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**PHILOSOPHIC ANTHROPOLOGY IN
ROUSSEAU AND ELIZABETH MARSHALL
THOMAS**

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PHILOSOPHIC ANTHROPOLOGY IN ROUSSEAU AND ELIZABETH MARSHALL THOMAS

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Anyone who knows anything at all about the lives of Leon Kass and Jean-Jacques Rousseau should think instantly of the contrast.¹ Their writings are as different as their conduct, with clarity and sobriety opposed to self-indulgent excess and infuriating paradoxes. But they can also look like brothers in arms, skeptical about modernity and determined to resist some of its most characteristic developments. They also share a philosophic interest in the natural sources and ends of the human soul. This essay seeks to throw some light on Rousseau's search for man "as Nature formed him,"² through the work of Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, who has presented new evidence of a kind that Rousseau hoped would come to light.

INTRODUCTION

The nature of the soul is a matter of such manifest scientific interest that Aristotle's *De Anima* opens with only a brief explanation of its importance. Aristotle then offers a pointed warning: "In every way, however, reaching any assured conviction about the soul is one of the most difficult undertakings."³ This is followed by a lengthy and intimidating discussion of the methodological

1. For many gory details about Rousseau's behavior, see his *Confessions*, which has been usefully and painfully supplemented by Maurice Cranston's three-volume biography.

2. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality* [*Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*], in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. III, ed. Bernard Gagnebin & Marcel Raymond (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1959-1995), 122. All page references to Rousseau are to this edition. The translations are my own, but I have borrowed freely from *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, Victor Gourevitch, ed. & trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), and from *The First and Second Discourses*, ed. Roger D. Masters, trans. Roger D. and Judith R. Masters (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964). The Gourevitch edition includes references to the pagination in the Pléiade edition.

3. Aristotle, *De Anima* 402a10-11.

difficulties posed by the inquiry.⁴ I will mention only two. It is not immediately apparent whether the soul is divisible or indivisible; nor is it immediately clear how, if at all, the soul is separate from the body. In the course of the methodological discussion, Aristotle also warns against focusing exclusively on the human soul.

In his own way, Rousseau seeks to begin working us through such difficulties in the *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men*. The epigraph to this book is a quotation in Latin from Aristotle's *Politics*: "What is natural must be viewed not in things that are corrupted but in those things that are well-ordered according to nature." The quotation, taken from a discussion of natural and conventional slavery, is immediately preceded in the text of the *Politics* by the assertion that the soul naturally rules the body in *all* living things. The quotation is immediately followed by Aristotle's assertion that what is natural in human beings will be clear in people with the best disposition in both body and soul.⁵

The *Discourse on Inequality* investigates this linkage or analogy between the rulership of human masters and what we might call self-rulership or the soul-body relationship. Rousseau's method is to trace the coming into being of man and his political relations from their pre-political and even pre-human origins up to modern times. The practical importance of this undertaking, according to some of Rousseau's statements, arises from its political implications. For example: "[S]o long as we do not know natural man, we will wish in vain to figure out the Law which he has received or that which best fits his constitution."⁶ Those implications are potentially so radical that the truth or falsity of the underlying analysis becomes a matter of significant political importance.⁷ But even apart from politics, there could hardly be many propositions whose truth or falsity matter more than Rousseau's claim that "Society no longer offers to the eyes of the wise man anything but an assemblage of artificial men and factitious passions which are the product of all these new [social] relationships, and have no true foundation in Nature."⁸

4. *Ibid.*, 402a11-403b19.

5. Aristotle, *Politics* 1254a34-1254b2.

6. *Discourse on Inequality*, 125.

7. See, e.g., *ibid.*, 180: "[T]he thing to do would have been to begin by clearing the ground and setting aside all the old materials, as Lycurgus did in Sparta, in order afterwards to erect a good Building."

8. *Ibid.*, 192. Observations of great apes that have been raised as pets, or like adopted human children, may give us a glimpse of what Rousseau believed he saw. Cf. Anne Russon, *Orangutans: Wizards of the Rainforest* (Buffalo, New York: Firefly Books, 2004), 104-12; Jane Goodall, *Through a Window: My Thirty Years with the Chimpanzees of Gombe* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 13; and Notes A and B at the end of this essay.

The presentation of Rousseau's thought in this book is simultaneously daring and cagy.⁹ An adequate commentary would have to extract the whole of Rousseau's considered views from his deliberately paradoxical presentation and assess the truth of those views. In this short essay I offer a few tentative comments on a handful of passages.

THE STATE OF NATURE

As the full title of the *Discourse* suggests, and as the context of the epigraph from Aristotle's *Politics* confirms, Rousseau's focus is on the relation between natural and conventional inequality. Almost at the outset, he defines the former as that which "is established by Nature, and which consists in the differences in age, health, strength of Bodies, and qualities of Mind, or of Soul."¹⁰ This he distinguishes from moral or political inequality, which depends on the consent of men and consists of different privileges that some enjoy, including even the privilege of making themselves obeyed. Rousseau dismisses the possibility that there is some essential correspondence between natural inequalities and disparities of political power or wealth.¹¹ Later, however, he asserts that "personal merit" or "personal qualities" are the origin of *all* the political and moral forms of inequality.¹²

The statements are not logically inconsistent, and their relationship is illuminated by Rousseau's account of the state of nature. He emphatically denies that the state of nature should be thought of as a set of circumstances in which people essentially like ourselves once existed without laws or governments. Rather, the state of nature was an articulated period of time during which our ancestors made a transition from life as independent, speechless animals roaming in the forests to socialized beings with stable governments and laws. Natural or physical inequalities among individuals would have had little effect when individuals had little to do with one another. "[T]here was neither education nor progress, generations multiplied uselessly; and as everyone always started at the

9. In Book IX of the *Confessions*, Rousseau characterizes the *Discourse on Inequality* as the place in which he revealed his principles "with the greatest daring, not to say audacity." *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. I, 407. In an unfinished draft of a response to criticism of the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, written just before he began work on the *Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau said that he believed he had discovered great things and set them forth with a "somewhat dangerous frankness," but that he had also often "been at great pains to try to condense into a Sentence, into a line, into one word tossed off as if by chance, the result of a long series of reflections." *Preface to a Second Letter to Bordes*, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. III, 103, 106.

10. *Discourse on Inequality*, 131.

11. *Ibid.*, 131-32.

12. *Ibid.*, 189.

same point, Centuries passed in all the crudeness of the first ages, the species had already grown old, and man remained ever a child.”¹³ This original condition is sometimes described in rather disparaging terms, as in this quotation, and sometimes more appealingly. Its crucial feature, however, is that it must have ended through “the fortuitous intervention of a number of foreign causes.”¹⁴ By this Rousseau means that changes in the natural environment or migration into new environments led individuals to begin cooperating with one another, perhaps in such activities as hunting for the purpose of self-preservation.¹⁵

Rousseau acknowledges, as he must, that such acts of cooperation—and all of the much more elaborate forms and achievements of society that eventually came to be—must be natural in the sense that nature provided our ancestors with the capacity to bring them about. What he denies—and this seems to be his central contention—is that *any* specific way of life is natural to man in the sense that it corresponds to our natural range of inclinations and powers.

Speaking of the city, Aristotle says: “If one were to look at how affairs (*ta pragmata*) develop from the beginning, one would, in this as in other cases, get the finest view of them. . . . [E]very city exists by nature, if the first communities really also do.”¹⁶ Rousseau denies that either cities or the first communities (other than mother-child pairs) exist by nature, at least in the sense that Aristotle is frequently thought to have said they do. Whatever disagreements he may have with Aristotle, which may be fewer and less significant than is commonly supposed, Rousseau does set out to explain how human society must have “developed from the beginning.”

What distinguishes man from all other animals is “the faculty of perfecting oneself; a faculty which, with the aid of circumstances, successively develops all the others, and resides among us as much in the species as in the individual.”¹⁷ As Rousseau makes clear, however, “perfecting oneself” involves the acquisition of qualities that *conflict* with our underlying natures. We are not like bees or herd animals,¹⁸ where the individual is necessarily “at the end of a few months what it will be for all its life; and its species is after a thousand years what it was in the first year of that thousand.”¹⁹ Rather, man is “compensated for the instinct he *perhaps* lacks by faculties capable of making up for it at first, and of raising

13. *Ibid.*, 160.

14. *Ibid.*, 162.

15. *Ibid.*, 166-67.

16. Aristotle, *Politics* 1252a24-26, 1252b30-31.

17. *Discourse on Inequality*, 142.

18. Cf. Aristotle, *Politics* 1253a6-8.

19. *Discourse on Inequality*, 142.

him afterwards far above nature.”²⁰ Sadly, we might be forced to agree that these faculties “render [man] at length the tyrant of himself and of Nature.”²¹

This grossly simplified summary omits Rousseau’s supporting arguments and evidence. It also leaves unexplored Rousseau’s very complex interweaving of emotional and judgmental rhetoric with dispassionate and even brutally uncompromising reasoning. But it does at least raise a question that invites further attention. Even if no one way of life is natural for man in the way that the lives of bees and herd animals are natural for them, is there a way of life that is naturally best for man?

“THE HAPPIEST EPOCH, AND THE MOST DURABLE”

Rousseau addresses this question directly. In the course of his description of human pre-history—reminiscent of that in Book V of Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura*²²—he identifies the last stage of the state of nature, or “nascent society,” as the best for man. Before drawing this conclusion, however, he describes a transition from the first societies, which resulted from “a first revolution” that united parents and children in a common dwelling.²³ When these families began gradually to unite in larger bands, people began to “acquire ideas of merit and of beauty which produce sentiments of preference.”²⁴ This would have produced sexual jealousy, and thus bloody conflict. More generally, people would have noticed natural differences in beauty, strength, grace, and eloquence. Soon, with everyone wanting to be recognized and respected, vanity and contempt would produce shame and envy, and thus vengeance.

Notwithstanding the new motives for conflict and violence, Rousseau concludes that fully human beings were at home in this condition, prior to agriculture and metallurgy, property and laws:

[T]his period of the development of human faculties, maintaining a fair mean between the indolence of the primitive state and the petulant activity of our *amour propre*, must have been the happiest epoch, and the most durable. The more one reflects on it, the more one finds that this state was the least subject to revolutions, the best for man (XVI*) and that he must have come out of it only by some fatal accident, which for the common good ought never to have happened. The example of the Sav-

20. *Ibid.*, 142-43 (emphasis added).

21. *Ibid.*, 142.

22. Unlike Lucretius, Rousseau offers no cosmology.

23. *Discourse on Inequality*, 167-68.

24. *Ibid.*, 169.

ages, who have almost all been found at this point, seems to confirm that Mankind was made to remain in it always; that this state is the World in the prime of its youth; and that all subsequent progress has been in appearance so many steps toward the perfection of the individual, and in fact toward the decrepitude of the species.

As long as men were content with their rustic huts, as long as they confined themselves to sewing their clothing of skins with thorns or fish bones, to adorning themselves with feathers and shells, to painting their bodies with various colors, perfecting or embellishing their bows and arrows, to carving with sharp stones a few fishing Canoes or a few crude Musical instruments; in a word, as long as they applied themselves only to tasks that one could perform alone and to arts that did not require the cooperation of several hands, they lived free, healthy, good, and happy lives as far as they could by their Nature, and continued to enjoy the gentle pleasures of independent dealings among themselves.²⁵

Note XVI supports these claims with evidence of the extreme reluctance that savages often exhibit when offered opportunities to adopt civilized ways of life. Rousseau also notes that Europeans have frequently chosen to join savage communities permanently, and others have experienced nostalgia after they have left such lives behind. The most striking anecdote involves a Hottentot from southern Africa who was raised from infancy as a European and was found to be so intelligent that he was successfully employed in the Indies by a trading company.²⁶ According to a report from which Rousseau quotes at length, the young man returned to Africa after the death of his employer and visited his Hottentot relatives. After this visit he informed the man responsible for his European education that he had decided to renounce the civilized life and to live in the way of his ancestors. He then ran off and was never seen again. Rousseau puts so much importance on this anecdote that he depicts the Hottentot's renunciation of civilization in the frontispiece of the book and includes cross-references below the picture and in Note XVI.

Rousseau, who has been called the founder of modern anthropology,²⁷ offers a frankly conjectural description of the human journey through the state of nature to historical times.²⁸ He consulted the science of his time but he bemoans

25. *Ibid.*, 171.

26. The term "Hottentot" appears to have been used at that time for the speakers of several click languages in southern Africa, a group that included the Bushmen discussed below.

27. Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Fondateur des sciences de l'homme," in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Neufchatel, France: La Baconnière, 1962), 239-48. An English translation is available in *Structural Anthropology*, vol. 2, trans. Monique Layton (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 33-43.

28. It is important to avoid overstating the conjectural nature of Rousseau's account of human development. He claims to have proven his most important assertion, namely that our kind did not always have language or live in stable groups. The details of the human journey are con-

the unreliability of travelers' reports, and holds out hope that a more complete understanding of primitive people—perhaps including some far more primitive than those who had by his time been reliably observed—might eventually be developed. In principle, his analysis of the way of life best for man, and most durable, is subject to enrichment and possible revision on the basis of new evidence. Such evidence exists, and some of it is presented in Elizabeth Marshall Thomas's recent book, *The Old Way: A Story of the First People*.²⁹

ELIZABETH MARSHALL THOMAS AND THE BUSHMEN

Thomas's life has some curious parallels with Rousseau's career as a gifted intellectual outsider, non-specialist, and autodidact.³⁰ Beginning at the age of nineteen in the early 1950s, she accompanied her parents and slightly younger brother on an extraordinary series of expeditions into the Kalahari Desert. These trips were organized by her father, Laurence Marshall, a retired businessman who took his family and several other adults on a dangerous search for people who were thought to be living in a primitive fashion in the interior of the desert. The mission was successful, and the group spent considerable time over several years living among various groups of Bushmen, including especially a group called the Ju/wasi (singular: Ju/wa).³¹ Thomas's mother, Lorna Marshall, was a former English teacher who went on to produce a series of ethnographic studies of the people. Thomas's brother, John Marshall, produced films of the Ju/wasi, married a Ju/wa woman, and remained involved in their affairs until his death. Thomas herself wrote a travelogue shortly after the expeditions,³² and has pursued a variety of literary projects in subsequent years. Her books include an account of a warlike people among whom she lived for a time in northern Uganda,³³ and two novels set in the Stone Age.³⁴ She has also written a book about cats,³⁵ and two books about dogs.³⁶ Her study of dogs included a

tural, but Rousseau appears to believe that the starting point is not. E.g., *Discourse on Inequality*, 162-63.

29. *The Old Way: A Story of the First People* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2006).

30. Cf. Leon R. Kass, "Looking for an Honest Man," *National Affairs*, No. 1, Fall 2009, 160-180.

31. Bushmen are sometimes called !Kung or San. There are controversies over the proper way to refer to these people, and there are different ways to represent the sounds of words in their click language. In this paper, I follow Thomas's usage.

32. *The Harmless People* (New York: Vintage Books, rev. ed., 1989).

33. *Warrior Herdsmen* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965).

34. *Reindeer Moon* (London: William Collins Sons & Co., 1987); *The Animal Wife* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990).

35. *The Tribe of Tiger* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993).

36. *The Hidden Life of Dogs* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993); *The Social Life of Dogs* (New

period of time camped out, alone, near a den of wild wolves on Baffin Island in northern Canada.³⁷

The Old Way, written more than half a century after her first encounter with the Bushmen, supplements her youthful first-hand experiences with further reflection and research. The book has some obvious resemblances to the *Discourse on Inequality* in its general approach or method. Thomas accepts scientific findings where they are well established, but she is willing to make conjectures when facts are uncertain, and to make moral judgments on matters about which modern science is necessarily silent. She is also unwilling to be confined by all of the conventions or prejudices of modern scientists. One example: She notes that the roots of certain plants stop feeding the vine and leaves at certain times, causing them to drop off and blow away, thus leaving the root hidden from herbivores, and concludes by saying, “This was what the root intended.”³⁸

The Old Way is specifically related to Rousseau’s claim that a certain kind of savage society was the most durable because it provided for the optimal, though not ultimate, development of human faculties. Thomas accepts the standard account of modern science, which traces our lineage to arboreal primates living in African rain forests. Climatic changes—an important element in Rousseau’s discussion of the “fortuitous intervention of a number of foreign causes”—stimulated adaptations to what became a substantially colder and dryer environment, and our ancestors eventually evolved as terrestrial hunter-gatherers on the relatively open grasslands in eastern or southern Africa that resulted from these climatic changes.³⁹ Modern human beings (i.e., members of our species) eventually covered the globe and have undergone spectacular cultural evolution. Thomas believes that the people she observed, who lived in

York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

37. *The Hidden Life of Dogs*, 31.

38. *The Old Way*, 11. Cf. Aristotle, *De Anima* 415a22-415b7 (offering a preliminary account of the manifest purposiveness of plants); David Bolotin, *An Approach to Aristotle’s Physics* (Albany, New York: S.U.N.Y. Press, 1998), especially 31-48, 149-53.

39. For an overview, see Richard G. Klein, *The Human Career: Human Biological and Cultural Origins*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). Thomas is not especially concerned with the precise details of biological evolution. She makes at least one technical error, when she assumes that human beings are descended from chimpanzees. Chimpanzees do appear to be our closest living relatives, but we are not descended from them. *Ibid.*, 74-75, 130-31. The closest common ancestor of chimpanzees and humans may have been physically similar to modern chimpanzees, but nothing is known about the social life of this extinct species. See *ibid.*, 135-36. Richard Wrangham argues that these animals may have lived in male-bonded territorial communities that engaged in lethal intergroup raiding, like modern chimpanzees. Richard Wrangham and Dale Peterson, *Demonic Males: Apes and the Origins of Human Violence* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996). The evidence to support this conjecture, however, is inconclusive. Cf. Note B at the end of this essay.

the same general area as the first modern humans, are descended from very early people who never left this area and who had by the 1950s undergone less cultural evolution than any other living people.

Recent work in genetic mapping strongly supports this conclusion.⁴⁰ So far as modern science has been able to determine, the Bushmen with whom Thomas lived in her youth more closely resembled “the first people” than any we will ever know. This means that the Ju/wa way of life may well have been, as Rousseau says, “the least subject to revolutions,” and thus might be the very one that he believes was “best for man.”⁴¹ It is important to stress that the Bushmen are not necessarily *typical* hunter-gatherers. Other such groups, having adapted to different environments and having different histories, have different social structures. What makes the Bushman people potentially significant is that their culture may be the *most durable* of any that has ever existed. That makes their way of life a plausible candidate for the state that Rousseau would consider the best for man.

Thomas’s account focuses on a group of about 550 Bushmen, particularly those who were still living as hunter-gatherers in the Nyae Nyae area of the Kalahari. These people were almost untouched by other cultures. Almost, but not quite. Although some of these people were so isolated that it took several months just to find them, they were aware of the outside world. Not so long ago, the Bushman range had been larger, and it may have extended throughout eastern and southern Africa for a considerable time after the origin of our species.⁴² By the time of the Marshall family’s expeditions, these people lived in a relatively small area surrounded by Bantu pastoralists and European farmers and ranchers. Some of the Bushmen had been enslaved or employed as servants, or had at least traded with their neighbors. All of them knew about such contacts (some had escaped from servitude and they all knew of others who

40. See, e.g., Spencer Wells, *The Journey of Man: A Genetic Odyssey* (New York: Random House, 2003), 56-57.

41. Rousseau anticipated that science might eventually enable us to trace our lineage back to other species, or at least to animals with radically different physical structures, but he concluded that the relevant sciences had not yet advanced sufficiently to make solid reasoning possible. Accordingly, he begins with the provisional and apparently non-essential assumption that man has always had the same general conformation, especially with regard to upright posture. *Discourse on Inequality*, 134 and Note III (196-98). As it happens, modern scientists treat upright posture or bi-pedalism as the defining characteristic of humans in the broadest sense of the term. See, e.g., Klein, *The Human Career*, 190. Rousseau, moreover, provides a proto-Darwinian account of physical evolution when he touches on what might be called racial differences among human beings. *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, chap. 10, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. V, 407.

42. The Bushmen speak one of several extremely unusual click languages. Outside the area where the Bushmen are found, the only other place where this type of language has been found is in east Africa, and skeletal material consistent with Bushman-like people has been found in paleolithic sites in Somalia and Ethiopia. Wells, *The Journey of Man*, 56-57.

never came back), and they had some foreign commodities and artifacts. The Marshall family, however, met and lived with individuals who had never seen a vehicle, a white person, or a graphic representation of any kind. Those living in the interior of the desert had a few tools made of metal obtained in trade from Bantus or Europeans, but the people were not dependent on these tools, and they continued to use stone, wood, and bone versions as well.

Subsequently, the Bushmen have been intensively studied by anthropologists, but the early Marshall expeditions seem to have been unique in the extent to which they involved an extended and deliberate study of isolated groups that had had only minimal contact with the outside world. Though the life Thomas describes is now gone, due to invasions from our world, I will generally discuss it in the present tense. Her account of the Ju/wasi is far too rich to summarize adequately, and I will focus on a few points that seem particularly relevant to Rousseau's discussion of "nascent society."

EQUALITY AND FREEDOM AMONG THE BUSHMEN

There is no rulership here, not even that of men over women. Decisions are reached by group consensus after discussion, or by individuals making their own choices. The semi-nomadic bands in which the people live, moreover, are somewhat fluid. Bands sometimes come together for a variety of reasons, and smaller groups may pay extended visits to other bands. The bands average about twenty-five members, but some are much smaller, and people gather in larger groups at times. Although rulership and law in our sense do not exist, there is a range of personality types and of natural ability, and the Ju/wasi have an elaborate customary social system. This can be illustrated with two related examples, involving the ownership of land and marriage.

At the most simple level, every person begins with the customary right to live in the place where he was born, unless his mother was only passing through at the time. The people with this right are the customary owners, but their ownership claim weakens if they leave or their close relatives are no longer there, and it may fade away entirely. One may not live in a place without permission from the owners, and this principle is scrupulously observed.

Many people, however, do not live where they were born, mostly because of marriage. With some important exceptions, any man and woman may marry if they so choose, and either can divorce the other simply by announcing it (though this is not done lightly or often). Polygamy (including polyandry) is

permitted and is practiced to a limited extent,⁴³ and care is taken to avoid the marriage of close relatives. Virtually everyone marries, and people who are divorced or widowed before they are old usually remarry. In such a small population the number of possible mates is limited, and many marriages are arranged during childhood. Such arrangements, however, do not bind the individuals when they reach marriageable age (which for girls may be as young as eight or so, though husbands do not have intercourse with their wives prior to the menarche). Through hunting, a new husband must contribute to the support of his wife's family until their third child can walk, which is seldom less than fourteen or fifteen years, and he may remain with that family for the rest of his life. Thomas found that about half the people were living where the wife was an owner and about half where the husband was an owner.

While these customs may sound to us like the fundamental elements of social organization, it is better to think of them as particular consequences of a more general and important organizing norm: sharing. Food and even water are frequently quite scarce. As we might expect from our own experience, close relatives share with each other, and the more closely they are related, the more they share. But the customs of the Ju/wasi take them far, far beyond this unsurprising practice.

Food is of two general kinds. Plants and small (or slow) animals like tortoises, rabbits, and snakes—which are gathered primarily but not exclusively by women—belong to the person who gathers them. Gatherers are generally free to eat whatever they find, or to share it with anyone they choose, which they frequently do. These foods are the staples of the Ju/wa diet, and they appear to be sufficient for sustaining life and health. The other category of food consists of large ungulates, such as antelope and giraffe, which are hunted. This meat is intensely craved by the Ju/wasi, and it is more scarce and hard to get than gathered foods (some of which themselves require considerable skill and exertion to obtain). Hunting is carried out exclusively by men, who pursue it very avidly and talk a great deal about it. Its extreme importance is illustrated by the fact that men may not marry until they have hunted successfully.

The distribution of hunted food is governed by an elaborate set of rules and rituals, which ensure that every member of the community gets a share of the kill, and that the shares work out pretty evenly over time. Unlike the simple and intuitive “finders keepers” rule for gathered food, these rules are

43. Thomas observed polygyny, which was considered unremarkable though also relatively uncommon. She was told that polyandry was permitted though rarely practiced, but she never observed it directly. She was also told that polygyny seems to work best when the wives are sisters. *The Old Way*, 179-80.

highly conventional. The right to make the initial distribution of hunted meat, for example, belongs to the person who fashioned the arrow that brought the animal down, who is often not the shooter and may even be a woman or child.

The central importance of sharing is reflected in the fact that the Ju/wasi never trade with each other, though they do with outsiders. Instead, they have a custom of bilateral friendships, called *xaro*, that begin when one person gives another a small gift, usually a luxury item such as a metal knife or ostrich shell necklace. After a time, the recipient reciprocates, and this practice continues as long as the two people continue to find pleasure in the exchanges. Most people have about fifteen such friendships, which may involve people whose homes are a hundred miles distant. These special relationships, which the Ju/wasi never have with outsiders (even when they receive gifts from them), are extremely important, and people often spend three or four months of the year visiting other bands for the purpose of seeing *xaro* friends.

Like almost everything the Ju/wasi do, these friendships promote survival in the Kalahari's hostile environment. For example, the practice of visiting friends effectively widens people's access to food, promotes communication among isolated bands, and provides relief from the stresses that occur when members of a small group spend extended periods of time in each other's company. But there are some subtler effects that are especially relevant to Rousseau's analysis.

One striking feature of Rousseau's discussion of nascent society is how little he has to say about the good and how much about the bad in the social relations of the state he calls "the best for man." Apart from a brief discussion of the awakening of sexual love, the only new pleasures that he mentions are communal song and dance. His discussion thus leaves us to wonder what it is in this savage state that more than compensates for the ills produced by the vanity and jealousy to which he gives more attention.

In Thomas's account of the Ju/wasi, the pleasures associated with food, especially meat, figure prominently, as one might expect among people who are frequently at the edge of starvation. In addition to sexual and family loves, the social pleasures appear mostly to be of a spontaneous kind. Children's games. Music and dance, involving both children and adults, much of which is not organized, planned, or ritualized. Joking and gossiping, also not organized (and also not without a dark undercurrent).

In the constellation of pleasures, *xaro* friendships are unusual. These relationships have a certain obligatory element, for one may not refuse a gift, and one is expected to reciprocate. But one does not reciprocate immediately because that would look too much like trading. More significantly, people take pleasure in preparing gifts for their *xaro* friends, anticipating the good feelings

that will result on both sides. This appears to be a custom that promotes social cohesion by cultivating friendships that provide an especially pure form of social pleasure. Unlike the kin relationships that dominate the social life of the Ju/wasi, these friendships are not imbued with necessity, or not to nearly the same extent. People enter these relationships for the sake of pleasing each other, which is why it seems significant that the gifts are luxury items among people who are often deprived of necessities and have very little in the way of luxuries.

Somewhat counterintuitively, and without elaboration, Thomas says that the *xaro* bonds are “perhaps the strongest fibers in the social fabric.”⁴⁴ If this is true, I think the importance of the bonds must arise from the extent to which these relationships are experienced as existing for their own sake and for the pleasure they bring. People have deeper ties to their kin, but also more burdensome and inescapable obligations. *Xaro* friendships seem to exemplify what Rousseau calls “the gentle pleasures of independent dealings among themselves,” the pleasures that he seems to treat as the defining social good of nascent society, the state that was “best for man.”

SOCIAL DISCIPLINE AMONG THE BUSHMEN

In contrast to Rousseau’s brief description of nascent society, *The Old Way* offers a detailed description of the difficulties and high personal costs that the Ju/wasi experience in maintaining their social life. The principal problem she identifies, however, is exactly the one on which Rousseau puts overwhelming emphasis: jealousy.

It is perfectly possible for large and highly intelligent primates to lead independent and largely solitary lives in the kind of rain forests where our distant ancestors lived. Orangutans offer conclusive evidence for this proposition. Except for sexual behavior and mothers with offspring, these animals typically spend their adult lives as self-sufficient loners.⁴⁵ Whether or not Rousseau was right to claim that our own ancestors did live this way,⁴⁶ in what he calls the pure state of nature, such a life is not possible in the very harsh environment of the Kalahari. And everything about the Ju/wa culture reflects this dominating necessity.

The Ju/wasi usually have enough food and water to survive, but they never have much more than that, and sometimes they die of starvation or dehydration.

44. *The Old Way*, 223.

45. For a slightly more elaborate description of orangutan life, see Note A at the end of this essay.

46. The answer to this question may be less important than it first appears to be. See Note B at the end of this essay.

They are seldom killed by predators, but if left alone they are likely to be taken by leopards or hyenas before too long. The overwhelming importance of group membership is poignantly captured in the words of a woman who said: “It is bad to die, because when you die you are alone.”⁴⁷ And the importance of group solidarity is reflected in virtually every aspect of their relations, especially the tremendous emphasis on sharing.

Such solidarity does not occur without strong social discipline. Anything that even resembles stealing is virtually unknown, and the language has no specific word for theft.⁴⁸ Children are trained to avoid physical violence, and the Ju/wasi do not have weapons suited for combat. Their famous poisoned hunting arrows, for example, produce wounds that are invariably fatal, but the poison has a delayed and very slow effect; the Ju/wasi, moreover, do not have shields of any kind. Considering the stresses under which the Ju/wasi live, violence is remarkably rare. The few homicides that Thomas knew of suggest how, and with what success, the Ju/wasi have interrupted man’s natural progress toward the Hobbesian state of war that Rousseau saw as the final departure from the state of nature.

In one case, a man suddenly and without explanation shot his wife with a poisoned arrow, then returned a few minutes later and shot two other men who were sitting nearby. The next day, the attacker was hunted down and put to death. In another case, a group reluctantly decided to kill a man who had begun to exhibit signs of mental illness. Thomas reports that none of these five homicides was regarded as a crime or as a punishment. Instead, they were all considered tragedies, in much the same way that the Ju/wasi saw a homicide in which a very young child shot a poisoned arrow at a man who was arguing with the child’s father. Similarly, Ju/wa mothers are sometimes required by necessity to put a newborn to death, because of deformities or because it would be impossible to support the child along with its older siblings. Such necessary acts of infanticide, rare because the Ju/wasi carefully space the births of their children, are regarded with extreme sadness.

Correlatively, ridicule and social snubbing—especially in the form of refusals to share—are powerful and common sanctions used against those who deviate from social norms. The success of the Ju/wasi in managing natural selfishness, natural assertiveness, and natural inequality can be illustrated with an anecdote.

A man named Short /Kwi, one of his band’s most successful and respected hunters, was bitten by a poisonous snake. Gangrene set in, the lower part of his

47. *The Old Way*, 213.

48. The one case of stealing reported by Thomas involved a man who took honey from a beehive that another man had found. This was such an extraordinary event that the original discoverer of the hive killed the thief. This is the only act of vengeance that Thomas reports, and it may not have been understood in quite that way by the killer.

leg fell off, and Short /Kwi appeared to be doomed. Thomas's father decided to use his vehicle to take Short /Kwi and his wife on the long trip to a hospital, where the couple would have to appear in clothing, which they didn't have. The Marshall family dressed the couple in some of their own clothes as they prepared to depart. Thomas was understandably shocked by what happened next.

We then heard raised voices at Short /Kwi's camp. The other people were erupting. The grief that all had felt turned to jealousy and anger when we gave so much to these people and nothing to anyone else. We went there and found all the people sitting together in a thick circle, recounting in impassioned voices all the slights and stinginess that anyone had ever shown to them or anyone else. *He was supposed to give me a knife. She was going to give the knife to Gao. Where is the blanket you promised my brother? When I gave her a necklace, she should give a gift in return. She never did. The necklace went to her sister. That was wrong. I have nothing. I am empty-handed. They should have controlled that necklace. Others have it now. Those people are selfish. They don't want to give. They won't give the necklace. People don't think of what they should be doing. They are stingy. All this is wrong.*

Surely some of these grievances had been festering for years. In the middle of the circle was Short /Kwi in his starched khaki shirt and trousers. Not only was he badly damaged by the loss of his leg and therefore in serious need of his people's goodwill for the future, but we were heaping him with gifts that would cause others to envy him for years to come. Already he was trying to give the clothes to other people.⁴⁹

Thomas reaches the same unequivocal conclusion about the way of life she observed that Rousseau reached about nascent society: "We have certainly gone downhill from the social excellence of the Ju/wasi."⁵⁰ Unlike the *Discourse on Inequality*, with its brief discussion of the state that was "best for man," *The Old Way* provides a detailed analysis of the social practices that enable the Ju/wasi to control the powerful forces of natural self interest and natural inequality. The most striking difference between her account of the Bushmen and Rousseau's

49. *The Old Way*, 241-42. See also 181:

[Gao Feet] was unfailingly calm and gracious and had the rather rare distinction of being an excellent hunter and also an important healer. Most men were one or the other, seldom both, because no Ju/wa person wants to stand out above the rest or have more of anything than anyone else, including ability. Thus a man such as Gao Feet was in a difficult position. His people needed both his talents. Any group would. Hence to forsake one talent for the other would have been selfish, depriving his people of a service in order not to arouse jealousy. Yet Gao Feet had such a low-key manner and was so modest and unassuming that people did not hold his talents against him. That was how he managed his excellence.

50. *Ibid.*, 224.

discussion of nascent society is her emphasis on the elaborate and repressive nature of the socialization that the Ju/wasi use to control the violent and vengeful impulses that Rousseau thought would have gone unchecked in nascent society.

This may not be a decisive correction of Rousseau's analysis. It is possible that Rousseau's picture of nascent society accurately corresponds with an early stage of Ju/wa life, while the social system that Thomas observed developed later.⁵¹ There certainly are other primitive societies (some of which Rousseau knew about) that are much more violent and much less egalitarian than that of the Ju/wasi. The differences could be due to variations among physical environments and to cultural accidents. What may be more significant is that the central social problem faced by the Ju/wasi is exactly the one, namely pride and jealousy, that Rousseau identifies as the basis of all social ills. Thomas's account shows that the most durable solution to that problem may in fact have been devised without the rulership and subordination entailed in all forms of political organization.⁵² The evidence she presents, therefore, may serve more to enrich Rousseau's analysis than to correct it.

JEALOUSY AND LIONS

In the spirit of Rousseau, Thomas looks for the roots of Ju/wa practices, and some of ours, in earlier times. For example, she conjectures that the dwellings of the Ju/wasi—grass huts that take only a few minutes to construct and are abandoned when the inhabitants move—are slightly modified versions of the nests that other large primates make for themselves.⁵³ Unlike Rousseau, who focuses almost entirely on the human (and proto-human) soul, Thomas is also intensely interested in understanding intelligent animals other than primates.

Rousseau understands, of course, that we are animals, and he even says that our ability to think differs from that of beasts only in degree.⁵⁴ In a tantalizing passage, he begins by claiming that he sees in animals only ingenious machines, programmed by nature to operate in certain ways, whereas men also have the

51. Among the Ju/wasi Thomas knew, the oldest male owner of a territory had a special title, with somewhat greater obligations to be generous, but no additional rights. Thomas speculates that the title may be a residuum from a time when the roles of men and women were more sharply differentiated than they are now. *Ibid.*, 78-79. The *Discourse on Inequality* is rather cryptic in its discussion of the transitions to and then from the patriarchal family that resulted from the "first revolution." Cf., e.g., *Discourse*, 160 with 167-68. For some speculations about this revolution and the discovery of fatherhood, see Note C at the end of this essay.

52. Cf. *Discourse on Inequality*, 187-88, where Rousseau contends that government and laws are always an inadequate substitute for sound *mœurs*.

53. *The Old Way*, 8-10.

54. *Discourse on Inequality*, 142.

quality of a “free agent,” and often deviate from nature’s commands, sometimes to their advantage and sometimes to their detriment.⁵⁵ But Rousseau quickly drops the claim that human freedom operates through “purely spiritual acts about which one explains nothing through the Laws of Mechanics.”⁵⁶ In place of this claim, which he says is disputable, he substitutes the faculty of cultural acquisition (or “perfectibility”) as the distinctive human quality. Given what everyone knows about the progress of human history, this is more descriptive than explanatory, and it leaves us to wonder whether animals should also be understood as free agents, or whether men can be seen as ingenious machines.

Thomas does not pursue this question directly, but she does give considerable thought to the ways in which certain other animals experience their lives, and to the relation between their experience and ours. A striking example involves the lions of the Nyae Nyae area.

Leopards and hyenas hunt the Ju/wasi, but neither presents a serious threat to the survival of the people. Leopards, which hunt alone and by stealth, are afraid of humans and easily discouraged, though they occasionally do succeed in taking a Ju/wa victim. Hyenas, which hunt in groups and do not kill their prey before they begin to feed, are more formidable. However, these nocturnal hunters focus their attention on stragglers, especially those in a weakened condition, which the Ju/wasi try hard not to provide them with.

Lions are a different story. These powerful predators routinely take prey that are much larger, tougher, and faster than human beings. They live near the same water holes on which the Ju/wasi depend. They hunt cooperatively, and they can do so day or night as they please. Their usual prey, moreover, are the same large ungulates prized by the Ju/wasi, and their hunting methods are similar, so the two are competitors for this food. The lions are fully aware of the Ju/wasi, whose camps they frequently approach at night, usually discreetly and apparently out of curiosity. Lions are known to hunt people in other places, but they do not prey on the Ju/wasi. Why not?

Thomas says that only the lions know the answer to that question, but suggests that the Ju/wasi and the lions of the Nyae Nyae area may have come to a kind of coexistence agreement sometime in the very distant past. The lions in this area hunt at night, and the Ju/wasi pursue the same prey during the day. The Ju/wasi also do most of their gathering during the hottest part of the day, when the lions are least active, even though this imposes extra physical stresses on the people.

55. *Ibid.*, 141.

56. *Ibid.*, 142. Compare Rousseau’s critique of mechanical explanations of the behavior of animals in the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, chap. 15, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. V, 417.

When the Ju/wasi do encounter a lion in the bush, they ordinarily observe a protocol that involves an affected nonchalance, neither aggressive nor fearful, and a casual departure at an oblique angle. If lions show themselves in camp, men discourage them with fire and with calm but stern commands to leave. Occasionally the Ju/wasi actually face lions down, as one group did when it came upon a pride that was trying to appropriate a wounded wildebeest that the human hunters were tracking after shooting it with a poisoned arrow.⁵⁷ Thomas herself once encountered a lion in the bush, and was so awestruck that she simply stared at the animal in spellbound fascination. The lion finally followed the usual protocol, walking calmly off at an oblique angle.

The lions are respected by the Ju/wasi beyond all other animals, but they are not loved. When confronting a lion they address it with the same term of respect used when speaking of the gods.⁵⁸ But when speaking *about* lions, the people use avoidance terms, one of which is “jealousy.” Why would this be? Thomas cannot say for sure, but she offers a suggestion. The Ju/wasi sometimes attribute mysterious deaths to the existence of people who, while appearing normal, harbor a nasty combination of jealous secrets and supernatural powers.⁵⁹ This could be a metaphor for lions, “out there in the dark not far away from you, able to kill you whenever they felt like it, refraining from killing you for reasons you were not equipped to determine. You hoped that they wouldn’t kill you, but you could never be sure.”⁶⁰ If lions are the greatest living threat in the physical environment, jealous people are like lions in society.

There is obviously a risk of pushing metaphors and speculation too far, but perhaps this connection between jealousy and lions reflects a Ju/wa insight that the most powerfully dangerous elements in their own souls can only be managed, not really subdued. When Thomas asked the Ju/wasi what they would do if lions were to prey on them, they responded that they would not live in such a place. Many years later, when Thomas studied how the Ju/wasi had changed after their lands were invaded and they were forced to alter their way of life, she found that they did not see themselves as a people of the desert, or one defined by their way of life there. Instead, they saw their community with one another as the central

57. Cf. *Discourse on Inequality*, 136-37.

58. *The Old Way*, 168.

59. Caution must be exercised in interpreting the meaning of explanations given by the Ju/wasi. Asked where the stars went in the daytime, one man said, “They stay where they are. We just can’t see them in the daytime because the sun is too bright.” The same man later said that stars were ant-lions who in the evening went up to the sky and returned to their sandy traps at dawn. *Ibid.*, 245. If one heard only the second story, it would be easy to get a distorted impression of the speaker’s understanding of the world.

60. *Ibid.*, 170-71.

and enduring element of their lives. As Rousseau would no doubt have expected, many Ju/wa individuals easily succumbed to the allures and some of the worst vices of civilization, and it is unclear today how much of their ancient social fabric can survive the disappearance of the conditions in which it developed.

PRE-HUMAN HAPPINESS

Rousseau's most succinct description of the distinctive good that people find in nascent society refers to "the gentle pleasures of independent dealings among themselves." The parallel good for "nascent man"⁶¹ in the pure state of nature is described this way: "His soul, which nothing agitates, gives itself over to the sole sentiment of its present existence, without any idea of the future, however near it may be."⁶² This proposition must be among the most arresting in the *Discourse on Inequality*, and perhaps the most baffling. How could Rousseau believe that he had access to the inner experiences of beings so different from ourselves that they did not even have language? And what implications could he think we should draw from this description of self-contemplation, so oddly reminiscent of Aristotle's description of the unmoved mover,⁶³ and so obviously evocative of the "Celestial and majestic simplicity" that Rousseau promised would be found beneath the outer surface of the statue of Glaucus?⁶⁴

Thomas may offer a suggestion. In *The Hidden Life of Dogs*, she recounts her efforts to understand what she calls dog consciousness, primarily through the careful observation of several pet animals with whom she and her family lived. At one point, the family moved to a new home, where they built a large pen for the dogs next to the house. Although the pen included a variety of shelters built for the animals' comfort, the dogs built their own den in the side of a hill. No ordinary hole in the dirt, the den was fifteen feet deep, ending in a three foot by three foot chamber that was two feet high. The entrance was hidden in a woodpile. Most remarkably, the dogs' project was carried out in perfect secrecy. Although Thomas spent a great deal of time in the pen and frequently checked for problems and evidence of escape attempts, she never even noticed any sign of the six cubic feet of soil that the dogs had excavated.

The effects of this undertaking by the dogs are at least as interesting as its causes and preconditions. Thomas discovered what had happened by accident,

61. *Discourse on Inequality*, 164. As Rousseau's use of this term suggests, man in the pure state of nature was not yet human. Cf. Notes A and B at the end of this essay.

62. *Ibid.*, 144.

63. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1072a19-1072b31.

64. *Discourse on Inequality*, 122.

when she suddenly arrived just as one of the dogs was entering the den through the woodpile. Once their project had been discovered, the dogs used the den openly, and it became the focus of their lives. The animals stopped interacting with each other in any manner that she could detect, suggesting that they had achieved a high degree of harmony in their social relationships. The dogs also lost interest in the human members of the family, and would not even respond to Thomas beyond a bland acknowledgment of her presence. The dogs' souls had, so to speak, disappeared from her view.

In response to these developments, Thomas started joining the dogs each afternoon to do just what they were doing. Nothing. Here is how she describes the experience:

To sit idly, not doing, merely experiencing, comes hard to a primate, yet for once I wasn't among primates. At last, as dogs learn to live among our kind, it came to me to live among theirs. In the late afternoon sun we sat in the dust, or lay on our chests resting on our elbows, evenly spaced on the hilltop, all looking calmly down among the trees to see what moved there. No birds sang, just insects. Off in the silent, drying woods a tree would now and then drop something—a pod, perhaps, or a leaf—and we would listen to it scratching down. While the shadows grew long we lay calmly, feeling the moment, the calmness, the warm light of the red sun—each of us happy enough with the others, unworried, each of us quiet and serene. I've been to many places on the earth, to the Arctic, to the African savannah, yet wherever I went, I always traveled in my own bubble of primate energy, primate experience, and so never before or since have I felt as far removed from what seemed familiar as I felt with these dogs, by their den. Primates feel pure, flat immobility as boredom, but dogs feel it as peace.⁶⁵

Dogs and wolves, of course, are highly social animals, and they organize themselves hierarchically. In that respect they are very different from the solitary pre-humans in Rousseau's pure state of nature. Thomas's experience on the hilltop, moreover was not a solitary experience, either for her or for the dogs. Still, even if it is someday proved that Rousseau wrongly conjectured that our direct ancestors lived much like orangutans, he might have been right to suggest that our soul has a craving to be agitated by nothing, to be given over to something like the sole sentiment of its present existence, without any idea of the future, however near it may be. That is not to say that such peacefulness is *the* good for dogs or for humans, for both display another strong craving for activity, for exploration and interaction. But it might still be *an* experience for which we

65. *The Hidden Life of Dogs*, 121.

have not entirely lost the desire. And it might be an experience that is one of the aims of social life.⁶⁶

PROTO-POLITICS

The pre-human condition is obviously irrecoverable, and Rousseau does not pretend that there is any going back to the state of nascent society that he calls the best for man.⁶⁷ That does not prevent him from concluding that there are better and worse possibilities among the various forms of political organization that have been devised in historical times. The *Discourse on Inequality* is more suggestive than definitive about the contribution that its analysis can make to identifying and fostering the better possibilities, though Rousseau does coyly say that “every attentive Reader . . . will find the solution to an infinity of problems in morals and Politics that the Philosophers cannot resolve.”⁶⁸

Thomas apparently has little interest in such questions, but her interest in the souls of animals provokes a number of suggestions that recall Aristotle’s assertion that “man is a political animal *more* than any bee or any herd animal.”⁶⁹ Thomas, who sometimes characterizes our pets as slaves (who are suited by their nature to be our slaves in a way that our fellow humans are not⁷⁰), also believes that we can have political relationships with them. She argues, for example, that wolves decided to form partnerships with our kind, contrary to the usual assumption that we have dogs because our ancestors decided to domesticate wolves.⁷¹

Another kind of political analysis is offered in one of her stories. Dogs typically use seniority as a default rule in determining social dominance, but they also engage in struggles for status. One such struggle took place when Thomas introduced a new dog into her household’s complex multi-species society.⁷² About a month before this happened, the dominant dog had died after a long and debilitating illness. The second ranking dog had previously struggled hard to obtain her current rank, but had never become completely secure there. Apparently, both she and the third ranking dog recognized that she was unsuited for the dominant po-

66. In the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, Rousseau says that only the passion for self-preservation is stronger and more primary than the passion for doing nothing, but he also refers to “natural restlessness,” and he says that primitive people are subject to boredom. *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. V, 376, 400 note, 406.

67. E.g., *Discourse on Inequality*, 133, Note IX, 207.

68. *Ibid.*, 192.

69. Aristotle, *Politics* 1253a7-8.

70. I leave aside the question whether there is some other way or some other sense in which some people might be slaves by nature.

71. *The Social Life of Dogs*, 123-28.

72. In addition to dogs and cats, Thomas’s family kept parrots, another highly intelligent animal.

sition. Accordingly, the third ranking dog, named Pearl, unobtrusively took over as leader during the illness of the dominant dog: “Pearl had occupied Place One in much the same way that a teacher takes charge of a classroom. The teacher doesn’t want to suppress and dominate the students—she wants to help them. She takes the leadership because she has more knowledge and experience than they do.”⁷³

Thomas first noticed Pearl’s new status when she brought the new dog, named Sheila, into the house. Sheila was extremely apprehensive, and apparently ready to defend herself from aggression, but Pearl stepped forward to welcome her. A young stray who had been living on the streets, Sheila started at the bottom of the hierarchy, but soon proved politically ambitious. Using threats and physical aggression, she quickly subordinated the two lowest-ranking dogs, and then the insecure second-ranking dog. Still not satisfied, Sheila began trying to intimidate Pearl. Thomas reports:

Pearl was like a dedicated teacher who has been insulted by a student for whom the teacher had always done her utmost and with the best of intentions. The student might want to chase away the teacher, but would lack the knowledge or ability to teach the class. . . . Short of getting rid of Sheila, I didn’t really know how to help Pearl. The dog politics of the household would boil around me with an energy of their own no matter how much I tried to suppress them. I felt at a loss, unable to solve the problem.⁷⁴

During this period of conflict, Pearl began having troubled dreams—growling, snarling, and crying out in her sleep. Suddenly this stopped, and so did the aggression between Pearl and Sheila. The political problem had apparently been solved, but how? Thomas noticed that Pearl had begun treating Sheila the way female dogs typically treat their daughters, and she believes that Pearl had in effect adopted the other dog.

Among dogs and wolves and many other kinds of animals including people, the children of high-ranking parents have high rank too. Thus Pearl was solving the problem of Sheila. Sheila was a high-powered dog who wanted significant status, and her adoption by Pearl raised her status. She would have fought for status if she had to, but she didn’t have to. Pearl gave it to her, and meanwhile kept her own.⁷⁵

Thomas emphasizes her belief that other dogs—especially males but also other females with a different temperament and less intelligence—would have han-

73. *Ibid.*, 204.

74. *Ibid.*, 212.

75. *Ibid.*, 212-13.

dled this situation differently, and not nearly as well. I would add the additional observation that these events occurred in a highly artificial environment composed of masters (however benevolent) and slaves, of different species. Dogs are descended from wolves, and show it in many ways, but they are not simply slaves of lupine instinct any more than they are simply the compliant slaves of their human masters.

It would be easy to ridicule the kind of analysis that Thomas offers here, and in many other discussions of her pets. But if this is not all just a lot of anthropomorphic nonsense,⁷⁶ perhaps it suggests that more attention should be paid to a point made subtly, almost invisibly, in the *Discourse on Inequality*.

Rousseau finds the source of our social virtues in a primitive sentiment that he calls pity or commiseration, which softens the equally natural desire for self-preservation, and which is “so Natural that the Beasts themselves sometimes give perceptible signs of it.”⁷⁷ In support of his claim, he offers several pieces of evidence, beginning with maternal tenderness and the bravery mothers display in guarding their young, a conspicuous part of our mammalian nature. The second example is an image of an imprisoned man forced to watch helplessly as a wild beast tears a child from its mother’s breast. The next example is an ancient tyrant who dared not attend a tragedy lest others see him sympathizing with the wife and father of the fallen Hector. The last piece of evidence contains the one vivid reference to civilized women in the body of the *Discourse on Inequality*: “In Riots, in Street fights, the populace assembles, the prudent man moves away; it is the rabble, it is the Market women, who separate the combatants and prevent decent people from cutting each other’s throats.”⁷⁸

The common thread in these examples is maternal love, and its extension by analogy or imagination to other social contexts.⁷⁹ In a note appended to his discussion of natural pity, Rousseau says that “Love of oneself is a natural sentiment which inclines every animal to watch out for its own preservation, and which, di-

76. For a useful short discussion of the perils of trying too hard to avoid anthropomorphism, see Joe Sachs, “The Work of Imagination: Sundry and Summary,” in *The Envisioned Life: Essays in Honor of Eva Brann* (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2007), 280-98.

77. *Discourse on Inequality*, 154.

78. *Ibid.*, 156. A blandly disapproving reference to the use of feminine wiles by civilized women occurs shortly thereafter in the text, 158. Outside the body of the *Discourse*, we find a condemnation of abortion and infanticide by civilized women in Note IX, 204, and a vivid statement about the virtue of Spartan women in the Epistle Dedicatory, 119.

79. The importance of this extension is suggested by Rousseau’s comment elsewhere that natural pity would remain eternally inactive without imagination to set it in motion. *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, chap. 9, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. V, 395. It may also be significant that Rousseau characterizes conjugal and paternal love, but not maternal love, as the sweetest sentiments that we know. *Discourse on Inequality*, 168. Compare the discussion of *xaro* friendships above.

rected in man by reason and modified by pity, produces humanity and virtue.⁸⁰ The story of Pearl and Sheila suggests one way in which something like this might happen even without the guidance of human reason. Perhaps it would not be completely fanciful to think that Pearl's political acumen may have human analogues, not just in family life but also in the work of exceptionally skillful managers of small human groups within modern societies. And maybe even in contexts as politically momentous as Abraham Lincoln's management of his cabinet?⁸¹

CONCLUSION

The rhetoric of the *Discourse on Inequality* is overwhelmingly aimed at puncturing unexamined assumptions about the superiority of civilized life and civilized people. Thomas, who does not begin with the usual unexamined assumptions, is nonetheless herself quite different from the Ju/wasi for whom she has so much admiration, and with whom she has found many friendships.

Thomas, for example, differs from the Ju/wasi in her disposition toward non-human animals. The Ju/wasi, who have tremendous practical knowledge about the living things in their environment, are completely indifferent to the suffering of animals, both the large animals they hunt and the smaller animals that they gather.⁸² Unlike the Ju/wasi, who have no pets, Thomas keeps animals for the pleasure of their company, powerfully commiserates with them, and feels a strong moral responsibility toward them.

Thomas never assumes an attitude of moral superiority toward the Ju/wasi. She would no doubt observe that there is a crucial difference between killing animals for food, even without a concern to minimize their suffering, and benevolently enslaving animals as pets. And she might therefore conclude that both she and the Ju/wasi implicitly, though for different reasons, respect Rousseau's suggestion that as beasts "share something of our nature through the sensitivity with which they are endowed, one will judge that they should also participate in natural right, and that man is subject to some sort of duties toward them. . . . [so that perhaps this sensitivity] should at least give the one the right not to be uselessly mistreated by the other."⁸³

80. *Discourse on Inequality*, Note XV, 219.

81. For details, see Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005).

82. See, e.g., *The Harmless People*, 52.

83. *Discourse on Inequality*, 126. The Ju/wasi exhibit the same acceptance of their own physical suffering that they display toward that of the animals. For a striking example involving a young girl who stoically endured several painful and dangerous hours caught in a metal trap that a white man had set in the desert, see *The Old Way*, 216-17.

Apart from questions of natural justice, Thomas's feelings about her pets seem to be inseparable from her efforts to understand them.⁸⁴ The same kind of sympathy informs her efforts to understand the Ju/wasi. Although Rousseau declares that we owe what is best as well as worst in civilized life to a "furor to distinguish oneself,"⁸⁵ he also says that "natural commiseration . . . no longer dwells in any but a few great Cosmopolitan Souls, who surmount the imaginary barriers that separate peoples and who, following the example of the sovereign being that created them, embrace all Mankind in their benevolence."⁸⁶ In her efforts to promote appreciation of a human way of life that may have been the most durable of all social arrangements, Thomas has certainly distinguished herself as a cosmopolitan—not just from a "furor" for distinction, perhaps, but not without some displays of *thumos* either.⁸⁷ And in her sympathetic observations about other animals, she has provided a vivid reminder of the difficulty—stressed by Rousseau and Aristotle alike—of determining with precision what the soul is and how human beings are unique.⁸⁸

AFTERWORD

General and abstract truth is the most precious of all goods. . . . Never has moral instinct deceived me. . . . Nothing personal, nothing which concerns the interest of my body, can truly occupy my soul.

–Rousseau, *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*⁸⁹

[U]nlimited freedom . . . is not the freedom of the dictator, who enforces his own will on the world, but the freedom of the artist, who has no will, who is free of will.

–Isak Dinesen, *Out of Africa*⁹⁰

84. A related phenomenon can be found among scientists who have done field work with great apes. Not infrequently they find that they cannot separate their desire to understand the animals from a desire to protect those they have come to know. Well-known examples include Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey, and Biruté Galdikas.

85. *Discourse on Inequality*, 189.

86. *Ibid.*, 178.

87. See, e.g., Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, "Reply to Melvin Konner," *N.Y. Rev. of Books*, vol. 54, no. 5, March 29, 2007.

88. Cf. Aristotle, *De Anima* 402a11-403b19 (discussed above), 432a22-432b3 (noting difficulties in classifying perception with respect to its being rational or not, and in determining the relationship of the imaginative part or aspect of the soul to the others); *Discourse on Inequality*, 141-42.

89. *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. I, 1026 (Fourth Walk), 1028 (Fourth Walk), 1065 (Seventh Walk).

90. New York: Vintage Books, 1937, 83. This claim is associated with dreaming.

The Old Way reports an encounter that Thomas had with an art collector at a dinner party. Upon learning that Thomas was writing a book about hunter-gatherers, the woman warned her not to romanticize the past or idealize primitive life. The woman was particularly concerned that in such a society, people with artistic genius “would find no means of self-expression.”⁹¹ Perhaps a little defensively, Thomas acknowledged that the Ju/wasi did not paint or sculpt or even produce creative beadwork, and the dinner conversation turned to other subjects. At first inclined to dismiss the woman’s comments as light-weight chatter, Thomas suddenly found herself more intrigued.

Upon reflection, Thomas mentions music as a Ju/wa art form, but focuses on hunting stories. These are dramatic and detailed accounts of actual hunts, told by men in special voices that resemble chants, delivered to attentive audiences around the fire at night. These she analogizes to Paleolithic cave paintings, which typically depict large mammals, often with projectiles sticking out of them. She concludes:

The will to hunt is deep in the brain, down there with art in the cave of the unconscious. That the two would join is not hard to imagine, especially in the minds of those who live with hunger. What better art form could there be than a successful hunt and its result—strong men together in a dark, lumpy line bobbing toward you through the golden grass, carrying a massive head with spiral horns and hundreds of pounds of meat?⁹²

This passage treats the hunt itself—at least as much as its dramatic or pictorial retelling—as a work of art, and suggests that both activities (neither of which is necessary for physical well-being) arise from ancient elements of our soul.⁹³ Perhaps as ancient and natural as the desire to be agitated by nothing, to be given over to the sole sentiment of one’s present existence, and perhaps as significant.

Leon Kass, a proponent of civilized life and an opponent of unexamined assumptions, focuses on a different kind of dinner party and a different kind of art when he retells the Isak Dinesen story, “Babette’s Feast.”⁹⁴ Babette is a talented French chef, forced into political exile and given refuge by religiously zealous Norwegian employers who eat only tasteless food. When Babette wins a large

91. *The Old Way*, 102.

92. *Ibid.*, 105.

93. All great apes eat meat, though some have very little access to this food source.

94. Leon R. Kass, *The Hungry Soul: Eating and the Perfecting of Our Nature* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 183-92.

sum of money in a lottery, she uses all of it to prepare an extraordinary dinner for her employers, a group of their similarly ascetic friends (who attend only from politeness), and a visiting military officer who happens to be a gourmet. Inspired by the excellence of the meal, General Löwenhielm delivers an eloquent speech about the gift of grace, which leads the others to experience an unaccustomed joy in the food and in each other. Afterwards, the employers are appropriately grateful, but shocked to discover that Babette has re-impooverished herself. Babette denies that she gave the dinner for their sake rather than her own. And she denies that she is now poor, saying, “No, I shall never be poor. I told you that I am a great artist. A great artist, Mesdames, is never poor. We have something, Mesdames, of which other people know nothing.”

Kass offers this comment: “Thanks to genius and taste, thanks to the extreme generosity and openness of both host and guest, the visage of the eternal shows itself in the midst of the most temporal, as superb food and wine nourish also the spiritual hungers of the assembled.”⁹⁵ The artistry displayed by Rousseau and Elizabeth Marshall Thomas offers a mirror image of General Löwenhielm’s work in Dinesen’s story, bringing to life a kind of “generosity and openness” that may no longer quite be attainable, and for which human beings cannot completely cease to hunger.

* * *

NOTE A

Until recently, very little was known to science about the lives of orangutans. The following brief and simplified summary is based primarily on field work reported in Biruté M. F. Galdikas, *Reflections of Eden: My Years with the Orangutans of Borneo* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1995), and Carel van Schaik, *Among Orangutans: Red Apes and the Rise of Human Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004).

On average, wild orangutans give birth once every eight years, and the offspring are weaned only when the mother becomes pregnant again. The mother-child relationship is extremely close and intense. Fathers have no role beyond insemination, and offspring may remain with their mothers for several years after the arrival of a sibling (with daughters remaining longer than sons). The animals go through a playful and gregarious phase during the period between infancy and adulthood.

95. *Ibid.*, 191.

In most environments, orangutans spend almost all of their adult lives foraging alone. Their primary interests are food and sex, and they display a high degree of intelligence, comparable to that of chimpanzees and perhaps greater. Tool use is common, and it differs from place to place, suggesting cultural transmission. Adult females usually have overlapping ranges (typically near their place of birth) and long-lasting dominance relationships, and they sometimes form transitory foraging parties. Males become much larger and stronger than females, and they are substantially more nomadic.

Both sexes compete for desirable mates—males by displays of virility and sometimes by fighting, females by resisting unwanted suitors (frequently without success) and by seductions (also frequently unsuccessful) of attractive males. Dominant males have a distinctive appearance and a distinctive call, and will not tolerate the presence of another male that has these characteristics. Some males appear to delay the development of these secondary sex characteristics (though not the ability or desire to breed) while living near an established dominant.

Orangutans exhibit significant variation in natural aptitude and personality type. Where population density is high (as in especially food-rich forests), the animals have greater social interaction. In captivity they readily form complex social relationships, not only with other orangutans but with humans as well. Indigenous people tell stories of male orangutans abducting human females, and there has been at least one documented case of a semi-wild orangutan forcibly copulating with a woman. One female orangutan at a rehabilitation center effectively became bicultural, acquiring a substantial sign-language vocabulary, living for extended periods in the wild, and acting as a kind of self-appointed ambassador between humans and orangutans.

The lives of wild orangutans thus bear more than a passing resemblance to that of man in Rousseau's pure state of nature, and their nature appears to include a significant element of what Rousseau calls "perfectibility." See *Discourse on Inequality*, 142.

NOTE B

The line of descent leading to orangutans apparently split off from the line that led to human beings earlier than the line of descent that led to chimpanzees and gorillas. See Klein, *The Human Career*, 88, and compare Rousseau's discussion of the inadequacy of the reports available to him about great apes in the *Discourse on Inequality*, Note X, 208-14. It is arresting, and perhaps significant, that the social structures of three extant great apes roughly correspond to the three main stages of human social evolution that Rousseau attributes to the state of nature.

Orangutans live much like man in Rousseau's pure state of nature; gorillas generally live in patriarchal family bands, much as Rousseau imagines man must have lived after the "first revolution"; and chimpanzees are cooperative and contentious hunter-gatherers. At the very least, this suggests that our fundamental ape nature lent itself to all these possibilities, even if it is someday established that none of our actual ancestors lived like orangutans or gorillas.

Of course, just as it is possible that our pre-human ancestors once lived solitary lives, so is it possible that the ancestors of modern orangutans were more social, and that these animals later became more solitary as part of an adaptation to new or changed environments. See Robin I. M. Dunbar, "Brains on Two Legs: Group Size and the Evolution of Intelligence," in *Tree of Origin: What Primate Behavior Can Tell Us about Human Social Evolution*, ed. Frans B. M. De Waal (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), 270, n. 4. All great apes, however, exhibit varying degrees of so-called "fission-fusion sociality," in which groups wax and wane in size, often when resources become more scarce or abundant. Van Schaik, *Among Orangutans*, 171. Thus, based on what we currently know, it apparently would have been possible for human cultural evolution to proceed very much as Rousseau imagined, even if fortuitous causes in fact produced a somewhat different path of development.

NOTE C

One form of natural inequality about which Rousseau says almost nothing in the *Discourse on Inequality* is that between men and women, whom he generally treats as equal in the sense that they are equally independent in the state of nature. But this is misleading in at least two ways. First, women could never have been as independent as men, for women have a natural social relationship with their children that men do not have. See, e.g., *Discourse on Inequality*, 147 (noting the social consequences of the mother's physical need to nurse). Second, women, like other mammals, have extra burdens imposed on them by nature, and women therefore have more incentive to enter into cooperative arrangements with other people.

In order for men to become fathers in more than a biological sense, they must overcome their natural selfishness at least to the extent that they become willing to share their food (a naturally private good) with another human being. A likely explanation for this self-overcoming is the presence of children who are seen as a shared responsibility. In the family, men and women become equal in a sense that is both natural and unnatural. It is natural because they are equally parents by nature. But it is unnatural because this formal equality of parenthood

is naturally hidden by the temporal lapse between insemination and birth, and by the greater natural investment that women make in their children.

Similarly, the family is naturally asymmetric because the father is by nature free of the burdens imposed by motherhood. It is not hard to imagine that the earliest families were constituted through a tacit exchange in which men assumed rulership in exchange for food and protection, an exchange that would have been facilitated by a modification of women's natural subservience toward their children.

One implication of all this might be that the most important inequalities between men and women are both natural and unjust, rooted as they are in the division of labor that nature imposes on mammals. This might help to explain why the *Discourse on Inequality* never offers the patriarchal family as a natural model for political society, while repeatedly suggesting that Sparta is a model. See *Discourse on Inequality*, 180, 181, 187-88; compare 119 (praising Spartan women as rulers of their men) with 158 (asserting that women should obey rather than dominate men). And it might help to explain why early Bushmen would have moved from a patriarchal family structure to the extreme egalitarianism that Thomas observed.