Nature “works by unknown gradations” (HN I, 13) and all that can be said universally is that all natural bodies are composed of organic molecules. Echoing Locke’s scientific method, Buffon claims that man has no choice but to acknowledge that natural
science is a construct of human reasoning (in Locke’s terms, of nominal essences). Buffon asks the reader to imagine an adult man who awakens without the use of his senses and gains them back anew (HN I, 32): “the man will distinguish nothing and will confuse everything; but letting his ideas grow little by little by the repetitive sensations of the same objects, very early he will form a general idea of animated matter . . . [and eventually] he will arrive at this first large division, animal, vegetable, mineral” (HN I, 36). Out of this Buffon wishes to make two foundational points about method.

First: divisions of nature into classifications are inevitable if one wants to form general ideas about the world, but they are not true in the most fundamental sense. Classifications are always subject to change, given that Nature works by gradations unknown to us. Abstractions imposed upon the creations of nature—such as definitions and groupings—are, Buffon claims, always “only very imperfect representations of the thing[s]” (HN I, 25). Second: what is most true is what is closest to us. This has a dual sense for Buffon. Closest to us are our immediate perceptions, and our most immediate perception—according to this waking man—is that of animated matter. This immediate and most true perception is corroborated by scientific investigation insofar as the most as we can truly know about Nature and her causes is that matter is animated by organic molecules. The second sense of ‘closeness’ for Buffon, however, has to do with the human’s place in the ordering of scientific thought. Because it is man that seeks to impose order upon nature through investigating it and abstracting its objects into generalizable ideas, man has no choice but to place himself at the center of any scientific theory. It only makes sense, Buffon claims, to recognize that that which man knows best is what is closest to him, beginning with himself: “all that is possible for us is to perceive some particular effects . . . and to
acknowledge finally an order relative to our own nature, as appropriate to the existence of the things we consider” (HN I, 12). In being the creature that seeks to have knowledge of the world, man must acknowledge that the abstract knowledge he imposes upon the creations of the world are his own and fundamentally relative to him.

What is, then, closest to man? This too is dual. Man is at once a material substance (as a natural being) and also in possession of a “spiritual principle” (HN IV, 70). Though in many ways these are intertwined, it works best to begin by speaking only of the first sense before moving on to the second. As has been discussed, Buffon claims that in investigating nature, the first consequence will be humbling for man, “which is that he ought to classify himself with the animals, which he resembles in all his material” (HN I, 12). This too is founded in the fundamental molecular make up of all things. Further than this, however, Buffon is adamant in his early work\(^62\) that the only classification of science that is not arbitrary, or human-imposed, is that of species. Buffon believes that a species is a natural grouping due to his observations of reproduction; that is, creatures (man and animal alike) that mate together, group together.

Like the many degrees and descents of the perfection of nature centering on and beginning with man, each species too exhibits more and less degenerated forms or individuals. Buffon’s first priority is to establish that species are not degenerated forms of one another. This doctrine appears in Buffon’s discussion of the donkey, or the ass. Buffon writes that there are many who consider the ass to be a degenerated horse due to the many physical characteristics that they share; a suggestion he considers preposterous: “if it be once admitted that there are families among plants and animals, that the ass belongs to the family of the horse, and differs from him only by degeneration; with equal propriety may it be

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\(^62\) He changes his position in the later volumes, to be discussed in the next chapter.
concluded, that the monkey belongs to the family of man; that the monkey is a man
degenerated; that man and the monkey have sprung from a common stock, like the horse and
ass; that each family, either among animals or vegetables, has been derived from the same
origin; and even that all animated beings have proceeded from a single species, which, in the
course of ages, has produced, by improving and degenerating, all the different races that now
exist” (HN Sm III [IV], 402). At this point in Buffon’s career, he maintains that species,
contrary to this erroneous position about a common stock, maintain their distinction despite
many attempts to cross-breed, which result only in “barren and vitiated individuals” (HN Sm
III [IV], 402). Further than this, species maintain themselves over time by the reproduction
of a constant succession of similar individuals which, despite the span of time and “shades of
nature, are most conspicuously marked” and consistently maintained (HN III Sm [IV], 405).

Nevertheless, due primarily to climatic conditions, degenerate instantiations of
species do develop and consistently maintain themselves. Buffon’s discourse on the horse
contains the most robust explanation of this phenomenon in Buffon’s early corpus:

There is in Nature a general prototype of every species, upon which each
individual is modeled, but which seems, in its actual production, to be depraved
or improved by circumstances; so that, with regard to certain qualities, there
appears to be an unaccountable variation in the succession of individuals, and, at
the same time, an admirable uniformity in the entire species. The first animal,
the first horse, for example, has been the external and internal model, upon which
all the horses that have existed, or shall exist, have been formed. . . The original
impression is preserved in each individual. But, among millions of individuals,
not one exactly resembles another, nor, of course, the model from which they
sprung. This difference, which shows that Nature is not absolute, but knows how
to vary her works by infinite shades, is equally conspicuous in the human
species, in all animals, and in all vegetables. What is singular, this model of the
beautiful and the excellent, seems to be dispersed over every region of the earth,
a portion of which resides in all climates, and always degenerates, unless united
with another portion brought from a distance. In order, therefore, to obtain good
grain, beautiful flowers, &c. the seeds must be changed, and never sown in the
same soil that produced them. In the same manner, to have fine horses, dogs,
&c. the males and females of different countries must have reciprocal
intercourse. Without this precaution, all grain, flowers, and animals degenerate, or rather receive an impression from the climate so strong as to deform and adulterate the species. This impression remains; but it is disfigured by every feature that is not essential. By mixing races, on the contrary, or by crossing the breed of different climates, beauty of form, and every other useful quality, are brought to perfection; Nature recovers her spring, and exhibits her best productions (HN Sm III [IV], 343-345).

This paradigmatic standard for each animal, the ‘original prototype,’ allows Buffon to account for the many variances (indeed, infinite degrees) one sees in individual members of a species, while also explaining their fundamental biological similarities. Further than this, however, Buffon’s ‘original prototypes’ inform his most important philosophical contribution to eighteenth century natural science, which is the assertion that only man has the capacity to bring things to their perfection, and toward their original prototype, which allows Nature to “exhibit her best productions.”

The fundamental distinction of man from the rest of the animal kingdom for Buffon—that which separates him from the rest of Nature by infinite degrees—is that between a sentiment of existence (belonging to both man and animal) and a consciousness of one’s own existence (belonging only to man). Man is, according to Buffon, Homo Duplex, an interior existence divided in two between sensory feeling (“which shines only in a tempest of obscurity” and consists of sensory impressions and passions [HN IV, 69]) and “the spiritual principle” (HN IV, 69). Buffon accords reason, thought, and morality to this spiritual sense. More interesting are the two other capacities or faculties that Buffon claims are unique to man: his capacity for invention, and his awareness of time.

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63 The doctrine of ‘original prototypes’ is, curiously, a position that Lovejoy ascribes to Robinet, who wrote De la Nature in 1761, more than a decade after the publication of Buffon’s first volumes: “Robinet finds, that there must be a single anatomical type-form common to all living things—which is to say, to all things. And this must, of course, be a particular form, distinct from all other possible forms; so that the ‘fullness’ of nature is limited to the realization of all possible variations upon a single prototype” (Lovejoy, Chain of Being, 277). Lovejoy also claims that Robinet borrows the language of prototypes from Denis Diderot, who writes in 1754 (also following Buffon) of the “successive metamorphoses of the envelope of the prototype . . . by insensible degrees” (279).
Buffon claims that “animals never invent, nor bring anything to perfection” (HN IV, 38). While animals distinguish better what is agreeable to their present existence, Buffon claims, they lack the capacity—in all sense of the word, the *spirit*—to perfect themselves or to change their conditions. The “spiritual principle” that is unique to man, Buffon writes, is “dependent on education” (HN IV, 69): for while the “excellence of the senses is a gift of nature, art and habit may bestow on them a greater degree of perfection” (HN IV, 32). This spiritual principle is, thus, a mark of superiority not only insofar as man is the only being to possess it, but also insofar as man is the only creature that is, firstly, *aware* of standards of perfection and degeneracy but, secondly and more essentially, able to work towards those standards of perfection through invention and education. That is, man is the only creature capable of perfecting himself.

Man is also, unlike the animals, conscious of his own existence as a temporal being: animals are “conscious of their present existence,” but in man “consciousness of existence is composed of the perception of actual existence, as well as the remembrance of past existence” (HN IV, 51). The conclusion of Buffon’s *Discourse on the Nature of Animals* (Volume IV) offers an expansion on the importance of man’s temporal awareness:

Let man, however, examine, analyze and contemplate himself, and he will soon discover the dignity of his being; he will perceive the existence of his soul; he will cease to degrade his nature; he will see, at one glance, the infinite distance placed by the Supreme Being between him and the brutes. God alone knows the past, the present and the future. Man, whose existence continues but a few moments, perceives only these movements: But a living and immortal power compares these moments, distinguishes and arranges them. It is by this power that man knows the present, judges of the past and foresees the future. Deprive him of this divine light, and you deface and obscure his being; nothing will remain but an animal equally ignorant of the past and the future, and affectable only by present objects (HN Sm III [IV], 300, my emphasis).
In this passage we have come full circle back to a re-affirmation of Buffon’s scientific method in an entirely new light. Only God can know the true comparisons, arrangements and classifications of nature; man, in his temporality, can only hope for an approximation of these natural truths. And yet, man as a temporal being is given the *spiritual* quality—the power—to be aware of time. As part of this temporal awareness man knows that he is more God-like than the other creatures of nature precisely because of his capacity to change the future of his species according to invention, and pertaining to standards of perfection only he has the capacity to perceive because he is closest to God.

Man’s place in the Great Chain of Being is a privileged one. While he remains part of the great order of nature (as an animal), he is the only natural creature capable of recognizing that order. In that recognition, he can also see that there are more and less perfect forms of things; and, indeed, that all things must be capable of a perfection they do not at present possess. Man as a species can strive toward a standard of perfection that does not exist in observable nature, but must by nature be achievable. We are endowed with the capacity to regenerate ourselves through improvements. Both inside and outside of nature’s imperceptible degrees, man is simultaneously a natural creature capable of regenerative perfection (and, likewise, subject to degeneration) and the site of his own regenerative power. With the natural model of the polyp, and the spiritually creative essence granted him by God, man can progressively change both his biology and his customs in view of a reborn and perfected form.64

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64 This ‘vitalist’ reading of nature, and of the revelation of the polyp, is also addressed in Jonathan Sheehan and Dror Wahrman, *Invisible Hands: Self-Organization and the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). Here Sheehan and Wahrman see the self-regenerative nature of the polyp as providing a natural explanation of an order that is self-regulating, and yet creative and dynamic.
The Great Chain of Being was described in 1742 by the Abbé Pluche as a spectacle to be observed in which the “work of creation was in a sense progressive until man was produced”; but “nothing more, therefore, will be produced in all the ages to follow. . .

Consult the evidence of experience; elements always the same, species that never vary, seeds and germs prepared in advance for the perpetuation of everything, . . . so that one can say, Nothing new under the sun, no new production.” As Lovejoy writes, however, “one of the principal happenings in the eighteenth century thought was the temporalizing of the Chain of Being.”

The Chain of Being was made historical, and coupled with this temporalization and emphasis on the progression of the Chain, Buffon would come to emphasize in his later work—which will be addressed in the next chapter—that man did have the capacity, in fact, to vary nature’s species. So too would Buffon provide an account of natural history itself, which rests on the reconciliation of biblical with natural time. Describing history as a sequence of epochs, Buffon claims that we are in the seventh epoch: only now does “the entire face of the earth bear the imprint of man’s power. . . It is with our hands that it has developed to its full extent, and came by degrees to the point of perfection and magnificence which we see today” (HN Supplement V, 237). And yet, we look back upon “the sad spectacle” of revolutions and deaths of civilizations, “all produced by ignorance, [and] hope that the current and imperfect balance between the civilized nations will continue and may even become more stable” (HN Supplement V, 237). Man cannot know in the present how his power may extend into the future; it depends on his intelligence, the revelations of further

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65 Abbé Noël Antoine Pluche, Histoire du ciel, où l’on recherché l’origine de l’idolatrie, et les méprises de la philosophie, sur la formation des corps célestes et de toute la nature (Paris: Chez le Veuve Estienne, 1742); cited in Lovejoy, Chain of Being, 243-244.
66 Lovejoy, Chain of Being, 244.
truths, “and the more he will observe, the more it will grow . . . Who knows to what point man may perfect his moral and physical nature?” (HN Supplement V, 253).

The distinct capacity of human beings to foresee the future in their temporal awareness, and thus to perfect themselves into the future, links Buffon’s natural science to the futurity of Leibniz’s philosophy. Leibniz’s account of the progress of the Great Chain of Being, and his account of the future perfection of nature that has not at present manifested itself in the world, is taken up by Buffon and his fellow natural scientist Charles Bonnet in a novel way. This futurity is no longer a matter of nature unfolding her infinite degrees, but is a matter of man participating in that unfolding. It is not only a spiritual awareness that is born in this natural science, but an historical one, and it is a history in which man is the active participant. Buffon and Bonnet67 share this account of the human being’s place in nature, and, as will be detailed in the next chapter, claim that man has a palingenetic consciousness: a consciousness of himself that rests on the capacity to regenerate himself and the rest of nature, and to make history.

67 Like Buffon, Bonnet’s philosophy is indebted to Leibniz, and to his emphasis on the progressiveness of nature: “Bonnet’s debt to Leibniz is acknowledged in his Memoirs. Here he tells us that he read Theodicée in 1748, at which time it opened up for him ‘another universe, whose view appeared to me as an enchanted, I would say almost magical, perspective.’ Memoirs autobiographies de Charles Bonnet de Genève, ed. Raymond Savioz (Paris, 1948), 100. Cited in Peter Harrison, “Theology and Early Theories of Evolution,” in Religion, Reason, and Nature in Early Modern Europe, ed. Robert Crocker (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), 224 (note 106). Harrison credits Virginia Parker Dawson for this citation. As Harrison also notes, a large portion of Bonnet’s Palingénésie Philosophique is devoted to Bonnet’s enthusiastic discussion of Leibniz’s philosophy.
Chapter 3

Buffon, Bonnet, and the Palingenetic World

In fast bondage he bound Prometheus . . . and against him sent a long-winged eagle to feed on his liver, which was immortal; but whatever this long-winged bird ate during the day grew during the night again to perfection.
- Hesiod, Theogony

The previous chapter concluded with Georges-Louis LeClerc de Buffon’s account of man as the sole natural creature who is able to invent and bring things to perfection. This account of Buffon’s Histoire Naturelle took stock only of the first four volumes, with the fourth being published in 1753. As Buffon proceeded to publish 15 total volumes of the Histoire Naturelle, 9 volumes of the Histoire Naturelle des Oiseaux (incorporated as Volumes 16-24), 5 volumes of the Histoire Naturelle des Minéraux (Volumes 25-29), and 7 Supplements (Volumes 30-36),¹ his position on the interpretation of man and his place in nature became significantly refined and further developed. Buffon would come to acknowledge in his later work that man has been capable of altering, changing and modifying animals to such a degree that “we have created physical and real genera” (HN XI, 369): he writes of domesticated sheep, that these species have been “altered differently by the hand of man” (HN XI, 369).² Buffon was also successfully able to cross-breed species of animals, creating

¹ As Buffon aged he became more reliant on contributors, with Bernard-Germain-Éteienne de Lacépède adding the Histoire naturelle des poissons and the Histoire naturelle des quadrupèdes oviarges et des serpents.
² All citations to Buffon’s Histoire Naturelle are to Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière, avec la description du cabinet du Roy (Paris: De L’Imprimerie Royale). A list of volumes and publication dates has been appended to the thesis. Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own. Hereafter intext (HN Volume,
‘mules,’ or hybrids, that he previously thought impossible. He writes in “De la Dégénération des Animaux [On the Degeneration of Animals]” that it is verified that the mule produced of the donkey and the horse is (contrary to previous speculation and experimentation) able to itself reproduce, and he speculates that the same could be the case for other “closely related” species such as dogs and wolves or foxes (HN XIV, 338, 350).³

This discovery seemingly problematized Buffon’s earlier assertion that the only scientific category that can be said to exist in nature is that of species due to each individual of a species only being able—or willing—to procreate with its like. Secondly, and more essentially, it seemed to problematize Buffon’s assertion that there is an unchanging and originary prototype for each species of animal: if humans are able to change or alter animals to such a degree that they are able to continue reproducing in their altered form, then it may in fact be the case that man is, in all his spiritual power, capable of replicating the creative powers of God. Buffon’s later philosophy of nature did, in fact, embrace more comprehensively the human superiority of being able to manipulate, control, and cultivate (or civilize) nature, but his theory did not have to subject itself to contortions so egregious as to result in an abandonment of his faith in the continuity of Nature and of God’s plan. The language of regeneration, or renewal, played an integral part in maintaining the cohesion of Buffon’s earlier and later volumes of the Histoire.

Charles Bonnet, who is the focus of the second half of this chapter, followed Buffon’s scientific conclusions, and was, like Buffon, inspired by the palingenetic powers of the polyp. The polyp revealed for Bonnet a new way of understanding the operations of nature, and man’s place in the Great Chain of Being. The human being was the only creature capable of having a ‘palingenetic’, or historically regenerative, consciousness. Man can actively give himself a second birth through the innovative capacity to modify his social and political circumstance, and to rise from his habitual, or corrupted, state “incorruptible and glorious” (*Contemplation* I, 72). Writing after both Buffon and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Bonnet also borrowed Rousseau’s invocation of perfectibility: the distinct capacity of human beings to change their circumstances. Rousseau is the subject of Chapters 4 and 5, and it will be demonstrated in these chapters that Rousseau’s “perfectibility,” as well as much of his philosophic corpus, owes its articulation to the natural science of Buffon, and to the idea of the Great Chain of Being. In detailing the arguments of Buffon and Bonnet prior to explicating Rousseau (including the arguments of Buffon’s that postdate the writings of Rousseau), however, a broad picture of the historical and natural-theological climate in which Rousseau was operating emerges. Buffon, Rousseau, and Bonnet share the argument that the distinction of the human being lies in his capacity to remake the world in pursuit of a state of perfection, or goodness, that does not exist in the present state of things. The palingenetic, or historical, consciousness makes man perfectible: the only agent in nature capable of regenerating himself through regenerating his conditions.

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4 All citations to Bonnets’ *Contemplation* are to: *The Contemplation of Nature*, translated from the French of C. Bonnet, 2 volumes (London: T. Longman, 1766). The French was also consulted. Translations, when my own, will be noted. Hereafter intext (*Contemplation* Volume, page number).
**Buffon’s unaltered prototype, and the alterations of man**

The case of the mouflon (a wild sheep) is a good entry-point into the shift in Buffon’s later work, which required an account of the relationship between the unchanging natural prototype and the possibility for, and evidence of, man’s capacity to reshape, or renew, natural beings. Buffon begins his discourse on the mouflon in stating that it is certain that the domestic sheep as it exists today “might not exist on its own, that is to say, without the assistance of man”; however, “it is equally certain that Nature has not produced it as it is, but in our hands it has degenerated” (HN XI, 353). Climate, food, and human care have caused the variety in sheep, but Buffon claims that the mouflon, which can still be found in “the mountains of Greece, the islands of Cyprus, Sardinia and Corsica, and in the deserts of Tartary,” appears to be the “primitive stock of all sheep; it exists in the state of nature, it subsists and multiplies without the help of man” and it is “sharper” and “stronger” than all domesticated sheep (HN XI, 363-364). Postulating about cross-breeding, Buffon writes: “there is every reason to believe that if we gave a [she]goat a mouflon instead of a domestic ram, she would produce goats approaching nearer the species of goat” (HN XI, 365, my emphasis). It is undeniable that we have “altered, modified, and changed” these animals, and, thus, it is undeniable that they may be re-altered by the hand of man (HN XI, 369).

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5 Buffon’s account of the effects of the domestication of animals is not unique for this period. For more examples, see Harriet Ritvo, “Nature and Domestication in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain,” in *An English Arcadia: Landscape and Architecture in Britain and America* (San Marino, 1992), and E.C. Spary, *Utopia’s Garden: French Natural History from Old Regime to Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

6 It is worthy to note that the mouflon is, indeed, still seen to be one of two ancestors for all domesticated sheep breeds (*O. Orientalis*). The allusions to Rousseau’s account of the natural state (and natural man) are also unmistakable here, concerning the strength and vigor of the ‘original’ stock. Relations to Rousseau will continue to be conspicuous throughout the account of Buffon’s *Histoire*, especially, and perhaps most importantly, in Buffon’s account of the degeneracy of human beings. Buffon’s relationship to Rousseau will be dealt with in full in Chapters 4 and 5.
Despite all of the species we have “handled” and “altered differently,” there remains a “unique and common origin in Nature” which, properly called, is the species (HN XI, 369). Buffon uses various phrases to differentiate the *species* (the unaltered natural prototype) and the species we see differentiated by man: he calls these altered types, or varieties, of sheep variously “races,” “genres,” or “genera”. Buffon’s account of sheep serves—despite the various nomenclatures employed to describe their differentiation—as a microcosm of Buffon’s broader perspective on man’s relationship to the rest of nature: one in which man is able to alter natural creatures either away from or toward their more perfect forms. The degenerate sheep need not be degenerate, given the power of man to change or modify its nature toward the fulfillment of its species, or perfection.

Buffon’s species-scale of degeneration to perfection also informed his account of Old- versus New- world animal—and human—life, detailed primarily in his “Animaux Communs aux deux Continents [Animals Common to Both Continents].” He begins by listing the animals that are found on both continents: bears, roe-bucks, elk, reindeer/caribou, hares, squirrels, beavers, wolves, foxes, and so on. Despite appearing on both continents, however, “in the new continent, the animals of the southern provinces are very small in comparison with the animals of warm countries in the old continent.” (HN IX, 102). Further still, “the animals that have been transported from Europe to America, such as horses, donkey, cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, dogs, etc. all these, I say, became smaller; and those which have not been transported, but who went there themselves, those who are in a word common to both worlds, such as wolves, foxes, deer, elk, are also considerably smaller in America than in Europe, without exception. There is therefore a combination of elements and other physical causes, something contrary to the aggrandizement of living [animated] Nature in the
new world.” (HN IX, 103). This accusation of the degenerative power of the New World led, in fact, to a charming interaction between Buffon and Thomas Jefferson. As Justin E. H. Smith writes: “[because] Buffon describes North American fauna as stunted and dwarf-like . . . in 1787, an indignant Thomas Jefferson sent him a counterexample in the form of a giant moose carcass.”

It is not, however, merely the climate of the Americas (and perhaps its differing hot and cold regions) that causes the degeneration of these animals from their species prototype: it is, for Buffon, the fault of the American man. In America, Buffon writes, man was “scattered in small numbers, wandering; where far from using this territory as his domain as a master, he had no empire; where having never had control over animals or the elements, nor having tamed the seas, directed the rivers, nor worked the land, he himself was only an animal of the first rank, and existed for Nature as a being without consequence, a kind of helpless automaton, incapable of reforming or seconding [the intentions] of Nature” (HN IX, 103-104).

Not only, then, is ‘savage’ man in America responsible for the degenerate nature

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[8] This account seems to be contradictory with Buffon’s account of the mouflon above which stands for the prototype of the species precisely because of its unmanipulated state (in its opposition to the ‘softer’ domesticated sheep). The reconciliation of this apparent contradiction can go as follows. Buffon suggests that the original stock of each species degenerated across the world, despite the fact that on occasion, as in the case of the mouflon, certain communities of animals maintained their more primary state. The American savage can be blamed, therefore, for not generally taking care to regenerate the animals around him who are already degenerate (and in the cases of animals who degenerate further when in America, both the climate and the inhabitants are to blame). The example of the mouflon is one that is an advantageous opportunity to exemplify the manner in which man is able to ‘second’ the intentions of nature in breeding animals to their more perfect form. This does not, however, explain the fact of domestication, which in its creation of new genera in fact weakens the species being domesticated by moving it away from its more perfect form. In this case, the supremacy of man takes priority. That is, the perfection of man (in altering nature to his own needs) takes priority over the perfection of other animal species. Put another way, though the mouflon is an example of how one can regenerate an animal to its more perfect form (or toward its ‘species’) it might be the case that ‘breaking the ox’ is more to God’s plan than is restoring the planet to its original natural glory. Indeed, because man is closest to God, whatever he deems to be more to his need (in relation to the creation of new species, and so on) is by default more perfect. The American savage is especially blameworthy, therefore, in failing to
of the continent’s animal life due to his lack of control over, or manipulation of, nature, but man himself on this continent is cast as degenerate—an automaton incapable of the truly human capacity for the propagation of artifice and civilizing progress. Men who do not manipulate nature are themselves deviations from the natural human prototype and species.

The human prototype, discussed in the previous chapter, thus attains a sharper focus in Buffon’s later work. Homo Duplex, or man understood as both sensory (natural) and spiritual (immaterial), is more acutely defined as the creature that stands opposed to the rest of the natural kingdom based upon his ‘spiritual principle.’ Unlike animals, “who never invent, nor bring anything to perfection” (HN IV, 38), man brings all things to perfection; and brings himself closer to perfection in emulating the creative and generative power of God. This too involves the distinct capacity, also discussed in the previous chapter, of the human being to be aware of his own temporality: “God alone knows the past, the present and the future. Man, whose existence continues but a few moments, perceives only these movements: But a living and immortal power compares these moments, distinguishes and arranges them. It is by this power that man knows the present, judges of the past and foresees the future. Deprive him of this divine light, and you deface and obscure his being; nothing will remain but an animal equally ignorant of the past and the future, and affectable only by present objects” (HN Sm III [IV], 300, my emphasis). This distinction is repeated in “Animaux Communs”: “Nature, I confess, is in a continual flux of movement; but it is sufficient for man to grasp the moment of his age, to throw glances backward and forward, and to try to glimpse what [Nature] was and into what it could be made” (HN IX, 127, my emphasis). Man’s unique capacity lies in his awareness of what nature is (in the present),

participate in the distinctively human quality of regenerating nature to his own purposes. It is this human activity that truly seconds the intentions of nature (or God)—as we will see in the conclusion of the discussion of Buffon in this chapter.
and how nature *ought* to be according to its eternal prototypes. This requires reflection on both the past instantiations of nature’s creations, and the present means to ensure the further perfection (and prevention of degeneration) into the future. Only man can actively participate in the perfection of nature because only he has the temporal awareness to perceive its standards and its deviations. And, indeed, only the man that actively participates in the perfection of living creatures (including the perfection of himself) can be properly called *man*. As Buffon writes in his “First View of Nature”: the rights given to Nature are those to “alter, change, destroy, develop, renew, and produce”; and man is, in this respect, the supreme regenerative, or renewing, agent (HN XII, iv).

**An Ode to Nature, and to man perfected**

Buffon’s “Ode” to Nature in his “First View” tells the hypothetical history of a savage man who has, until now, been living in the “profound silence” of “dreary solitude.” He suddenly “shrinks back and exclaims”:

‘Uncultivated nature is hideous and unflourishing; it is I alone who can render her agreeable and vivacious. Let us drain the marshes, and give animation to the waters, by converting them into brooks and canals; let us make use of that active and devouring element, whose power we have discovered; let us apply fire to this burdensome load of vegetables and to those decaying forests which are already half destroyed; let us complete the work by destroying with iron what we cannot destroy by fire . . . That land, which was formerly impassable, will become a flourishing pasture for flocks of cattle, where they will find plenty of food, a never-failing supply, and where, by the excellence of their sustenance, they will increase and multiply, and thus reward us for our labours and the protection we have given them. Let us still go farther, and subject the ox to the yoke, let his strength and weight of body be employed to plough the ground, which acquires fresh vigour from culture. Thus will the operations of Nature be assisted, and acquire double strength and splendor from the skill and industry of man.’ How beautiful is cultivated Nature! How beautiful does she appear when decorated by the hand of man! He is himself her chief ornament, her noblest production (HN B X [XII], 338).
This empire of man over the earth, and over its inferior living creatures, is seemingly a recapitulation of Genesis: “And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth . . . and God blessed them and said unto them, be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it.”

The equation of Buffon’s Ode with the Biblical narrative is, however, far from simplistic. Jacques Roger points out, for example, that Buffon’s “allusion to fire” — which as Buffon writes in the “First View” “‘was hidden from us and which we owe only to ourselves’”— reveals the Promethean character of this human undertaking.

Indeed, Buffon’s claim that the human being is ‘spiritual’ in his ability to remake Nature in view of its perfected form (looking to the eternal prototype, or species) is difficult to reconcile with his claim that Nature “works by unknown gradations” (HN I, 13), and that the contemplation of her glorious works is meant to result in “the first sensation [of] astonishment mixed with admiration . . . [followed by a] humility turned back on ourselves” (HN I, 5). The hubris here attributed to man in being capable of determining the ways in which Nature requires further perfection seems, from Buffon’s own perspective, positively sinful.

Buffon, however, maintained the reconciliation between his reverence for both Nature and Scripture through an account that grounded his arguments for perfection and renewal in

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9 Genesis 1:26-28. And, in a similar respect, it is reminiscent of John Locke’s Second Treatise of Government.
10 Roger, Buffon, 237.
11 This reconciliation is described by Arthur McCalla as one involved in the “metaphor of the ‘Two Books’—the Book of Scripture and the Book of Nature.” Arthur McCalla, The Creationist Debate: The Encounter Between the Bible and the Historical Mind, Second Edition (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013), 1. Natural theology attempts to harmonize the Book of Nature and the Book of Scripture through deducing “knowledge about God from the study of nature” (12). Natural theology is a long-standing tradition in Christian interpretation, with Buffon and Bonnet’s immediate predecessors stretching to Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton, and Robert Boyle, who wrote that “it is rational, from the manifest fitness of some things to cosmical or animal ends or uses, to infer, that they were framed or ordained in reference thereunto by an intelligent and designing
a scientific and universal history. His late “Des Époches de la Nature [The Epochs of Nature]” in Supplement V of the *Histoire* attempted to establish that the six days of creation in Genesis correspond to six historical time intervals, or Epochs. He begins “Des Époches de la Nature” in claiming that like civil history, in which one “deciphers ancient inscriptions to determine the ages of human revolutions and note the dates of moral events; similarly, in Natural History, you have to search the world’s archives, draw old monuments out of the bowels of the earth” (HN Supplement V, 1). Unlike Civil History, however, Natural History “embraces all space and all time, and has no limits other than those of the Universe” (HN Supplement V, 2). Throughout the Epochs, Buffon writes, “Nature has been found in different states; the surface of the earth has taken successively different patterns; even the heavens were varied, and all the things of the physical universe are like those of the moral world, in a continuous movement of successive variations. For example, the state in which we see Nature today is our work as much as hers; we knew how to temper, modify, bend it to our needs, our desires; we surveyed, cultivated, fertilized the earth: the way in which it is presented is very different from the time previous to the invention of the arts” (HN Supplement V, 3). How many buried things there were, Buffon writes; “how many events completely forgotten! The previous revolutions in the memory of men! It took a very long


12 “Des Époches” was an elaboration of his account of the genesis of the earth already found in Volume 1 of the *Histoire*. He acknowledges that his calculations were off in his earlier work, but the principles remain the same. He nevertheless adds far more philosophic and historical flourish to his account in “Des Époques.” While Buffon’s work on pre-Biblical history was highly influential, it also was not without its predecessors, including Giambattista Vico’s *New Science*. The seventeenth century was also rife with scholars attempting to reconcile geological history with the Great Chain of Being: for example, Thomas Burnet’s *Sacred Theory of the Earth [Telluris Theoria Sacra]* (London: R Norton, 1684 [1681]) and William Whiston’s *New Theory of the Earth* (London: Benjamin Tooke, 1696).
series of observations; it took thirty centuries of culture in the human *esprit* only to acknowledge the present state of things” (HN Supplement V, 4). Here Buffon acknowledges the many geological phases of the earth, and the slow combinations of organic molecules into increasingly complex forms. The earth was subject to warming and cooling periods, speeding up and slowing down (respectively) the emergence of new forms of life and geological structures.

While this account of the history of the Universe (and of the earth and its life forms) seems to contradict the chronology of Scripture, Buffon claims that the two accounts are compatible, for “it must be remembered that [God’s] divine inspiration has been passed through human organs: His Word was transmitted to us in a poor language, devoid of precise expressions for abstract ideas, so that the Interpreter of the divine word was often obliged to use words whose meanings are determined only by the circumstances.” (HN Supplement V, 32). Six days of creation can, therefore, mean six epochs, but communicated to simpler men with simpler ideas. Buffon indeed says as much with respect to Moses: “everything said in the story of Moses is put to the scope of the intelligence of the people; everything represented with respect to the common man” (HN Supplement V, 38). The history of Biblical man is, thus, mediated by man and the historical record. While it communicates truths about the spiritual nature of the human being (and the genealogy of Adam’s descendants, the chronology or timing of which Buffon accepts), its account of the genesis of the world can be revealed to us anew through Nature. Though the stories told to those of Moses’s time sufficed, it is necessary to “strengthen from time to time, and even expand the idea of God, in the mind and heart of man . . . [and God] uses humans to discover and reveal the wonders with which he has filled the heart of Nature” (HN Supplement V, 38). Natural history, in its
successive revelations, and the history of man, in its accounting for revelation, are one, for every “new truth is a kind of miracle” (HN Supplement V, 38).

Buffon concludes “Des Époches de la Nature” with an account of the current, seventh, epoch. Ebbing and flowing in periods of dark and light, Buffon accounts for the revolutions of man’s society in which art, industry, and scientific wisdom have been exalted and lost. Only now, finally, does “the entire face of the earth bear the imprint of man’s power. . . It is with our hands that it has developed to its full extent, and came by degrees to the point of perfection and magnificence which we see today” (HN Supplement V, 237). And yet, we look back upon “the sad spectacle” of revolutions and deaths of civilizations, “all produced by ignorance, [and] hope that the current and imperfect balance between the civilized nations will continue and may even become more stable” (HN Supplement V, 237). Man cannot know in the present how his power may extend into the future; it depends on his intelligence, the revelations of further truths, “and the more he will observe, the more it will grow . . . Who knows to what point man may perfect his moral and physical nature?” (HN Supplement V, 253).

As time-bound beings, however, Buffon claims that individuals have a limited existence. It is only in relation to their species—to their eternal prototype—that human beings can be truly perfect: “Of whatever kind, or however numerous, individuals are is of no estimation in the universe; it is species alone that are existences in nature, for they are as ancient and permanent as herself. To have a clear and distinct idea of this subject we must not consider a species as a collection or succession of similar individuals, but as a whole, independent of number and time, always active, and always the same; a whole which was considered but as one in the works of the creation” (HN B X [XII], 343). We are here
reminded of the mouflon, which, Buffon claims, exhibits the prototype from which other varieties of sheep were formed, and according to which (as with other species of animal) one can assess the degeneracy or perfection of the individual.

But the analogy of the ‘prototype’ to the human being is more complex. With respect to the eternal prototype or species, the human being is in one sense incapable of the perfection of that which would unite and generalize all instantiations of the species. This is eternal and unchanging; from God. But, in another sense, the human being is uniquely capable of manifesting the species in himself:

To Nature [man] is, at first, indebted for every thing, without making her any return. No sooner, however, does [sic] his senses acquire strength and activity, and he can compare his sensations, than he reflects upon the universe; he forms ideas, which he retains, extends and combines. Man, after receiving instruction, is no longer a simple individual, for he then, in great measure, represents the whole human species. He receives from his parents the knowledge which had been transmitted to them from their forefathers; and thus, by the divine arts of writing and printing, the present age, in some sort, becomes identified with those that are past. This accumulation of the experience of many centuries in one man, almost extends his being to infinity. He is born no more than a simple individual, like other animals, capable only of attending to present sensations; but afterwards he becomes nearly the being we supposed to represent the whole species, he reads what is past, sees the present and judges the future; and in the torrent of time, which carries off and absorbs all the individuals of the universe, he perceives that the species are permanent, and Nature invariable (HN B X [XIII], 346-347).

While God is the source of all that is perfect—and the creator of the universal prototype—man is, in himself, the manifestation of his own universal nature when he holds in himself both the history and the future progress of his species. The natural right to “alter, change, destroy, develop, renew, and produce” (HN XII, iv) is itself the manifestation of the prototype of man as the spiritually superior artificer and creator. He is granted the power to renew both the species that are inferior to him and the power to regenerate himself. Though we have seen, Buffon claims, dark periods of human history, and though it seems man is
often “intent on destroying himself,” the human species will nevertheless “germinate anew” through science, culture, innovation, and education (HN B X [XII], 340, 342). Concern for the renewal, progress and perfection of the species, manifested in the moral and scientific education of individuals, is itself what makes man human: “all actions which ought to be denominated human are relative to society,” and the distinctively human quality of moral sense, Buffon wrote much earlier in the Histoire’s Second Volume, comes from a “direction toward futurity” (HN B IX [XIV], 144; HN II, 516). Homo Duplex is a being suspended between the natural and the spiritual existence; between, as Buffon writes, the “laws of renovation” and the laws of “permanency” (HN B X [XII], 340-342). Man, however, has his futurity in his own power—his renovation, or renewal, in view of that which is permanent fulfills the perfection of his manifestation as a universal prototype. Man is perfect when he perfects himself. He is regenerated, or renewed, when he regenerates himself. His distinct capacity to perceive both time and the passage of history makes it such that his identity—indeed, man’s identity as a species—is one of an historical, and yet spiritually ordained, progress and perfectibility. And it is a history that is manifest and manifested in Nature.

In this accounting of Buffon’s conception of history, we can once again return to the consistent foundation this story has in his theory of generation. The discovery of the polyp, which Roger claims led to Buffon’s assertion that the universe is composed of organic molecules, also led Buffon to deny the preformation of the souls of animate creatures. The fundamental distinction of Buffon from the preformationists was that the preformationists claimed that each act of generation was an act of God, with preformed seeds coming into being in succession. For Buffon, the only act of God was the generation or creation of the prototype, with each successive generation being a degeneration from the initial or universal
perfection of the living creature. In making man the site of renewal, or the creature capable of progressing both nature and himself to a state of perfection, however, Buffon and his fellow natural philosopher Charles Bonnet share the assertion that the renewing and perfecting powers of man are the immanentized seat of a spiritual capacity to remake—or regenerate—the world. It is only in the work of Charles Bonnet, however, that the term ‘regeneration’ takes on its explicit, and explicitly new religio-scientific, significance as it is transformed from a baptismal religious concept to one encompassing the same renewing and perfecting capacities as those enumerated in Buffon’s description of man’s spiritual principle.

**Bonnet, the polyp, palingenesis**

The similarities of Buffon and Bonnet’s natural scientific work have been regularly noted. Lorin Anderson writes, for example, that Buffon’s “Première Discourse” in the *Histoire* (1749) was very similar to Bonnet’s *Traité Insectologie* (published 4 years earlier in 1745), and Bonnet’s later work in his *Considérations sur les Corps Organisées* (1762) and *Contemplation de la Nature* (1764) also seemed to draw upon some of Buffon’s language and work in emphasizing the organic makeup all things, or the “preexistence of germs.”\(^\text{13}\) The philosophical overlap of their theories has also been noted by Jacques Roger and by Peter J. Bowler, who argues that “Buffon and Bonnet were working within an essentially similar framework” insofar as Buffon’s prototype and Bonnet’s ‘germs’ were both

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preexisting and created by God.\textsuperscript{14} Bonnet and Buffon did not in fact seem to engage in any serious disagreement in their own lifetime, aside from perhaps a few slings here and there from Bonnet, who claimed Buffon’s *Histoire* was close to being a “philosophical novel,”\textsuperscript{15} and said of Buffon in his *Contemplation*: “if nature has not made him an observer of his works, she has in compensation of it enriched him with her choicest gifts, by forming him the most eloquent man of the age he lived in. If he is not a Malpighi, a Reaumur, he is a Plato, a Milton” (*Contemplation* I, 203). It is not clear, according to Roger, whether Buffon read Bonnet’s *Contemplation*, but in any case, Buffon soon after voted for Bonnet’s election to the Academy of Sciences.\textsuperscript{16} Bonnet was often cast as a ‘preformationist’, along with Lazzaro Spallanzani and Albrecht Von Haller, and they formed, Roger claims, what was seen as “a common front against Buffon and his supporters,” who were grouped together as ‘epigenecists.’\textsuperscript{17} Bonnet would come to Buffon’s defense against the accusation of Haller that Buffon ought to be grouped with d’Alembert and Diderot.\textsuperscript{18} Bonnet diplomatically claimed that “not all the modern epigenesists are unbelievers . . . All the Unbelievers or Infidels are not epigenesists either: witness Voltaire, who blames Buffon and his partisans here, there, and everywhere, and who preaches about Germs from the rooftops.”\textsuperscript{19} In fact, Bonnet and Buffon seemed to share common enemies: those who, in Bonnet’s words, borrow


\textsuperscript{16} Bonnet spent much of his life trying to get into Buffon’s good graces and correspondence to little avail. In June 1769, Bonnet sent Buffon a copy of his *Palingénésie Philosophique* [1769], in which Bonnet concluded that he and Buffon “were not enemies at all” (Roger, *Buffon*, 345).

\textsuperscript{17} For the distinction between these two theories of generation, see the previous chapter.

\textsuperscript{18} Roger, *Buffon*, 343.

\textsuperscript{19} Bonnet to Haller, January 20, 1770. Cited in Roger, *Buffon*, 344.
their ideas and use them, like Diderot, as one who “dispenses bad drugs from a peddler’s stand.”

Bonnet’s unrequited relationship with Buffon was a source of consistent frustration to him, and it is clear that Bonnet had great admiration for Buffon. It is also the case that Buffon never stated an antipathy to Bonnet’s engagement with his work. We cannot say decisively that this is because they agreed, but we can operate on the assumption that the seeming similarities between Bonnet’s work and Buffon’s are indeed compatible. Not only are their scientific methods similar, but, like Buffon, Bonnet’s scientific theory was ignited by the discovery of the miraculous self-regenerating polyp.

Bonnet, like Buffon, grounds his scientific method in acknowledging that matter is divisible to “an indeterminate degree” (*Contemplation* I, xxvi). “The divine mind,” Bonnet writes, “has so closely connected every part of his work, that there is not one which has no relation to the whole system,” not only insofar as it shares particulate matter, but insofar as “every being has an activity peculiar to it, whose sphere has been determined by the rank appointed for it in the universe . . .The elements act reciprocally on each other according to certain laws which result from their relations, and these relations unite them into minerals, plants, animals and to men” (*Contemplation* I, 16). Also like Buffon, Bonnet takes a

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20 Bonnet to Haller, July 22, 1757. Cited in Roger, *Buffon*, 344. Bonnet also claimed that Jaucourt had plagiarized him in the Encyclopédie, and James Llana has written an excellent piece detailing the ways in which a large amount of Diderot’s material in the Encyclopédie was (sometimes directly) reflective of Buffon’s work: James Llana, “Natural History and the ‘Encyclopédie,’” *Journal of the History of Biology* 33.1 (2000): 1-25. Further than mere plagiarism, the concern of Bonnet and Haller was that Encyclopédists were taking their material and secularizing it; replacing, for example, ‘Adorable Wisdom’ with ‘eternal laws’ (cited in Roger, *Buffon*, 344).

21 Buffon was extremely reclusive with most. As will be discussed further in Chapter 4, however, he did seem to have a fondness for Rousseau until the publication of his *Confessions*, which, Buffon said to Hérault de Séchelles, changed his mind: “I like him fairly well; but when I saw the *Confessions*, I ceased admiring him. His soul revolted me” (cited in Roger, *Buffon*, 350).
Leibnizian approach to Nature’s infinite degrees: “there are no sudden changes in nature; all is gradual, elegantly varied” (Contemplation I, 23). Bonnet identifies a comprehensive “chain of being” in Nature: “between the lowest and the highest degree of corporeal or spiritual perfection, there is an almost infinite number of intermediate degrees. The result of these degrees composes the universal chain. This unites all beings, connects all worlds, comprehends all the spheres. One Sole Being is out of this chain, and that is He that made it” (Contemplation I, 23). The Great Chain of Being extends from angels to vegetative matter; “from the elephant to the mite, from the globe of the sun to a globule of light, what an inconceivable multitude of intermediate degrees are there” (Contemplation I, 136). Like Buffon, Bonnet acknowledges that these intermediate degrees often “differ from each other by slender shadowings,” unknown to the scientist until they are discovered or revealed (Contemplation I, 50).

As was discussed in the previous chapter, upon Abraham Trembley’s discovery of the polyp in 1740, the scientific community became convinced that the link—the intermediate degree—between the vegetative and animal spheres was finally identified. Bonnet, initially tempted to classify it as an intermediate creature, cautioned himself to investigate further, as he cautions his reader—in a Buffonian style—about making hasty scientific judgments: “our classes and genera will often be put out of course by new beings, which we know not where to fix, because we suffer ourselves too hasty in making distributions. If all is shadowed over in the physical world, our partitions which are so abridged cannot be very natural; they are only convenient and we often sacrifice more real

22 Bonnet devoted an entire section of his Essai d’Application des Principes Psychologiques to the ‘Idées de Leibniz,’ in La Palingénésie Philosophique, ou Idées sur l’État Passé et sur l’État Futur des Êtres Vivans (Genève: Claude Philibert and Bartheleme, 1769), Part VII.
23 The Great Chain of Being is discussed at length in the previous chapter.
24 Charles Bonnet is in fact the nephew of Abraham Trembley—both Genevan natural scientists!
advantages for the sake of this convenience” (Contemplation I, 171). One of these beings that set a new course—indeed, for Bonnet, the being that illuminated a new view with which to examine nature—was the polyp: “polypus’s,” Bonnet writes, “are placed at the frontiers of a new universe” (Contemplation I, 191). “We shall travel through a country, where we may be apt to imagine that nature is no longer like herself”; the discovery of a polyp is a “miracle,” and “has astonished the world” (Contemplation I, 183). Describing the revelation that occurred in his own thought upon this miraculous discovery, Bonnet writes that “the polypus puts everything into motion in the brain of the naturalist” (Contemplation I, 209).

As Bonnet discusses in the Contemplation, the polyp is a miracle only because it is an animal. Self-regenerative vine cuttings (and graftings) have always been observed, and have been replicable with other vegetative matter. But, Bonnet writes, “before the different species of polypus’s you have been contemplating were discovered, could any persons flatter themselves they were acquainted with animal nature?”; “Polypus’s have astonished us because on their first appearance there was no idea in our brains analogous to them” (Contemplation I, 188, 191). Accepting—due to its locomotion, sensitivity, and activity—that the polyp is an animal, means that included in the class of animal on the Chain of Being is the capacity to “regenerate anew in all its parts,” to produce fully perfected forms of itself from itself; and, Bonnet writes, to be grafted to itself and manipulated: it may be “grafted by approximation or inoculation, turned inside outward like a glove, afterwards cut, turned back and cut again, without ceasing to live, devour, grow and multiply” (Contemplation I, 191). There is “scarce any miracle that may not be performed by means of the polypus” (Contemplation I, 187).
Not only is the polyp itself a miracle, then, but it may perform and have miracles performed upon it. The polyp’s self-regenerative power, and its malleability, illuminates for Bonnet the foundations of the natural universe: “what light does not the polypus also throw on the first origin of organized beings?” (Contemplation I, 211). The polyp allows us to see nature’s mechanisms in a new light: “we have seen a chicken’s thigh that has entirely regenerated itself, and what a number of particular regenerations must that suppose? What a number of arteries, veins, nerves, muscular fibres, &c. were regenerated in this thigh? The polypus helps us to conceive these wonderful reproductions” (Contemplation I, 211). The polyp is in fact the genesis of Bonnet’s conception of preformation, in which all living things are the product of a ‘germ,’ encased [emboîtement] ad infinitum in the reproductions of living creatures, and capable of regenerating individual instantiations of the species. Germs, for Bonnet, demonstrate “the indelible stamp of a work formed by a single stroke, which is the expression of that Adorable Will who said, Let there be organized bodies, and it was so.25 They were from the beginning, and their first appearance is what we very improperly call generation, birth” (Contemplation I, 213). In fact, what the polyp has revealed is that it is more properly called regeneration: “when I use the word germ, in speaking of the polypus, I mean in general, by that term, all preformation, all pre-organization, of which a new being, a new polypus, is the result” (Contemplation I, 214). The polyp’s capacity to self-regenerate informs “us pretty clearly,” Bonnet claims, “that all these generations were comprised in the first, as this also was in the generation that preceded it” (Contemplation I, 212).

The polyp thus revealed to Buffon the way in which God’s miraculous creation is manifested on earth. It is the creation ex nihilo made flesh. Regeneration, as was discussed briefly in the second chapter, is a seminal Biblical term. The word itself appears only twice

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25 Not a direct quotation from the Bible, clearly.
in the New Testament: Matthew 19:28, “And Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones”; and Titus 3:5, “not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost.” Regeneration carries both a resurrective and baptismal meaning in Biblical scholarship. The commentary included in De Sacy’s Port-Royal Bible [1665-1708] for Matthew 19:28 states: “the regeneration about which J.C. speaks, must mean, according to Saint Jérôme, Saint Augustin, and Saint Ambrose, the last reformation of the Universe and of Man, which will be the end of the world, when God, according to Scripture, makes all things new, forming a new heaven and earth, or rather by the renewing effect of his power; and when the men come out of the dust of their graves, their flesh will be regenerated by the power of the resurrection, which will make it incorruptible; as well our souls are presently regenerated by the virtue of the self and the Sacrament of Baptism, which purifies our corruption.”

From the Greek *palingenesias* (new birth, reproduction, renewal, re-creation) regeneration is thus tied in Scripture to “being born anew (John 3:7, ‘from above’) . . . a resurrection from the dead (Eph 2:6); a putting off of the old man and putting on the new man (Eph 5:22-24). And the subjects of this change are represented as begotten by God (John 1:13; 1 Pet 1:3) . . . The efficient cause of regeneration is the divine spirit. Man is not the author of the regeneration (John 1: 12, 13;

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26 My translations from De Sacy’s Bible, or *Le Bible des Messieurs de Port Royal* (pub. 1665-1708). De Sacy’s was the most widely used French Bible in the eighteenth century. The edition consulted is: *Sainte Bible traduite en François, avec l’explication du sens littéral et sens spirituel, tirée des Saints Pères et des Auteurs Ecclésiastiques* (A Nimes, Imprimerie de Pierre Baume, 1789). We might also consider John Calvin: “Faith does not proceed from ourselves, but is the fruit of spiritual regeneration.” John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Gospel of John 1:13*. 
3:4; Eph 2: 8, 10); the instrumental cause is the word of God (James 1:18; 1 Pet 1:23; 1 Cor.
5:15).”

Bonnet’s invocation of the term seems to be consistent with its biblical instantiations: in nature, Bonnet claims, we can see God’s works and preformation is the receptivity of natural beings to being born anew throughout successive generations. Each creation is, like the polyp, a new creation, equally begotten by God. As in Scripture, in which Jesus was made flesh to bring the Word of God to earth, so then is the polyp the regenerative or baptismal principle made flesh in nature. Even further, Bonnet’s Palingénésie Philosophique is an extension of this same regenerative principle to historical development. Like the Polyp, which as “the instrument of this future regeneration . . . will raise the polyp to a degree of perfection that does not much comport with the present state of things,” (Palingénésie, 234) so too will the passage of time raise the Great Chain of Being to a greater state of perfection: “I conceive that the germs of all organized beings have been originally constructed or calculated with a determinate correlation with the diverse revolutions that our globe must undergo.”

The historical revolutions of the globe modify the germs of Creation, which regenerate themselves anew in the revolutionized epochs: “these multiplied Revolutions will increasingly modify the primitive form and structure of Organic Beings, as they will increasingly change the outer and inner structure of the Globe . . .

. I am easily convinced that if we could see a horse, a hen, a snake, in their first form, in the form they had at the time of Creation, it would be impossible to recognize. The last

28 All citations from Palingénésie are from: Charles Bonnet, La Palingénésie Philosophique, ou Idées sur l’État Passé et sur l’État future des Êtres Vivans (Genève: Claude Philibert et Barthélemy Chirol, 1769). Translations are my own unless otherwise noted. Hereafter intext (Palingénésie, page number).
revolution will bring, no doubt, much greater changes to the Globe itself and to the various beings that inhabit it” (*Palingénésie*, 258). In what is the most often-quoted citation from Bonnet’s work, he claims that the Great Chain of Being remains intact even in these revolutions, with each creature keeping their spot in the hierarchy even when they become ‘perfected’ or modified from their current instantiation:

There will be a continual and more or less slow progress of all the species toward a higher perfection, so that all degrees of the scale will be continually variable within a fixed and constant relation. I mean to say that the mutability of each degree will always have its reason in the degree immediately preceding it. . . Man, once transported to an abode better suited to the eminence of his faculties, will leave to the ape or the elephant that preeminent place which he formerly occupied among the animals of our planet. In this universal restoration [restitution] of animals, therefore, it will be possible to find Leibnitzes and Newtons among the apes or the elephants, Perraults and Vaubans among the beavers, and so on. In this new hierarchy, inferior species, such as oysters and polyps, will stand in the same relation to higher species such as birds and quadrupeds do to man in the present hierarchy (*Palingénésie*, 204).

Bonnet’s account of revolution and the Chain of Being has led decades of scholars to attribute to him a ‘static’ account of temporal history. Arthur O. Lovejoy writes, for example, that Bonnet’s “progression of types . . . does not seem to be, for Bonnet, a progress from generation to generation. The ‘perfectibility’ of the oyster does not mean that oysters will be gradually transformed in the course of heredity, in the present epoch, until their remote posterity become elephants or men or cherubim; it means that the corpus organique of each individual oyster will, after its death, be conserved without alteration until the right state of the globe supervenes to call forth its next and higher unfolding.”

Lorin Anderson has, similarly, claimed that Bonnet’s account of the regeneration and temporal perfection in global revolutions turns “the chain of beings into a slow-moving escalator, rising toward that

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31 Lovejoy, *Chain of Being*, 286.
one Being who stands outside of it.” Indeed, this static view seems to be equally reconcilable with regeneration, or palingenetic history: it is a process, for all species, of participating in the unfolding of God’s plan. With the major revolutions, or cataclysms, of the Globe, Earth’s creatures may be reborn: but always and only in the great, and predestined, chain of living things that has been preordained by God.

**Perfection through perfecting: Bonnet on moral education**

While it cannot be denied that Bonnet saw the chain of being existing in perpetuity, with each being only ascending its ladder in line with the ascension of the whole, it is not, however, the case that Bonnet settled on a distinctively passive conception of regeneration or perfectibility. “The force of education,” Bonnet writes, “modifies the force of the natural. *Education is a second birth* which imprints new determinations” (*Essai de Psychologie*, LXVII). In the *Contemplation*, Bonnet describes “less perfect” and “more perfect” species (*Contemplation* II, 27); “in the assemblage of all the orders of relative perfections, consists the absolute perfection of th[e] whole” (*Contemplation* I, 5). While, certainly, the Chain of Being (the whole of nature) is—in its absolute—perfection itself; man, as the most perfect, stands apart from the rest of nature in being able to “combine and perfect without ceasing” (*Contemplation* II, 120). While the “brute is at its birth what it will remain its whole life” (*Contemplation* II, 121), “man, the most perfectible of all the earth’s species” (*Palingénésie*, 315) is active in his own moral and social education toward a greater spiritual perfection: “the faculty of generalizing ideas, or abstracting from a subject what is common with others,

and expressing it by arbitrary signs, constitutes the highest degree of spiritual perfection, and therein consists the difference between the human soul and the soul of brutes” (Contemplation I, 20).

Like all of nature’s creatures, man is, according to Bonnet, a mixed being subject to both corporeal and spiritual perfection, the former of which is peculiar to bodies, the latter of which is peculiar to souls (Contemplation I, 19). The harmony of the universe demands, he claims, “that every being is endued with a perfection suited to the ends of its creation” (Contemplation I, 4), but they present themselves “in different degrees” (Contemplation I, 18). There is, thus, a perfection of the oyster, of the muscle, of the elephant, of man, and so on. Because each thing has a distinct sort of perfection, living Beings are also subject to different degrees of excellence. For Bonnet, man possesses two sorts of excellence which are intertwined: those engendered by his reason, and those engendered by “societies, or bodies politick” (Contemplation I, 66). The distinct excellence of man as an “intelligent being” is that of a being imbued with reason, and as such with the capacity to invent and investigate:

[Man] has ideas; he compares these ideas together, judges of their relations or oppositions; and acts in consequence of his judgment. He alone, of all the other animals, enjoys the gift of speech; he cloaths his ideas in terms, or with such signs as he thinks proper, and by this admirable prerogative he forms a connection between them, which renders his imagination and memory an inestimable fund of knowledge. By this means man communicates his thoughts, and brings all his faculties to state of perfection, by this he attains to all the arts and sciences, and by means of this all nature is subject to him. . . Now do we behold him, by the assistance of the microscope of his own invention, discovering new worlds amidst invisible atoms, or penetrating the secret exercise and motion of a particular organ. . . Afterwards directing his sight toward the more exalted regions of metaphysics, he dives into the nature of beings, examines their relations, and the admirable harmony resulting from them, and by an attentive view of their various perfections, he sees an immense chain formed, comprehending the whole (Contemplation I, 65).

Man’s spiritual perfection—his capacity to generalize ideas—is reached at the pinnacle of comprehending nature’s most comprehensive generality: that of the continuity and harmony
of nature itself. Man’s essence is not only reflective, but self-reflective insofar as he comes to understand his place in the ever-regenerating and ever-renewing complexity of nature. The soul deprived of speech, language and reason, like the beast’s, “does not reflect on its actions . . . Does not generalize its ideas . . . [and] is incapable of morality” (Essai de Psychologie, VIII).

Morality is one of the abstract arts attainable only by man, and it is how man is distinctively able to bring his faculties to a greater state of perfection. For Bonnet, moral education is a confluence of inherited faculties, and learned behaviours enhancing natural aptitudes. The physical body is made up of fibres that, Buffon claims, are altered and transformed when a creature is educated. All animals receive sensory impressions which subsequently create a “seat of durable impressions” (Contemplation I, xlii). The impressions are, for Bonnet, physical fibres that remain in the individual body of the animal, and, as they are received, “modify its course in a determinate relation to their present state.” (Contemplation I, xlii) These durable impressions form both habits and character. When we ‘attack’ habits, Bonnet writes, “we are astonished at the resistance they make, not imagining, that we are combating against nature. The resistance is still much greater when we undertake to change the character which results from that assemblage of determinations which an infinity of fibres have contracted” (Contemplation I, xlii-xliii). Habit and character are qualities belonging to all living things: animals, like man, form these durable fibres simply by existing in the world and in nature.

It is also the case that all animals, including humans, are as diversified in their generation (their inherited qualities) as they are in their experiences; individuals of all species have certain preformed or natural dispositions that can be shaped by their circumstance. In
this respect, Bonnet also differentiates between species that do or do not exist in societies for the sake of the “education of the young” (Contemplation II, 92). Those that do include ants, wasps, bees, and beavers, calling them (clearly drawing on Mandeville34) “republics” and “governments.” The beaver is the most valorized in Buffon’s account. They are “an academy of engineers, that proceed on rational plans, which they rectify or modify as they judge necessary, pursuing them with as much constancy and precision, [and] all [are] animated by the same spirit” (Contemplation II, 114). These are educative societies precisely because of the order and precision they exhibit. Each generation replicates the same plan and organization demonstrating that the elders educate their young to accord with the architecture of their society. They thus form consistent and replicable habits of character through generational replication. And yet, despite even the “astonishing marks of industry” of the beavers, they do not have that “ray of light which raises man far above the rest of animal creation” (Contemplation II, 119). The beaver “never perfects or combines. Were they only for once to erect square cottages! But they are eternally round or oval. They move like the planets, in the circle which nature has traced out for them” (Contemplation II, 120). Bonnet maintains that the “brute is at its birth what it will remain during its whole life” (Contemplation II, 121).

This ‘education’ of animal societies is, thus, not education properly understood. Education for man “is a second birth which imprints new determinations” (Essai de Psychologie, LXVII)—it “modifies the force of the natural.” While man, like the other animals, retains the fibres of habits and character, he must both modify and elevate his

34 While Mandeville is most often associated with this particular metaphor, it was commonly used in the eighteenth century and, as Rebecca Kingston has pointed out to me, well before Mandeville. See, for example, Cristopher Hollingsworth, Poetics of the Hive: Insect Metaphor in Literature (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 1999).
natural inclinations and dispositions “by degrees to the rank of moral virtues” (*Essai de Psychologie*, LXXIII). Man’s capacity to form general and abstract ideas can be employed to re-orient his habitual fibres. Through the acquisition of knowledge, “man acquires of himself, becomes acquainted with the beings that surround him, and converts them to his use, he is enabled to say, *Myself*, judge of his relations, conform himself to them, and thereby augment his happiness. By speech he becomes a truly sociable being; and those societies he forms, he governs by laws which he creates, changes, or modifies, as times, places and circumstances admit” (*Contemplation* II, 182). The second birth of education is the result of, and involves, man’s innovative capacity to modify his social and political circumstance, and to rise from his habitual, or ‘corrupted’ state “incorruptible and glorious” (*Contemplation* I, 72). “The excellence of human reason shines likewise with new lustre, from the establishment of societies or bodies politic. In them, virtue, honour, fear, and interest, variously employ’d or combined, prove the source of peace, happiness and order . . . From that the mechanical and liberal arts flourish. From thence are born poets, orators, historians, physicians, philosophers, lawyers, divines” (*Contemplation* I, 67). Society and education have a transformative power: to encourage man to innovate and to expand his knowledge. Bonnet writes: “who can be mistaken, in particular, concerning the force of education? Would Newton, had he been born in the most remote part of California, of barbarous parents, have discovered the system of the world?” (*Contemplation* I, xlv). Man is thus most perfectly fulfilled in an educative society that encourages his own rational perfectibility. He is born again, or regenerated (or, indeed, self-baptized), in the presence of abstract ideas and the encouragement of the virtuous expansion of human knowledge, art and innovation.
Man’s distinctive capacity is, thus, twofold. He is uniquely capable of perfecting himself in view of a standard of perfection, unlike beasts who are subject always to the world. Animals, unlike man, are passive recipients of sensory impressions despite being ‘educable’ in habit. Man is, however, capable of giving himself a second birth, a moral life, through education. He is able to change the fibre(s) of his being according to customs, laws or institutions that will increase, or enhance, his perfection. He is, secondly, uniquely capable of understanding that these educational or moral modifications are both permissible and preferable precisely because he is capable of understanding the overarching regenerative principles of Nature herself. Man’s capacity to penetrate Nature with microscopes and metaphysics, and thus penetrate the designs of God, results in his capacity to perceive a world in which everything is striving toward a perfection that is both immediately and historically regenerative. To regenerate, renew, or re-birth oneself through moral and civic education is, thus, to act in concert with the harmony of Nature and the will of God. Man becomes more perfect through striving to perfect, or regenerate, himself.

The “existence of my soul,” Bonnet writes, is “an immaterial substance, which it has pleased the Creator to unite to an organized body,” and is in its mixed essence —its human existence—physically and morally regenerable or renewable (Contemplation I, xxxi). The immortality of the soul is demonstrated by revelation (Contemplation I, liii); what Bonnet

35 Lorin Anderson writes: “rational beings are distinguished from sentient beings in that they are able to overcome pure passivity and to actively affect and even redirect these modifications” (Anderson, Charles Bonnet, 101).
36 This is the aspect of Bonnet’s theory—the regenerative nature of man’s perfection—that does not, I believe, receive enough emphasis in accounts of his science. Citing Foucault’s Order of Things, Lorin Anderson claims that time “has no fundamental role in his system” (Charles Bonnet, 47). Far from it: Bonnet’s educational regenerative theory relies on the capacity of human beings to change their circumstances in view of the future. Though it may be the case that all evidence of progress in the human species becomes evidence of the providence of God, this does not discount the malleability of the human condition when it concerns educational and political orders which require that men be actively oriented to progress for the sake of the future betterment of their communities or the species.
aims to demonstrate is the “immortality of man”: “do we know with certainty that it would be suitable to the nature of human souls to have been disunited from organized bodies? Assuredly this does not consist with the plan of the Creator, and this plan was of the highest wisdom. In the most eloquent philosophical discourses they extol the excellency of our soul, but it is the excellence of man which they ought rather to celebrate . . . It is not so much the immortality of the soul as the immortality of man that the gospel sets forth to view” (Contemplation I, lii). This ‘immortality’ of man is his capacity to be born and re-born again through the exercise of that which will make him more perfect: “the faculty of generalizing ideas, or abstracting from a subject what it has in common with others, and expressing it by arbitrary signs, constitutes the highest degree of spiritual perfection” (Contemplation I, 20). This is a perfection that is the work of God, who is the “constant and ultimate end. [The soul] will love him from gratitude, will fear him from a principle of love, and will adore him as the Supremely Amiable Being, and the Eternal Source of life, perfection and happiness” (Contemplation I, 75).

Just as in Buffon’s natural science, then, Bonnet’s ‘man’ is the immediate site of an eternal theological and spiritual principle. And just as in Buffon, this spiritual principle of self-renewal, or self-regeneration, is the—and the only—defining separation of man from the rest of the natural kingdom. In both Buffon and Bonnet the works or ends of God were definitively placed in nature, and the ability to both understand and renew, or regenerate, nature and the human species was placed in the hand of man himself. To place this ‘second birth’ or renewal in the sphere of sociality and education, and to simultaneously place the powers of that rebirth in the definition of man, is to make history, politics and society the

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37 We are reminded here of Buffon’s claim that the “spiritual principle” that is unique to man is “dependent on education” (HN IV, 69): for while the “excellence of the senses is a gift of nature, art and habit may bestow on them a greater degree of perfection” (HN IV, 32).
definitive site of human manipulation: it is his creativity, his capacity to invent, to speak in and to comprehend universal ideas, that informs his conception of the possibilities of his future, and which separates him from the animal kingdom of which he is an otherwise integrated, integral, and indeed renewable, part. This capacity and distinction of the human being is precisely what Jean-Jacques Rousseau calls “perfectibility.”

38 In The Great Chain of Being, Arthur O. Lovejoy describes the movement toward understanding God in this way in the 18th century: it was an emerging God “whose prime attribute was generativeness” (315), and was “insatiably creative, [and thus] it followed that the man who, as a moral agent or artist, would imitate God, must do so by being himself ‘creative’” (309). While I agree with this account of the ‘emerging’ God, Lovejoy does not attribute this movement to Bonnet’s theory (nor do I generally agree with Lovejoy’s account of Bonnet’s science on the whole, which is cast as quite static).
Chapter 4

Rousseau’s Perfectible Animals

Since you, O Gods, created
Mutable arts and gifts, give me the voice
To tell the shifting story of the world.
- Ovid, Metamorphoses

This chapter, and the chapter that follows it, place Rousseau within the natural-scientific tradition articulated by Buffon and Bonnet. As will be demonstrated, Rousseau owes much of his philosophy to the idea of the Great Chain of Being, to Buffon’s Histoire Naturelle, and to the idea of the ‘original prototype.’ Buffon, Bonnet, and Rousseau also share an affinity in describing the historical nature of the human being. Rousseau’s identification of the faculty of perfectibility as the distinction of the human being has routinely been associated with an historical consciousness. As Arthur Melzer puts it, we must view “Rousseau as taking the crucial first step toward the concept of the self-defining, self-grounding subject, to be developed later by the German Romantics and Hegel.”¹ Arthur O. Lovejoy has also identified this shift in the conception of the human being’s place in nature as one that prefigures German Romanticism and history-making man. Lovejoy cites the work of Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz, a student of Immanuel Kant’s who was instructed to read Rousseau. In his First Principles of Morals (1772), Lenz identifies what he believes has been the unifying impulse of eighteenth century philosophy, which is the “urge toward completeness.”² Lenz

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places this urge in the tradition of the Great Chain of Being, through which the principle of completeness “demands a perpetual rejection of the status quo, an endless ascent of the Scale of Being. Take heed that I am speaking here of a human perfection. I hope that the reproach will not here be brought against me that, since God created the first men good, they must, on my view, have required no morality, ie no conscious effort. ‘Good,’ in the case of the earliest men, meant perfectible, not perfect, for otherwise there would have been no fall.” Lenz situates Rousseau’s perfectibility in the themes that unite Rousseau’s corpus, and those which unite Rousseau with his natural scientific interlocutors. Morality and perfectibility, the identifying markers of human beings, are the means by which human beings strive for a goodness, or perfection, that does not exist in the present state of the world. The identification of this history-making faculty and capacity to change the conditions of the world which unites the work of Buffon, Bonnet, and Rousseau, changed our understanding of human beings, and opened up possibilities of what we might become. For the “self-regenerative” human being to regenerate the world, conscious effort and faith in a future good are required.

While animals are subject to the world, and to the natural chain and their place within it, human beings are not. For Rousseau, this distinction of the human being could be either a blessing or a curse. The “rejection of the status quo,” in Lenz’s terms, or the turn away from our corruptions, in Rousseau’s, requires an account of the goodness or perfection from which we have been detached. The manner in which Rousseau articulated this perfectible nature of the human being captured the hearts and minds of eighteenth century actors, who saw themselves as ushering in a new historical epoch founded on the natural good, and on natural

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3 Ibid, 251.
4 Including the fall of man, which is discussed in detail in Chapter 5.
right. The self-regenerative human being as the regenerator of politics was the regenerator of the conditions of human salvation.

As in the natural science of Buffon and Bonnet, Rousseau’s account of man’s degeneracy and the potential for his redemption is grounded in the Great Chain of Being and the attempt to sort out the human being’s place within it. We are, he claims in a Letter to François-Joseph de Conzié Comte des Charmettes, “invincibly ignorant” about man’s place in the Great Chain of Being because we are invincibly ignorant about man himself.5 Just as Buffon took Linnaeus’s *nosce te ipsum* (*know thyself*) as his primary challenge in the *Histoire Naturelle*, Rousseau states it as his objective in his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* [*Second Discourse*]: “of all the branches of human knowledge, the most useful and the least advanced seems to be that of man: and dare I say that the inscription on the temple at Delphi [*know thyself*] alone contained a precept more important and more difficult than all the huge tomes of the moralists. Thus I regard the subject of this discourse as one of the thorniest that philosophers can attempt to resolve” (SD, 33).6 Rousseau grounds the pursuit of knowing ourselves in the tradition of the Great Chain of Being through expressing his admiration for one of the great poets of the Chain: Alexander Pope.

**The Essay on Man and the Great Chain of Being**

On January 17, 1742, eight years before his infamous *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote a letter to François-Joseph de Conzié Comte des Charmettes (a

6 All citations to the *Second Discourse* are to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Basic Political Writings*, trans. and ed, Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987). Hereafter intext (SD page number). It was written in 1754, and published in 1755.
Savoyard noble) thanking him for lending his copy of Alexander Pope’s *An Essay on Man* (written in 1734 and translated into French in 1739 by J de Seré de Rieux) to Rousseau along with *Les Sentiments Critiques*—an anonymous response to Pope’s poem. Critics of Pope (including the author of *Sentiments Critiques*) accused Pope of Leibnizianism, Spinozism and disguised atheism. Rousseau apologizes to Conzié in the conclusion of his letter: “for I realize, sir, that in trying to write you a letter, I have almost produced a dissertation.”

Indeed, Rousseau’s letter is an extensive and lengthy account, and praise, of Pope’s poem against its detractors. The derisive attitude toward science with which Rousseau is often associated (as he writes in the *First Discourse*: “the sciences, letters and the arts . . . spread garlands of flowers over the iron chains with which they are burdened, stifle in them the sense of that original liberty for which they seem to have been born, make them love their slavery, and turn them into what is called civilized peoples”), is, in one way, a fitting match with his support of Pope’s *Essay on Man*, which couples the scientific knowledge with which man can come to know himself with the hubris or error it inevitably engenders. Pope’s Second Epistle of the *Essay* opens as follows:

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan
The proper study of Mankind is Man.
Place on this isthmus of a middle state,
A Being darkly wise, and rudely great:
With too much knowledge for the Skeptic side,
With too much weakness for the Stoic’s pride,
He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest;
In doubt to deem himself a God, or beast;
In doubt his mind or body to prefer;

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7 Letter to Conzié 17 January 1742.
8 This is praise that will be repeated in Rousseau’s Letter to Voltaire August 18, 1756. Letter to Voltaire, in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, trans and ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 242-243.
Born to die, and reas’ning but to err;  
Alike in ignorance, his reason such,  
Whether he thinks too little, or too much;  
Chaos of Thought and Passion, all confus’d;  
Still by himself, abus’d or disabus’d;  
Created half to rise and half to fall;  
Great Lord of all things, yet a prey to all,  
Sole judge of truth, in endless error hurl’d;  
The glory, jest and riddle of the world.

Go, wondrous creature! mount where science guides,  
Go, measure earth, weigh air, and state the tides;  
Instruct the planets in what orbs to run,  
Correct old time, and regulate the sun;  
Go, soar with Plato to th’empyreal sphere,  
To the first good, first perfect, and first fair;  
Or tread the mazy round his followers trod,  
And quitting sense call imitating God;  
As Eastern priests in giddy circles run,  
And turn their heads to imitate the sun.  
Go, teach Eternal wisdom how to rule—  
Then drop into thyself, and be a fool!  

For Pope, the scientific hubris of man is to presume to know the operations of nature and, thus, the operations of God: “Tell (for you can) what is it to be wise? ’Tis but to know how little can be known.” Far from criticizing scientific knowledge in full, however, Pope wants human beings to approach the study of nature with reverence, both understanding the Great Chain of Being and being satisfied with man’s place within it:

Slave to no sect, who takes no private road,  
But looks through nature up to nature’s God:  
Pursues that chain which links th’immense design,  
Joins heav’n and earth, and mortal and divine;  
Sees, that no being any bliss can know,  
But touches some above, and some below;  
Learns, from this union of the rising whole,  
The first, last purpose of the human soul;  
And knows where faith, law, morals, all began,

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All end, in love of God, and love of man. 
For him alone, hope leads from goal to goal, 
And opens still, and opens on his soul; 
Till lengthen’d on to faith, and unconfin’d, 
It pours the bliss that fills up all the mind.\textsuperscript{12}

Rousseau’s support of Pope’s poem, as he writes in the Letter to Conzié, is grounded in his affirmation of the simplicity with which Pope claims human beings ought to live their lives: “What does it take, according to M. Pope, with virtue, or the peace of heart of which it is the fruit, to crown the happiness of man? Only two things, health and necessity.\textsuperscript{13}

Fortunate (happy) heart sufficiently moderate to be content! It is a sad sight to see men on earth rush after honors and chimerical goods and thus away from the true sources of happiness to which M. Pope tries to bring them back.” In this early letter we can, thus, see the seeds of Rousseau’s life-long philosophical occupation with attempting to restore or rescue an idea of man in the face of civilizing corruption. In the concluding portion of his Letter to Conzié, Rousseau recounts the story of a visit to Chambery (the “country of reason”) in which an assembly of those gathered discussed M. Vaucanson’s flute-playing automaton\textsuperscript{14}: “you can consider that the beaux-esprits that were found there did not spare him the comparison with Prometheus, with which Voltaire has been so pompously regaled. For me, said I, my admiration must be all the more suspect, because I am accustomed to

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} In fact, Rousseau is conflating two separate portions of Pope’s poem: the Fourth Epistle, in which Pope discusses the happiness and virtue of human life, and the Second Epistle in which Pope defines the two principles of human nature: “Two principles in human nature reign; Self-love, to urge, and reason, to restrain; Nor this a good, nor that a bad we call, Each works its end, to move or govern all: And to their proper operation still Ascribe all Good, to their improper, Ill.” The mapping of self-love with health (and thus with physical man), and reason with necessity (and thus moral man and his perfectibility) is an incredibly rich and intriguing manner in which to consider the implications of the Second Discourse.
\textsuperscript{14} Wendy C. Neilson writes: “Vaucanson’s creations belong to an ongoing philosophical debate throughout the eighteenth century about the mechanical nature of man; the so-called defecating duck simulates digestion, thus suggesting the mechanical nature of the biological process (Riskin, ‘The Defecating Duck,’ 609). This illusion lent support to materialists for whom the human body resembled a machine.” Wendy C. Neilson, “Rousseau’s Pygmalion and the Automata in the Romantic Period,” in Romanticism, Rousseau. Switzerland: New Prospects, ed. Angela Esterhammer, Diane Piccitto and Patrick Vincent (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 69.
shows that are, dare I say it, even more marvelous. They looked at me with astonishment. I come, I added, from a land replete with well-made machines, which know how dance the Quadrille and play Faro, that swear, drink Champagne, and pass the day reciting lines to other quite marvelous machines that pay them back in kind. People began to laugh; and what’s funny is that two or three machines there laughed harder than all the others.” Derisive of ‘civilized’ society’s own artificial character, Rousseau concludes his Letter with the same maxim as that which would serve as the epigraph to his First Discourse and to Rousseau Juge de Jean-Jacques: “Here I am the barbarian because they do not understand me.” Rousseau would seem to claim occupation of this place of barbarism with the poet Alexander Pope.

Expressing a preference for the simplicity of Pope’s ‘happiness of man’ to these artificial machines, Rousseau also establishes a foundational preoccupation in the Letter to Conzié that would inform his Discourse on the Origin of Inequality (the Second Discourse). A great part of the Letter is involved in accounting for Pope’s “chain consisting of all beings, where each species occupies its place in proportion to the degree of excellence and perfection with which it is endowed.” Rousseau remarks that despite the torture of attempting to arrange the proportional gradations of “plants to insects, insects to animals, animals to man” that we are nevertheless “invincibly ignorant on the ends of the chain.” Even if, Rousseau writes, we “push conjectures and hypotheses as far as they can go, and take for granted that the vilest insects, the least organized of all the plants, the most imperfect of all the minerals, and finally the last atom of matter, are the lower chain of the ring,” our ignorance is only multiplied, for our concern ought to be with “discovering the other end . . . Could we occupy our mind with a matter more majestic or worthy of our attention?”

15 Ovid, Tristia V, x 37; quoted in the Latin.
Rousseau is, however, critical of Pope’s assignment of God to the highest end of the Chain of Being: for “reason will never find a relationship between God and any other being, between the Creator and his work, between time and eternity, in a word, between the finite and the infinite.”

This reservation of Rousseau’s about Pope’s system is discussed again in his Letter to Voltaire of August 18, 1756, in which Rousseau praises Voltaire’s correction to Pope’s system (but which we can see Rousseau developed a decade and a half prior): “you have made a correction in Pope’s system which is very much to the point, by observing that there is no proportional gradation between the creatures and the Creator, and that, if the chain of beings leads to God, it does so because he holds it, and not because he ends it.”

Inquiry into the end of the Chain of Being, with which we ought to occupy our mind, is thus a matter of investigating creations and not the Creator: it requires the investigation of nature, and of the nature of man. As Rousseau begins the Preface to the Second Discourse: “of all the branches of human knowledge, the most useful and the least advanced seems to be that of man: and dare I say that the inscription on the temple at Delphi alone contained a precept more important and more difficult than all the huge tomes of the moralists. Thus I regard the subject of this discourse as one of the thorniest that philosophers can attempt to resolve” (SD, 33).

Norce te ipsum served as the launching point of Rousseau’s Second Discourse, responding to and engaging with both Carl Linnaeus and the natural scientists, and the great poet, Alexander Pope. Like Pope, who begins his Second Epistle calling for men to know themselves, and who, in an antinomous claim that both valorizes and criticizes man’s rational capacity, claims that the “proper study of Mankind is Man,” so too does Rousseau open his

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16 Rousseau makes a concession to Pope insofar as “philosophers are to be pitied if they happen to discuss points of faith, for the Sorbonne rises and asks why they meddle. If they [philosophers] take advantage of not saying anything, there is no shortage of their being treated as atheists or deists.” It is thus possible, it seems, that Pope placed God at the highest point in the chain of being precisely to avoid criticism.

17 “Letter to Voltaire,” in Early Political Writings, 239.
Second Discourse writing: “the more we accumulate new knowledge, the more we deprive ourselves of the means of acquiring the most important knowledge of all. Thus, in a sense, it is by dint of studying man that we have rendered ourselves incapable of knowing him” (SD, 33).  

The remainder of this chapter will be concerned with Rousseau’s attempt to account for man’s place in the Great Chain of Being, and in the natural world. Based on evidence from the Letter to Voltaire, Robert Wokler claims that Rousseau believed, like Leibniz and Pope, in the Great Chain of Being, and writes that Rousseau’s “elaborate commentary in the Discours sur l’inégalité forms one of the earliest and boldest sets of conjectures regarding the physical transformation of mankind in an age when most arguments about the natural chain of being remained fundamentally wedded to a belief in the fixity of the species . . . Rousseau was, I believe, the first Enlightenment figure . . . to conceive that the last link in the natural chain—that is, the relation between apes and men—might be one of genetic continuity.”19 That is, savage man in the state of nature—who is “the first embryo of the species” (SD 39) and is an “advantageously organized” “animal” (SD 40)—is difficult to distinguish (as Rousseau himself makes clear in Note 10 of the Second Discourse) from the ourangutan or pongo.

A majority of this chapter will discuss this ‘highest stage’ of the natural chain and will lay out the manner in which Rousseau’s account was both formed by, and stood in relation to the objections of, the two natural scientists discussed in the previous chapters:

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18 This is also, of course, a criticism of accounts of the state of nature found in Pufendorf, Grotius, Hobbes, and Locke, who “have transferred to the state of nature the ideas they acquired in society. They spoke about savage man, and it was civil man they depicted” (SD 38).

Georges-Louis LeClerc de Buffon and Charles Bonnet (who wrote a criticism of Rousseau’s *Second Discourse* under the pseudonym ‘Philopolis’). Buffon and Bonnet maintain, as Wokler writes, that man and ape are separated by “a qualitative gulf which, as Buffon put it, even nature could not bridge” even as the human species is able to perfect itself through artifice, civilization, and morality, possessing what Buffon calls the “spiritual principle.” This principle grants man the natural/divine power to “contemplate himself”; he “knows the past, judges of the present and foresees the future,” which allows him to prevent or reverse his own degeneracy through changing his own future or that of his society (which is “dependent on education”). Rousseau, who is not so certain about the divisibility of the ape from man, will nevertheless settle on a similar account of the human being, claiming that the distinction of man lies in his perfectibility. This portion of the argument is, thus, very much in line with Jean Starobinski’s claim that Rousseau accepts the Chain of Being, but “locates the dividing line [between animal and man] at a lower level.” Anything more than “an ingenious machine” (an animal) that exhibits ‘human tendencies’ is human; Rousseau merely allows for the potential expansion of the “limits of mankind.”

The similarities with Starobinski’s account end here, however, as he claims that despite the fact that “Rousseau found in Buffon a philosophical anthropology that he was largely willing to accept,” Starobinski writes that Buffon’s account was lacking entirely in the historical nature of Rousseau’s account: “Rousseau replaces [Buffon’s] metaphysical

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difference [of man and ape] with a historical one." While all commentators resist ascribing to Rousseau a fully ‘evolutionary’ account of the historical development of savage to civilized man, many nevertheless claim that Rousseau was, in the words of Matthew D. Mendham, the father of progressive history. This ‘historical’ account of Rousseau unites many interpretive schools: Asher Horowitz claims Rousseau presented a “radically historical understanding of human nature,” attributing to him a pre-Hegelian account of history; Arthur Melzer writes that Rousseau was “the first to discover ‘History.’ And as such, he became the first to render at least possible the startling hypothesis that the human being as we now know it—with its obvious and universal badness—is completely changed from its original form.” Melzer also writes that this is “to view Rousseau as taking the crucial first step toward the concept of the self-defining, self-grounding subject, to be developed later by the German Romantics and Hegel,” citing Charles Taylor’s study upon which this association of Melzer’s is based. In *Natural Right and History* Leo Strauss claims that for Rousseau “man’s humanity is the product of the historical process”; “what is characteristically human is not a gift of nature, but the outcome of what man did.”

24 Primarily due to Rousseau’s claim in the Preface to the *Second Discourse* that “it is no light undertaking to separate what is original from what is artificial in the present nature of man, and to have a proper understanding of a state which no longer exists, which perhaps never existed, which probably never will exist, and yet about which it is necessary to have accurate notions in order to judge properly our own present state” (SD 34).
Horowitz claims that Rousseau’s account of perfectibility is essential to his “philosophical anthropology.” This perfectibility, however, “does not mean the capacity to achieve a transcendent moral or rational perfection. It refers, rather, to the process of self-transformation which occurs when men at first unconsciously, and later with fuller conscious purpose, set out to transform nature.”

This “very specific quality which distinguishes [man and animal],” writes Rousseau, is “the faculty of self-perfection, a faculty which, with the aid of circumstances, successively develops all the others, and resides among us as much in the species as in the individual . . . This distinctive and almost unlimited faculty [perfectibility] . . . through centuries [gave] rise to [man’s] enlightenment and his errors” (SD 45). As Rousseau makes evident in the Second Discourse, and as Wokler writes, “Rousseau supposed that the perfectibility of men in their original condition did not ensure that they would become more perfect creatures”; indeed, it is the source of both man’s “vices and virtues” (SD 45). Man would bless the passage from “the state of nature to the civil state,” Rousseau writes in the Social Contract, whereby all of “man’s faculties are exercised and developed, his ideas are broadened, his feelings are ennobled, his entire soul is elevated,” were it not for the inevitable “abuse of this new condition” which transformed man “from a stupid limited animal into an intelligent being and a man” (SC 150-151).

This distinctive human faculty of self-perfection is, thus, for Rousseau seemingly indeterminate; as Horowitz phrases it: man is “culturally formed to be biologically ‘unfinished’”—his perfectibility is both in his nature and responsible for his having lost touch with it. It is this creative, and historically creating—and indeed history-creating—

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29 Horowitz, “Historical Anthropology,” 219, 225.
32 Horowitz, “Historical Anthropology,” 225.
faculty that is said to be Rousseau’s unique contribution to the history of political thought, and his uniquely counter-Enlightenment critique of man’s impulse to perfect himself through civilization, which is, according to Rousseau, the source of all our vices. Against this, it is claimed, are both Buffon’s, and later Bonnet’s, ‘static’ accounts of the Chain of Being, which hold to an account of perfection toward which man’s creative capacities are directed. It is not perfectibility (as an historical and thus limitless faculty) that defines man, but his capacity to perceive and thus work toward perfection (as ordained by God). As I have demonstrated in the previous chapters— but will recount in this chapter as well—this account of Buffon’s and Bonnet’s natural science is misleading. Like Rousseau, Buffon and Bonnet locate man’s distinctiveness in a capacity for self-renewal, or self-regeneration, that is the—and the only defining—separation of man from the rest of the natural kingdom. For these natural scientists, the distinction of the human being is, as it is for Rousseau, one dependent on the capacity of man to historically remake himself. While for Rousseau our perfectibility can be employed either for good or for ill, for it to be employed for the good, it requires a standard of goodness or perfection—one that Rousseau grounds in nature. And it requires, simultaneously, a faith that, in the words of Wokler, “perfectibility might still be employed to our advantage.”

The state of nature and natural man: man, or animal?

In the Second Discourse, Rousseau writes of the “primitive” state of man, from which the “progress of the human species” continually moves away (SD 33): “like the statue of

33 Wokler, “Perfectible Apes,” 25.
34 Mendham provides a comprehensive account of the many (and various) ways about which the ‘natural’ man is spoken in the secondary literature, ultimately drawing a distinction between the ‘primitive’ and the ‘savage.’
Glaucus, which time, sea, and storms had disfigured to such an extent that it looked less like a god than a wild beast, the human soul, altered in the midst of society by a thousand constantly recurring causes, by the acquisition of a multitude of bits of knowledge and of errors, by changes that took place in the constitution of bodies, by the constant impact of the passions, has, as it were, changed its appearance to the point of being nearly unrecognizable” (SD 33). Seeking the “human constitution” in its “first origin,” (SD 33), Rousseau describes natural man (the “first embryo of the species” [SD 39]) from both the physical and “metaphysical or moral point of view” (SD 44). He will not, he writes, conjecture like Aristotle about savage man’s form (for “comparative anatomy has as yet made too little progress” to do so [SD40]), but does see “an animal less strong than some, less agile than others, but all in all, the most advantageously organized of all. I see him satisfying his hunger under an oak tree, quenching his thirst at the first stream, finding his bed at the foot of the same tree that supplied his meal; and thus all his needs are satisfied” (SD 40). The tranquility and simplicity of natural man’s life, Rousseau claims, “are fatal proofs that most of our ills are of our own making, and that we could have avoided nearly all of them by preserving the simple, regular and solitary lifestyle described to us by nature. If nature has destined us to be healthy, I almost dare to affirm that the state of reflection is a state contrary to nature and that the man who meditates is a depraved animal” (SD 42).  

This distinction seems to lie in the degree to which natural man has become social, or has begun to move toward ‘moral’ man. In this chapter I will be using primitive and savage interchangeably, as it appears in Rousseau’s text, but will discuss the ‘sociability’ of man in the next chapter.  

I will follow Denise Schaeffer and John T. Scott here in drawing attention to Rousseau’s all-too-common use of qualifiers when describing the ‘pure’ physical, or savage, man: most and almost suggest not quite as definitive a line between natural simplicity and civilized reason (engendered by perfectibility) as is suggested. See Denise Schaeffer, “The Utility of Ink: Rousseau and Robinson Crusoe,” The Review of Politics 64.1 (2002); John T. Scott, “The Theodicy of the Second Discourse: The ‘Pure State of the Nature’ and Rousseau’s Political Thought,” The American Political Science Review 86.3 (1992): 696-711.
Moving to the consideration of natural man from the moral point of view, Rousseau writes that like all animals, man is “an ingenious machine to which nature has given senses in order for it to renew its strength and protect itself,” but in the “human machine” there are two additional qualities: free agency and perfectibility (SD 44). Where animals choose or reject “by instinct,” man does so “by an act of freedom. Hence an animal cannot deviate from the rule that is prescribed to it, even when it would be advantageous to do so, while man deviates from it, often to his own detriment” (SD 42). Rousseau claims that “every animal has ideas, since it has senses; and up to a certain point it even combines its ideas, and in this regard man differs from animal only in degree . . . [But] man knows he is free to go along or resist [the impetus of nature]; and it is above all in the awareness of this freedom that the spirituality of his soul is made manifest” (SD 45). Nevertheless, Rousseau claims, there are “difficulties” that “leave room for dispute on this difference between man and animal.” Rousseau therefore claims that he can identify only one “very specific quality which distinguishes them and about which there can be no argument: the faculty of self-perfection” or perfectibility. While the “animal, at the end of a few months, is what it will be all its life; and its species, at the end of a thousand years, is what it was in the first of those thousand years,” man is, through his faculty of self-perfection, subject to enlightenment and error (SD 45).37

36 This is the distinction between man and animal that Bonnet will later echo, collapsing it—as Rousseau does—into perfectibility: while the “brute is at its birth what it will remain its whole life” “man, the most perfectible of all the earth’s species” is active in his own moral choice. Charles Bonnet, The Contemplation of Nature, Translated from the French of C. Bonnet, 2 volumes (London: T. Longman, 1766 [1764], II 121; Charles Bonnet, La Palingénésie Philosophique, ou Idées sur l’État Passé et sur l’État Futur des Êtres Vivans (Genève: Claude Philibert and Bartheleme, 1769), 315 (my translation).

37 My thanks to Rebecca Kingston for always drawing me back to Montesquieu, in which he makes similar claim about human beings: “‘Man, as a physical being, is governed by invariable laws like other bodies. An intelligent being, he constantly violates the laws god has established and changes those he himself establishes; he must guide himself, and yet he is a limited being; he is subject to ignorance and error, as are all finite
The puzzle of Rousseau’s natural man lies, thus, in the following passage: the savage has “modest needs” that are “easily found at hand, and is so far from the degree of knowledge necessary to make him acquire further knowledge, that he can have neither foresight nor curiosity. The spectacle of nature becomes a matter of indifference to him by dint of its becoming familiar to him. It is always the same order, always the same succession of changes. He does not have a mind for marveling at the greatest wonders; and we must not seek in him the philosophy that a man needs in order to know how to observe once what he has seen every day. His soul, agitated by nothing, is given over to the single feeling [sentiment] of his own present existence, without any idea of the future, however, near it may be, and his projects, as limited as his views, hardly extend to the end of the day” (SD 46).

This is the description of man distinctively lacking the qualities enumerated by Rousseau as belonging to the human being. Man has not yet, Rousseau writes, been provoked “by necessity” to exit the natural condition (SD 47). That is, the necessary qualities of the human being—as an individual and species—have not yet exhibited themselves.

As Victor Gourevitch has noted in his comprehensive notations to the Second Discourse, this passage is invoking the language and categories of Buffon’s Histoire Naturelle. Gourevitch writes: “Buffon had distinguished at length between what he called a

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38 Victor Gourevitch, notes to The Discourses and Other Political Writings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 358 note I [21]. Rousseau calls Buffon’s reason “solid and sublime” and praises and references Buffon at length in the Notes to the Second Discourse (SD 83). When Rousseau is writing the Second Discourse, the first four volumes of Buffon’s Histoire Naturelle had been published. Rousseau and Buffon maintained an intellectual friendship throughout Rousseau’s life, and Rousseau is said to have actively sought out every new volume of the Histoire Naturelle as they were published. In the spring of 1770, Buffon hosted Rousseau: and “according to tradition, Rousseau went down on his knees at the entrance of the small building in the park where Buffon had installed his office. An inscription would for a long time recall the event: ‘Passerby, bow down; it is before this retreat/ That the author of Émile fell at the great Buffon’s feet.’” Jacques Roger, Buffon: A Life in Natural History, trans. Sarah Lucille Bonnefoi (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 350. Following the posthumous publication of the Confessions, however, Buffon reversed his fondness for Rousseau, writing to Hérault de Séchelles: “I like him fairly well; but when I saw the Confessions, I ceased admiring him.
sentiment of one’s existence, which he allowed that beasts have, and a consciousness of one’s existence, which he attributed to man alone.”

This distinction of Buffon’s has been described in detail in the preceding chapters, but I will restate it here. The fundamental distinction of man from the rest of the animal kingdom for Buffon—that which separates him from the rest of Nature by infinite degrees—is that between a sentiment of existence (belonging to both man and animal) and a consciousness of one’s own existence (belonging only to man). Man is, according to Buffon, *Homo Duplex*, an interior existence divided in two between sensory feeling (“which shines only in a tempest of obscurity” and consists of sensory impressions and passions) and “the spiritual principle.” Buffon claims that “animals never invent, nor bring anything to perfection.” While animals distinguish better what is agreeable to their present existence, Buffon claims, they lack the capacity—the *spirit* (*esprit*: mind and/or soul)—to perfect themselves or to change their conditions. Man is also, unlike the animals, conscious of his own existence as a temporal being: animals are “conscious of their present existence” but in man “consciousness of existence is composed of the perception of actual existence, as well as the remembrance of past existence.”

“God alone knows the past, the present and the future. Man, whose existence continues but a few

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Gourevitch, 358 note I [21]. Gourevitch also writes: “As Rousseau’s third and final mention of the sentiment of one’s own existence in the present Discourse indicates, he comes to endow this sentiment with far greater significance than had his predecessors; it is also central to his argument—his theodicy, really—in the *Letter to Voltaire* and to his last discussion of happiness in the *Rêveries*.” We will be returning to the significance of the sentiment of present existence shortly.

Buffon, HN IV 69; IV 69; IV 38; IV 51. All citations to Buffon’s *Histoire Naturelle* are to *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière, avec la description du cabinet du Roy* (Paris: De L’Imprimerie Royale). A list of volumes and publication dates has been appended to the thesis. Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own. Hereafter (HN Volume, page number). I will occasionally use translations: William Smellie: *Natural History, General and Particular* (London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1781), and J.S. Barr, *Barr’s Buffon: Buffon’s Natural History*, 10 volumes (London: H. D. Seymonds, 1797). These will appear intext (respectively) in the form (HN Sm Volume Number, Page), and (HN B Volume Number, Page). Because Smellie and Barr’s volume numbering sometimes differs from Buffon’s, when I employ these translations I have placed the original French volume number in brackets following the cited (translated) volume number.
moments, perceives only these movements: But a living and immortal power compares these moments, distinguishes and arranges them. It is by this power that man knows the present, judges of the past and foresees the future. Deprive him of this divine light, and you deface and obscure his being; nothing will remain but an animal equally ignorant of the past and the future, and affectable only by present objects.”  

The categories with which Buffon makes these distinctions are echoed almost identically in Rousseau’s description of metaphysical or moral man, who possesses the spiritual principle of self-perfection, and a consciousness or awareness of time (and death)—and, thus, the capacity for both foresight and curiosity. Rousseau again asserts this distinct capacity of the human being in his tenth note to the Second Discourse, in which he draws a distinction between monkeys and the great apes: “it is well demonstrated that the monkey is not a variety of man: not only because he is deprived of the faculty of speech, but above all because it is certain that his species does not have the faculty of perfecting itself, which is the specific characteristic of the human species, experiments that do not seem to have been made on the pongos and the orangutan with sufficient care to enable one to draw the same conclusion in their case . . . Precipitous judgments, which are not the fruit of an enlightened reason are prone to be excessive. Without any fanfare, our travelers made into beasts, under the names pongos, mandrills, ourangutans, the same beings that the ancients, under the names satyrs, fauns, sylvans, made into divinities. Perhaps, after more precise investigations it will be found that they are neither beasts nor gods but men” (SD 98). He describes the pongos, based on accounts of travellers, in Note 10 as follows:

41 HN Sm III [IV], 300 (my emphasis).
42 For a thorough account of the travel literatures upon which Buffon and Rousseau’s descriptions of the great apes were based, see Moran, “Of Pongos and Man,” in which Moran establishes that the description of the pongo and ourang were grounded in Antoine-François, l’abbé Prévost’s Histoire Générale des Voyages (Paris,
Pongos “bear an exact resemblance to man, except that they are much larger and very tall. With a human face, they have very deep-set eyes. Their hands, cheeks, and ears are without hair, except for their eyebrows which are very long. Although the rest of their body is quite hairy, the hair is not very thick; the color of the hair is brown. Finally, the only part that distinguishes them from men is their leg, which has no calf. They walk upright, grasping the hair of their neck with their hand. Their retreat is in the woods. They sleep in the trees, and there they make a kind of roof which offers them shelter from the rain. Their foods are fruits or wild nuts; they never eat flesh. The custom of the Negroes who cross the forests is to light fires during the night. They note that in the morning, at their departure, the pongos take their place around the fire, and do not withdraw until it is out; because, for all their cleverness, they do not have enough sense to lay wood on the fire to keep it going . . . When one of these animals dies, the others cover its body with a pile of branches or leaves . . . Sticking to the preceding accounts, we find in the description of these alleged monsters striking points of conformity with the human species and lesser differences than those that would be assigned between one man and another. From these pages it is not clear what the reasons are that the authors have for refusing to give the animals in question the name ‘savage man’; but it is easy to conjecture that it is on account of their stupidity and also because they did not speak – feeble reasons for those who know that although the organ of speech is natural to man, nevertheless speech is not natural to him, and who knows to what point his perfectibility can have elevated civil man above his natural state.” (SD 96)

As Starobinski notes, Buffon’s anthropology is everywhere in Rousseau’s description of these potentially human creatures. Rousseau in fact claims that only when observers such as “a Buffon” have themselves travelled and studied the apes will we able to “affirm of an animal that it is a man, and of another that it is a beast” (Note 10, SD 100).43

Both Buffon and Bonnet deny, however, that the ape could be (and could ever have been) a man, despite the fact that they acknowledge that physical and physiological markers of humanity are not sufficient to differentiate the two. Buffon writes in the Histoire

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43 This has not yet solved the mystery of the ‘puzzling’ passage mentioned above.
Naturelle: “though apes have the art of imitating human actions, they are still brutes . . . This power, however, is entirely the effect of his organization. He imitates the actions of men because his structure has a gross resemblance to the human figure. What originates solely from structure and organization is thus ignorantly ascribed to intelligence.”

Bonnet similarly writes in the Contemplation of Nature: the “ape is this rough draft of a man; this rude sketch; an imperfect representation, which nevertheless bears a resemblance to him.”

For Buffon and Bonnet, the species of man was impenetrable and universal: spiritual in its regenerative capacity, and superior because of its reason and creativity. Man knew by divine ordination—demonstrable and witnessed in nature—that the capacity to renew or perfect oneself and one’s society and knowledge was a mark of belonging to the human species. As Bonnet writes: despite even the “astonishing marks of industry” of the beavers, they do not have that “ray of light which raises man far above the rest of animal creation.” The beaver “never perfects or combines. Were they only for once to erect square cottages! But they are eternally round or oval. They move like the planets, in the circle which nature has traced out for them.” The “brute is at its birth what it will remain during its whole life.”

Bonnet also objects directly to the Second Discourse, publishing a letter to Rousseau under the pseudonym ‘Philopolis’—a letter to which Rousseau responds. Bonnet claims man is social by nature; as Rousseau writes: “the state of society, you tell me, results immediately from men’s faculties, and hence from his nature. To wish man not to become sociable would, therefore, be to wish that he not be a man, and to criticize society is to attack God’s

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46 Bonnet, Contemplation, II 119-121.
Rousseau claims in his Letter that his goal was to show men “the miseries of a condition which they take to be the perfection of the species,” and most of his response is crafted in refuting Bonnet/Philopolis’s optimism about the human condition. While Rousseau’s response to Philopolis is often cited, the Letter from Philopolis to Rousseau is not often cited in its full original. Commentators often rely on the portions of Philopolis’s letter upon which Rousseau himself chose to focus and cite. A full account of Philopolis’s letter is beyond the scope and purposes of this chapter, but one passage is particularly striking.

Bonnet’s most essential criticism concerns the identity of natural man: “the perfectibility which Rousseau claims distinguishes the character of man from the brute [is misplaced] . . . [For in the state of nature] man is not at this point man.” In the state of nature they may be “monkeys or apes, but not man.” Rousseau’s response to Philopolis on this question is as follows: “I believe that the monkey is a beast, and I have stated my reason for believing it; you are good enough to inform me that the Orang-Outang is also one, but I must admit that given the facts I cited, this one seems difficult to prove.” Rousseau has not, in fact, responded to Bonnet’s objection. The objection was not that ourang-outangs are not capable of perfectibility (though Bonnet does hold to this position), but that the man that Rousseau presents in the pure state of nature does not possess or exhibit the faculty of perfectibility. Bonnet approves of the identification of man as the creature with perfectibility, but denies

47 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Letter to Philopolis,” in The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings, trans. and ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 223. Much more will be said about this aspect of the letter (addressing sociability) in the next chapter.
50 Letter to Philopolis, 227.
that this is the creature present in Rousseau’s state of nature.$^{51}$ Bonnet is, thus, clearly thinking of the ‘puzzling’ passage I mentioned above, which describes natural man as distinctively lacking perfectibility, and Rousseau is clearly unwilling to answer this puzzle directly.

The puzzle is however resolvable through re-reading Note 10 of the Second Discourse. What at first seems a simple comparison between beasts and gods—that between pongos and ourangoutans and satyrs, fauns and sylvans—is more intriguing than a first glance. Satyrs, fauns and sylvans (sylvanus) are all human-animal hybrids. Silvanus (meaning ‘of the woods’) is particularly interesting: he was a Roman god, the protector of the forests (sylvestrus deus) who watched over both plantations and natural forests. Francis Moran III writes that, “as Gourevitch reminds us [Gourevitch, “Notes,” 358], Rousseau would have known that ‘orang-utang’ was Malay for ‘man of the woods’.”$^{52}$ Richard Velkley claims that Rousseau “in fact never tries to exhibit, much less explain, the emergence of the human from the subhuman [in the Second Discourse]. The earliest being he considers is already greatly different from the other animals. Just how different? Rousseau says that the earliest human has erect posture, use of his hands, and is ‘directing his gaze over the whole of nature, with his eyes sweeping the vast expanse of Heaven’ (I.I). Clearly a being that can survey the whole of nature is not one whose thoughts are limited to immediate needs and sensations.”$^{53}$ We are already, Velkley claims, in the “unsettling

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$^{51}$ Bonnet, in this sense, anticipated Strauss’s interpretation of Rousseau’s state of nature in Natural Right and History, in which he described Rousseau’s natural man as “subhuman” (271). This is an honour Bonnet shares with Voltaire. As Wokler writes (mistakenly): “to my knowledge, no one—apart from Voltaire, who characteristically thought the idea absurd—has ever recognized that Rousseau’s savage man was truly an ourangoutan” (Wokler, “Perfectible Apes,” 13).

$^{52}$ Moran, “Of Pongos and Men,” 655. Up to and following Linnaeus’s classification of living things (including man and apes), in fact, the ourangutan retained the name ‘satyrus.’

$^{53}$ Velkley, “The Measure of the Possible,” 224. Velkley does much work prior to this assertion demonstrating that savage man in fact has desires that exceed his needs—the first marker, for Velkley, of a creature that has
thickets” of perfectibility and humanity.\textsuperscript{54} We can hardly expect for Rousseau not to have us notice the conflict of the passage cited by Velkley with that of the ‘puzzling’ passage describing the savage as one who is indifferent to the “spectacle of nature”: it “becomes a matter of indifference to him by dint of its becoming familiar to him. It is always the same order, always the same succession of changes. He does not have a mind for marveling at the greatest wonders” (SD 46). Taking these two passages in tandem thus reveals that natural man is—as he is in Buffon—presented as \textit{Homo Duplex}. On one hand, he is indifferent to the spectacles of nature and is immersed (self-sufficient) in the sentiment of his existence; on the other, he has already been divided from himself. He is either immersed in, or cognizant of, his place in the natural order. In all cases, however, we may call him a ‘man of the woods.’ An ourangutan, a savage man, and a \textit{sylvan} or \textit{satyr} all, the only difference between them that a physical division of man and beast (in the form of a pagan god) is visible to the naked eye, whereas in all other cases it can only be performed, and only performed \textit{over time} (that is, historically).\textsuperscript{55} Perfectibility, that “elusive essence of the human, is not immediately

\textsuperscript{54} Velkley, “The Measure of the Possible,” 225.

\textsuperscript{55} As Rousseau writes in relation to the ourangutan: “there would be means by which, if the ourangutan or others were of the human species, even the least sophisticated observers could assure themselves of it by means of demonstration. But \ldots a single generation would not be sufficient for this experiment” (SD 98, my emphasis).
visible.” How are we to tell, if we are all wandering in the forest, which of us are looking at the stars?

We are, of course, not all wandering in the forest. We are feverish and civilized creatures—perfectibility run rampant. There is no doubt that we are human. But, according to Rousseau, there can also be no doubt that we are corrupt and degenerate: “our souls have become corrupted in proportion as our sciences and our arts have advanced toward perfection. Will it be said that this is a misfortune peculiar to our age? No, gentlemen, the evils caused by our vain curiosity are as old as the world” (FD 5). Rousseau begins the second part of the First Discourse claiming that all the sciences, “even moral philosophy, [were born] of human pride” (FD 11). That the “subject of the frontispiece” of the First Discourse is, Rousseau writes, “the allegory of the fable of Prometheus is easy to see”; Prometheus, who Rousseau claims was a “god who was antagonistic to men” was also the “inventor of the sciences” (FD 10-11). Prometheus’s stealing of fire from the gods is not, however, the portion of the myth upon which Rousseau focuses in his note: “‘The satyr,’ says an ancient fable, ‘wanted to kiss and embrace fire the first time he saw it. But Prometheus cried out to him, ‘Satyr, you will mourn the loss of the beard on your chin, for it burns when touched’” (FD 11). Gourevitch writes that “the version of this fable which Rousseau here cites is drawn from Plutarch’s essay How to Profit from One’s Enemies, an essay which he re-reads and rethinks to the very end of his life [see Rêveries IV]. . . All ancient sources—Hesiod’s Works and Days (42-105), Theogony (561-616), Aeschylus’s Prometheus Bound, Plato’s Statesman (274c-d)—agree in showing Prometheus’s gift

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56 Velkley, “The Measure of the Possible,” 224. “How sweet it would be,” Rousseau writes in the First Discourse, “if outer appearances were always the likeness of the heart’s dispositions” (FD 4).

57 As Strauss puts it, we are “a part of nature revolt[ing] by natural necessity against all other parts of nature”: Leo Strauss, What is Political Philosophy? (Glencoe: Free Press, 1959),176.
accompanied by suffering for men. Plutarch has his Prometheus go on to say that fire can also profit those who know how to use it.”58 What Gourevitch does not cite, however, is that Plutarch is himself referencing a satyr play of Aeschylus’s: Prometheus Fire-Kindler (of which only fragments survive).

As Carol Dougherty writes, at the Dionysiac theatre festival the Athenian audience would, “looking through the distorted lens of [this] satyr drama. . . [watch] Prometheus light the first torch and hand it to the satyrs—hybrid, trickster figures who could help them imagine both the city’s need for purification after the devastation of war and its renewed ability to make the best possible use of Prometheus’s gift to mankind.”59 In a response to Claude-Nicholas Le Cat, Rousseau claims that the Prometheus on the frontispiece of the First Discourse is himself.60 And yet, as I began this chapter, Rousseau also (and even in the same Discourse) seems to cast himself as the anti-rational figure: “Here I am the barbarian because they do not understand me.”61 Neither Prometheus (the pinnacle of scientific man) nor a mere animal or barbarian, all human beings—including Rousseau himself—are more aptly seen as satyrs, or ‘men of the woods’: hybrids that are both immersed in, yet observant of (and detached from), nature and the chain of being; both subject to perfectibility and the creation of it. Man is Homo Duplex: it is his perfectibility that makes him human and his perfectibility that leads him away from his own humanity. The cult of Prometheus worships fire for both its creative and destructive capacities—and the satyrs rush toward its heat and

58 Gourevitch, “Notes,” 327.
59 Carol Dougherty, Prometheus (London: Routledge Press, 2006), 64.
60 Though, as Donald Phillip Verene writes, “Rousseau says that this allegory is just, beautiful and sublime. [But] he asks what we should think of a writer who, having meditated on it, cannot attain an understanding of it. Le Cat is not too bright, and Rousseau has given him a clever answer.” Philosophy and the Return to Self-Knowledge (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 5.
61 Ovid, Tristia V, x 37. And, in the same Letter to Conzié in which this future epigraph is cited, Rousseau speaks desirously of the Promethean aspirations of the men who would create and enjoy automatons. He similarly notes that “it does not appear that the Greeks who nailed [Prometheus] to the Caucasas thought any more favourably of him than the Egyptians did their god Theuth” (FD 11).
beauty without considering its dual potential. We, as satyrs, are drawn to scientific progress\textsuperscript{62}, and to political arrangements that present themselves as just, yet bring only inequality.\textsuperscript{63} But, as Robert Wokler writes (and as the Promethean tale suggests) the rest of Rousseau’s corpus—“the Social Contract, Emile and Rêveries[—]bear ample testimony to the belief that our natural perfectibility might still be employed to our advantage.”\textsuperscript{64}

\textbf{The advantage of perfectibility}

But what is the direction away from corruption, from degeneracy, and from the “decay of the species” (SD 65)? As was discussed in the introductory portions of this chapter, Rousseau’s ‘historical man’ is seen to be distinctively exempt from the determinacy of the rest of nature: his perfectibility makes him unfinished and subject to limitless possibilities. As Horowitz writes, perfectibility is “not a transcendent moral or rational perfection, but is only a process of self-transformation.”\textsuperscript{65} Here Rousseau is seen to be revising or transforming Christian doctrine in which the movement toward perfection is passively received by the human being, in relation to God’s plan. As John Calvin (a fellow Genevan) writes: “God abolishes the corruption of the flesh in his elect in a continuous succession of time” toward which man moves, “little by little,” to his spiritual perfection.\textsuperscript{66} Buffon and Bonnet too are typically

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{62} As the \textit{First Discourse} recounts.
\item \textsuperscript{63} This is the story of the second part of the \textit{Second Discourse}.
\item \textsuperscript{64} Wokler, “Perfectible Apes,” 27.
\item \textsuperscript{65} Horowitz, “Historical Anthropology,” 225.
\item \textsuperscript{66} Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, III.iii. For an excellent overview of doctrines of perfection and perfectibility see John Passmore, \textit{The Perfectibility of Man} (London: Duckworth Press, 1970). Passmore discusses two theologians that are of great interest but the discussion of which in relation to this chapter and to Rousseau must be left for another time: Pietro Pomponazzi (who wrote \textit{On the Immortality of the Soul}), and Pierre Charron (\textit{Of Wisdom}). Both, Passmore claims, anticipated the ‘perfectibility’ that characterized more eighteenth and nineteenth century accounts: “the perfect man is a work of art, the harmonious realization of an educator’s ideal; education, not
seen to have ‘passive’ accounts of the natural world and of the Chain of Being.⁶⁷ As was discussed in the previous chapter, however, Buffon revises this account through making man the active agent of his own perfection.

Buffon claims that for each species there is an ‘original prototype’: “there is in Nature a general prototype of every species, upon which each individual is modeled, but which seems, in its actual production, to be depraved or improved by circumstances; so that, with regard to certain qualities, there appears to be an unaccountable variation in the succession of individuals, and, at the same time, an admirable uniformity in the entire species. The first animal, the first horse, for example, has been the external and internal model, upon which all the horses that have existed, or shall exist, have been formed.”⁶⁸ Over time, however, Buffon claims that animals—man included—have dispersed across the globe and have been subjected to various conditions, climates and breeding, which have led to degenerate forms. When natural creatures are brought closer “to perfection; Nature recovers her spring, and exhibits her best productions.”⁶⁹ While Buffon claims “animals never invent, nor bring anything to perfection,” it is the distinctive—and distinctively divine—capacity of man to both perceive in nature the degenerate and more perfect forms, and to bring them closer to perfection.⁷⁰ This spiritual principle is, thus, a mark of superiority not only insofar as man is the only being to possess it, but also insofar as man is the only creature that is, firstly, aware of standards of perfection and degeneracy but, secondly and more essentially, able to work towards those standards of perfection through invention, artifice and education. Man is the

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⁶⁷ See the previous chapter.
⁶⁸ Buffon, HN Sm III[IV], 343-345.
⁶⁹ Ibid.
⁷⁰ HN IV, 38.
only creature capable of perfecting himself through “art and habit [which] may bestow on them a greater degree of perfection.”

This distinctive quality identified by Buffon (and later echoed in Bonnet) makes history, politics and society the definitive site of human manipulation: it is man’s creativity, his capacity to invent, to speak in and to comprehend universal ideas, that informs his conception of the possibilities of his future, and which separates him from the animal kingdom of which he is an otherwise integrated, integral, and indeed renewable, part. And this is precisely what Rousseau calls perfectibility. Like Buffon, Rousseau claims to be able to perceive the degeneracy of his species. And, like Buffon, Rousseau also seems to be offering an original prototype. Despite inverting Buffon’s standard of perfection (which he claims is evident in civilization and European society), Rousseau preserves the structure of his argument. Correcting “what we have become” (SC 36), as Rousseau writes in the *Social Contract*, is intimately bound up with what we were and ought to be. And for this, Rousseau claims we need to look to nature: “all that men have made men can destroy. The only ineffaceable characters are those printed by nature.”

But what, given the parameters of human nature that we have established above, will nature tell us about what we will find? Inspired by Arthur Melzer, many have found the answer in the ‘natural goodness’ of man; for, as Melzer opens his book, Rousseau proclaims that “the fundamental principle of all morals . . . on which I have reasoned in all my writings. . . is that man is a being that is naturally good”; “nature has made man happy and good but

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71 HN IV, 32.
society deprives him and makes him miserable.” 73 Richard Velkley writes that Rousseau presents this picture of man’s ‘natural goodness’ as the (though he does not employ the Buffonian comparison) ‘original prototype.’ Natural man—“the image of primitive human self-unity”, the “original man [who] was truly whole”—is “the indelible image of the human as we would wish it to be: perfectly equal to itself, undisturbed by unnecessary desires, undivided and whole.” 74

The natural man of the Second Discourse is described as one whose “soul, agitated by nothing, is given over to the sole feeling [sentiment] of its present existence” (SD 46). John T. Scott writes, discussing man’s natural goodness, that “the order of nature. . . is found in our original or natural condition as physical beings embedded unproblematically in the physical whole of nature.” 75 This is undeniably the case. What has been illuminated in this chapter, however, is that natural man’s embeddedness in nature is only possible if he is an animal; his natural self-sufficiency can occur only if he is, to use Scott’s phrase, unproblematically embedded in the Chain of Being along with all of nature’s other creatures. It is only possible if he is Homo Unus as opposed to Homo Duplex; when he is lacking the perfectibility—the dividedness— that defines his own humanity. Man can only be in nature when he is lacking his own.

This does not mean that the ‘original prototype’ loses its force, however. As will be discussed in the next chapter, “Rousseau exploits the image of primitive human self-unity to disclose what we long to be.” 76 Nature, thus understood, is, as Jonathan Marks writes,

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74 Velkley, “The Measure of the Possible,” 224.
76 Velkley, “The Measure of the Possible,” 224.
therefore “not a beginning but an end of perfection.” It is, just as it is in Buffon’s natural science, a simultaneously natural and divine original prototype that depends for its realization on the distinctively human nature of perfectibility—the capacity to remake oneself in the world. It is also an end that would see man embedded in, rather than divided from, the great Chain of Being; in which man, like the rest of nature, has “always the same order, always the same succession of changes.” (SD 46) This prototype, or image, inspires all of Rousseau’s subsequent work: striving for the ideal of self-sufficiency in the general will of the Social Contract, the natural virtuous man of Émile, and the Rêveries of the Solitary Walker.

But this is, yet, only accounting for one half of the natural satyr we have described above: it strives for the self-sufficiency of present existence while denying man’s other half. Human nature proper—Homo Duplex—is the human species’ distinct prototype. And it is the same described by Alexander Pope:

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan
The proper study of Mankind is Man.
Place on this isthmus of a middle state,
A Being darkly wise, and rudely great:
With too much knowledge for the Skeptic side,
With too much weakness for the Stoic’s pride,
He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest;
In doubt to deem himself a God, or beast;
In doubt his mind or body to prefer;
Born to die, and reas’ning but to err;
Alike in ignorance, his reason such,
Whether he thinks too little, or too much;
Chaos of Thought and Passion, all confus’d;
Still by himself, abus’d or disabus’d;
Created half to rise and half to fall;
Great Lord of all things, yet a prey to all,
Sole judge of truth, in endless error hurl’d;
The glory, jest and riddle of the world.

An undivided man, however,

78 To be discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.
looks through nature up to nature’s God:
Pursues that chain which links th’ immense design,
Joins heav’n and earth, and mortal and divine;
Sees, that no being any bliss can know,
But touches some above, and some below;
Learns, from this union of the rising whole,
The first, last purpose of the human soul.

In his Letter to Voltaire, Rousseau praises Pope’s poem for its consolation: “the state of
doubt is too violent a state for my soul, because when my reason wavers, my faith cannot
long remain in suspense, and decides without it; and finally because a thousand things I like
better draw me toward the more consoling side and add the weight of hope to the equilibrium
of reason.”79  We cannot doubt that we are human, and we cannot doubt that we are endowed
with perfectibility, but the certainty about nature and human nature ends there without an
origin that is also a purpose.  Man’s hybridity—on nature’s terms, his unnatural duality—is
his greatest enemy and, possibly, his regenerative redemption.

The redemption of man depends upon his capacity to change his own conditions
through education and through politics. Just as Bonnet claims in his Essai de Psychologie
(1755) that education is “a second birth which imprints new determinations”—a force that
“modifies the force of the natural”80—and Buffon claims in the Histoire Naturelle in 1753
that the excellence of man is “dependent on education,” for while the “excellence of the
senses is a gift of nature, art and habit may bestow on them a greater degree of perfection,”81
so too will Rousseau write in 1762 in Emile that education is “the first of all useful things, [as

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79 Letter to Voltaire, in Early Political Writings, 242-243. This is also restated as part of the Profession of Faith
of the Savoyard Vicar in Emile, which is discussed at length in the next chapter.
80 Charles Bonnet, Essai de Psychologie, in Oeuvres d’histoire naturelle et philosophie de Charles Bonnet,
Vol.17 (Neuchatel: Samuel Fauche, 1783), LXXIII.
81 Buffon, HN IV 69, 32.
it is the art of forming men." The capacity the human being has to modify the force of the natural is for Rousseau, as it is for Buffon and Bonnet, the distinction we have by nature. It is our human nature, defined by the ability to change ourselves, that allows us to strive for the correction of our corruptions, and the perfection and redemption of ourselves. We also get a prelude in *Emile* of Rousseau’s argument for political redemption, which appears in full in the *Social Contract*: “good social institutions” would be those that know how to transport “the I into the common unity, with the result that each individual believes himself no longer one but a part of the unity and no longer feels except within the whole.” In both the moral and political world, reconstituting our conditions involves reconstituting ourselves, and this depends on our self-regenerative, or perfectible, human nature.

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82 Rousseau, *Emile*, 33.
83 Ibid, 40.
Chapter 5

The Possibility of Redemption in Rousseau: From Sin to Salvation

What then is to become of man? Will he be the equal of God or the beasts? What a terrifying distance! What then shall he be? Who cannot see from all this that man is lost, that he has fallen from his place, that he anxiously seeks it . . .

-Pascal

The focus of the preceding chapter was on Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s Second Discourse, which is just one piece of Rousseau’s large corpus. This chapter focuses on the texts that establish Rousseau’s “natural theology,” and on Rousseau’s Emile. Emile is a text that addresses Rousseau’s philosophy of education; it is an account of the “the first of all useful things, the art of forming men” (Emile, 33).¹ In this project, Bonnet and Buffon are Rousseau’s allies and interlocutors: they too claim that human beings can remake themselves through education. But this doctrine of education is for Rousseau, as it is for Buffon and Bonnet, dependent on a natural theology, or cosmology. For human beings to change, modify, or better their conditions they must have a standard of goodness or perfection toward which to strive. If the world is degenerate, there must be an image of a non-degenerate world; if man is degenerate, there must be an image of non-degenerate man. Just as Bonnet claims that through regenerating our conditions we may rise “incorruptible and glorious,”² so too will Rousseau claim that the corrupt must turn toward an image of the uncorrupted. This

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uncorrupted image is natural man: a man at one with the Great Chain of Being. “Natural man,” Rousseau writes, “is entirely for himself. He is numerical unity, the absolute whole which is relative only to itself or its kind” (Emile, 39). What Rousseau’s natural theology and the narrative of Emile demonstrate is that the natural, undivided man is an aspirational ideal. It is an image of unity and wholeness with nature that stands opposed to human nature itself. Drawing once again from Buffon’s account of the divided human being, Homo Duplex, Rousseau shows that human nature proper is one of division, one that sees itself as a particular ‘I’, as a relational being. Our capacity to change our conditions (our changeable and relational self) is our natural inheritance that can be either a blessing or a curse. We only have our human nature to work with, but in orienting ourselves to natural goodness, Rousseau claims, we can turn away from our own corruption.

While what follows in this chapter is not meant to be a comprehensive accounting of Rousseau’s views across all of his works, it will take as its foundation Rousseau’s own assertion that his work forms a unified whole. Rousseau’s corpus has often been cast as reflective of his arguments’ “paradoxical character”; Jason Neidleman writes in Rousseau’s Ethics of Truth that Rousseau’s texts have “come to be associated with paradox and contradiction.”³ Neidleman sees himself as reviving “a much maligned tradition of Rousseau scholarship which takes seriously Rousseau’s claim to have presented a coherent system.”⁴ This tradition is founded in pioneering works such as E.H. Wright’s The Meaning of

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⁴ Neidleman, Ethics of Truth, 1.
Rousseau, and Ernst Cassirer’s *The Question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.* These thinkers “did not deny the paradoxical character of many of Rousseau’s pronouncements, but they agreed with Rousseau that these paradoxes do not impair his fundamental consistency.”

Neidleman and his predecessors are united by Rousseau’s own claims that his works formed a coherent system. In his later autobiographical (or semi-autobiographical) writings, Rousseau repeatedly reminded his readers that his corpus was a unity: “All that is daring in the *Contrat Social* had previously appeared in the *Discours sur l’inégalité*; all that is daring in *Emile* had previously appeared in *Julie.*” As Peter Gay writes, citing *Rousseau Juge de Jean-Jacques,* “[Rousseau] reiterated this conviction, which must have been of great importance to him, as he came to reflect on his work once more at the end of his life: ‘One great principle,’ he maintained, was evident in all of his books.”

Rousseau claims in the *Letter to Beaumont* that he wrote “always with the same principles: always the same morality, the same belief, the same maxims.” In the *Social Contract,* too, Rousseau writes apologetically of his scattered presentation, “all of my opinions are consistent, but I cannot present them all at once;” and many have interpreted this as a statement that Rousseau intended to refer to his system as a whole.

The genesis of Rousseau’s “one principle” is defined through a story that he tells about himself in his *Letter to Malesherbes,* in which a young Rousseau was struck with an

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illumination while walking the road from Paris to Vincennes to visit his companion, Denis Diderot,\textsuperscript{10} while he was imprisoned.\textsuperscript{11} On one of these frequent walks in 1749, Rousseau sees the posting for the competition at the Academy of Dijon, asking the question ‘Has the rise of the arts and sciences contributed to the purification of morals?’ Rousseau’s response would be his *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts* [the First Discourse]—the work that would make him famous. As Neidleman writes, “Rousseau relates having been overtaken by a powerful illumination,” and he is forced to pause his walk to accept his intellectual revelation under a tree.\textsuperscript{12} He relates to Malesherbes that he cannot even “write a quarter of what [he] saw and felt under that tree . . . How clearly I [could] have made all the contradictions of the social system seen.”\textsuperscript{13} Though he insists that his revelation exceeded (by at least four times) what he was able to write, this one principle that Rousseau saw so clearly is summarized in the maxim: “Nature made man happy and good but society depraves him and makes him miserable.”\textsuperscript{14} He also states his maxim in his *Letter to Beaumont*: “the first movements of nature are always right.”\textsuperscript{15}

If Rousseau is, seemingly, so clear that his works form a comprehensive whole, and that they can all be related to “one principle,” why then have scholars been resistant to taking him at his word? What is the paradox at the heart of Rousseau’s scholarship that could cause us to doubt Rousseau’s own claim that all of his writings are working with and toward the

\textsuperscript{10} This is prior to the infamous parting of ways between Rousseau and Diderot.
\textsuperscript{11} While this story is often cited as the moment for inspiration Rousseau’s philosophic doctrine, I have demonstrated in the previous chapter that Rousseau was already thinking along the same lines years before, after having read Alexander Pope’s *Essay on Man*. It is of course not beyond what we would expect of Rousseau to have fabricated a romanticized version of his inspiration.
\textsuperscript{12} Neidleman, *Ethics of Truth*, 15. Rousseau writes another work in which he is struck by an illumination, and subject to a dream, under a tree, the *Fiction or Allegorical Fragment on Revelation*, to which I will return later in the chapter.
\textsuperscript{13} Cited in Neidleman, *Ethics of Truth*, 15.
\textsuperscript{14} *Rousseau Juge de Jean-Jacques*, in Collected Writings, ii, 22.
\textsuperscript{15} *Letter to Beaumont*, in ibid, ix, 28.
same principle? The paradox is the seeming break from the emphasis on the natural standard of independence and goodness in the *Second Discourse* to Rousseau’s emphasis on the political solution of the *Social Contract*. It is a break that is one from a critic of society and civilization (in both the *First* and *Second Discourses*) to its advocate.

Rousseau writes of the civilized man in the *Second Discourse*, for example, that “savage man and civilized man differ so greatly in the depths of their hearts and in their inclinations, that what constitutes the supreme happiness of the one would reduce the other to despair . . . Savage man breaths only tranquility and liberty; he wants simply to live and rest easy . . . On the other hand, the citizen is always active and in a sweat, always agitated.” The true cause of all of these differences, Rousseau writes, is that “the savage lives in himself; the man accustomed to the ways of society is always outside of himself and knows how to live only in the opinion of others” (SD 80-81).16 “Most of our ills,” he says in the *Second Discourse*, “are of our own making, and . . . we could have avoided nearly all of them by preserving the simple, regular, and solitary lifestyle prescribed to us by nature.” These ills, the story of the *Second Discourse* relates to us, are all attributable to “the ways of society” by which men become “weak, fearful, and servile” (SD 42-43). The “bonds of servitude” are forged “merely from the mutual dependence of men and the reciprocal needs that unite them” (SD 59). Our social and political dependence is here cast by Rousseau as something which degenerates our nature and deprives us of the goodness and tranquility of the natural condition.

In the *Social Contract*, it appears as if the argument of Rousseau’s *Second Discourse* is inverted: “Although in [the civil state, man] deprives himself of several of the advantages

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belonging to him in the state of nature, he regains such great ones. His faculties are
exercised and developed, his ideas are broadened, his feelings are ennobled, his entire soul is
elevated to such a height that . . . he ought to bless the happy moment . . . which transformed
him from a stupid limited animal into an intelligent being and a man” (SC 151). Natural man,
who is described in the Second Discourse as having “purely animal functions,” is here cast as
inferior to the reasoning and intelligent citizen (SD 45).17 The social contract is presented as
an opportunity for men to exercise and fulfill their freedom through the general will, a “moral
and collective body” that prevents the subsistence of the state of nature—a state in and
through which our associations would “necessarily become tyrannical or hollow” (SC 148).
It is only via the political condition that man, Rousseau claims, acquires “moral liberty,
which alone makes [him] truly the master of himself” (SC 151).

While I do not ascribe to an account according to which the Social Contract initiates
a rupture in Rousseau’s thinking, one can see the grounds for claiming that his system is far
from cohesive, and is, indeed, paradoxical. Ernst Cassirer references many scholars who
“declare candidly that the Contrat social explodes the unity of Rousseau’s work, that it
implies a complete break with the philosophical outlook from which this work had originally
sprung” citing John Viscount Morley, Emile Faguet, Louis Ducros, and Daniel Mornet.18 The
accounts, including Cassirer’s own, which seek to reconcile Rousseau’s earlier writings with

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17 I have done much work in the previous chapter unpacking what Rousseau means when he describes the
‘natural man’ as having ‘purely animal functions’, and I will be resurrecting this argument shortly. The present
presentation of the paradox also ignores the division of physical and moral man—this is, in fact, the source of
much of the confusion about whether or not Rousseau’s system is a coherent whole.

18 John Viscount Morley, Rousseau (Champman and Hall, 1873); Emile Faguet, Dix-huitième siècle (Paris,
1891); Louis Ducros, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Paris, 1888); Daniel Mornet, Rousseau, l’homme et l’Oeuvre
(Boivin, 1950). Neidleman’s focus in the contemporary scholarship is on those who do not necessarily claim
explicitly that the Social Contract is the break, but who are also comfortable with embracing Rousseau as a man
and a thinker of paradoxes, and thus leaving his paradoxes unresolved. He cites Elizabeth Wingrove,
“Interpretive Practices and Political Designs: Authenticity, Integrity, and Reform in Jean-Jacques Rousseau,”
Political Theory 29.1 (2001): “at some point it is fair to ask, why labor to maintain distinctions that the text
consistently fails to keep clear?”, 98.
his later ones are much more convincing, and typically employ the *Discourses* as the Archimedean point from which one ought to view the unity of Rousseau’s system. Cassirer writes that “into his old age Rousseau never tired of affirming and upholding the unity of his work. He did not see the *Contrat Social* as an apostasy from the fundamental ideas he had advocated in his two essays on the prize questions of the Academy of Dijon; it was, rather, their consistent extension, their fulfillment and perfection.”

The later works of Rousseau are thus seen as responding to the earlier discourses. Neidleman writes that it is the *Second Discourse* in particular that informs the rest of Rousseau’s work: “The second *Discourse* provides the foundation for what Rousseau called his ‘system.’ Rousseau’s later writings ought to be read in the context of the pathologies identified in the second *Discourse***. That is, the *Discourses* are the diagnosis, and the later works are the cure: “the *Second Discourse* is a chronicle of humanity’s alienation from natural goodness, while *Emile*, the *Social Contract*, *Julie*, and the *Reveries* describe ways of recuperating natural goodness in a modern context.” Rousseau provides us with “models of reconciliation” to cure our alienation. As should be evident, however, in order to reconcile the unity of Rousseau’s corpus, one must sort out what is meant by Rousseau’s “one principle”: the idea of natural goodness. For it is not the case that Neidleman’s description of the potential for the recuperation of natural goodness absolves Rousseau of the

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21 Ibid, 20.


23 Asher Horowitz also sees the *Social Contract* and the *Emile* as responses to the *Second Discourse* and its presentation of “human nature”: “‘Laws and Customs Thrust us Back to into Infancy: Rousseau’s Historical Anthropology,” *Review of Politics* 52.2 (1990), 215-241.
paradoxes established above between the celebration of the natural in the Second Discourse, and the promulgation of its inverse in the Social Contract.

I concluded the previous chapter discussing the role that natural goodness plays in Rousseau’s thought, arguing, through employing Richard Velkley, Jason Neidleman, and John T. Scott, that ‘natural goodness’ in Rousseau’s thought is an image or prototype not of man as he was, but man as “we would wish him to be: perfectly equal to [him]self, undisturbed by unnecessary desires, undivided and whole.”24 As Jonathan Marks puts it, “nature is not a beginning but an end of perfection.”25 This position is echoed by Cassirer, who claims that the goodness of man is not an origin, properly understood, but a “destiny of man’s will”; a destiny that requires the activity of man to reach its goal. While “Rousseau deplored the gift of ‘perfectibility,’ which differentiated man from all the other living creatures, he also knew that it alone can bring ultimate deliverance.”26

I also established that the image of natural goodness invoked by Rousseau is one that is modeled on the natural self-sufficiency of the animal kingdom. The sense of ‘wholeness’ and immediacy that belongs to the natural Chain of Being—the sense of being part of a whole that “is always the same order, always the same succession of changes” —is distinctively non-human (SD 46). We are marked by our capacity to corrupt and change our natures; to be perfectible, whether for good or for ill. Man can only truly be in nature when he is lacking his own. There is, thus, a distinction in Rousseau between nature and human nature. This is what drives all of the paradoxes in his thought; paradoxes that, I have

26 Cassirer, Question, 104: 78. See also John Dewey, Democracy and Education, in which he outlines the idea “that nature not merely furnishes the prime forces which initiate growth, but also its plan and goal” (New York: The Free Press, 1966), 118.
demonstrated, are informed by Buffon’s natural science and his description of *Homo Duplex*. We are animals, and yet divided from the animal kingdom. We are in nature, and yet divided from it *by nature*. To claim, then, that we are alienated from natural goodness is in one way correct. But to claim that this natural goodness is itself *characteristically human* is incorrect.

Natural man, understood as a pure and tranquil state in which we are one with nature—
independent and asocial, amoral and self-sufficient—is not man at all. This is man described as animal; it accounts for only one half of the *duplex* that informs our distinctive human nature.

If, then, we take Rousseau’s founding principle to be that the “first movements of nature are *always right,*” and we take those “first movements” to be the “origin story” in the *Second Discourse* (the presentation of natural man *as animal*, as naturally good, whole, undivided, independent, amoral, and asocial), then human beings qua human beings are *always wrong*. To say, as I do, that man properly understood is *not* these things (naturally good, tranquil, asocial), is thus to claim that man—properly understood—is the inverse: that human nature is social and naturally inclined to corruption. It is to claim, indeed, that the human being, when held up against the goodness of nature, is defined by original sin.

It has become dogma in Rousseau scholarship to claim that Rousseau foundationally rejects original sin through arguing that man is naturally good. As Melzer writes, Rousseau’s account of nature is a reversal of the Christian doctrine of original sin: “there is no original perversity in the human heart.” While there are some elements of the doctrine of original sin that are modified in Rousseau’s account, I argue that the structure remains intact. For the unity of Rousseau’s thought to work, and for the tension between nature and human nature to

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27 *Letter to Beaumont*, in *Collected Writings*, ix, 28, my emphasis.
do the work it is meant to do, this modified original sin must be understood. As in the
preceding accounts of “natural goodness,” the lack of perversity in the human heart upon
which Melzer places his emphasis is an aspirational ideal. For its fulfillment, or the
approximation of its fulfillment, faith and salvation are required.

The human being: a sin against nature

Save for a select few scholars, who will be discussed in what follows, it is widely held that
Rousseau rejects the doctrine of original sin. Victor Gourevitch has argued that “‘sin’ has
no place in Rousseau’s teaching.”29 Original sin is here understood as an idea of an “original
moral evil”; that human beings are born evil and must repent, or seek their salvation, through
Jesus Christ.30 Rousseau’s claim that there is “no original perversity in the human heart”
seemingly justifies Gourevitch’s argument, as well as the arguments of all those with whom
Gourevitch agrees.31 The claim also rests on how to conceptualize the human capacity to do
the opposite of good. With the Christian doctrine of original sin comes the need for the
reception of Jesus as a pathway to redemption. Without original sin, man is on his own: he is
the cause of his own misery, and the solution to his own problems. As Neidleman argues,
“according to Christian orthodoxy, Jesus Christ’s intercession is required for salvation,
because human beings are constitutively marked by original sin.” But in Rousseau’s system,
“human nature is itself our redemption, the source of salvation, the thing toward which we

31 For those who deny that Rousseau is operating within the structure of original sin see, for example: Melzer,
Natural Goodness, 355; Neidleman, Ethics of Truth, 16; Marks, “Who Lost Nature,” 481; Horowitz,
must turn in order to escape our sinful tendencies.” As Cassirer puts it, “man must be his own savior.” As I have demonstrated in the previous chapters, however, the capacity of human beings to change their own circumstances can be reconciled with a Christian world-view, especially in the terms in which the natural scientists came to understand nature in the eighteenth century. It is this same understanding of Nature, and of man’s place within it, that informs Rousseau’s modification of the doctrine of original sin.

In order to explicate this ‘original sin,’ I will be focusing on some of the necessary and constitutive elements of Augustine’s generation of the doctrine of original sin in the *City of God Against the Pagans.* Augustine is, for Rousseau, a consistently ‘absent presence.’ Rousseau’s *Confessions* are modeled on Augustine’s despite the fact that, as Patrick Riley points out, “nowhere does Rousseau explicitly acknowledge Augustine’s *Confessions* as a model: Rousseau insists only on the novelty and uniqueness of his own autobiographical project.” While it is not my intention here to establish a definitive textual relationship

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33. Cassirer, *Question*, 76.

34. The textual similarities between Augustine and Rousseau in what follows are what merit this comparison. But it should be noted that many of the same themes and concerns could be a result of Rousseau’s Genevan Calvinist heritage (Calvin was himself a careful reader of Augustine, and his theology heavily bears Augustine’s trace). Helena Rosenblatt has outlined the many Calvinists who were writing and maintained an immense popularity in the eighteenth century. “Calvin’s successors,” she writes, were “reacting to different historical circumstances” and thus altered Calvin’s doctrines into more “ethical” teachings (12). Jean La Place and Jacques Abbadie are of particular interest. For Place, “man not only had to believe, but had to do something in order to be saved”; in Place’s “moral theology” “the role of grace was lessened while the role of man was enhanced. Man was consistently depicted as being able to reform himself” (13). Abbadie, the disciple of Place, “proposed first to ‘search for man in man’ . . . According to this prominent Calvinist, man’s essence was good, while his present existence was predominantly sinful. Man therefore had to ‘find’ himself again: he had to ‘retrace his steps’ in order properly to grasp his God-given essence” (13). Rosenblatt also cites P.M. Masson’s *La religion de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, in which Masson claims that Rousseau had written “Abbadie” in the margins of his *Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar* (note 9, 13). Helena Rosenblatt, *Rousseau and Geneva: From the First Discourse to the Social Contract, 1749-1762* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). For more on Rousseau and Calvinism, see Pamela A. Mason, “The Communion of Citizens: Calvinist Themes in Rousseau’s Theory of the State,” *Polity* 26.1 (1993): 25-49.

between Rousseau and Augustine on the use and modification of the doctrine of original sin, employing Augustine’s development of the doctrine is informative for illuminating the manners in which Rousseau’s account of nature and human nature have much more in common with this doctrine than is normally supposed. I will first outline Augustine’s account, followed by a parallel account in Rousseau.

In Book XIV, Chapter 10, of the *City of God*, Augustine describes human beings “before the fall” as “animal bodies” with “sentiments.” In the Garden of Eden, Augustine writes, “what could men fear or suffer in the midst of such an abundance of goods, where neither death nor sickness of body was feared, where nothing was missing which a good will might want, and where nothing was missing which might prevent a human being from living a happy life, both physically and mentally? . . . Their avoidance of sin was tranquil.” “Just as the first human beings were happy and free from mental distress . . . so the whole human society would have been happy if these first human beings had not transmitted this evil to their posterity and if each of their descendants had not committed in iniquity what they would receive in condemnation.”

But we *did*, of course, sin against God. The sin against God was perpetrated by an “evil will”; “after all, the evil work would not have been done unless an evil will preceded it. Further, how can the will begin to be evil except through pride? Thus, ‘The beginning of all sin is pride’ (Sir 10:13) . . . This exalting is wrong when the mind deserts the principle to which it ought to cling and becomes, as it were, its own principle . . . If the will had remained established in the love of the higher unchangeable good, then it would not have turned

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away.” God, Augustine writes, “‘made man upright’ (Eccl. 7:29) and hence possessing a good will. If man had not had a good will, he would not have been upright. . . [But] the first evil will, which preceded all evil human works, was less a single deed than a falling away from the work of God to its own works.” Nevertheless, Augustine emphasizes that despite the fact that God is good, and man’s will is evil, God made human nature as such as part of the order of things, and according to nature: “although an evil will is not according to nature, but contrary to nature, since it is a defect, it nevertheless belongs to the nature of which it is a defect, for it cannot exist except in a nature.” “Because God foresees everything,” Augustine writes, “he knew that human beings would sin . . . God’s foreknowledge anticipated how evil man, whom he created good, would become, as well as what good God himself would still draw forth from him.” What else would we thus call man’s misery, Augustine asks, “if not his disobedience to himself?”

In the Second Discourse, Rousseau describes human beings in the state of nature as having “purely animal functions”; natural man “had only the sentiments appropriate to that state; he felt only his true needs” (SD, 45, 57). In this state, Rousseau writes, man’s “desires do not go beyond his physical needs. The only good he knows in the universe are nourishment, a woman, and rest; the only evils he fears are pain and hunger. I say pain and not death because an animal will never know what it is to die; and knowledge of death and its terrors is one of the first acquisitions that man has made in withdrawing from the animal condition” (SD 46). “Nature has destined us to be healthy . . . With so few sources of ills, man in the state of nature hardly has any need of remedies, much less of physicians.” (SD 42-43). “Savage man breathes only tranquility and liberty; he wants simply to live and rest

37 Ibid, Ch. 11, 13: 100-103.
38 Ibid, Ch. 11, 15: 101-104.
easy” (SD 80). And Rousseau famously claims: “most of our ills are of our own making . . .
We could have avoided nearly all of them by preserving the simple, regular, and solitary
lifestyle prescribed to us by nature” (SD 42).

But we did not, according to Rousseau, preserve this life. There were “happenings”,
Rousseau claims, “that were able to perfect human reason while deteriorating the species,
making a being evil while rendering it habituated to the ways of society, and, from so distant
a beginning, finally bring man and the world to the point where we see them now” (SD 59).
The life of the animal, “limited at first to pure sensations” changed when “engendered in
man’s mind [were] the perceptions of certain relations. These relationships which we express
by the words ‘large,’ ‘small,’ ‘strong,’ ‘weak,’ ‘fast,’ ‘slow,’ ‘timorous,’ ‘bold,’ and other
similar ideas, compared when needed and almost without thinking about it, finally produced
in him a kind of reflection, or rather a mechanical prudence” (SD 61). “The new
enlightenment which resulted from this development increased his superiority over the other
animals by making him aware of it . . .Thus the first glance he directed upon himself
produced within him the first stirring of pride . . . and contemplating himself in the first rank
by virtue of his species, he prepared himself from afar to lay claim to it in virtue of his
individuality” (SD 61).39 This comparative pride generates comparative relations in sociality:
“the one who sang or danced the best, the handsomest, the strongest, the most adroit or the

39 My emphasis. This is essentially the birth of amour-propre, which will be discussed further below.
Individuality is, indeed, defined by man’s becoming his own principle. As will be outlined in the Profession of
Faith of the Savoyard Vicar, the redemption from one’s having become one’s own principle is to see oneself as
embedded in nature, as opposed to nature revolving around your own orbit. It should be noted here too that
pride is a central feature of Alexander Pope’s Essay on Man, and his discussion of human nature’s identity and
limitations: “The bliss of man (could pride that blessing find)/ Is not to act or think beyond mankind;/ No
pow’rs of body or soul to share/ But what his nature and his state can bear.” Compare to the Emile: “O Man!
Confine thy existence within thyself, and thou wilt no longer be miserable. Remain in the place which nature
has assigned to thee in the chain of beings, and nothing can compel thee to depart from it . . . Man is strong
when he contents himself with being what he is.” Both are quoted in Arthur O. Lovejoy, The Great Chain of
most eloquent became the most highly regarded. And this was the first step toward inequality and, at the same time, toward vice. From these first preferences were born vanity and contempt on the one hand, and shame and envy on the other. And the fermentation caused by these new leavens eventually produced compounds fatal to happiness and innocence” (SD 64).

Note 3 of Rousseau’s Second Discourse outlines that man was made to be a biped (that is, upright) (SD, 84). The earliest human has erect posture, use of his hands, and is “directing his gaze over the whole of nature, with his eyes sweeping the vast expanse of Heaven.” As was outlined in the previous chapter, this claim is more significant than it first appears. Richard Velkley argues that “a being that can survey the whole of nature is not one whose thoughts are limited to immediate needs and sensations.” Lucretius, upon whom Rousseau also regularly relied, ties this uprightness of the human being to his capacity to see himself as part of greater whole: “For indeed when we look up at the heavenly quarters of the great world, and the firm-set ether above the twinkling stars, and it comes to our mind to think of the journeying of the sun and moon, then into our hearts weighed down with other ills, this misgiving too begins to raise up its wakened head, that there may be perchance some immeasurable power of the gods over us.” The uprightness of the human being, if we are drawing on the previous chapter’s analysis, is thus the description of the creature who surveys the whole, who is capable of surveying the order of nature, and of seeing the

40 This is certainly the cheekiest of Rousseau’s Augustinian appropriations.
41 See the previous chapter for the significance of this claim, which will be discussed further here.
42 Velkley, “The Measure of the Possible,” 224; Lucretius, On the Nature of Things, translated by Cyril Bailey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910). Velkley does much work prior to this assertion demonstrating that savage man in fact has desires that exceed his needs—the first marker, for Velkley, of a creature that has left natural immediacy and is already ‘outside of himself’. Also see Ovid: “While other animals face down toward to earth, to man he gave a face raised to the skies, and to the stars he bade him lift his eyes”; cited in Michel de Montaigne, “Apology for Raymond Sebond,” in The Complete Works translated by Donald M. Frame (New York: Knopf Everyman’s Library, 2003).
goodness of its order. The natural order, the home of natural man, in which “the spectacle of nature... is always the same order, always the same successions of changes” is lost when man begins to have a “mind for marveling” (SD 46). He is no longer indifferent to the natural order, but pridefully sees himself as superior to it. It begins with a detachment from the animal kingdom as a whole, and pathologizes into the genesis of inequality among men. Our miseries are of our own making, for “what kind of misery can there be for a free being whose heart is at peace”? (SD 52).

The emphasis on the ‘necessity’ or “happenings” of nature which led to the change in natural man—the exhibition of the perfectibility that defines human nature’s separation from the rest of the natural kingdom—is often invoked in Rousseau scholarship as concrete evidence of Rousseau’s rejection of original sin; it was not man that sinned, but some ‘inevitable course’ of nature which caused him to change.\(^43\) Comparing Rousseau’s account to Augustine’s reveals that this is in fact consistent with Augustine’s understanding of the relationship of providence to original sin. God knew that human beings would sin. Although the corrupted human being is contrary to nature, it is, yet, according to nature: it belongs to nature as a defect. So, too, for Rousseau, does “nature know” that the human being will sin against its order. The course of events (though Rousseau denies that these were in fact historical) led to the stirrings of man’s pride; but this defect of man’s nature, which was caused by nature, is nevertheless a turn away from nature. It is man’s defect or corruption which defines him; a defect we have inherited from the first man who saw himself as detached from the natural order. It is our identity as detached from the order of things that makes us human, and which makes it possible for human beings to effect change on the

\(^{43}\) See the interpretation of the ‘historical fall’ in, for example, Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: La Transparence et l’Obstacle* (Presses Universitaires de France, 1957) and the discussion of this interpretation in Horowitz, “Anthropology.”
exhibitions of our corruption. So long as we maintain our corruption, and our separation and detachment, we sin against nature. The human species as such is a sin against nature. Pride, as in Augustine, is our original sin. The “natural state of man” which Rousseau examines from its origin in the “first embryo of the species” is the story of, to paraphrase Augustine, the sin and corruption that dwells within human beings by nature of being human.44

The few scholars who resist the dogma that Rousseau rejects original sin phrase this argument in similar terms (though without invoking Augustine). In his “General Overview” commencing the Cambridge Companion to Rousseau, George Armstrong Kelly writes that “man alone among the phenomenal beings has been torn from the natural order,” and that if man is to have some kind of salvation it will be in a form that reverses our historical (and history-making) detachment from the natural order of things: “salvation, if salvation there be. . . will be a human act against history.”45 While Fred H. Willhoite Jr. agrees that Rousseau structures his argument in a manner that reflects the doctrine of original sin, and that Rousseau’s concern is with “salvation,” he does not look upon this move too favorably, claiming that Rousseau’s work is really a “hymn to pride.”46 Ronald Beiner has come closest to making a claim that Rousseau preserves the structure of original sin, in his Civil Religion

44 “And so it was “not I” that brought this about “but sin which dwelt in me,” sin resulting from the punishment of a more freely chosen sin, because I was a son of Adam.” Saint Augustine, Confessions, Henry Chadwick, tr. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), VII.x.22, p. 149. Augustine’s Biblical reference is to Romans 7:17, 20. My attention was drawn to this quote by a dissertation by Joshua Karant: “A Peculiar Faith: Navigating Rousseau’s Road to Democratic Virtue,” 2004. While I do not have the space in this project to develop a full comparative account in the following respect, I will point out, too, that Augustine held that original sin was passed to children through procreation. The wound of original sin on the human being occurs via sexual reproduction: a spiritual passing of concupiscence. The “second birth” of the human being is an act of faith. Thinking, then, of the polyp there are some fascinating comparisons to draw with Augustine’s account (in Bonnet’s case, potentially refracted through his Calvinism). The polyp is miraculous precisely because of its novel mode of regenerating itself in a manner that does not require sexual reproduction. Its capacity to “rebirth” itself is thus a natural model of the renewal of biological forms that does not carry original sin and, thus, it is the perfect analogy for the human capacity to redeem itself from degeneration or corruption; or, that is, to regenerate itself without inheriting corruption/original sin.
(tucked away in a note). Beiner acknowledges Rousseau’s claim (as written in the *Pastoral Letter*) that ‘there is no original perversity in the human heart’, and yet, he writes, “at the same time, it seems that for Rousseau human passions cannot help but become corrupted, and human institutions cannot help but become unnatural. In that sense the natural innocence of man seems no more relevant to the quasi-natural fact of human corruption than (in the orthodox view) the original sin of Adam is to the fact of original sin. Rousseau himself seems to make this very point in ‘Letter to Beaumont’.”

The passage to which Beiner is referring is one in which Rousseau is responding to Beaumont on the topic of original sin, and in which Rousseau claims that he has explained original sin more thoroughly than all of the theologians. He writes:

> Original sin explains everything except its own principle, and it is this principle that has to be explained. You [Beaumont] propose that with my principle [of the *Pastoral Letter*, that ‘there is no original perversity in the human heart’] one loses sight of that ray of light that lets us know the mystery of our own heart. And you do not see that this principle, far more universal, illuminates even the fault of the first man, which yours leaves in obscurity. The only thing you can see is man in the hands of the Devil, while I see how he fell into them. The cause of evil, according to you, is corrupted nature, and this corruption itself is an evil whose cause had to be sought. Man was created good. We both agree on that, I believe. But you say he is wicked because he was wicked. And I show how he was wicked. Which of us, in your opinion, better ascends to the principle?  

Rousseau’s accounting of nature is, thus, a theology; and a theology that relies on the structure of an original sin *against nature*. His ‘hymn to pride’ is an account of human nature (perfectible and corrupting) that therefore requires an account of *nature* for its salvation.

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49 This reading of original sin, and its moral and political implications, is most opposed to Joshua Cohen’s reading of Rousseau’s political philosophy, in which he claims that it is Rousseau’s rejection of Augustine’s doctrine of original sin that leads to a free community of equals: Joshua Cohen, *Rousseau: A Free Community of Equals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
Rousseau’s natural theology: nature, what is it good for?

Rousseau’s debt to the doctrine of original sin, and his substitution of Nature for Augustine’s God, is what illuminates the distinction between nature (or “natural goodness”) and human nature in his work. Nature is presented as a Great Chain of Being, in which there is order, goodness, and self-sufficiency. Human nature is our distinction; one marked, as I discussed in the previous chapter, by our perfectibility, and thus marked by our deviation from the natural order. Rousseau’s presentation of ‘nature’ is elaborated in two further sources: his Fiction or Allegorical Fragment on Revelation, and the Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar in Emile, in which God is re-introduced through a “natural religion.”

The understudied Allegory is printed in the twelfth volume of the Collected Works of Rousseau. In the Allegory, Rousseau tells a story about the revelation of the Great Chain of Being. We find a philosopher who dares “to raise his reflections up to the sanctuary of Nature” on a warm summer evening when “an abundant and healthy dew was already reviving the greenery withered by the heat of the sun, [and] the flowers were casting their sweet perfumes from every direction . . . The murmur of the brooks was beginning to make itself heard, various domestic animals returning slowly . . . [The night] betokened places that were tranquil without being deserts, and [that had] peace rather than solitude.”

While in this natural setting, he is plunged into thought; alternating courses of doubt ensue about the order of the universe, and of the perpetual motion of the world. “The philosopher was striving vainly to pierce the mysteries of nature, [but it was becoming only] a subject of uneasiness

50 For exceptions see Lee MacLean, The Free Animal: Rousseau on Free Will and Human Nature (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013); Christopher Kelly, Rousseau as Author: Consecrating One’s Life to the Truth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
51 Fiction or Allegorical Fragment on Revelation, in Collected Writings, xii, 165.
for him.” All of a sudden, “a ray of light happened to strike his mind, and to unveil for him those sublime truths . . . A new universe offered itself so to speak to his contemplation; he perceived the invisible chain that links all Beings among themselves, he saw a powerful hand extend over everything that exists, the sanctuary of nature was open to his understanding.”

“The course of the Heavens, the magnificence of the stars, the adornment of the earth, the succession of Beings, the relations of conformity and utility that he remarked among them, the mystery of physical organization, that of thought, in a word, the action of the entire machine, all became possible for him to conceive as the work of a powerful Being.”
The philosopher has had a revelation of the order, and the succession of changes, that is referred to in the *Second Discourse*. This is the order, the Great Chain of Being, that unites all things in nature in their immediacy. Natural man is described in the *Second Discourse* as one who is immersed in this natural world: “the spectacle of nature becomes a matter of indifference to [natural man] . . . It is always the same order, always the same succession of changes.” (SD 46). Man here, like the animals, is embedded in the Great Chain of Being as opposed to being divided from it.

This same “spectacle of nature” is professed by the Savoyard Vicar in *Emile* and it is the foundation of the Vicar’s “natural religion” (Emile, 295). The Vicar claims that “impenetrable mysteries surround us on all sides . . .Nevertheless we want to penetrate everything, to know everything . . .[But] we are a small part of a great whole whose limits escape us” (Emile, 265). The Vicar senses that there “is an order to the world, although I do not know its end”: an article of his faith is that the world is intelligently ordered, for “to act, to compare, and to choose are operations of an active and thinking being. Therefore this

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52 Ibid, 167.
53 Ibid, 168.
54 I will address the role of the Vicar in Rousseau’s work, and his association with Rousseau himself, below.
being exists. ‘Where do you see him existing?’ you are going to say to me. Not only in the heavens which turn, not only in the star which gives us light, not only in myself, but in the ewe which grazes, in the bird which flies, in the stone which falls, in the leaf carried by the wind” (Emile, 275). This Being, he continues, which is active in itself, “which moves the universe and orders all things, I call God. I join to this name the ideas of intelligence, power and will, which I have brought together, and that of goodness” (Emile, 277). Goodness, he claims, is “the love of order which produces order” (Emile, 282). “Man,” the Vicar proclaims, “seek the author of evil no longer: it is yourself. No evil exists other than that which you do or suffer, and both come to you from yourself. . . Take away our fatal progress, take away our errors and our vices, take away the work of man, and everything is good” (Emile, 282). Here Rousseau’s revised doctrine of original sin reappears. The Vicar’s proclamation is as much as to say ‘take away man, and all is good.’ It is nature that is good; man is corrupt. It is nature that is whole; and man that is divided—from it, and from himself.

What good, then, is “natural goodness” to man? Where are we to find this “lack of perversity in the human heart”? The narrative of the Second Discourse is one that presents natural goodness lying only with the natural man who, as we saw in the previous chapter, is in essence an animal. This image of our nature is presented by Rousseau as one in which we are naturally good (tranquil and free) insofar as we do not exhibit any of the qualities of being human. We lack the perfectibility that defines our nature when we are unproblematically embedded in the natural state. With these accounts of the Chain of Being considered in tandem with the account of the Second Discourse, one possible reading would be to accord to Rousseau the position that was assigned to him by many of his critics: that
returning to nature, and becoming naturally good, is becoming-animal. The Vicar does indeed proclaim in *Emile*: “the animals are happy; their king alone is miserable” (Emile, 278).

Natural goodness for Rousseau is, however, not a lack of perversity in the human heart in a simply originating sense: it is an origin story that is also (or primarily) a purpose. As Richard Velkley claims, natural man—“the image of primitive human self-unity”, the “original man [who] was truly whole” —is “the indelible image of the human as we would wish it to be: perfectly equal to itself, undisturbed by unnecessary desires, undivided and whole.” It is an image of man who is part of this Great Chain of Being; who is unfrenzied, self-sufficient, tranquil, and unplagued by doubts about his place in the world, his errors, and his death. It is an image of goodness toward which we corrupt and divided human beings can strive. Human beings are distinguished in their capacity to “have a view of the whole” if they so desire: “what being here on earth besides man is able to observe all the others, to measure, to calculate, and foresee their movements and their effects . . . Show me another animal on earth who knows how to make use of fire, and who knows how to wonder at the sun. What! I can observe and the beings and their relations, I can sense what order, beauty, and virtue are, I can contemplate the universe and raise myself up to the hand which governs it, *I can love the good and do it*, and I would compare myself to the brutes? Abject soul, it is your gloomy philosophy which makes you similar to them. Or, rather, you want to debase yourself’ (Emile, 278). It is, thus, our all-too-human nature of wondering at the marvels of

55 These critics were discussed in Chapter 1, and will be discussed again in the Conclusion. ‘Becoming-animal’ is a phrase that is most often attributed to Deleuze and Guattari, and I have no doubt that they would stop their analysis here to attribute this position to Rousseau. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Milles Plateaux [A Thousand Plateaus]* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1980).
56 Velkley, “The Measure of the Possible,” 224-225.
57 We ought to be reminded here again of the ‘uprightness’ of man, who has a “mind for marvels.”
nature, of seeing ourselves as detached from it, of both being in and perceiving order, that allows us to correct the corruptions that define our own humanity. We are not beasts, because we can orient ourselves to the good. Our return to nature is, thus, not becoming-animal, but instead requires that we use our humanity to its utmost degree: we must harness our perfectibility to save ourselves in the image of what we long to be.

We are here still in Augustine’s world. God, Augustine writes, “knew what good he would draw from human beings” when he knew they would sin. So too does nature provide the means for our own natural goodness, despite having cursed us with the faculties that divide us from the unified whole that otherwise characterizes all of her creations. Our human nature is what allows us to strive for natural goodness because we can change and determine our own political and moral conditions. Our perfectibility must be harnessed toward our redemption.

As such, the image of natural goodness is an article of faith. Jason Neidleman’s language is that of communion: natural goodness is, or would be, a kind of communion with nature: “an unconscious harmony between oneself and nature’s order.” Patrick Riley writes that Rousseau’s claim is that “men [I would add: qua men, or human beings qua human beings] do not naturally or originally think of themselves as parts of a greater whole; they must therefore be brought to this non-natural belief. They must acquire a kind of faith.” Rousseau’s desire for, in Arthur Melzer’s words, “the restoration of this-worldly wholeness,” is one that perhaps required him to present these images of wholeness in

58 Neidleman, Ethics of Truth, 17.
59 Ibid, 12.
allegories and through Vicars. Rousseau’s own faith when he is professing the Great Chain of Being, and, relatedly, the natural goodness of man, could be insincere; he could here be providing us with the very images he thinks that human beings most need. As I concluded the previous chapter, Rousseau himself confessed that he preferred to bet on hope, so to speak, as the state of doubt was too violent a state for his soul. This is confession that we see re-appear in the voice of the Savoyard Vicar: “I have never led a life so constantly disagreeable as during those times of perplexity and anxiety, when I ceaselessly wandered from doubt to doubt and brought back from my long meditations only uncertainty . . . Doubt about the things it is important for us to know is too violent a state for the human mind” (Emile, 268). Rousseau too is only human: divided and in doubt. It is possible that he needed these professions as much as his readers.

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62 In multiple places, Rousseau asserts that the Savoyard Vicar’s teaching is his own: he writes in his Letter to Moulou, “the profession of faith of the Savoyard Vicar is mine,” and in the Reveries Rousseau claims that the Profession is “approximately” what he believes (sources from Neidleman, Ethics of Truth, 205). He also called the Profession the “best and most useful” writing of the century in his Letter to Beaumont. I believe I have demonstrated that there is a remarkable consistency across Rousseau’s corpus that would allow us to see the Profession as part of Rousseau’s overall ‘system’, especially when we consider the influence of Buffon. For those who doubt this association, see: Peter Emberley, “Rousseau Versus the Savoyard Vicar,” Interpretation 14 (2986): 299-329; Arthur Melzer, “The Origin of the Counter-Enlightenment: Rousseau and the New Religion of Sincerity,” The American Political Science Review 90.2 (1996): 344-360. Jeffrey Macy, “‘God Helps Those Who Help Themselves’: New Light on the Theological-Political Teaching in Rousseau’s Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar,” Polity 24.2 (1992): 615-32. Macy’s discussion is one of two footnotes. Like myself, Ronald Beiner, questions the validity of Macy’s claim that Rousseau “uses his footnotes” in this instance “to intimate his own skepticism about the central tenets of the Vicar’s natural religion.” (28). Macy’s argument rests on Rousseau’s (the Vicar’s) invocation of Scripture. While it is true that Rousseau is playing with scripture, I will here also side with Beiner in asserting that “rejection of orthodox Christianity does not entail rejection of Christianity per se, and (in the case of Rousseau) rejection of Christianity does not entail rejection of religion per se.” (211, nt 28) This is, in fact, the entire message of the Vicar’s “natural religion.” Beiner also writes: “Interpreters who question whether the Vicar’s arguments really reflect Rousseau’s own views should consult the Letter to Franquières . . . which makes clear beyond question that the Vicar’s theology is also Rousseau’s theology” (207).

Human nature and *Emile*: the “sad privilege of leading [ourselves] astray”*64*

To understand Rousseau, we must understand human nature as much as we must understand “natural goodness.” The faith in natural goodness is matched with the potentialities of the distinctively human condition. If, indeed, human nature is to be, as Neidleman writes, “the source of salvation, the thing toward which we must turn in order to escape our sinful tendencies,” it is important to unpack what this nature of the human being *is*. In the previous chapter I discussed the fact that Rousseau inherited the idea of the ‘original prototype’ from the natural scientist, Buffon. Buffon claims that for every species there is an ‘original prototype’: an origin upon which every individual instantiation follows, degenerating from the perfection of the original. While at first it seems that Rousseau borrows this idea of the ‘original prototype’ from Buffon only to elaborate upon the idea of “natural man,” and thus develop the idea of natural goodness, I outlined that in fact the “undivided” prototype (upon which I have focused for much of this chapter) is definitively un-human. The *true* prototype of the human being, for both Buffon and Rousseau, is what Buffon calls *Homo Duplex*.

The fundamental distinction of man from the rest of the animal kingdom for Buffon—that which separates him from the rest of Nature by infinite degrees—is that between a sentiment of existence (belonging to both man and animal) and a consciousness of one’s own existence (belonging only to man). Man is, according to Buffon, *Homo Duplex*, an interior existence divided in two between sensory feeling (“which shines only in a tempest of obscurity” and consists of sensory impressions and passions) and “the spiritual principle.” Human beings for Rousseau are also *Homo Duplex*: split between the sentiment of present

*64* Emile, 290. See also Moral Letters, in Collected Writings, xii, 197 in which this phrase (and the passage from which it is drawn in the *Emile*) also appears.
existence, and the consciousness of existence. Man is by nature divided for Rousseau. Our hybridity and our detachment from the natural order makes it so that we are the only creatures capable of exercising our perfectibility to the ends of changing our conditions. His duality is his greatest enemy and, possibly, his regenerative redemption.

Man considered as **Homo Duplex** accords with what I have outlined here insofar as Rousseau appropriates the structure of original sin to explain the corruption, relationality, and pridefulness that marks the distinctively human condition. The first stirrings of pride were, in the hypothetical narrative of the *Second Discourse*, those that occurred when we stepped outside of, and individuated, ourselves in relation to the rest of nature through comparison, and took pride in our superiority. This was one small step for a man, but one giant fall for mankind. It was the seed of *amour-propre*, or “egocentrism”: “a sentiment that is relative, artificial, and born in society, which moves each individual to value himself more than anyone else, which inspires in men all the evils they cause one another” (SD 108 nt 15). The human being understood properly is thus constitutively marked by his *amour-propre*, and distinguished by his relations with others: his **social** and his **moral** relations. Man considered “from a metaphysical and moral point of view” is the man exhibiting perfectibility; who can, unlike animals, deviate from the rules prescribed to him by nature (SD 44). Rousseau later claims, in addition, that the perfectibility that man receives from nature exists in concert (in potentiality) with “social virtues” (SD 59). Rousseau’s adoption of the structure of original sin also leads him to claim that man is by nature social when we consider him as a human being qua human being.65

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65 In this argument we find conformity, as opposed to disparity, in the work of Rousseau and Montesquieu, who claims in *The Spirit of the Laws* that man is “made for living in society.” Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. and ed. Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller, and Harold Samuel Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), I.1, 5. *Amour-propre* serves as the foundation of much of Montesquieu’s philosophy; in
Because Rousseau writes that “nature made man happy and good but society depraves him and makes him miserable,” and presents natural man in the Second Discourse as living in tranquility, solitude, and independence, the assertion that society depraves us is typically read as one that is a wholesale condemnation of the relational life. It is when we begin to live outside of ourselves in seeing ourselves only through others that we are seen to lose this natural tranquility. The human tendency to compare oneself to others is also the source of Rousseau’s criticism of bourgeois society in the First Discourse, and his rebuke against the agitated and sweaty citizen of the end of the Second Discourse.

But we are, nevertheless, as humans tied to the social condition. As much as our perfectibility defines our ‘original sin,’ our relation to others, and our sociality, defines our distinction as human beings. Like perfectibility, sociability has the potential to manifest in more and less corrupting forms. The first stirrings of pride (SD 61) give rise to “mutual commitments.” (SD 62). The first revolution of human existence, Rousseau claims, was the

development of the “distinction among families,” from which villages, or “bands” arose (SD 63-64). From here, “relationships and bonds are tightened,” and perceptions of natural inequalities (those who are stronger, more handsome, or better dancers) become hardened (SD 64). This social condition, Rousseau writes, “this period of the development of human faculties, maintaining a middle position between the indolence of our primitive state and the petulant activity of our egocentrism [amour-propre], must have been the happiest and most durable epoch. The more one reflects on it, the more one finds that this state was the least subject to upheavals and the best for man.” (SD 65). Here, human beings “lived as free, healthy, good, and happy, as they could in accordance with their nature” (SD 65, my emphasis).

The remainder of the Second Discourse tracks the process by which this “Golden Age” became subject to institutionalized inequalities and to political organization. The emergence of the ‘first’ social contract, Rousseau writes, made men the cause of their own subjection: “they all ran to chain themselves, in the belief that they secured their liberty, for although they had enough sense to realize the advantages of a political establishment, they did not have enough experience to foresee its dangers” (SD 70). “If we follow the progress of inequality,” Rousseau writes, “we will find that the first stage was the establishment of the law, and of the right of property, the second stage was the institution of the magistracy, and the third and final stage was the transformation of legitimate power into arbitrary power” (SD 76-77). Society, thus, in the modern world, “no longer offers to the eyes of the wise man anything but an assemblage of artificial men” (SD 80).
The Golden Age of human social life serves an important function in Rousseau’s work. It is society without artifice; a sociality without politics. It is not the natural man of the pure state of nature (that is, the man of natural goodness), but is instead the state of nature proper to the human being. Like perfectibility, however—that faculty that distinguishes us from the rest of nature—the social condition is one that is subject to both virtue and vice. Its inevitable corruption in the Second Discourse does not mean that it cannot be reconstituted. Human beings are, as Rousseau writes in Emile, subject to “the sad privilege of leading themselves astray,” but this does not mean that we are barred from the privilege of leading ourselves toward the perfection of those same conditions and institutions. Indeed, Rousseau’s description of the happiest epoch contains in itself both the positive and negative aspects and results of the human condition:

Here we find all our faculties developed, memory and imagination in play, egocentrism [amour-propre] looking out for its interests, reason rendered active, and the mind having nearly reached the limit of which it is capable. We find here

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67 My reading of the Golden Age as part of a human condition that is distinct from the rest of the natural state is atypical. Roger D. Masters relates the two, for example, in claiming that Rousseau’s theory of human nature is divided into three stages, the first of which is “the natural goodness of the pure state of nature and its residue in the savage societies of North America”: Roger D. Masters, “Rousseau and the Rediscovery of Human Nature,” in The Legacy of Rousseau, ed. Clifford Orwin and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 115. He bases this analysis on Rousseau’s claim that “in our primitive state, in the genuine state of Nature, amour-propre does not exist” (SD note 12). I agree with Rousseau’s claim, but disagree with Masters that this amour-propre-less state can be attributed to the ‘primitive communities.’ Rousseau is, on my view, very clear that pride is born of the first moment that the human being sees himself as distinct from the animal kingdom, and thus gains a sense of comparative superiority. In his Enlightenment Against Empire, Sankar Muthu similarly divides Rousseau’s analysis into three parts, distinguishing between the primordial (which he too equates with a state of animalism) and the primitive middle stage. Muthu claims that Rousseau “conflates the boundary between New World humans and animals. . . [and thus] Rousseau manages to humanize certain animals and animalize certain humans”: Sankar Muthu, Enlightenment Against Empire (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 42-43. Here too I disagree. Rousseau sees the Golden Age as distinctively human; the pure natural state as animalistic. While he certainly idealizes primitive communities in the Second Discourse in ways that could contribute to a romanticized primitivism, he does not call them animal. Muthu’s analysis in this portion of his book is a comparison with Diderot’s conception of humanity, which Muthu claims is more humanizing because it allows communities to develop of their own accord without the invocation of a kind of romanticized (and thus degenerate, or less civilized) primitivism. I believe Rousseau does the same. Our civilization, for Rousseau, is the degenerate one. But we cannot go back to the Golden Age. In Book I, Chapter ii of the Geneva Manuscript, Rousseau writes: “Gone is the cherished ‘age of gold’” . . . “What then must be done to bring it back to life? A single, but impossible thing: to love it.’ Cited in Kelly, “A General Overview,” 31. More will be said about what it means to love the Golden Age in the next chapter (note 46).
all the natural qualities put into action, the rank and fate of each man established not only on the basis of the quantity of goods and the power to serve or harm, but also on the basis of mind, beauty, strength, or skill, on the basis of merit or talents. And since these qualities were the only ones that could attract consideration, he was soon forced to have them or affect them. Being something and appearing to be something became two completely different things; and from this distinction there arose grand ostentation, deceptive cunning, and all the vices that follow in their wake (SD 67).

Human comparison, relation, and *amour-propre* can manifest in positive ways. The condition of living in relation to others, being outside of oneself, is proper to the human being, though it is subject to highly corrupt and corrupting forms. Our dividedness is proper to us as human beings, and thus the social condition, too, belongs to the distinctively human life.

In this analysis, we once again find a surprising conformity with Rousseau’s contemporaries, Bonnet and Buffon. As was discussed in the previous chapter, Bonnet wrote to Rousseau under the pseudonym, Philopolis. I previously emphasized the portions of Bonnet’s criticism that Rousseau ignored in his response; that is, Rousseau’s evasion of the

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69 It is for this reason (along the same argumentative lines) that Fred H. Willhoite Jr. has argued that Rousseau’s “religion is essentially social rather than theological, man [is] *born into social sin* yet capable of salvation only through society,” “Rousseau’s Political Religion,” 501. Gourevitch finds this interpretation ridiculous. He cites another interpreter, Pierre-Maurice Masson (*La Religion de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*) who “has gone so far as to assert that Rousseau’s teaching substitutes social for original sin . . . It is not at all clear what ‘social sin’ might mean, especially since ‘sin’ has no place in Rousseau’s teaching.” “Rousseau on Providence,” 587. The argument that human nature qua human nature is social also places Rousseau in line with another of his interlocutors, Shaftesbury, who argues that human beings are naturally social. Ronald Beiner also draws a link between Shaftesbury’s natural theology and Rousseau’s in “Shaftesbury’s Characteristics and the Problem of Priestcraft,” draft; and I am grateful to Ronnie for pointing me toward the interaction of Rousseau and Shaftesbury, and toward Rousseau’s reference to Shaftesbury as one of the major philosophical thinkers of the tradition, in *Collected Writings* v 12, 183.
question of whether or not man in the state of nature in fact possesses perfectibility. In his letter, however, Bonnet also challenges Rousseau on the natural sociability of man. Rousseau quotes Bonnet in his response: “the state of society, you tell me, results immediately from men’s faculties, and hence from his nature. To wish man not to become sociable would, therefore, be to wish that he not be a man, and to criticize society is to attack God’s work.”

Rousseau’s response is yet another discourse on the relationship between providence and original sin, which begins with his assertion that he fundamentally agrees with Bonnet: “since you mean to attack me in terms of my own system, please do not forget that in my view society is as natural to mankind as decrepitude is to the individual, and that Peoples need arts, Laws and Governments, as old men need crutches.” As in his Letter to Beaumont, Rousseau here claims that he is explaining the human condition, original sin, and providence, better than the theologians and, indeed, Bonnet. While it is man’s nature to be social, Rousseau claims, he does not, as others do, therefore take the social conditions as they exist to be what they of necessity ought to be. Men have it “in their power” to change their conditions, and thus he claims he is merely showing men “the miseries of a condition which they take to be the perfection of the species.” “It was good for the whole that we be civilized since that is what we are, but it would certainly have been better for us if we were not so.”

Rousseau’s rebuttal to Bonnet in turn mischaracterizes the conformity that exists between their systems, both of which rely on the natural capacity human beings have to change the conditions of their existence: you [Bonnet] claim that “simply because a thing exists it is not

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71 Ibid, 224.
permissible to wish that it exist differently.” As we have seen, this could not be further from the case for Bonnet.

Buffon too speaks of “a philosopher’s” doctrine of natural man in the “Nomenclature of Apes” found in Volume XIV of his *Histoire Naturelle*. This philosopher (assumed to be Rousseau) misrepresents the natural condition as independent as opposed to social. But the affinity with Rousseau’s system is striking: Buffon claims that “all actions that can be called ‘human’ are relative to society.” Indeed, Buffon writes, “a pure state of nature, in which man is supposed neither to think or to speak, is imaginary, and never had an existence.” The sociality about which Buffon speaks in this “Nomenclature” is one of education. He begins by outlining his theory of the organic particles that form all things in the natural world, which in turn forms a unity of living things. This Chain of Being is unified by “features [that] are common to all organized substances. They are eternal and divine; and instead of being effaced by time, it only renews [them]. . . If, from this grand picture of resemblances exhibited in animated nature, as constituting one family, we pass to that of differences,” we shall find that “mind, reflection, and language” are the endowments peculiar to man. While there is a form of education in nature, Buffon claims, it is one that “ceases the moment the aid of the parents becomes unnecessary.” The education of animals is one that considers “animals separate from their parents as soon as they can provide for

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73 Ibid, 226.
74 Buffon, HN Sm VIII [XIV], 72. All citations to Buffon’s *Histoire naturelle* are to *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière, avec la description du cabinet du Roy* (Paris De L’Imprimerie Royale). A list of volumes and publication dates has been appended to the thesis. Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own. Hereafter (HN Volume, page number). I will occasionally use translations: William Smellie: William Smellie, *Natural History, General and Particular* (London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1781), and J.S. Barr, *Barr’s Buffon: Buffon’s Natural History*, 10 volumes (London: H. D. Seymonds, 1797). These will appear (respectively) in the form (HN Sm Volume Number, Page), and (HN B Volume Number, Page). Because Smellie and Barr’s volume numbering sometimes differs from Buffon’s, when I employ these translations I have placed the original French volume number in brackets following the cited (translated) volume number.
75 HN Sm VIII [XIV], 70.
76 HN Sm VIII [XIV], 63-64.
themselves.” Buffon claims, exactly as does Rousseau, that the family is the birth of society, that intelligence and language come together with this origin, and that this founds the improvement of the human condition “and the progress of society. As soon as society begins to be formed, the education of the infant is no longer individual, since the parents communicate to it not only what they derive from Nature, but likewise what they have received from their progenitors, and from the society to which they belong.” Rousseau could not have said it better himself. Indeed, he did say it himself in the Emile.

Emile, or On Education is, Rousseau writes, about “the first of all useful things, the art of forming men” (Emile, 33). Rousseau claims to be giving an account of the “education of nature” (Emile, 41). The order of our institutions has caused our depravity; society teaches man “everything, except to know himself” (Emile, 48). Rousseau presents us with an “imaginary pupil” (Emile, 50) who will be subject to a “natural education [which] ought to make a man fit for all human conditions” (Emile, 52). He is, thus, to be educated without the social institutions that define modern education. Reinvoking his conception of natural goodness, Rousseau begins Emile: “everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man” (Emile, 38). As Buffon will later echo in the Histoire Naturelle, Rousseau claims that the human species is relational by nature: as a

77 HN Sm VIII [XIV]. 68. We ought here to be reminded of Rousseau’s Second Discourse: “In the primitive state . . . once [children] had the strength to look for their food, they did not hesitate to leave the mother.” (SD 48).

78 HN Sm VIII [XIV], 71.

79 In what follows I will be explicating and discussing as much of Emile as is necessary for my argument, but I will not be focusing too seriously on the content of Rousseau’s elaborate discussions of psychology. Without doubt, Rousseau was influenced by a number of philosophers in building this account. As I mentioned in the third chapter, Charles Bonnet’s Essai de Psychologie was an influence on Rousseau’s invocation of the fibres that are reconstituted through education. The two other primary influences are Condillac’s Traité des Sensations and Locke’s Essay Concerning Human Understanding. For the relationship between Rousseau and Condillac, see especially Victor Goldschmidt, Anthropologie et Politique: les principes du système de Rousseau (Paris: Vrin, 1974); and Lee MacLean, The Free Animal. For Rousseau and Locke see: Jonathan Marks, “Rousseau’s Critique of Locke’s Education for Liberty,” Journal of Politics (2012); Peter D. Jimack, La gênes de la redaction de l’Émile de J.J. Rousseau, in Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century 13 (Geneva: Institut et Musée Voltaire); Robert Wokler, Rousseau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
species we are social and thus receive knowledge, morality, and education from our progenitors. Rousseau wishes to strip away all of these receptions, and begin an education that attempts, as much as possible, to prevent the degeneracy to which we are so inclined.

He writes that the system of the book is according to the “march of nature” (Emile, 34). What Rousseau provides is the education of one pupil throughout the march of nature of his life: the inevitable journey that we all face in our birth, growth, and our death. This requires that we address education, for we are, Rousseau claims, “born weak, we need strength; we are born totally unprovided, we need aid; we are born stupid, we need judgment. Everything we do not have at our birth and which we need when we are grown up is given us by education” (Emile, 38). *Emile* takes the fact of sociability, of human relationality, as a given: beginning in the family, and moving toward society proper. It also takes the dividedness of human nature as a founding principle: we are divided between our sensations, and the “consciousness of our sensations” (Emile, 39), between our physical existence, and our moral one. Book One of Emile considers “the child in the child,” in which, Rousseau writes, he wishes to give his pupil the life of the animals: “I will be told that animals, living in a way that conforms more to nature, ought to be subject to fewer ills than we are. Well, their way of life is precisely the one I want to give to my pupil” (Emile, 55). In this state, Rousseau claims, the child does not know or sense its own existence. It is unproblematically embedded in nature. Rousseau concludes the first book: *vivit, et est vitae nescius ipse suae* [he lives and is unconscious of his own life] (Emile, 74). But in the second book, the pupil “gains consciousness of himself. Memory extends the sentiment of identity to all the moments of his existence; he becomes truly one, the same, and consequently already capable
of happiness or unhappiness. It is important, therefore, to begin to consider him as a moral being” (Emile, 78).

The pupil has been transformed from a physical to a moral existence, and from pure unmediated and undivided sentiment, to a consciousness of his division from others. He has become moral when he has been divided from physical immediacy. It is, Rousseau writes, “nature, which does everything for the best, which constituted him in the beginning. It gives him with immediacy only the desires necessary to his preservation and the faculties sufficient to satisfy them . . . Only in this original state are power and desire in equilibrium and man is not unhappy” (Emile, 80). The state of our physical being, the state of the animals, is a condition of happiness: “all the animals have exactly the faculties necessary to preserve themselves” (Emile, 81), it is only man—metaphysical or moral man—who lives outside of himself. But this is what makes him a man, and not a beast: “we were made to be men” (Emile, 85). Rousseau begins to speak of what is “natural to man” as opposed to nature (Emile, 87): if man were not sociable, “he would be a monster among his kind” (Emile, 87).

While the “first movements of nature” are good, “man’s first natural movements are to . . . measure himself against everything surrounding him” (Emile, 125). While the story of Emile is one in which these comparative relations are meant to be redirected away from other men in his solitary education, and toward natural objects (Emile, 144), it is nevertheless the case that the human being’s nature is comparative. It is his amour-propre—“the first and most natural of the passions” (Emile, 208)—and individuation that defines him. While Emile is raised solitary, he is raised “alone in human society” (my emphasis, Emile, 208). He is raised to be a man, and thus raised to be social, without the inheritance of all of society’s errors.

Remember, Rousseau writes, “that as soon as amour-propre has developed, the relative I is

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80 See also Montesquieu, The Spirit of the Laws, I.1, 5, and supranote 65.
constantly in play” (Emile, 243). Thus, to understand the human being—the moral and individuated man—one must know that it is in his nature to be social, and to think socially: “The study suitable for man is that of his relations. So long as he knows himself only in his physical being, he ought to study himself in his relations with things. This is the job of his childhood. When he begins to sense his moral being, he ought to study himself in his relations with men. This is the job of his whole life” (Emile, 214).

While it is the case the Buffon resonates with Rousseau in the work that came after Emile, it is also the case that Emile is indebted to Buffon’s earlier volumes of the Histoire. In Emile, Rousseau marks the true end of childhood at the end of 15 years (Emile, 208), the same division as that drawn by Buffon between our physical and moral existence. After “the first 15 years of our existence . . . the train of our ideas, and even the nature of our existence, suffer a total change. We do not begin to live, in a moral sense, until after we have arranged our thoughts, to direct them toward futurity.”81 The Rousseauian resonances continue. In the fourth volume of his Histoire Naturelle (published 1753, nine years before Emile, and two before the publication of Second Discourse), Buffon explains the identity of man as Homo Duplex: a division between the physical, which involves the sentiment of present existence, and the moral, which is the consciousness of existence. Buffon also calls these the material principle and the spiritual principle.82 To explicate the difference between the two, Buffon provides the examples of both animals and children: “the happiness of man consists in the unity of his internal structure: during infancy, he is happy, because the material principle reigns alone.” The child, too, if “left entirely to himself” would be completely happy. Children, Buffon claims, are like beasts, “whose nature is simple and purely material, [they]

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81 HN Sm II, 516-517.
82 See also the comparison of Rousseau and Buffon on these categories in the preceding chapter.
feel no internal conflicts . . . If we were deprived of understanding, of memory, of genius, and
of every faculty of the soul, nothing would remain but the material part, which makes us
animal.”

Buffon continues (though it is almost as if it comes directly from *Emile*): “the
material principle has absolute sway during infancy, and would continue to reign alone
through life, if the spiritual principle were not unfolded, and put into motion by education.”
The physical principle, or the sentiment of present existence, is held in common by man and
animal. It is the “gift of nature” to all living things. Animals, according to Buffon, have a
more exquisite sentiment of present existence because they “want the faculty of comparing”
their sensations, “or of forming ideas.” These latter capacities are distinct to the human
being, and are all generated of the consciousness of existence; our desire to know that brings
with it the ability “to doubt, to deliberate, to compare.” There is, thus, Buffon writes, a
great “difficulty of reconciling man to himself” which “originates from his being composed
of two opposite principles.” He is, fundamentally, *Homo Duplex*.

The thing, for Buffon, that redeems this foundational division of the human condition,
is the understanding of our place in Nature. This was discussed extensively in the preceding
chapters, but a brief reminder here is necessary to facilitate a comparison with *Emile*. Buffon
writes of his method of discovery: “after having successfully ordered the different objects
which compose the Universe, and having put himself at the head of all created beings, he
[man] will see with astonishment that one can descend by almost imperceptible degrees from

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83 HN Sm III[IV], 270-271. And also: “Let us view a child when left at full liberty, and removed from the
observation of his guide. We may judge of what passes within him from his external actions. He neither thinks
nor reflects. He follows indifferently every path to pleasure. He obeys all the impressions of external objects.
He acts without reason. Like the young animals, he amuses himself by running and bodily exercise (HN Sm III
[IV], 265).
84 HN Sm III [IV], 265.
85 HN Sm III [IV], 294.
86 HN Sm III [IV], 270.
the most perfect creature to the most formless matter, from the animal best organized to the
to the most crude material; [and] he will recognize that these imperceptible nuances are the
great work of Nature."87 “The first sensation that results is astonishment mixed with
admiration, and the first reflection that follows is humility turned back on ourselves.”88 The
Great Chain of Being, placed by the “Supreme Being,” is known to man by a “divine light.”
It is only an “immortal power” that knows the infinite degrees of nature, and knows all
moments in time; but it is also “by this power that man knows the present, judges the past,
and foresees the future.”89 It is man’s ability and power to reflect on himself that allows him
to change his conditions in foreseeing the effects of his social institutions, and his education.
The “spiritual principle” that is unique to man, Buffon writes, is “dependent on education”:
for while the “excellence of the senses is a gift of nature, art and habit may bestow on them a
greater degree of perfection.”90 Moral life, for Buffon, is our natural inheritance, our distinct
power, and the means by which we can live well in society91: “man commands the universe
solely because he has learned to govern himself.”92

The Profession of Faith of The Savoyard Vicar is spoken almost as if taken directly
from Buffon’s Histoire. “The generation of living and organized bodies is by itself an abyss
for the human mind. The insurmountable barrier that nature set between the various species,
so that they would not be confounded, shows its intentions with utmost clarity” (Emile, 276).
From his “doubts”, the Vicar presents his “natural religion,” the idea of divinity, as the
“spectacle of nature” (Emile, 295).93 He claims that he had for a long time been carried away

87 HN I, 12-13.
88 HN I, 5.
89 HN Sm III [IV], 300.
90 HN IV, 69, 32.
91 Buffon very specifically distinguishes society as part of man’s moral life (HN Sm III [IV], 288-289).
92 HN Sm III [IV], 288.
93 We must be reminded here too of Rousseau’s Allegory.
by a bad education, “unable to raise [his] feeble conceptions up to the great Being” (Emile, 296). The Vicar tells us that he had to first turn his glance upon himself. He finds a man, divided. We are divided between our “sentiment of existence” (Emile, 270), and the ‘I’ that compares and judges. The Vicar determines that he is not simply a “sensitive being,” but “an active and intelligent being” (Emile, 272). “In meditating on the nature of man, I believed I discovered two distinct principles; one of which raised him to the study of eternal truths, to the love of justice and moral beauty, and to the regions of the intellectual world whose contemplation is the wise man’s delight; while the other took him basely into himself, subjected him to the empire of the senses . . . In sensing myself carried away and caught up in the combat of these two contrary motions, I said to myself, ‘No, man is not one’” (Emile, 278). While this nature of man as divided (as Buffon would put it, Homo Duplex) raises us above the beasts, the division between sentiment and the comparative (or reasoning) faculty brings about error: “it is the abuse of our faculties which makes us unhappy and wicked. Our sorrows, our cares and our suffering come to us from ourselves” (Emile, 281). It is not, therefore, the case that the ‘higher’ faculty, the one which desires justice and the good, is correct. We in fact use this higher faculty—of comparing and reasoning—only to arrive at profound error and wickedness. Because of his duality, man “only lives halfway” during his life (Emile, 283).

The solution to our interior dividedness is only via our moral life: “it is from the moral system formed by [a] double relation of oneself and to one’s fellows that the impulse of conscience is born” (Emile, 290). Our conscience, what the Vicar will call the sentiment of the good, is dependent on the relational ‘I’: the ‘I’ that exists only because it is divided and insofar as it is divided (individuated) from others. The comparative creature, the human

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94 See the discussion of the Savoyard Vicar above.
being, can achieve his salvation only because of his divided nature: “Conscience, Conscience! Divine instinct, immortal and celestial voice, certain guide of a being that is ignorant and limited but intelligent and free. . . it is you who make the excellence of his nature and the morality of his actions. Without you, I sense nothing in me that raises me above the beasts, other than the sad privilege of leading myself astray from error to error with the aid of an understanding without rule and a reason without principle” (Emile, 290). Without conscience, we are perfectibility and division run amuck. With conscience we are reason with a principle.

That principle is the natural good. It is the revelation of the Great Chain of Being, the confidence in knowing order, in feeling a unity as opposed to feeling divided from oneself. How does one come to such a conscience? While the Vicar repeatedly equates it with an “innate feeling,” he nevertheless claims: “consciences which are agitated, uncertain, almost extinguished, and in the condition in which I have seen yours, need to be reinforced and awakened; and in order to put them back on the foundation of eternal truths, it is necessary to complete the job of ripping out the shaky pillars to which they think they are still attached” (Emile, 310). Conscience requires education. Though conscience is unique to man, it is [and I am here going to employ Buffon’s Histoire Naturelle] “dependent on education”: for while the “excellence of the senses is a gift of nature, art and habit may bestow on them a greater degree of perfection.”\textsuperscript{95} This capacity to perfect and improve the senses is man’s spiritual principle: unique to him, and the cause of his division from nature. It makes him distinct from the beast, yet can also lead him astray. Moral life, as for Buffon, is our distinctive human nature. It is our division that defines us, and thus we must use our division to our advantage.

\textsuperscript{95} Buffon, HN IV 69, 32.
Emile (the text) is thus an account of human nature. The story of the education of Emile is the story of the human species as a whole. It mirrors the story of the Second Discourse, and the account of the human being in Buffon’s Histoire Naturelle. Emile, however, traces one individual from his birth, so that we can see the division of man’s physical from his moral existence. We can see the birth of the “division” of the human being from nature in the development of a particular self-consciousness and the ‘I.’ We can see the stirrings of pride, the moments of reflection. We can, thus, also see what would make “good social institutions”: those that know how to transport “the I into the common unity, with the result that each individual believes himself no longer one but a part of the unity and no longer feels except within the whole” (Emile, 40). Rousseau calls this “denaturing” (Emile, 40) man precisely because human nature proper is one of division. Human nature is one that sees itself as a particular ‘I’, as a relational being. “Natural man,” on the other hand, “is entirely for himself. He is numerical unity, the absolute whole which is relative only to itself or its kind” (Emile, 39). We do not, in fact, see natural man in Emile. What we see is human nature itself: the story of one ‘I’ that tells the story of the species.

The fall of man is replicated in each individual. Proper education can soften the blow, but cannot prevent it. It is not that the education of Emile eradicates his sociability, his individuation, and his relationality. These are inevitable and constitutive parts of human nature, and of being human. What this education can do is orient the ‘I’ toward the good, preventing the corrupt forms of the relations that make us human beings. This is possible only through our human nature, and not in spite of it. If we are to save ourselves from ourselves we must use what is distinctive to our nature. This is our relationality and our sociability. We must, thus, use what we have in our power: the family, society, and
education (which, as will be discussed in the concluding chapter, can take the form of a civil religion). We must harness our perfectibility to our advantage, as opposed to our corruption.

The only way to think through the splice between “nature” and “human nature” in Rousseau, is, as I have demonstrated, to cast it in terms of a modified original sin. We are simultaneous monsters and miracles of nature; aberrations that are detached from the natural order, and the natural wholeness that comes naturally to all other natural species. The Augustinian explanation of the human being’s relationship to divine providence provides a guideline for thinking through what this means for, and to, Rousseau. Our consciousness, our dividedness and particularity, is what gives rise to our comparative nature and our sociability. Homo Duplex is human nature. Human beings properly understood as human beings are social and particular. But human beings properly understood are also divided from a wholeness that the rest of nature possesses by necessity. A return to nature is thus, for Rousseau, an aspiration to eradicate our dividedness as much as possible. For salvation, the conditions of wholeness must be approximated through moral education and political life.

If we find ourselves in poor political and social conditions, we can remake them. We can be re-educated, and can refashion our institutions. It is human nature itself that allows us to perfect our conditions in the same manner that it allowed us first to create and corrupt them. If we find ourselves in political and social conditions in which we believe we have lost touch with what is good for ourselves, we need a standard of goodness toward which to strive. If we are corrupt, from what have we been corrupted? The answer we are given is Nature. The role natural goodness plays in Rousseau’s corpus is one that provides an aspiration and a prototype that can steer the ship of state away from corruption. Natural man, as undivided, whole, tranquil, and living in liberty, is this aspirational ideal. He is an
inhuman representative of what we wish we could be, and our human nature is the means to its potential realization. Sociality, morality, and intelligent thought are our distinction, and thus the distinctive sites of our attempts at tranquility, liberty, and wholeness. Politics, education, and philosophy are Rousseau’s three paths to redemption. It is in fact unparadoxically our distinction from nature that can allow us to return to it. Man is the agent of his own redemption because he has fallen from the order of nature. To constitute the conditions of his redemption, then, man must be in position to reconstitute himself.

As the next chapter will discuss, The Social Contract is Rousseau’s political answer to the problem of human nature. Here, as in Emile, there is call to turn toward the natural good, and to remake ourselves and our conditions. As Rousseau writes in the Second Discourse, the “study of original man, of his true needs and the fundamental principles of his duties, is also the only good means that can be used to remove those multitudes of difficulties which present themselves regarding the origin of moral inequality” (SD 36). Just as in the Second Discourse, this original man, presented to us in the Social Contract as the man of liberty and equality, has never existed. For Rousseau, the human condition has never been one in which men are truly free and equal. To correct this lack in the circumstances of our lives, and in the history of the institutionalization of inequalities, an image is required of what we would like to become. It is an image of a future perfection; a future that, for its fulfillment, requires the distinctive regenerative activity of men. This vision of the future associated Rousseau with the regenerative politics of the French Revolution. As François Furet writes, it is “by virtue of the project of regeneration that the Revolution belongs to Rousseau.”96

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Chapter 6
Regeneration, Revolution, and the New Man

_Not in depraved things, but in those well oriented according to nature, are we to consider what is natural._
-Aristotle, _Politics_ Book II

_**Emile** is a book about the forgotten art of “forming men” (Emile, 33).¹ The _Social Contract_ is the political equivalent to _Emile_. While the _Second Discourse_ accounts for us “what we have become left to ourselves,” given our comparative and social natures, the _Social Contract_ is about how we can see a means of “correcting our institutions and giving them an unshakeable foundation, [which will prevent] the disorders that must otherwise result from them” (SD, 36). There is typically an interpretive distinction drawn between _Emile_ and the _Social Contract_ which rests upon Rousseau’s claim in _Emile_ that “one must choose between making a man or a citizen, for one cannot make both at the same time” (Emile, 39). Jason Neidleman writes that this is the tension that has “served as a fulcrum for much of Rousseau scholarship.”² Neidleman names, for example, Victor Gourevitch, who claims that ‘man’ and ‘citizen’ are “fundamentally different ways of life”; Steven Kautz who distinguishes between the ‘private’ sentimental works (including _Emile_), and the ‘public’ and political works, such as the _Social Contract_, the division between which rests on the individual versus common

way of life; and Frank Manuel, who “distinguishes between the moi and the moi commun.”

I would certainly add to this list R.D. Miller, who grounds his work, *The Changing Face of Nature in Rousseau’s Political Writings*, in the distinction between the collective self and the pure soul. In these interpretations, the civic life is seen as inferior to the natural life. Politics is a kind of collective ‘substitute’ for a natural goodness that is available only to the natural individual, the soul of whom is exposed in *Emile*. While there is much more to be said about the influence that this dichotomy has had in interpretations of Rousseau, I will instead just direct the reader to Matthew Mendham’s “Gentle Savages and Fierce Citizens against Civilization: Unraveling Rousseau’s Paradoxes,” in which he catalogues the interpreters who fit this mold.

Neidleman places himself in a camp that seeks to move “beyond the solitary/citizen binary,” instead arguing that there are parallel lives in Rousseau’s corpus. We should here be reminded of the beginning of the previous chapter, in which Neidleman was cited, among others, to cast the *Second Discourse* as Rousseau’s description of man’s alienation from goodness, and Rousseau’s subsequent works as the means by which we might redeem, or save, ourselves. Rousseau provides, Neidleman claims, “models of reconciliation,” all of which revolve for Neidleman around the idea of a “communion” with nature: Rousseau presents options for “how the immediate communion of the state of nature might be

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5 This mold is what he calls the “Straussian model,” and thus he grounds it in the work of Leo Strauss (see *Natural Right and History*). Matthew Mendham, “Gentle Savages and Fierce Citizens against Civilization: Unraveling Rousseau’s Paradoxes,” *American Journal of Political Science* 55.1 (2001): 170-187. But, as will be discussed further below, Arthur Melzer seemingly occupies a place outside of this group, which suggests that the ‘mold’ is not as static as might be imagined.

recuperated in a modern, mediated context, whether it be in the small circumscribed world of a small country estate (*Julie*), in the political context of equality (the *Social Contract*), in a personal relationship with God or Nature (*Letter to Beaumont* and the *Reveries*), or in the moral education of a child (*Emile*).”⁷ Neidleman is not alone in this enterprise of ‘pluralizing’ the pathways to nature and natural goodness in Rousseau. Jonathan Marks has argued, for example, that the way to natural goodness in Rousseau “does not rule out a kind of pluralism”; it is not limited to a single way of life.⁸ Arthur Melzer also seems to allow for this possibility in “The Origin of Counter-Enlightenment,” writing that above all the “unity of the soul is the supreme good,” and that Rousseau in fact sees “two forms of inner unity for civilized human beings—republican citizenship, and solitary individuality.”⁹

What is at stake in this debate, according to Neidleman, is determining what *man* is for Rousseau; or, discovering what our “true self” is. If the position is adopted that the only *true* self is one that is internal and individualized, communing with nature in solitude (a position he ascribes to Melzer), then in matching fashion our relational self can never be our true self.¹⁰ What I have sought to do in the preceding chapter is to show that Rousseau is making the claim that the *true self* of the human being is, at root, relational. This is what makes us distinct as a species. Only in seeing the self as relational and divided in this way can we make sense of Rousseau’s appeal to natural goodness, which is the opposite of the human condition: a state of being whole, at one with oneself, and undivided. As I have

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demonstrated in the previous chapter, *Emile* is in fact a narrative about human nature, and in this respect, it is about the education “suitable to man,” which is the study “of his relations”: “when [man] begins to sense his moral being, he ought to study himself in his relations with men. This is the job of his whole life” (*Emile*, 214). *Emile* is, thus, not the education of natural man, but it is a book about educating the human being to be best prepared for the social and relational world he is destined to inhabit.

*Emile* is, nevertheless, an education that attempts to accord with the image of natural man as much as possible. It is an education that trains Emile to be as self-sufficient as he can be in the relationships in which he will find himself. Emile is being trained to be *properly social*, and thus *properly human*. Emile has a “purer and healthier heart” than he would have had otherwise, had he been left only to himself and without the proper education (*Emile*, 354). One must indeed, Rousseau writes, “use a great deal of art to prevent social man from becoming totally artificial” (*Emile*, 317). *Emile* can never *be* natural man, who is truly and “entirely for himself . . . the absolute whole which is relative only to itself” (*Emile*, 39). His human nature is such that he is a divided creature, defined in the moment he gains a sense of himself, of his individuality, and, if he is properly educated, a sense of the good through his conscience.

It is important to see the parallels between *Emile* and the *Social Contract* (the story of one individual, and the story of a collective) not because I believe it is important to ‘pluralize’ Rousseau’s lives. The parallels more importantly illuminate the great divide that

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11 This is an argument that seems to come with the assertion that there is no single more choiceworthy way of life, though there may in fact be. I do not see it as a necessary part of the mandate of this project to wade into this discussion. I am instead focusing on what I will call the ‘conditions of possibility for redemption’ in Rousseau, which are determined by our human nature. Politics was the venue chosen by the revolutionaries, and so it is upon this that I direct my focus in the concluding chapter of the thesis. I will, however, note Buffon’s description of the “wise man”: He is “both master of himself and of events. Content with his condition, he desires not to live in any other manner than he has always lived: possessed of sufficient resources,
exists between nature and human nature, and in turn demonstrate the spheres available to human beings in crossing this divide. Rousseau’s ‘conditions of possibility’ of redemption are determined by human nature itself, which is relative. We must use our perfectibility to perfect ourselves; thus, we must use our sociality, and our morality. Politics and moral education are the sites that activate our distinctive human nature. They have become corrupt, but that does not mean that they are barred pathways to our redemption. They are, indeed, proper to our nature.

Of all interpreters of Rousseau, Judith Shklar is closest to the account of human nature I am describing. Shklar founds her analysis of Rousseau in the assertion that “all our self-created miseries stem from our mixed condition.”12 She argues, as I do, that the fundamental thing to understand about Rousseau is the deep “inner division” that dwells “within each of us,” and repeatedly emphasizes that we are fundamentally social, claiming that Rousseau was forcing his readers to “face the moral reality of social life.”13 This moral reality is, however, that our division is our downfall. The ideal images of our sociability (which she locates in the Golden Age, and in the family) are lost, and Emile (as well as Julie) are tragedies. Thus, she claims, “when Rousseau called upon his readers to choose between

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13 Ibid, 74, 214.
man and citizen he was forcing them to face the moral reality of social life. They were asked, in fact, not to choose, but to recognize that the choice was impossible, and they were not and would never become either men or citizens.”

Thus while Shklar was correct to identify the social (both family and society) as a distinctive human ideal, she, like many other interpreters, sees tragedy without a fall; and, thus, she sees human nature without the possibility of redemption. While Rousseau might have been pessimistic, he was not tragic. He saw human nature for what it was, and provided accounts of what it might become. The things that are definitively ours are things that are relative: relative to ourselves, and relative to others. Because they are relative, and because our relations have been modified by us we have the power to modify them away from their corruptions. We have made politics and education, and thus they are ours to remake. If they are remade properly, however, we will, in the process, remake ourselves, for only in turning toward what is good can we move away from what is corrupt. Only in turning toward nature can we move away from our human nature: the corruption of natural goodness and order. In Rousseau’s political work, this relies upon the general will. As Ernst Cassirer writes: “the hour of salvation will strike when the present coercive form of society is destroyed and is replaced by the free form of the political and ethical community—a community in which everyone obeys only the general will . . . But it is futile to hope that this salvation will be accomplished through outside help. No God can grant it to us; man must be his own savior

and . . . his own creator. In its present form society has inflicted its deepest wounds on humanity; but society alone can and should heal these wounds.”

The general will: ordering oneself to the whole

The remaking of politics—the healing of our social wounds—in Rousseau’s *Social Contract* is through forming a community in which everyone obeys the general will which, basically understood, is a common good that unifies the citizens. Rousseau’s description of the general will is, however, itself quite general. The general will is the keystone of legitimate politics, and the social compact: “Each of us places his person and all of his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will; and as one we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole. At once, in place of the individual contracting party, this act of association produces a moral and collective body composed of as many members as there are voices in the assembly, which received from the same act its unity, its common self, its life and its will” (SC 148).

It is a unity that depends on the harmony of the members of the state: “the more harmony reigns in the assemblies . . . the more dominant too is the general will” (SC 205), and what makes it general, Rousseau claims, is the “common interest that unites” the citizens (SC 158).

Neidleman claims that the general will is the keystone to Rousseau’s understanding of political redemption through its association with “communion.” Individual citizens gain a sense of wholeness and unity through their participation in a wholeness and unity. The

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perfect community, Rousseau claims, would in fact be one in which the dividedness of human beings was eradicated: “if each citizen is nothing and can do nothing except in concert with all the others, and if the force acquired by the whole is equal or superior to the sum of the natural forces of all the individuals, one can say that the legislation has achieved the highest possible point of perfection” (SC 163). Patrick Riley describes the Rousseauian general will as one that moves us away from our *amour-propre* (that is, our dividedness) and toward the common good, toward the “public happiness.”17 The general will’s demands of unity and conformity are what govern the reading of Rousseau that reinforces a robust republicanism that leans toward totalitarianism.18 It seems to demand that citizens abandon their particular interests in favor of the interests of the whole. Indeed, Rousseau claims that the “general will is always right,” and if you diverge from this will, then it is you who are in error.

But what happens if we read the ‘rightness’ of the general will in tandem with the rest of Rousseau’s corpus? What to make of the assertion that the “first movements of nature are always right”?19 Thinking of the general will as one of these ‘first movements of nature,’ we can gather an account of the general will that coheres with Rousseau’s theology. Like the description of the ‘spectacle of nature’, the general will is “always the same order” (SD 46);20 it is, as Rousseau writes, “always constant, unalterable and pure” (SC 204). Like “natural

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20 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality [Second Discourse]*, in *Basic Political Writings*. Hereafter intext (SD page number).
goodness,” then, the general will cannot err; it is by its nature whole with itself, undivided and good. The general will, too, exists in every man: man cannot extinguish the general will in himself, only evade it (SC 204). Much like Rousseau’s description of the conscience in *Emile*—that “divine instinct, immortal and celestial voice, certain guide of a being ignorant and limited but intelligent and free . . . Without you, I sense nothing in me . . . other than the sad privilege of leading myself astray from error to error” (Emile, 290) —the general will is, as Fred Willhoite Jr. has argued, the “inner moral consciousness of the entire community.”

It is the rightness that persists in spite of human error, and the order that human beings lack in their dividedness (from each other) and their particularity (in themselves).

This affinity of the general will to a divine conscience has historical grounds. As Patrick Riley has demonstrated, the concept of the general will has its roots in theological concepts that preceded the eighteenth century. Pascal’s reading of 1 Corinthians 12 was a heavy influence on Rousseau (and indeed the importance of this passage was insisted upon by Rousseau, as Riley writes, in his *Letter to Archbishop Beaumont*). Riley writes: “for all those French moralistes who come after Pascal and who are struck by his reading of 1 Corinthians 12 . . . men would do well to will as God first willed—generally . . . Men after the fall must try to will generally, though their inability to will generally (à la Dieu) is what led to their Fall. They failed to imitate God when they were pure, and must now strive to do so while corrupt.”

The idea of volonté générale is invoking man’s fall: his corruption and the impulse he must cultivate to purify his corruption. The general will in Rousseau is, thus,

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22 Riley, *General Will*, 21. Riley also cites Rousseau’s reworking of St. Paul in a fragment, “Le Bonheur Public”: “Make man one, and you will make him happy as he can be . . . For being nothing except by [the body politic], they will be nothing except for her” (22). Compare with Rousseau’s statement about the citizens being nothing that is cited above.
23 Knowing Rousseau’s admiration for Alexander Pope’s *Essay on Man* (see Chapter 3), it is worthy of note that Rousseau approvingly cites this passage of Pope’s in his *Letter about Pope’s Essay on Man*: “But errs not
striving to bring oneself into accord with a unity that will allow you to transcend your particularity. It is a wholeness that will purify your divided nature.

If, however, the general will plays the role of the ‘conscience’ of the community in Rousseau, then it too is subject to the same troubles as the individual conscience of *Emile*. Conscience, as *Emile* makes evident, is dependent on education. Though the general will, like conscience, might persist even if we ignore it, for it to compel it must be cultivated. It is not *natural* for human beings to be undivided, to think in an undivided way. We must be directed to the general will, for it is contrary to our particularity to think in these terms. This is the source of scholarship on Rousseau’s republican virtue and civil religion. Mauricio Viroli, for example, argues that the “well-ordered society” about which Rousseau speaks in the *Social Contract* is one that “is ordered in such a way that men find it in their interest to treat their fellows with justice and consideration—that is to say, to live in harmony.” This takes place through the development of laws and customs, as indeed Rousseau says is

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Nature from the gracious end,/ From burning suns when livid deaths descend,/ When earthquakes swallow, or when tempests sweep/Towns to one grave, whole nations to the deep?/ ‘No’ (‘tis replied) ‘the first Almighty cause/ Acts not by partial, but by general laws.’” Cited in Riley, *The General Will*, 236.

There are many more steps involved in Riley’s account of the ‘secularizing’ of the general will, a major figure of which is Montesquieu. As Riley writes: “it was surely no accident that Montesquieu, who was wholly familiar with the seventeenth-century controversy over the nature of divine will, should have used the ideas of general will and particular will in a substantially new political way,” *General Will*, 141. Riley agrees with his mentor, Judith Shklar, however, that Rousseau’s notion exceeded all of the immediate historical influences (including Montesquieu, Bayle, Malebranche, and Pascal) in conveying ‘everything he wanted to say’ in his philosophic system. Rousseau is less concerned, Riley claims, with “Montesquieuian topics”: the *causes physiques* and historically contingent *rapports particulière* (221). I am inclined to agree with Riley on this point, and so were many of the members of the National Assembly, and critics of Rousseau following the French Revolution. His concern with the *foundation* of political legitimacy—with the general will—left the particulars undefined. This will be discussed further in the chapter. There are also analyses such as Jonathan Israel’s, in which he claims that the *volonté générale* of the French Revolution is taken from Diderot and his fellow atheists, not Rousseau: “volonté générale, originally introduced by Diderot, had been vigorously adopted in his sense by d’Holbach, Helvétius, Condorcet, and Volney but adapted to mean something quite different by Rousseau”: Jonathan Israel, *Revolutionary Ideas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 23. As Patrick Riley makes clear, it is also possible to make the claim that the general will was ‘introduced’ by the moderates Israel so deplores—including Montesquieu. In either (or both) cases, it is the case that its roots were theological. And indeed we will see that it is the theological strain of the general will’s interplay with the invocation of nature, and natural right, that becomes significant.

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necessary: the citizenry must learn to have reverence for the laws. This requires that the hearts of the citizens be shaped to love their country as they love themselves: “the true constitution of the state” is “in the hearts of citizens” (SC 172). It is therefore to the harmony of men’s hearts that the legislator ought to look, for the “social spirit” is what forms and maintains a state (SC 164). As Neidleman writes, “political communion, in those rare instances in which it can be found, surpasses all other forms of happiness . . . The soul’s ‘most delicious feeling,’ Rousseau writes in the *Geneva Manuscript*, is ‘love of virtue’.”

Republican citizenship is grounded in a re-orienting of the human being from his particularity to the general: it is teaching man to love the general as he loves himself. If successful, it would indeed be “an immediate love of existence based on an unconscious harmony between oneself and nature’s order.”

If, as we read in Emile, “the good man orders himself in relation to the whole” (Emile, 292), then the general will is a means by which man can participate in order, wholeness, and unity.

To say that man can participate in wholeness or unity is one thing; to make him do it, however, is another. Ronald Beiner’s discussion of *Civil Religion* emphasizes Rousseau’s insistence that “a State has never been founded without religion serving as its base.”

Religion has the power to shape men’s hearts, and to change their moeurs and customs. In the *Social Contract*, Rousseau discusses civil religion through differentiating between the religion of man, and the religion of the citizen (SC 223). “The first—without temples, altars or rights, and limited to the purely internal cult of the Supreme God and to the duties of morality—is the pure and simple religion . . . The other, inscribed in a single country, gives it

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26 Neidleman, *Ethics of Truth*, 111. Think here too of Emile’s “purer and healthier heart” following his education (Emile, 354). Here too there are many points of conformity with Montesquieu’s *Spirit of the Laws*.

27 Ibid, 29.

its gods, its own titular patrons” (SC 223). In his own corpus, Rousseau has supplied a pure and simple religion. He has provided an account of the “greatest good” for human beings: the one principle that guides our conscience toward the good, that makes us desire the good. This greatest good is, as Rousseau writes in the Social Contract, “liberty and equality” (SC 170). The greatest good is natural man. It is a religion of man that will serve as the base for the political community that could save human beings from themselves.

**Natural man, the greatest good**

In the Social Contract, Rousseau writes: “if one enquires into precisely wherein the greatest good of all consists, which should be the purpose of every system of legislation, one will find that it boils down to the two principal objects, liberty and equality” (SC 170). “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains”; thus the principal goal of political change ought to be man’s “recovering of its liberty” (SC 141). The question of political legitimacy becomes one of invoking what is right by nature: “no man has a natural authority over his fellow man,” Rousseau writes, and men have been wrongly convinced that they can “alienate [their] liberty” in the political order (SC 144).

The Second Discourse, as the diagnosis of our pathologies, recounts the manner in which human beings came to see institutionalized inequalities as politically sound. It is an account, Rousseau claims, “of what the human race could have become, if it had been left to itself” (SD 39). What the Second Discourse is, in fact, is the story of what the human race did become, left to itself. “Here is your history,” Rousseau tells his reader, read in the book of nature, “who never lies” (SD 39). It begins in a state of natural liberty and equality, and
ends in a condition in which men are deceived about their liberty, so corrupted have they become with political power, ambition, and greed. We are living always outside ourselves, with “merely a deceitful and frivolous exterior: honor without virtue, reason without wisdom, and pleasure without happiness” (SD 81).

For men to turn their politics away from corruption, they must be reminded of their nature. They must be reminded that in the state of nature, man “breathes only tranquility and liberty” (SD 80); that the “essential gifts of nature” are “life and liberty” (SD 74); that the state of nature was one in which inequality did not exist: “the equality which nature established among men [has been destroyed by] the inequality they have instituted” (SD 26). Men in the state of nature were, he writes, “naturally as equal among themselves as were the animals of each species” (SD 33). This is the “first origin” of man—an origin that has, according to the narrative of the *Second Discourse*, been forgotten.

As the preceding analysis has shown, however, this state is not natural to man. This image of natural man, this “hypothetical history” (SD 36), is the image of natural goodness: a state that is foreign to human nature. We know that Rousseau claims that human nature is defined by division and relationality, and that what comes naturally to man is comparison, and the perception of inequalities. Rousseau in fact claims that men *are* naturally unequal. The ‘Golden Age’ of man, the happiest epoch for human beings, is one in which these natural inequalities are respected in the social order. But what the *Second Discourse* also tells us is that this natural sociability of the human being, and the natural preference for skill, merit, and talent, inevitably become a source of institutionalized and illegitimate inequality.

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29 It is, as I have demonstrated, comparable to a state of animality. See also Jonathan Marks: “what comes first, for both human beings and animals, is equality or sameness”: “Who Lost Nature?,” 485.
To save us from our corruption, then, Rousseau provides an image of our salvation: the “study of original man, of his true needs and the fundamental principles of his duties, is also the only good means that can be used to remove those multitudes of difficulties which present themselves regarding the origin of moral inequality” (SD 36). In the Social Contract, Rousseau binds this natural liberty of the original man to our *first rights*: “Once the social compact is violated, each person then regains his first rights and resumes his natural liberty” (SC 148).

Rousseau is providing an original prototype of man that serves to correct human nature. We claim that we are born free and equal, but we are not born free and equal. The world must therefore be changed to accord with nature as opposed to circumstance. But this is an aspirational ideal. For Rousseau, the human condition has *never* been one in which men are truly free and equal. To correct this lack in the circumstances of our lives, and in the history of the institutionalization of inequalities, an image is required of what we would like to become. We must remake ourselves in the image of natural goodness and orient ourselves

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30 Ronald Beiner has directed me toward Immanuel Kant’s *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* via his address of the text in *Civil Religion*. Here Beiner compares the natural theology of the Savoyard Vicar to Kant’s through Kant’s emphasis on the “relevance of religion to morality” (221). The one true religion for Kant is a “purely moral religion” (225). Kant, most intriguingly, uses the language of the “prototype” when discussing Jesus: “we can only be pleasing to God when we move in the direction of moral duty, and for this purpose we need a ‘prototype’ of the purely good human being” (223). Here Kant distinguishes between the intelligible and actual prototype: the idea of the prototype of the moral ideal, and the historical Jesus himself. Here Kant finds the latter of lesser significance than the former. This makes a fascinating comparison with Buffon’s natural science and Rousseau’s philosophy—especially to Rousseau’s *Fiction or Allegorical Fragment on Revelation*, in which his character dreams of two contrasting prototypes: one Socrates, and one Jesus, neither of whom are specifically named. The ‘prototype’ also figures heavily in the philosophy of Friedrich Schelling. See Bruno; or, on the Divine and Natural Principle of things: “But inasmuch as a soul has the character of the intrinsically infinite, while the body is finite (though infinitely finite, and capable of representing the universe), the individual temporal being reveals the mystery hidden away in God—the absolute identity of the infinite, which is prototype, with the infinitely finite, which is the copy.” Cited in Fred Dallmayr, *Return to Nature? An Ecological Counterhistory* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 49-50. The manners in which the natural theology of the eighteenth century appear in nineteenth century German romanticism and idealism are in fact too great to even brush upon in a footnote. This would (or will) be a separate project all together. For one example, however, see Peter Hans Reill, who ties Buffon’s natural science to its analogue in German romanticism (including to Friedrich Schelling) in *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment*, which was discussed in the Introduction: Peter Hans Reill, *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
to the good, as opposed to accepting the corrupt. We must see ourselves as natural man in order to bring about his existence. We have to turn away from the inheritance of our human nature toward a nature that is better than ourselves.\(^{31}\)

The idea of natural man is the keystone of Rousseau’s political thought. It is itself what will turn men toward the reform of their political institutions. We can change men’s hearts if they can see that the way things are are not the way they must, or indeed ought to, be. When man sees himself with the eyes of natural goodness he makes the world accord with this image of himself. He will harness his *amour-propre*, his pride, to match this natural image. The general will is, thus, the antidote to this *amour-propre*. As the conscience of the community, the general will becomes the means or the mechanism by which man orders himself to the whole as opposed to ordering the whole to himself.\(^{32}\)

Adopting the structure of original sin, natural man is thus an origin that is also a purpose.\(^{33}\) It is an aspiration through which human beings can harness what is in their own power (politics and morality) and use what is natural to them (their *amour-propre*) to become better than themselves. We have never been naturally good, but we may become so through remaking ourselves. This requires institutions, and the institution of moral liberty and moral equality through the sovereignty of the general will. Because we are not free and equal by *nature*, we require the institutions that will make us free and equal: “the social compact

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\(^{31}\) As Ernst Cassirer writes, “the natural man is not our first forbear, but the last man to whom we are travelling on to be”: *The Question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, 21.

\(^{32}\) “The good man orders himself in relation to the whole, and the wicked one orders the whole in relation to himself” (Emile, 292). In this respect, Rousseau is certainly drawing a line between himself and Buffon’s scientific method, which relied upon the claim (see Chapter 2) that it is inevitable that man must order the whole in relation to himself. As will be discussed further in this chapter, there is also an important distinction between Buffon/Bonnet and Rousseau as regards the belief that the world is inevitably progressing. But this does not obscure the argument they share about human nature, and the possibility of a future good.

establishes among the citizens an equality of such a kind that they all commit themselves under the same conditions and should all enjoy the same rights” (SC 158). It “substitutes a moral and legitimate equality to whatever physical inequality nature may have been able to impose upon men, and . . . however unequal in force or intelligence they may be, men all become equal by convention and by right” (SC 153). Morality is the gift bestowed upon man by nature: a gift that leads to our error as well as facilitates their corrections. We must therefore “recover our liberty by the same right that stole it” (SD 141). These are institutions that are ours. They are distinctive to us. It is thus in our power to change them; and indeed they are the spheres of life that are properly ours by our human nature.

To reform political institutions, Rousseau writes, the legislator “should feel that he is, so to speak, in a position to change human nature, to transform each individual . . . into a part of a large whole from which this individual receives, in a sense, his life and being; to alter man’s constitution in order to strengthen it” (SC 163). This is a transformation that Rousseau has undertaken himself. With the image of natural man, Rousseau reveals the transformation of human nature that must occur for us to be good: we must feel in our hearts that we are born free and equal to realize it in the world. Natural goodness is, thus, an act of faith; a revelation that will transform how we think of ourselves and will indeed change our human nature. No longer divided from ourselves and others, we would participate in an order and a whole that is greater than ourselves.34 The paradox of legislating this political condition is such that “the social spirit which ought to be the work of that institution would have to preside over the institution itself. And men would be, prior to the advent of the laws, what

they ought to become by means of the laws” (SC 164). This paradox is resolved only through believing that we can become what we are not, and believing that we have it in our power to make it so. Rousseau has placed natural man as both the origin and purpose of the social contract, and made politics the site of its realization.

In this enterprise, Rousseau is one with the natural scientists Buffon and Bonnet. Buffon’s natural philosophy is built upon the assertion of “original prototypes”: divine wholes from which the species of the earth degenerate in their imperfections. It is only the human being, Buffon claims, that seems “intent on destroying himself,”35 and yet it is the only species that has within itself—in its combination of the physical and spiritual principles—the capacity to remake and perfect its conditions. *Homo Duplex* is a being suspended between the natural and the spiritual existence; between, as Buffon writes, the “laws of renovation” and the laws of “permanency.”36 Man, however, has his futurity in his own power—his renovation, or renewal, in view of that which is permanent fulfills the perfection of his manifestation as a universal prototype. The renewal of society, politics, and education is the distinct capacity of the human being; we can, in the words of Bonnet, give ourselves a “second birth” through reconstituting ourselves.37 Because we are the only creatures capable of perceiving the whole of nature, and knowing it is ordered,38 we are the only creatures, Buffon claims, who “glimpse what [Nature] was and into what it could be made.”39 Human nature is constituted for Buffon, as it is for Rousseau, by a capacity to remake the world. Man strives to become good through renewing and perfecting his moral

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35 HN B X [XII], 340.
36 HN B X [XIII], 347.
37 Charles Bonnet, *Essai de Psychologie* [1754], in Oeuvres d’histoire naturelle et philosophie de Charles Bonnet, Vol.17 (Neuchatel: Samuel Fauche, 1783), LXVII.
38 HN B X [XIII], 346-347. Man “reads what is past, sees the present and judges the future; and in the torrent of time, which carries off and absorbs all the individuals of the universe, he perceives that the species are permanent, and Nature invariable.”
39 HN IX, 127.
and political institutions. His capacity to remake the world is his gift of nature. Borrowing
the language of Rousseau, Bonnet claims that man is “the most perfectible of all the earth’s
species” and must therefore be active in his own moral and social education toward a
greater spiritual perfection. Man possesses an innovative capacity to modify his social and
political circumstance, and to rise from his habitual, or ‘corrupted’ state “incorruptible and
glorious.”

It is Charles Bonnet who gives this capacity the language of regeneration. We are
instruments of “this future regeneration” which can raise us “to a degree of perfection” that
does not exist in the present. As was discussed in Chapter 3, this transformation of the idea
of regeneration was significant. Regeneration was no longer understood in its purely biblical
sense, which relied upon a passive receptivity to the grace of God through faith and
revelation. Regeneration was used by Bonnet to describe an active power of human beings.
All of nature strives toward perfection, but only human beings have the capacity to make
themselves more perfect through regenerating themselves. Man is the author of his own
regeneration; he is part of a palingenetic history in which he is the only true palingenetic
agent.

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41 Charles Bonnet, *The Contemplation of Nature*, Translated from the French of C. Bonnet, 2 volumes (London: T. Longman, 1766), V 1, 72. The French was also consulted [published 1764].
42 Bonnet, *Palingénésie*, 234
43 Arthur McCalla claims that *palingenesis* did not take on a social dimension until Ballanche explicitly adopted it as such in the nineteenth century in his *Essais de Palingénésie sociale*. He concedes that the “historicization of both nature and culture . . . was effected between, roughly, 1770 and 1810,” (431) but does not accord any transformative power to the French Revolution explicitly. As will be demonstrated further in this chapter the idea of “regeneration” was definitively social in this period, and derived from the regenerative philosophy of the eighteenth century. Arthur McCalla, “From Palingénésie Philosophique to Palingénésie Sociale: From a Scientific Ideology to a Historical Ideology,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 55.3 (1994): 421-439.
The distinction of Rousseau is, perhaps, a pessimism not possessed by Buffon and Bonnet. Despite Rousseau’s invocation of natural man, and his description of the divine general will, he claims that it is impossible for human beings to truly realize a general will in which there is a perfectly good equality in sovereignty. We are bound by our human nature to the degree that we cannot fully realize the wholeness and unity to which we might aspire. But this does not prevent Rousseau from presenting these images of unity; for while totalizing unity and communion with the natural good is impossible, turning toward the good is possible, and just might make the world, and our political conditions, better.

Rousseau’s natural theology sees a whole from which we are detached, and a unity of which

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44 Sankar Muthu presents this pessimism as a tragedy, much as Judith Shklar does in *Men and Citizens*. The prospect of human beings fixing themselves, writes Muthu, “seems vanishingly thin”; Rousseau’s general will “illustrates from a distinctive and genuinely all-encompassing global perspective, the profoundly tragic sensibility of his social and political thought”: Sankar Muthu, “On the General Will of Humanity: Global Connections in Rousseau’s Political Thought,” in *The General Will: The Evolution of a Concept*, ed James Farr and David Lay Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 270-306. As I have made evident, while it is certainly not the case that Rousseau is a champion of human progress as such, he is also not resigned to a tragic view of the human possibilities.

45 “A people that would always govern well would not need to be governed . . . A true democracy [that is, perfect equality and liberty] has never existed and never will . . . Were there a people of the gods, it would govern itself democratically. So perfect a government is not suited to men” (SC 180). “Whatever is good and in conformity with order is such by the nature of things and independently of human conventions. All justice comes from God; he alone is its source. But if we knew how to receive it from so exalted a source, we have no need for government or laws” (SC 160)

46 In my analysis in the body of the text, there is a notable lack of attention paid to Rousseau’s writings on Corsica and Poland. Poland will be addressed in what follows, but I will also make a few remarks here. These are, assumedly, places in which Rousseau thought that some kind of political good was realizable. Judith Shklar ties Rousseau’s writing on Corsica to the Golden Age. Rousseau advises to Corsicans to remain “primitive” despite the fact that Shklar believes the plan for Corsica, as well as the *Social Contract*, reveal fundamentally the unsustainability of the attempt to resurrect the Golden Age (Shklar, *Men and Citizens*, 28). Neidleman writes: “In his essay on Poland, Rousseau offered the same advice to the Poles that he had given to Geneva and Corsica. Everything is to be geared toward the cultivation of unity . . .Rousseau invokes here, as he so frequently did, the Spartans’ ardent ‘love of the fatherland’ . . . Sparta’s patriotism allowed it to overcome the divisiveness that left others subject to conquest and internal strife” (Neidleman, *Ethics of Truth*, 32). I believe in the cases of Corsica and Poland the invocation of the Golden Age is significant. Referring back to note 67 of Chapter 5 in which Rousseau claims that the single thing that it is possible to do in relation to the Golden Age is to “love it,” we are here still talking about a redirection of the people of a particular (and small) state toward love of the general as love of oneself. When he is discussing real places, the Golden Age becomes the model (and the invocation of Sparta becomes the political and historical exemplar) of a condition that was always described as being natural to humans. That is, in the context of narrative of the Second Discourse, the Golden Age is the natural sociability of man. Also related to note 67 in Chapter 5—it’s primitiveness does not make it inhuman.

47 And perhaps undesirable for, indeed, it would make us inhuman.
we must constantly be reminded. The public order depends on ensuring that that general will “is always questioned, and it always answers” (SC 204). The common good must be re-invoked to keep the conscience of the community oriented to what is good. So too must the image of natural man be recalled, “the image of the simplicity of the earliest times. It is a beautiful shore, adorned by the hands of nature alone, toward which one continually turns one’s eyes.” The invocation of the general will, and of the standard of nature, are reminders of what we long to be. When we lose sight of these, we lose the orientation to what is good and ordered, and slip into the corruption that comes all too naturally to us. If we wish to become free and equal by nature, we must, therefore, actively regenerate the world in its image, and ensure that this guiding principle is continually renewed. To strive for what is good, we must actively regenerate ourselves.

Indeed, in the Considerations on the Government of Poland, Rousseau recounts the means by which the Poles could come to love liberty, and to give themselves a “second birth” (Poland, 192). Just as Bonnet claims in his Essai de Psychologie that education is a “second birth which imprints new determinations,” and is a force which “modifies the force of the natural,” so too does Rousseau claim in Poland that this second birth is dependent on an education that will teach men to “respect the laws” and which will “make and keep it happy and free; extirpating from its breast the passions that elude the laws, it will foster those

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48 See Allan Bloom’s discussion of Rousseau’s paradoxes in Emile: they “are not expressions of a troubled soul, but accurate reflections of an incoherence in the structure of the world we all face . . . [His work is] an experiment in restoring harmony to that world by reordering the emergence of man’s acquisitions in such a way as to mend the imbalances created by them, while allowing the full actualization of man’s potential”; “man requires a healing education.” Allan Bloom, “The Education of Democratic Man,” Daedelus 107.30 (1978): 135-153.


51 Charles Bonnet, Essai de Psychologie, in Oeuvres d’histoire naturelle et philosophie de Charles Bonnet, Vol.17 (Neuchatel: Samuel Fauche, 1783 [1755]).
that cause them to be loved; finally,” Rousseau writes, replicating exactly the palingenetic language of both Buffon and Bonnet, “renewing itself so to speak by itself” (Poland, 193, my emphasis).

The educational program is one in which we must “infuse, so to speak, the soul of the confederates into the entire nation, to establish the Republic in the hearts of the [citizens]” (Poland, 183). Continually drawing his readers back to the Social Contract, Rousseau claims that the Poles must learn to “love freedom” (Poland, 178), and must be accustomed from “early on to rule, to equality, to fraternity” (Poland, 191). Also re-invoking the language of his First Discourse, Rousseau writes that the Citizens must make the state their principal business; it must “be continually kept before their eyes” (Poland, 185). Denise Schaeffer ties this to Rousseau’s cautious hope in the Discourse on Political Economy that men could come to love what is “truly beautiful”: “it is not impossible for [men] to learn to love one object more than another and what is truly beautiful more than what is deformed.”

Schaeffer continues: “the ‘truly beautiful’ image that Rousseau parades before the Poles is not simply a dazzling salutary illusion to replace a deformed one, but in fact a hermeneutic device constructed to facilitate a correct interpretation of their present situation and future prospects—in other words, to help them to strive to become what they really are.” It is, indeed, a means by which the Poles could come to regenerate themselves.

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52 Margaret Kohn discusses Rousseau’s emphasis on ‘spectacle’ in this project of keeping the public in view: Margaret Kohn, “Homo spectator: Public Space in the Age of the Spectacle,” Philosophy and Social Criticism 34.5 (2008): 467-486.
53 Cited in Denise Schaeffer, “Realism, Rhetoric and the Possibility of Reform in Rousseau’s ‘Consideration on the Government of Poland’,” Polity 42.3 (2010): 377-397, 380.
54 Ibid, 381. For more readings of Poland being representative of a less tragic Rousseau also see: Patrick Riley, “Rousseau’s Philosophy of Transformative, ‘Denaturing’ Education,” Oxford Review of Education 37.5 (2011): 573-586; Jeffrey A. Smith, “Nationalism, Virtue, and the Spirit of Liberty in Rousseau’s ‘Government of Poland,’” The Review of Politics 65.3 (2003): 409-437. Nevertheless, Rousseau is always cautious about reminding his reader that despite the necessity of orienting oneself to the good, its realization may be impossible in full: “a Government should move toward its true goal as directly, as surely, and for as long as possible;
Rousseau and regeneration

Despite the resonances of Buffon and Bonnet in Rousseau’s ‘regenerative’ politics, Rousseau did not use the language of regeneration explicitly. In the French Revolutionary period, however, his name became synonymous with it. Joan McDonald writes that second only to Sièyes’s _Qu’est-ce que le Tiers États_ [What is the Third Estate], the most widely read pamphlet on the convocation of the États-Généraux was Antraigues’s _Mémoire sur les États Généraux_, which appeared in three re-printings from 1788 to 1789. The first part of the pamphlet, McDonald writes, reads like a summary of the first three books of the _Social Contract_ in which d’Antraigues employs Rousseau’s “concept of inalienable sovereignty, which he put forward as the essential and traditional basis for the regeneration of the state.”

McDonald objects to the association of Rousseau with regeneration in three ways. The first, she writes, is that Rousseau does not in fact _have_ a theory of regeneration. Regeneration was simply “‘in the air’ at the time when d’Antraigues was writing, [and so] it is not entirely surprising that he should have placed emphasis” on it. The second objection of McDonald’s is that “there is no reason to suppose that in 1788 and 1789 familiarity with the _Social Contract_ was so widespread that d’Antraigues’s readers would recognize the Rousseauist origins of his argument.” Thirdly, she writes, “the word ‘regeneration’ was on the lips of many orators and writers from 1788 onward, [and so] d’Antraigues may be

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56 Ibid, 68.
57 Ibid, 69.
regarded as writing in the language of his times rather than as spreading a new idea culled from the pages of the *Social Contract*.”

McDonald’s attack on the association of Rousseau with regeneration is thorough: she claims that the *Social Contract* was not a significant text; that even if it was, there is no concept of regeneration in Rousseau; and, third, that Rousseau came to be associated with regeneration, as she writes, not because of his political teaching, but simply because of the ‘cult of personality’ that formed around him. On the second of these points, I have built an argument to claim the opposite; that while Rousseau did not use the term regeneration in his texts, his works are about the regeneration of man through politics. This was not due to a cult of personality, but because of what he in fact wrote. More will be said about this shortly.

On the first point of McDonald’s, however, more deserves to be said about the reception of Rousseau’s work in the period leading up to and during the revolution. It is the case that Rousseau’s ‘sentimental’ works—*Emile* and *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse*—and the two early *Discourses* are typically seen as the texts that make up the core of ‘Rousseauism’ in eighteenth century France. McDonald claims that these works built up a cult around Rousseau, in which he was seen as the man who “revealed humanity” in the eighteenth century. He was the founder of the constitution and the father of liberty because he “formulated the basic principles of justice and those human rights which the makers of the constitution sought to guarantee.” These, McDonald claims, are general concepts that could belong to anyone.  

The reverence for Rousseau was constructed around general principles that were evolved from a generic (indeed, so basic as to be reducible to nothing) association of ‘good things’ with the great philosopher.

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58 Ibid, 70.
McDonald’s thesis does not hold on a number of counts. On the question of the reception of the *Social Contract*, James Swenson has demonstrated, contra McDonald, that the *Social Contract* was a major part of Rousseau’s corpus in the years leading up the revolution. Citing R.A. Leigh, Swenson writes that the primary evidence for the lack of influence of the *Social Contract* was the number of editions in print. Leigh has shown, however, “that there were far more prerevolutionary editions of the *Contrat Social* than had previously been admitted: ‘Between 1762 and 1783, a period of twenty-one years, we can enumerate twenty-eight separately available texts of the *Contrat Social*, at a conservative estimate, plus at least twelve reprints in collective editions, forty in all. Not bad for an unread book.’ It is manifestly impossible to treat the *Contrat Social* as unread before the Revolution.”\(^{60}\) Nevertheless, Swenson concedes that relative to the rest of Rousseau’s works, the *Social Contract* was received later than the others.\(^{61}\) This, however, merely served to conflate the doctrines of Rousseau’s moral with his political teachings; to, in fact, respect the unity of Rousseau’s corpus. It “was an awakening to the political dimension of the vision of virtue presented in those works, in reaction to a changing political situation.”\(^{62}\) Swenson links the interest in Rousseau’s sentimental works and his political treatise through the idea of regeneration. *Emile* and *La Nouvelle Héloise* are individual and subjective accounts of a regeneration that would get appropriated into the political context: “the experience of subjective regeneration and renewal to which all the accounts of reading


Rousseau that we have encountered testify, must have at the very least suggested a powerful analogy to the demands made for a regeneration of the nation. Though revolutionary actors of all stripes called upon Rousseau to justify regeneration, what they all shared is a “passionate longing for unity” that can only come through their “vigorous experience of division.” Rousseau could not have said it better himself.

McDonald’s analysis is also premised on the assertion (assumption) that no one read Rousseau carefully, and that what Rousseau wrote (even the ‘sentimental’ texts) was of no import to his association with the regeneration of man in the French Revolution. In fact, as Swenson demonstrates, there were a great deal of careful readers of Rousseau, and they read both his moral and political works. As Judith Shklar has written, while it was one of Rousseau’s favorite activities to complain that he was misunderstood, in fact “those who read him understood him very well . . . He was understood by his highly intelligent and knowledgeable audience.” Shklar challenges interpretations of Rousseau that seek to find speculative influences. When interpreters work in this way, “frequently the ‘influenced’ theorist was unaware of these distant sources of his own thought . . . Thus the only path worth pursuing,” Shklar claims, is one that takes account of those with whom Rousseau was most intimately related, his ‘milieu’, which, in addition to the greats of the philosophical (and ancient canon), included his contemporaries. While Shklar argues that Rousseau is assuredly writing to an audience much wider than that of his Enlightenment brethren—in speaking of the great and perennial subject of human nature—if one is going to discuss the

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63 Ibid, 193.
64 Ibid, 226.
65 Shklar, *Men and Citizens*, 222. On Rousseau’s complaint, we ought to think here, for example, about his exchange with Philopolis about which I have spoken at length in what has preceded. While he might openly write that Bonnet misunderstood him, he carefully evaded the points at which they agreed; and in fact slyly revealed the manner in which he agreed with Bonnet through feigning abject disagreement.
import of Rousseau’s thought, attention must be paid to those with whom he was engaged, and those who read and engaged with him. Those who read Rousseau thoroughly in the French Revolutionary period did associate him with regeneration in the manner in which I have interpreted his thought, which is itself interpreted through his engagement with natural science. Rousseau was important to the revolutionaries because of the image he provides of natural man: an image that, to become actualized, requires the regeneration of man through the regeneration of the state.

D’Antraigues is merely one example of many who invoke Rousseau in the name of regeneration. At the opening address of the Cercle Social in 1790, Gary Kates writes that “the participants pushed and shoved though the door . . . Included among the well dressed people were deputies of the National Assembly, local politicians, and members of other patriotic societies.”67 They had all come to hear the opening address of Claude Fauchet. “‘A magnificent idea brings us together,’ Fauchet began. ‘It concerns the beginning of the confederation of men, the coming together of useful truths; tying them into a universal system, getting them accepted into national government; and working in general harmony with the human spirit to compose world happiness.’ The French revolution had inaugurated an ‘epoch of regeneration,’68 wherein all states would recognize the essential goodness of men and exploit potential love among them. France was the vanguard of a ‘regeneration of the social order’.69 Fauchet grounded this regeneration in the philosophes, “all of the profound political writers,” which included Montesquieu, Mably, and Raynal. But “there was one book that itself had revolutionized political language and summarized all of the

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68 It should be noted here, too, that Fauchet’s use of “epoch” is very much grounded in the kind of epochal analysis of human history that was detailed in Chapter 3. I will address this further in the chapter.
69 Citied in Kates, The Cercle Social, 78.
Fauchet in fact announced that each subsequent meeting “would be devoted to a particular section of the *Social Contract*.”71 He founded a revolutionary book club, which ran from October 1790-April 1791, to usher in the epoch of regeneration, for the very book McDonald claims was of no import, and which maintained no logical association between Rousseau and regeneration.72

Louis-Sebastien Mercier, a moderate of the French Revolution, and member of the Convention (who in fact voted against putting Louis XVI to death), also sang the praises of Rousseau as the regenerator of the human spirit in his *De J.J. Rousseau considéré comme l’un des premiers auteurs de la Révolution* (1791): “Rousseau was never weary of repeating—Man is at once creator, inventor, builder, and reformer. But the last name is the noblest of all, proclaiming as it does a yet higher degree of intelligence. When, in virtue of these faculties, man strikes a blow for the regeneration of the world, he will not all at once attain perfection, but he will be able to reduce the sum of his miseries. Every reform is a step towards greater happiness. Meditate carefully the writing of Rousseau—He never ceased to say to Man: use the noblest privilege thou hast! Be a reformer!”73 As C.E. Vaughan writes of Mercier’s pronouncement: “this is not the letter of Rousseau’s teaching, as recorded in his books. But Mercier was not wrong in believing it was the spirit.”74 It is, indeed, precisely the Rousseau that I have explicated here; a Rousseau that is indebted to the works of natural

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70 Ibid, 80.
71 Ibid.
72 Because of McDonald’s aversion to associating Rousseau with regeneration in any substantive way, she writes that “strictly speaking [Fauchet] did not set out to instruct his listeners in the principles of the *Social Contract* but rather to use Rousseau’s text as a starting point for the exposition of his own views” (*Rousseau and the French Revolution*, 77).
74 Ibid, 18.
scientists who did proclaim man’s noblest privilege as that of creating, inventing, and regenerating, and whose spirit Rousseau shared. What Mercier also perceived was that Rousseau’s philosophical paradox, between the two contradictory ideals of nature, or natural man, and civic virtue was “the greatness of Rousseau.” His works contained the seeds of “the cause of freedom” in laying out the goodness to which we might aspire, and the human means we have of achieving it. Mercier writes that this is Rousseau’s teaching, “as opposed to the guidance he might offer through the labyrinth of constitutional riddles.”

Mercier hits upon the foundational criticisms of Rousseau’s political thought, and of the role his work serves in the French Revolution. In the National Assembly, Rousseau was invoked from all sides, often at the same time: pitting Rousseau against Rousseau. There was a divide between the Montaigne and Gironde, between the moderates and the radicals (primarily Séchelles and Robespierre, who will be discussed shortly); as James Swenson writes, citing Roger Barne’s work documenting these Rousseauian invocations, “every period and every party made some claim upon the heritage of Rousseau.” There was much attention paid to the general will in the National Assembly, and much of it circled around debates concerning representation. In the Social Contract, Rousseau denies that the general will can be “represented,” yet he also sees a division between the sovereignty of the general will and the structure of government. Because of Rousseau’s explicit denial of representative government, scholars have attributed the invocation of the general will in political debates, in the Assembly, and subsequently in the Declaration(s) of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen to more “constitutional” thinkers such as Montesquieu and Sièyes. Sièyes, who wrote the

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75 Ibid, 13.
most famous and most read pamphlet leading up to the first phase of the Revolution, *What is the Third Estate*, employed Rousseau’s political philosophy and applied it to representative government. While, Swenson writes, “Sièyes links the sovereignty to the people in Rousseauian terms” he turns it into a “representative Rousseauianism.”\(^{77}\) And while Alexandre-Joseph de Falcoz, a deputy from Dauphiné, wrote in a letter “that the principles of Sièyes’s text ‘were almost entirely drawn from the *Contrat Social*,’”\(^{78}\) many scholars have sought to establish that Sièyes’s political thought, and thus its influence on political debates, was distinct from Rousseau’s own thinking insofar as Sièyes was more legally minded, and concerned with the practicality of political representation.\(^{79}\) Marcel Gauchet, however, claims that Rousseau’s discussion of the general will perfectly matches the initial debates about the institution of the Declaration because his theory allowed for the compatibility of the sovereignty of the people with the preservation of the monarchical power: “had Rousseau’s thought not existed, it would have been necessary to invent it . . . It is in fact the thought that most rigorously ensures the plenitude and preeminence of legislative power even as it leaves open the possibility of a monarchical executive. The theoretical model is an exact fit [s’ajuste exactement] for the practical difficulty. The signal virtue of the ‘general

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\(^{77}\) Swenson, *Rousseau Considered*, 198, 201.


will’ is to carefully preserve the king’s place, while offering the most radical vision of the engendering of collective legitimacy on the strict basis of the rights of individuals.”

These contradictory interpretations point to the very contradiction of Rousseau’s own invocation in the political debates of the revolutionary period. For the reasons that Gauchet cites, it makes sense that the king was for a long time referred to as “the regenerator.” When the members of the assembly still saw it as a feasible option to preserve the monarchy while claiming and asserting their natural rights, there was faith that Louis XVI would facilitate the birth of a new man. As was written in the Memorandum on the regeneration of the public order (1789): “the king developing the intensity of his thought, imperiously affixing it to the perfect seal of justice, will ordain, will command, that at the instant peace is born, Man [will] be regenerated . . .[when] heaven [joins] its supreme will with that of the Monarch.” Sièyes too used the language of regeneration in the preface to his Préliminaire de la Constitution Françoise: “the representatives of the French Nation, gathered at the National Assembly, recognize that they have as their mandate the special charge of regenerating the Constitution of the State.” These invocations of regeneration, regardless of the countless ways in which Rousseau was or was not invoked, point us, however, to Rousseau’s broader and more significant influence.

Rousseau’s influence outside of the “labyrinth of constitutional riddles” is correctly attributed by Mercier to something more profound than the constitutional riddles themselves. It is not that we do not need to understand and study the legal and constitutional sources and debates of this political period in history. This is important, and in this study it is very

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probable that thinkers such as Montesquieu, Sièyes, and their predecessors are more central than Rousseau to the development of certain clauses of the *Declaration* and to the particular laws that were generated and refined. But what McDonald attributes to a facile and empty invocation of the cult of Rousseau is much more than this. Rousseau is invoked in the spirit of regeneration because of the manner in which he changed men’s hearts, and spurred them to remake the world in the name of natural liberty, goodness and equality. His invocation from all sides gets to the core of what Rousseau represents for the Revolution: the fact that despite the debates over the *content* of the laws, all men desire that they be remade, and that despite the *means* employed to regenerate the state, all men desire its regeneration. It is, as François Furet has written, “by virtue of the project of regeneration that the Revolution belongs to Rousseau.” It was an indebtedness to Rousseau’s new understanding of the human being: “like [Rousseau], the revolutionaries wanted to create a new man.”

The invocation of Rousseau’s new man was not grounded in a kind of generalized sentiment, but in careful readings and discussions of his work. Fauchet’s ‘book club’ was

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83 Montesquieu has a reputation for being a philosopher of “comparative politics,” and, in Keegan Callanan’s wording, of “political particularism”: Keegan Callanan, “Liberal Constitutionalism and Political Particularism in Montesquieu’s *The Spirit of the Laws,*” *Political Research Quarterly* 67.3 (2014): 589-602. It is true that much of Montesquieu’s work emphasizes the particularism of legislation appropriate to each regime, and to the peoples that make up that regime. In this respect, he is far more particular than Rousseau. But Montesquieu and Rousseau share many philosophical premises (see note 65; and also note 24 above), and the emphasis on the legislation that can shift men’s *moeurs* and virtue, and so in one way it is unjust to classify Montesquieu as unqualifiedly opposed to Rousseau. Nevertheless, Rousseau’s philosophy aims higher, and is more universal, than Montesquieu’s in constructing a philosophically grounded account of human nature. As Rebecca Kingston writes, “in general, [Montesquieu’s] work demonstrates an ongoing attempt to find a moral basis for politics, not in any pre-social or meta-political framework, but through a close examination of the dynamics of human association and the conventions to which it gives rise”: Rebecca Kingston, *Montesquieu and the Parlement of Bordeaux* (Genève: Librarie Droz, 1996), 26. Montesquieu also devoted much of his work to particular recommendations, and Kingston emphasizes the legal language with which he was familiar, and in which he was operating, as a means of understanding his “new language of politics” (11). His emphasis on the effective means of governance, political moderation, and legal and jurisprudential language and norms, certainly place him at a distance from Rousseau; and it is a distance that does, indeed, emphasize political particularities as opposed to natural-political regeneration of the sort discussed here. For an interpretation that places Rousseau himself in this same legal language, see Robert Derathé, *Rousseau et la Science Politique.*


85 Ibid.
only one instantiation of regeneration being invoked through Rousseauian explications. Restif de la Bretonne’s literary series, published from 1769-1789 contained a volume entitled *The New Emile*, which was an examination of, and homage to, Rousseau’s text of the same name. This text, de Baecque writes, “located the foundations of the dreams of total regeneration of society, its morals, and thus of the subtlest forms of society, in a utopian space.” The most stunning example is, however, François d’Escherny’s *Éloge de J. J. Rousseau*, which he wrote in 1790. D’Escherny begins by proclaiming Rousseau the man who “brought the lost titles of the nobility of our origins back to the human race,” “who recalled men to the simplicity of nature.” It is by Rousseau’s works, d’Escherny claims, that France is able to “regenerate its empire.” While what has been quoted thus far sounds like the work of a general sentimentalist, d’Escherny acknowledges that Rousseau is a man who thought hard about paradoxes, and d’Escherny spends much of his work explicating Rousseau’s philosophy. He discusses Rousseau’s relationship to Descartes, to Fontenelles and Montesquieu, and claims that Rousseau approaches philosophic paradoxes with the “timid march of a skeptic.” The most foundational paradox, according to d’Escherny, is the paradox of nature, which he first discusses through Rousseau’s *Emile*. To understand

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86 de Baecque, *The Body Politic*, 144. It should be noted that Mercier, who was discussed above, also engaged in utopian fiction, publishing *L’An 2440, rêve s’il en fut jamais* in 1770. Mercier’s tale involves a Frenchman falling asleep and waking up in a future Paris, which has fulfilled many of the goals of Rousseau’s natural man: living in equality, liberty, and without the institution of Christianity.

87 This text also serves as the introduction to his *La Philosophie de la Politique, ou Principes Généraux sur les Institutions Civiles, Politiques, et Religieuses* (Paris, 1796), in which he discusses the *Social Contract* at length. All citations that follow are from this volume, and translations are my own. D’Escherny was a member of the Encyclopedic circle, and was a great friend of Rousseau’s until 1768, when they seemingly had a falling out over d’Escherny’s attempt to introduce Rousseau to a publisher who had rejected Rousseau’s work some years before.

88 *Éloge*, iii.

89 Ibid, vi.

90 Ibid, xiii-xiv.

91 Ibid, liv.
Rousseau’s work it is “necessary to find out what nature is.” ⁹² In one way, man is in nature; he is a natural creature like all other species. But Rousseau’s conception of nature is, for d’Escherny, in its more complicated paradox, the source of moral and political change. 

D’Escherny writes that Rousseau initially presents us with a simple model and a simple governing principle—nature—which is more complicated than it first appears. There are in fact two models of nature in Rousseau’s work: one the simplistic origin, and the other, to which it is bound, the “ideal model.” This is what d’Escherny calls the Archimedean point of Rousseau’s work: “Archimedes demanded one point to support the globe, to raise the world. What Rousseau said, what Rousseau did, executed it . . . He seized upon a state that never existed, a state at odds with everything that exists; This is the state of nature, in which he finds his support. By making this metaphysical lever move, it raises and renews the whole system of our moral knowledge, [and] disrupts all of our ideas.” ⁹³ It is by taking advantage of this model, of using it and applying it, that we will regenerate the state. The word nature for Rousseau involves goodness, perfection, and he emphasizes the natural goodness of man, but ‘nature’ in its second sense is truly an “ideal model of perfection.” ⁹⁴ It is from this model, d’Escherny writes, that “all his writings breathe humanity, the taste of virtue, and the love of equality of liberty. It is on this model that we base the principles of natural and political law.” ⁹⁵ This is the model that is employed in Emile, in which the paradox of the human condition is expressed: “everything is natural in man, and he alone is the source of art, and in this sense art belongs to nature.” ⁹⁶ But the “art of forming men is the first of all the

⁹² Ibid.
⁹³ Ibid, lxxxvi.
⁹⁴ Ibid, xciv.
⁹⁵ Ibid, xcv.
⁹⁶ Ibid, lvii.
arts [and] is the foundation of the social order;" and so Rousseau claims that we must use art to make ourselves natural.

D’Escherny thus asserts that Rousseau is himself the Archimedean point of the revolutionary, regenerative spirit in revealing to men that nature, natural goodness, liberty and equality, are, to paraphrase Jonathan Marks, origins that are purposes. In order for human beings to be free and equal, according to nature and according to natural right, they must make themselves so through political regeneration. In remaking the state, they remake or regenerate themselves, through striving for a natural ideal that is not yet (and has never been) realized in the world.

This regenerative spirit, and its link to Rousseau, is most often seen only through the connection to the Jacobin Club and Robespierre’s Cult of the Supreme Being. The radical phase of the French Revolution, the Terror, was characterized by a totalizing ‘secularization’ of the Christian calendar, and a call to Nature as the supreme God. Robespierre picked up on Rousseau’s claim that men can re-create themselves, and give themselves a “second birth” through reconstituting the state in the name of nature: “they would return France to ‘nature’ and to a seconde naissance. ‘If nature created man good,’ declared Robespierre, ‘he must be brought back to nature.’” The natural-theological tones were also not lost on Robespierre. As Fayçal Falaky writes, “in his discourse, ‘Sur les rapports des idées religieuses et morales’ of May 1794, Robespierre attacks atheism and the materialist philosophers, and while urging the importance of religious faith as a means to cement the idea of the revolution, he

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97 Ibid.  
99 More will be said about this in the conclusion.
turns to the figure of Rousseau who, Robespierre writes, is ‘worthy of the ministry as preceptor of humankind.”

The natural theology—the Cult of the Supreme Being of the Jacobins was built around the Fountain of Regeneration. This monument, erected on the site of the fallen Bastille, was a statue of Isis, whose breasts poured water that was meant to represent the milk of liberty and equality. There was a cup that was passed around to all those who stood around the fountain, so that they could drink the milk of their own regeneration. At the inaugural festival, Séchelles proclaimed: “Sovereign of the savage and enlightened nations, O Nature! This immense people gathered together, at the first rays of day, before your image, is worthy of you: it is free. It is in your womb, it is in your sacred springs that it has regained its rights, that it has regenerated itself. After having traversed so many centuries of errors and servitude, it was necessary to return to the simplicity of your ways in order to regain liberty and equality. O Nature! Be the expression of the eternal attachment of the French to your laws; And that those fruitful waters which spring from your breasts, and that pure drink which nourished the first humans, consecrate in this cup of fraternity and equality the oaths which France makes to you on this day.”

So too did Séchelles state to the “French People”: “nature had made you free; Slavery then degraded you; You have regained your liberty. By this return to the rights of nature, you have regenerated yourself.”

The call to return to nature in the Jacobin club is the radical instantiation of the regenerative spirit. Here we do see the invocation of Rosseauian tropes, in calling for man to regenerate himself.

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101 Itself an homage to the Profession of a Faith of the Savoyard Vicar.
102 Archives Parlementaires de 1787 a 1860 Première Série (1787 a 1799) Tome LXXIV, Du 12 Septembre 1793 au 22 Septembre 1793.
through asserting his natural right and in celebrating the springs of natural liberty and equality.

But it is not only the radical Jacobins who invoke these themes. The regenerative spirit and the return to nature called for throughout the revolution have the same echoes. As François Furet has written, the ‘radicalism’ of the call for regeneration was present in the “men of 1789, [and in this] they showed their affinity with Rousseau. Like him, they wished to educate an entire people for happiness in and by liberty—an undertaking that, like the one articulated in *Emile*, was without precedent either in its ambition or its universality.” A search of the Parliamentary Archives through the ARTFL database shows 463 results for ‘regeneration’ in 1793, and almost the same amount, 408, in 1789. In 1789, we have calls to “regenerate the nation” and to “restore to man his first rights” to “regenerate moeurs and put an end to corruption” , “France can only be regenerated, and in some manner, have a new life, by reconstructing it on those principles as ancient as the world, which are engraved in all hearts and whose nature is to exist, though often forgotten.” In 1790, Camus makes a speech to the National Assembly: the “Frenchman again becomes a man” when he exercises “his love for liberty, his perfect enthusiasm for gentle enjoyments and the principles of nature . . . [When] our primitive rights [are] recovered, [and] all servitude annihilated, the most perfect equality [will be] established.” Into 1791 (still a moderate phase of the revolution), we see speeches against material inequality, which, if corrected

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105 Archives, Tome Premier États Généraux – Cahiers des Sénéchaussées et Baillages; Cahiers des Sénéchaussées et Baillages, Cahiers Contenant les Pouvoirs et Instructions Remi, etc.
106 Archives, Première Série, Tome VII du 5 mai 1789 au 15 septembre 1789.
107 Archives, Première Série, Tome Quatrième États Généraux, 1789, from the Third Estate of Seneschales of Nimes to be taken to the États generale.
108 Archives, Première Série, Tome XVI, Assemblée Nationale Constituante du 31 mai 1790 au 8 juillet 1790, M. Camus.
toward equality, would “regenerate les moeurs and make men simpler and better”\textsuperscript{109}; Duport counsels the National Assembly: “may your views . . . be directed toward the means of inspiring the people with generality . . and a profound humanity; [cultivate the] virtues . . so natural, which form the most beautiful character that man can receive from nature and society. To do this, make man respectable to man; increase, reinforce with all the power of the laws, the idea that he must have of his own dignity, [and] you will have done everything by inspiring in him the principle of all the virtues, I mean the respect for himself and the pride which is founded not on vain distinctions, but on the full enjoyment of all the rights which belong to man”\textsuperscript{110}; in 1792: “when all the ferments of our old depravities will be destroyed, austere morals will then have regenerated the species . . . When servitude [has] disappeared, [and there is] a truly new posterity, [there will be] a generation of men created by the constitution and worthy of perfecting it because they will be better . . . [Then will we] open or renew to the human race the true age of glory and bliss”\textsuperscript{111}; on the 10\textsuperscript{th} of August [1792], “the decrees of the legislative body. . . had regenerated [the people] to liberty and equality”\textsuperscript{112}; this year “a nation at last broke its chains, it regenerated itself.”\textsuperscript{113}

The Declaration of the Rights of Man of 1789, which asserted that the “aim of all political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man,” and the debates over its terms as it changed form over the years of the revolution, relied on men asserting those rights by nature and through regenerating the morals and institutions of the state. In regenerating the state, they were, as they knew, regenerating themselves. Human beings must remake the state, and in the process make themselves into the bearers of natural

\textsuperscript{109} Archives, Première Série, Tome XXIC du 10 mars 1791 au 12 avril 1791.
\textsuperscript{110} Archives, Première Série, Tome XXVI du 12 mai au 5 juin 1791, M. Duport.
\textsuperscript{111} Archives, Première Série, Tome XXXIX du 22 février au 14 mars 1792.
\textsuperscript{112} Archives, Première Série, M. Lavigne, Assemblée Nationale Législative.
\textsuperscript{113} Archives, Première Série, Tome XXXVII du 2 au 28 janvier 1792.
right: a process that will make them good, free and equal, and thus in accordance with a nature that does not at present exist. They must use human art to make themselves natural; thus they must use what they are, to become what they might be. For this regeneration to occur, human beings must have been turned toward what they might be—turned toward the good—and it is in this respect, “by virtue of the project of regeneration that the Revolution belongs to Rousseau . . . like him, the revolutionaries wanted to create a new man.” As Mona Ozouf has written, this “new man is at once the beginning and the end of the enterprise,” and indeed this is precisely what d’Escherny recognized in the philosophy, and the natural man, of Rousseau.

The new man of the French Revolution

Though this regenerative idea of the new man was seen through Rousseau, it was not entirely of Rousseau. If it is by virtue of the project of regeneration that the revolution belongs to Rousseau, this is only by virtue of Rousseau belonging to the broader natural-theological science of eighteenth century France. The very concept of ‘regeneration’ contains both theological and scientific roots. In both the Encyclopédie and the Dictionary of the French Academy, regeneration was seen as having two meanings. These two meanings are listed in the Dictionary of the French Academy in 1762: 1) the regeneration of the flesh/ it is said in chemistry la régénaration des métaux; and 2) speaking of baptism/ it is said figuratively for

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114 See Rousseau, Social Contract, 141.
116 Mona Ozouf, L’homme régénéré: essais sur la révolution Française (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), 157. Translations are my own. Ozouf has more to say about Rousseau’s relationship to regeneration, which will be addressed in the next section.
Renaissance, *There is no salvation without regeneration in Jesus Christ.* 117 By 1835, the French Academy had listed a third figurative definition: “It is used figuratively and means Reformation, improvement, renewal. *The regeneration of morals, the regeneration of a people.*” 118 In the previous chapters, I have demonstrated that the overall transformation of this idea owes its debt to the revolutions in natural science, in which Buffon and Bonnet came to see the natural world as regenerative, and thus participating in a progressive natural history. The human being, as the only active agent of regeneration in the world, was to use the sites of morality and politics to bring about his own self-regeneration through perfecting himself in perfecting his conditions. Rousseau, as I have also demonstrated, was a participant in this same natural-theological enterprise.

It is, however, only Bonnet who uses the language of regeneration explicitly, and his theory of palingenetic history is not fully developed until his *Palingénésie Philosophique* in 1769. While the first appearance of palingenesis was in reference to the self-regenerating polyp, the political and historical use of the term has been attributed by some to the political use of regeneration by Mirabeau (the elder; the younger was the revolutionary), who employed the term to describe the regeneration of the nation in his *L’ami des hommes, ou traité de la population* in 1756. 119 There is also one use of regeneration in d’Alembert’s Preliminary Discourse to the *Encyclopédie*, in which he discusses the “regeneration of ideas” 120 (though it should be noted that d’Alembert’s Preliminary Discourse is itself indebted to Buffon’s description of his philosophic method in Volume One of *Histoire Naturelle*). Neither of these sources on their own come close, however, to explaining the

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117 Dictionary of the French Academy, 1762.
118 Dictionary of the French Academy, 1835.
explosion of the regenerative discourse in the revolutionary period, and they do not explain the dominant and robust natural-theological tone of its invocation.

Scholars who have recently discussed the invocation of regeneration in revolutionary discourse have tied the political use to either the biological or the theological root. Antoine de Baecques’ *The Body Politic* focuses on the corporeal metaphor, linking ‘regeneration’ to its comparability to the regeneration of the body of the state.\(^{121}\) Lucien Jaume’s recent *La religieux et le politique dans la révolution Française: l’idée de régénération* focuses, as its title suggests, on the religious origins. Jaume denies that there is any significant influence through the scientific sense of the term, and also denies its ‘philosophic’ import amongst the lumières. Its usage is “strictly religious.”\(^{122}\) Gilles Barroux swings the opposite way in *Philosophie de la régénération: medicine, biologie, mythologies*, through drawing a line of heritage from the political and social regeneration of the revolutionary period to the natural sciences, primarily in the work of Charles Bonnet and his interest in biological regeneration.\(^{123}\) Taken together, these works explain many pieces of the heritage of regeneration, but they do not add up in their particulars to a general account of the whole. It is the theological aspect of the natural science that makes it important; it is the inheritance of that new world-view in Rousseau that informs his philosophy, and in turn informs his association with regeneration in the revolution; and it is the theological-political application

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121 This is hardly doing justice to de Baecques’ text, which is masterful, and it is a book to which I myself owe a large debt for pointing me in new and interesting directions.

122 Lucien Jaume, *La Religieux et le Politique dans la Révolution Française: l’Idée de Régénération* (Paris: PUF, 2015), 7. Jaume notes that Rousseau does not anywhere use the term regeneration, though also notes that there are some usages in philosophy, namely in d’Holbach’s speaking of the “regeneration of the political body” in his *La Politique Naturelle* (1773). This, I would point out, is published 4 years after Bonnet’s *Palingénésie Philosophique*, and almost a decade after his *Contemplation of Nature*.

of the idea of nature to the development of the rights of man in the revolutionary period that brings this idée-force\textsuperscript{124} to its culmination.

Rousseau alone does not explain the epochal tones of Buffon and Bonnet in the pamphlet, the Political Painter, or the Rate of Present Operations of 1789: “the epoch of a new revolution is moving on the wings of time . . . The earth opens up, entire regions disappear; the sea takes their place; the universe seems to reach its dissolution. But no, on the contrary, another world has arisen from its waters, under which it has been fertilized and made fruitful, in order to feed thousands of generations, who will disappear one day along with it, when the need for a renewal has returned. The course of events is the same on the surface of the earth. All that exists, all that crawls on the earth, disappears only to provoke a new procreation. Thus everything is destroyed and re-created alternately: everything masters and yields in its turn. This variation stems from nature. It makes itself felt morally, physically, politically.”\textsuperscript{125} This regenerative universe is the universe of Buffon and Bonnet, and in it man is seen as the regenerative agent: capable of effecting epochal change through regenerating himself in the image of his own moral and political perfection. This position was conflated with Rousseau’s in the remarks of Fauchet, who declared an “epoch of regeneration”; and Mercier declares the beginning of a new epoch of human history in his “Farewell to the Year 1789”: “Great year! You will be the regenerating year, and you will be known by that name. History will extol your great deeds.”\textsuperscript{126}

The revolutionaries here express a Buffonian and Bonnetian palingenetic consciousness of making history through remaking themselves. They have borne a new

\textsuperscript{124} This term is borrowed from Alfred Fouillée: Alfred Fouillée, L’évolutionnisme des idées-forces (Paris: Alcan, 1890).
\textsuperscript{125} Cited in de Baecque, 137.
epoch of history through effecting a palingenetic re-birth of themselves.\textsuperscript{127} As was concluded in the third chapter, placing the capacity to enact a “second birth,” or regeneration, in the hands of man made history, politics and society the definitive site of human manipulation: it is his creativity, his capacity to invent, to speak in and to comprehend universal ideas, that informs his conception of the possibilities of his future, and which separates him from the animal kingdom. This idea of a capacity for perfectibility was shared by Rousseau, and it is an idea of the uniqueness of human nature that sees us as distinctively capable of shaping the world around us, and of making our own politics and our own history. In the Great Chain of Being, we are the only self-renewing animals. By taking up Leibniz’s account of the progression of the Great Chain of Being, and turning this into the progressive epochs of Nature, Buffon and Bonnet no longer saw the future as a matter of nature unfolding her infinite degrees, but as a matter of man participating in that unfolding. It was the vision of a redemptive future that inspired their account of the spirituality of man’s soul, and the palingenetic consciousness of the self-regenerative human being.

In crafting an image of natural man, Rousseau gave shape to the redemptive future for human beings.\textsuperscript{128} While it is true that Rousseau did not share the enthusiastic faith that history was inevitably progressive, he did share the faith that things that were once good were no longer, and that it was within the human capacity to strive for the good through moral and political reconstitution. The human being’s distinctive place in the Great Chain of Being was one that made human beings into creatures of perfectibility. It made them into

\textsuperscript{127} Stephen Gaukroger also ties Buffon and Condorcet together through Condorcet’s account of scientific knowledge (61) and thorough his \textit{Equisse d’un tableau historique des progrès de l’esprit humain}, in which Condorcet (like Buffon) divides historical and human progress into epochs, ending with the “Future Progress of Mankind”: “experience of the past enables [man] to foresee, with considerable probability, future appearances.” Stephen Gaukroger, \textit{The Natural and the Human} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 25, 61.  
\textsuperscript{128} This “new man” of Rousseau’s, the natural man, is therefore more akin to Jesus than he is to Adam. We ought to think here of Rousseau’s \textit{Allegory} in which Rousseau presents two prototypes, and favors the latter (the unnamed Jesus figure) for the manner in which he is able to change men’s hearts.
regenerators. The enactment of our distinctive nature is the capacity to change our institutions, and if we truly want to change our institutions for the better, we must be in a position to change ourselves. Our eyes must be turned toward a future good that corrects the degeneracy and degenerate conditions in the world around us, looking toward the condition in which “everything is renewed and nothing degenerates.”

Mona Ozouf writes that in the French Revolutionary period the “new man” was born. L’homme régénéré is the both the creator and recipient of his new identity. For man to be regenerated as the bearer of natural right, he must regenerate himself. The biblical regeneration of “putting off the old man and putting on the new man” (Eph 5:22-24) is no longer a passive receptivity to the grace of God, but is an activity of the human being that reconstitutes both the world and himself. Ozouf writes, however, that especially in the invocation of Rousseau, this calling forth of the “new man” gives rise to politically dangerous consequences. A radical instantiation of regeneration is complete renewal; that is, for its fulfillment the past must be rejected, and things must be purified. This is indeed what happened in the Terror, when Robespierre’s full-scale attempt to eliminate the old orders in the name of the purity of nature also led him to eliminate anyone who he took to be representative of impurity. So too do theories such as the Abbé Grégoire’s develop out of

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130 Ozouf, L’homme régénéré, 157.
this rhetoric, in which he believed that the principles of natural right could regenerate
degenerate religions and citizens.\textsuperscript{132}

It is typical to cast Rousseau and regeneration as the source of the Terror, and of the
violent and repressive means of achieving political unity and control.\textsuperscript{133} On this reading, if
there was a “new man”—the regenerated and regenerating man—born in the French
Revolution, he leads inevitably to totalitarianism and to contemporary fascism. Roger
Griffin has indeed made this argument in \textit{The Nature of Fascism}, arguing that regenerative,
or palingenetic, politics is a form of “populist ultra-nationalism” that was born of the
regenerative thinking of our earlier centuries.\textsuperscript{134} \textit{Palingeneses}, Griffin writes, invokes “the
myth of renewal, of rebirth. Etymologically, the term ‘palingeneses’, deriving from \textit{palin}
(again, anew) and \textit{genesis} (creation, birth), refers to the sense of a new start or of
regeneration after a phase of crisis or decline, which can be associated just as much with
mystical (for example the Second Coming) as secular realities (for example the New
Germany).”\textsuperscript{135} Waller Newell similarly draws a direct link from Rousseau to Robespierre to
Heinrich Himmler: we can trace a line from “Rousseau’s Legislator, who ‘re-creates’ human
nature with a godlike determination, and from there to the incorruptible Robespierre, a prime
example of the ‘secular saint’ who destroys thousands, without personal malice, for the sake

\textsuperscript{132} Abbé Grégoire, \textit{Essai sur la régénération physique, morale et politique des Juifs: Ouvrage couronné par la
Société Royale des sciences et des arts de Metz, le 23 août 1788}. 1789. As the authoritative source on Grégoire
and the idea of regeneration see: Alyssa Sepinwall, \textit{The Abbé Grégoire and the French Revolution} (Berkeley:
\textsuperscript{133} See, for example, Joseph de Maistre, \textit{Considerations on France} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
1994 [1797]); Hippolyte Taine, \textit{The Ancien Regime} (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1876); Simon
\textsuperscript{134} Roger Griffin, \textit{The Nature of Fascism} (London: Pinter Publishers, 1991), 32.
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid, 33.
of the collective. It leads finally to ascetic police state mass murderers including Dzerzhinsky and Himmler.”\textsuperscript{136}

It is certain that Rousseau would have been adamant, as he always was, that he had been misread; that history has misread him. I too believe that history has misread Rousseau, and regeneration. We are still living in the world of the “new man” born in eighteenth century France, and not because (or not only because) we can trace a politically abhorrent history back to the regenerative tradition. This “new man” is the very thing that holds the structure of human rights together, as it held together the \textit{Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen}. For man to assert his rights in eighteenth century France, nature had to serve as both an origin story, and a final good. Human beings found themselves in a world in which they were not free and equal, and they desired to be so. The world would be made better, the world would be \textit{good}, if the natural rights of man were made actual. For natural rights to come into being, however, man had to be the agent of his own transformation: his distinctively regenerative nature had to be employed to \textit{change and transform} that very nature itself. The eradication of the corruptions to which man’s particularized and divided human nature led him required an image of what he longed to be. Natural right, asserted as the \textit{true nature of man}, only took effect when man was able to change himself. The new man of the eighteenth century—the regenerator—is the man of the modern and contemporary age. We still believe that by nature human beings are free and equal, and we still perceive that our own corruptions have prevented the world from according with nature. To make the world

reflect this natural image, we must change it. And to change the world, we must change ourselves. No longer subject to inequalities, and no longer unfree, the world would be made better—indeed, the world would be *good*—if it were *in accordance with nature*, and we only have our all-too-human natures to employ to get us there.

Buffon and Bonnet held an account of the world, and of humanity, that saw us on a course of inevitable progress. Our regenerative nature must be employed to improve our conditions, because in the process of bettering our moral and social world, we perfect ourselves. Rousseau did not see the inevitability of progress, though he saw its possibility. Through his natural theology he provided the means by which human nature could redeem itself in the name of nature, and in the name of a natural goodness from which we have been divided. To do this, he provided an image of natural liberty and equality that would allow us to denature ourselves; to turn away from whatever corruptions we have inflicted on ourselves. The institution of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* was one such mechanism of human transformation. The corruptions to which it has succumbed, whether under a Terror or the colonial imposition of universal right, are, he would say, inevitably the consequence of our human nature.

But we have been transformed. The faith in human rights and in the natural sanctity of freedom and equality in the Western world are the debts we owe to Rousseau, and to the natural theology of the eighteenth century as a whole. It is, however, not in the achievement, but in the striving for the good, that we are human, coupled with the faith that what we strive for will be realized. The gap between what we are and what we could be is filled by the potential we have to regenerate the world and to regenerate ourselves.
Upon having read the *Second Discourse*, Voltaire wrote to Rousseau in 1755 thanking him for his new book “against the human species.” “No one,” Voltaire writes, “has ever been so witty as you are in trying to turn us into brutes: to read your book makes one long to go on all fours.”\(^1\) Drawing on Voltaire’s characterization of Rousseau’s work, Charles de Pallisot staged a satirical play, *The Philosophes*, in 1793, “in which a character alleged to be Rousseau fell on all fours to stuff his mouth with grass.”\(^2\) So too does Reimarus write: “it is well known that M. Rousseau, of Geneva, has lately exerted his imagination, in representing to us, among other animals in a desert, an original man in his natural state, as a brute or something worse (*plus bête que les bêtes*). This is not done, with the view of other writers of the Law of Nature, to shew . . . that such a state is rather unnatural and extremely miserable . . . but to maintain that nature has formed man only for a brutal state, and that he would be most happy in such a state.”\(^3\) Rousseau was accused of being the “apologist of bestialness.”\(^4\)

As I documented in the first chapter, this perception of Rousseau’s philosophy, and its relationship to the French Revolution, persisted throughout the counter-revolutionary literature. Hippolyte Taine phrases his aversion to the political anarchy caused by this corruption as “a return to nature[. What is meant] by this [is] the abolition of society, the war-cry of the whole Encyclopedic battalion. The same shout is heard in another quarter,

\(^1\) Voltaire, *Letter to J.J. Rousseau*, 30 August 1755.
\(^3\) Hermann Samuel Reimarus, *Principal truths of Natural Religion Defended and Illustrated* (London, 1766 [1755]), 316.
coming from the Rousseau battalion.” The return to nature was cast as one in which man was made animal; in which liberty and equality were grounded in a state that man shares with the beasts. This makes man equal to the beasts, and all of the beastliness of the revolution can be attributed to man having lost his dignity. The Jacobins were, apparently, so committed to equality and liberty, and to the equality of man and beast in nature, that a story was told about their liberation of the animals of the king’s menagerie on the 10th of August, 1792.

Rousseau and the revolutionaries are, on this reading, grouped with the materialist and atheistic philosophers. Barruel writes that the revolution spurred on the “light which Philosophy ha[d] spread”: “What are these great events which the learned atheist claims in the name of philosophy? They are those of a Revolution which discovers man breaking the shackles of slavery, and shaking off the yoke with which audacious Despots had burdened them. It is the people recovering their inalienable right, of making alone the laws, of despising Princes, of changing or continuing them according to their will and pleasure.”

Atheistic and materialist philosophy caused man to equate all living things: Taine writes that the philosophes claim man “must not forget, if he would comprehend his own being, that, along with himself, other lives exist in his vicinity, graduated up to him and issuing from the same trunk. . . He is there as the part of a whole, by virtue of being a physical body, a chemical composition, an animated organism, a sociable animal, among other bodies, other compositions, other social animals, all analogous to him.” Science and material philosophy—the study of nature—renders man equal to the beast.

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This is a position, and a reading, of eighteenth century France and the revolution that we have inherited from the counter-revolutionary scholarship. Rousseau explicitly distinguished himself from, and criticized, materialist philosophy, as did his infamous follower, the Jacobin Robespierre. Rousseau’s Savoyard Vicar proclaims in his Profession of Faith: “Man is the king of the earth he inhabits; for not only does he tame all animals, not only does his industry put the elements at his disposition, but alone on earth knows how to do so, and he also appropriates to himself, by means of contemplation, the very stars he cannot approach. Show me another animal on earth who knows how to make use of fire and who knows how to wonder at the sun. What! I can observe and know the beings and their relations, I can sense what order, beauty and virtue are, I can contemplate the universe and raise myself up to the hand which governs it, I can love the good and do it, and I would compare myself to the brutes? Abjct soul, it is your gloomy philosophy which makes you similar to them. Or rather, you want in vain to debase yourself.” As for the materialist philosopher, he continues, “who comes to tell me that trees and rocks think, [and] may entangle me in his subtle arguments, I can see in him only a sophist speaking in bad faith who prefers to attribute sentiments to rocks than to grant a soul to man.” Rousseau himself had a life-long argument with Helvétius, the later stage of which occurred when Helvétius perceived correctly that the Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar was an attack on his materialism. The Jacobins also saw materialist philosophy as “vice-stricken” and contrary to the human and political good. In ‘Sur les rapports des idées religieuses et morales,’

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8 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Emile; Or, on Education, trans. Allan Bloom (Basic Books, 1979), 278, my emphasis.
9 Ibid, 279, my emphasis.
(1794), Robespierre “attacks atheism and materialist philosophers . . . while urging the
importance of religious faith as a means to cement the ideas of the revolution,” which he
placed in the natural theology of Rousseau.\footnote{Ibid, 96 note 2.}

The study of nature, too, is cast (as in Taine’s analysis above) as one that is intimately
bound with a kind of materialist and atheistic skepticism. This does not only apply to
philosophers such as Helvétius and La Mettrie, but to taxonomists like Linnaeus, who
questioned the distinction of the man from the ape. This accounting of nature has been
documented in the first chapter of this thesis; and the response of Buffon, Bonnet, and
Rousseau has occupied the rest. Far from degrading man in placing him in the natural order
of things—in the Great Chain of Being—they raised him up above the animals, and saw a
“spiritual principle” that could redeem his imperfections and corruptions. Relying not on the
revelation of Scripture, but on the revelation of the “book of nature,” they saw the human
being as part of the natural order, and yet distinct from it. Our distinction is in our capacity
to remake our own moral, social, and political conditions in striving for goodness and the
perfection of ourselves. It is a turn away from degeneracy and corruption, and toward a
future that can redeem what Rousseau called our “sad privilege of error.”\footnote{Rousseau,
\emph{Emile}, 290; \emph{Moral Letters}, in \emph{The Collected Writings of Rousseau} (Hanover: University Press of
New England, 1990-2009), xii, 197.} This was a
natural theology that saw human nature as striving for natural goodness, wholeness, and
unity. In creating the conditions of our own betterment, through the fulfillment of natural
liberty and equality, we remake and thus redeem ourselves.

Rescuing this natural theological tradition from the annals of history is not merely
scholarly quibbling. The reading of the French Revolution as inspired by atheistic natural

\footnote{Rousseau, \emph{Emile}, 160.}
philosophy obscures and ignores the studies of nature that did in fact have an effect on the regenerative ideals of the revolutionary spirit. The “return to nature” of the eighteenth century, and its political result, was not a reduction of man to his animal state; it was a means to the salvation of the human being that rested on a distinction of the human being from the rest of the natural kingdom. The polyp that started it all, which astounded natural scientists for its seeming aberration from the rest of the animal kingdom, became part of the natural order through being seen as a natural miracle as opposed to a natural monster. This self-regenerative creature set the minds of the natural scientists on a new course: one that would reform their understanding of the natural kingdom, and their understanding of the human being. Man was now the active agent of the regenerative potential of the world, and of himself. Rousseau saw in this capacity the possibility both for improvement, and for our further corruption. We can be either monsters or miracles to ourselves. So too can the human being’s place in nature be seen as either monstrous or miraculous: we are in one way aberrations of the natural order in being capable of remaking and perfecting ourselves, but we can strive to become divinities through orienting ourselves to the unity and goodness that we lack, and, in the words of Buffon, from which we have degenerated. The French Revolution strove to put in place the conditions under which we could give ourselves a second birth, and through which we could remake ourselves for the better. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen and the revolution did not return us to our animal nature. It did the opposite. Human, natural rights are visions of a future good that require human activity, self-regeneration, and our “spiritual principle,” for their fulfillment.

Alexis de Tocqueville saw this transformative theology for what it was: “Though the men who made the Revolution were more skeptical than our [American] contemporaries as
regards the Christian verities, they had anyhow one belief, and an admirable one, that we
today have not; they believed in themselves. Firmly convinced of the perfectibility of man,
they had faith in his innate virtue, placed him on a pedestal, and set no bounds to their
devotion to his cause . . . They had a fanatical faith in their vocation—that of transforming
the social system, root and branch, and regenerating the whole human race.”

Thus “the ideal the French Revolution set before it was not merely a change in the French social system
but nothing short of a regeneration of the whole human race. It created an atmosphere of
missionary fervor and, indeed, assumed all the aspects of a religious revival . . . It would
perhaps be truer to say that it developed into a species of religion,” a religion which has
“overrun the whole world.”

This religion of the return to nature, a calling forth of our
natural rights of liberty and equality, is founded on a faith that a future possible world will be
the source of our salvation. This is a faith that still courses through our political and moral
aspirations, and the discourse of human rights; it has overrun the whole world.

We are regenerative political animals.

*Nosce te ipsum.*

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Books, 1955), I.3, 13. Thanks to Rebecca Kingston for pointing me to Tocqueville’s regenerative analysis. It
might be of interest to note that Tocqueville named both Rousseau and Buffon as philosophical influences:
Tocqueville as Philosophical Historians: Liberty, Determinism, and the Prospects for Freedom,” in *Montesquieu
Appendix I


Volume I (Premier Discourse): 1749
Volume II (Histoire Générale des Animaux, Histoire Naturelle de l’Homme): 1749
Volume III (Description du Cabinet du Roi, Histoire Naturelle de l’Homme): 1749

Volume IV (Quadrupèdes I): 1753
Volume V (Quadrupèdes II): 1755
Volume VI (Quadrupèdes III): 1756
Volume VII (Quadrupèdes IV): 1758
Volume VIII (Quadrupèdes V): 1760
Volume IX (Quadrupèdes VI): 1760
Volume X (Quadrupèdes VII): 1763
Volume XI (Quadrupèdes VIII): 1764
Volume XII (Quadrupèdes IX): 1764
Volume XIII (Quadrupèdes X): 1765
Volume XIV (Quadrupèdes XI): 1766
Volume XV (Quadrupèdes XII): 1767

*Histoire Naturelle des Oiseaux* (1770-1783)
Volumes XVI-XXIV

*Histoire Naturelle des Minéraux* (1783-1788)
Volumes XXV-XXIX

*Supplements à l’Histoire Naturelle, Générale et Particulièr e*
Volume XXX (Supplement I): 1774
Volume XXXI (Supplement II): 1775
Volume XXXII (Supplement III): 1776
Volume XXXIII (Supplement IV): 1777
Volume XXXIV (Supplement V): 1779
Volume XXXV (Supplement VI): 1782
Volume XXXVI (Supplement VII): 1789
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