**Dreaming of Justice, Waking to Wisdom: Rousseau’s Final Insight**

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The inquiry undertaken in this paper was launched by two tentative observations. The first observation was that there is a narrative movement to Rousseau’s *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. Not just coherence, but a story. The better interpreters of the *Reveries* have noted that the book has an order—an order, incidentally, that belies Rousseau’s claim to have written the book only for himself.[[1]](#footnote-1) But I am not aware of any interpretations of the book as a single narrative or story. My second observation was that there seems to be a significant relationship between the *Reveries* and Plato’s *Republic*: a thematic relationship—each work treating such themes as contemplation, truth-telling, and the divine—and perhaps even a formal or structural relationship. These two observations taken together raise the question of whether there isn’t a third observation to be made: is the story told by the *Reveries* akin to the story told in the *Republic*?

The *Republic* does indeed tell a story, a narrative of a conversation as recounted by Plato’s character, Socrates. The conversation that Socrates recounts has an arc—it progresses. The topic of the conversation, as everyone knows, is justice; the progress of the conversation is progress toward an improved understanding of justice. The dramatic culmination of the *Republic* is a twofold realization (592b). The first part of the realization is negative: justice understood politically is shown to be problematic with respect to both desirability and possibility. The pursuit of perfect political justice is shown to impose costs that many would argue amount to the imposition of a nature-suppressing tyranny (and therefore no justice at all). The second part of the realization is that there is a kind of justice that is *not* problematic but rather both desirable and, in principle, possible. This desirable justice is justice within the soul, or between the various parts or forms of the soul. Understood at this level, what justice really means is the individual human being’s health of soul. The *Republic* also seems to suggest a relationship between these two realizations. It would seem that truly understanding the impossibility and undesirability of perfect political justice is necessary to and partly constitutes the achievement of justice in the soul. And so my question becomes, does the *Reveries* tell a comparable story?

I believe that it does, and in what follows I will try to sketch the grounds for that position. My central contention is that over the course of the book Rousseau moves toward a deeper acceptance of the insuperability of injustice among human beings—that is, an acceptance of the fact that wrongs are not always made right—and then, or even thereby, toward the actualization of justice, understood as health of soul, in himself. To see how this is so requires that we recognize the distinction between Rousseau as the subject of the book and Rousseau as the narrator. By Rousseau as subject I mean the person who is at the center of the book’s various recollections and meditations—the young lover of Mme. de Warens, the famous author, the target of a cruel conspiracy, the amateur botanist, the philosopher who meditated on such matters as the sentiment of being, truth and lying, etc. These recollections and thoughts are not recounted in chronological order. By Rousseau as narrator I mean the person who is speaking to us “now,” or from the page, about those prior events and meditations. Crucial to my reading is the claim that Rousseau the narrator is as much a character in the book as Rousseau the subject. It is Rousseau the narrator whose story I mean to outline. I will try to show that the narrator develops over the course of his narration. He comes to understand things that he hasn’t previously understood and he achieves things that he hasn’t previously achieved. Rousseau the narrator is a bit like Socrates in the *Republic* in that he narrates “now” events that have already taken place, though he is *unlike* Socrates in the *Republic* by virtue of developing or changing over the course of the narration.

My theme, then, is the philosophic development enacted in the narrating of the *Reveries*. This theme should be understood to belong to an even larger theme, which I regard as *the* theme of the *Reveries*—namely, the being and coming-to-be of the philosopher as understood by Rousseau. The focus of this paper, however—because I take it to be the focus of the “action” of the *Reveries*—is the final step of Rousseau’s philosophic development.

A final prefatory point is required. In claiming that the *Reveries* is akin to the *Republic* concerning the being and development of the philosopher, I do not mean to say that Rousseau simply restates Plato’s view, or what he takes to be Plato’s view, for a different age. As we will see, and as I have argued elsewhere, Rousseau’s conception of the philosophic life, while closer to Plato’s conception than is typically thought, nevertheless is distinct and unique.

Let me sketch the outlines of Rousseau’s story of development before turning to a necessarily selective examination of the ten Walks that constitute the *Reveries* as we have it.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The major thrust of my case is that over the course of his narration Rousseau (1) deepens his understanding of the insuperability of injustice and the consequent need to resign himself to injustice and that he (2) learns *how* to achieve this resignation. The particular injustice that Rousseau grapples with and ultimately comes to accept is not injustice among political entities or actors but rather the injustice done to himself, an innocent, by a conspiracy of enemies, a good many of whom had formerly been his friends. Rousseau’s condition, as he depicts it, was much like that of the perfectly just man whom Glaucon imagines in *Republic* book 2—the man who is actually just but who is perceived as unjust and is thus subjected to the most horrific penalties.[[3]](#footnote-3) That Rousseau himself is the victim of the injustice adds vividness to the story and permits an intimate experiential account. Rousseau shows us the moral consciousness at work—a moral consciousness that struggles and develops, in some respects overcoming itself.

Notice one more effect of this subjective focus. By showing the way he experiences and reacts to injustice, Rousseau in the *Reveries* treats one of the greatest, perhaps the greatest of, *political* themes. The perception of injustice, especially injustice to oneself, is arguably the primary political experience as such, the primary impetus to political passion and action. Thus the *Reveries*, which is as personal as any writing we have from Rousseau, is also, for precisely that reason, a profound book of political philosophy.

As a student of the Socratic tradition, Rousseau sees the possibility of breaking free of the conventional moral consciousness. This is evident from the beginning of the *Reveries* and in prior works as well. But at the start of the *Reveries* Rousseau is still, let’s say, a semi-Socratic: Socratic insofar as he has seen the impossibility and undesirability of perfect political justice and the consequent need for acceptance, but *semi-* because he has not yet been able to *achieve* that acceptance. The fiery language of moral indignation that marks so many of Rousseau’s books testifies to his distance from complete Socratism. But it is my contention that in the action of the *Reveries* Rousseau finally achieves—he enacts for us—the acceptance that marks him as fully Socratic, or nearly so, at least in this decisive respect. For the Socratic tradition resignation to injustice may well be the most important step or marker in becoming a true philosopher. (But wait: Doesn’t the Platonic Socrates teach that that philosophy is the acceptance not of injustice but of *death*?[[4]](#footnote-4) To be sure. But the reason our own death is so difficult to accept is that it strikes us as the ultimate injustice against ourselves. We are *offended*. Life still owes us something, we think.) And so we may add that the *Reveries* is a profound work of *Socratic* political philosophy.

Rousseau’s acceptance of injustice isn’t perfect, as indeed, by the lights of his most mature thought, it cannot be. All human beings, even the most self-sufficient, have some dependence on others, and with this dependence comes—inevitably, it would seem—a certain psychological investment that marks a limit to our resignation to external injustice. The name of this investment is amour-propre. As the relative form of self-love, amour-propre is a chief source of injustice. But as a form of self-love that judges merit or worth (whether fairly or not—alas, usually not), amour-propre is also a sense of justice and a passionate devotee of justice. And as a passionate devotee of justice, amour-propre must also be a great *believer* in justice—it believes that justice must and will be done in the end. (Without such belief one may admire and love justice, but not in the passionate way of the morally expectant and energized.) Amour-propre rebels against the possibility that justice will *not* be vindicated. It resists resignation. Therefore the key to achieving internal justice or wisdom in Rousseau’s reformulation of classical philosophy turns out to be the overcoming of amour-propre. This, as we’ll see, Rousseau learns to do—again, not completely, but nearly so. This is the culminating accomplishment of the *Reveries* and indeed of Rousseau’s life as a philosopher. Incidentally, Rousseau’s acknowledgment that he cannot *utterly* overcome amour-propre and thus cannot achieve resignation to injustice *in all circumstances* arguably makes him *more* philosophic than Socrates. More philosophic than Socrates because more honest than Socrates. Socrates, in Rousseau’s estimation, falsely believed that he could remain indifferent to the opinions of others in all circumstance. Even in his philosophizing this great Socrates remained captive of a certain pride, which is a form, albeit the noblest form, of amour-propre. Rousseau, by contrast, comes to be free of amour-propre during all the time that he is not engaged with society.

Now one might question whether the endpoint I see Rousseau as reaching in the *Reveries* is truly desirable or that it has anything to do with wisdom. Is it really an intellectual and moral *achievement* to let go of the belief that justice will always be vindicated in the end? Many would say that ceasing to believe in justice constitutes an intellectual and moral *failing*. And others who might agree that overcoming faith in justice would be an intellectual achievement would nevertheless consider it a mournful achievement. Rousseau himself, throughout his career, consistently called attention to the perniciousness of doctrines that undermine faith. And in his own life, at least early on, Rousseau explicitly relied for consolation on faith in God’s justice (*Confessions* 198, *Reveries* 21). He certainly does not wish to discourage such faith among people at large. Indeed, his popular religious teaching—the “The Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar,” which appears at the center of *Emile*—seeks to rationalize, in a sense to naturalize, and thus to buttress precisely this kind of faith.[[5]](#footnote-5) Rousseau clearly hoped the Profession would be influential on the broader culture of his time and times to come. In the Third Walk of the *Reveries* he calls the Profession “a work vilely prostituted and profaned among the present generation but which may one day make a revolution among men, if good sense and good faith are ever reborn among them” (34).

Rousseau himself, however, seems to depart from this faith—and seems not to suffer from this departure. In the very same passage in which he expresses his hope that the Vicar’s Profession will “make a revolution among men,” Rousseau indicates that he does not himself fully subscribe to its teaching. He recounts a sustained religious inquiry he undertook at age forty whose result was only “*approximately* [*à peu près*] that which I have since set down in the ‘Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar’” 34; emphasis added). In fact the Vicar’s Profession contradicts a number of the tenets of the philosophic system that Rousseau propounds in his own name, including the principle of natural goodness, which is the foundation of Rousseau’s entire system.[[6]](#footnote-6) (Unlike Rousseau himself, who vindicates human nature by attributing the origin of evil to society, the Vicar attributes evil to individual choice.)

How is it that Rousseau can do without the Vicar’s teaching and not suffer? The answer, I believe, is twofold. The first part of the answer lies in what are probably the most striking moments in the *Reveries*, moments of exultation and spiritual self-sufficiency. Indeed, so exultant are these moments that I would say that Rousseau not only doesn’t suffer from giving up faith in the Vicar’s God, or God as an ontological Other—he gains from it. More than once Rousseau likens *himself* to God in respect of his self-sufficiency (5, 69). But a serious qualification is called for. For all that he seems to proclaim spiritual self-sufficiency during extended moments, Rousseau still seems potentially needful of a providential if not a personal God in other moments. In which other moments? Well, he especially has recourse to faith in such a God when he is suffering at the hands of his enemies (21). But I think I can give an answer that is both broader and more precise than that: Rousseau may need recourse to a just God precisely insofar as he is animated by amour-propre. Only when, and for as long as, amour-propre is dormant can he or anyone, in his view, be altogether free of the need for faith. Whether that need can be fulfilled, though, is another question. It’s possible that Rousseau feels the moral need for God less frequently than other men but also more poignantly. In which case we’d have to say that he does suffer for lack of faith, but that the suffering is a price worth paying.

The second reason Rousseau can survive and at times positively flourish without anything like the Vicar’s faith is the ability and disposition to live well in the face of metaphysical and theological uncertainty. Surely this ability serves as the enabling foundation of Rousseau’s capacity for exultation and spiritual self-sufficiency. In the *Reveries* Rousseau indicates that the case for the Vicar’s God faces “insoluble objections” (34). Now such objections don’t prove anything. Indeed *all* sides face insoluble objections. If one finds doubt intolerable, as Rousseau supposes that most of us do, then the Vicar’s Profession might be not only the most salutary creed but even the most rationally defensible. Rousseau himself, however, does not seem to find doubt intolerable. And for such a one as himself it may well be that spiritual self-sufficiency is not only possible but best. In the Fifth and Seventh Walks Rousseau depicts himself ecstatically transcending the limits of the separate self and becoming one with nature or with being or else filling himself with the pure sentiment of being, godlike not only in his sufficiency but also in his expansiveness.

Here too, however, I must introduce a serious qualification—or, rather, restate the same qualification of a moment ago. Rousseau can tolerate and even flourish in conditions of uncertainty only when his amour-propre is not enflamed—perhaps only when his amour-propre is altogether dormant or nonexistent. When his amour-propre *is* enflamed, he needs someplace fixed to lay down his head. The workings of the world must be seen somehow to make sense. Indeed, this is a way in which to understand not only Rousseau’s recourse to God but also his presumable exaggeration of the diabolical intricacy of the conspiracy against him. (Does Rousseau the author see the Rousseau the narrator as exaggerating the conspiracy? Quite possibly so.)

Rousseau’s overcoming of faith in God as an ontological Other may also be of help in the progress toward his final insight (Eight Walk). Who knows if it would have been possible to overcome amour-propre if he hadn’t already overcome faith in amour-propre’s kind of God, that is, a God who vindicates justice.

Finally, before making our way (briskly) through the text, it is worth emphasizing that the story told in the *Reveries* was indeed something new in Rousseau’s work and arguably in the history of Western thought. Although he hadn’t realized it at the time, in his prior writings Rousseau had not shown a complete understanding of the need to transcend amour-propre for the sake of accepting injustice in the world. He’d lacked crucial practical knowledge. He hadn’t understood *how* amour-propre prevents resignation or, consequently, how to reliably free himself from amour-propre’s stifling hold. Even as he had sometimes seemed to present himself as returning to a life of natural goodness (in the *Confessions*, for example[[7]](#footnote-7)), he had remained notably vulnerable to the unjust moral opprobrium heaped on him by his enemies. In the *Reveries*, by contrast, we watch Rousseau finally free himself to the extent possible. The process is protracted. From the start of the *Reveries* Rousseau understands the hold his enemies have on him by virtue of their false depiction of him as wicked. He understands that resignation is the way out of this hold. He even professes to have accomplished this resignation. Yet his claim must strike the reader as doubtful—not insincere, but rather a self-deception. However much he claims to have resigned himself to necessity and to the insuperability of external injustice, he has not yet succeeded in doing so. It is only after he has come to see (in the Eight Walk) that amour-propre is what has kept him from resignation, and how it has done so, that he makes good on his earlier professions of resignation.

Now to the text proper.

**First Walk**

The First Walk introduces the theme of resignation but it does so in a most deceptive way—deceptive to the reader because, first and foremost, *self*-deceptive. Here we need to take note of another distinction and yet another Rousseau. Thus far I have spoken of Rousseau the subject and Rousseau the narrator, each of whom, as I have said, may be regarded as a character in the *Reveries*. Behind both of these is Rousseau *the author*. When I say that Rousseau is self-deceptive, I am saying that Rousseau the narrator is deceiving himself. I presume that Rousseau the author is aware of, indeed that he deliberately reveals, this self-deception.

Almost from the beginning of the First Walk Rousseau the narrator lays claim to precisely the wisdom that I am contending he as yet manifestly lacks. He acknowledges that the conspiracy caused him “no less than ten years” of agitation, indignation, and delirium. “Finally,” however, “feeling that all my efforts were useless and that I was tormenting myself to no avail, I took the only course which remained—that of *submitting* to my fate without railing against *necessity* any longer. I have found compensation for all my hurts in this *resignation* through the *tranquility* it provides me” (2; emphases added). His tranquility has been further deepened and secured, he tells us, by being freed from hope and fear as a result of knowing that his tormentors could not threaten him with anything worse than they had already done (2-3). He goes so far as to say that he has become “*unreservedly* resigned” (4; my emphasis). And he claims that he is indifferent to being understood by others either now or in the future and indifferent even to the fate of his writings (7). One might wonder whether the repetition and force of these claims aren’t themselves signs that Rousseau has not (yet) made good on them. It is hard to avoid suspecting that he protests too much.

In any case, there are clear indications amid these very protestations that Rousseau is neither as resigned and indifferent nor as tranquil as he says he is. He concedes that he can’t “cast [his] eyes on what touches and surrounds” him without indignation or distress (5). Hence his decision to turn inward. Yet among the rewards of his inward turn are not only consolation and peace but also hope (5)—this despite the fact that he has already claimed to have been “delivered” from hope (3). His protestations notwithstanding, Rousseau is still counting on, he still “believes in,” justice. Indeed, he is preparing his brief for the divine Judge: “I consecrate my last days to studying myself and to preparing in advance the account I will give of myself before long” (5). Finally, Rousseau expects that by setting down in writing the “charming periods of contemplation” that he means to record in subsequent Walks, he will be preparing pleasant dreams for himself—dreams of justice rewarded: “each time I reread them I will enjoy them anew. I will forget my misfortunes, my persecutors, my disgrace, while dreaming of *the prize my heart deserved* (6; emphasis added).

The contradiction is clear: however much Rousseau the narrator professes resignation, he shows us that, even as he is writing, he still falls short of­ that condition. He remains captive of the prevailing faith of his time and probably all times. Perhaps that faith could be an even greater source of consolation than resignation—if it were a faith securely held. But it is not a faith securely held, in part because it is just that, a faith. For one such as Rousseau, a different kind of deliverance seems to be needed. What’s perhaps most notable is that, even at the outset of the book, Rousseau’s views are entirely right. He knows *what*’s needed, and *why*. Nothing in the formula he pronounces in the First Walk needs to be corrected in the Walks to come. What’s needed is not correction but a missing piece, the *how*l

Much else goes on in the First Walk that is worthy of the reader’s attention but which, for reasons of focus and space, can’t be addressed here. I do want to mention one more thing, though, since it may further illuminate the political character of the *Reveries*. I’m referring to Rousseau’s seemingly off-hand criticism of Montaigne. As in the *Confessions* (433), so in the *Reveries* Rousseau characterizes his work by contrasting it with that of Montaigne:

I will perform on myself, to a certain extent, the measurements natural scientists perform on the air in order to know its daily condition. I will apply the barometer to my soul, and these measurements, carefully executed and repeated over a long period of time, may furnish me results as certain as theirs. But I do not extend my enterprise that far. I will be content to keep a record of the measurements without seeking to reduce them to a system. My enterprise is the same as Montaigne’s, but my goal is the complete opposite of his: he wrote his *Essays* only for others, and I write my reveries only for myself (7).

What’s interesting about this passage is that Rousseau at one and the same time describes his own project disingenuously and alludes to a similar disingenuousness he discerns in Montaigne—which, if one reflects on it a moment, suggests a *kinship* between the two philosophers.

For reasons that have been noted above and developed more fully by others, it seems evident that Rousseau did not write only for himself but rather that he too, like Montaigne, wrote for others. But which others? And for what purpose? Perhaps these questions are best approached by way of Montaigne and *his* disingenuousness. Unlike Rousseau, Montaigne acknowledged that he wrote for others—but only for a select few others, he claimed, and with an entirely personal purpose. He claimed to write only for his intimates, so that they would have a way to keep company with him even after his death. Yet there is very good reason to conclude that Montaigne actually wrote for a much broader readership and with a much more ambitious goal than he admitted to. The full case for this conclusion is much too intricate to explain here.[[8]](#footnote-8) For present purposes, though, it might suffice to point out that Montaigne addressed great questions regarding how to live well; that he purported to show that the great theological and metaphysical issues that were so roiling the politics of his day were insoluble and incendiary and hence better left aside; and that he modeled a distinctive mentality and way of life that aimed at—*and promised to deliver*— “present enjoyment.” What does all of this add up to if not a political project—an advertisement for something like what we now know as secular, liberal society? Montaigne’s grand ambition was recognized by, indeed it influenced and perhaps even recruited, later thinkers of the first rank, even if prudence often kept those successors from openly acknowledging their debt to Montaigne.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Was Rousseau among those who regarded Montaigne as attempting a political project? It seems likely that he was. Rousseau was quite attentive to the ways in which presenting a compelling “portrait” ( or self-portrait) of an exemplary human being can be a powerful political act,[[10]](#footnote-10) indeed a kind of legislative act. He could hardly have failed to see the power of Montaigne’s self-portraiture and therewith a likely political intention in the *Essays*.

Might Rousseau have written the *Reveries* with a comparable political intention? Might he have been indicating just this by covertly likening himself to Montaigne even while seeming to distance himself from him? Montaigne himself, by the way, practiced a similarly duplicitous method of indicating hidden kinship with various predecessors. In his case, the method was to plagiarize writers whom, for political reasons, he did not want to acknowledge openly, all the while anticipating that his more learned and careful readers would recognize these instances of plagiarism and recognize them as homage. (The trick was to hide what needed to be hidden but not so well that it would be undiscoverable by the readers he sought.) Montaigne pretended to write for his intimates while in fact attempting to prepare the ground for a new kind of society, in the process offering insight into the type of person (himself, the philosopher) capable of such a project.

Rousseau does the same thing, though across two books rather than one. (Come to think of it, though, Rousseau suggests that the *Reveries* can in a sense be thought of as an additional volume of the *Confessions*, which would make of the *Reveries* and the *Confessions* a single work of three volumes, just like Montaigne’s *Essays*.) Like Montaigne, Rousseau puts himself forward as an exemplar of a new way of life, even if the character of Rousseau’s exemplary life, or the content of his legislation, in some ways opposes Montaigne’s. Rousseau advertises a life that is whole by virtue of being grounded in natural sentiment. Like Montaigne, Rousseau explores the type of person (himself, the philosopher) capable of such a project. This latter task he performs somewhat in the *Confessions* but more extensively in the *Reveries*, where he not only explores the soul and the experience of the philosopher (himself), but also indicates the ways in and the reasons *for* which he has undertaken such a grand political project.

**Second through Sixth Walks**

The story I’m trying to tell, or rather the story that I see Rousseau telling, is the story of the full maturation of a philosopher. By the time the narration of the *Reveries* begins, Rousseau has already produced a corpus that would secure him a place among the greatest political philosophers of modernity and indeed of all of Western history. However, as I’ve claimed, it remains for him to take another step, the one that will enable him to live according to the formula he has already laid out. The crucial preparation for that step and the step itself take place, respectively, in the Seventh and Eighth Walks, to which we will have to devote special attention. The intervening five Walks depict Rousseau’s movement toward this culmination. The movement is cognitive, though it entails much reflection on lived experience.

The basic contradiction of the First Walk persists through the next five. Rousseau continues to claim that he lives by the principle of resignation, but the evidence from his own pen belies that claim. He continues to take his persecution personally; he continues to dream of or count on the vindication of justice; he continues to hope for this vindication by God in an afterlife. In sum, he not only suffers, he *resists* suffering and the causes of his suffering. This resistance only intensifies his suffering and adds new dimensions to it.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the **Second Walk** is the obviousness of the suffering born of Rousseau’s continued failure to achieve resignation to injustice. Early in this Walk Rousseau tells the extraordinary story of being violently knocked over by a downhill-barreling Great Dane. Despite the violence of the accident and the severity of his injuries, Rousseau hardly seems to suffer. In fact, he experiences an extended period of bliss. The source of this bliss? He loses his sense of individual or personal existence. For a while he can’t remember his name. If one’s name is a *marker* of personality, one’s body is the *ground* of personality. Accordingly, Rousseau ceases to be aware that he has his own, individual body; his being seems to expand to fill all that he sees. Another thing that sustains individuality or personality is a sense of time. Time too falls away for Rousseau. Nameless, at one with the world, altogether in the Now—his experience, in other words, is both nondual and eternal. Or to say it again, blissful.

A little while later, however, individuality returns and the bliss dissolves—with a vengeance. Not only does Rousseau come to feel the effects of his considerable physical injuries, he suffers a resurgence of moral pain. Our narrator now strikes a more pathetic tone than we’ve heard heretofore until, as Butterworth puts it, “By the end of the [Second] Walk, the inner turmoil generated by the plot has become the dominant issue.”[[11]](#footnote-11) The First Walk’s claims of resignation and tranquility ring hollower even than before.

Rousseau’s post-accident bliss teaches us something about the ways in which our consciousness of being separate selves constrains and afflicts us, or at least keeps us from a wonderful expansiveness. The impersonality of this expansiveness and perhaps especially the forgetfulness of the body may also point to affinities with the *Republic*. No, the *Republic* does not depict and it certainly does not celebrate the kind of bliss Rousseau describes in the Second Walk. But it does hold that philosophic liberation is an essentially impersonal condition. In fact, there may even be a structural parallel between Rousseau’s Second Walk and the second book of the *Republic*. Recall that in book 2, after hearing the powerful challenges to justice levelled by Glaucon and Adeimantus, Socrates begins his lengthy attempt to vindicate justice by constructing a city in speech—or rather, what turns out to be a series of cities in speech. The first of the cities, called by Socrates the “true city” or the “city of utmost necessity” (372e, 369d), was marked by contentment and harmony, by a lack of conflict and *egotism* (372a-b)—by a kind of civic bliss. Might Rousseau’s episode of bliss correspond to this city? Of course the “true city” seems to Glaucon a city fit for pigs, and so Socrates goes on to spice it up until it becomes a very different, “feverish city” (372d). Does the Second Walk offer a counterpart to *this* city? Possibly: in the grim days that followed the descent from his bliss, as the effects of his physical injuries really set in, Rousseau recounts, very little “was needed to alarm me, especially given the state of agitation my head was in from my accident and the resultant *fever*. I abandoned myself to a thousand troubling and sad conjectures and made commentaries on everything which went on around me, commentaries which were more a sign of the delirium of *feve*r than of the composure of a man who no longer takes interests in anything” (17-18; emphases added).

Is it inapt to cite Rousseau’s fever in connection with the *Republic*’s “feverish city”? Perhaps not. Rousseau’s fever infects his moral and mental being. The heavy or oppressive return of bodily consciousness leads to moral and mental suffering. This doesn’t sound so different from what Socrates would seem to have in mind in calling his second city feverish: civic ease and oneness give way to feverishness precisely as the desires of the body make themselves felt. Indeed, one might argue that the entirety of the *Republic*’s fanciful quest for perfect political justice is based on abstraction from the body.[[12]](#footnote-12) Fanciful, of course, because in reality the body cannot so easily be abstracted from. And so Rousseau’s sequence of experiences in the Second Walk testifies at the level of the individual to what Socrates demonstrates at the level of the city. Rousseau’s testimony, if in fact that’s what it is, is perfectly fitting: the professed purpose of the cities in speech was to serve as a bigger and thus easier-to-read analogue of the soul.

Now the *Reveries* is a much shorter book than the Republic, and for that reason alone it would be foolish to expect a complete set of parallels. Even so, we might hope to find *some*. The remainder of *Republic* book 2, which begins the project of purifying the feverish city or turning it into a beautiful one, offers a brief discussion of the need for a guardian class and then a much longer discussion of what members of that class should be taught. The focus of that longer discussion is what the guardians should be taught about the gods. (The discussion of the guardians’ education continues into book 3, where the focus moves away from the gods to the topic of courage.) The gods are the source of good things only, and the gods do not lie. So says Socrates. And Rousseau? He concludes the Second Walk with a profession of faith. Yes, he is an innocent victim of injustice. But far from calling into question the existence of a just God, the very intricacy and unlikeliness of the conspiracy speak in *favor* of God’s existence. So insidious is the conspiracy against him that it must be God’s will. And that can only mean that this apparent evil will not prove evil in the end: “God is just; He wills that I suffer; and He knows that I am innocent. That is the cause of my confidence; my heart and my reason cry out to me that I will not be deceived by it. . . . In the end, everything must return to order, and my turn will come sooner or later” (21). Attributing to God everything that is happening to him and believing it all to be *good*, Rousseau says, “consoles me, calms me, and helps me to resign myself” (21). For the first time, Rousseau’s claim to resignation is credible. But his resignation is only as deep and stable as the religious faith that underlies it—which is to say, quite possibly not deep at all.

The **Third Walk** is largely devoted to Rousseau’s account of his views on ultimate questions, especially the question of God, and how he arrived at these views around the time he turned forty. We’ve already noted Rousseau’s comment regarding the differences between his own views and those he puts in the mouth of the Savoyard Vicar. Yet there were also affinities between Rousseau and the Vicar. Rousseau himself came to the view that the there is a moral order to the world that corresponds to the physical order (33-34). A feature of this moral order is the immortality of his nature. Rousseau claims that he is no longer vigorous enough to think through these questions. Rather, he’ll trust the adequacy of his earlier reasoning and accept the conclusions he arrived at then. There is reason to suspect the truth of this claim. After all, Rousseau demonstrates considerable intellectual vigor in the *Reveries*. Probably the most incontrovertible evidence of his continued intellectual vigor is the Fourth Walk’s sophisticated meditation on truth and lying. (And as we’ll soon see, the Fourth Walk forms a unit with the Third.) So Rousseau may or may not any longer believe in the moral order he claims to have come to believe in at age forty, if indeed he ever did believe it. Given the Fourth Walk’s defense of salutary or harmless falsehoods, and given that the third and Fourth Walks form a single unit, there is every reason to doubt the full sincerity of anything Rousseau says here about religion. (Anything he says anywhere, but especially here.)

But if there is any truth at all to Rousseau’s story of the spiritual accounting around age forty, or if he was a believer earlier on, his faith was probably helpful to him—not only in giving him consolation, but also in keeping him from corruption that would have made his final philosophic ascent impossible. In this there is an affinity, again, between the *Reveries* and the *Republic*. In the *Republic*, those who are finally selected to be given an education in philosophy, have first been given an extensive civic education. Teachings about the divine (*Reveries* 3, *Republic* 3) that will later be superseded by a higher teaching (*Reveries* 7, *Republic* 7) prepare the student for that very teaching.

Toward the end of the Third Walk Rousseau makes an admission that may be a step toward the final stage of his philosophic development. He acknowledges that he as yet lacks certain virtues: “if few acquisitions remain for me to hope for in the way of useful insights, very important ones remain for me to make in the way of the virtues necessary for my condition. In that regard, it is time to endow and adorn my soul with learning it might carry away with it” (40). The virtues he lists—which, as he clearly shows in the surrounding passage, must be *learned* and known—are patience, sweetness, resignation (at the center of the list), integrity, and impartial justice. Acknowledging one’s need would seem to be an important step toward finally fulfilling that need.

Finally, it might be worth noting a virtue that Rousseau says he *did* have when he undertook his inquiry into fundamental questions: “For the first time in my life I had courage” (33). This is the only time in the book that Rousseau claims to have or have had courage. Indeed, the word appears only one other time, in an instance where Rousseau says he should have had courage but did not (58). So perhaps it’s noteworthy that the singular claim of courage in the *Reveries* occurs in the Third Walk and that the *Republic*’s thematic treatment of the education to courage appears in book 3.

As I just noted, the **Fourth Walk** forms a unit with the Third. The Third Walk began with a maxim of Solon as reported by Plutarch (and slightly altered by Rousseau).[[13]](#footnote-13) The Fourth Walk closes by returning to that maxim. The Fourth Walk presents the most sustained philosophic inquiry in the *Reveries*. Its subject is truthfulness and lying. But in being an inquiry into truthfulness and lying, it is necessarily and even more fundamentally an inquiry into justice. According to Rousseau, what determines whether something we say is a lie is that it is unjust. A falsehood that is not harmful is a fiction, not a lie. All the more so, one would suppose, when the falsehood is *beneficial*—something like the *Republic*’s noble lie, for example. (One effect of Rousseau’s making a single unit of the Third and Fourth Walks is that his discussion of truth and lying is made in a sense to correspond structurally to the noble lie.) In the course of the Fourth Walk Rousseau proceeds to investigate what justice *is*, conceived in terms of what we owe to others and to ourselves. In this, of course, he mirrors book 4 of the *Republic*, in which justice, the quarry sought after by Socrates and his friends, is finally cornered, caught, defined, and examined. Part of the examination by Socrates concerns whether justice toward others is the same thing as justice within oneself. Similarly, Rousseau’s discussion in the Fourth Walk takes up the relationships between different kinds of justice, including the relationship between justice to others (including society) and justice to oneself (47).

Rousseau acknowledges that he still lies on occasion—not out of envy or spite “but solely due to embarrassment and mortification” (53). He also falls short of perfect truthfulness by ornamenting his writings and making up innocent fictions. These are not grave sins, and some of them would not even be misdeeds at all had he not made truthfulness into his personal motto (*vitam impendere vero*). From this admission we learn two things. First, Rousseau is honest enough, he is *just* enough, to admit these failures. Second, he holds himself to the standard of the perfectly truthful or perfectly just man. Nowhere in the *Reveries* does Rousseau call himself a philosopher, and nowhere does he equate the philosopher with the just man, as Socrates does in the *Republic*. But in holding himself to the standard of perfect justice, he indicates that he judges himself by the highest standard and thus perhaps that he regards himself as capable of approaching that standard. (Was Rousseau a philosopher? Did Rousseau consider himself one? We’ll have reason to turn to those questions shortly.)

In the **Fifth Walk** Rousseau recounts “the happiest time of [his] life”—his two-month stay on St. Peter’s Island—as well as how he came to be there and how he was made to leave. The happiness Rousseau enjoyed on the Island was splendid, indeed rapturous. It is no stretch to describe it as an ongoing experience of erotic excitement and fulfillment. Which of course brings to mind the *Republic* and its depiction of the philosophic life. Indeed, the account Rousseau gives in the Fifth Walk corresponds not only to *Republic* 5’s focus on eros, it even corresponds, part by part, to the “three waves of paradox” that make up the bulk of book 5.

That the happiness Rousseau enjoyed on the island might be considered erotic is indicated in several ways. There is rapturous self-forgetting. There is exultation. There is a great sense of fulfillment and sufficiency. Of course there is no eros toward a woman, which is a departure from so much of Rousseau’s earlier life as recounted elsewhere in the *Reveries* and in the *Confessions*. But there is, I would say, eros toward Sophia, both in his rapturous reveries in the boat or on the lakeshore—these are not instances of discursive philosophizing, to be sure, but they are cases of beholding and merging with *what is*—and in his “passionate” pursuit of botany, which is also rapturous and ecstatic and which expresses itself in the ambition to describe, to observe, to *know*, all there is to know (65). Rousseau set out to describe “all the plants of the island, without omitting a single one . . . It is said that a German did a book about a lemon peel; I would have done one about each stalk of hay of the meadows, each moss of the woods, each lichen that carpets the rocks; in short, I did not want to leave a blade of grass or a plant particle which was not amply described.” What is this but a labor of love—a labor of *intellectual eros*? In treating eros, these parts of the Fifth Walk correspond, at least loosely, with the *Republic*’s first two waves—not with the waves as political institutions, but rather as the psychic analogues to the political institutions. (As political institutions, the first two waves are, respectively, the equal treatment of men and women and the elimination of private families among the guardians. The psychic analogues of the waves treat, respectively, the equal development of both “male” and “female” cognitive strengths (first wave) and the redirection of eros toward impersonal objects and the production of only noble progeny (second wave).) Recall that everything in the kallipolis is supposed to have an analogue in the soul: the city in speech was only created in the first place as a tool for examining the meaning and goodness of justice in and for the individual.

Rousseau’s response to the Fifth Walk is even more complete than his response to the first two waves. Rousseau offers a counterpart to the psychic analogue of all three waves. Please note that Rousseau’s counterparts are affirmations of their Platonic predecessors. To the third wave alone he offers a counterpart to the political version of the wave, which in the case of the third wave is, of course, rule by philosophes. Here too Rousseau’s counterpart is an affirmation. Rousseau embraces—in principle and even for himself—the notion of rule by the philosopher.

This will seem unlikely. Not only does Rousseau not call himself any kind of ruler—indeed, he presents himself as a defenseless victim of the rising powers, those who, perversely, might seem to be the real *philosophe*-kings—he doesn’t even call himself a philosopher, and for and for good reason. And yet in a very definite sense and in exactly the right place Rousseau does show himself to be a philosopher. He whom Plato called a true philosopher Rousseau calls a “celestial intelligence.” And Rousseau indicates that he counts himself just such a one, or at least hopes to. Imagining what life would have been like if he had been permitted to remain on St. Peter’s Island, Rousseau writes: “Delivered from all the earthly passions the tumult of social life engenders, my soul would frequently soar up above this atmosphere and commune in advance with the celestial intelligences whose number it hopes to augment in a short while (71).” This passage appears in the final paragraph of the Fifth Walk, making it correspond in placement to the introduction of the third wave and the investigation of the philosopher at the end of book 5 of the *Republic*.[[14]](#footnote-14)

But what grounds are there for supposing that Rousseau aspired to be a kind of philosopher-*king*? The *Reveries* as a whole, and perhaps especially the Fifth Walk with its compelling depiction of the happiness of the contemplative life, constitute an advertisement for a way of life. And such advertising is a chief means, perhaps the only realistic means, whereby a philosopher could legislate for a civilization.

Is this teaching really an affirmation of Plato’s? This is a big question and not quite central to my investigation. I’ll simply suggest that even as he seemed to show the utter improbability of philosophers becoming kings, Plato indicates with his Cave Image the possibility that a philosopher might hope to rule indirectly but powerfully and on a wide scale, just as the great poets already do. Plato raised the prospect of philosopher-kings and then showed it to be improbable to the vanishing point. The philosopher would “simply” have to join to the power of his philosophic vision the poetic power to project it.

I said above that it is to the third wave alone that Rousseau offers a political counterpart. Strictly speaking, I should have said that it is to the third wave alone that Rousseau offers a *serious* political counterpart. Surely his rabbit-breeding scheme is his counterpart to the eugenics scheme and the abolition of private erotic attachments that is the Republic’s second wave. What better way to show the implausibility of the kallipolis than this? Which means, of course, that here too Rousseau is affirming Plato, who also knows that his kallipolis, and the second wave more than any of the rest of it, pushes hopelessly against nature.

Finally, to Rousseau’s embrace of the third wave as applied by analogy to the soul. Surely the psychic analogue of philosopher-kings is rule of the soul by its philosophic part. Does this describe Rousseau? I would say so. Particularly in the Fifth Walk, Rousseau orders his soul in a way that gives priority to contemplation or the love of wisdom. Now it’s true that Rousseau’s depictions of contemplation and wisdom are at some distance from Plato’s. But that only means that Rousseau wasn’t simply a Platonist, and I haven’t said that he was. I take Rousseau to be responding to Plato both because he has affinities to Plato but also because he has an alternative to offer. I noted this earlier. However, as I also noted earlier, the substantive differences between Rousseau and Plato regarding the contemplative life aren’t as great as they seem to be.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The **Sixth Walk** begins as a meditation on freedom. Rousseau explains at the outset that once-cherished benefactions become tedious and unpleasant once he, the benefactor, feels an obligation to do what he had once down spontaneously out of the goodness of his heart (74). Freedom versus obligation remains the theme of the entire walk. More specifically, Rousseau’s overarching theme is natural freedom. But when the person involved is not only a man who has maintained an unusual degree of naturalness but also a philosopher, the theme of natural freedom resolves into the theme of the philosopher’s relationship with society—which, of course, is the major theme of book 6 of the *Republic*.

Book 6 of the *Republic* divides into three general sections. The first section explicates the nature of those with the potential to develop into philosophers and the various factors that favor or undermine this development. The second section explains why philosophy has such a poor reputation: philosophers are seen by the general public as useless at best and wicked at worst. One reason for this, Socrates explains, is that the true philosophers, those who really ought to benefit the city by ruling it, are *made* useless by the city itself, which does not recognize their merit. Another reason is that those who aggressively contend for power and call themselves wise or philosophic are vicious and incapable—capable perhaps of gaining rule, but not capable of using it well. These lessons are neatly conveyed by the famous Image of the Ship, in which the true pilot is dismissed as a star-gazer while those who violently battle for the helm have no piloting skill themselves. Finally, the third section takes up the question of “the greatest studies” and focuses on the greatest of all, the Good. Socrates cannot hope to make his opinion of the Good understood under the present circumstances, but he presents what he calls a “likeness” of the Good through two images, the Sun and the Divided Line.

Rousseau’s Sixth Walk addresses each of these general matters—the first and second in so obvious a way as to make the Sixth Walk the part of the *Reveries* whose connection with the *Republic* is most clear and indeed indisputable in my view.

Where Socrates explicates the nature of potential philosophers, Rousseau explicates two important features of his own nature. (Unlike Socrates, Rousseau doesn’t offer a discussion here of the factors that favor or inhibit the development of the philosopher, though both the *Confessions* and the *Reveries* can be seen as addressing this matter extensively. Rousseau does speak at this juncture of factors that favor or inhibit the *expression* of his natural qualities [80].) A strong case could be made that the two features of his nature that Rousseau highlights are the features that constitute in his view the philosophic nature in its outward or social (political) expression. The first feature is his love of freedom and dislike of obligation. The second is his goodness, that is, his love of benefiting others. The articulation of the former theme culminates in Rousseau’s admission that he altogether lacks virtue, “virtue” meaning for Rousseau the performance of duty over and against inclination: “virtue consists in overcoming them [inclinations] when duty commands in order to do what duty prescribes, and that is what I have been less able to do than any man in the world” (77). But of course the meaning of the second feature, i.e., his goodness, is that Rousseau’s inclinations are thoroughly beneficent: “I know and feel that to do good is the truest happiness the human heart can savor” (75). One might suppose that a lack of virtue would be no problem so long as the person in question is truly good. And one would be right—but only if the person in question was not a social being. Men not being naturally social, society requires things of them that are not natural. Even the best of inclinations won’t suffice to make good citizens.

So where does that leave Rousseau? As a deficient citizen, to be sure. But he is, or at least he could be, something greater than a citizen—greater even from the standpoint of society itself—if only society would let him. Rousseau, a true philosopher and one who dearly wishes to do good, is useless to society because he has been made useless. “I know and feel that to do good is the truest happiness the human heart can savor; but it is a long time now since this happiness has been put out of my reach, and it is not in such a wretched lot as mine that one can hope to perform wisely and fruitfully a single really good action” (75). In this passage Rousseau is speaking of small benefactions. Indeed, he speaks *only* of small acts of goodness in this Walk. He has already told us that whatever good his books might have done for society has been undone by the poisoning of the public mind against him. He has even lost hope that he might reach future generations (4-5). Meanwhile, as he sees it, the well-known *philosophes* of his time were a relentlessly pernicious social force. *His* uselessness and *their* wickedness constitutes the core of Rousseau’s response to *Republic* 6’s second section. Rousseau’s response is a perfect illustration and thus a kind of restatement of Socrates’ argument.

Rousseau’s agreement with Socrates on the uselessness of true philosophers and the wickedness of false ones is obvious enough to require no more elaboration here. But what about the third section of *Republic* book 6? Does Rousseau offer anything corresponding to “the greatest study,” that is, the Good? It doesn’t appear so, and one might suppose that the reason is obvious enough: Rousseau nowhere seems to accept anything like Plato’s *ideas*. And yet perhaps Rousseau offers something responsive after all. In the final part of the Sixth Walk, the part that corresponds structurally to Socrates’ allusive discussion of the Good, Rousseau hypothesizes about what he would do if he were given the ring of Gyges (which itself inevitably brings to mind the *Republic*, though not book 6). Now the very purpose of such hypothesizing is to reveal what one considers the greatest good, at least the greatest good that one can possess or the greatest activity in which one could engage. Let’s look at how Rousseau develops this hypothetical: “In my castles in Spain, I have often asked myself what use I would have made of this ring; for it is surely here that the temptation to abuse would be close to the power to do so. Master of contenting my desires, able to do anything without anybody being able to fool me, what could I have reasonably desired? One thing alone: that would have been to see every heart content. Only the sight of public felicity could have affected my heart with a permanent feeling, and the ardent desire to contribute to it would have been my most constant passion” (82). What Rousseau seems to be telling us is that for him the highest good is not metaphysical or contemplative but moral-political. In which case he might be pursuing the highest good by writing this book.

We must note, though, that if Rousseau is in fact indicating that the highest good is moral or political, then this view separates him from the *Republic* and classical political philosophy more generally, for which the highest good is trans-moral and trans-political and accessed by contemplation. However, there is reason to hesitate before accepting that Rousseau’s highest good is moral or political—recall the peaks he achieves in solitude. The Sixth Walk may knowingly present the view of things from the partial perspective of a social being. A more comprehensive perspective might reveal beneficence to be a good, not only for the beneficiary but even for the beneficent one, but not the highest good. From that more comprehensive perspective beneficence might prove to be derivative from or a part of a greater, trans-moral and trans-political good. This would be yet another affinity between Rousseau and his classical predecessors, who regard hold the highest good to be trans-political but who also allow that political activity may be a good, conceivably even a great good, for the philosopher.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Yet I must repeat that I don’t believe that the difference between Rousseau and the classical tradition is ever altogether erased. Rousseau is simply too much a creature of moral passion. In the Sixth Walk he notes that “The sight of injustice and wickedness still makes my blood boil” (81). Nor does he give any sign of transcending this disposition in the remaining Walks. Compare Rousseau’s boiling blood to Socrates’ playful remark that the dishonor done to Lady Philosophy “almost” aroused his spiritedness (536c), as if to say that he is not one to become angry even when that which he most cherishes is abused. And the ancients never express an “ardent desire” or “constant passion” “to see every heart content.” In his moral passion Rousseau is closer to the Biblical tradition than to the classical. Or, if one wants to stay within the classical tradition, he is in this regard closer to the Lawgiver than to the philosopher.[[17]](#footnote-17)

**Seventh and Eighth Walks**

Whatever the status of lawmaking in the hierarchy of Rousseau’s goods, the *Reveries* remains primarily a book about philosophy, or at least a book about the philosopher Rousseau. With that in mind, one could make the case that the **Seventh Walk** is the peak of the book. (Butterworth considers the Fifth Walk to be the peak, and with reason: “The Fifth Walk is the most beautiful and most moving essay of the *Reveries*. From the very beginning it is clear that this Walk is different from the rest of the essays. Its tone is more lofty. . . . Constant attention is paid to man’s greatest concern, the attainment of happiness.”) But the Seventh Walk not only tells of Rousseau’s happiness, it is also the only Walk in which Rousseau claims to be led by wisdom in what he’s doing (89, 90). (He similarly claims to be governed by reason [90].) And what “wisdom itself wills” is that he follow his inclination, which is to engage in the study of nature by way of botany. From the standpoint of wisdom and from the standpoint of the apprehension of nature, the Seventh Walk stands above all the others. We might remember here, too, that it is in its own seventh division that the *Republic* lays out the education toward philosophy.

Rousseau doesn’t say much about, though perhaps he shows, what wisdom is. His focus is on his experience itself rather than any implicit precepts or interpretation. But in any case, for our purposes what is particularly interesting is perhaps less what wisdom is than what it *does* *for* Rousseau. (Or perhaps the latter *is* the meaning of wisdom, its effectual truth.) Rousseau pronounces himself “persuaded that in my present position it is great wisdom and even great virtue to give myself up to pastimes which gratify me. *It is the means of not letting any germ of revenge or hatred spring up in my heart*” (90; emphasis added). The path of wisdom renders his “natural temperament quite *purified of all irascible passions*.” This, I would submit, is the first such profession in the *Reveries* that is truly credible, in part because Rousseau tacitly concedes that prior to his current extravagant “infatuation” with botany (89) he *had* been subject to revenge and hatred. After this pronouncement of purification Rousseau continues to suffer at the hands of his enemies (and for other reasons too)—botany does not inoculate him against mental or moral suffering—but I see no evidence of hatred or the longing for revenge after this point. The claim to have been purified of irascible passions is not much highlighted or elaborated by Rousseau. His preferred focus in the Seventh Walk is botany as the rapturous study of nature. He chooses to investigate the activity itself and the joyful experience it brings, not the moral ills it helps extinguish. But in a work in which those ills are otherwise so evident, we do well to take note of this crucial point. Perhaps the rapturous reveries on St. Peter’s Island (recounted in the Fifth Walk) similarly purified Rousseau of irascible passions. But St. Peter’s Island is far in the past, never to be visited again except in memory. Botany, by contrast, is similarly a source of “ecstasies” and “delicious intoxication,” and one that is more scientific, less dependent on imagination, and less dependent on the unlikely circumstances that characterized the time on the Island (beginning with the forced exile). Botany is an activity open to any sensitive soul. Here in the Seventh Walk Rousseau shows us the philosopher as ecstatic.

Rousseau’s elaboration of botany and the botanical experience is too extensive even to summarize here. I would like to highlight a few features of his account, however, if only because the *elimination* of irascible passions is rooted in the *positive* activity and experience that Rousseau recounts. There can be no hatred when one “gives himself up to the ecstasies this harmony arouses in him” (92).

Rousseau had been a life-long lover of nature, and he had been an impassioned botanist during previous stretches of his life, but somehow it is only “now,” when he has quieted his imagination (for fear that suffering might make it “turn its activity to this side”), that he embarks on the kind of botanizing that will put him in position to take the next step—this long-claimed but in fact *un*claimed step, the final step as it turns out—in his philosophic development. Unlike past forays into botany, this time “an instinct” is aroused that “made me consider in detail for the first time the spectacle of nature which until then I had hardly contemplated except in a mass and in its wholeness” (91). This first-time consideration of nature in detail has an amazing effect: the careful attention to *particulars* leads to “a delicious intoxication [through which] he loses himself in the immensity of this beautiful system with which he feels himself one. Then, *all particular objects elude him;* *he sees and feels nothing except in the whole*” (92; emphasis added). This is no contradiction. Rather, whereas Rousseau had formerly contemplated nature as a whole seen as a “mass,” he now sees, indeed loses himself in, nature seen as a variegated and beautiful whole, a harmonious system, rather than a mass. The transcendence Rousseau experiences may be supra-rational, but it was brought about by reason.

Now there is an obvious objection to my claim that Rousseau is illustrating the joy of intellectual activity. In this most scientific of Walks, of all places, Rousseau makes the following blunt, apparently *anti*-intellectual and anti-Platonic statement: “I have sometimes thought rather deeply, but rarely with pleasure, almost always against my liking, and as though by force. Reverie relaxes and amuses me; reflection tires and saddens me; thinking always was a painful and charmless occupation for me” (91). This statement would seem to imply that Rousseau’s botany must be a glassy-eyed affair. But it’s not; we’ve already seen that. And in any case the objection can be answered—indeed, answered in such a way that draws Rousseau *closer* to Plato and the spirit of classical philosophy.

Three pages after the passage in which he characterizes thinking as a chore—pages in which he lingers over the ecstatic joy of botany and then excoriates those who study botany only for medicinal purposes—Rousseau explains that “everything which pertains to feeling my needs saddens and spoils my thoughts, and I have never found true charm in the pleasures of my mind except when concern for my body was completely lost from sight” (94). *Concern for my body*. The thinking that Rousseau finds wearying is instrumental and personal. The body is the source and locus of the narrowly personal or egoic. What Rousseau dislikes is not thinking as such but thinking that constricts his being. What enthralls him, in intellectual activity perhaps especially, is that which expands his being: “No, nothing personal, nothing which concerns my body can truly occupy my soul. I never meditate, I never dream more deliciously than when I forget myself. I feel ecstasies and inexpressible raptures in blending, so to speak, into the system of beings and in making myself one with the whole of nature” (95). Again we see Rousseau apprehending and losing himself in a variegated whole—a “system.” To blend with a system requires that one see the system as system. And that most assuredly requires the employment of some kind of scientific activity—the pleasant, perhaps erotic, employment of intellect: “Plants seem to have been sown profusely on the earth, like the stars in the sky, to invite man to the study of nature by the attraction of pleasure and curiosity” (98).[[18]](#footnote-18)

In keeping with the general thrust of the *Reveries*, Rousseau concludes the Seventh Walk by highlighting how botany helps him deal with the vicissitudes of his life. Strangely, he seems to have aged over the course of the Walk. Having spoken just a little earlier of ecstasies and intoxication, he now speaks more moderately, as befits one who “can no longer roam about those happy regions” (102). But he needs only to open his herbarium to enjoy renewed pleasure and to find refuge from his relentless enemies: “Botany makes me forget men’s persecutions, their hatred, scorn, insults, and all the evils with which they have repaid my tender and sincere attachment for them. It transports me to peaceful habitats among simple and good people, such as those with whom I formerly lived. It recalls to me both my youth and my innocent pleasures; it makes me enjoy them anew and, quite often, still makes me happy in the midst of the saddest lot a mortal has ever undergone” (102-03). Botany, one might say, has provided Rousseau with a means of ascent. And in so doing it has purified him of hatred and other irascible passions.

But no one can maintain altitude indefinitely, least of all one with the saddest lot a mortal has ever undergone. What remains for Rousseau is to learn how not to be undone by injustice. That is exactly what happens next.

The **Eighth Walk** presents us with two kinds of descent or decline. Rousseau’s *narration* descends from the rapturous study of nature to an investigation of the effects upon him of a variety of conditions (110). And Rousseau *the narrator* confesses a decline in spiritual vigor: “My soul—clouded and obstructed by my organs—sinks down day by day and, [beneath the] weight of these heavy masses, no longer has enough vigor to thrust itself out of its old wrapping as it used to do” (111). The motif of decline calls to mind the sequence of ever worse regimes sketched in book 8 of the *Republic*. Yet neither decline diminishes Rousseau’s self-sufficiency or well-being. In fact, there is an inverse relationship between the prosperity of his circumstances and his inner well-being (110). Is this a *reversal* of *Republic* 8? Not really, for the decline of his circumstances is decline only as the world judges such things. One of the chief points of the Eighth Walk is that to follow the world in such judgments is wrong-headed. A truer standard exists by which to gauge our well-being.

Of course this is nothing new, or at least nothing very startling in the *Reveries*. From the start of the book Rousseau has presented himself as one who has long seen through the vanity of the world. It was by pronouncing this insight that he provoked the conspiracy against himself in the first place.

Early in the Eighth Walk Rousseau recapitulates the story that we know quite well by now: that he was initially overwhelmed, shocked, and disoriented by the conspiracy against him; that he was angry and indignant; and that he finally regained calm and peace by “learn[ing] to bear the yoke of necessity without murmur” (112-13). Rousseau knows that “the wise man, who sees only the blows of blind necessity in all the misfortunes which befall him, does not have this insane agitation.” The wise man “cries out in his suffering, but without being carried away, without anger. He feels only the material blow of the evil to which he is prey, and the beatings he receives injure his body in vain—not one reaches his heart” ( 114-15). We have heard all of this before. And yet there *is* something new in the Eighth Walk. Rousseau now realizes that all this knowledge was still insufficient. To see the need for resignation “is a lot . . . but it is not all. If we stop here, we have indeed cut out the evil, but we have left the root.” Rousseau had long understood that the causes, instruments, and means of the conspiracy “ought not to matter to me”; that he “ought to regard all the details of my fate as so many acts of pure fatality”; that “I had to submit to it without reasoning and without struggling”; and that “I ought not to use up, in futilely resisting my fate, the strength I had left to endure it” (115). But what he had *not* yet understood was that understanding is not enough. In spite of all he knew, his *heart* still grumbled. He had “left the root.” Finally the root comes into sight—he makes his crucial discovery: “What gave rise to this grumbling? I sought for it and found it: it came from amour-propre which, after having become indignant about men, also rebelled against reason.” Reason had proved insufficient as a force in his soul; it hadn’t been able to master amour-propre.

This discovery was so long in coming not only because amour-propre is recalcitrant but also because it is damnably clever. It disguises itself. Once the disguises have been penetrated, however, things improve quickly, easily, as a matter of course: “This discovery [that amour-propre disguises itself] was not as easy to make as one might believe, for an innocent persecuted man considers his petty self-pride as pure love of justice for a long time. Still, once the true source is known, it can easily be dried up or at least diverted. Self-esteem is the greatest motive force of proud souls. Amour-propre, fertile in illusions, disguises itself and passes itself off as this esteem. But when the fraud is finally discovered and amour-propre can no longer hide itself, from then on it is no more to be feared; and even though we stifle it with difficulty, we at least easily overcome it” (115).

I have quoted Rousseau so extensively here partly because the matter is so important but partly too because Rousseau’s words make the case for a new (or is it an ancient?) kind of rationalism. Reason is both humbled and empowered. Reason had proved insufficient, yes; and it had compounded its insufficiency by supposing itself to be more powerful than it is. (Reason, it would seem, has its own vanity or amour-propre.) Yet it is reason that now makes this very discovery—a truly reasonable reason that recognizes the limits of its own practical power. Even now, after it has effected this change in Rousseau, reason still cannot command the passions. But it now knows and accepts that incapacity. Rousseau understands that he will continue to suffer keenly from the injustices done to him, and indeed from any number of other distressing sights. Such is the fate of so sensitive soul as his. But precisely because he now understands all this, Rousseau understands as well that he ought not resist what might seem like irrational feelings and passions. Resistance is futile and indeed worse than futile: it compounds suffering by keeping one engaged in a battle that can’t be won. The battle can’t be won because the passions are grounded in the body. Anger has, in some sense anger *is*, a set of physical sensations. These sensations can’t be stopped mid-way by reason. And so the thing to do is to practice a certain kind of acceptance or nonresistance—even to resistance itself (anger and outrage being forms of resistance). Let the sensations run their necessary (because physiological) course. And try to put oneself in positions less likely to cause or exacerbate suffering in the first place. Reason must practice something very much akin to the art of statesmanship. Which, by the way, is a classical idea that perhaps finds its classic expression in the *Republic*, where the rational part of the soul rules the rest of the soul, when it does rule the rest of the soul, through a combination of indirect means.

**Ninth and Tenth Walks**

The primary significance of the **Ninth Walk** with respect to this new stage in Rousseau’s development is to show us more of what that stage does and doesn’t mean. What it does mean is a proper understanding and a healthy attitude toward the various kinds of pleasure. The results of such an understanding and attitude include tranquility, contentment, and a certain sweetness of existence. In taking up and ranking the varieties of pleasure, the Ninth Walk parallels *Republic* 9 and offers its own version of the second and third of the *Republic*’s three so-called proofs of the superiority of the just man’s (i.e., the philosopher’s) life to that of the tyrant. The *Republic*’s second proof was based on the claim that the philosopher alone has known all the classes of pleasure—he alone is in a position to make an informed choice—and he chooses the pleasure of philosophy above the others. Similarly, Rousseau asserts his own rare access to the various pleasures; see, for example, p. 130. The *Republic*’s third proof is based on a system of hedonistic classification that grants superiority to pure pleasures, or pleasures that don’t depend on having been preceded by pain such as hunger or thirst or the pangs of desire. Similarly, Rousseau says the following about his own pleasures: “If my pleasures are few and brief, I surely savor them more deeply when they come than if they were more familiar. I ruminate upon them, so to speak, by frequently remembering them; and, however few they might be, if they were *pure and without mixture*, I would perhaps be happier than I was in my prosperity (127; emphasis added).

This passage is admittedly, perhaps strangely, conditional. However, Rousseau goes on to describe pleasures that do indeed seem “pure and without mixture.” And perhaps the conditional phrasing serves to indicate what his new philosophic stage does *not* entail. Although his breakthrough in the Eighth Walk has brought Rousseau a new degree of understanding and freedom of mind, it does not shield him from what surrounds him. Perhaps he is now more attentive and therefore *more* vulnerable to certain kinds of pain even as he is more available to pleasure and contentment. Signs of pain or distress in another person cause *him* pain and distress, since his imagination causes him to identify with the suffering being (131). “A sign, a gesture, a glance from a stranger, suffices to disturb my pleasures or to calm my troubles. I am my own only when I am alone. Apart from that I am the plaything of all those around me (132). Rousseau remains as sensitive and vulnerable as ever, if not more so. Nevertheless his breakthrough in the Eighth Walk has raised him to a previously unattained freedom. By learning how to see through amour-propre and to practice inner nonresistance, he has learned how to resign himself to such pain as is inevitable. He has learned how *not* to multiply and extend his pain. And he has learned how to retain, or at least regain, his hard-won freedom of mind. Might this be the beginning, or more than the beginning, of wisdom?

What to say about the very brief and apparently incomplete **Tenth Walk**? Perhaps just two things. First, by dating the Walk Palm Sunday—the only such dating in the book—Rousseau recalls Jesus: both his triumphal entry into Jerusalem and his impending crucifixion. Does Rousseau see himself as having achieved a triumph in this book, or perhaps more likely, in his life? He well may. He also speaks at several places in the *Reveries* of his impending death. In any case the notation reminds us that Rousseau has always engaged not only the classical philosophical tradition but also the Bible. (The *Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau’s first and most scientific inquiry into nature, reads as a secular retelling of Genesis 2-3.) We are also reminded of Rousseau’s previous treatments of Jesus, for whom he expresses great admiration even as he questions the efficacy of Jesus’ life as an exemplary life, at least as compared with his own.[[19]](#footnote-19) In this paper I’ve tried to illuminate Rousseau’s deepening affinities with classical political philosophy. But those affinities have limits. Even in his final stage, Rousseau expresses a moral passion and compassion that partake more of Jerusalem than of Athens.

But my second and final observation returns to Plato—whether appropriately or tiresomely, let the reader say. Book 10 of the *Republic* culminates with a myth (the myth of Er) that explains what determines the character of one’s life and the fate of one’s soul after death. Similarly, the two pages of the Tenth Walk give us Rousseau’s explanation of what “*determined my whole life*” (140; emphasis added) and depict the “period of four or five years” spent in the country with Madame de Warens in terms reminiscent of the heaven described by Er in *Republic* 10. Perhaps in keeping with its modesty vis-à-vis the *Republic*, whereas Plato’s souls spend a thousand years in heaven or hell, the *Reveries* has Rousseau enjoying in these four or five years only “a *century* of life and a pure and full happiness” (emphasis added). (Or maybe this isn’t modesty: Rousseau’s century of happiness was no myth.)

Where the chief theme of the two books is concerned, though, the parallel is just about perfect. In Plato’s moral-cosmological myth, souls spend a thousand years in one of two realms after their lives on earth have ended. Those who have lived decently on earth are rewarded with a thousand years in heaven. Those who have lived badly are punished with a thousand years in a hellish underworld. Following that millennium all souls are called upon to choose their next lives in a lottery. Those who have been chastened by hell choose decent lives. Those who have just emerged from heaven choose badly: to them the best of lives is the life of a tyrant. But it’s imp­­ortant to note that those who choose decent lives for their next incarnation do so only because they fear returning for another round in hell: they choose decent lives only for the sake of extrinsic consequences. They too would seem to regard the tyrant’s life as the most intrinsically satisfying life, just as Glaucon suggested with his hypothetical ring of Gyges scenario. Why *does* the tyrant’s life have such appeal? Surely the core of the answer—for both Plato and Rousseau—is the tyrant’s apparent power to indulge every appetite, most especially lawless appetites. And surely the appeal of lawless appetites lies in their very repudiation of restraint, in their elevation of the ego or separate self to godlike status.

For both Plato and Rousseau there is a way out of thralldom to the appeal of injustice. Both thinkers show us the possibility of seeing the intrinsic goodness of justice properly understood, i.e., justice in the soul. And both thinkers identify the philosopher as the one who has achieved this condition. Plato shows us Socrates as such a one; Rousseau shows us himself. Seeing the goodness of justice requires overcoming delusions, which means overcoming the *source* of the delusions. For Plato that means seeing through tyrannical eros. For Rousseau it means seeing through amour-propre. This is what Rousseau learns over the course of the *Reveries*. Seeing through the delusions of amour-propre allows him finally to resign himself to the world’s injustice and thereby attain a more truly philosophic way of being. He achieves what may be the better part of human wisdom. And he thereby gains greater surety for the contemplative moments that may reflect an even higher wisdom.

1. Rousseau claims that the book is to be a disordered collection of reveries and meditations written for no one but himself (7). But interpreters like Charles Butterworth, Michael Davis, Eve Grace, and David Lay Williams have convincingly shown that the book was written with rigor and indeed with order, even if the order isn’t always immediately apparent. That Rousseau took the time and effort to edit this writing is reason to think that he did indeed mean for his book to be read by others. There are further reasons for supposing that Rousseau was writing for others: for example, his use of the second person imperative voice (67-68) and his references to previous passages that would not seem to be needed by the author himself. All page references to the Reveries are to Charles Butterworth’s translation (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “The Reveries *as we have it*.” What I’m referring to here is the apparent incompleteness of the text. The Tenth and final Walk breaks off quite early, and it is dated Palm Sunday, 1778, which was just a few weeks before Rousseau’s death. Also, whereas the first seven Walks appear to have been edited by Rousseau, the remaining walks seem not to have been. Yet although the Tenth Walk does appear to have been left incomplete, we should remain open to the possibility that Rousseau meant to end the work in something like the way he did. Rousseau was a great reader and admirer of at least two philosophers, Plato and Bacon, who created the appearance of incompleteness in works that do seem to have been completed to the author’s satisfaction (the *Critias* and *New Atlantis*, respectively.) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Eve Grace, “Justice in the Soul: the *Reveries* as Rousseau’s Reply to Plato’s Glaucon,” in Ruth Grant and Philip Steward, eds., *Rousseau and the Ancients / Rousseau et les Anciens****, Pensée libre 8* (Rousseau Association, 2001).** [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Phaedo* 64a. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rousseau clearly meant for the Profession to [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Regarding the disparities between the Vicar’s Profession and views Rousseau professed in his own name, see Arthur Melzer, “The Origin of the Counter-Enlightenment: Rousseau and the New Religion of Sincerity,” *American Political Science Review*, 90, 2: June 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Christopher Kelly has developed this claim in *Rousseau’s Exemplary Life*: The “Confessions” as Political Philosohy” (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. David Lewis Schaefer, The Political Philosophy of Montaigne (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990) ; Alan Levine, *Sensual Philosophy: Tolerations, Skepticism, and Montaigne’s Politics of the Self* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Laurence Lampert, *Nietzsche and Modern Times: A Study of Bacon, Descartes, and Nietzsche* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Kelly, *Rousseau’s Exemplary Life*, pp. 1-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Butterworth, “Interpretive Essay,”p. 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Leo Strauss sees the *Republic* in its entirety as abstracting from eros and therewith the body. See *The City and Man* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964 ), p. 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Plutarch had quoted Solon as follows: “I continue to learn many things while growing old.” (See editor’s note. 1, page 40.) Rousseau altered the quote by deleting the words, “many things.” This deletion may suggest something about Rousseau’s philosophic life in this final stage of his life—namely, that what’s he’s pursuing is not discursive knowledge but something more immediate yet higher, something comparable perhaps to Plato’s *nous.* [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. A final observation before leaving the Fifth Walk: a small thing—a small error, in fact—that may be of interest to those who aren’t allergic to the notion of numerical clues. Others should feel free to skip this note and return to the main text—which, in any case, should stand on its own:

    Recalling his time on St. Peter’s Island, Rousseau says that the memory still “arouse[s] intense, tender, and lasting regrets in my heart at the end of fifteen years” (68). Butterworth points out that Rousseau’s arithmetic is in error: “The interval is really only twelve years, for the Fifth Walk was probably written in 1777,” whereas Rousseau spent his months on the Island in 1765 (73, n. 11). Now Rousseau is a careful writer; that should be obvious to all who have read him closely. And the Fifth Walk was edited by him. What then to make of this false fifteen? As it happens, fifteen years is the length of time that the *Republic*’s philosophers must spend back in the Cave, administering political affairs, after they have been liberated from it. Does it not seem plausible to suppose that Rousseau would compare his years of exile from St. Peter’s Island, years of chronic anxiety and instability, to years spent back in the Cave tending to political affairs? These were the years in which he defended himself, presented his life as exemplary (in the *Confessions*), and tried to explain his thought and protect it against distortion (the *Dialogues*)—political acts all.

    If we’re willing to go this far, let’s note a few more relevant details. The philosophers in the *Republic* are *compelled* to leave the sunshine and color of the real world and return to the Cave to administer political affairs, as Rousseau was most definitely compelled to leave beautiful St. Peter’s Island. The philosophers in the *Republic*, once they’ve completed their fifteen years of service, return from the Cave and are *compelled* to behold the Good. Rousseau too might be seen as being compelled to discover the good, in that the new happiness and insight he has managed to find at the end of fifteen years in his own Cave were prompted by the intense suffering imposed by his enemies. Finally, the philosophers in the *Republic*, even after they’ve returned from the Cave and have beheld the Good, are compelled from time to time to “drudge in politics” at the highest level—this is their service as philosopher-kings (539e-540b). And Rousseau? Might such “drudgery” be exactly what he is doing “now,” in writing the *Reveries*?

    If Rousseau’s arithmetic error was intentional, it proves to be a crack through which to peek into the interior of the *Reveries*—a crack that is of course no mistake at all. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. I have addressed this issue in *The Politics of Infinity: Eros in Plato, Rousseau, and Nietzsche* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), pp. 322-327. For present purposes let it suffice to say that while for Rousseau the contemplative life involves a degree of poeticizing that we don’t find in the philosophic life as described by Plato, Rousseau doesn’t so much replace reason as much as he supplements it with imagination. Discursive reason, as we see in his botanical investigations, helps one to ascend beyond discursive reasoning to a more direct beholding of what is. For that matter, Plato too sees discursive reason as leading to and helping to sustain a more direct beholding that is higher than discursive reason: this is the meaning of what Plato calls *nous*. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. In Plato’s case, as already mentioned, the Cave image opens such a possibility: might not the philosopher succeed the poet and the prophet as puppet-master? Aristotle, who declares the contemplative life the best of lives in book 10 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, gives a strangely thin presentation of that life; and he suggests in book 7, chapter 11 of the same work that the one who studies politics philosophically is “the architect of the end, with a view to which we call one thing bad and another good without qualification.” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Indeed, it’s not implausible to read Rousseau’s description of the Lawgiver in the Social Contract as something of a self-description. He describes the Lawgiver as “a superior intelligence, who saw all of men’s passions yet experienced none of them; who had no relation at all with our nature yet knew it thoroughly; whose happiness was independent of us, yet who was nevertheless willing to attend to ours; finally, one who, preparing for himself a future glory with the passage of time, could work in our century and enjoy the reward in another. Gods would be needed to give laws to men” (*On the Social Contract*, book 2, chapter.7). The last line suggests that Rousseau is knowingly engaging in hyperbole. If we temper the description just a little, as we should (after all, the lawgivers the world has seen were men, not gods), it might well describe Rousseau himself, at least the side of him that has sought to influence society. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. This passage voices a Platonic sentiment even as it arguably leads into a gentle rebuff of Plato. Rousseau not only praises botany, he contrasts it with astronomy, which, unlike botany, figures into the pre-philosophic education outlined in *Republic* book 7. Astronomy, Rousseau suggests, is a less effective invitation to the study of nature because the heavenly bodies are so far away. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See Kelly, *Rousseau’s Exemplary Life*, pp. 57-75. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)