

Thesis Title: Rousseau, In Search of the Authentic

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Rousseau, In Search of the Authentic

Be yourself; follow your heart. For better or for worse, such has become the ethos of our time and the motto befitting the contemporary man¹. The need for authentic expression—albeit vaguely defined—seems to have gradually taken the central seat of modern psyche, over the need for knowledge, truth, wisdom, and virtue. We have Rousseau to thank for this profound revolution. For he was perhaps the sharpest antagonist of modern hypocrisy, and the father of a new culture that holds individual authenticity² as a supreme good in and of itself. But what exactly is authenticity according to Rousseau? Moreover, is civilized authenticity, as opposed to savage-authenticity, attainable?

Previous scholars have interpreted Rousseauian authenticity to be numerous things: sincerity, autonomy, a new ethics³, and even a new religion⁴. Yet the answer to the seemingly straightforward question of “what is” remains surprisingly ambiguous. This is partially because Rousseau was often apt at clarifying what the authentic self is *not*⁵, but never presented a completely-formulated theory of what it *is*, relying instead on fictional characters (Julie and Emile), speculative history (the state of nature and the good savage), and autobiographical

¹ Here, the contemporary man refers to mainly individuals (men and women) in cosmopolitans such as New York, Shanghai, London, and Paris. In rural communities, religious and traditional virtues are perhaps still dominant.

² Authenticity is not a term that Rousseau directly used, but it incorporates some ideas that Rousseau put at the center of his works, such as sincerity, the sentiment of existence, and a return to the inner self. Sincerity is being true to others and being free of hypocrisy. Authenticity is a more demanding term; it requires being true not only to others, but more importantly to oneself.

³ Ferrara, *Modernity and Authenticity*; Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*

⁴ Melzer, *The Origin of the Counter-Enlightenment: Rousseau and the New Religion of Sincerity*

⁵ See Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, and *Letter to M. D’Alembert on the Theatre*.

writings (*The Reveries of a Solitary Walker*) to describe rather than define the so-called “sentiment de l’existence”⁶.

This essay re-examines the Rousseauian ideal of the authentic self, drawing mainly from his layered critique of bourgeois hypocrisy in the two discourses and *The Letter to M. D’Alembert*, his ambitious educational program to create an authentic man in *Emile*, his political vision to establish a Sovereign nation of free citizens in *On the Social Contract*, and his final retreat to nature in *The Reveries of a Solitary Walker*. Upon closer look, I argue that the Rousseauian authenticity is, firstly, distinct from the notions of sincerity and autonomy. It is, secondly, problematic when interpreted to be either intimacy to one’s inner self, or a new kind of ethics, because it remains ultimately unclear what “the inner self” is— besides spontaneous and often deceiving sentiments —when stripped of all social elements. The authentic self, therefore, can only be an aesthetic ideal, as opposed to an ethical or philosophical one. Masked under the pretense of “the natural”, it glorifies the whole, the masculine, and the rustic. Specifically, it is an aesthetics embedded in concrete imageries, an ideal destined exclusively- despite Rousseau’s claim otherwise- for certain kinds of people, and a status attained only through a process of careful design, performance, and manipulation. Despite Rousseau’s famous disdain of the arts, his apparent preference of the functional over the beautiful, his emphatic loathing of the delusional and the false, the Rousseauian authentic self is a an image most moving, an aesthetics most seductive, and a myth most inspiring.

Yet how authentic can Rousseau’s creation of the authentic self be? Rousseau’s inability to conceal himself as the creator and propagator of a specific aesthetics, reveals a fundamental

⁶ A case could be made that Rousseau’s choice of the literary forms corresponds nicely to his understanding of authenticity. That is, authenticity cannot (and should not) be formally defined and philosophized, because it belongs to the realm of the heart, not of the mind. It can only be expressed through an aestheticized representation of what authenticity looks like or feels like.

difficulty in conceptualizing authenticity: to articulate, to represent, and to aestheticize the authentic inevitably self-compromises. Furthermore, beyond the content of Rousseau's books, Rousseau's personal struggle to be an authentic man in an inauthentic age is yet another manifestation of the numerous paradoxes of authenticity. Did Rousseau succeed at proving the possibility of being authentic in a civilized world? This is, for me, the one question that any investigation of Rousseauian authenticity should end with.

At the end of the day, this essay cannot possibly disentangle most of the tensions in Rousseau and his works—I'm too humbled by the preceding scholarly efforts to attempt such a task. It does, hopefully, help to reconcile some tensions in Rousseau's critique of the arts and his personal contributions to it, his simultaneous rejection of exterior motives and obsession of self-defense, as well as his taste for solitude and longing for community.

The rest of the essay is structured in three parts. I shall first approach the Rousseauian authentic self by reconstructing and synthesizing his critique of the modern society. Hopefully, I will prove that Rousseauian authenticity should not be interpreted as sincerity, autonomy, intimacy to the self, or an ethical ideal. In the second part of this thesis, I shall delineate authenticity as an aesthetic ideal, with concrete imageries, elements, designs, and a well-staged process of creation. In the last part, I shall speak more about the inherent paradoxes and limitations of Rousseauian authenticity.

I. Approaching the Authentic from the Corrupt

I.1. Hypocrisy vs. Sincerity

Rousseau considers hypocrisy to be the most prevalent malaise of his time, a time when the commercial society started to grow while the old regime died slow. Even before the

bourgeois came to be a prominent social class, inflated desires to distinguish oneself in social rank—resulting from inflamed *amour propre* and the rise of property—led to intensified social competition and “the hidden desire to profit at the expense of others”⁷. As Berman commented, Rousseau’s description of social competition was not limited to the domain of the economic. He saw presciently that “once any area of life was defined as property, all areas of life would be redefined as property”⁸. The expansion of *amour propre* creates a universe of vain desires that soon turn into necessities. Thrown in the whirlpool of this endlessly competitive society founded on market exchanges, one has “to appear to be different from what one in fact was”⁹, and thereafter comes “ostentatious display, deceitful cunning, and all the vices that follow in their wake”¹⁰. The result, according to Rousseau, is the loss of sincerity, transparency¹¹, and any certainty in social interactions.

“No more **sincere** friendships, no more **real** esteem, no more **well-founded** confidence. Suspicions, offenses, fears, coolness, reserve, hatred, betrayal continually **conceal** themselves behind that **uniform and deceitful veil of civility**, behind that much lauded urbanity we owe to the enlightenment of our age.”¹² [emphasis my own]

While the salience of Rousseau’s critique is widely appreciated, its analytic rigor is questionable. Indeed, liberals like Smith and Hume offered a strong reply to this “Conflict of Interest Thesis”¹³ by noting correctly that exchanges facilitate rather than undercut mutual benefits in most cases¹⁴. Even in cases where deceit in the immediate term is profitable, honesty

⁷ Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, 100

⁸ Berman, *The Politics of Authenticity*, 147-148

⁹ Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, 100

¹⁰ Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, 100

¹¹ Starobinski (*Transparency and Obstruction*) centered his thesis around the theme of transparency.

“Everything being reduced to appearances, everything becomes fabricated and staged -- honor, friendship, virtue, and often even the vices themselves”. (Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, 117)

¹² Rousseau, *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, 13

¹³ See Griswold, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith: A Philosophical Encounter*, 154

¹⁴ Smith, *Wealth of Nations* I.ii.2. “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their

is the best policy in the long term¹⁵. Rousseau, due to the limitation of his time, might have missed the crucial idea of the mutually beneficial trade in market exchanges. Nevertheless, it is clear that the authentic self for Rousseau cannot be hypocritical.

Does it then follow that the opposite of hypocrisy—sincerity¹⁶, so to speak— equals authenticity? I argue that sincerity and authenticity are two distinct concepts. The sincere is not always authentic, whereas the authentic is always sincere, for they do not know how to be fake. One need only to look at Rousseau’s own examples to spot the difference. Julie, the main character of Rousseau’s novel *The New Heloise*, exemplifies a woman who is sincere in her dedication to the role of a prudent wife, a loving mother, and a loyal friend, but who, in doing so, fails the test of authenticity. In suppressing her passionate love for Saint-Preux, Julie betrays her own heart. She became in the end, as Lord Bomston admonished beforehand, “respected but contemptible”¹⁷. Julie’s virtues are in fact “sacrifices”¹⁸ she made that erode her sense of identity step by step. Julie’s sincerity, in this case, is the result of immense emotion-work¹⁹ to bring her feeling and expression in harmony, an excruciating process during which her identity becomes fragmented. Authenticity, on the contrary, certainly should not require such effort or lead to such

humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages. Nobody but a beggar chooses to depend chiefly upon the benevolence of his fellow-citizens.”

¹⁵ Hume leaves open the possibility that a minority of well-skilled liars could perhaps deceive their counterparties on a continuous basis, but he dismisses this concern by asserting that such cases would be very rare and irrelevant to the general culture. (*A Treatise of Human Nature*)

¹⁶ Sincerity here as defined by doing what one says and saying what one does, without deceitful traps that are intended to profit at another’s expense.

¹⁷ Rousseau, *Julie, or the New Heloise*: III, 18. It is an interesting question what Rousseau’s attitude and judgement towards Julie really is. I suspect that Rousseau sees Julie as respected but lamentable, given the fact that Rousseau portrayed the psychological emptiness and miseries that Julie experienced towards the end of her life as she re-examined her earlier choices to forgo her love with Saint-Preux.

¹⁸ Ferrara, 102.

¹⁹ Ferrara, 104

disunity of the self, as Rousseau repeatedly stated that what is required is simply listening to the voice of heart²⁰.

I.2. Enslavement vs. Autonomy

The second attack waged by Rousseau against what he saw as corruption of civilization is that the big cities, with all the customs, norms, and cultural authoritarianism, deprives individuals of their psychological autonomy and turns them into a conforming herd without authentic ideas²¹.

“Incessantly civility requires, propriety demands; incessantly it is customs that are followed, never one’s own genius. On no longer dares to appear to be what one is; and under this perpetual constraint, the men who make up that herd called society, placed in the same circumstances, will all do the same things unless more powerful motives deter them from doing so.”²²

In *The New Heloise*, Rousseau even compares them to rigid, lifeless machines incapable of creativity.

“Just as clocks are ordinarily wound up to go only twenty-four hours at a time, so these people have to go into society every night to learn what they’re going to think the next day.”²³

Conformism as a strategic move might not be a problem of true significance, if one could choose to follow social customs when engaging in the social game, while being true to oneself in private sphere. The more serious problem, for Rousseau, is that such conformity will become

²⁰ It is very ambiguous and in fact undefined what the voice of heart really means. Nevertheless, it is clear that Rousseau would not see authenticity as requiring heavy emotional work. He was always inclined towards the simple instead of the complex.

²¹ See also *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*. “Before art had fashioned our manners and taught our passions to speak a borrowed language, our morals were rustic but natural, and differences in conduct announced those of character at first glance.” (13)

²² Rousseau, *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, 13

²³ Rousseau, *Julie, or the New Heloise*, II. 14, 234

internalized, threatening to efface the original self and replace it with a subjugated self, filled with vain desires of social distinction and interpersonal domination.

“Here is man, **subjected**, so to speak, by a multitude of new needs to all of nature and especially to his fellow humans, **whose slave he in a sense becomes even in becoming their master.**”²⁴

Starobinski was well aware of this layer of Rousseau’s critique when he commented on man making himself “the slave of appearances”, of “his image of others and others’ image of him”²⁵. Such enslavement does not only take away men’s autonomous action, but also distorts their sense of value and happiness. The rich, under such social environment, “value the things they enjoy only to the extent that the poor are deprived of them”²⁶.

Enslavement is certainly the antithesis of the authentic, and we shall see more about this in our following analysis on *Emile*. That said, it does not follow that authenticity lies in autonomy. The autonomous man can be inauthentic. The citizen, as Rousseau imagined in his book *On the Social Contract*, are autonomous beings who willingly choose to defer their personal will to the general will of the Sovereign. No external force imposes such restraint on them. Rousseau in fact claims that they remain free even after the sealing of the social contract, since “obedience to the law one has prescribed to oneself is freedom”²⁷.

Are the citizens, however, authentic men? This question contains more ambiguity, to say the least. On one hand, it goes without saying that Rousseau would consider the citizens under the social contract less corrupt than the civilized man in a commercial society. On another hand,

²⁴ Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, 100

²⁵ Starobinski, *Transparency and Obstruction*, 249

²⁶ Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, 113

²⁷ Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, 176. Here, a caveat is warranted. Rousseau’s claim that the citizens are free after the formation of the social contract is debatable, given that the contract implies a complete replacement of the individual with a collective wholeness. The citizen is nothing, can do nothing, except with all the others (191). Yet, it is clear that Rousseau sees them as autonomous, in the sense that they are not forced into the social contract by external forces.

the citizens for Rousseau are most denatured, most removed from their original dispositions, most self-combatting, and therefore most inauthentic in some sense of the word. The legislator, Rousseau argues, should be capable of changing human nature and transforming each complete and solitary whole into a part of a greater whole²⁸. If being authentic means being close to our natural intuitions and dispositions, then the autonomous citizens are certainly inauthentic men. If, on the other hand, authenticity means being a unified and whole self, then perhaps the citizen can have more of a *feeling* of authenticity, for they can be made to *feel* whole and at ease with themselves, with the help of well-made social institutions and successful civil education. As Rousseau himself claimed,

“Good social institutions are those that best know how to **denature** man, to take his absolute existence from him in order to give him a relative one and 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**. A citizen of Rome was neither Caius nor Lucius; he was a Roman.”²⁹

That said, I could not help but smell collective delusion in this supposed feeling of unity and wholeness. The well-transformed citizen might have the *feeling* of authenticity, but they are not authentic. To put in another way, they are made to feel authentic only insofar as they are ignorant of their true conditions. Ferrara is getting at something important when he states that “the person who adheres totally to his or her social position or role, and grounds his or her identity on it, appears as the ultimate embodiment of inauthenticity”³⁰. What about a person who autonomously chooses to ground his or her identity on a social role? Is it really possible for an authentic being to remain authentic after consenting to total self-effacement and an adoption of an identity defined solely as a part of the collective? When the “self” is erased, there can be no

²⁸ Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, 191.

²⁹ Rousseau, *Emile*, 40.

³⁰ Ferrara, 87.

authenticity to speak of³¹. Thus, I'm inclined to conclude that authenticity and autonomy are not quite the same thing.

I.3. Self-alienation vs. Self-intimacy

The third layer of Rousseau's critique of modern malaises, and to me the most perceptive, is the idea of self-estrangement, or self-alienation. Rousseau is concerned that constant role-playing gradually estranges us from our true self. In his attack on the profession of acting, he proclaimed,

“What is the talent of the actor? It is the art of **counterfeiting** himself, of putting on another character than his own, of appearing different than he is, of becoming passionate in cold blood, of saying what he does not think as naturally as if he really did think it, and, finally, **of forgetting his own place by dint of taking another's**. ...What, then, is the spirit that the actor receives from his estate? A mixture of abjectness, duplicity, ridiculous conceit, and disgraceful abasement which **renders him fit for all sorts of roles except for the most noble of all, that of man, which he abandons.**”³²

Griswold argues that self-forgetfulness comes to place when “theatrical sense of ‘act’ morphs into unself-conscious ‘actions’”³³. This corrosive effect of acting is apparently not exclusive to the theatre, and even the smartest minds can be susceptible to such corrosion without being aware of it³⁴. Social role-playing leads ultimately to self-falsification, with which comes “the loss of capacity for critical reflection, for resistance to the social script, and hence a loss of self-

³¹ One might reply that the self can be a dynamic rather than a static entity, and therefore the newly-formed citizen-self counts as a valid and authentic self so long as the citizen feels at ease with his or her own conscience. This view is questionable, because the citizen-self is by its nature a self that cannot exist without the collective. Such a self cannot qualify as a complete, whole self that Rousseau often seems to associate with the authentic and the free.

³² Rousseau, *Letter to M. D'Alembert*, 79-80.

³³ Griswold, 162

³⁴ Griswold, 167-168. The epistemological vulnerability of self-effacing desire is the idea that those who live “outside” of themselves have no idea that they are doing so. The person who believes that certain things are desirable may not have the capability to recognize the self-effacing nature of such desires. Think about cults, or any other kind of collective self-delusion. The believers have no idea that what they sincerely believe in are delusions that often distance them from their original self. Once they realize such self-delusion, they no longer are believers. But such realization is often difficult.

direction”³⁵. Rousseau thus observes that the savage lives within himself, whereas the sociable man lives always outside himself³⁶, estranged from his inner being.

Rousseau draws a key conclusion that social role-playing does not just take us away from freedom, but also from *ourselves*. For Smith³⁷, this does not pose a fundamental problem. If anything, to live outside of oneself, is needed. The imagined impartial spectator—taking a third-person perspective outside of the self—serves the crucial role of adjudicating what is just from what is not. For Rousseau, this is tragic, since self-alienation takes away part of the experience and sentiments that can only be intact when one adopts a first-person perspective.

Yet, how is living within oneself then different from narcissism³⁸ and self-absorption? To frame the question more moderately, isn't the person who lives only within himself deprived at least partially of the capacity to empathize with others? Rousseau would undoubtedly say that *pitié*—a natural endowment in all men—would prevent us from narcissism. Yet living solely within oneself could certainly tip the balance between *amour de soi* and *pitié* seriously towards the former, resulting in a sort of excessive self-centeredness. Rousseau would consider such a scenario still less pathetic than the counter scenario of living completely outside of oneself. Nevertheless, the key here is the balance. Is reaching an equilibrium of self-sufficiency without self-absorption possible? This question stretches beyond the scope of this essay, but it's useful to consider that Rousseau has not proven that a man who lives within himself can successfully coexist with men who are just like him. His ideal citizens co-exist in the city under the social contract, but they each does not qualify as man who lives within himself, as their identities are

³⁵ Griswold, 165

³⁶ Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, 117

³⁷ Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*

³⁸ It can be said, of course, that Rousseau's living within oneself does not preclude possibilities of social interaction with others. Rousseau indeed tries to create an authentic man who can coexist with others in society without being subjected to their will.

merged completely with the collective self. His dear Emile, a man raised to be free and within himself, forms an intimate relationship only with Sophie, who is raised to be the antithesis of Emile³⁹. Sophie is emphatically made to please, to be subjugated⁴⁰, and to be for another—her husband. The solitary walker remains exiled from his contemporaries, finding peace of mind only in the middle of trees, rivers, and rabbits.

If the authentic man is someone who always lives within himself, then perhaps the authentic man risks sliding to self-absorption⁴¹.

I.4. Morality vs. Voice of the Heart

The last and most ambiguous of Rousseau's critiques of his time concerns the relationship between morality and authenticity. Rousseau himself demonstrates an extreme aversion to duties and moral obligations, seeing it as unnatural, intolerable, and inharmonious with the inner self. In *The Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, he wrote,

“I often found my good deeds a burden because of the chain of duties they dragged behind them; then pleasure vanished and it became intolerably irksome to me to keep giving the same assistance which had at first delighted me.”⁴²

Many scholars⁴³ have thus argued that Rousseau suggested a new kind of ethics, one that put truthfulness to one's feelings or sentiments as the most virtuous thing to do, before both rationalist standard of morality and socially sanctioned moral codes. I do not quite agree with this interpretation. For one, I think it over-simplifies Rousseau's view on the relationship

³⁹ Emile's relationship with the tutor cannot be said to be a free relationship, since Emile is always under the control of the tutor.

⁴⁰ Rousseau, *Emile*, 358

⁴¹ Nafstad also deals with this possibility in *Rousseau: Authenticity or Narcissism?*

⁴² Rousseau, *The Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, 94-96

⁴³ Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*

between virtue and authenticity. For another, even if Rousseau does intend to propose a new ethics of authenticity, it is a problematic one.

Rousseau's view on what constitutes virtue remains very ambivalent and sometimes self-contradictory. It is true that Rousseau does at times elevate returning to one's moral sentiments to a guiding principle of our behaviors. For example, at the end of the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, he exclaimed,

“O virtue! Sublime science of simple souls, are then so many efforts and preparations needed to know you? Are not your principles engraved in all hearts, and is it not enough to learn your laws to return into oneself and to listen to the voice of one's conscience in the silence of the passions?”⁴⁴

At other times, however, he seems to suggest repeatedly that the natural goodness in men have nothing to do with virtue. In fact, he explicitly states that men in their natural state were amoral, having no idea of what morality was at all.

“It appears at first that men in that state, since they have neither any kind of moral relation among themselves nor known duties, could be neither good nor evil, and had neither vices nor virtues.”⁴⁵

Rousseau clearly distinguishes men's natural sentiment to do good from virtue, claiming that “the pleasure of doing our duty is one which only the habit of virtue can produce in us”, whereas “those pleasures which come to us directly from nature are less exalted”⁴⁶. It seems that Rousseau is also saying that to follow one's moral intuition makes one authentic, but not dutiful or virtuous, since what comes naturally to men could not merit any praise of morality. How do we reconcile this obvious contradiction?

As I discussed in previous sections about Julie, Rousseau seems to say that to be dutiful and virtuous at the expense of sacrificing one's true feelings is respectable, but lamentable. The

⁴⁴ Rousseau, *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, 36

⁴⁵ Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, 81

⁴⁶ Rousseau, *The Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, 98

authentic man, on the other hand, is more real and more truly alive, even if less virtuous. To frame it the best way I could, Rousseau sees authenticity as the most important source of happiness and psychological coherence, even the most importantly thing that makes us human, but not a most exalted moral good. He is not sure whether being authentic is more virtuous than being dutiful, but he surely sees being fake and empty as more pathetic than being evil. Thus, I'm inclined to agree more with Cassirer's interpretation that Rousseauian ethics is not an ethics of feelings⁴⁷.

Even if Rousseau does make authenticity the first principle of ethics, we could easily raise many suspicions against such an ethical standard. What if our innate sentiments call for selfish and even perverse acts? Rousseau would reply by insisting that men are naturally good and cannot harm others since their self-love is moderated by *pitié* for others⁴⁸. However, if we are to take civil men as they are, it is unclear that the remnants of our natural goodness will always outweigh our other impulses such as revenge and violence. Authenticity as the primary ethical principle, therefore, only works for the imagined "authentic man" like *Emile*⁴⁹.

Furthermore, our sentiments can be fickle and deceiving. How do we distinguish those sentiments and intuitions that are central to our identity from those that are peripheral⁵⁰? It seems that the ethics of authenticity inevitably slides to subjectivity. Finally, authenticity as an ethical principle, according to Nafstad, relies on a kind of narcissistic worldview which "presupposes

⁴⁷ Cassirer, *The Question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, 95-100. Cassirer, who is a Kantian interpreter of Rousseau, goes further to argue that Rousseauian ethics is in fact a most radical form of ethics based on duty.

⁴⁸ Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*

⁴⁹ If all men are made like *Emile*, then perhaps Rousseau's so-called theory of the ethics of authenticity can be internally consistent. Yet, it is clear that *Emile* cannot represent all individuals, despite Rousseau's claim otherwise. *Emile* cannot be women, and he cannot be men who are born physically weak.

⁵⁰ Ferrara, 136

either the indifference or the insignificance of the others, or their non-individuality”⁵¹. No clear answers avail to support the so-called ethics of authenticity in Rousseau.

Ferrara offers a revised and more nuanced interpretation of the ethics of authenticity. He argues that to be a fully moral being, “we must not deny or try to suppress, but rather acknowledge the presence and force of the urges which deflect us from our principles, while at the same time continuing to orient our conduct to a moral point of view”⁵². While this is an interesting interpretation, one wonders what the moral point of view even is. If it is morality based on reason, then a mere recognition of one’s emotional activities does not qualify as authentic. If anything, abiding by the standard of rationalist moral point of view while knowing full well that our heart speaks otherwise sounds like servitude and timidity. Berman offers yet another interpretation that I’m more sympathetic towards. He argues that authenticity in and of itself is not enough to achieve the full status of morality for Rousseau; authenticity for love is the only guarantee to virtue⁵³ in the Rousseauian system of thoughts. Berman cited words of Saint-Preux in *The New Heloise* as testament to his interpretation.

“Be mine forever, and you will be innocent. The tie that binds us is legitimate; the only crime you could commit would be the infidelity that would break it. From now on **only love can guarantee your virtue.**”⁵⁴

I’m not convinced that Rousseau had intended for authenticity to be a new ethical principle at all. And even if authenticity were a new Rousseauian ethics, it is a suspicious one. The authentic cannot be simply interpreted as a new morality, another formulation of autonomy, intimacy, or sincerity. Rousseau’s ideal of the authentic is something else.

⁵¹ Nafstad, *Rousseau: Authenticity or Narcissism?*

⁵² Ferrara, 89

⁵³ Berman, 196

⁵⁴ Julie, I.31.100

II. Authenticity as an Aesthetic Ideal:

The authentic is, more than anything else, an aesthetic ideal that glorifies the harmonious, the masculine, and the rustic, that originates from the myth of “the natural”, and that personifies in the most manipulatively educated child, Emile.

II.1 The Myth of the Natural

Arguably, Rousseau’s whole system of thoughts starts from the myth of the good-hearted, independent natural man.

“Wandering in the forests, without industry, without speech, without domicile, without war, and without contact, without any need of his fellow humans, likewise without any desire to harm them, perhaps without ever even recognizing anyone individually—savage man, subject to few passions and self-sufficient, had only the feelings and the enlightenment suited to that state, that he felt only his **true needs**, looked at only what he believed it was in his interest to see, and that his intelligence made no more progress than his vanity.”⁵⁵

The good savage, at this primitive stage, has no foresight, imagination, or knowledge, and “gives itself over to the sole feeling of its present existence”⁵⁶. He is independent and free, for he has no desire beyond his true needs⁵⁷. Unlike the citizen who “sweats, bustles about, constantly frets to

⁵⁵ Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, 88

⁵⁶ Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, 74. “His imagination portrays nothing to him; his heart asks nothing of him. His modest needs are so easily found at hand, and he is so far from the degree of knowledge necessary for desiring to acquire greater knowledge, that he can have neither foresight nor curiosity. ... His soul, which nothing agitates, gives itself over to the sole feeling of its 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. ”

⁵⁷ Rousseau differentiates between “true needs” (primary needs) and secondary needs. The exact difference is hard to clarify and the two concepts cannot be taken as dichotomous terms. Roughly, however, primary needs for Rousseau seem to be associated with our physical and visceral experience, whereas secondary needs are derived from concepts and ideas that are constructed in social interactions. The true needs emanate from our heart alone, while secondary needs (vain desires) emanate from external sources. The boundary, of course, is often blurred. As human beings perfect themselves, as their imagination and cognitive capability expand, they naturally come to develop new desires that are not necessarily vanity-driven, such as the desire to know more about our origin, the desire to study the mystery of the universe, etc.

seek ever more laborious tasks”⁵⁸, he is characterized by a “profound indifference to any other object”⁵⁹, which renders him immune to the opinions of others. The savage, Rousseau concluded, lives within himself.

Despite Rousseau’s fascination of the good savage, he knew that civilized men could not and should not go back to the savage state. He explicitly stated that the historical accuracy of his account was beside the point, and that the state of nature is a myth, but a useful one.

“For it is no light undertaking to disentangle what is original from what is artificial in the present nature of man, and to know correctly **a state which no longer exists, which perhaps never did exist, which probably never will exist**, and about which it is nevertheless necessary to have correct notions in order to judge our present state properly.”⁶⁰

Moreover, he also warned against attempts to preserve the “primacy of the sentiments of nature”⁶¹ in the civil state, since such wishful thinking results always in contradictions between inclinations and duties. Trying to make a savage out of a civilized man only produces a person good “neither for himself, nor for others”⁶². The natural man, although free and independent, was also “narrow, shallow, undeveloped, a paltry thing”⁶³. That said, what Gauthier calls the “legends of the fall” in Rousseau remains an important theoretical premise. It expresses the angst of

⁵⁸ Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, 116, “Observation fully confirms what reflection teaches us on this subject: savage man and civilized man differ so much in the bottom of their hearts and inclinations that what constitutes the supreme happiness of the one would reduce the other to despair. The former breathes only repose and freedom, wants only to live and to remain idle, and not even the ataraxia of the Stoic comes close to his profound indifference to any other object. By contrast, the citizen, forever active, sweats, bustles about, constantly frets to seek ever more laborious tasks: he works to death, he even runs toward it in order to be in a position to live, or he renounces life in order to acquire immortality.”

⁵⁹ Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, 116

⁶⁰ Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, 52

⁶¹ Rousseau, *Emile*, 40

⁶² Rousseau, *Emile*, 40

⁶³ Berman, 172

modernity that we each experience, and a “nostalgia for a past perhaps remembered, perhaps imagined”⁶⁴.

Another part of Rousseau’s nostalgia for the past is his fascination on the primitive patriarchal family.

“The first development of the heart were the effect of a new situation that brought together husbands and wives, fathers and children, in a common dwelling. **The habit of living together gave rise to the sweetest feelings known to men: conjugal love and paternal love. Each family became a little society all the better united as reciprocal attachment and freedom were its only bonds.**”⁶⁵

Unlike the savage which he clearly foregoes as a modern possibility, it is apparent that Rousseau thinks the Golden Age of family should be retained in some ways. In fact, he would go on to make Emile into a free man and a patriarch, for whom the joys of conjugal love and family essentially makes him a complete man. The patriarchal family, for Rousseau, embodies the natural possibility of social bonds without subjugation, that which is missing in the unnatural modern societies.

I’m very skeptical of Rousseau’s claim that the family is a union of reciprocal attachment and freedom⁶⁶, but this question would merit a whole new essay for a discussion on interfamilial inequality and gender dynamics. For the purpose of our essay, it suffices to say that when Rousseau talks about the authentic, he has in mind clear and specific visualizations—rooted in his myth of the natural man and the primitive family—of what the authentic **looks** like.

⁶⁴ Gauthier, *The Sentiment of Existence*. Griswold also argues that Rousseau seems to always have “a dream of solitude without the angst of modernity- a dream about a tranquil Savage, a mythic figure that Rousseau does not harbor as an inner self, a figure he would not become even if he could”. (185)

⁶⁵ Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, 94

⁶⁶ Rousseau clearly agrees that a master is himself enslaved, for he depends on the deference of the slave to feel the sentiment of his existence. Following his logic, a patriarch cannot escape the chains of enslavement, since the man clearly dominates the woman in the family. Rousseau was perhaps conscious of this contradiction, so he claims that the woman could manipulate the emotions of the man to become his ruler. In any case, it is important to notice that relationship of domination and submission exists in the family, which Rousseau sees as the peak of human happiness.

Moreover, I argue, he also successfully implants in the mind of the readers a standard of authenticity that hinges more on the *feeling* of the authentic, than its objective realness⁶⁷. We care not whether the savage truly existed in the original state of the world. We need not believe that men were born free and good savages as Rousseau described. We are fascinated, just as Rousseau was, by the image of the solitary savage, all by himself, experiencing the sentiment of his existence whenever he exercises his limited capability to fulfill his equally limited needs. If we ask our hearts, we know that we recognize things and people as authentic, before even knowing whether they truly are, so long as they remind us of some imagined past that can never be returned⁶⁸.

II. 2. L'air de l'authentique: the Aesthetics of Authenticity

What then characterizes l'air de l'authentique⁶⁹? In other word, if Rousseauian authenticity mirrors the myth of the natural, then what are its aesthetic features? First of all, the aesthetic of authenticity favors the whole and the harmonious— that which is “oneself and always one”⁷⁰, that which is never “ill at ease inside”⁷¹. In *Emile*, Rousseau argues that,

⁶⁷ Nafstad makes a similar argument in his essay. I will only add that this is consistent with Rousseau's sentimentalist understanding of life in general. To be alive, for Rousseau, is to feel alive. To do good is to follow one's heart and let our natural goodness guide us. For Rousseau on living as subjective experiencing, see *Emile*, 42. “To live is not to breathe; it is to act; it is to make use of our organs, our senses, our faculties, of all the parts of ourselves which give us the sentiment of our existence. The man who has lived the most is not he who has counted the most years but he who has most felt life. Men have been buried at one hundred who died at their birth.”

⁶⁸ This conclusion, while speculative, rings a bell in every heart. The fascination and romanticization of the old, the historic, the natural-looking permeate our modern cultural life. We pay to visit primitive tribes on some forgotten islands oceans apart from their home country; we fancy the old rustic restaurants for their apparent authenticity; we rush to commercialized and reconstructed ancient towns, for their aesthetic of authenticity. In China, little towns are frequently rebuilt completely in fake ancient styles to attract tourists who see in the most inauthentic architectures the appearance of the authentic.

⁶⁹ A term borrowed from Nafstad.

⁷⁰ Rousseau, *Emile*, 40

⁷¹ Rousseau, *Letter to M. D'Alembert*, 16

“Natural man is **entirely** for himself. He is **numerical unity**, the **absolute whole** which is **relative only to itself or its kind**. Civil man is only a **fractional unity** dependent on the denominator; his value is determined by his relation to the whole, which is the social body.”⁷²

Here, we see how Rousseau’s conception of the natural man has a strong aesthetic dimension, in his almost radical emphasis on the form of unity⁷³. The authentic is that which is whole and harmonious.

The authentic is also that which is masculine and strong. Rousseau abhors the feminine and the soft, considering it unfit for the natural and independent man, the authentic man. He condemns the “artificial and subtle Greeks who were *seducing* the virtue and *softening* the courage of his fellow-citizens”⁷⁴, he laments the “effeminate morals”⁷⁵ which lead Rome to corruption, he criticizes the study of the sciences as it tends to “soften and emasculate men’s courage than to strengthen and animate it”⁷⁶. Most tellingly, he explicitly rejects the “sickly and ill-constituted child” as potential material for an authentic man, for he who is sick is considered utterly useless to himself and others⁷⁷. If the ill-constituted are born as they are, how can Rousseau justify a rejection of their authenticity by blaming their natural defects? The good man, for Rousseau, is “an athlete who enjoys competing in the nude”, who spurns all the vile ornaments invented “solely to hide some *deformity*”⁷⁸. It is clear that the authentic and the natural that Rousseau looks for is more about the appearance and the aesthetics of the natural, than actual naturalness. The deformed cannot be authentic—never mind that nature does create

⁷² Rousseau, *Emile*, 39-40

⁷³ Rousseau tolerates no middle grounds; he always seems to intuitively favor the radical. This is perhaps why his thoughts can easily turn to a certain aesthetic, for he is in constant search of a utopia that never exists in its full extent.

⁷⁴ Rousseau, *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, 19

⁷⁵ Rousseau, *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, 19

⁷⁶ Rousseau, *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, 29

⁷⁷ Rousseau, *Emile*, 53. It is hard to not be at least critical of Rousseau’s perception of the physically ill-constituted.

⁷⁸ Rousseau, *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, 13

ill-constituted men—since the authentic will always be appropriately formed to achieve a certain aesthetic standard.

Finally, the authentic is associated with the image of the rustic. He romanticizes the “thatched huts and rustic hearths where moderation and virtue once dwelled”⁷⁹. He finds the robust man “beneath the rustic clothes of a farmer and not beneath the gilt of a courtier”⁸⁰. He recalls nostalgically his earlier encounters⁸¹ with the happy farmers in the vicinity of Neufchatel, who, “free of poll-taxes, duties, commissioners, and forced labor”⁸², put their inventive genius to use in making artifacts by hand, whose “amazing combination of delicacy and simplicity”⁸³ inspires immense admiration. For Rousseau, rusticity is closely related to authenticity and genuine inventiveness, as he speaks of little town authenticity in the *Letter to M. D’Alembert*,

“In a little town, proportionately less activity is unquestionably to be found than in a capital, because the passions are less intense and the needs less pressing, but **more original spirits, more inventive industry, more really new things are found there because the people are less imitative; having few models, each draws more from himself and puts more of his own in everything he does;** because the human mind, less spread out, less drowned in vulgar opinions, elaborates itself and ferments better in tranquil solitude; because, **in seeing less, more is imagined;** finally, because less pressed for time, there is more leisure to extend and digest one’s ideas.”⁸⁴

It is hard to believe that significant inventions come more from little towns instead of big cities, as the cities have historically been the places where artistic creations and scientific discoveries flourished. Rousseau might argue that urban arts and sciences are vain and inauthentic, but this argument seems more like prejudice than solid facts. It shouldn’t matter where one is, as long as

⁷⁹ Rousseau, *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, 19

⁸⁰ Rousseau, *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, 13

⁸¹ It is not clear whether Rousseau is telling the truth or merely imagining an encounter that never really happened. His descriptions of the happy farmers closely resembles that of his mythical first farmer families in the Second Discourse.

⁸² Rousseau, *Letter to M. D’Alembert*, 62

⁸³ Rousseau, *Letter to M. D’Alembert*, 62

⁸⁴ Rousseau, *Letter to M. D’Alembert*, 60

one has the heart for the sincere pursuit of arts and sciences. Rousseau's obsession with the rustic genius is yet another example of his aestheticization of the authentic.

As a result of these specific aesthetic standards embodied in vivid imageries, Rousseauian authenticity makes a concrete and visceral impression on the hearts. Even if few can synthesize precisely what Rousseau mean by authenticity, each can grasp a feeling of it intuitively. Such is the power of an aesthetics. Like an art piece, one admires its beauty without articulating the principles beneath.

II.3. Creating the Authentic Man:

Rousseau's art piece is Emile, a new human type who embodies Rousseau's ideal of authenticity in the civilized world. The great irony, however, is that Emile—who bears an air of wholeness, originality, strength, and rusticity—is to be the most protected and manipulated child ever raised! Emile is to be kept away from the whirlpool of civilization, secured from the impact of human opinions, and gradually taught how to live⁸⁵. He is to be watered and sheltered by the mother, like a nascent shrub⁸⁶ in a greenhouse; he is then to be transferred to the Tutor, who would exert total control over his life in order to make him a “natural” man. In a nutshell, Emile is a most delicate aesthetic product, designed and monitored from birth to become a man free of physical and psychological deformities that Rousseau considers uncharacteristic of “the authentic”.

That Rousseau's project is an aesthetic one is evident even from the very first lines in *Emile*.

⁸⁵ Rousseau, *Emile*, 41-42.

⁸⁶ Rousseau, *Emile*, 37-38.

“Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything **degenerates** in the hands of man. He forces one soil to nourish the products of another, one tree to bear the fruit of another. He **mixes** and **confuses** the climates, the elements, the seasons. He **mutilates** his dog, his horse, his slave. He **turns everything upside down**; he **disfigures** everything; he loves **deformity, monsters**. He wants nothing as nature made it, not even man; for him, man must be trained like a school horse; man must be fashioned in keeping with his fancy like a tree in his garden.”

Man left to his own in civilized societies will degenerate into deformity and disfiguration, thus the need for aesthetic recreation. The main trick of this radical kind of aesthetic education⁸⁷, to borrow a term from Kukla, is to substitute for the absence of Nature in the civilized world by artificially creating an environment where the child is made to feel free without being allowed a cent of real freedom.

“Doubtless he ought to do only what he wants; **but he ought to want only what you want him to do**. He ought not to make a step without your having foreseen it; he ought not to open his mouth without your knowing what he is going to say.”⁸⁸

Emile is to be made to *feel* as if his choices and desires are his own, while in fact everything that occurs to him, everything that he wants remains tightly under the oversight of the Tutor⁸⁹. Rousseau repeatedly insists that the control of the Tutor over his pupil be total, or not at all. Such control does not only concern the child’s physical movements, it concerns, more strikingly, a sort of mental control concealed from the subject. The tutor must rule without the appearance of ruling⁹⁰.

“The child ought to be wholly involved with the thing, and you ought to be wholly involved with the child—observing him, spying on him without letup and without

⁸⁷ Kukla, *Making and Masking Human Nature: Rousseau's Aesthetics of Education*

⁸⁸ Rousseau, *Emile*, 120.

⁸⁹ As Gauthier interpreted, what matters for the education of a free man is not that he be free, but that he experiences the feeling of freedom. (36)

⁹⁰ This should sound familiar to the readers of the social contract. The legislator, similar to the tutor, should orchestrate mundane practices to which he attends in secret, while appearing to limit his rule to particular regulations.

appearing to do so, sensing ahead of time all his sentiments and forestalling those he ought not to have.”⁹¹

Quite strikingly, Rousseau’s Tutor exemplifies things that Rousseau hates about modern society: deception, manipulation, and hypocrisy. He should be the best play director and the best actor in the world, capable of constant orchestration and role-playing, something that Rousseau, again, despises in his contemporaries.

Some examples suffice to illustrate just how meticulously designed and well-staged the performances by the Tutor are. To discipline the tyrannical inclinations of the child without giving him any impression of his submission, the Tutor arranged a little incident for the child to go out alone and to have “chance” encounters that would persuade the child from going out again. The Tutor advises,

“Take an opposite route with your pupil. Let him always believe that he is the master, and let it always be you who are. **There is no subjection so perfect as that which keeps the appearance of freedom. Thus the will itself is made captive.**”⁹²

In another episode of the education of Emile, the Tutor colluded with the “magician” in the fair to teach the child a lesson on being humble. We learn from the note that this whole event is staged by the tutor with the cooperation of an actor⁹³. Emile, of course, would not know the schemes of his beloved instructor. In the words of Kukla, Emile’s education consists largely of “an elaborate series of stagings of little scenes designed to shape a child’s will and sense of identity”⁹⁴.

In carefully molding Emile’s senses and identity to approximate that of the imagined authentic ideal, Rousseau completes his masterpiece of a perfectly authentic man who is,

⁹¹ Rousseau, *Emile*, 189. See also earlier on page 120. “You will be able to study him at your complete ease and arrange all around him the lessons you want to give him without his ever thinking he is receiving any.”

⁹² Rousseau, *Emile*, 120

⁹³ Rousseau, *Emile*, 487

⁹⁴ Kukla, *Making and Masking Human Nature: Rousseau's Aesthetics of Education*

ironically, fundamentally inauthentic, since he has to be made by an external agent. His desires and thoughts do not emanate from his inner self, but are rather arranged and manipulated by another entity.

How does Rousseau reconcile this apparent paradox? Emile himself seems to realize, as he grows up, the reality of his obedience to the Tutor, but has by then completely internalized the will of the tutor as his own true identity. He says to the Tutor,

“I want to obey your laws; I want to do so always. This is my steadfast will. **If ever I disobeyed you, it will be in spite of myself.** Make me free by protecting me against those of my passions which do violence to me. Prevent me from being their slave; force me to be my own master and to obey not my senses but my reason.”⁹⁵

Here, we see perhaps an indirect response from Rousseau to some of the questions we raised in earlier sections on the inability to differentiate what is central to one’s identity from what is not. Rousseau seems to suggest that the rule of the tutor protects rather than compromises Emile’s authenticity by freeing him from the chains of his own fickle passions. Is this reconciliation successful? I argue that Rousseau’s case is invalid. For one, Emile’s claim that he wants to be forced to be his own master and to obey not his senses but his reason contradicts Rousseau’s overall sentimentalist understanding of the world and of life in other writings. For another, Emile’s realization of his obedience to the Tutor and his voluntary abandonment of agency sounds much like self-deceiving rationalization of his state of enslavement⁹⁶, rather than some transcendent form of elevated authenticity that Rousseau seems to hint at. Emile as a personification of the authentic and the free is authored by his Tutor, who is, in turn, an artistic incarnation of perhaps Rousseau himself.

⁹⁵ Rousseau, *Emile*, 325

⁹⁶ Gauthier (36) argues that the relationship between the Tutor and Emile exemplifies a sort of total captivity of the will. Kukla conceptualizes the relationship in a different way. She comments that Emile’s body has been shaped by the tutor into a “vehicle of freedom”.

We have thus come to a crucial paradox in Rousseauian authenticity: attempts to create an aesthetic model of the authentic self proves to be a self-defeating project. Can the authentic be created by anyone other than God or, for atheists, random chances of the universe? It seems that the feeling of authenticity—or, the air of authenticity, to continue the aesthetics terminology—can be fostered if the man being created remains ignorant or self-delusional about the true nature of his education, much like Emile. Real authenticity, however, cannot be recreated by staging, performance, and role-playing. The script that Rousseau attempts to write for the authentic man, however perfect and natural-feeling, is still a script after all, not too different from the social script that the modern bourgeois follow.

III. The Solitary Walker: Rousseau's Final Refuge

Rousseau's philosophical and literary quest for the authentic self has not seen much real success, even after the heroic effort to construct Emile, a new human type embodying a new aesthetics. His personal struggles for the same ideal are equally intriguing. It is no exaggeration to say that Rousseau is the first intellectual who positioned himself as a proud social and intellectual outcast throughout his career and his life. He has written numerous books and essays to defend himself against the accusation of his contemporaries, which he believed to have been a series of well-designed traps⁹⁷ intended to destroy everything he was, to make him “the horror of the human race, the laughing-stock of the rabble”⁹⁸. In his last work, *The Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, Rousseau declares himself finally liberated from the shackles of others' opinions and

⁹⁷ Ironic how Rousseau himself seems to be overly paranoid of manipulation, something his character Emile is unable to fathom.

⁹⁸ Rousseau, *The Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, 27-28

evil intentions, for he sees his “feeble ray of hope extinguished and his earthly destiny irrevocably fixed”⁹⁹.

What exactly was it that Rousseau had been defending and hoping for? His ideas and writings, undoubtedly. More importantly, he was asserting his integrity as an authentic man, expressing his self, and experiencing the sentiment of his existence via writing and guarding against the attacks from the others. What a heroic personal struggle! A man alone in a world of hypocrisy, looking for originality, sincerity, and authenticity. Yet the paradox here seems obvious: in needing to constantly assert himself and defend against the attacks from his enemies, Rousseau remains still in the chains of opinions. He claims to be finally set free and indifferent to his fellow human beings in *The Reveries*, yet his constant reiterations of his very peace of mind betray his anxiety.

Dent is perceptive when he says that all humans need to know their own actuality and that the “captious engagement becomes the objective, the end, itself, for in it is comprised the only material which remains to us in which we can disclose and substantiate our effective existence”¹⁰⁰. To contend with others, and to triumph over them “comprise the whole matter of one’s own self’s assertion”¹⁰¹. Rousseau seems to be a prime example of someone who asserts his own actuality by writing, and by contending against others. The problem with this approach to self-actualization, of course, is that the self is extremely vulnerable in its attempt to assert its existence. To be uniquely oneself and to confirm one’s unique existence, one needs to first expose oneself to the others, a kind of transparency that Rousseau also seems to advocate for¹⁰².

⁹⁹ Rousseau, *The Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, 30.

¹⁰⁰ Dent, *Rousseau: An Introduction to his Psychological, Social and Political Theory*, 51

¹⁰¹ Dent, *Rousseau: An Introduction to his Psychological, Social and Political Theory*, 51

¹⁰² Starobinski’s thesis centers more on the theme of transparency and the obstacles to it.

At the same time, however, self-exposure lends to vulnerability, of which Rousseau is clear a victim.

This leads us to the second fundamental paradox in achieving the authentic self: the path to asserting our authentic existence involves making ourselves vulnerable to threats. Rousseau's solution to this problem is to dehumanize all others surrounding him and to return to the refuge of Nature, for that which has no will cannot harm¹⁰³. In *The Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, he claims that all his fellow men have ceased to be human and "no longer exist"¹⁰⁴, so that he no longer has to worry about their aggression. He finds happiness in memories of his time on the little-known Island of Saint-Pierre, surrounded by the lake, the woods, the birds, the rabbits, and blessed by the company of his partner Thérèse and another couple who pose no threat to him. Rousseau finds there in Nature a lasting state of stability that provides enough security for the soul to simply experience the sentiments of existence¹⁰⁵.

Is the Rousseau on the Island of Saint-Pierre authentic? Yes and no. He is authentic because he is, at that moment, concerned only about himself, concentrated on his sentiment of existence and nothing else. Nevertheless, underlying such peacefulness and happiness, one finds a soul still in need for authentic expression and in fear of imagined threats. The ultimate paradox

¹⁰³ Nafstad (194) points out that Rousseau's retreat to Nature is inevitable, since the Nature is where the self becomes insignificant and where there is no need to be on constantly "guard against irony, condescending looks, and other expressions of human mental warfare". Faced with nature, the soul can safely be naked.

¹⁰⁴ Rousseau, *The Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, 27

¹⁰⁵ Rousseau, *The Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, 88-89. "But if there is a state where the soul can find a resting-place secure enough to establish itself and concentrate its entire being there, with no need to remember the past or reach into the future, where time is nothing to it, where the present runs on indefinitely but this duration goes unnoticed, with no sign of the passing of time, and no other feeling of deprivation or enjoyment, pleasure or pain, desire or fear than the simple feeling of existence, a feeling that fills our soul entirely, as long as this state lasts, we can call ourselves happy, not with a poor, incomplete and relative happiness such as we find in the pleasures of life, but with a sufficient, complete and perfect happiness which leaves no emptiness to be filled in the soul. Such is the state which I often experienced on the Island of Saint-Pierre in my solitary reveries, whether I lay in a boat and drifted where the water carried me, or sat by the shores of the stormy lake, or elsewhere, on the banks of a lovely river or a stream murmuring over the stones."

of authenticity is therefore the following: the truly authentic being should have neither the desire for authentic expressions, nor the need for recognition and confirmation of his very authenticity. He should be indifferent, not only to external perception of his properties and reputation, but also to his status as a complete, whole, and authentic being. He should, for lack of more accurate wording, be at ease with what he is without harboring an inch of anxiety over his authenticity.

The psychological longing for authenticity, on the other hand, is a product of modern angst in the civilized men. The more one sees his or her conditions of enslavement as they truly are, the stronger such longing becomes. Rousseau was a genius who had, at the same time, the blessing to see civilized men as they were, and the misfortune to never un-see what have been seen.

Conclusion: A Secular Redemption?

Is Rousseau unescapably damned by his longing for authenticity and his inability to reach it? In other word, has he at the end of the day provided us with a possibility of achieving authenticity in an inauthentic world?

Granted, his efforts to construct an authentic man and an authentic citizen have not generated real success. But does his personal struggle for authentic expression of the self not merit something? To the very least, Rousseau has given his most sincere efforts in pursuing such ideal and is therefore beyond blame. If the source of authenticity is indeed too elevated, if the strength for going farther is lacking to him, of what can he be guilty¹⁰⁶? It is, as he said, “up to the truth to come nearer”¹⁰⁷. Perhaps Melzer¹⁰⁸ is right when he says that Rousseau has created a

¹⁰⁶ Rousseau, *Emile*, 294

¹⁰⁷ Rousseau, *Emile*, 294

¹⁰⁸ Melzer, *The Origin of the Counter-Enlightenment: Rousseau and the New Religion of Sincerity*

new religion of authenticity whose ultimate goal is to “restore this-worldly wholeness”¹⁰⁹ in an age where the soul is divided. Piety, in such a new religion, is sincerity and nothing more.

Rousseau is pious, so he cannot be damned.

I attribute even more merit to Rousseau than sincerity. I think that his effort to create a new aesthetic ideal of the authentic self was not only a sincere effort, but a successful one. Emile, as a type of “*everyone hero*”, continues to charm and inspire even those who remain skeptical of Rousseau’s projects to create authenticity. The mind may refuse what Rousseau has written; the heart cannot. By igniting in every reader’s heart a real longing for the authentic, Rousseau contributed to a cultural awakening that profoundly influences us to date. His writings are his ultimate redemption, for they have transcended the limitation of time and space to find in each heart a little bit of the companionship and solidarity that Rousseau was so desperately looking for in his life time.

¹⁰⁹ Melzer, *The Origin of the Counter-Enlightenment: Rousseau and the New Religion of Sincerity*

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