The disenchantment of the world

War on his temples, do not all charms fly
At the mere touch of cold philosophy
There once was a rainbow in heaven
We know her woof, her texture, she is given
In the dull catalogue of common things
Philosophy will clip an angel's wings
Conquer all the mysteries by rule and line
Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine
Unweave the rainbow, as it erstwhile made
The tender person'd Lamia melt into a shade

(John Keats, Lamia, Part II, ll. 229–37)

Keats wrote these lines in the early part of the nineteenth century. Yet, it is questionable if the Englishman would have expressed himself in this way had it not been for Jean-Jacques Rousseau. More than any other writer, Rousseau became the apostle of the romantic reaction against vain scientism and the intellectual hubris of the Enlightenment. Strangely, perhaps, as Rousseau in the same period was treated as the intellectual father of the French Revolution, and as he – according to Joseph De Maistre and Edmund Burke – was to blame for the demise of the traditional order. To be sure, great men invite different interpretations. Yet, it is difficult in fairness to accuse Rousseau of having sought to undermine the metaphysical foundations of the established order. (We shall argue below that Burke and Rousseau, in fact, shared the same view on the 'disenchantment of the world.') Rousseau – the 'noble savage' among the 'philosophers' – was nothing if not a critic of progress and enlightenment.

And it is for this reason that he may be judged irrelevant today. More than ever the doctrine of progress stands unopposed. Haven’t we achieved the final phase of history? Is there any society better than the secular welfare
state? Where would we be without the progress of medical technologies and the tremendous advances in the sciences, which have led to electricity, the lap-top computer, MTV, the electric guitar, Viagra, Boeing 747s, the hedonistic pleasures of the welfare state and cellular phones? Have we ever had it so good? Brave new world! What more could we possibly want?

The history of progress

Certainly the sciences have made life easier in many respects. Yet it is as if there is a flaw in the heaven of progress, as if something is not quite as it was meant to be. We are no longer frightened by serpents, the eternal pyres of Hell, we no longer burn witches – and thank God for that! Yet, the epoch that has been described as ‘three centuries united by progress’, has also had a downside. And in some ways, this down side has, perhaps, been as dark as the evils which science and knowledge were supposed to overcome. The modern epoch has brought us soap-operas, Prozac and the electrical toothbrush, but it has also brought us the nuclear bomb, CO₂ pollution, child pornography on the Internet, and totalitarian ideologies based on ‘scientific’ reasoning. This is the dark side to a development, which no one intended; applications of technologies established for the benefit of mankind, which turned against him.

This is a replay of the development in Rousseau’s time. Armed with the insights of the scientific revolution, philosophers like Diderot, d’Alembert, Voltaire and d’Holbach set out to free mankind from its age-old cocoon of superstition and establish a more reasonable world of experiment and progress. While the great majority of the populations in Europe continued to accept the literal truth of the Bible and the existence of a Christian order, those in the forefront of the new scientific and intellectual movements had been ‘alienated from a Church that insisted on the literal truth of revelation’ (Hampson 1990: 94). It was left to d’Holbach, in his Système de la nature, to assert, with characteristic bluntness, that there was no divine purpose and no master plan:

The whole cannot have an object, for outside itself there is nothing towards which it can tend ... Men have completely failed to see that this nature, lacking both good and evil intentions, merely acts in accordance with necessary and immutable laws when it creates and destroys living things, from time to time making those suffer whom it created sentient, as it distributed good and evil among them. (d’Holbach quoted in Hampson 1990: 94)
Yet by 1800 this optimism about man and society had begun to evaporate—thanks mainly to the work of Rousseau (and later Goethe). In Rousseau’s works there was discernible a new inner voice, and an awareness of the individual’s uniqueness, which had eluded his colleagues.

It is still not customary to criticise progress. Conservatism is not a positive adjective in the early stages of the twenty-first century—nor was it in the middle of the eighteenth. Voltaire scornfully rebuked Rousseau’s opposition to science and progress in *Discourse sur l’inégalité*, branding it Rousseau’s ‘second book against the human race’ (Gray 1998: 38). Yet, even in popular culture there have occasionally been criticisms of the unintended consequences of the evolution of technologies that take over the control of humans; Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is not that different from Arnold Schwarzenegger’s *Terminator*. Works of varying intellectual merit, to be sure, but both expressions of the same concern; that technologies have taken control—to the detriment, rather than to the benefit, of mankind. (A fact which, more than anything, is evident in the history of warfare. As military historian John Keegan (1993: 359–61) has shown, the increasing number of casualties in wars—civilian as well as non-civilian—is a direct consequence of technological developments.) They never intended it to happen in this way. The scientists who reacted against clerical reaction and supposition were not what Rousseau was later to term ‘evangelists of atheism’ (Stiebing 1993: 32). Rather they were God-fearing men of considerable theological sophistication. Isaac Newton wrote more about theology than about mathematics; Mendel, the father of modern genetics, was a pious monk; Blaise Pascal was a religious thinker more than a mathematician and a physicist; Johannes Kepler was a mystic as well as an astronomer, as was Copernicus. Nicolas Steno—the father of modern palaeontology and geology—was an ordained priest, so too was Bruno. Being a heretic was not a pre-qualification for entering into the premier league of great scientific minds—but a degree in divinity seemed a good starting point (indeed, even Charles Darwin acquired one!). But the new creed was a threat to the established order—an order which, paradoxically, had been weakened by the Reformation initiated by pious souls like Martin Luther and Jean Calvin. While the God-fearing intentions of these two men were beyond dispute, the consequence of their revolt was a wholly unintended secularisation. Summing up this development Max Weber concluded that ‘the fate of our times is characterised by rationalism and intellectualisation, and above all the disenchantment [entzauberung] of the world’ (Weber 1997: 155). Even Friedrich Nietzsche, in so many ways the evangelist of atheism, could empathise with the *Angst*
and the gruesome prospect of *horror vacui*. In *The Joyful Science* Nietzsche wrote the story of the madman, a tale which leaves nobody in doubt about how disturbing the author found God’s death:

> We have killed him [God] you and I! We are all his murderers. But how have we done it? How could we swallow the sea? Who gave us the sponge to rub the entire horizon? What were we when we unchained the Earth from the Sun? Where is it going? Where are we going? Away from all suns! Are we hurling straight downwards! And backwards, sideways, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an up and down? Are we drifting through infinite nothing? (Nietzsche 1994: 125)

The scientists and the religious reformists had sought to encourage a deeper love of God. Much to their horror, their findings were seized upon by their enemies as arguments against that very belief system which they supported. Agnostics, and outright atheists, skilfully used the writings of the early scientists to sow the seeds of doubt. Not, it should be said, for devious reasons (though religious fanatics are certain to suggest that), but for the benefit of mankind. Equipped with the tools and insight of science, modern progressives like Hobbes, Hume, Diderot, Helvetius and d’Alembert – to mention but a few – saw that God was no longer needed in order to create a better world. While Christ remained a revered character – and a model for emulation even for atheists – Christendom was no longer needed to secure the benefits of everyone. Rather the Church had prevented progress that (even then) had brought benefits for mankind – or those of them who could afford such modern wonders and benefit from the new understanding of the human body begun by the likes of Harvey and Paracelsus. They – ie. the scientists – had a point. The Church – Protestant as well as Catholic – got bad press from trying to suppress scientists like Galileo, Bruno and Spinoza. Furthermore, relief from the prospects of a miserable afterlife (as described in Dante’s *Inferno*) must have seemed refreshing for even the staunchest believer.

It was against the backdrop of these developments that Rousseau took up his pen in 1749, to write his *Discourse sur les sciences et les arts*. The work was not, he would later admit, ‘one of my best’, yet, perhaps, was still his most forceful contribution to the history of the ideas, providing, as it did, the first assault on a creed that had already become the dominant one in the collective psyche of Western society.

We have already recounted the events that prompted him to enter into the Republic of Letters – albeit as a disloyal subject! It serves little purpose to repeat a story so well-known. What remains an open question, however,
is whether Rousseau's opposition to the plight of modernity – and his advocacy of a simple (Christian) philosophy is a credible one – and not merely one that can be confined to the dustbin of dated doctrines of a bygone age. Rousseau was not the first thinker to advocate a traditional view (Pascal had done the same), neither was Rousseau the first to reject the prevailing positivist doctrine. Nor, for that matter, was he the last to do so (Kierkegaard was later to strike similar chords). But Rousseau was possibly the most eloquent – and the most misunderstood – of the anti-modernists.4

John Locke, not normally regarded as an anti-modernist, warned against the challenge of the atheist philosophers in The Reasonableness of Christianity: 'Collect all the moral rules of philosophers and compare them with those contained in the New Testament', he wrote, continuing, '[the doctrines of the philosophers would] fall short of the morality delivered by our Saviour and taught to his Apostles, a College made up for the most part of ignorant but inspired fishermen' (Locke 1965: 217–18). A pre-modern view, perhaps, but one which has also been expressed by a modern thinker like Alistair MacIntyre who, in After Virtue, noted that the Enlightenment project had 'failed by its own standards, since its protagonists had never succeeded in specifying a uniquely justifiable set of principles to which any fully rational agent whatsoever could not fail to assent' (MacIntyre 1989: 271). This view seems reasonable – if not undisputed – today. August Comte's confident belief in the 'unquestionable superiority of demonstrated [i.e. scientific] morals over revealed morals', is no longer in vogue (Comte 1854: 356).

Yet, while other (prominent) writers have raged similarly against the seemingly unquestioned and unchallenged advances of scientism, Rousseau remains the most forceful, and least compromising, of the challengers. Not merely because of his eloquence but also because of his tenacity of purpose and his ceaseless insistence that the Enlightenment, which was to free man, has trapped and imprisoned him in a disenchanted, Godless world. As he put it: 'To wrest all belief in God from men's heart is to destroy all virtue in it' (IV: 1144). Religion – and for Rousseau this meant Christianity – was not merely an ethical doctrine but a metaphysical 'truth'. God had sent His son to redeem the world. Jesus was not merely a symbolic figure along the lines of Socrates; 'if the life and death of Socrates are those of a sage, the life and death of Jesus are those of a God' (IV: 625). This view was as strange to the Philosophes as it is to their present-day heirs. In more ways than one everything has changed and yet remained the same. The 'ardent missionaries of atheism' still confidently predict the
demise of religion, the belief in the afterlife, the existence of God, and ‘ordinary’ men and women still worship – while scientific theories are being falsified. It was this hubris that Rousseau sought to combat – and it was this that brought down the wrath of the proto-positivist thinkers of his day. Yet, while Rousseau was a ‘gospel Christian’ (at least by his own definition), he was also preoccupied with the moral and political implications of secularism. Especially the development (or demise) of ethical theory after Hobbes. It is not least because of this that he is of interest to the modern science of politics. Rousseau rejected the Hobbesian view. In opposition to his colleagues he maintained that the ‘summation of all morality is given by the Gospel in its summation of the Law’ (III: 155–6).

**The poverty of neo-liberalism**

Nobody in the political mainstream speaks out against capitalism today. Opposition to free markets is seen as naive – or a proof of ignorance of the laws of economics. Hibernating or moribund Marxists of a Gramscian hue may talk about a ‘hegemonic project’, others – however reluctantly – may admit to Fukuyama’s thesis of the ‘End of History’ (Fukuyama 1992); that world history, ideologically speaking, has ended, that liberalism has triumphed. Scores of reports trumpet the virtues of the prevailing system of market capitalism – and are followed up by prophecies proving that Adam Smith’s ‘invisible hand’ will ensure a Pareto-optimal allocation of resources to the benefit of all. As always the empirical evidence in support of the utopian prospects is thin – if not, as in this case, almost wholly absent. Indeed, the *Financial Times*, hardly a basher of capitalism, concluded that twenty years of capitalism had resulted in growing inequalities: ‘in 1980 the top 1 per cent of American households owned a quarter of the American wealth: by the late 1990s, that single percentage owned more than 38 per cent’ (*Financial Times*, 17 August 2002). Figures from the global economy showed an even greater – and growing – divide between rich and poor. And, just as the rich were getting richer, the poor were getting (much) poorer. Even the World Bank has conceded that ‘it is the rich who benefit from globalisation’ (World Bank 2002: 1). In 1990 2.7 billion people were living on less than US$2 a day. Ten years later this number had grown by one hundred million people. The poor get poorer.

The legacy of vulgar capitalism was one of a belief in the automatic society. But its proponents were also ideologues with a particular philosophical outlook. Free marketers – not unlike ‘scientific socialists’ –
argue that we must endure the hardship (of IMF conditionals) before we can rest in the free marketer nirvana of the minimal state. It has taken a long while for this system to be established. It is testament to Marx’ predictive powers that what he foresaw in the 1840s has finally materialised in the early decades of the twenty-first century. The new creed of WTO-induced global capitalism has – and here we invoke Marx:

 ‘torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his natural superiors, and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous cash payment. It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour … in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single unconscionable freedom – Free Trade. (Marx 1848: 82)

Alas the Rheinländer’s predictive powers were stronger than his prescribed cure for the illness. Marx’s diagnosis was, it seems, correct – the treatment was not! For like the free-marketer liberals, Marx sought to resolve the failings of capitalism with a misplaced faith in rationalism and social engineering. Like Ricardo, Smith and Malthus, Marx sought to discern ‘the laws of motion of modern society’ in order to create a better world on the basis of this knowledge (Marx 1962, 15). Strangely for a would-be working-class hero, Marx never developed a philosophical argument for his social outrage. He never explained why capitalism was morally corrupt. He merely focused on the positive arguments. Marx was evidently concerned about the plight of the poor (chapter 40 in the Capital being a case in point), yet he never sought to underpin his observations with a philosophical theory of why political action was necessary to relieve the weak from their unjust hardship in a ‘heartless world’. Like the free-marketers and utilitarians, Marx believed ethical considerations to be of a second order. Leave capitalism to itself, thought Marx, and it will give way to a better society. The current neo-liberals, scarcely less confident in their ideology, reason in much the same way; leave capitalism alone, and it will reach the panglosian best of all possible worlds. In both cases a belief in the objective laws of political economy has provided the theoreticians with the answer. And, in both cases self-interest was the key to understanding society. The utilitarians championed individual self-interest. This was especially true for Helvétius (Helvétius 1963: 204), who went on to become the main inspiration for Jeremy Bentham – and, indeed, Marx. Bentham left no one in doubt about his position. In An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation, he wrote that ‘nature has placed mankind under
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the governance of two sovereign masters; pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do’ (Bentham 2000: 87, italics added). The Marxists, on their part, rested their theoretical faith on antagonistic class interests locked in a zero-sum game destined to end in the final victory for the proletariat. Arguably just another name for the same thing.

It seems fair to conclude that neither doctrine has produced the expected result. The legacy of decades of experiments with first socialism, and latterly capitalism, should leave few observers in doubt that these doctrines have failed to resolve all the ills of society. Certainly some problems have been resolved, yet others have emerged. We have not squared the politico-philosophical circle – Francis Fukuyama’s obituary over world history notwithstanding. This development would not have surprised Rousseau.

Modernity created a Titanic out of scientific hubris. The circumstances of the present crisis might be unique. Yet, the underlying pattern is the same as that which Rousseau rejected in the 1750s. Like the Soothsayer of the Village, in his opera of that name, the Genevan foresaw that modernity, rather than liberating man, has locked him up in a system from which there is no escape, no prospect of a blissful afterlife, and no salvation. A world of hedonism and run-amok materialism. Rousseau’s lamentations about the decline of spirituality (see the previous chapter), and his horror at the deification of selfishness, were what caused him to develop an alternative to the models which have prevailed since his own time.

The poverty of Hobbesianism

Nobody quite knows how it happened. No single philosopher, statesman or cleric can be blamed for the demise of the selfless ethics of the classics and of Christian religion. Yet one philosopher stands accused of putting the doctrine into writing; Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679). Hobbes – perhaps alongside Machiavelli – deserves (dis)credit for being the first major philosopher who sought to develop a moral philosophy on immoral foundations. The ‘son of an otherwise undistinguished Wiltshire vicar’ (Oakeshott 1991: 221) had somehow got it into his brilliant head that man was driven by egoism alone – and that all attempts at improving society would have to take this (regrettable) fact as its point of departure. In Leviathan he spelled out his chilling view of moral life, noting that ‘whatsoever is the object of any mans Appetite or Desire; that is it, which he for his part calleth Good: And the object of his hate, and Aversion, Evill’ (Hobbes 1650: 24). All human actions and attitudes towards other people were – in Hobbes’ view – derived from these first principles. On the face
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of it an absurdly simplistic account, however not an unreasonable one for someone who had witnessed the atrocities of the Civil War. What is bizarre is that the Hobbes' philosophical heirs, above all Jeremy Bentham (2000: 87) – who had been spared the horrors of Cromwell's onslaught – followed the former in assuming that the human heart was driven by 'Appetite' and 'Desire'. Hobbes' model struck a chord; perhaps because of its extremely economical account, its stringent style, and his imitation of the cherished model of the natural sciences and Euclidean geometry. Rousseau had great respect for his adversary, yet he believed that:

Hobbes' error was that … of having established that a state of war had existed between men who were independent and sociable, where he went wrong was in supposing that this state was natural to mankind and in considering it the cause of vices of which it is really the effect. (III: 288)

Selfishness – or **amour propre**, as he called it (see below) – was caused by a depraved society: it did not precede it. It would be natural to jump to the conclusion that Rousseau, therefore, regarded the state of nature as a blissful paradise of noble savages. And while he was – in weaker moments – inclined to express this view, it was not an opinion he expressed in his political and sociological writings. Morality did not exist in the state of nature. Against the romantics who longed for paradise lost he stressed that the 'common brotherhood of all men arrived fairly late on the scene and made such slow progress that only with Christianity was it generalised' (III: 287). So much for going back to nature!

Yet Hobbes was not the only culprit. One cannot, in fairness, accuse Hobbes of having established a new moral order. Indeed, it is possible that Hobbes merely sought to develop a solution to the circumstances in which he found himself. Further, Hobbes – unlike later utilitarians – did not believe that selfishness could have a positive spin-off. Indeed, Hobbes' conclusion was that only an autocratic despot would protect mankind from a 'Warre, and such a warre, as is of every man against every man' (Hobbes 1650: 64). In order to avoid this Hobbes would transfer all power to a 'mortal god', who would have the 'use of so much power and strength … conferred on him that by terror thereof he is inabled to forme the wills of all of them to peace at home, and mutuall ayd against their enemies abroad' (Hobbes 1650: 89–90).

Rousseau was not – to put it mildly – convinced by this argument. He wrote in *Du Contrat Social*:

[Hobbes'] despot gives his subjects the assurance of civil tranquillity. Very well but what does it profit them, if those wars against other powers which
result from the despot’s ambition, if his insatiable greed, and the oppressive demands of his administration, cause more desolation than civil strife would cause? What do people gain if their very condition of tranquility is one of their hardships? There is peace in the dungeons but is that enough to make the dungeons desirable? (III: 355)

This was a question that Hobbes could not have answered. And yet Rousseau’s attack on Hobbes did not have the intended effect of rendering the Englishman’s approach to philosophy null and void. Hobbes differed from his followers. For while subsequent generations adopted his principle of human selfishness, they parted from Hobbes in assuming that selfishness could lead to a moral outcome. Faced with the altogether less horrifying spectre of emerging capitalism, a new generation of like-minded scholars (such as Adam Smith and Bernard Mandeville) concluded that selfishness, rather than leading to mutually assured destruction, would in fact result in untold economic benefits. Nowhere is this doctrine more clearly stated than in Smith’s *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, where the Scottish ideologue asserted:

> Give me that which I want, and you shall have this which you want, is the meaning of every offer; and it is in this manner that we obtain from one another the far greater part of those good offices which we stand in need of. 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 humanity but to their self-love. (Smith 1776: 26–7)

It is difficult to overestimate the importance and the implications of this statement for the subsequent development of ethical and economic theory. More than merely a statement of libertarian creed, Smith’s credo provided a firm footing for economic thinking and political practice for generations of politicians. *Laissez-faire*, while seemingly immoral from a traditional Christian perspective (as well as from a Kantian one), was perceived as the only efficient means of effectively allocating scarce resources. Having furnished a new outlook on human action, selfishness became the touchstone of practically all political thinkers, on the right as well as on the left. Even John Rawls, a thinker of the moderate left, felt compelled to base his theory of justice on the foundations of egotistical calculation (Rawls 1971: 85). This is not to say that it was all the result of the Enlightenment. It was a popular, if erroneous, assumption among many of the critics of modernity that Nietzsche’s assassination of God was to blame for the moral decay and demise of ethics (Macintyre 1981). ‘Without God, no morals’, says one of the characters in Dostoevsky’s *Demons*. Not
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really. In fact, the famed golden rule of ‘do unto others as you would have them do unto you’ (Matt. 7.12), which Hobbes cited (Hobbes 1651: 36) (!), was as much an example of consequentialism, as were later professions of this creed. While Christ may have intended it differently, the teaching of Hell and eternal damnation for those who failed to live up to the teachings of the Gospels became a morality based not on the ‘purity of the heart’, but on a calculation that one should behave in a fashion that would prevent you from eternal torment in Hell. 10 As Rousseau wrote to d’Offreville, ‘… in the system of religion, that is to say of punishments and rewards in the other life, you see that the interest of pleasing the Creator and judge of all our actions is so important as to outweigh the greatest evils’ (Quoted in Gourevitch 1997b: 262). Christendom – in practice at least – had degenerated into consequentialism; a doctrine which was at odds with the teaching of Christ as perceived by Rousseau.

Rousseau lamented the demise of this system of morals and he never accepted this invisible hand. He wrote:

All our writers regard the crowning achievement of our century’s politics to be the sciences, the arts, the commerce, laws and all the other bonds which, by tightening the social ties among men through self interest, place them in a position of mutual dependence … and oblige everyone to contribute to everyone else’s happiness in order to secure his own. These are certainly fine ideas, and they are presented in an attractive light. But when they are examined carefully and impartially, the advantages which they seem to hold out prove to be subject to a good many reservations. (II: 968)

Rousseau’s moral philosophy, therefore, was not only a radical break with Hobbes, it was also a break with the perceived teachings of the Church(es). For Rousseau, the goal – however good – did not justify the means. In one of his Fragments, entitled Des Moeurs, he stated that ‘for an action to be good [and just it must] not only be this in its ends but in all its relations’ (III: 555) – clearly not a view that was compatible with the morals of selfishness. This view was later to become the central dogma in Immanuel Kant’s moral philosophy. In Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals, written in 1785, the German Meister famously noted that we should ‘act so as to treat every rational being, whether in yourself, or in another, never as a means only, but also as ends’ (quoted in Scruton 1981: 152). A moral individual is constrained by this ‘Categorical imperative’ not to bend others to his own purpose, not to enslave or exploit them but always to recognise their worth and dignity as fellow human beings created by God. The proto-Kantian approach (i.e. that other individuals must be goals rather than
means) was perhaps most forcefully expressed in the moral creed of Rousseau’s fictional heroine Julie in La Nouvelle Héloïse: ‘An individual, Rousseau lets her write, ‘is too noble a being to be a mere tool for others. It is not to be used only for the needs of others without concern for its own wishes … the aim is to be as good and as happy as possible’ (II: 536, italics added). Individuals are ends not means. To base one’s action on self-interest is to make that other individual into ‘a mere tool for others’, and hence unethical.

Having declared war on all the apostles of self-interest he sought to restate a true moral philosophy, based not on self-interest, but on a true concern for our fellow men. For, as he asked, why rely on moral philosophers ‘when we can find [goodness] in our own hearts’ (III: 30)? In contrast to most subsequent philosophers—who sought to justify ethics in self-interest and who accepted this as the only credible axiom of ethical theory—Rousseau adopted not one but several axioms. Man was not the product of one passion or desire only. While accepting the existence of self-preservation (amour de soi même), he found Hobbes doctrine too restrictive as the latter had not distinguished between self-preservation and selfishness (amour propre). Yet these two drives of human action were not the only ones. There was a third; compassion—pitié. ‘There is’, wrote Rousseau,

another principle, which has escaped Hobbes; which having been bestowed on mankind to moderate, on certain occasions, the impetuosity of egoism, or before its birth, the desire of self-preservation [amour de soi même], tempers it’s ardour with which he pursues his own welfare, by innate repugnance of seeing his fellow creatures suffer … I think I need not fear contradiction in holding men to be possessed of only one natural virtue, which could not be denied to him by even the most violent detractor of human nature; namely compassion [pitié]. (III: 154)

A modern observer has summed it up as follows: ‘against Hobbes and Locke and their followers, Rousseau insists that no amount of self interest ever leads to true concern for one’s fellow as opposed to the fraudulent show of it. It is not merely that Enlightenment thought overestimates the possibilities of reason … but that it underestimates those of sentiment’ (Orwin 1997: 299). Rousseau himself wrote:

The more complete our identification with the individual [who suffers] the greater our compassion with him. Even should it be true that pity is only a sentiment that puts us in the place of he who suffers — a sentiment that is obscure and strong in savage man but weakly developed in civilised man—
what would this idea matter to the truth of what I say, except give it more force? In fact, commiseration will be all the more energetic. (III: 155)

Libertarians may sing the praises of ethical egoism – and Rousseau was willing to concede that self-preservation was a laudable characteristic in man’s constitution. Yet he pointed out that the insistence on merely one principle was not only unethical but also untenable. Again his tactic reveals that Rousseau was unconstrained by philosophical method and rational discourse. Robert Wokler has pointed to the post-modern traits in Rousseau’s thought (Wokler 2001). Fittingly for a premature post-modernist, Rousseau used the language to show his point rather than to refute his opponents’ philosophical arguments. ‘In the most vigorous language’, he writes in the Origin of Language, ‘Everything is said symbolically, before one actually speaks … thus one speaks more effectively to the eye than to the ear’ (V: 377) – a view which has been vindicated in the television era. True to his rhetorical observation he did not engage in a dialectical discourse with Hobbes and Mandeville, but rather refuted the doctrinaires of self-love, offering a description of:

a man who, from a place of confinement, is compelled to behold a wild beast tear a child from the arms of its mother, grinding its tender limbs with its murderous teeth, and tearing its palpitating entrails with its claws.

What horrid agitation must not the eye-witness of the scene experience, although he would not be personally concerned! What anxiety would he not suffer at not being able to give any assistance to the fainting mother and the dying infant?’ (III: 154–5)

By presenting an appeal to the senses – and to the readers’ natural compassion – Rousseau was able to pour scorn on Hobbes’ purportedly realist account. That self-sacrifice could appeal to the heart was not a passing observation. Indeed, Juliet – his fictional heroine – sacrifices herself for her child in La Nouvelle Héloïse (Rousseau 1968: 401). All these actions are driven by pitié.14

But Rousseau, being a philosopher, did not stop at compassion. Especially in his Essay on the Origin of Languages he went a step further and sought to establish what we might call the transcendental conditions necessary for our compassion being stirred. As he wrote: ‘Although compassion is native to the human heart, it would remain eternally quiescent unless it was activated by imagination (V: 395). It is, in other words, only by empathy – the ability to step into somebody else’s shoes and then step out again, as Anna Freud has reportedly defined it15 – that we can feel compassion. For it is only through this ability to get ‘outside
ourselves’ we can ‘suffer as much as we believe him [a fellow human being] to suffer’ (V: 395).

‘Don’t tell it show it!’ runs the maxim of television journalism. By appealing to our feelings (in his fictional as well as in his philosophical writings) Rousseau did not need to engage in a discussion about the truthfulness of Hobbes’ description of man’s motives as deriving from the sole concern of self-preservation. Rousseau showed us that Hobbes was wrong, he didn’t argue his point. By presenting us with a case where self-sacrifice is — seemingly — the natural option, he had, in fact, rendered Hobbes’ doctrine null and void, and had done so in a way, which was more understandable to the post-modernists of today than to the budding modernists of eighteenth-century France.

Hobbes was Rousseau’s main target. Yet Rousseau was also profoundly inspired by the Englishman. Rather like Kant in relation to Hume, Hobbes awakened Rousseau from his dogmatic slumbers, and forced the latter to re-assess his own foundations by rethinking the origin of human society. So, while Rousseau was less of a ‘scientist’ than Hobbes, the former’s analysis of the state of nature is much more realistic, and more explicitly built on empirical arguments than Hobbes’. Hobbes was a stringent writer displaying his Euclidean skills. Rousseau, no less stringent, was more of a Newtonian, preoccupied with empirical accuracy. Rather than merely stripping man of his social characteristics (as Hobbes did in *Leviathan*), Rousseau challenged Hobbes’ notion that egotistical man was natural man, by outlining a hypothetical — though broadly empirically based — story of human evolution.16 Foreshadowing later historicists, Rousseau emphasised that in the state of nature man was yet to develop the negative characteristics which Hobbes attributed to him. Primitive man, Rousseau argued, was also solitary man, and, as such, someone who had no conception of good and evil. ‘Other men, it is true, were not to him what they now are to us; he had no greater intercourse with them than with other animals’ (III: 166). The envy, contempt and vanity (*amour propre*) of Hobbes’ state of nature were of a later date, and were only established once man entered into unequal societies, i.e. when strong individuals deceived others into believing that their might was right. It was only when this happened that man developed *amour propre*, which in turn poisoned the relationship between men. Rousseau often spoke of l’*error de Hobbes* (III: 298) — indeed Diderot even contrasted the two as antithetical in *L’Encyclopaedia*.

The philosophy of M. Rousseau of Geneva is almost the opposite [*l’inverse*] of that of Hobbes. According to the philosopher of Geneva, the state of
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nature is a state of peace, according to the philosopher of Malmesbury it is a state of war. (Diderot 1775: 240-1)

One could perhaps be forgiven for reaching the conclusion that Rousseau was a latterday advocate of an Aristotelian conception of man as a *zoon politicon*. He wasn’t. Rousseau was rather the proponent of a third option – that is to say he borrowed from both. He rejected the rational choice position that man is an utility maximizer, yet he also (and perhaps more surprisingly) rejected Aristotle’s position that ‘the state is a creation of nature … and man is by nature a political animal [*zoon politicon*]’ (Aristotle 1984: 1253). Man, according to Rousseau, had to be taught to become a good citizen (IV: 600). Rousseau agreed with Hobbes that political society was not natural – as Aristotle had believed. Hence the establishment of society required conventions, which in turn required the consent of the governed. But is it possible to establish such a commonwealth? To answer this Rousseau found it necessary to inquire if it was possible to create a political order which was both just and compatible with man as he was created – as a naturally un-social (though not anti-social) individual (III: 351). In other words, would it be possible to ‘combine what rights permits with what interest prescribes, so that justice and utility may not be disjoined’, as he put it in *Du Contrat Social* (III: 351). His answer – in so far as it can be reduced to a single sentence – was that such a legitimate order was a ‘form of association that will defend and protect the person and goods of each associate with full common force, and by means of which each, uniting with all, will be as free as before’ (III: 360). Yet *Du Contrat Social* – the institutional framework – was not sufficient in itself. It could not stand alone. *Du Contrat Social*, therefore, did not present a rounded political theory of the best of all possible political worlds. It merely addressed the theoretical question of legitimacy. Rousseau was never in any doubt that institutions were but part of the equation, and possibly a minor one at that. ‘Justice and utility’, he believed, could only be reconciled through education (broadly defined) – i.e. through re-finding the natural goodness of man; his compassion for his fellow men (Melzer 1990). It has therefore been said that Rousseau elevated the status of *le bon sauvage*, and that he aspired to take men back to nature.17

There is an element of truth in this, though not in the banal sense often implied. Rousseau, for a start, was no fan of primitive man as he is found in tribes in remote areas of Asia, the Amazon and Africa. Indeed, he believed that these had already lost their innocence. The state of nature depicted by Hobbes, Rousseau conceded, was very much like the state ‘reached by most savage nations known to us’ (III: 170). Rousseau’s natural man existed
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prior to the establishment of society – however primitive. Yet Rousseau, himself a *rever solitaire*, was fascinated by and indeed drawn to this primitive existence – though he would vehemently claim the opposite. 'The good man orders himself in relation to the whole … the wicked man orders the whole in relation to himself. The one makes himself the centre of all things; the other measures his radius and holds himself at the circumference' (IV: 356), he was later to write in *Emile*. But Rousseau did not always practice what he preached. The feeling of being alone and irresponsible (in the positive sense of the word, if there is such) attracted him. For primitive man, 'his soul … is given to the single feeling of his own presence, without any idea of the future, however near it may be', wrote Rousseau (quoted in Froese 2001: 20). Some twenty years later he would define happiness in a very similar tone in *Reveries*: where he wrote:

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. (I: 946)

The parallel is striking – though not necessarily intended.

Great works invite different interpretations – and often ones that are equally textually substantiated! A classic, it might be argued, invites different interpretations because the writer himself is wrestling with the deepest of questions. Rousseau is no exception, inspiring writers from Marxists, through liberals to conservatives. Can we take sides in the debate? Can we resolve the conflict between the warring fractions in the scramble for the intellectual corpse of the revered master?

The Left seems so far to have enjoyed a privileged position. Indeed, one it seems to have fortified recently. Andrew Levine, a proponent of the 'Jacobin' interpretation of Rousseau, even asserts that the latter not only was on the left and a revolutionary but that 'Marxian communism is an essentially Rousseauian idea' (Levine 1993: 159). Having described the blissful – though no longer obtainable – state of nature, and having singled out private property as the main culprit, we may conclude that Rousseau belongs to the radicals. Just witness the following outcry – which could serve as a battle cry of the anti-capitalists of the early 2000s:
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The extreme inequality in our lifestyle: excessive idleness among some, excessive labour among others … are the fatal proofs that most of our ills are of our own making, and that we could have avoided nearly all of them by preserving the simple, regular, and solitary lifestyle prescribed to us by nature. (III: 138)

Add further Rousseau’s famous observation that ‘the first man, having enclosed a piece of ground, besought himself of saying this is mine, and found people simple enough to believe him’, was an ‘impostor’, whose actions led to ‘many crimes, wars, murders’, and ‘horrors and misfortunes’. Also his assertion that ‘the fruit of the earth belongs to all of us and the earth itself to nobody’ (III: 164), and the contours of a proto-communist are not far off. And, yet this interpretation leaves out main caveats and qualifications. Rousseau was not a revolutionary, still less a man who believed that anything could be solved by confiscating private property. Like Locke, he was a defender of private property. Roughly at the same time as he wrote the just cited passage in The Origin of Inequality, he penned his essay on Political Economy, in which he boldly observed that ‘the right of property is the most sacred of all rights of citizenship, and even more important in some respects than liberty itself because it affects the preservation of life’ ([le droit de propriété est le plus sacré de tous les droits des citoyens]) (III: 263). Indeed, in Emile he even adopts the same justification of property rights as Locke had developed in his Second Treatise (Locke 1988: 99). Locke had argued that ‘though the earth and all inferior creatures are common to all men, yet he has property in his own person … the labour of his body and the work of his hand, we may say are properly his … when a man has added something more than nature, the common mother of all had done … they [the things he has worked on] be his of right’ (99).

Rousseau was under no illusion that property could be done away with. What he rejected was merely the accumulation of wealth. As a perceptive observer has put it; ‘of the most salient aspects of Rousseau’s critique of private property [was] the belief that ostentatious wealth poses the greatest danger to liberty’ (Putterman 1999). True to his reverence for Christendom, Rousseau did not seek radical solutions, but merely stressed Christ’s insistence that ‘you cannot serve two masters; God and Mammon’ (Matt. 6.24). He was adamant that ‘it is one of the most important functions of government to prevent extreme inequality of fortunes’ (III: 113), however, he was equally unequivocal that this goal could not be attained by ‘taking away wealth from its possessors’. The negative consequences of excessive inequality – while generated by greed (and hence by private property) –
could not be cured by stripping man of one of his most fundamental rights. Rousseau, somewhat surprisingly for someone who has been canonised as the patron saint of the revolution, therefore rejected radical change, noting (rightly, it turned out) that ‘revolutions hand themselves to seducers’ (III: 113). Rather, he favoured education – a revolution of the mind – as the answer to the excesses of unbridled capitalism.

Rousseau was not a revolutionary, nor indeed was he a utopian. ‘If we wish to form a durable establishment’, he wrote in Du Contrat Social, ‘let us not dream of making it eternal’ [‘ne sorgeons donc point à rendre éternel’] (III: 424). This anti-utopianism was a characteristic of his general outlook, and something we find in other parts of his oeuvre. In Les Solitaries, an unpublished sequel to Emile, the main character of the earlier work, while having received the most thorough education possible, still ended up leaving Juliet (his spouse) and failed to follow the teachings of his tutor. Rousseau was under no illusions that it was possible to establish a perfect society, yet he was a severe critic of bourgeois man all the same.

Small is beautiful: Rousseau’s economic philosophy

So what did he want? Which alternative to capitalism on the one hand, and revolutionary change on the other, did he propose now that he rejected communism? A case can be made for the view that Rousseau developed the first ‘Green’ economic philosophy by synthesising the theories of the physiocrats and the mercantilists. Rousseau was no believer in free trade. Many of his doctrines may therefore appear strange in the current climate where the free market has become an article of faith. This, of course, does not make his analysis redundant. Rousseau was an acute observer on man’s feeling of alienation – or anomie – in a society that had evolved in a way that was detrimental to his nature. Rousseau himself was not always sure that he had found a solution to the problem, nor did he necessarily seek one. He saw himself as an analyst rather than a problem solver. He expressed this view in one of his fragments, where he declared that ‘I intend to attack more than establish truths’ (quoted in Shklar 1969: 7) and in, the largely ignored, autobiographical essay Mon Portrait (I: 1120), where he stated: ‘I am an observer, not a moralist. I am the botanist who describes the plant. It is for the physician to order its use.’ Unlike Marx – who remarked that philosophers, rather than interpreting the world, should change it – Rousseau was not a political activist. Yet, like Marx, he distinguished himself by making the right diagnosis of the plight of modern men and women. That both his and Marx’s followers drew the wrong implications
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of this analysis is another story – and a tragic one at that, though perhaps one that could have been avoided had Rousseau's followers cared to consider the blueprint for reform Rousseau – despite his protestations – penned in the Autumn of his life.

Rousseau, while not opposed to private property, would have been opposed to most other doctrines of modern (capitalist) economics, especially international trade. His economic credo was founded upon a preference for economic self-sufficiency, agriculture and decentralised government. That is, an economic system that would be conducive to the simple life Rousseau cherished – and which always lies at the core of his thinking. It is somehow odd that these ideas have tended to be ignored by political and economic theorists as they are just as integrated into his philosophy as are his writings about the social contract. Bernard de Jouvenel has expressed it thus: 'his [Rousseau’s] influence on our ideas presents a paradox. For the political ideas of Du Contrat Social have profoundly affected us, but the social ideas, which have a larger place in the work of Rousseau, have not done so at all' (de Jouvenel 1965: 18). Or perhaps it was Jouvenel who was in the wrong. For while Rousseau may not have much in common with the free marketers of the early twenty-first century, his writings seem rather closer to the modern environmentalist economists than is commonly recognised.22

In the history of economics Rousseau may appear as a marginal figure (Puttermann 1999; Fridén 1998). That is not how it always was. Bertil Fridén, in an insightful study, offers this interesting observation:

The spot was not always marginal. In the enlightened salons of Paris during the decades just before the fall of the Ancien Régime, Rousseau’s economic philosophy was evidently a hot topic. The editors of the great Encyclopédie selected Rousseau to write the article on political economy in Tome V. They selected him, not Quesnay, Mirabeau, Turgot, Condorcet or Diderot himself. (Fridén 1998: 13)

The economic thinking of his time was dominated by two schools; the physiocrats and the mercantilists. The former favoured agricultural production and laissez-faire economics, the latter favoured non-agricultural production and opposed free trade.

Physiocracy has been described as a ‘form of agrarian capitalism’ (Fermon 1997: 136). The term was coined by Pierre Samuel du Pont de Nemours, in 1767, to describe Quesnay’s economic doctrine. Quesnay rejected artisan and proto-industrial forms of production. Where
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mercantilists in both Britain and France held that wealth was created by the process of exchange – which could be boasted by manufacturers – the physiocratratrs held that agriculture was the best means of generating prosperity. ‘The sovereign’, wrote Quesnay, ‘should not lose sight of the fact that the earth is the unique source of wealth, and that it is agriculture which causes it to multiply’ (Quesnay quoted in Fermon 1997: 137).\footnote{21}

Subsequent thinkers borrowed from both these schools. Adam Smith, the most prominent, combined the physiocrats’ zeal for free trade with the mercantilists’ enthusiasm for non-agricultural production. Rousseau did the opposite. He adopted the physiocrats’ preference for agricultural production – but sided with the mercantilists on the matter of free trade. It was, historically speaking, the former view that initially won the day. Smith’s doctrine became the touchstone of the science of economics, Rousseau’s view sank into oblivion. (At least until he was resurrected by present-day environmentalists.)

While his reputation declined, it seems that elements of his thinking can be found in the doctrine that ‘small is beautiful’. He questioned the wisdom of free trade and liberalism, as well as attacking consumerism, materialism, and defending small-scale production. Rousseau’s position on trade and commerce was as harsh as it was unequivocal; ‘the financial systems are modern’, noted the conservative Rousseau, and continued, ‘I can see nothing good or great coming out of them’ (III: 1004). Money, for Rousseau, could never be but a means to an end (III: 519). The objection to finance capitalism was not, as discussed in the previous chapter, a sign of any fundamental objection to the principle of private property. What Rousseau objected to was merely the degenerated form of a liberal economy. He believed that an economic system based solely on egotistical rationalism would yield increased inequalities, and this he resented above all; ‘it is’, he wrote in Discourse sur l’inégalité, ‘contrary to the law of nature that the privileged few should shower themselves in superfluities, while the starving multitudes are in want of the bare necessities of life’ (III: 194).

His remedy for this inequality was the establishment of economically self-sufficient units, united in a federal system (a blueprint of this was developed in Projet du Corse). But there was more to his economic thinking than just this. Unlike modern economists, who pay relatively little attention to political matters, Rousseau sought to combine his thinking on economic matters with his political outlook. An adherent to a realist interpretation of international affairs (Waltz 1959) – i.e. as someone who saw international politics as the naked struggle for power – he found that reliance on free trade was both unwise and utopian – as well as it would have negative
implications within societies (such as growing inequality). ‘The only means to maintain a nation in independence from others is agriculture. Had you all riches of the world but nothing with which to nourish yourself, you would depend on others’ (III: 903). There are several interesting aspects of this view, not least that Rousseau also expresses an ecological awareness in addition to his political concerns. When advising the Corsicans to adopt an economic system based on agriculture he is aware that the natural resources are scarce:

[T]he island abounds with wood suited for building material as well as for fuel yet one should not exhaust this abundance and leave the usage and cutting to the proprietors. In the same measure as the population grows and the cultivation multiplies a rapid devastation of the woods will take place. (III: 926, italics added)

The proto-ecologist Rousseau, therefore, urged that it was ‘necessary to establish in good time a policy for the forests, and to regulate the cuttings in such a way that it equals consumption’ (III: 926). While Rousseau thus indicated an awareness of ecological thoughts — an awareness which is truly historically unique — he was not an ecologist. Deforestation and independence were not the only reasons for advocating self-sufficiency. An economic system based on agriculture would also be consistent with his militant opposition against luxuries (a theme that formed a large part of the argument in Discourse sur les sciences et les arts).24 In 1750 he had argued that ‘money though it buys everything else, cannot buy morals and citizens’ (III: 20). In order to acquire the latter two things (which were indispensable in a viable republic), he urged the adoption of a system which would: ‘Get the people to spread over the surface of the territory, get them to stay there, to cultivate the love for rural life and work connected with it, and so find the necessities and satisfaction of life that they don’t want to leave it’ (III: 904). For in addition to preventing luxury this system would also ensure that ‘the whole world lives and nobody enriches himself’ (904).

It has been argued that all of Rousseau’s subsequent ideas were contained in On Political Economy. One might equally argue that all his mature thoughts reached their zenith in Projet du Corse, where he combined his Spartan romance for rural austerity, a concern for the poor, a realist understanding of international relations — and an understanding of the necessity of nation building and maintaining a viable polity. In advocating this system Rousseau parted company with the emerging liberal tradition for whom nationalism, ecologism and realist politics are obstacles for
creating the optimal conditions for the invisible hand. It is fair to say that Adam Smith won the argument – or at least the first round. Yet there are perhaps some who would argue that Rousseau might be vindicated by history. The classical liberals’ scarce concern for the environment and natural resources, along with their failure to acknowledge that man does not live of material wealth alone is perhaps – it is still too early to tell – an indication that Rousseau’s economic thinking is less anachronistic than it first appears. Bernard de Jouvenel found that Rousseau’s thoughts on these matters had descended into oblivion. Another, more recent commentator has reached a different conclusion: ‘what’, asks Pierre Hassner, ‘would have been Rousseau’s response to the current situation?’ (Hassner 1997: 215). Hassner provided this answer: ‘he would have condemned, deplored or derided the ideological victory of free trade, and welcomed resistance to it. He would have sided with American unionists against NAFTA, with French farmers against GATT, with Third World radicals and with the dependencia school … and against unequal exchange and the imperialism of free-trade’ (216).

A reactionary republican: Rousseau and Burke

‘Nations stumble upon establishments, which are indeed the result of human action but not the result of human design’ (Fergusson 1767: 187). Thus wrote Adam Fergusson, a prominent thinker of the Scottish Enlightenment, and – alongside Edmund Burke, David Hume, and Josiah Tucker – a proponent of the belief that spontaneous, unplanned action often creates greater things than individual minds can comprehend. ‘The forms of societies’, continued Fergusson, ‘are derived from an obscure and distant origin: they arise long before the date of philosophy, from instincts, not from the speculations of man … we ascribe to a previous design, what became known only by experience, what no human wisdom could foresee, and what without the concurring humour and disposition of age, no authority could enable an individual to execute’ (187). This scepticism in the powers of human reason might seem misplaced in the age of rationalism. This anti-constructivist conception of society as something that has evolved through what Hayek was later to call ‘spontaneous action’, was rejected by – and largely written in opposition to – a different conception of society, which we might call (for want of a better expression), constructivist. René Descartes, in Discourse on Method, was a proponent of the constructivist view. He argued that ‘there is seldom so much perfection in works composed of many separate parts, upon which
different hands had been employed, as in those composed by a single master. And he went on to say, ‘the past pre-eminence of Sparta was not due to the pre-eminence of each of its laws in particular … but to the circumstance that, originated by a single individual, they all tended to a single end’ (Descartes 1950: 60). As in epistemology, so too in practical philosophy, Descartes, the rationalist, was opposed to Hume, the empiricist. Where the Frenchman was a constructivist the Scot was not. The latter wrote:

It is not with forms of government as with other contrivances where an old engine may be rejected, if we can discover another more accurate and commodious, or where trials may safely be made, even though the success be doubtful. An established government has an indefinite advantage, by that very circumstance of being established; the bulk of mankind being governed by authority not reason … To temper, therefore, in this affair, or try experiments merely upon credit of supposed argument and philosophy, can never be part of a wise magistrate. (Hume 1985: 512)

As would be expected, historians of the ideas have rightly seen traces of this dichotomy throughout the history of Western political thought. Plato, Augustin, Descartes, Hobbes, di Campanella, Voltaire, Marx and Comte were – in various degrees – ‘constructivists’, whereas Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Burke and Hume could be categorised in the opposite camp. Rousseau has hitherto been unequivocally placed among the former. Hayek, to mention but one writer, thus sees a chain of ‘design theories of social institutions, from Descartes through Rousseau and the French Revolution down to what is still a characteristic attitude of the engineers to social problems’ (Hayek 1948: 10). Hayek was not the only one to get this wrong. McManner’s comment that the philosophy of Rousseau ‘is the work of a revolutionary condemning all existing institutions’ (McManner 1972: 305), is another example of this fallacy. In fact, Rousseau argued that ‘all the laws of Europe were made little by little, by bits and pieces, an abuse appeared and a law was made to deal with it’ (III: 975). Hayek was not alone in thinking that Rousseau was a constructivist. Edmund Burke’s case against Rousseau – and the French Revolution – was, above all, based on what he saw as the latter’s constructivist approach. It is, however, questionable if Burke in reality held views that differed significantly from those propagated by Rousseau. As Annie Marion Osborn has found in her *Rousseau and Burke*: ‘When Edmund Burke thundered forth his vitriolic denunciations of Rousseau, he had no conception of the fact that they were both dreaming of a better society in which men would be free and would be willing to assume the responsibilities of citizenship in a state
dedicated to liberty’ (Osborn 1940: 238). ‘We are not’, wrote Burke in Reflections on the Revolution in France, ‘the converts of Rousseau, we are not the disciples of Voltaire … atheists are not our preachers’ (Burke 1790: 282). Burke might be forgiven for his rejection of Rousseau. Indeed, the latter’s thinking was often singled out as a scapegoat among contemporary writers – and was commonly associated with Voltaire. William Blake, for instance, wrote in his Notebook:

Mock, mock Voltaire, Rousseau
Mock, mock on ’tis all in vain
You throw the sand against the wind
And the wind throws it back again

(Blake 1979: 184)

Burke (and Blake, it seems) used Rousseau as a convenient political scapegoat. Burke’s charge would, perhaps, have been true had he focused solely on Voltaire, who – unlike Rousseau – advocated revolutionary change. Or, as he bluntly put it in his Dictionnaire Philosophique, ‘if you want good laws, burn those you have and make yourself new ones’ (Voltaire, n.d., 32). Yet Burke was wrong to lay all the blame at Voltaire. Helvétius held the same views. Writing with revolutionary fervour, he noted that the only means of improving society was to reject ‘the stupid veneration for old laws and customs’ (Helvétius 1973: 144). Rousseau never wrote anything to this effect.

It is therefore slightly puzzling why Burke misrepresented Rousseau, as the British MP-cum-thinker had been aware of the Swiss writer for decades and had read his works. Burke’s opposition to Rousseau was not confined to the years around the French Revolution. He had written a sharply critical review of Rousseau’s Letter to d’Alembert in the Annual Register for 1759 and a similarly critical review of Emile for the same publication in 1762. His dislike of the Genevan – which was shared by many of his generation (for example Samuel Johnson) – was merely systematised after the Revolution. The thrust, however, was the same. Burke assumed, almost a priori, that the Revolution’s excesses were to be a direct consequence of Rousseau’s teachings. Interestingly Burke never quoted Rousseau.

It has been asserted that Rousseau’s theory could be seen as an alternative to the ideal of limited government (Barber 1988). While Rousseau did not advocate a Hayekean theory (Hayek 1960), let alone a Nozickean doctrine of the Minimal state (Nozick 1973), he was adamant that the magistrates should pass as few laws as possible, as legislation potentially undermined already existing institutions, which have proven their worth
in the course of time. The magistrates did not – and could not – know the consequences of their enactments. Their predictions as to the consequences of their laws could prove to be flawed, which could result in dire consequences. Rousseau thus urged legislative caution. While ‘the magistrates’ ought to have a monopoly of proposing legislation, they should only use ‘this right’, he wrote in Discourse sur l’inégalité,

with so much caution … that before the constitution could be upset by them, there might be time enough for all to be convinced … by accustoming themselves to neglect ancient customs under the pretext of improvements states often introduce greater evils than they endeavour to remove. (III: 114)

Arguably a view which resembled Burke’s view in Reflections on the Revolution in France – which has traditionally been described as the quintessential statement of the Tory doctrine of gradual reform. Burke wrote, in rejection of the ‘violent haste’ of the French revolutionaries:

At once to preserve and to reform is quite another thing. When the useful parts of an old establishment are kept and what is superadded is to be fitted to what is retained … Such a mode of reforming possibly might take up many years. Without question in mind, and it ought. It is one of the excellencies of a method in which time is among the assistants, that its operation is slow, and in some cases almost imperceptible. (Burke 1986: 280)

Rousseau could not have agreed more. Almost echoing his foremost critic, Rousseau concurred, ‘men soon learn to despise laws which they see daily altered (III: 114). This was not a mere passing idée fixe, indeed, in Considérations sur la gouvernement du Polonge, written seventeen years later, he again stressed: ‘let us never lose sight of the important maxim; do not change anything, add nothing, subtract nothing, unless you have to’ (III: 975). Again – like Burke – Rousseau’s justification for this conservatism – was a profound scepticism with the practical usefulness of political science. In Lettre à Mirabeau, a physiocrat, Rousseau noted that the art of government is nothing but ‘a science of combinations, applications, and exceptions’ (Quoted in Gourevitch 1997b, 269). An approach to government, which, if anything, was consistent with Burke’s view that the ‘science of constructing a commonwealth … is like every other experimental science, not to be taught a priori. Nor is it a short experience’ (Burke 1986: 442). Burke, who never missed an opportunity to excoriate Rousseau, presumably, was unaware of this. Perhaps Burke would – had he read Rousseau’s entire output – have hailed him as a great Tory? It seems that the probability of this would have increased
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even further had Burke paid attention to Rousseau’s denunciation of violent change, which he believed would lead to despotism:

If they [the people] attempt to shake off the yoke will still more estrange themselves from freedom, as, by mistaking for it an unbridled licence to which it is diametrically opposed, they nearly always manage, by their resolutions, to hand themselves over to seducers, who only make their chains heavier than before. (III: 113)

Burke could not have put it better. But there are more similarities. Burke noted in Reflections that ‘our passions instruct our reasons’ (Burke 1986: 442); Rousseau, in a similar way, found, in The Origin of Language, that ‘feelings speak before reason’ (V: 417). This scepticism as regards rationalism – and faith in tradition – is what places the two adversaries on the same side in the battle. Other philosophers maintained that it was possible, once we have fathomed what Adam Smith called ‘the secrets of social astronomy’ (Smith 1937: 200) – to engineer society in accordance with our wishes. These constructivist philosophers strove to become for the political sciences what Newton had been for the physical sciences. Like Burke, Rousseau, true to his distrust of reason, rejected this constructivist view. Further, he also held it impossible that man could ever achieve an understanding of society that would enable him to legislate for a perfect society. Other philosophers maintained that it would be impossible to know all the consequences of legislative action. Legislation was not a panacea, as believed by revolutionaries, and fellow-travellers such as Jeremy Bentham.

Caution was the common denominator in the philosophies presented by Burke and Rousseau. This relationship is rarely noted though difficult to ignore. Sceptics, who may still regard Rousseau as a revolutionary (and Burke’s antithesis), are challenged to explain this rejection of Abbé de Saint-Pierre’s utopian proposal for a European superstate:

one must begin by destroying everything [tous ce qui existe] to give the government the form imagined by Abbe de Saint-Pierre, and no one knows how dangerous it is to create a moment of anarchy and crisis which necessarily must precede the establishment of new institutions in large states … who can hold back [retenir] the earthquake, or foresee all the effects it will have. While this plan has incontestable benefits, who will take responsibility for changing established norms and old customs, which it has taken more than 1300 years to establish? (III: 637–8)
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It is the cruel irony of history that the only philosopher in the eighteenth century who predicted the dire consequences of violent revolutions become associated – through no fault of his own – as the patron saint of the French Revolution, and through this with all subsequent violent overthrows of established political orders.

Notes
6 Economists have shown that when people have imperfect knowledge the invisible-hand theory does not work. For a formal argument see J.E. Stiglitz (1986), ‘Externalities in Economics with Imperfect Information and Incomplete Markets,’ in *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, vol. 101, no. 2, pp. 229–64.
8 For a thorough study of Helvétius’ influence upon Bentham and Marx see Irving Horowitz’s essay ‘Helvétius, Bentham and Marx’ (Horowitz 1954: 170).
9 There is considerable literature on Rousseau and Kant. For a recent, balanced, account see Richard L. Velkley, *Freedom and the End of Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
11 The relationship between Rousseau’s own thoughts and those of his fictional characters is widely discussed, as is his novel. For a thorough understanding the reader might consult: Anne Tilleul, *La vertu du beau: essai sur ’La nouvelle Héloïse’* (Montréal: Humanitas, 1989); Byron R. Wells, *Clarissa and La nouvelle Héloïse: dialectics of struggle with self and others* (Ravenna: Longo, 1985); Claude Labrosse, *Lire au XVIIIe siècle: ’La nouvelle Héloïse’ et ses lecteurs* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1985); Michel Launay et al., *Jean-Jacques...*
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In fact Adam Smith concurred with him. In the Theory of Moral Sentiments he departed from the axiom of rational self-interest. Smith himself wrote in The Theory of Moral Sentiments: ‘man … ought to regard himself, not as something separated and detached, but as a citizen of the world, a member of the vast commonwealth of nature … To the interest of this great community, he ought at all times to be willing that his own little interest should be sacrificed’ (Smith cited in Amartya Sen, On Ethics and Economics (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), pp. 22–3.


This concept is mainly developed in the Discourse sur l’inégalité and in Essay on the Origin of Languages. It should be noted here that some commentators have identified slight differences in the way Rousseau uses the term in the two works. Fetcher’s illuminating Rousseaus politische Philosophie was seminal in focusing attention on this problem, even before French scholars began writing about it.

I have been unable to trace this reference, and cannot therefore verify it.

It is a cruel irony that Rousseau, the thinker most opposed to the godlessness of modernity, thus became one of the first thinkers to propose an evolutionary theory (roughly one hundred years before Charles Darwin). Rousseau’s writing on the subject was greatly inspired by Buffon’s, whose Histoire naturelle began to appear in 1749. The Discourse sur l’inégalité was in large measure based on Buffon’s system and account of human history (III: 195–6).

See, for example, Jacques Derrida in On Grammatology: ‘according to Rousseau … evil is exterior to nature, to what by nature is innocent and good’. Derrida, Of Grammatology (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 145.


The disenchantment of the world


21 As we are unlikely to come back to this point later, it ought to be noted that Rousseau was a botanist too. Indeed he was a rather accomplished one at that. He drafted long letters on botanical topics between 1771 and 1773. While he was engaged in the meticulous study of the systematisation of plants (IV: 1220) he evidently – and as expected – preferred to study plants as a kind of worshipping of nature. The Seventh Walk of the *Reveries* is typical, and hence worth quoting at some length: ‘I shall remember all my life a botanical expedition I once made on the slopes of Robeila, a mountain belonging to Justice Clerc [in the region of Môtiers, where Rousseau lived from 1763–65]. I was alone, I made far into the crevices of the rocks, and going from thicket to thicket and rock to rock I finally reached a corner so deep that I do not think I have ever seen a wilder spot: black fir trees were mingled and intertwined with gigantic beeches, several of which had fallen with age … Here I found seven-leafed coral-wort, cyclamen, *nudus avis*, the large *laserpitium* and a few other plants which occupied and delighted me for some time, but gradually succumbing to the powerful impression of my surroundings, I forgot about botany and plants and sat down on pillows of *lycopodium* and mosses, and began dreaming to my heart’s content, imagining that I was in a sanctuary unknown to the whole universe’ (I: 1068–9).


24 He elaborated on this point in the fragment *Le Luxe, le Commerce et les Arts* (III: 516–24).