Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Return to Nature vs. Conquest of Nature

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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 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 (Emile, 37).

That is the unique declaration with which Rousseau begins Emile, his most comprehensive philosophical work. To be sure, most earlier thinkers had maintained much of what is asserted here: things are good when they are in conformity with their nature or with God’s design; but, tragically, they fall short of that conformity. Yet, heretofore, this “fall” was attributed either to sin, in Christian thinkers, or to ignorance, in most classical thinkers. What is unique in Rousseau’s declaration is that it places the primary blame on a drive to control everything, to master and alter nature. He thus becomes the first to thematize and problematize “the conquest of nature,” to the point of portraying it as the central issue. Furthermore, reacting against this phenomenon, he also became the first to promulgate a new nature-religion as the basis for a new rhetoric of “return to nature” – all of this as the precise counterpoise needed to illuminate and resist the prevailing ethos of “the conquest of nature.” Rousseau, in short, was the thinker who first put “the problem of technology” on the agenda of modern philosophy and culture. The echoes of his thought can be heard clearly in the Romantics of the following century, as well as
in contemporary environmentalism and in Heidegger.

Yet, it is the common misfortune of influential thinkers to be tenaciously misunderstood. Their thought gets assimilated to all the similar but different ideas of those they have influenced. In order to uncover the precise grounds and character of Rousseau’s opposition to the conquest of nature, then, we need to proceed with caution, step by step, especially because Rousseau’s thought is also, on a number of other grounds, notoriously complex.

There are, in fact, at least four grounds of Rousseauian complexity, which it will be useful to summarize from the outset to help us find and keep our bearings going forward. First, Rousseau is a powerfully dialectical thinker, which leads to the co-presence of opposites in his writings. He may eagerly join certain thinkers – the philosophers of the Enlightenment, for example – in their fundamental motives and their first principles and yet end up as the founder of the counter-Enlightenment because, thinking through these same, shared principles in a more radical way, he draws opposite conclusions. Thus the Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment co-exist in his writings since the latter, in his view, is simply the former more consistently worked through.

Second, Rousseau never for a moment loses sight of the tragic fact that what is good for the individual (or certain rare individuals) is not necessarily good for society, and vice versa. Thus, every question has potentially two different answers – one from each of these very different points of view.

Third, as an Enlightenment thinker, Rousseau is never content simply to elaborate some abstract, theoretical ideal, but is driven to then turn to the issue of practical application. In executing this turn, moreover, he is an eager disciple of Montesquieu, holding that the self-same institution can be either good or bad depending on the character of the political whole in which it
appears. Thus, in the First Discourse and again in the Letter to d’Alembert, Rousseau loudly proclaims the theater a highly pernicious institution for healthy republics like Geneva. Yet, in the latter writing and elsewhere, he also quietly concedes that it is actually salutary for the world of large, decadent monarchies like France, which explains the apparent contradiction that the author of these famous declamations also published plays and operas (d’Alembert, 65; Narcissus, 196).

Fourth, Rousseau, again like most Enlightenment thinkers, is an esoteric writer, as he openly acknowledges. He appears to be willing, among other things, to promulgate certain doctrines to which he does not subscribe in the hopes of moving the world in a healthier direction (Second Letter to Bordes, 184-85; Reveries, fourth walk). I believe that such is the case with Rousseau’s new nature-religion mentioned above, and that the awareness of this fact is the necessary starting point for any adequate analysis of Rousseau’s position on our topic.1

With his constant rhetoric of a divine and teleologically ordered nature which “does everything for the best” (Emile, 80) and deserves our reverent obedience, the reader understandably assumes that this is the true source of Rousseau’s opposition to the conquest of nature. But this religious doctrine, I suggest, is not actually the cause but the effect of that opposition. If one looks beyond the rhetoric to the actual arguments that Rousseau makes in rejecting the project of conquest, one finds that they are not theological, but entirely political and psychological. He simply argues that that project conflicts with the healthy and happy life both for communities and for individuals. But to give this opposition more real-world power, he links it to a religion of nature, akin to what one finds later in the Romantics, which gives the conquest

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1 It is not possible to try to substantiate this claim here. For a brief effort, see Melzer, Natural Goodness of Man, 30n1 and “The Origin of the Counter-Enlightenment,” 355.
of nature the feeling of something unholy, and the return to nature, a sense of grateful reunion with the divine source.²

The Truth of Modern Science – and the Good of it

To approach Rousseau’s real views on the subject of modern science and the conquest of nature, let us begin our analysis where Rousseau begins. In his basic premises, Rousseau is clearly a man of the Enlightenment. As one easily sees in the *Second Discourse*, notwithstanding certain religious protestations, his approach to the study of man is unflinchingly scientific and anthropological, his epistemology is empiricist, his psychology is egoistic and reductionist, and his political theory is built on rights-based egalitarian individualism and social contract theory. And more radically than anyone before, he argues that man, in his true nature, is not fashioned in the image of God nor is he Aristotle's rational animal; he is a poor, solitary, amoral, arational, sub-human brute. Similarly, in his motivations, Rousseau shares the Enlightenment’s hope to liberate humanity from religious and political oppression and thus also shares with it its greatest enemy: the Church (and, secondarily, the monarchy).

Turning, with all this in mind, to the new natural science (but not yet to the question of the conquest of nature), it should come as no surprise to learn that Rousseau was greatly impressed and attracted by it, and indeed, through most of his life, he engaged in scientific researches, primarily chemistry during the 1740s (see his *Les institutions chymiques*) and botany thereafter (see his extensive botanical writings which mostly follow the system of his Swedish

² Like the Rousseauian rejection of the conquest of nature, the Romantic opposition to it also did not stem from of a sincerely held religion of nature. Still, the true grounds of Rousseau’s views, I will be arguing, were essentially classical and so, in most respects, quite different from those of the Romantics. Regarding Romanticism on these and related issues, see the brilliant series of studies by Paul Cantor, especially *Creature and Creator* and “Romanticism and Technology.”
contemporary Linnaeus). His enthusiasm for the new science is displayed very clearly in the
*First Discourse* (62-63): when he seeks to name the thinkers who have raised “monuments to the
glory of the human intellect,” and “whom nature destined to be her disciples” he points, not to
Aristotle, but to the great modern natural philosophers Bacon, Descartes and Newton. Bacon in
particular he calls “the greatest, perhaps, of philosophers.”

Of course Rousseau also greatly admires and relies upon certain modern political
philosophers, above all Hobbes and Locke, but he does not name them here, no doubt because he
ultimately considers their thought radically defective and in need of being replaced by a
fundamentally new political philosophy. But Rousseau never speaks of any corresponding
deficiency in modern *natural* philosophy. He registers no protest against it, as later philosophers
and poets will. He would seem to be a firm admirer of Baconian science and Newtonian physics.

But if Rousseau regards modern science as essentially true, that conclusion by no means
settles for him the questions of whether science is good, and in what way, and for whom. Those
further questions form the subject of his first writing, the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* –
where he declares his great break with the Enlightenment. The thesis of that complex work is
stated most simply in one of Rousseau’s later replies to his critics. He makes three points:

[1] If celestial intellects cultivated the sciences, only good would result. [2] I say
the same of great men, who are destined to guide others.... [3] But the vices of
ordinary men poison the most sublime knowledge and make it pernicious for
nations (*Final Reply*, 111; see 88).

Philosophical or scientific knowledge, pursued for its own sake (not for any practical benefits), is
the highest good for the few genuine philosophers living the “celestial,” contemplative life. But
it is simply bad for ordinary men, not only because, misunderstanding it, they stumble from one
sophistical idea to another, but also because it is inimical to true citizenship. The lofty contemplative life – detached, cosmopolitan, gentle, and self-concerned – undercuts the ancient Spartan ideal – the committed, patriotic, war-like, and self-sacrificing republican citizen. And fervent adherence to this ancient republican ideal is essential, in Rousseau’s view, for any genuinely healthy political life. No citizens, no city. And yet, on the other hand (the third), philosophy need not remain wholly irrelevant to the people, but can, in an indirect way, bring moral/political benefits to them through the intermediation of the “great men, who are destined to guide others.” Such men are the legislators and, to a lesser extent, book-writing philosophers who, while scorning the Enlightenment effort to disseminate philosophy directly to the people, use their exclusive philosophic understanding to design and propagate among the people salutary institutions, laws, mores and religions.

Greece owed its morals and its laws to philosophers and legislators. I acknowledge that. I have already said a hundred times that it is good for there to be philosophers provided that the people don’t get mixed up in being philosophers (ibid. 115).

Rousseau’s complex view is essentially the classical one: the highest good of science and philosophy is neither practical nor technological, but contemplative and so the preserve of a few “celestial intellects.” It is corrupting to the people. But certain philosophic legislators can nevertheless benefit the people by helping to make them, not contemplaters and not technologically empowered consumers, but virtuous and patriotic citizens.

Thus, while Rousseau greatly admires the advances in our understanding of the natural world achieved by modern science, he nevertheless rejects the account given by modern political philosophy of the role that such knowledge should play in the world – including its use for the
technological conquest of nature. To understand more precisely what Rousseau is rejecting and on what grounds, let us turn to a quick description of the Enlightenment as he saw it.

**The Value of Technology in the Two Forms of Society**

In a brief but oft-quoted sentence from the *First Discourse* (51), Rousseau points to a difference between ancient thinkers and modern: “Ancient political thinkers incessantly talked about morals and virtue, those of our time talk only of business and money.” In a later work, he elaborates on the far-reaching importance of this seemingly simple observation:

Our writers all regard as the masterpiece of the politics of our century the sciences, arts, luxury, commerce, laws, and the other ties which, by tightening among men the bonds of society from personal interest, put them all in mutual dependence, give them reciprocal needs, and common interests, and oblige each of them to cooperate for the happiness of others in order to be able to attain his own (*Narcissus*, 193).

To spell out Rousseau’s view still more broadly, there are basically two opposite ways in which selfish human beings can be induced to unite in social cooperation. One can, like the ancients, bend every effort to instill within people public-spirited “morals and virtue,” which, by severely restraining the selfish, acquisitive desires and heightening fellow-feeling, can unify people through genuine respect and affection.

Or conversely, one can attempt to produce sociability from selfishness itself. The more one unleashes human selfishness and acquisitiveness, after all, the more people will feel the need of things, and the more they need things, the more they will require the help of others to supply their needs, and the more they depend on others, the more they must be willing to serve others so that these others will serve them in turn. In this way, selfishness, through a kind of inner
contradiction, generates sociability.

The Enlightenment thinkers, beginning from the hard-headed premise that humans are not really the social animals Aristotle had claimed them to be, but rather asocial and selfish, switched their allegiance to the second alternative as a more natural, realistic, and elegant solution to the political problem. And this fundamental shift had, in turn, monumental consequences for the question before us, which may be stated, in this context, as: in what ways are science and philosophy useful or dangerous for society?

First, in this brave new world, which no longer has an essential stake in strict republican morals, it was no longer dangerously corrupting to disseminate philosophical knowledge among the people. On the contrary, popular enlightenment now became positively useful because the new science, through its uniquely rigorous and verifiable explanations of natural phenomena, could help as never before to push back the kingdom of darkness and superstition.

Furthermore, this science was not merely theoretical and contemplative but also practical in the new sense of technological: it promised increased power over nature for the “relief of man’s estate,” in the Baconian phrase. And this meant not only that people would experience in their own lifetimes the amelioration of various ills thanks to new technologies, but also more sweepingly, that the human race in its age-old longing for salvation from the miseries of this life, might now find in the progress of its own scientific reason a new historical force, a secular messiah, on which to pin its heretofore millenarian hopes.

And this secular shift in life-orientation would then feed back into and strengthen the new social order of selfish sociability by further liberating and legitimizing people’s material concerns and desires.

Finally, if this new society was to work well in harmonizing people’s selfish material
interests, it was essential that it strive not for a traditional, static economy but rather a dynamic, growing one. Only when the whole pie is continually increasing does one person’s gain not necessarily constitute another’s loss. Machiavelli, for example, recommended constant imperialism as the only way of harmonizing the interests of the great and the poor (Prince, chapter 16). But a superior driver of economic growth is the increase in labor productivity stemming from technological advance. In this way, the new technological science becomes important – not only for the provision of wealth and new conveniences, and not only as a secular displacement for our providential hopes – but also as the crucial source of dynamism and growth needed to sustain the whole new social order itself. It is the conquest of nature which, replacing the conquest of one’s neighbors, makes it possible for selfish and acquisitive individuals to unite together harmoniously in a growing economy.

This, in brief, is the Enlightenment scheme that all progressive writers of the time celebrate as the “masterpiece of the politics of our century.” Rousseau, however, finds them horribly mistaken. “Of all the truths I have proposed for the consideration of the wise,” he declares, “this is the most surprising and the most cruel” (Narcissus, 193). When it is claimed that “society is so constituted that each man gains by serving the others,” Rousseau replies “this would be very well, if he did not gain still more by harming them. There is no profit, however legitimate, that is not surpassed by one that can be made illegitimately, and wrong done to one's neighbor is always more lucrative than services” (Second Discourse, 194-5). Rousseau does not deny that the modern, acquisitive individual will often be driven by his very selfishness to conclude cooperative agreements; and these will indeed be "mutually beneficial" in that they will leave all parties better off than they were before – a win-win. But all this does not suffice to make them truly in people’s selfish interest. For each party to the agreement sees very clearly
that he would be better off still if he received these same benefits without doing his share -- and it is to the achievement of this optimal outcome that the strong will devote all their strength and the weak all their ruses. One can of course object that the government will outlaw cheating and exploitation, but how effective is that likely to be when the ill is so universal and when the same selfish motives must be assumed to infect the government itself.

In Rousseau’s view, then, the Enlightenment scheme of selfish sociability can succeed in producing the appearance of cooperation, but never its reality. Such a society is a conflict system, a community of smiling enemies, drawn and held together by their need to use each other. It simply organizes us for mutual deceit and exploitation (Second Discourse, 194-95).

Rejecting the Enlightenment on these grounds, Rousseau returns with a vengeance to the opposite alternative, the classical martial republic. And both of these moves – both the rejection and the return – furnish Rousseau with good reasons for opposing the scientific conquest of nature. Where the Enlightenment celebrates technological advance for helping to make the new society of acquisitive selfishness possible, Rousseau opposes it for precisely the same reason. It is an essential cog in a destructive machine.

Conversely, in turning to the ancient martial republic, Rousseau fervently embraces, as he must, everything that suppresses selfishness, promotes material austerity, hardens and invigorates men, and attaches their purified, energized spirits to the city and to virtue. Viewed from this political standpoint, the project for the scientific conquest of nature is – in the material ease that it fosters, the softening comforts and conveniences it introduces, and the larger materialistic hopes that it inspires – a major force for corruption and moral/political decline. In sum, Rousseau’s view of the modern project for the conquest of nature is that it is politically harmful in the two most fundamental respects: it is ideally suited to corrupt and undermine the
good form of society based on “morals and virtue,” while also being a major enabler of and false advertisement for the bad form based on “business and money.”

Broadening the Question

This two-pronged objection to technology is what first comes to sight in Rousseau’s works. But, while it is an important part of his view, it is not the whole of it. It needs supplementing on at least two grounds.

First, this objection has been formulated from a very specific perspective -- that of society, of what is needed in order to make political communities healthy or to make the individual good for others. But this is not necessarily the same as what makes individuals good for themselves. According to Rousseau, many things that are bad for Sparta are good for a private individual like Emile and, more rarely, like Rousseau. Examples include: romantic love, isolated family life, softness and sentimentality, the theater, and philosophy. It is essential to reevaluate technology, then, from the possibly very different standpoint of its consequences for individual happiness.

Secondly, we also need to follow Rousseau in his wonted shift from the standpoint of abstract theorizing to the question of what, in practice, is most beneficial under prevailing historical circumstances. In Rousseau’s strongly pessimistic view, the theoretical ideal, the healthy spartan republic, can no longer be restored in the historical conditions of the modern world, with its large states that can only be ruled monarchicaly, with its tastes and morals that are irreversibly decadent, and with its religion – universal, other-worldly, and gentle – that is antithetical to the republican spirit (Social Contract, 126-30; Emile, 40). Only a few distant approximations to the genuinely healthy community, such as his birthplace Geneva and a few other small republics, still manage to linger on in his time. Rousseau’s practical purpose in
proclaiming his passionate republican ideal is primarily to help them: to give these endangered citizens clearer and more rigorous foundations for their republican principles and to aid them in reforming and strengthening their political institutions.

But for the world of large, decadent, and despotic monarchies, Rousseau had no serious hopes on the political level. He certainly proclaimed his theoretical republican ideal there too, but his practical purpose was the opposite: not to encourage republican revolutions but rather resignation and detachment. Rousseau makes this perfectly explicit in *Emile*. When Emile – a Frenchman – is about to get married, the tutor suddenly uproots him and takes him on a long journey in quest of a legitimate and nonoppressive regime in which to settle with his new family. To help in this quest, he also steeps him in the doctrine of the *Social Contract*. Rousseau states the result of this particular study as follows: "you will be cured of a chimera. You will console yourself for an inevitable unhappiness, and you will submit yourself to the law of necessity" (*Emile*, 457-58). In the modern, monarchical world – a new age of iron – the public realm is hopelessly illegitimate and oppressive.

But one consequence of this dire practical situation is that one is released by it to save oneself, to pursue a private, individual happiness, especially – as Emile will – by fleeing the cities (the epicenters of bourgeois selfish sociability) for rural isolation and by retreating into the bosom of the family: the new love-based, child-centered, sentimental family (of which Rousseau was the first ideologist).

Thus, it turns out that, at this particular moment in history, the two shifts in perspective called for above essentially point in the same direction. If we turn from the abstract, theoretical ideal to what is required in practice under the historical conditions of the modern, monarchical world, we will at the same time be making the needed turn from the standpoint of society’s good
to that of the individual. So the question before us now becomes: whatever consequences the conquest of nature may have for the genuinely healthy society (which is now more or less out of reach) and for Enlightenment society (which is a total disaster), what benefits or harms does it hold for the individual who seeks a private happiness outside or apart from society?

Technology and Individual Happiness

To state Rousseau’s answer in a word, the technological project is pernicious for the individual for essentially the same reason as it is for the citizen: it conflicts with and undermines moderation – that word, so profound and meaningful for the ancients, so shallow and boring for us. To be sure, even we were able to see why the Spartan citizen, who is called to subordinate his own good to that of others, must firmly moderate his self-seeking desires. But what is the need for such austerity and self-abnegation if one is pursuing only one’s own well-being? Moderation obviously makes you good for others, but how does it make you good for yourself? That is a far more difficult and far reaching question.

“In what,” Rousseau asks, “consists human wisdom or the road of true happiness?” (Emile, 80). He proposes a simple schema. We have our needs and desires on the one hand, our faculties for satisfying them on the other. “Our unhappiness consists, therefore, in the disproportion between our desires and our faculties. A being endowed with senses whose faculties equaled his desires would be an absolutely happy being.” While it is not possible for human beings to equalize these two things completely, we must strive to minimize the gap between them as much as possible.

If that is the essential task of life, then two fundamentally opposite life-strategies present themselves: we can either restrict our desires or extend our powers – self-restraint or world-mastery. And between these two choices – the life of austere moderation and the life of conquest
Rousseau sees no real choice: only moderation can succeed. Conquest – which might seem at first the superior path – turns out, in a variety of ways, to be self-defeating.

Rousseau embraces moderation, then, but not because of any pious restraint before nature. Also, not because he is a puritanical Christian who condemns desire as sinful. On the contrary, he never tires of proclaiming that human beings are naturally good: our basic desires are all innocent and healthy, the source of our preservation and well-being (Emile, 212). For the same reason, Rousseau is no Buddhist ascetic equating desire with suffering and calling for its complete extirpation. He goes out of his way to caution that if our desires were diminished “beneath our power, a part of our faculties would remain idle, and we would not enjoy our whole being” (Emile, 80). Rousseau embraces the moderate life, the simplification of existence, purely because he finds it to be the true art of living, the only path that offers one genuine peace, pleasure, and satisfaction. Not unlike the ancient epicureans, Rousseau believes in a kind of hedonistic or sensuous asceticism.

By contrast, the strategy of power or conquest – whether the power be economic, political, or technological – is self-defeating, and that in at least three different ways. People always imagine, to take the most common example, that if only they had ten times as much money as they do now, they would have all they desire, they would find satisfactions and contentment. The flaw in this fantasy, however, is that you always think of yourself and your desires as remaining unchanged – you hold that part of the equation constant – so your newly increased wealth strikes you as more than enough. But in fact, great wealth changes you, and the little things you now desire will not continue to satisfy you then. Desire grows because habitual possession of the things that once excited your longing will cause them to lose “almost all their pleasantness through habit” (Second Discourse, 147). As these pleasures fade, you seek new
ones, better ones. More generally, the imagination richly adorns and idealizes the things that we strive for, but it abandons them when they are securely possessed. That is why the desires and passions, while not sinful, are deceitful, full of false promises, and why possession is inevitably disappointing. And, so long as that disappointment does not finally open our eyes to the wisdom of moderation, it will push us to a still more determined pursuit of new goods – the real ones this time – and then new ones after that, and so on without end (Emile, 80-81, 242-43). In other terms, as economic and technological power increase, they inevitably produce not only new and more goods, but new and more needs.

The effort to achieve an equality of desire and power through the pursuit of the latter is self-defeating, then, because as power increases so does desire – and at a far faster rate. For power must be rooted in the real world, which has its laws and limits, whereas desire stems from the imagination which knows no limit. It can leap in an instant beyond the bounds of even the greatest power. Human desire, encouraged by our increasing power, is endless and infinite.

The quest for power is self-defeating also in a second way– not only by stimulating desire but by undermining power itself: In seeking power, for instance, we acquire things; in acquiring things we extend ourselves; in extending ourselves we increase our exposure and insecurity, hence our need for power. It is this inner contradiction that turns the limited desire for power into the ceaseless quest that Hobbes famously speaks of. The cause of this, as Hobbes explains, is:

not always that a man hopes for a more intensive delight, than he has already attained to; or that he cannot be content with a moderate power: but because he cannot assure the power and means to live well, which he hath present, without the acquisition of more (Leviathan XI, 80).
Rousseau agrees with this Hobbesian point, only spelling out more fully its consequences. He particularly emphasizes that even those at the pinnacle of power, absolute tyrants, are afflicted by this problem: they are slaves of their power, spending all their days trying to protect it. As Rousseau states, "Whoever is master cannot be free, and to reign is to obey. Your Magistrates know that better than anyone, they who like Othon omit no servility in order to command" (*Montagne*, 841-42; see *Second Discourse*, 173). Many a workaholic CEO of our day must have a good sense of how this feels. The tyrant appears to be free and powerful since he constantly makes others do what they do not want to do; but to acquire, protect and exercise this "power," he must constantly do what he does not want to do. This is the meaning of the famous declaration that Rousseau places at the beginning of the *Social Contract*: "One who believes himself the master of others is nonetheless a greater slave than they." This is the classic statement of the self-defeating character of power.

Rousseau also points to a somewhat different way in which our increasing power, especially technological power, can weaken us. Speaking admiringly of the strength, vigor and hardness of savage man, he states:

If he had an axe, would his wrist break such strong branches? If he had a sling, would he throw a stone so hard? If he had a ladder, would he climb a tree so nimbly? If he had a horse, would he run so fast? (*Second Discourse*, 106).

Human progress from savagery to civilization, as Rousseau recounts it in the *Second Discourse*, is largely the story of the strengthening of our technologies and the diminution of our inner strength and vigor. For technology consists precisely in the outsourcing of our faculties. No doubt we gain access to enormous power in this way, but as our tools are perfected, we ourselves atrophy. Sometime in the relatively near future, there will be smart machines that can do a far
better job of literally everything that a human being can do with his body or his mind. There will be nothing left for us to do. Still, if all that matters in life is what you have and not what you are, then the atrophy of our faculties and energies will be no great loss. But if, as Rousseau suggests in a passage already quoted above, the good life requires the employment of all our faculties and the exercise of our inner strength so that we “enjoy our whole being,” then the loss from technology may be far greater than the gain (see also *Emile*, 42).

There is also a third way – ultimately the most fundamental – in which the strategy of conquest proves utterly futile. As Rousseau acknowledges, even under the best of circumstances, we can never completely close the gap between desire and power. What he has in mind, of course, is that we humans, being vulnerable and mortal, necessarily desire to escape that condition and necessarily lack the power to do so. Thus our true task as human beings is to narrow the gap between desire and power as much as possible, but above all to find some way to live with the unconquerable part of the gap that remains.

This ultimate task is clarifying: in its light, it becomes perfectly clear that the pursuit of power, perhaps useful for other things, is of absolutely no help in the decisive respect. There is no amount of power that will take you even one tiny step in the direction of immortality. (Our increases in longevity, while certainly a good thing, always fall equally because infinitely short of immortality). Since ancient times we have been told, the only (secular) solution is to be found in the opposite strategy, in moderation in the deepest sense of the word: knowledge and acceptance of man’s limits, stopping short before what cannot be changed, resignation to necessity. That is what it means to learn how to die, which, Rousseau insists, is the true key to learning how to live. If you don’t know how to die, then you will spend your whole life (often unwittingly) in the futile effort to flee or resist it, with the result that you *will* die but without
ever having really lived. You will continually ignore, postpone, and distort your existence, busying and burdening yourself with the impossible task of preserving it. As Rousseau puts it in Emile: “I am not able to teach living to one who thinks of nothing but how to keep himself from dying” (*Emile*, 53). Only in accepting the necessity of death do you stop wasting the finite life that you have -- and start to live. For you can only truly love and enjoy what you know how to lose.

Rousseau’s whole education of Emile is designed with this thought in mind. Thus, it is above all an education in strength and hardness through the experience of adversity. As he explains:

> What does not admit of exceptions... is man’s subjection to pain, to the ills of his species, to the accidents, to the dangers of life, finally to death. The more he is familiarized with all of these ideas the more he will be cured of the importunate sensitivity which only adds to the ill itself the impatience to undergo it. The more he gets uses to the sufferings which can strike him, the more, as Montaigne would say, the sting of strangeness is taken from them, and also the more his soul is made invulnerable and hard (*Emile*, 131).

From his earliest youth, a person must be confronted with hardship, difficulty, and suffering, not in order to instill in him a preoccupation with evil and the effort to avoid it, but precisely to cure him of that fatal preoccupation and thus free him for a positive orientation in life. This training in adversity will work in at least two ways.

First, on the intellectual level, he will not live in a fantasy world, but come to know reality as it is, learn the harsh truth of the human condition. He will acquire a wise disillusionment and a salutary fatalism, understanding that pain, suffering and death are essential
and inescapable features of the human condition that must be expected and greeted with acceptance and endurance, not resistance or denial.

But to hold to such a harsh vision of life requires tremendous inner strength. Thus, beyond the purely intellectual component, the training in adversity also aims to toughen and harden him both physically and psychologically. It will give him the sense that whatever evils the future will inevitably bring, they are not beyond his ability to endure, he is ready for them – a strength and confidence that will free him to unclench his fist, to live in and enjoy the positive good of the moment, while awaiting the inevitable end.

If this, according to Rousseau, is the true core of an education for happiness, then it is obvious that the pursuit of power in general and the technological conquest of nature in particular are not only the wrong life-strategy but are destructive of the right one, the path of moderation and resignation to necessity. They directly undermine the two purposes of the education in adversity we have just seen.

The growing comfort and softness of life provided by technology obviously works directly contrary to the toughening and hardening education that Rousseau sees as so necessary. Indeed, in our world the very idea of such an education has now come to seem pointless, not to say curmudgeonly. When our lives are so safe and our labors relatively easy, what possible need is there for this old-fashioned emphasis on toughening? But Rousseau would argue that the importance of human strength and hardness has always had less to do with our external challenges and more to do with the internal one. The defining struggle of life concerns not our relation with the world but with our own mortality. And notwithstanding all our extraordinary progress, the human species remains not a jot less mortal than it used to be. To live our lives, today, in a free and positive way in spite of death requires every bit as much strength as it did in
the past (if not more) – and indeed a great deal more than most of us can muster.

But in addition to the process of strengthening, Rousseau’s education in adversity is also meant to be an intellectual education, to teach Emile to see life for what it is, to live in the real world, to understand the harsh limits of the human condition and to accept those limits. This is not to deny, of course, that life is also full of a multitude of evils that can be avoided or overcome and often it is good to do so. There are many useful arts. But these successful conquests must always be properly contextualized. Most things in life can be changed; some few cannot. But unfortunately master fact of human life falls squarely in the latter category. Thus, in a proper vision of human life, the posture of conquest must be strictly subordinated to that of resignation.

But the technological conquest of nature – seen not merely as a series of useful inventions, but as a worldview – stands this whole intellectual education on its head. In its most radical formulation, it teaches the fundamental priority of conquest to resignation. It preaches, not a salutary fatalism but what can be called solutionism – the belief that there are no problems which the human race cannot eventually solve. Thus, it tends not merely to reject the belief in necessary limits but to debunk it as cowardice and as self-fulfilling defeatism. And conversely it celebrates the resolute refusal to recognize such limits as the highest virtue and the key to the future.

It must be confessed, of course, that it is hard not to be inclined to such a view when we continually see things once regarded as impossible fall before the juggernaut of our science. Our constant experience is of the continuing and glorious expansion of the realm of the possible. But still, if it is our aim to see the world as it is, we must also confess that, according to the laws of physics as currently understood, it does not seem that our ever-evolving universe will remain
supportive of life eternally. So even under the most imaginative schemes for longevity, we remain mortal and thus continue to labor under the necessity of adjusting ourselves to that master fact. But while learning how to die is, by nature and under all historical circumstances, an extremely hard thing to do since there is always a powerful part of us that clings to denial, it has been made even more difficult in our age due to the unique influence of the modern spirit of progress and conquest which embraces, at least as a heuristic device, the assumption that there are no natural limits for us and that the resignation to necessity is an attitude toward life that is fundamentally outmoded, cowardly, and counter-productive.

**One Final Twist: The Road to Kant**

We have seen that Rousseau opposes the conquest of nature, not from the standpoint of any kind of nature-piety, but because it conflicts with the virtue of moderation which is necessary for the healthy and happy life both of communities and of private individuals. But this statement requires some qualification. It is true if “the conquest of nature” is taken to mean what it ordinarily means and what I have been using it to mean: the control of external nature for the sake of man’s material needs and acquisitive desires.

But Rousseau specializes in taking Enlightenment concepts and institutions and turning them to his own, often counter-Enlightenment purposes. That is true here too. Thus, when Rousseau proclaims, in opposition to the Enlightenment, that a healthy society must strictly moderate men’s acquisitive passions, replacing them with an ardent patriotism, he actually makes use of the Enlightenment concept of conquering nature, albeit taken in a different sense. Since human beings are by nature asocial, for Rousseau, one can produce the needed patriotic citizens only through a conquest of human nature. Thus, describing the great Legislator in the *Social Contract* (68), Rousseau states: “One who dares to undertake the founding of a people
should feel that he is capable of changing human nature, so to speak.” Again, in *Emile* (40):

“Good social institutions are those that best know how to denature man.”

And it is not only the Legislator, in Rousseau’s account, who will be engaging in the conquest of human nature, but also the virtuous citizens themselves. In the *Social Contract* (56), he gives a famous description of the citizen’s “moral freedom, which alone makes man truly the master of himself. For the impulse of appetite alone is slavery, and obedience to the law one has prescribed for oneself is freedom.” In the *Second Discourse* (114) as well, Rousseau suggests that man’s true uniqueness and dignity is that, through morality, he rises free and superior to the laws of nature.

Rousseau is always very tentative in his discussions of this new notion of moral freedom and it is quite possible that here, as with his religion of nature, he is more persuaded of the utility than the truth of this doctrine. Whatever the case, it remains remarkable – and very important for his influence on later, especially German thought – that Rousseau does not leave it at simply rejecting the modern project for the conquest of nature as something destructive of moderation, as described above. In certain contexts, he also goes on to adopt and dialectically transform that seductive modern conceit into something that serves his own quite opposite goals. He makes it combat its own defects. He turns the conquest away from external nature and back onto man himself – self-conquest. More specifically, he directs the conquest against that part of man that greedily seeks to conquer external nature. In so doing he transforms it into a powerful new force for moderation itself. In short, Rousseau embraces (or at least makes use of) the modern, humanistic view that man’s true dignity consists in rising above and mastering the realm of nature, but he reinterprets this as the mastery of one’s own natural appetites through moral freedom. He turns the technological conquest of external nature into Kantian autonomy.
References


