

# Cosmic Compassion

As a viewpoint to all-encompassing nature and human society

Jussi Griinari

University of Turku

Faculty of Social Sciences

Department of Philosophy, Contemporary History and Political Science

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The present essay is an attempt at pursuing understanding about the widely spread tendency of human thinking to perceive "nature" as the outside of human society and culture. The attempt has been carried out by investigating, and also developing, the notion of compassion found in selected writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78). The essay follows Rousseau in finding compassion a fundamental aspect of the existence of, at least, many animal species and then examining how the social development of humanity has affected our relation to this "pure emotion of nature". Inspired by Rousseau, and secondary level education about modern sciences, the essay adopts an outlook of nature as all-encompassing connectedness of worldly beings, outside of which nothing can exist. Thus human societies, in which ideas about defining nature as the outside of humanity are conceived, are also recognised as being thoroughly in and of nature. This result will then provide some interesting ways of viewing, for example, the nature of "environmental problems" that human societies are nowadays known to be facing.

Keywords: Compassion, Environmental problems, Existence, Humanity, Nature

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# 1. Introduction

When ancient humans started building cities out of stone and clay, the feeling of living in an environment made by the hands of ourselves as opposed to just lodging in caves that had always been there, or some temporary huts made of sticks and leaves, must have been somewhat extraordinary. We probably have loved the familiarity, safety and order of our self-made environments from the very beginning. This love frequently appears in everyday language, when we say a small rural town has "nothing but a gas station" or a person living on the "remote" (from what?) countryside lives "in the middle of nothing", for example. Sometimes, when the busy urban life gets too tiring, we want to take off a bit and "relax in the calm of nature", only to eventually "return to civilisation" to continue our everyday hustle and bustle. While the phrases selected here have a rather modern tinge, the tendency of thought they are used to illustrate, are probably as old as civilisation itself. The varying themes of opposition between countryside–civilisation and wilderness–agriculture have long and clear enough roots in history to validate the point.

Were one to enquire about the theme of the present essay, the pair of words "nature" and "humanity" could be given in reply. The existence of the words itself, or rather the conceptual distinction they suggest, ignites a forest of philosophically interesting thoughts into which the present essay will dive.

What is and what is not nature is a surprisingly little problematised question. Usually, whether in everyday conversations, old books of philosophy or modern academic papers on ecology, one sees the word "nature" being used quite carefreely as a concept to roughly mark that in the world which has not been touched by human hands, as opposed to "culture". A forest for example, according to this gut feeling, is definitely "nature". So are trees felled by storms and elks that consume the bark of these and other, healthy trees. But when we hear the roaring of chainsaws and harvesters in the forest, many of us are probably going to feel slightly differently. The chainsaws, one easily tends to feel, are intruders in the forest whereas the elks are not.

In order to understand this feeling, one must consider the question of humanity. We students of university, citizens of a country, peoples of the world are all of the mammalian species *homo sapiens*. We are humans. But what is it that makes us human, our humanity? This is a question philosophers have always been interested in, and a lot of theories have been written about the subject. Traditionally, the question of nature, as if by definition, has gone together with that of humanity. The traditions of both philosophy and everyday attitudes, rather uncritically, suggest that humanity is precisely that which separates us from nature, the very special character of our and only our existence (whoever this "we" might be). Nature is thus seen as the world outside the realm of humanity. Many suggestions have been made throughout history as to what could this distinguishing feature, humanity, consist of: rationality, language, self-consciousness, a special access to something "supernatural" or divine, to name a few without jumping into any problems of each right now. The roots of this tradition of thinking are obviously ancient.

However, the worldview of current scientific knowledge, if nothing else, convincingly invites us to answer the question of humanity in a different manner. Through industrious investigations of nature, we have come to realise that humans are of an animal species with an evolutionary history which we can trace back to forms of life that were not human. We may indeed trace this continuum of organisms from humans all the way back to the beginning of life on Earth to unicellular microorganisms. The features and possibilities that characterise humans today are the result of millions of years of biological evolution.

Humans have indeed built big skyscrapers, computers and complex social systems but there is no qualitative, or categorical, difference between these and, for example, anthills, beaver dams or the flock behaviour of birds. From the viewpoint of evolutionary history of life, the only real distinctions between humans and the living beings of their environment are related to bodily structures and bio-chemical composition. The distinctions are purely physical, and they result from the organisms' myriad interactions with their environment. This is an outlook of humanity about

which millions of children in every part of the globe are learning in schools. Scientists do not regard it as a wild hypothesis but a fact backed up by enormous observational evidence that we descend from some non-human primates. Yet, the opposition "humanity–nature" still stands proud in everyday thoughts and attitudes of the vast majority of us humans.<sup>1</sup>

This confusion is the starting observation of the present essay. On one hand, there is no question about the fact that humanity belongs in nature like everything does. On the other, we live in civilisations that are more or less based on the idea of human separatedness from, and dignity over, nature. Our naturalness is quite literally written in our DNA while our separatedness from nature could be said to be written in our "cultural DNA". In other words, our genes carry the biological inheritance of millions of years of both human and nonhuman ancestors, but at the same time we also carry cultural heritage from some much later human ancestors.<sup>2</sup> Nowadays that we have recognised the reality of our genetic nature and history, the knowledge about our naturalness has become an important part of our cultural tradition, the tradition which has long been emphasising our separatedness from nature. Here one may see a fundamental confusion at the heart of society, regarding our very existence.

However, the extent of the problem is by no means limited to mere conceptual ambiguity in what is humanity. Rather, how the worldview of our culture accords with reality has profound effects on the concrete relationship of our species with the environment. Only in the recent decades has the awareness of the scope and effects of humanity's environmental impact gradually spread wider in our societies. Global environmental problems, such as climate change and biodiversity loss, caused to a large extent by human activities, are now, on the 21st century, slowly becoming a more and more central theme in politics.<sup>3</sup>

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- 1 One might also suggest this idea is so deeply encoded into our thinking and language that it would be plausible to say *all* of us, no matter what, are bound to thinking in terms of this opposition. This branch of thought, though important for the subject matter, will not be expressly followed in the present essay.
  - 2 In evolutionary theories, a distinction between genetic and cultural evolution is recognised. Basically all life engages in genetic evolution which means the spontaneous passing of genes in reproduction. Much fewer species have also cultural evolution which means the passing of acquired skills, knowledge etc. to new generations through imitation, training and such. (See Tahvanainen1987.)
  - 3 For all that the scientists know, this political change should have started a lot earlier, and at least now it had better be remarkably faster and more determinate than it still is today. At the time of writing, the pandemic outbreak of a coronavirus has resulted in

The "environmental crisis" of our times has been seen as a symptom of humanity's relation with the environment being broken. And it indeed is an important aim of the present essay to find deeper understanding about this brokenness of our relationship with nature. The aim is by no means totally clear, and not least because, when it comes to "philosophical" ponderings on humanity and nature, it will not suffice just to "analyse" the concepts and clarify their meanings, neither will it be enough to find out logical necessities and metaphysical truths about the subject. It will not do to isolate the questions "What is nature?" and "What is humanity?" and treat them as if independent from a host of other questions. Instead, in order to have understanding on the forest of problems lying behind these seemingly straightforward questions, one needs sincere involvement in actuality and deep will to learn from nature. One needs to let themselves be taught by the envioning world. Combining this demand with the requirement of having to be secluded in a study, writing, is just much more easier said than done. But that is what we have to try.

It is obvious that the problematic that has been sketched out in this introduction cannot be fully addressed in a short essay like the present one. Thus the aim of the essay is not to fill the whole sketch with texture but rather to occupy a little spot from the scene that has been sketched and work at least something out in that spot, keeping in mind the vast envioning scene. Effectively, the essay revolves around some writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) whose philosophical method and ideas have served as a remarkable influence in forming the thoughts expressed in the essay. It is worth noting that the object of the essay is not to attempt scholarly work on Rousseau but rather to use his writings as a guide in dealing with the abovementioned confusions regarding nature and humanity.

The leading guide of the present essay will be Rousseau's notion of compassion. The aim of the essay is to find inspiration from this notion for thinking about the apparent friction between how

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strongly restricting the insatiable pursuit of profit of the global economy for the sake of the health of the nations. It is still too early to say whether the current situation will lead into a more profound political change. Whether, for example, as "environmentalists" have been insisting for decades, the global environmental problems will finally be recognised on the level of world politics as an acute crisis threatening the health of the nations and requiring measures as radical, but not as temporary, as the current pandemic.

humanity is actually related to nature and how this relation is conceived of in human societies.

Following Rousseau, the present essay will twine the topic of compassion together with discussing the birth of human society, and its relation to the place in which it emerged. Chapter 2 will address the latter topic while chapter 3 will dive more expressly to the topic of compassion. Chapter 4, then, has been reserved for concluding remarks.

The main pre-assumption that the essay will examine and, in the end, defend is the conviction that humanity's deep connectedness to the rest of nature is a fact, and that denying this fact constitutes a multi-faceted host of problems in our species' relationship with the environment. In terms of "philosophical analysis", the conceptual difference between humanity and nature will be put under a critical investigation, based on considerations as sincere as possible about the nature of both nature and humanity in it.

Lastly, it is worth noting that the present essay is not an attempt to solve any particular problems on specific "fields" of philosophy. Rather, the style of the essay could be characterised as contemplative and illustrative. This does not mean that the value of getting problems solved is by any means disregarded. In the age of global ecological crisis we are, day in day out, faced by political and moral problems regarding the sustainability of humanity's existence. While not trying to provide a political program or normative ethics, the essay can be celebrated as succesful if it can provide at least some food for real-life-directed thinking amid all the theoretical meandering.

## 2. Society Sprouting

This chapter is dedicated to pondering how the modern way of human existence, society, came into being. Society, or culture, is conventionally conceived of as the realm of humanity as a counterpoint to nature. It is the very symbol of humanity, the house which we have built against nature. It should be noted that, in the present essay, a factual account of historical events is not being attempted. Rather, two different approaches, represented by Rousseau and John Locke (1634–1704), to the



question of society will be contrasted and then compared with regard to their illuminating effects. The two approaches are examined here especially with regard to their historicity, that is how they relate to the historical nature of human development. Some broader views will then be opened in the next chapter.

Both Locke and Rousseau wrote some insightful texts on how human society came into being. Both of them employ the idea of *state of nature* which is thought of as the (hypothetical) predecessor of human society, the way of human life before society was established. However, the explanatory meaning of this notion seems to be quite different for the two thinkers. For Locke, state of nature quite straightforwardly answers the question "Why there is society?", whereas Rousseau seems to be more interested in understanding the relationship between nature and society in general. Even if this distinction were too subtle to be helpful, comparing Locke and Rousseau's accounts of the transition from state of nature to that of society will provide us a fruitful image of their differing views on the nature of humanity and our relation to the environment.

As the title already suggests, Rousseau's famous *On the Origin and Foundation of Inequality of Mankind* (*Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*) is about inequality. But what Rousseau actually illustrates in the book is the beginning of human society. The account given is of course not intended as a description of actual events. Rather, it is a quasi-historical fable about a certain scene in human evolutionary history, namely the appearing of human society. This scene (that did not happen in a flash) appears in Rousseau's work as a line dividing two epochs in the history of humanity: the state of nature and that of society. As Rousseau himself points out, even though the investigation of humanity's "natural state" is not factually possible<sup>4</sup>, thinking about how humanity might have been before society, and how society has changed humanity, should provide us in the present day with some thought-provoking insights (Rousseau 1972b, 160–1).

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4 Today, through fossil evidence, we can actually observe quite a lot about the life of ancient humanity.

Although Rousseau is expressly cautious about making any too far-fetched speculations about the pre-social humans' actual way of life or bodily features, yet in the book he vividly describes the life of two-legged wild mammals not too different from our modern perception of prehistorical humans. These mammals roamed in forests and plains, gathered whatever edible they might easily find, slept in caves or in the shade of trees and led spontaneous lives guided by instincts, with no mental capacities to be concerned about future or really care about anything but the natural drives of nutrition, reproduction and avoidance of bodily damage (ibid. 168–78; 181–3).

In addition to the obvious physical characteristics, Rousseau recognises two features in humans in the state of nature that no other animal has. One of them is "free will" the obvious problems of which will not be discussed in the present essay. Another uniquely human, and much more interesting for the present purposes, characteristic Rousseau finds in pre-social humans is their "faculty of improvement". By this Rousseau means that humanity, both individually and as a species, can develop through time, while all other species are as they are, unchangingly: "a brute [unlike human] is, at the end of a few months, all he ever will be during the rest of his life; and his species, at the end of a thousand years, are exactly what it was the first year of that thousand" (ibid.). Nowadays we know that these speculations were not quite correct with respect to nonhuman animals. However, this mistake in facts does not really undermine Rousseau's insights into human society. We will see that recognising the fact of human development is rather crucial in distinguishing Rousseau's view of the origin of society from that of Locke's.

Now that we have an idea of how humanity in the state of nature seemed to Rousseau, let us find how the transition to society happened, according to him. In probably one of the most well-known passages of *On Inequality* Rousseau states that the first man who fenced an area of land and claimed it their own was the founder of society. However, as Rousseau immediately notes after this line, the process which lead to the idea of owning and private property probably lasted for generations and had to be preceded by various other developments in human thinking. (ibid. 213).

It is indeed a very important point in Rousseau's account of the transition from nature to society that the process was not simple and straightforward. As has been pointed out, humans in Rousseau's state of nature were not rational thinkers, unlike "philosophers pretend" (ibid. 180–6). In state of nature there was no thinking beyond one's next meal, no language or universal concepts to think of distant things, no ideas except direct observations of one's surroundings. Rousseau was aware that the appearance of all these complicated phenomena of human consciousness, that we today take for granted, must have taken ages to develop, yet by humanity's natural tendency to improvement the process was possible. With surprising congeniality to modern paleoecological theories, Rousseau suggested that what forced mankind to sharpen their wits and end up with the complicated mind familiar to us now were hardships with environment. Life in the wild was not idle roaming in paradisaal gardens but occasionally harsh struggle with environmental conditions, of which Rousseau mentions weather and competition for resources.<sup>5</sup> (ibid. 213–6).

To sum up, whether or not the details of Rousseau's speculations (ibid. 216–20) are correct, is not, as he himself points out, that important. The main idea, that even the processes of attaining some sort of conceptual consciousness and the following idea of oneself as a part of certain animal species, humanity, took generations to happen is what matters for the purposes of the present essay. When humans, on the course of this gradual development, started communicating more intensively with each other, the bonds of co-operation got stronger which paved ground to the appearance of such phenomena as society, morality, language and passing of knowledge over generations (cultural evolution). Only as a part of these complex stages of human development could ideas of our separatedness from nature emerge. When we study humans in Rousseau's state of nature, we hardly find evidence for any separation from nature<sup>6</sup>, only a two-legged species of animal among many

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5 In more recent studies it has been suggested that it was actually competition with other humans that mainly drove the evolution of more complex intelligence (including self-awareness) and social structures. One's ability to establish and maintain good relations with other members in a primitive society became a crucial factor in how much genes one could pass onward to new generations. (see eg. Flinn et al 2005).

6 The reader may recall that freedom and "the faculty of improvement" were mentioned in the text as unique special characteristics of humanity. However, to regard the latter as a uniquely human feature is, as was noted, a mistake and there is a similar kind of problem regarding the question of freedom that will nevertheless not be discussed in the present essay as that discussion would take the text too far from the main topic.

others.

Let us then compare Rousseau's state of nature with that of Locke's. For Locke (*Second Treatise* §§ 4–15; 87; 89; 99), the difference between state of nature and that of society was rather modest and, contra Rousseau, instantaneous. Here the switch from nature to society is seen as happening through a mutually agreed contract to formally establish a "commonwealth" between individual people. In Locke's state of nature, humans are from the outset rational individuals governed by the "law of nature", which for Locke did not mean the laws of physics but various rights and duties that (some) humans allegedly have by nature. Examples of these rights include one's right to turn the fruits of nature into their "property" and the right to punish those who harm one's "person" or this "property".

Let us take a more careful look at this notion of property. When Rousseau's simple-minded forest human picked up an apple and ate it, the situation was with all respects analogous to a bear eating an apple. Locke, on the other hand, sees a remarkable difference between the two events. In the case of the bear the apple simply becomes a part of the bear's metabolism. This is what happens in the human case as well, but in this case there is also something else. The human being, by picking up the apple, makes it their rightful property. In general, according to Locke, humans become *owners* by virtue of simply taking things from nature, but for any other species this is not the case. This fact, Locke explains, is due to "the law of nature". Notice that for Rousseau, the idea of property rights needed generations of social development to emerge. But for Locke, this law existed already in the state of nature, though "unwritten, and so nowhere to be found but in the minds of men" (*ibid.* § 136).

In some sense, Locke's "law of nature" also renders humans owners of themselves. As noted above, in Locke's state of nature every individual human being is free to enforce the law of nature, that is to protect their person and their property from alien forces threatening these. This, however, easily leads to loops of resentment, excessive punishments and overall insecurity. Thus humans,

rational as they are, are quite naturally driven to establish commonwealths, ruled by the majority's consent, where a small portion of each individual's natural freedom, the freedom to enforce the law of nature, is given up for the common interest of a stable society. (ibid. §§128–131). This seems indeed a very natural course of action for rational beings with thinking quite congenial to ours. For Rousseau, however, this kind of explanation was not available because he thought humans in the state of nature must have had very different psychology from ours.

In addition to the extraordinary intellectual and moral capacities of pre-social humans, there is also a noteworthy hierarchy of beings in Locke's state of nature. In this hierarchy, humanity is naturally "property" of God and, in a similar vein, "inferior ranks of creatures" are there for humans to appropriate. Based on this value-laden hierarchy, an order of natural equality among humanity is built. There should be no "subordination among us" since "we" are all equally of God's "workmanship". It is just reasonable to think that this beloved property of the "omnipotent and infinitely wise Maker" should absolutely be preserved by all costs. Should an individual human violate this natural obligation by, for example killing another human, thus discarding their reason, that is becoming blind to nature's rational order, they may (and ought) rightly be "destroyed as a lion or a tiger, one of those wild savage beasts with whom men can have no society nor security". (ibid. §§ 4–15).

The rift between civilised humans endowed with morality and reason and the untamed beasts lacking these traits could hardly be more clearly expressed. It is also obvious that this rift illustrated by Locke reflects some real human conceptions of the structure of the world. We indeed have a tendency to think we are the crown of creation. However, shouldn't Locke, as a philosopher, have approached this idea a bit more critically? If the "law of nature" from which the moral order of creatures is derived only exists in human mind, shouldn't we be rather cautious about its truthfulness? The fact that we have an ideology, no matter how persistent, by no means renders the content of that ideology true in reality. True, the ideas Locke describes are widely accepted among

humanity but just sticking those ideas on nature and declaring them as its laws is not very illuminating if we want to understand nature and society.

How about the historicity of these two "social theories", then? We have seen that in Locke's state of nature humanity is an orderly collection of self-absorbed rational agents. Society, then, is formed through a decision of these agents to join together because they consider it a prudent course of action for their selves. As far as Locke is concerned, it seems, these creatures could have descended from the heavens just as they are. The intelligence and consciousness of Locke's humans in the state of nature do not really differ from those of modern humans. It is as if Locke looked at the society around him, just imagined a forest scene in place of the city scene, and thus had conjured up his "state of nature", the supposed cradle of modern humanity before his eyes. In Locke's nature, there are no signs of any historical development of human nature but instead the supposition of an unchanging essence of humanity loaded with a lot of capabilities and tendencies of thought we currently happen to have.

On the other hand we have Rousseau's evolutionary ponderings about an animal species whose natural capabilities and way of life gradually change through the passing of time. When Rousseau imagined forests in place of our cities, he noticed that it will not do to change just the environment and consider humans as if they had always been like we observe them now. The genius of Rousseau, as compared to Locke, is the view of humanity not as an unchanging essence in us and our ancestors but as the organic nature of ours, developing through interaction with our environment. For Rousseau, all the structures of society and morality, rationality and intelligence are but accidental superficialities that humanity has acquired through time. They have little to do with our fundamental nature as a species rooted in the soil of the Earth.

It is probably true, though, that Locke was not deeply interested in the relationship between humanity and nature, in the first place. What he tried to do was to provide reasonable grounds for

the existing social order. To ask how the rather complicated "state of nature" that he envisions came into being was either an uninteresting question for his purposes, or maybe it never crossed his mind at all. Thus, rather than simply condemning Locke's views as wrong, which they, under certain assumptions, of course are not, we would do better to point our criticism to the limited scope of his investigation. The critical question is: Does Locke's fable help us understand the nature of society, or humanity, or does it rather just serve as strengthening some misleading prejudices about these things? The question is not just about having or not having some facts correct. As has been suggested, mistaken views about humanity's relation to the environment may be fertile soil for dangerous ideologies and policies.

Of course, there is also a side of simple truthfulness to the issue. One may ask, for example, if it is true that humans are, by nature's order, morally superior to wild beasts, or if humans through their labour turn nature into their "property" (*Second Treatise* §§ 25–51). Even setting aside the moral hierarchies and all the refined right/duty structures that Locke's state of nature contains, one would do well to consider just the question: is it *essential* for humanity to be "civilised" and, by virtue of that, categorically distinct from the "wild" nature? A positive answer seems to be deeply rooted not only in Locke but in our culture and everyday thinking both before and after Locke, as well. But it is a very different thing to consult our traditional ways of thinking and conceptual distinctions on these topics than trying to find the answer from the things of interest themselves. Where, in a lion, does its subordination to humans lie? Where in the human species their superiority in the eyes of God?

For a conclusion, let us (repeat the) claim that this distinction between the ways of thinking presented here, that might be labelled historical and ahistorical, displays not just any irrelevant quarrel of some old philosophers but a clash of worldviews one of which is in a very important sense in agreement with the actual nature of reality while the other fails to attend to it. In Rousseau, we find a historical account that, though factually inaccurate at some points, provides us with a

realistic outlook to the nature of nature and humanity in it. Locke's account, on the other hand, can hardly be regarded as a proper history but rather a clever derivation of results under certain, rather wilful, conditions. As such, it may be a fine piece of reasoning. It is nevertheless dubious whether this account provides us any plausible understanding to the actual nature of humanity.

The reader is also encouraged to notice that the opposition between historical and ahistorical views on humanity (and nature) put under focus in this chapter is by no means a mere curiosity of the past. A modern perspective to the dispute can be found in the still flourishing debate about biological evolution through natural selection. Despite being as well-studied a phenomenon as any, evolution is still widely denied on ideological grounds.<sup>7</sup> This effectively means that there are a lot of people who obstinately ignore generally known facts about the nature of humanity and the world we inhabit.

Probably one of the most famous contemporary lamenters of, and industrious fighters against, this less flattering state of human education is the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins who calls the evolution-denying creationists "history-deniers" and dubs the ideological obstacle for accepting the fact of evolution "essentialism". (Dawkins 2009). Similarity of the terms used by Dawkins to the ones in this chapter is a coincidence but a rather illustrating one. The dispute between Locke and Rousseau is far from being over, even if a remarkable element to the dispute concerns little more than just accepting well-documented facts.

### 3. Quest for Heart: Compassion

In the previous chapter, we found from Rousseau the supposition that the mind of an early human being must have been rather tranquil compared to us moderns with our myriad social worries. Still, there is one remarkable emotion Rousseau suspected must have belonged to the early human mind.<sup>8</sup>

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7 For example, according to recent Gallup results, 38% of the people of the US claim to believe that "God created man in present form" (see Swift, 2017).

8 There is another, namely "love" (Rousseau 1972b 203–7), which will not be considered in this essay separately since, in *On Inequality*, the discussion on "love" is limited to reproduction. We will soon see that one could just as well identify compassion with a kind of universal love, and that sexual love may be seen as a natural part thereof.



This emotion he calls compassion, describing it as the awareness and tendency to be concerned about suffering and death of one's fellow beings even if the suffering does not directly involve oneself. And it is not only in humans but in other animals as well where Rousseau recognises compassion. His empirical examples include horses that "shew a reluctance to trample on living bodies" and "the mournful lowings of the cattle when they enter the slaughter-house". (The cows are anxious not about their own forthcoming death but from seeing their fellows being slaughtered). (Rousseau 1972b 199–200).

Compassion for Rousseau, it must be noted, has no socio-ethical connotations, at least in any common philosophical sense. That is to say, compassion is not a manner of reasoning or a justificatory ground for moral judgements. On the contrary, it is like an instinct, a "pure emotion of nature prior to all kinds of reflection" (ibid.). When struck by compassion, we do not imagine ourselves in place of an other being or anything like that, for compassion strikes before any clear notion of one's self. One should try and think about it as a selfless, or a pre-self, emotion, an emotion *between* us living beings all of whom are trying to get by in the surrounding conditions which are not always mere fun and games. Maybe there are biologists who would like to point out that the basic function of compassion is to warn us, to keep us alarmed and safe. This is not to be denied. But, what we are trying to learn from Rousseau is that this "safety mechanism", if you will, does not arise from selfish reflection. It is more primordial, and independent of, one's ever noticing any selves.<sup>9</sup>

In order to understand what we mean by saying that compassion precedes self-reflection and is "between beings", it is probably worth emphasising that the compassion currently under our focus is better understood as not quite like a colour that one may have in their eye or hair, neither is it like some personality trait. It is not a particular characteristic of a particular being but rather something that arises in the being together of beings. One might identify it with the bonds of mutual concern

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<sup>9</sup> The word "self" has had a lot of uses in different philosophical theories in which it is considered as the subject of one's actions, the object of introspection, the essence of one's identity or something like that. However, there seems to be no agreement on what/where the "self" is. Upon some deliberation, the author has decided not to dive deeper into the topic of self in this essay. See eg. Sartre's *Being and Nothingness (L'être et le néant)* for thrilling discussions.

between beings that share an environment.

The idea expressed here could also be clarified by saying that there is a kind of objectification of beings that we want to avoid in order to understand compassion. It is precisely rendering this being here and that being there into theoretical units of (philosophical) consideration which diminishes the sense of compassion. "Do to others as you would have them do to you" may be a rather universal moral principle but it does not express compassion. Rather, Rousseau suggests, compassion renders us to "[d]o good to yourself with as little evil as possible to others" (ibid. 202). This formulation, though containing the word "self", is not about self-centered reasoning with self-units. Rather, it has to, or at any rate could, be read as an expression of the very basic nature of organisms. What Rousseau's formulation from this point of view would express is that living beings seek subsistence, obviously, "for themselves", for it is impossible to metabolise nutrients for others. In addition, they basically do it rather prudently, that is avoiding unnecessary, and naturally repugnant, actions like harming other organisms.<sup>10</sup>

In some sense, we could probably say that compassion is like Rousseau's counterpart to Locke's "law of nature". Recall that in Locke's state of nature there are laws that secure the property rights of humans to the fruits of their labour, for example. But Rousseau's compassion is something very different indeed from these laws. The only sense in which one may call compassion "law" is the same sense in which physical "laws of nature" are laws. But one should be very careful with this term. Neither laws of nature nor compassion order beings of the world from outside, as if the beings were first there and then some laws were imposed on them. Rather, "laws of nature", compassion among them, are the very conduct of the beings of nature. These laws are derived from the beings of nature, not imposed on them. The unrestrictedly spontaneous being of beings, their free flowing through existence, is precisely what the "laws of nature" try to express. And one just needs to be very careful keeping in mind this is actually somewhat contradictory to the ordinary understanding

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<sup>10</sup> For example, *playing*, which many animals are known to engage in (see Telkänranta 2015), is surely unnecessary for subsistence. The relevant difference here between frolic and vitiosity is that the former makes happy while the latter obviously does not. It is one of Rousseau's basic observations that human beings, naturally, do not *enjoy* harming other living beings. How our later tendency to wickedness arose is to be discussed next.

of what a law is.

Now that some general remarks about the nature of compassion have been made, let us consider the relation of compassion to ethics and morality. We have already emphasised that it would be better to consider compassion as free from ethical connotations in any traditional sense. Still, Rousseau thought compassion is actually the original source of "all [...] social virtues", of which he lists some examples: "generosity, clemency [...] humanity [...] benevolence and friendship" (ibid. 200). The first lesson that may be drawn here is that compassion is not a product of ethical considerations but their source. It is true that ethics can be seen as a tool to pursue social virtues but what is striking in Rousseau is the observation that we – humans, cows, and all – live by the root of these virtues before any ethics. Thus, in "state of nature" we do not need to pursue these virtues particularly. Ethics was needed only after our social development lead us astray from the compassionate harmony with our fellows. Let another fable of Rousseau's clarify the idea.

First, in order for there to be ethics and moral judgements, we have to be able to value things. To illustrate how values invaded human perception, Rousseau invites us to imagine life in early human communities. Due to trivial division of labour having taken place in these communities, people started having leisure in their hands. This led to the birth of social pastime activities such as singing and dancing. And it was in the midst of this kind of activities where, Rousseau suspects, humans started becoming interested in the opinions of others. The best performers were keenly admired and everybody wanted to have their share of that admiration. Similarly, weak performers were scoffed. The notion of "public esteem" had been born. (ibid. 221–2).

Again, the historical accuracy of this fable does not matter. What is important is that Rousseau traces our valuing of some characteristics as worth pursuing back to comparing one's self with others. This is clearly expressed in footnote 10 of *On Inequality* (ibid. 306–8) where distinction

between "self-love" and "selfishness" is being made. The first is "a natural sentiment which inclines every animal to regard its own preservation" while the latter prompts "individuals to get a greater value on themselves than upon other men". Notice the English translations of the words used to express the idea are less than excellent.<sup>11</sup> For the purposes of the present essay, the reader is encouraged to emphasise "love" in "self-love" and associate the word with something like universal love between beings (compassion). "Self-love" is thus understood as a branch of compassion pointing to one's own being (self-preservation). "Selfishness", on the other hand, should be understood in a rather everyday sense as the all too familiar, yet hardly desirable, characteristic of personality, also known as egoism or narcissism.

In the previous section, compassion was characterised as something akin to physical laws of nature. Compassion was seen as a major force in the dynamics of (organic) existence in nature. Recognising now "self-love" as an indispensable part of this force strengthens the conviction that what Rousseau draws our attention to is not a schematic justification for a social theory but the "physical laws" of living together in the world. "Self-love" is the reason that compassion is not a miraculous guarantor of frictionless existence, free from all pain and displeasure, between beings. It is remarkable that Rousseau's state of nature is not a utopic paradise of eternal bliss. Instead, the natural necessity of "self-love" (self-preservation) sometimes leads to confrontations between animals (and plants) in the state of nature. It is just obvious that at times organisms have to fight over scarce resources and, as we observe, it is most usually each organism itself (or its offspring) for which the organism fights. However, the crucial point is that this harming other beings for one's own sake is not the root from which some "altruists" are exceptions. On the contrary, the root is a coherent system of organisms living on, and violent bursts of "self-love" are circumstantial exceptions from this shared being.<sup>12</sup>

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11 The 1972 reprint of the 1767 English edition used here as a reference regularly confuses the two words.

12 The example of the "cruelty" of cats who play with mice has been pointed out to the author. Apparently, prowling and catching prey release hormones that make cats, and other like predators, happy. This is basically why cats are tempted to prowl for strings, paper balls etc. (Telkänranta 2015). So, the cats do not kill mice out of cruelty but because nature has rendered them enjoy this activity. What Rousseau observed of humans is that we normally do not enjoy witnessing, to say nothing of causing, other beings suffer.

Thus, whatever harms and pains humans in the state of nature may have caused each other, there was no ill will in this kind of, let us call it impersonal, violence. The humans involved were simply driven by their empty stomachs to relatively troublesome means of securing their next meal. It is a different case when we consider harmful actions between humans tainted by selfishness, that is the aspiration to shine in the eyes of public. Only after, says Rousseau, "the party injured was certain to find in it [the injury] a contempt for his person", the road to pride, jealousy, and all kinds of malicious plotting and distrust between people so common in modern society was opened. In short, "the first step toward [...] vice" had been taken. (ibid. 222). From this it should be quite clear that, from Rousseau's point of view, the possibility of self-centered moral judgements and ethics seems actually to be a distraction from the "natural virtue" of compassion. Strange as it may sound, it is an important key to understanding Rousseau's idea of humanity's original connectedness with nature.

In order to understand the connection between morality and our divergence from compassion, a few remarks on property may prove useful. As the reader may recall, Locke considered property as a basic element of nature. According to him, it is essential to human persons to appropriate the fruits of nature by their very unique way of using nature's resources, called *labour*.

From Rousseau's point of view, the development of the idea of property is closely connected with that of the perception of values discussed above, for property is something not only for satisfying "this present hunger" but for one's personal *value*. The idea of accumulating wealth beyond one's physical needs was alien to the early human without self-esteem. It is precisely the notion of self-esteem that was necessary for the idea of increasing one's wealth by increasing one's property to appear. The consequences were less than desirable, though, since with the idea that some people are more worthy and respectable than others also emerged social hierarchies and oppressive systems where the weak were made to toil and moil to increase the property of those in power.

Rousseau had rather express views on how this emergence of the accumulation of wealth affected our relation with the environment. As people became greedy for social esteem and wealth, it of course became necessary to exploit natural resources more intensively than the early hunter-gatherers had done. In Rousseau's words: "[A]ll equality disappeared [...] industry became indispensable; vast forests became smiling fields, which it was found necessary for man to cultivate with the sweat of his brow, and in which slavery and misery were seen presently to germinate and grow up with the harvest<sup>13</sup>". (ibid. 225–9). That selfish accumulating of property has here been presented as corrupting both the compassionate existence with our fellow humans and the harmony between us and the rest of nature is quite obvious.

As a conclusion to this chapter, let us return to considering the relation of society and nature. As we have found, there is a remarkable difference between Rousseau and the targets of his criticisms, like Locke, concerning ideas about morality and society, and the role of these in understanding humanity's relationship with nature. For Locke, and so many modern thinkers, society is something that humans, already inspired by moral consciousness, established in order to police people from moral corruption that the nature of humanity in pre-social state entails. Laws and government are seen as necessary procedures against morally undesired human tendencies, such as greed and malice, that are prone to emerge in the pre-governed way of life.

Rousseau, on the other hand, thought that only society built on the idea of property could give birth to all the less appealing human vices and cruel institutions like slavery and oppression. Rousseau, keeping to the original amorality of humanity, pointed out two remarkable things. First, it is wrong to suppose that humans, anymore than other animals, are prone to evilness. Second, the kind of systematic evilness against which we need protection had to be preceded by social inequality<sup>14</sup> which Rousseau saw as co-emergent with the idea of property and value-consciousness.

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13 Allusion to the third book of Genesis is hardly a mere coincidence. Notice also the perceptive concern about deforestation. As a comparison, Locke held quite a different idea of our natural environment: "land that is left wholly to nature, that hath no improvement of pasturage, tillage, or planting, is called, as indeed it is, 'waste', and should thus be cultivated by man." See explanations for this disheartening opinion in Locke (1968) §§40–3.

14 Rousseau actually makes a distinction between two kinds of inequalities. By "natural" inequality he meant the difference of physical features, such as body size, strength, etc. The actual theme of his essay is what more exactly would be called "moral" or "political" inequality, that is the social conventions that hierarchise people. (Rousseau 1972b, 164). In the present essay,

It was the social way of life where some people were enslaved or impoverished, while others were bathing in material wealth, which made it necessary for the poor to resort to violence and theft towards the rich.

Only in this violent unrest, caused by inequality caused by property, appeared the idea of the institution of laws to police people. According to Rousseau's suspicions, laws and government were not, as Locke supposed, a mutual agreement for the common wealth of people, but a scheme by the rich and the powerful in order to maintain the state of social inequality and secure the possibility of uneven accumulation of property. In Rousseau's grandiose words: "[S]ociety and laws [...] brought irretrievable destruction on natural liberty, fixed eternally the law of property and inequality, [...] and for the advantage of a few ambitious individuals, subjected all mankind to perpetual labour, slavery, and wretchedness". (ibid. 231–5; 248–9). In other words, society and laws were for Rousseau the pinnacle of humanity's development away from the ignorant innocence that characterised our primordial existence. They are in some sense the evidence of our having stepped astray from the spontaneous order of compassion.

It bears emphasising that we have stepped *astray*, not completely *away*. The branch of humanity on the tree of life has probably grown in an unhealthy direction but it has never left the tree to grow on its own. Society, morals, culture and such are all manifestations of the development of a species in nature, not something opposite to nature. As Rousseau put it, "Mankind are naturally perverse" (Rousseau 1972a, 20). This is to say, it has become a part of our nature to defy our nature.

Thus the discussion until now should not be interpreted as a claim that modern humanity is morally depraved and should seek redemption from "recurrence to nature". Rousseau himself was well aware that the "vitiating hearts" of humankind are incurable, that there is no returning to the "primitive equality, the preserver of innocence and source of every virtue" (Rousseau 1972a, 75–7). Neither is it possible for an individual to try and leave society for "nature". The "whole earth" is already "appropriated by others". (Rousseau 2007, 167–8). Harsh as this may sound, there is a

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"inequality" is used to refer to the latter kind.

precious piece of wisdom in these words. Namely, it makes no sense to lament our "fall" from nature and crave for "return" to it. There simply is no "nature" to return to, for we never left nature in the first place (that would be impossible).

But why criticise the perverse defiance against our connectedness so sharply, then? Why did Rousseau write a whole dissertation on the "cultivation of arts and sciences" where he resolutely insists on the uselessness and corruptive decadence of these self-inflating human activities? If evolution has rendered us "perverse", what is there to complain, especially as quite a many of us are actually leading rather comfortable lives and modernity has achieved at least some kind of, though very scarce for most of human population, improvement in material wealth and health?

Actually, the fact that this question occurs in the first place strengthens Rousseau's point. What Rousseau observed already in the 18th century was that we indeed are able to turn a blind eye to the screaming social inequality and suffering of our fellow people, and that we indeed are cogs in the wheels of the cruel institutions that maintain this sorrowful situation. In *Emile* there is a telling passage (Rousseau 2007, 165–6) where Emile is taken to a luxurious dinner feast, with "course after course" of various dishes, "many guests, many servants [and] dainty and elegant china". At the feast, Rousseau prompts the young Emile to think about how all this extravagance made its way to the table. Letting Emile then rack his brains, Rousseau wonders "what will he think of luxury when he finds that every quarter of the globe has been ransacked, that some 2,000,000 men have laboured for years, that many have perhaps been sacrificed, and all to furnish him with fine clothes to be worn at midday and laid by in the wardrobe at night". Rather dishearteningly, the problematic of global inequality is still, more than 250 years later, exactly the same.

The alarming problem is precisely that we are able to disregard our concern for the suffering because *this* part of humanity has achieved "wealthy and comfortable" lifestyle. But one of Rousseau's major observations is that this concern actually exists in our hearts. That many of us do not feel it very strongly is a symptom of later developments of human mind towards selfish



reasoning and pursuit of personal wealth that tend to silence the natural tendency to compassion. That even more of us are not motivated to act, or are at loss for what to do, is because we are, by nature, creatures of this nature-opposing society.

These may appear like wilful stipulations but they are not. The compassion that Rousseau talks about is not just another trick our minds can play, neither is it just a clever theoretical tool. Rather, it is an indispensable aspect of being in the world, that is, being environed by beings, a law of nature, if you will. In compassion, one might say, the connectedness of our being to the environment is manifest. But as we humans are now, thoroughly self-important and reason-infected, our sense of the original connection to reality has dimmed. Or as Rousseau puts it: "It is philosophy that detaches him [the reasoning human] from the rest of the world". (Rousseau 1972b 201–2).

Would it now be too far-fetched an idea to suggest that this disconnectedness from the rest of the world has brought with it the various "environmental problems" our species is known to be facing? This is a hypothesis that definitely needs to be examined more thoroughly, though not in the present essay. To conclude this chapter, let us follow Rousseau in finding there is no point in trying to "subvert the actual state of society". What Rousseau saw as his task was saying "without disguise, what the truth demanded of me" (Rousseau 1972a, 132–4). And this is what we would do well to strive for, too. Even if we currently are all occupied with ourselves and our businesses, compassion, the very essence of living in nature, has by no means left our hearts.

## 4. Conclusion

There are two questions to be answered in this concluding chapter. The first concerns bringing together the results of the two previous chapters that may have appeared independent to some extent. The second one is more general. How do these considerations on the nature and origin of human society and Rousseau's compassion relate to the wider problematic of nature and humanity? The following passage is an attempt at answering these questions.

There is a certain, perhaps rather unusual, way in which the notion of compassion has been treated in the present essay. Rousseau gives no explicit directions to this way of understanding but one surely can gather suggestive clues from his writings. This way of understanding views compassion as not just an attributive emotion that some individual beings have and others do not. Instead, compassion is seen as a force of nature running through beings that exist together. Compassion is then, rather literally, understood as "feeling together", where that who feels is not an isolated subject and that which is felt is not a private sensation. It is a feeling of togetherness, of nature itself, arising among shared existence.

In this sense compassion is there before society, even before humanity. It is an old force, perhaps something like like gravity or magnetism for organisms. But it is not a characteristic that each organism exemplifies individually, rather it is something like a characteristic of the whole of organic existence. Thus compassion is seen as a key to understanding nature and our humanity, and also more generally, our animality and being of the ecology of the planet.<sup>15</sup>

Were a sceptic to ask where do we find this compassion, we could follow Rousseau pointing to the evidence of our hearts. When we go through passions together (with humans or some other species), when we are shaken by suffering around us, we directly encounter traces of compassion. We find compassion in our psychology, but a very important point of the present essay is that the limits of my psychology are not the limits of compassion. In addition to our psychology, we also encounter compassion in the order of organic nature. By this we do not mean a moral hierarchy or any external order imposed on beings. Instead, we focus on the order expressed by the actual, wild conduct of organisms.

Does not this conduct appear ever so harmonious? See the various species of birds feeding and nesting on a single tree, or the rich community of decomposers in a carcass. See not only forests and meadows but also gardens and streets as environments that sustain astonishing varieties of life.

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15 "Ecology / -al" is an attractive, but by no means self-explanatory, word which could have been given a more central role in the present essay. Here this word is used for emphasising the view of nature as a whole whose parts work in webs of mutual interactions, as a whole where the being of individual beings is not self-sufficient but *is of* interactions with the environment. See eg. Haila & Levins (1992) for further discussion.

That these varieties form systems that maintain their existence, so called ecosystems, is a sort of miracle, is it not. What it is in the nature of life that makes it arrange itself as it does? What it is that keeps life so beautifully together?

One influential metaphor that has been used a lot to express the nature of life is "struggle for existence". The struggle is due to the facts that life strives for continuance and that this continuance demands resources. This much is just basic dynamics of life, and in this sense life indeed is struggle. However, there is but a stone's throw from this piece of wisdom to the misguided metaphor of "war of all against all". If the life of organisms, humans included, was fundamentally a continuous battle against each other, there would probably have been no life in the first place. One point about "struggle for existence" is indeed that organisms usually do not have the luxury of warring with each other which would indeed be the most imprudent thing to do, producing nothing but excessive anguish. One has to be careful in telling these two ideas apart.

As was noted in chapter 3, compassion is not an ideal guarantee of a utopistic existence free from struggle. Instead, we characterised it as a sort of "universal love" between beings. It was also noted that the self-directed branch of this love, which often has been celebrated as the fundamental impetus of life, is indeed but a branch of the more general attention to, and concern for, the environment. Recognising a remarkable universal feeling between beings as love, not hatred, is not just an arbitrary stipulation. It is very difficult to imagine how life could ever have organised itself as it has if it was driven by selfish and hostile instincts. How could ants build their hills, birds maintain their flocks or wolves hunt in packs without deep concern for the beings around them? How indeed could humans have established their first village together if they were aggressive and self-important egoists?

Remember that, unlike many distinguished thinkers have done, one would do well not to give in to the idea that early hunter-gatherers, displaying the rational human essence, were as calculative and "reasoning" as we are nowadays. The first humans to form packs and establish

communities were probably closer to "animals" from our point of view, that is they hardly had complicated self-interested strategies in mind but acted more "on instinct". It is this instinct at the heart of organic existence that we have here called compassion.

It is most certainly true that the influential idea of the world being divided in two fundamental realms, of nature and of humanity, has for ages prevailed in human cultures. And it may also be true that this idea, of us being extraordinary in and superior to nature, has been of great help in establishing the so called success of human societies. The development of humanity into cunningly strategising self-important agents has without a doubt been profitable to numerous human beings in the course of our history. But, one may wonder whether this development has been for the good of our species. For Rousseau, human as a rational self-centered agent was a human "detached from the world", a human living in an illusion. Society with its morals and laws was for Rousseau a structure built in order to maintain this illusion of life as an insatiable pursuit of personal wealth.

The world politics now sees humanity struggling with various "environmental problems". The sustainment of the aforementioned illusion, and a fruitful relationship with the Earth, is threatened by unprecedentedly fast and unpredictable changes in ecosystems, largely caused by achievements of our industrialised consumer culture driven by selfishness, indifference and greed. The mere fact that many high level political organisations nowadays recognise that we have serious "problems" with environment should already be a rather telling signal of something being deeply wrong.

There is a tendency to accuse humanity of this "wrong". It has been claimed that we have destroyed the ecosystems and keep doing so and that we should change our ways in atonement. Various social institutions and the global economy should be renewed according to new environmental ethics. This ethics would take nature into moral considerations that until now have mainly concerned humanity only. This is probably what we can, and should, wish from the current social situation. But notice that Rousseau for one does not offer this kind of solution.

From the point of view we have adopted from Rousseau, it would seem like a mistake to try and "bring" nature into our ethical considerations, or in any case this would be totally unimportant as regards the actual problem. Trying to regain our connection to the rest of nature with "rational" moral schemes that calculate values for "objects" and "actions" is precisely part of the problem; the problem of our having become so fond of this fortress of ours, called society, that has become the whole world to us outside of which there is "nothing" (like on the countryside). That we fail to see nature except as a system following rules and ideologies born in our culture shows that we have become numb to the touch of nature – not to nature as the outside of our society, for this is an idea we daily embrace, but to nature as the greatest and the most wonderful, the beautiful scene of being.

It would again be overly grandiose, however, to think that humanity would have fallen from nature once and for all. The point is precisely that the ties with nature cannot be cut. We may defy and play deaf as much as we want. Such is the current stage of our evolution as a species. But, though it may appear difficult, we should also be able to let our hearts echo the sound of compassion ringing all about. Although the hustling and bustling noise of society keeps drowning out this harmonious sound, yet we none the less have ears to listen, still.

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